As N Approaches Infinity

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by Corisanna

Summary

Despairing as yet another timeline goes horribly wrong, Homura wanders into Karakura. There she discovers that while the spiritually-aware people of Karakura were distracted by Ichigo Kurosaki and Xcution, Kyubey had managed to contract the Kurosaki sisters as magical girls. Drawing the attention of the shinigami could be just the advantage Homura needs.

Prologue through chapter 80 replaced by edit 11/1/19
Most changes to neaten 1st timeline; no plot changes
Hopefully more screenreader friendly
A/N: For this fic, you should know Bleach through the end of the Xcution arc and all of Madoka Magica's core anime (no movies), though I will be trying to make this equally accessible for each fandom. I'm going to be cheerfully contorting the canon mechanics of both Madoka Magica and Bleach and spoiling the hell out of them right out the gate so if you haven't watched them, you might want to go do that.

PROLOG IM FEGEFEUER

Chapter Notes

A peaceful spring had descended upon Karakura Town. It was a welcome relief to the inhabitants of the Urahara Shop. Their major project to counter Xcution's sinister supernatural plotting had been successfully resolved mere months before. All the supernaturally aware residents of Karakura had breathed a collective sigh of relief and found themselves able to relax and enjoy the budding and blossoming of trees and flowers. True, they would never be free of Hollows, but individual Hollows were much less stressful than predatory conspiracies. Simple Hollow hunting was like a vacation compared to the threats orchestrated by Sōsuke Aizen and Xcution.

One of these calm spring days two weeks into the new school year found Jinta Hanakiri and Ururu Tsumugiya in the courtyard of Urahara Shop, as usual. Neither had bothered to change out of their school uniforms. Life had gone back to normal for them, which is to say Ururu was dutifully sweeping the path while Jinta acted out and narrated an imaginary baseball game in which he led his team to victory. Both stopped and looked up when someone entered the courtyard.

A girl with long dark hair stood primly at the entrance to the yard. She appeared to be a middle schooler, but her uniform was unfamiliar to Jinta and Ururu—a cream jacket, red bow, and black and white plaid skirt worn with black leggings. The girl stared at them for a moment, then approached the shop with a measured pace.

Ururu smiled blandly. “Welcome to Urahara Shop. Can I get anything for you? Today we have a sale on imported candy.”

The girl stopped a couple yards from the shop entrance. “No, thank you,” she replied in a cool voice. “I would like to speak with the owner, please.”

Ururu blinked. Before she could answer, Tessai’s mountainous form leaned out the door. “May I ask what about, Miss?”

The girl shifted her gaze to him, unruffled. “Personal business.”

Tessai cocked his head to one side and sized her up. Not recognizing her but sensing that she was more than the average human, he asked, “And who shall I tell him is calling?”
The girl ran a hand through her hair and tossed it over her shoulder. “Homura Akemi.”

“All right. Please, do come in.”

Tessai led Homura into the shop, ushered her to a table in the room behind the stock room, served her tea, and disappeared into the depths of the building. Jinta and Ururu found excuses to clean the stock room to eavesdrop on the mysterious stranger wanted. Homura just sat neatly and stared at her teacup between sips.

Ten minutes later, Kisuke Urahara breezed into the room, Tessai at his heels, and cheerfully began, “Good afternoon, Miss Akemi! Lovely day, isn't it?”

Homura blinked up at him and set down her empty cup. She folded her hands in her lap. “I suppose so, Mr. Urahara.”

Urahara seated himself across from Homura with a manic grin as Tessai refilled Homura's teacup and served his employer before backing away. The shopkeeper peered at her over the rim of his teacup. “So! To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, Miss Akemi?”

Homura shifted slightly. Urahara noted her fists clenched and unclenched. “I have collected the data you requested and am here to submit it for study.”

Urahara raised an eyebrow curiously. “Thank you very much, Miss Akemi. What data would that be?”

Homura picked up her teacup again and solemnly stared at Urahara over it. “The data you requested in an effort to save the lives of the Kurosaki sisters from a threat that went unnoticed while you were distracted by their brother.” She calmly sipped her tea. A scuffling noise came from the stock room.

Urahara froze, mind racing. He rapidly considered and discarded possibilities, then lowered his head and peered out at Homura from the shadow of the brim of his hat. “And how could I have requested such data from you when I am unaware of any threat and don’t recall ever meeting you?”

Homura lowered her teacup and locked eyes with him. She tucked her hair behind one ear and bluntly replied, “Just because this is the first time you have met me does not mean that I have not met another you.”

Urahara stared. In the silence, they could hear Jinta's muffled voice declare, “That makes no goddamn sense.”

Several moments passed as Urahara thought. Homura merely sipped her tea. Finally, Urahara leaned toward her and slowly asked, “When did you meet me, then?”

Serene, Homura answered, “Five weeks from now.”

Urahara quirked one eyebrow. “Five weeks ago?”

Homura shook her head slightly. “No, roughly five weeks from today. Late April. The day the Tenth Division Captain has arranged to begin his survey of his division's assigned districts in this region, starting with Naruki City. His goal is to ensure the density of shinigami he is assigning to cover the area is adequate. He contacted you to arrange for supplies two days ago.”

Urahara sat back and stared at her for a long time. The girl patiently bore his scrutiny.
Finally, Urahara tipped his hat to her and grimly said, “It seems we have much to talk about, Miss Time-Traveler.”

Homura inclined her head in agreement. “Quite.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: The idea to use selective bolding instead of runes is something inspired by The Magic Catgirl's Like No Other. I think it's a brilliant idea. I'm new to Madoka fandom so I don't know if that's a common thing or what, but it's still brilliant.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

EINS

TIMELINE X+N

Homura stood on a catwalk in a building under construction across from Mitakihara's central train station. A haunting maritime symphony still echoed in her head; ghostly violinists danced across her eyes. She stared numbly at the wall where the entrance to the Mermaid Witch's labyrinth had just melted away in the dying sunlight. The sharp ping of the Witch's Grief Seed bouncing on the catwalk dispelled the final strains of the ominous melody. After a moment, Homura bent and picked it up.

Too late again. Always too late. Or wrong. Or both, this time.

She had not expected this timeline's Kyōko to care enough about Sayaka to want to save her. Had not expected this Kyōko to have enough idealism to even consider the possibility. Had definitely not expected Kyōko to drag Madoka with her on her fool's errand. Was absolutely shocked to enter the haunted, inverted concert hall only to witness Kyōko launching a suicide attack at the Mermaid Witch, in whose armored hand Homura had mere moments to see Madoka's crushed, bloodied body. Homura had only begun to comprehend the magnitude of her failure when the labyrinth crumbled around her, awash in ruby light.

None of this had happened in other timelines, so what had she missed this time? Her manipulation of time didn't allow for her to be everywhere at once, so she had no idea what Kyōko and Sayaka had gotten up to. Most frustrating was the fact that she would be unable to find out—after all, everyone she could ask was dead.

This time Homura had managed to let everyone else die ten entire days before Walpurgisnacht's descent. Homura looked down at the shield attached to her left wrist and the purple glint of the Soul Gem on her hand. She had ten entire days' worth of sand left in her shield's sand timer. Ten entire days before the sand timer could reverse and send her back to the beginning. She had ten entire days to wander around Mitakihara and reflect on her failure and plan for the next timeline while the city taunted her with memories of what once was.
Unbearable.

That would be unbearable.

While there were multiple timelines in which Mami, Kyōko, and Sayaka didn't survive until the end, never before had she approached Walpurgisnacht with Madoka already dead. Fresh grief and ten days to reflect on her failure... no. She would despair. The futility of facing Walpurgisnacht in this timeline would drag her down and turn her into a Witch before she could save Madoka in the next timeline. Homura couldn't allow that to happen.

With halting steps, Homura turned from the wall and wandered back across the catwalk. Plodded down the stairs instead of hopping down. Aimlessly left the construction site and roamed the train switchyard. Blankly stared at the sky as a commuter train roared past her and disheveled her hair in the last of the twilight.

Generally, Homura disapproved of whims. Impulsiveness had proven too deadly for her to do much without forethought. But the rising need to get away from Mitakihara consumed her. She couldn't bear to see Madoka's empty desk at school. Couldn't bear the inevitable media furor that would arise when Madoka was reported missing, Mami's disappearance was finally noticed, and Sayaka's corpse was discovered wherever Kyōko had stashed it. Couldn't bear the cheerfully accusatory faces of her friends staring out at her from missing persons posters. Couldn't bear that there would be no posters for Kyōko, as there was no one left to miss her. So, on reflection, it wasn't terribly surprising that Homura lifted her shield, stopped time, staggered her way to the passing train, and jumped onto its roof. She flopped down on the cold metal and automatically secured herself with magic. Time resumed with a click. Scenery rushed by in a blur before Homura's dull eyes.

She didn't particularly care where the train took her as long as it wasn't Mitakihara.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
OKTAVIA VON SECKENDORFF
The Mermaid Witch. It is in her nature to fall in love. Looking for the feeling that moved her so long ago, she moves with the entire concert hall. Her fortune only turns under the weight of memories and no longer moves toward the future. Nothing will reach her any longer. She will come to know nothing more. She simply allows no one to disturb her minions' playing.

Minion: Holger, whose duty is to perform. Several of them form a hollow orchestra that continually plays music for the Witch. People who listen to their music for long enough will lose their soul. This orchestra only exists for its Witch; to her, the orchestra is everything.

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Homura had a warped relationship with the flow of time. It played tricks on her sometimes in ways the less-rational part of her mind considered revenge for her manipulations. Morosely perched upon the train, Homura ceded all control and let time do with her what it would. She passively drifted along with time as the train charged through it, watching the constellations appear and shift as the wind and wheels roared in her ears. Many stops barely registered to her. Homura finally blinked back to reality when a regular stop stretched on unusually long and the sound of men arguing drifted up to her.

Glad for something new to focus on, Homura climbed to her feet and stealthily hopped along the cars until she reached the engine, where the arguing was loudest.

“You're not listening. I'm telling you, the computer is saying we're scheduled to be here until midnight, but that's obviously wrong.”

“Obviously. Are you sure you tried to override it?”

“Yes! I told you five times already! The system shut down the train and won't let me re-start it!”

“Maybe you should let me try. It's been a long shift, eh?”

“Are you saying you think I'm too tired to know what I'm doing?!”

“Not exactly—”

“I could do this in my sleep! But something is wrong with the scheduling program! You should be able to see it on the station terminal, too!”

A deep sigh. “Right, right. Let me look at it.”

The men withdrew into the train, their bickering growing muffled as they went deeper into the engine.

Homura cocked her head curiously. After a moment, she shrugged and reached up to push her hair away from her face.

Her Soul Gem ring was glowing.

Adrenaline flooded her body. She sharply surveyed the train station, then slowly spun and swept her bejeweled hand around her like a compass needle. The Soul Gem gloved the brightest when she faced the train station proper. The magical girl frowned and gracefully descended from the train car. She flitted from corner to corner like a phantom thief, largely concealed by the purples and blacks of her costume. The glowing Soul Gem led Homura to the main electronic schedule display board. Her eyes narrowed. There: a momentary flicker. Homura brandished her Soul Gem, prompting the appearance of an orange sigil shaped like a pumpkin with a clock face overlapping
The labyrinth was new to her, though it reminded her of the initial appearance of the Mermaid Witch’s labyrinth when she had first transformed. There were haphazard train tracks and tunnels zigzagging about. Industrial wreckage littered every horizontal surface that did not host rails. A multitude of clocks adorned every vertical surface, causing an echoing cacophony of asynchronous ticking. This nightmare world didn’t have the heavy sense of presence that a true labyrinth held, so it likely only housed a Familiar. No matter; Homura could stand to vent by shooting up an inconsequential enemy. She drew a gun and used her Soul Gem to choose the best train track to follow.

As she wove through the maze of tracks and tunnels, the sound of battle drew her attention and gradually grew louder. So another magical girl had beaten her to the punch. Homura paused, considered leaving, and decided to continue for lack of anything else to do. Soon, she emerged into what appeared to be a large subway station studded with clocks, the floor covered in scattered wreckage and pumpkins of varying sizes. The familiar was plainly visible on a far platform. It was a scarecrow the size of a man with a gigantic turnip for a head. It was dressed as a train conductor. A whistle was jammed into the turnip where a mouth would be on a human face. The whole thing topped off its surreality with a pair of glimmering fairy wings on its back. A shrill burst of sound from its whistle knocked back not one but two magical girls, one clothed in red and the other in yellow.

Homura would have preferred to find magical girls wearing different colors. Like green. Or perhaps brown. Red, yellow, blue, and pink were heavy colors for her. Especially pink. Thank everything neither of them wore pink. She could handle red and yellow, in comparison.

The two girls recovered admirably, vaulting in different directions. They executed what appeared to be a practiced move: The yellow-clad girl lashed out and ensnared the Familiar’s legs with a golden whip and yanked. When the Familiar fell, the red-clad girl rushed in and slashed it with a katana. The fairy scarecrow shattered like glass and the labyrinth began to waver out of existence.

The girl in yellow threw her hands up and cheered happily. The girl in red grinned and high-fived her partner, then noticed Homura standing against the far wall of the deserted train station terminal. Homura had to give the girl credit—she snapped into seriousness and took a defensive pose in the blink of an eye. Her partner instantly went on alert, too, despite apparent confusion.

Homura stood passively as the red-clad girl with dark hair and eyes stared at her suspiciously. After a moment, Homura made a show of putting her gun in her shield, spread her arms slightly, palms forward, and neutrally called out, “I do not intend to attack you. I apologize for the intrusion. I was traveling and did not realize the situation was under control.”

The yellow-clad girl relaxed. Her red-clad companion lowered her blade but remained wary. Homura took a moment to glance around the empty train station. The previously glitched electronic schedule board declared the time to be 9:17 PM. The next train wasn’t scheduled to appear until 10 PM. That explained the lack of people. Homura returned her gaze to the new magical girls. The girl in red opened her mouth to speak but stopped and glanced to the side when loud steps echoed along the tile hall, accompanied by male voices.

“Train conductors,” Homura announced. She stared the wary girl in the eye and released her power, allowing her school uniform to replace her magical girl costume. After a beat, the other two girls followed suit, each wearing matching school uniforms. They were still staring at each other when the two uniformed men who Homura had overheard arguing turned a corner and crossed the far end of the room. The three girls silently watched the two men bicker about glitches and
technical support. One stopped suddenly as his mobile device beeped.

“Oh, now it works?”

“Eh? The reset went through or something?”

“Damned if I know. System says it's ready to go now. What the hell is with this town, Hatori? Something goes wrong with my train whenever I come through here. It's like the place is jinxed.”

“Well, weird things do happen in Karakura. You get used to it. Just get back on your train and get on with your life. No big deal.”

“Tch. Easy to say when you're not the one who's going to get chewed out for being late.”

“Then get back on your train and go before you run later. God, you're such a—”

The girls watched the men separate and stood silently until they heard the muffled sounds of the train pulling out of the station. The brunette who had worn the yellow costume started slightly and turned to Homura.

“Oh! Was that your train?”

Homura turned to the girl. She found the brunette looking concerned while her black-haired companion's face had settled into deadpan boredom. After a moment, Homura realized the girl expected an answer. “I suppose.”

“Tch.” The dark-haired girl tossed her ponytail and stretched her arms. “You suppose that was your train?”

The brunette pouted. “Karin!”

“Yeah, yeah, Yuzu.” Karin waved a hand dismissively before locking both hands behind her head, elbows up in the air. With bland skepticism, she drawled, “So you're traveling and don't mind missing your train? Where are you going?”

Homura stared, then carelessly answered, “Nowhere in particular.”

Karin raised her brows dubiously and drew breath to speak. The brunette beat her to it, glaring her into silence as she tried to enforce politeness. Yuzu turned to look at Homura and earnestly said, “I understand if you want to keep that secret. We've only met one other magical girl and—” she faltered—“I can understand if you don't want us to be able to follow you. But you look kind of lost and tired, so if you tell us where you want to go, we can help you. We don't want any more territory than we have. Karakura is enough for us.”

Homura frowned. “I appreciate your offer, but I really do not have any destination in mind.”

Yuzu looked confused. Karin raised a brow. “So, what? You hopped on a train to see where it'd take you?”

“I suppose.”

Karin's eye twitched. Yuzu frowned and stepped closer to Homura. She cocked her head and asked, “Why would you do that?”

Homura's first inclination was to remain silent. To pull her mysterious disappearing act and run away. But there wasn't another train to hop on and she didn't know where she was. And, as Yuzu
had observed, she was tired. So tired. And those concerned brown eyes... they were the wrong color, but the expression reminded her of Mado—

“My friends were killed by a Witch today,” Homura blurted.

This was why she was so quiet these days. As soon as she spoke the words, made the whole situation real, the grief overwhelmed her careful mental barriers. Tears welled up in her eyes. She sniffed. She fought it. Tried to stifle a sob. Trembled with the force of it.

Karin and Yuzu's eyes widened as their faces paled.

Homura clenched her fists so tightly her nails bit into her palms. “They went to fight it without me. When I got there— when I got there—” The thing that had been Sayaka had killed her best friend, Madoka had been a macabre rag doll, and Kyōko had initiated self-immolation. And here she had thought she had hardened her heart against the miserable fates of everyone but Madoka. She had been fooling herself. Still, though Sayaka's fall and Kyōko's sacrifice hurt, Madoka's umpteenth death was agony. Tears ran down her face and she sobbed once. Homura pressed her hands over her mouth and bent toward the ground to hide her face. She heard a few quick footsteps then found herself wrapped in a warm embrace.

“I'm so sorry,” Yuzu's voice wobbled. Homura could feel the other girl's wet cheek press against her ear. A girl she had just met was crying for her. “That's horrible. That must— that must— you must feel—Oh, I'm so sorry.”

The two girls held one another and cried for a few minutes while Karin hovered nearby, awkward and concerned. The crying girls were oblivious to a security guard whose patrol took him near them. He eyed the girls then raised a brow at Karin in search of an explanation.

“Oh, our... friend, ah, got some bad news. Um, a death. So we're...” Karin shrugged and looked at her sister and the stranger helplessly. Homura appreciated the cover-up.

The security guard's face went solemn. “Ah.” He glanced at the schedule board clock. “If you'd prefer privacy, you might want to find a more out-of-the-way place. The last of the commuter trains from up north will be showing up soon.”

“Oh, uh, thank you, sir.” Karin sketched a quick bow and bit her lip. After the guard moved on, she stepped forward and gently took both girls by their shoulders. “Come on, let's go somewhere else.”

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

Minion: Jakob, whose duty is to keep everything on schedule.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Totally making up where Mitakihara is located for plot convenience, but referring to canon maps for where Karakura and Naruki are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For once, Homura passively allowed herself to be led. Yuzu sniffled and hooked her arm in Homura's to guide her along behind Karin as they left the train station. Homura was too tired to pay much attention to landmarks or where they were going; somehow, they ended up at a park bench under a street lamp near some vending machines. Yuzu sat on the bench with Homura and fussed over her while Karin fetched drinks for them. When Homura had calmed enough to hold her drink, the three sat in silence and watched the fluttering shadows of moths as they drank.

At length, Karin stood up and focused on Homura, face hard and angry, eyes betraying her more tender emotions as she brandished a fist. “Do you need any backup to nail that Witch?”

Homura looked up in surprise. Both girls were staring at her with fire in their eyes, angry on her behalf as though the death of any magical girl was a grave offense even if they had not known the deceased. It was heartwarming and disgustingly naïve at the same time.

Homura sat straighter and absently brushed the tears from her cheeks, regaining her composure. When she felt she could speak in an even voice, she coolly replied, “That will not be necessary.” As the girls began to object again, she curled her free hand into a fist then opened it to reveal the Mermaid Witch's Grief Seed. The two girls snapped their mouths shut.

“You got it?” whispered Karin.

“No,” Homura said dully. “When I got there, my... my best friend was dead, and... my other... friend hit the Witch with a suicide attack. The labyrinth was gone before I could do anything.” Instead of looking at the girls, she stared at the Grief Seed. The silver musical staff against its onyx center had a simple elegance. Homura vaguely noted that she had never heard the music made by
the boy Sayaka had traded her soul for. She wondered if hearing him play would make her want to break his hands. He complicated the timelines so much sometimes.

The gravitas of the moment was interrupted by the most annoying ringtone Homura had ever heard. She looked up as Karin rummaged about and pulled out her phone. “Ah, we're late, Goat-Face is probably looking for us.” She fiddled with the device and read the text message. Her eye twitched in irritation. “God, why so many emojis? And... fifteen question marks? Ugh.” She lowered her voice and muttered to herself, “Achievement unlocked. I need to find a more annoying ringtone to match.” The device trilled again. Karin bared her teeth. “Oh my God, yes, I'm replying, shut up!” Her fingers danced over the touch screen as she growled.

Homura stared at Karin strangely. “Goat... Face...?”

Yuzu laughed awkwardly. “That's what Karin calls our dad. He's... kind of eccentric.”

“Pshh. Understatement of the century,” grumbled Karin.

Homura raised her eyebrows. “You are sisters?”

Yuzu grinned. “Yep! Karin and Yuzu Kurosaki, Twin Champions of Love and Justice!” She struck a pose, holding a V-for-victory sign over an adorable wink.

Karin rolled her eyes powerfully. “We aren't characters on Sailor Moon, Yuzu.”

Yuzu pouted. “But you're the Mars to my Venus! We even have the right colors!” She glanced aside and mumbled, “Close enough.”

Karin scoffed. “If I was Sailor Mars I'd go all Medieval and burn the Witches with a snap so I could have more time for important things. Like playing video games and siccing my magic space-crows on Goat-Face.”

Yuzu's pout turned childishly grumpy. “You're no fun, Karin.”

“Whatever.” Karin smirked slightly as she slid her phone back into her pocket. “We'd better get going before Goat-Face comes looking for us in ridiculous pajamas or something.”

The playful banter was a bit distant for Homura. All she could think was how cruel the Incubator was to rob a family of not one daughter, but two. As if she needed any more reasons to hate that monster.

Yuzu sighed affectionately and stood up. She bit her lip and turned to Homura. “Do you have someplace to stay— uhhh—” Her eyes went wide and she held a hand in front of her face and gasped. “Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't ask your name!”

Still half wondering which tragic fate would befall the twins and what manner of hole they would leave in their family, Homura distractedly answered, “Homura Akemi.”

Yuzu smiled and bowed cheerfully. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Homura!” Her face dimmed. “I wish it was under better circumstances.”

Karin inclined her chin. “Likewise.”

Homura sighed softly. “It can not be helped,” she said as she stood and straightened her uniform. “So, do you?” Yuzu anxiously fidgeted with the cuff of her sleeve. “Have somewhere to stay
tonight, I mean?”

“No. Where am I?”

“You're in Karakura. Little place west of Tokyo. We were at Old Karakura Train Station, not far from Naruki City.” Karin scratched her head. “Where are you from, O Rider of Rails?”

Homura frowned. She really was quite far from home. That had been the slap-dash plan, though, she supposed. Really should have thought it through more. She huffed in frustration and absently answered, “Mitakihara,” as she considered her options. She had lived in Tokyo once upon a time. Maybe she could double back and find something to do.

The twins' eyes went round. “That really nice city with all the pretty buildings?!” gushed Yuzu.

“The fancy city way up by Sendai?!” Karin screeched.

Homura glanced at Karin. “Closer to Soma, really.”

“Because that's *so* much closer.” Karin pressed a palm to her face. “There won't be any more trains up that way until morning.”

Homura pursed her lips. “I will be fine. I did not intend to return immediately anyway.”

Yuzu was the picture of innocent concern as she asked, “Homura, won't your parents be worried?”

Violet eyes glanced away from the twins. “I live by myself. No one will miss me.”

“But your friends—!”

“My friends are dead.”

“Your other friends—”

“I have no other friends.”

There was a long silence, finally broken by a sniffle. Homura glanced back at the twins and found Yuzu tearing up again and Karin looking... defiant?

Yuzu scrubbed an arm across her eyes, swept forward, grabbed Homura's hands in her own, and stared her down with a determined face. “You have us.”

Homura blinked in surprise. “What?”

“She said you have us.” Karin put her hands on her hips and glared at Homura. “We may have only met tonight, but we're in this together.”

Homura stared at them in bafflement. “But—”

Karin nonchalantly waved off Homura's objections. “You're a fellow magical girl. And you're not attacking us, plus you seem to have been close enough to a team of magical girls to care about them dying. You're not one of those cold magical girls. You're one of us, and we take care of our own.”

Guilt flooded Homura. She hadn't been part of a team. Not in this timeline. She had been cold to everyone. Distant and not particularly helpful. Homura shook her head slowly in disbelief. “You do not know that. What kind of person I am. You do not know me—”
Yuzu squeezed Homura's hands again and looked her in the eye. “You care enough about other magical girls to cry for them. You were polite about coming into our territory. You didn't attack us while our backs were to you. You could have stayed in Mitakihara and taken control of the territory your friends held, but you didn't. You could have killed us before we even knew you were there, but you didn't. That's enough for us.”

Homura just stared.

Yuzu released Homura's hands, stepped back, and struck a thoughtful pose. Then she nodded decisively. “You're coming home with us tonight,” she declared.

“What?”

Karin snorted. “As if we'd let you sleep under a bridge after the day you've had.”

“I couldn't— You're kind, but really—”

Yuzu's cheerful face went serious again. “Homura, there's a tricky Witch on the loose. It's dangerous to wander around when you're tired and lost.”

Karin regarded the new girl from heavy-lidded eyes and darkly added, “Besides, Witches aren't the only danger in Karakura.” She bit her lip and looked speculative. “We have Hollows here.”

Homura stared at Karin intensely, confused and wary. “What is a Hollow?”

Karin's face shifted. It was an odd expression that Homura didn't like one bit. It said that Karin had half expected her answer but that she wasn't particularly happy with it. Karin sighed and ran a hand through her bangs. “It's late. I'll explain tomorrow.” She eyed Homura's disapproving scowl and relented. “The short explanation is they're kinda like Witches that don't hide in labyrinths.”

Homura stared. That... would be terrifying. The only Witch that Homura knew didn't bother with a labyrinth was Walpurgisnacht. Questions swarmed her mind. She startled slightly as Karin flicked a finger against her shoulder.

“Tomorrow. Promise. Right now we need to get home before the old man comes looking for us.”

Homura frowned and allowed the change of subject. “How are you going to convince your father to let a stranger stay in your house?”

Yuzu smiled conspiratorially and winked. “Let us handle Daddy. He doesn't need to know you're a stranger and he let my brother have a girl stay with us a couple years ago. It shouldn't be too hard,” she chirped.

“You won't even need to make up a sob story like Rukia did.” Karin pulled her phone out again and pulled up a web browser. “Just tweak the truth a bit. Dad's a goofball so even if he does think to look up the news in Mitakihara you should be good as long as your story is vague enough to not contradict anything he finds.” Nimble fingers tapped out mitakihara news in the search bar. A few taps later, Karin's eyebrows jumped up. “It looks like some girl named Madoka Kaname didn't show up for school and has been reported missing? And a friend of hers who was missing was found dead... in a hotel room? Um, Sayaka Miki? And there's another girl who's been missing longer than either of them? Mami Tomoe.” She looked up. “Are any of those your friends?”

“All of them.” Homura's voice was heavy. “Mami was eaten by a Witch almost three weeks ago. They will not find a body. Sayaka contracted after Mami died. She... did not handle it well.”
Karin frowned. “How did her body end up in a hotel?”

Homura closed her eyes. “That was probably Kyōko's doing. She did not want to believe we had lost Sayaka and…” she trailed off with a shrug, emotionally exhausted. “It's complicated.”

“Hmmm? I don't see anything about a Kyōko in the news.”

Homura sighed. “You wouldn't. Her family is dead and she did not attend school like Mami. There is no one to report her missing. She died in a labyrinth so no one will find her body, either. Madoka has a family, so she will actually be missed.” She couldn't help thinking of a handful of timelines in which she had gone to Madoka’s house and met her loving family. Her parents would move heaven and earth to find her and never be successful. “She also died in the labyrinth, so she will never be found.” It will be different next time, she told herself.

Yuzu looked horrified. “You... you lost four friends in three weeks?!”

Homura hummed quietly in confirmation.

Yuzu's face crumpled as she teared up again. “That's too cruel. That's— that's—” She stepped forward and hugged Homura again. Homura passively accepted the hug, but didn't return it.

Karin cleared her throat, eyes glassy with unshed tears, face grim. “Well, we'd better get going. We'll work on the cover story on the way and talk more tomorrow. Come on.” She turned away and glanced over her shoulder. Yuzu looped her arm through Homura's again and gently guided her forward. Homura followed with hesitant steps.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Homura, get used to being railroaded by Kurosakis. No one can resist them LOL.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
VIER

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for the lovely reviews.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIER

TIMELINE X+N

The three girls meandered through the night, the twins quietly conspiring between prodding Homura for information to flesh out their story. Finally satisfied with their cover, the twins led Homura to a quaint neighborhood clinic that was closed for the evening. Homura was confused until the girls coaxed her to go around the clinic to access the house to which it was attached, which was dark save for the downstairs. Yuzu fished out her keys as they approached the door.

“Homura, I apologize in advance for any shenanigans you experience in this building,” drawled Karin. “I think the old man was dropped on his head as a baby or something.”

Yuzu laughed awkwardly. “He can be... overwhelming, if you're not used to him.”

“He’s like a hyperactive puppy who lives to embarrass us.”

Homura eyed the door warily as Yuzu opened it and entered. Karin waved for her to go next.

Yuzu cheerfully called out, “Daddy, we're ho—”

Karin and Homura peered around Yuzu to see what had made her stop mid-sentence.

“Oh, for the love of God,” groaned Karin. “Where do you think you're going in that?!”

Homura was at a loss for words. Before her was a tall, burly man with spiky black hair and stubble not quite dense enough to be called a beard. He wore what she assumed were pajamas—a tight black t-shirt with a faded faux tuxedo printed on it in white and loose light blue pants with... lobsters. Lobster-print pants. Okay. A flashlight and a phone were jammed into his right hand. He stood on one foot. His left hand was in the process of pulling a plush Totoro slipper onto his other foot. The man stared at them stupidly for a moment. Then he dropped the phone, flashlight, and slipper, teared up, and loudly declared, “I was going to go looking for you! You were gone so long! I thought my darling daughters had been kidnapped!” The man launched himself at his daughters, arms wide for a hug.

Karin dodged inside his guard, planted her hand on her father’s face, and redirected him toward a wall. “I texted you like fifteen minutes ago, Goat-Face,” she groused.

The man pulled away from the wall and looked over his shoulder at Karin. Melodramatic tears dribbled down his pouting face. “Daddy was worried!”

“We're big girls now, Daddy,” Yuzu chirped.
“You'll always be my babies!” the man wailed.

Yuzu giggled uncomfortably. Karin rolled her eyes and sighed. “Can you please behave like a rational adult in front of our friend?”

The man blinked away his tears in an instant and whirled away from the wall, seeming to notice the third girl for the first time. He gasped dramatically. “You brought home a friend!”

“That's what I just said.”

Homura stepped forward and primly bowed. “I am Homura Akemi. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kurosaki.”

The man casually bowed his head and waved. “It's a pleasure to meet you, too, Miss Akemi. The name's Isshin.” He scratched his chin and eyed his daughters speculatively before looking back to Homura. “Do your parents know you're here this late?”

“I live by myself right now. My uncle is often away on business.”

“I see.” Isshin looked from one of the girls' faces to another. “Are you girls having a sleepover? It's a school night.”

“Um, kind of,” said Yuzu. “Can Homura stay with us for a night or two? Some bad things happened at her school and some weird things are happening in her city and she...” Yuzu trailed off and looked at Homura somewhat helplessly.

Playing the role assigned to her, Homura bowed her head slightly and looked at the floor. “I did not want to be there. And I did not want to be... alone.”

Isshin frowned in concern. “Which school is this? And what kind of things? What city? Wait, how did you three meet?”

“I attend Mitakihara Middle School.”

Isshin's eyebrows jumped toward his hairline. “Mitakihara?!?”

“She moved up there this year,” said Yuzu. “She used to go to a school in Tokyo. Karin and I met her on our class trip to the botanical gardens in sixth grade.”

“We kept in touch on the internet,” Karin continued. “She's been telling us about some freaky stuff going on in her town lately.”

“What freaky stuff?” Isshin asked Homura.

Homura clenched her fists in the folds of her skirt and grimly met his eyes. “A week ago, a classmate and over a dozen other people woke up in a warehouse in the middle of the night. The authorities suspect mass hallucination, but it is strange. A few days ago, a classmate went missing. Today my friend did not come to school. Now they say she is missing, and someone found the first missing girl's body in a hotel room. And now they are saying that a girl from the next grade up has been missing since before the 'hallucination' event.” She twisted her skirt in white-knuckled hands. “It seems like someone is doing things to the girls at my school. I do not want to be next. And I do not want to see Madoka and Sayaka's empty seats.” She glanced down and to the side as though embarrassed. “It sounds stupid now, but I wanted to get away so I just got on a train and rode. I recognized the name Karakura when they called out the stop and I got off.”
Yuzu took over. “That's when she texted us for help. So we went to the train station and got her. And we talked for awhile and it got late.”

“Sorry we didn't call you, Goat-Face, but she was really upset and we totally forgot,” Karin offered with a shrug.

“So can she stay with us, Daddy? Please? It sounds so scary.”

By then, Isshin's face had completely morphed into that of a seriously concerned parent, all silliness put aside. Rather like a mask, Homura thought. He frowned and stared hard at Homura. For her part, Homura allowed her own mask to slip slightly under his scrutiny, let him see the exhaustion and grief.

After a long pause, Isshin scratched his head and shifted slightly, still frowning. “Does anyone know you're here?” he asked Homura.

“No, sir.”

After a moment he nodded. “You can stay as long as you call your school to report your absence in the morning. What you tell them is your business. I just don't want you to be reported missing, too. It would be cruel to your teachers and classmates and unhelpful for the police while they look for your friends.”

“Yay! Thank you, Daddy!” Yuzu cheered. She threw herself at her father for a hug. The loud goofiness immediately returned.

“Ah, my little girls are such good friends! MASAKI, OUR DAUGHTERS ARE GROWING UP TO BE SUCH KIND YOUNG LADIES!” He started bawling as he swung a squealing Yuzu around. “DADDY'S SO PROUD!”

Homura and Karin stared, Homura uneasy and Karin bored but blushing slightly.

Yuzu soon whirled away from her father and clapped her hands together. “Homura! I'll make you something quick for dinner, then a big breakfast in the morning!”

Homura blinked at the sudden change of topic. “Thank you, but that will not be necessary.”

Karin frowned. “You were on the train for hours. When's the last time you ate?”

Homura opened her mouth, paused, thought back, and frowned. “I do not know.”

Yuzu's face became more determined. “You must be starving. I can give you leftovers while I whip up something else to fill you up.”

“Please do not trouble yourself,” Homura demurred. Then her stomach betrayed her with a quiet growl.

Yuzu's face turned fierce, eyes commanding. “I'm making you dinner and you are going to eat it. Do you understand?”

This would have made the old Homura stammer and blush and generally fumble in mortification as she rushed to obey. This Homura merely gaped silently for a moment before nodding slightly.

Yuzu's face instantly slid back into good cheer. Like father like daughter? Homura wondered. “Great! I'll get started!” She turned and trotted down the hall, humming happily and randomly
saying ingredients aloud. Homura just blankly watched her go.

Karin patted Homura's shoulder. “Good call. She's all cute and nice but she can be the scariest of all of us sometimes.”

“So much like her mother,” sniffled Isshin, reminding the girls of his presence. “MASAKI, OUR—OOF!”

Karin withdrew her foot from her father's midsection. “Can you *not* start howling every five minutes, Goat-Face? Jeez.”

“So much... like my cousin,” wheezed Isshin.

Karin rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “Whatever. Come on, Homura, I'll reel in Yuzu and keep her from cooking you a midnight banquet. You must wanna sleep.” She grabbed Homura's hand and half-dragged her down the hall.

*What have I gotten myself into?* Homura wondered numbly.

Chapter End Notes

*A/N: Isshin is so fun to write.*

In this continuity there is no Quincy invasion, but Isshin told Ichigo the backstory from *Everything But the Rain*. In this story I presume the girls know some of the shinigami stuff because at the end of the Xcution arc they are seen welcoming Ichigo back to the World of the Living. It's an anime-only thing but I like it and it's convenient.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for the lovely reviews. Thanks for your patience while I'm setting up my chess board and establishing who knows what. I'm trying to do so in such a way that people who aren't super familiar with one of the canons can make sense of things. Also, I'm showing what each storyline looks like through the lens of the other canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

FÜNF

TIMELINE X+N

Isshin stood in the foyer for a few moments and watched the three girls disappear into the kitchen. He stood and listened to his daughters bicker over what constituted a reasonable amount of food for their guest while the new girl remained silent. It was sweet, but he frowned hard.

What worried him more, though, was the strange girl's high reiatsu and the way a Hollow reiatsu clung to her. Up close, he could feel Homura's own reiatsu gradually sloughing off the taint, but it was strong. And her face... It had been apparent that both Homura and Yuzu had cried hard earlier in the night, eyes red-rimmed and dried tear tracks on their faces. Both his girls had been quietly riled up and ready to argue with him to secure a place to stay for the girl. Then, for a moment when the new girl looked him in the eye, he saw genuinely painful grief and helplessness. How could he deny her help?

He didn't know what part of their story was a lie, but he knew that the girl's grief and fear were real. She was exhausted and hurting, Hollow reiatsu clung to her like lingering mud, girls were allegedly disappearing and dying, and his daughters had some level of involvement. It was as if he was seeing just the tip of the iceberg, the signs that something sinisterly larger was happening beneath the surface.

After another minute of thought, Isshin pasted a goofy expression on his face and pranced into the kitchen. He hummed obnoxiously as he got a cup and filled it with water, then glanced toward the girls. Yuzu was industriously throwing things in a pan as if it had offended her while a hesitantly sympathetic Karin served a lost-looking Homura a plate of reheated leftovers from the family's dinner earlier in the evening. The poor girl seemed too exhausted to guard her expression anymore, face wavering as though she couldn't decide whether to eat the food, scream and throw it, or fall asleep in it. It hurt to watch. Isshin saw echoes of his bereaved nine-year-old son staring at his food every night after being dragged home from the riverbank where his mother had died.

Every fatherly instinct Isshin had screamed that something was deeply wrong and the girl was caught up in something far over her head.

Isshin temporarily tucked his concern away and swung the fridge door shut with a flourish. "Well,
girls, Daddy's off to bed! I'll be up for awhile reading the new medical journal, though, and you can always get me if you need me, okay?"

Karin waved him off halfheartedly while Yuzu cheerfully wished him good night. Homura simply sat straight and stared at him as though not really seeing him. Isshin frowned at her in concern and gave her a small nod to wish her good night but she just stared.

Isshin took his water upstairs and climbed in bed with his laptop. He pulled up a window with his medical journal and scrolled down to a random point, then opened an internet browser to begin his own amateur investigation. Calling up the news sites for Mitakihara was the easy part. As a father, reading the results grew difficult.

**MISSING SCHOOLGIRL FOUND DEAD IN UPSCALE HOTEL ROOM**

*April 21 20XX 06:13 PM*

Sayaka Miki (14), the Mitakihara Middle School second year who has been missing since April 12th, was found dead this evening by security staff at Hotel Nikko Mitakihara. The police have released a statement indicating that the girl's death appears to have occurred sometime within the preceding 24 hours, though the cause of death is as yet undetermined. More details may be released following an autopsy.

*Updated April 21 20XX 06:47 PM*

The girl is said to have looked clean and in good health with no injuries on her person and no sign of struggle in the hotel room. Police continue to process the scene, which anonymous sources indicate appears normal save for a number of bags of food from various convenience stores and fast food restaurants. The investigation will continue through the night.

*Updated April 21 20XX 07:49 PM*

A girl who sources say is friends with Sayaka Miki has been reported missing by her parents this evening. For details, see our article here (link)

*Updated April 21 20XX 08:52 PM*

A press conference is tentatively scheduled for 10:00 AM tomorrow.

**FRIEND OF DEAD SCHOOLGIRL REPORTED MISSING**

*April 21 20XX 07:46 PM*

Junko and Tomohisa Kaname report that their daughter, Madoka (14), did not return from school today. Mitakihara Middle School reports that Madoka Kaname was recorded absent from classes today. Her disappearance is particularly troubling in light of the disappearance and subsequent discovery of the body of her close friend Sayaka
Miki this evening.

Mr. and Mrs. Kaname cite a phone call to another of their child's friends to indicate their daughter was last seen on her usual path to school. The friend said the missing girl appeared troubled and suddenly decided to go home instead of continuing to class. She never made it home. Kaname was last seen running north from Mitakihara Middle School around 07:45 AM. She was wearing a Mitakihara Middle School girls' winter uniform with white stockings and her pink hair was tied up in two pigtails with red ribbons. Anyone who thinks they have seen her or has any relevant information is urged to call the Mitakihara Municipal Police at XXX-XXXX.

SCHOOL OFFICIALS REPORT THIRD MISSING GIRL

April 21 20XX 08:14 PM

At the request of investigators, administrators scoured records at Mitakihara Middle School for attendance anomalies relating to the mysterious disappearances of Sayaka Miki (14) and Madoka Kaname (14). Concerned administrators expanded their examination to the entire student body out of an abundance of caution. They discovered that third year student Mami Tomoe (15), an emancipated orphan, had not attended classes since April 4th, predating Sayaka Miki's disappearance by eight days. When calls to her home went unanswered, police were dispatched to her apartment. The door was found to be unlocked. Sources report that there was no obvious sign of foul play, though the scene has yet to be processed in depth. One source indicates that the apartment appears abandoned. Officials are submitting her photo to local hospitals in hope of finding that she was admitted without identification. Tomoe's last known whereabouts are yet to be determined. She has blond hair which she usually wears in two curled pigtails decorated with flower hairpins. Anyone who thinks they have seen her or has any relevant information is urged to call the Mitakihara Municipal Police at XXX-XXXX.

Updated April 21 20XX 08:42 PM

An anonymous law enforcement source claims that physical evidence of a tie to the newly missing Madoka Kaname (14) (link) was found in Tomoe's apartment. Mitakihara Municipal Police Department spokesperson Kuroe Mura declined to comment, citing the investigation in progress and promising a news conference sometime tomorrow morning.

Isshin sat back and scrubbed a hand over his face, then held his chin and stared at the articles and the school ID photos of three girls smiling out at him. He vaguely noted the timestamps. Something didn't add up, but he was too tired to spot it. Sighing in temporary defeat, he shut his laptop and settled down for the night.

Sleep was a long time coming. What the hell had his daughters gotten involved in?
A/N: Papa!Bear Isshin is on the case.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
SECHS

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for the lovely reviews.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

SECHS

TIMELINE X+N

Waking up somewhere completely new was strange for Homura. She had become so accustomed to endlessly repeating the same events with the same people in the same setting that change was a surreal novelty. So there she was, drowsily sitting on the spare futon that had been dragged into the girls’ room from their absent brother's closet, squinting at the clear sky outside the window while the Kurosaki twins got dressed. Weird.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and Madoka was dead again.

Yuzu swiftly pulled on her uniform and hurried out the door, calling out that Homura could look through her closet and dresser for clothes. A sleepier Karin made the same offer. Fifteen minutes later Homura followed Karin downstairs to the kitchen in one of Yuzu's dresses. Yuzu turned from the stove to greet them and cooed over how cute Homura looked in her dress. Karin and Homura had just sat at the table when Isshin burst into the room dressed like a responsible adult, complete with lab coat and tie.

“GOOOOOD MORNING, GIRLS!” he cheered.

“Good morning, Daddy!” bubbled Yuzu.

“Mornin',” mumbled Karin.

Homura stared for a moment, then bowed her head respectfully and quietly said, “Good morning, Mr. ...Dr. Kurosaki.”

Sitting down to a hot, fresh breakfast was another oddity for Homura. She was no longer sure how many times she had relived six weeks of her life, but surely it had been years. After the first several variations on disaster, she had been reduced to eating leftovers from the takeout she got for dinner on the way home from various fights and weapons heists. The sheer normalcy of sitting around a table while a family chattered pleasantly was disturbingly abnormal. It all felt quite distant to her, but she also presumed she wouldn't have anything like this in the next timeline so she had better appreciate it while it lasted. Conversation had always been terribly awkward for her so she didn't even try to participate, but she could easily savor food in silence. Homura was grateful that the odd collection of cheer, sarcasm, and buffoonery somehow seemed able to gauge her mood with small glances and accordingly fall into easy banter around her without trying to draw her in. She felt free to stare out the window and let their voices wash over her as she ate. Some part of her fretted that she was being a terrible guest, but the majority of her didn't particularly care.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, the Kurosaki family was happy, and Madoka was
dead again.

Karin set down her empty glass. “Hey, Homura. It's Friday so we'll be at school all day. We'd ask Goat-Face to let us ditch and hang out with you but the first chapter tests for a few classes are today. Then we have a half day tomorrow— maybe we could ditch that?” Karin glanced at her father, who made a skeptically considering face. She dropped the subject to pick up later and looked back at Homura. “We have a lot of video games and books. We don't mind if you use them.”

Homura hesitated, confused that Isshin hadn't scolded Karin for calling him Goat-Face right in front of him. Once upon a time, her father would have lectured— She forcefully smothered that train of thought.

“She could also help in the clinic if she wants,” Isshin suggested between bites. He looked to Homura. “Nothing big, just refilling the supplies in the exam rooms when the delivery comes in, maybe watch the waiting room while I'm with a patient.”

Homura stared at him in surprise.

“You don't have to,” he continued. “I just figured I'd give you another option for keeping busy if games or books don't distract you enough. Waiting for news must be terrible.”

Homura looked down at her lap, hunching her shoulders with the weight of guilt. She already knew what had happened and that it would never be figured out. All because she had been too slow to realize that Madoka's loving heart would drive her to the Mermaid Witch's labyrinth even if she wasn't contracted. Homura had been so late to the scene that she couldn't even retrieve Madoka's body so she could have a proper funeral.

Gritting her teeth and wringing her skirt, she kept from crying by sheer force of will. It will be different next time, it will be different next time, it will be different next time. After a moment she gave Isshin a general nod of agreement. Any distraction would be welcome.

Isshin watched her for a long moment as he sipped his coffee. He nodded as if the matter was settled and stood. “Right. We'll call your school after I see the girls off and go from there.”

“Oh! Is it already that late?!” gasped Yuzu.

Karin smirked. “It's because you cooked such a fancy breakfast. You lost track of time.”

“Why aren't you worried?! We have a test in first period!”

Karin's eyes widened comically. She abruptly stood and shoved back her chair, tripping over herself to grab her book bag. “Shit, c'mon, Yuz, let's run!”

“Laaaaaanguage young laaaaady!” sang Ishhin. He sounded smug rather than angry.

“Shut it, Goat-Face!” Karin reappeared in the doorway, hopping as she slid on a shoe. “We'll see you later, Homura. Take care of yourself!”

Yuzu ran up and briefly hugged Homura. “We'll come straight home and then we can have some time to talk, okay?” The brunette pulled away and waved. “Have a good day, Homura!”

Homura and Isshin stared toward the door in the twins' wake for a moment before looking at each other. Isshin clapped loudly. “Well! Let's get this over with. Do you need a phone? Or need to look up the number?”
“No, thank you, sir. I have the number programmed into my phone.” Mostly because she had originally anticipated calling out sick a lot in the first timeline. After using her magic to heal herself, she had left the number on her phone for lack of any reason to remove it.

Isshin sat down with a new cup of coffee as Homura dialed her school. The phone rang unusually long before a frazzled secretary picked up.

“Mitakihara Middle School attendance office, how may I help you?”

Homura stared blankly at her plate and rolled a grape back and forth beneath one finger. “My name is Homura Akemi. I would like to call out sick for today, possibly tomorrow.”

“A-ke-mi, ah, there you are,” the secretary murmured to her computer. “And what is the reason for your absence?” she asked with dread.

“I am feeling unwell because of the stress from the disappearances. Two of the girls were in my class. One of them was very kind to me and she... the thought that she is gone...” Homura swallowed hard and controlled her voice once more. “There is a note in my file about previous illnesses made worse by stress. My uncle is out of the country on business and I was... afraid... so I decided to visit some friends west of Tokyo.”

The secretary sounded worried when she asked, “Tokyo? That's so far! And if you're not well—”

Damn. Needed to placate the woman. How...? Ah. “My friends' father is a doctor. I will be staying with him in his clinic today.”

“But Miss Akemi, with all that's happening—”

Homura's patience was wearing thin. “I will be supervised by a competent adult. And my uncle's attorney filed forms to allow me to make such decisions in his absence. I may be young but I know I am all but emancipated. He only controls my finances.”

The secretary sounded uncertain. “Still—”

Isshin interrupted with a mild, “Would you like me to talk to them, Homura?”

Homura looked at him warily, then switched to speaker and held it out to him.

Isshin cleared his throat and assumed a businesslike persona. “Good morning, ma'am. This is Doctor Isshin Kurosaki, proprietor of the Kurosaki Clinic in Karakura. In case it is relevant, I have admitting privileges at Karakura General Hospital. My daughters brought Miss Akemi to my house last night, quite distraught. Being with my girls seems to have calmed her some, but I don't recommend throwing her into the media circus that must be around the school right now, especially when she has no one at home to support her and look after her. I thought it would be best to report her whereabouts so she doesn't get counted among the missing.”

The secretary sighed tiredly. “Thank you for that. Honestly, she's not the first to call in sick today. A lot of students and parents are worried. Rightly so, I'm sorry to say. And yes, the press is accosting students.” They couldn't see her, but Homura was certain the woman was massaging her temples or somesuch.

“Shall I leave all of my contact information with you in case the school wants to check on her location?” Isshin offered.

Homura tilted her head to one side and owlishly watched the man. It was like observing a
completely different person from the one she had met the night before. She never would have pegged him as a doctor, but she could see it now. *Which is the mask?* she wondered. Also, it was strange to hand over her personal business to someone else. It took a few moments, but she finally pinned down the unsettling feeling as it having been so long since she had actually depended on an adult for anything. Even so minor a concession of control was uncomfortable.

Isshin eventually ended the call and sat looking at Homura searchingly. “You didn't say you had health problems.”

Homura looked surprised for a moment, then shrugged and ran a hand through her hair while looking away. “I had arthroscopic surgery to correct a heart defect awhile back. I am perfectly fine now. Adults keep fussing over me, though. They need not bother.”

Isshin frowned. “Adults *should* worry over the health of children. Don't take your health so lightly.”

Homura raised her eyebrows and glanced at him. “You seem awfully invested in my health for a stranger.”

“I'm a doctor. That's my job.”

“You are not *my* doctor.”

Isshin's frown deepened. “Maybe not. But I couldn't call myself a father if I didn't worry about other children besides my own.”

Homura tilted her head and stared at him silently as though he was some kind of creature she had never seen before and was unsure of. Isshin met her gaze with stern earnestness until she finally looked away.

The quiet was broken by a buzzer in the distance. Both turned toward it.

“Ah, the supply delivery is here.” Isshin turned back to Homura. “Do you want to help in the clinic or would you like some time to yourself?”

She leaned toward solitude, but figured she'd end up obsessing over Madoka's many deaths without direction. “I would like to help in the clinic, please.”

“All right, then!” Isshin jabbed a thumbs up her way. “Let's get started!” He wore a small grin, but still looked serious.

Homura wasn't sure how his mood could slide around so easily. Still uncertain what to think of him, she hesitantly followed him to the clinic.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Thank you for the lovely reviews.

And today on The Muggles Aren't Completely Oblivious and Want to Know What the Hell is Happening...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isshin found the girl to be an efficient helper in the clinic. Her familiarity with general clinic structure and procedure was obvious in the ease with which she began tidying and arranging the rooms and supplies, avoiding that which was not to be touched without instruction. When a young mother hauled in a bawling toddler with blood all over his front from his adventures in climbing up to a medicine cabinet to play with Daddy's razor, Homura was unruffled. She silently assisted with supplies while Isshin cleaned and sutured the boy's cheek, displaying no aversion to blood. It seemed a bit odd, but Isshin chalked it up to the medical history she had so casually alluded to.

After an otherwise slow morning, Isshin ordered lunch to be delivered from a little takeout place down the street. Homura ate neatly but was politely distant in the face of every attempt Isshin made at conversation. He found himself amid one of the rare times when he was at a loss for what to do. There were many questions he wanted to ask her, but he worried that the poor girl was barely holding herself together as it was. Isshin had seen how she had kept herself from flying apart at the seams when he had brought up waiting for news at breakfast. Had seen her face twist and fists clench, had seen the shimmer of tears she refused to shed. Had seen, worryingly, that she felt some degree of blame. Between his time leading the Tenth Division and his time as a father, Isshin had become very good at reading behavioral cues to decipher emotions a person tried to hide. Years of ferreting out who was playing innocent— and playing the fool himself— prepared him to spot guilt. And Homura Akemi reeked of it. Her body language screamed of it no matter how hard she tried to stifle it. Even her unusually well-developed and well-controlled reiatsu was threaded with guilt. Isshin wondered if she was blaming herself irrationally or if there was something more behind it. He wanted to poke at what she knew, but the girl was fragile behind her cool front. Better for now that he tried to gather information independently.

When Homura claimed she didn't feel well after lunch and asked his leave to take a nap, Isshin gladly agreed. He sat tapping a finger on the clinic's front desk as he sensed her reiatsu shifting around the house. When her little cloud of gloom settled in the twins' room, he snapped open his laptop and continued his research.
Stunning information was revealed at this morning's press conference. Mitakihara Municipal Police Department spokesperson Kuroe Mura stated that evidence in the cases of the three Mitakihara Middle School students who have disappeared in recent weeks ties them to each other and additional suspicious activities in town.

Though initially unreported, third year Mami Tomoe (15) was the first of the girls to fail to attend class. Teachers describe her as studious and positive, but a loner. She is an emancipated orphan and lives alone. Authorities searched her apartment through the night. An anonymous law enforcement source reports that the living space appeared as though someone stepped out and intended to return shortly: There were dishes in the kitchen sink, a stale cake on a cooling rack, a pot and cup of mostly-evaporated tea on the coffee table, and a school bag near the table. Dates on the assignments correspond with April 4th, the last day Tomoe is known to have attended school. Curiously, a spiral-bound notebook labeled as property of Madoka Kaname (14), the girl who disappeared only yesterday, was found neatly placed on the coffee table, said a second source. Police hope to find further clues within its pages, which also have no dates beyond April 4th. Our source says it contained some assignment lists and a large number of doodles. It has not been dismissed as unimportant, as at least five of the doodles portray a figure with Tomoe's distinct hairstyle.

“Evidence implies that Kaname knew Tomoe before her disappearance despite never being in the same class and never having been known to meet,” Spokeswoman Mura said after confirming the details given in anonymous leaks. “This is perhaps corroborated by Kaname's parents. They report that about a week before Tomoe's disappearance, their daughter came home late and said she had been invited to an upperclassman's home. Our working hypothesis is that this upperclassman was Mami Tomoe. What seems more ominous now is that Kaname's parents report that their daughter was tearful on the morning of April 5th. Both recall that she specifically said something like 'nothing's wrong with me, I'm alive.' Based on the timing, we are concerned that Kaname may have known something about Tomoe's case. Upon speaking with Miki's parents, we found that Miki showed similar behavior at the same time, leading us to speculate that she also knew Tomoe.”

Desperate for leads, Mura went into unusual detail about what is known about Sayaka Miki (14), found dead in an upscale hotel room yesterday evening. Her disappearance was the first to be noticed. She and Madoka Kaname were longtime friends. Like her friend, Miki had no previously known relationship to Tomoe. As previously reported when she went missing, Miki regularly traveled to and from Mitakihara General Hospital to visit a friend through March and into mid-April. Like Kaname, Miki also displayed distress on April 5th. Her behavior became erratic after her friend was released from the hospital. On April 11th, Miki's mother reports she was depressed and obviously ill. This was the first day Miki did not attend classes. Miki attended school on April 12th and another friend reported that she went to a cafe with Miki after school. Sayaka Miki never went home after her last known appearance at the cafe. Authorities previously speculated that a schoolgirl rivalry discussed by the girls had caused Miki to run away, but this theory is now in question.

Miki's body was found in a room at Hotel Nikko Mitakihara now thought to have been
reserved fraudulently. The online payment for the room has been traced to a prepaid credit card purchased with cash in Kazamino City. Police have requested surveillance footage from the store where it was purchased. Hotel Nikko lobby footage shows a red-haired girl of perhaps fourteen to sixteen picking up the room key on April 9th. The desk clerk is being interviewed about the transaction. Sayaka Miki does not appear on any of the tapes, so it is unclear how she came to be in the hotel room. The mystery girl is seen coming and going at odd times of day and night, often with food. She is never accompanied by anyone and has not been seen since the morning of the day the body was found. Police are working on a composite sketch to release to the public in search of clues to this girl's whereabouts. “At this time, the unknown girl is simply a person of interest in this case,” said Spokeswoman Mura. “Considering the demographics of the other missing girls, we are also concerned for her safety.”

A forensic team is still combing through the hotel room, but initial fingerprint collections have brought up an interesting link. The prints match those collected at the sites of two ATM “break and bust” robberies on the east end of town in the last two weeks. Considering the proximity of these crimes to the edge of town nearest Kazamino City and the purchase of the prepaid credit card there, Mitakihara Municipal Police Department has requested the cooperation of the Kazamino City Police Department to investigate leads and look for similar incidents in their jurisdiction.

MYSTERIOUS “MASS HALLUCINATION” EVENT MAY BE LINKED TO DISAPPEARANCES

April 22, 20XX 10:58 AM

The April 5th event during which eleven people woke in a warehouse in the middle of the night with no memory of how they got there is being scrutinized more closely in light of today's revelations regarding the missing girls from Mitakihara Middle School.

Two of the disappearances have a common witness: Hitomi Shizuki (14), heiress to Shizuki Architecture & Engineering CEO Yasuhiro Shizuki. Miss Shizuki is on record as the last person to see both Sayaka Miki and Madoka Kaname before their disappearances. The three are good friends. Shizuki purports to have invited Miki to a cafe to talk about personal business after school on April 12th. She has a receipt to prove she was there and a waitress corroborates her statement that she left by herself afterward. The waitress said Miki sat at the table and stared at her food for perhaps twenty minutes before also leaving. Shizuki's testimony regarding Kaname isn't as easy to corroborate. Shizuki says that shortly after they met up and headed toward school, Kaname stopped, said she decided to go home, and ran away. All this would simply be a curious and sad coincidence if not for a third point of involvement.

Said heiress was one of the people found in varying states of consciousness and confusion when police were summoned to a television station by a silent alarm around 9:30 PM April 5th. The television station has been closed for renovations since mid-March. The group's initial entry did not trigger an alarm as a member of the station's security staff was in the group and used his card to gain entry. The fingerprints of
other adults at the scene were found on empty bottles of household chemicals which are deadly when mixed. The alarm was triggered by the breaking of a window. Investigation outdoors found that a bucket full of chemicals had been thrown out the pane. Whoever did this saved the lives of those inside. Authorities had isolated a set of fingerprints on the bucket, window sill, and a doorknob, but they didn't match any of the victims left on the scene.

Today, authorities cited the presence of Madoka Kaname's notebook in missing girl Mami Tomoe's apartment to get samples of her fingerprints from objects in the Kaname home. The samples match partial prints on the doorknob of Tomoe's apartment, which was somewhat expected. What was a complete surprise was for the database to identify the prints of the mystery savior at the television station as belonging to Kaname, who was previously not known to be involved in any way.

In light of this development, all evidence regarding the “mass hallucination event” is being reevaluated and the victims are being interviewed further. Police ask the public to refer to their official tip site for this case if they saw anyone behaving oddly on the evening of April 5th.

When asked for a statement, Yasuhiro Shizuki commented with condolences for the Miki family, support for the Kaname family, and an announcement that while his family will cooperate with police, he will withdraw his daughter from school temporarily in case she is being targeted. He expresses concern that the April 5th event was a botched attempt on his daughter's life or thwarted human trafficking and urges the police to solve the case swiftly.

**BREAKING: MISSING MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS SEEN IN SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE EVIDENCE IN EARLIER DISAPPEARANCE OF 6TH GRADER**

*April 22, 20XX 12:53 PM*

An eagle-eyed detective investigating the April 4th disappearance of Nagisa Momoe (12) has spotted a major clue to the Mitakihara Middle School disappearances. Authorities now suspect there could be a larger problem at hand than originally thought.

Though from rural Kinuma, Momoe spent considerable time visiting her terminally ill mother at Mitakihara General Hospital, which she had traveled to in order to receive treatment for pancreatic cancer. As we reported earlier this month, Momoe was present for her mother's death around 4:10 PM April 4th. A few minutes after her mother passed, Momoe became upset and said her mother's death was her fault. No one could calm her and she escalated to hysterically yelling that she could have made her mother get better, but was stupid. When nurses moved to restrain her, she dodged around them and ran away.

Restored security footage shows her run into a stairwell, descend to the ground floor, pass through the main lobby, and run out of the main entrance. A camera positioned to monitor the bicycle racks shows her run into the frame and fall to her knees sobbing.
To everyone's dismay, the camera went offline at this moment due to electrical problems which crashed the surveillance network for the north wing of the building's first floor, including the lobby. No other cameras show Momoe leave, but the outdoor cameras in areas unaffected by the outage are focused around points of entry and the bicycle racks face an open park. The footage from the lobby was not immediately available to those seeking Momoe due to the outage, so they did not know to focus their search by the bike racks.

The initial search for Momoe focused within the hospital building itself. An expansion of the search did not begin until 25 minutes after she left the oncology ward. By then, Momoe could have run through the park herself or been abducted. The search has been stymied by the camera malfunction and a total lack of other evidence.

Detective Kentaro Tachibana was assigned to the sixth-grader's case on April 6th. He went over the security footage repeatedly over the last few weeks. “I just thought that maybe I had missed something and if I watched enough, I could find it and bring Nagisa home,” the detective explained at a press conference today.

When the pictures of the missing girls circulated the police headquarters, Tachibana felt a nagging familiarity though he had never met them. He was particularly certain he had seen Kaname. When he heard the detail that Miki had been known to frequent the hospital, he watched the security footage again on a hunch. He was stunned by what he found.

In the videos of the main lobby, Momoe is seen running down the center aisle and out the front door. In one of the camera angles, Madoka Kaname is clearly visible sitting in a chair. 31 minutes after Momoe left the screen—10 minutes after an initial perimeter sweep by security found nothing suspicious by the bike racks—Sayaka Miki approached Kaname, who stood up and left with her. Cameras show the two exit by the front door and turn toward the bike racks. It is unknown what happened off-camera, but Kaname is spotted on a camera aimed out the emergency room entrance about 10 minutes later. She is not carrying her school bag as in the tape immediately before and is running.

Security services focused on not allowing exit from the building while it was thoroughly searched, as it was then believed Momoe must still be indoors. The bike racks were left unattended.

Kaname reenters the ER camera about 20 minutes later. She is running back the way she had come. Following her is Mami Tomoe, verifying that the two did know each other and establishing Tomoe’s last known location. None of the girls appear in any subsequent camera footage, causing authorities to speculate that they left by way of the park.

“This is a major break,” says Mitakihara Municipal Police Spokeswoman Kuroe Mura. “Many threads are gathered together in one place. However, this also raises many more questions.”

One new curiosity centers on Tomoe’s school bag. She is plainly carrying it in the video. It was found in her apartment weeks later near Kaname's notebook. One could infer that she returned to her apartment at some point later in the evening. The question now becomes one of whether she was alone when she did so. Did some or all of the girls go to Tomoe's apartment after the events in the video took place? Did the three
girls encounter Momoe? Did Momoe leave with them? Authorities are reexamining the evidence gathered from Tomoe's apartment to see if they can find anything indicating Momoe was there.

One theory from a source who wishes to remain anonymous is that Kaname and Miki found Momoe crying, then Kaname ran to get her older friend for help. Whether they all went to Tomoe's apartment afterward or not, there is now speculation that the three middle schoolers may have interrupted an attempt to commit a crime against the younger Momoe and become targeted in turn. Tomoe had disappeared by the next day.

“If only that camera system hadn't malfunctioned,” sighed the source. We can't help but agree.

Isshin frowned worriedly and scrubbed a hand over his face. No mention of Homura, and yet... He wondered just what she knew. What she had seen or heard. Something bothered him. He scrolled through the articles he had saved the night before and focused on the time stamps. Sat up sharply and looked them over again more critically.

He had been to a medical conference in Mitakihara once. The ride by commuter train was roughly four hours. There was no way Homura could have heard about even the first news— Miki's death — in time to get on a train and make it to Karakura by the time she had. He did some math. The news about Kaname would have been released more than halfway through her journey; the announcement of Tomoe's disappearance, not until three-quarters through her travel time. And the tie to the “mass hallucination” hadn't been released until morning.

Homura knew about it all before any of it was made public.

Given the faded Hollow reiatsu that clung to her... well. Homura's reiatsu was strong and controlled. She should be able to see spirits. What if there was a Hollow hunting girls in Mitakihara? What if at least some of the missing girls were also spiritually aware? What if they had been trying to defend themselves, been overwhelmed, and Homura was left alone in a world of grownups who would call her crazy if she told them the truth? What if she had kept in touch with his girls from a happenstance meeting on a field trip because she found out Karin could see the same spirits she could? He knew Karin had long since learned to use her reiatsu to defeat Hollows. Had Homura, too, but been outclassed?

Gently, Isshin reached out with his reiatsu to gauge Homura's. It was muted with sleep, yet easier to read without her conscious control.


Isshin withdrew and stared blankly at his computer screen, hand covering his mouth as he leaned on his elbow and considered his options. At length, he sighed, rubbed his eyes, and picked up the phone. He completely ignored the singsong greeting when someone picked up at the other end of the line.

Still staring at the frozen image of one of the security videos, he interrupted with a grim, “Hey, Kisuke. I have something I think you should look into.”

Chapter End Notes
This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Karin and Yuzu had a hectic day at school. The morning full of testing was stressful enough, but their anxiety grew from lunchtime on. They sneaked off to eat their bento on the roof of the school and, by silent agreement, spent the entire period glued to their phones reading all the news they could find on Mitakihara. Both gradually stopped eating in favor of reading between the lines of the articles. When the warning bell rang, they packed away their lunches and phones on autopilot, faces pale.

Yuzu turned her phone off and looked up at her sister. “This looks really bad, Karin.”

“Yeah.” Karin pocketed her phone and stared blankly at the sky. “It'll be hard, but we need to talk to her. Figure out just how bad things are up there. Seems like they have way more magical girls and Witches in Mitakihara. It's weird.”

Yuzu stood and picked up her bag. She frowned doubtfully. “Kyubey did say Karakura was backwards from a lot of places because of the Hollows.”

Karin hummed at Yuzu's point. “And it sounds like a lot of the area's magical girls got taken out in only two, three weeks. And... I'm guessing those were Witch Kiss attacks? A place with enough strong Witches to pull that off... I don't like it.”

They walked to the roof access door in silence. Yuzu caught Karin's sleeve as she entered. Karin looked back at her sister.

Yuzu looked troubled. “What can we do to help Homura? We can't just run away to help her defend Mitakihara. But she doesn't have anyone and she's so sad. How do we help her?”

Karin sighed and looked down. “I dunno yet. We'll figure something out. We need more information first. If we can't think of anything, maybe we can ask Kyubey. Maybe he knows about some magical girls closer to Mitakihara who can help out.”

Yuzu pursed her lips unhappily. “I don't like it.”

“Haa, that's what I just said.”

The tardy bell rang, startling the sisters into scrambling down the stairs to return to class.
Homura woke from her nap around two, but didn't bother getting up. She lay on her side in the futon and stared at the storage tubs under Yuzu's bed while critiquing her performance in the current timeline. Her mind spun round and round and round, finding flaws, plucking their threads to try to figure out how to be better next time. It was an all-consuming process that swallowed her time until the Kurosaki girls called out their return greetings downstairs. The cheerful sound jostled her out of her mental spiral. Homura slowly got up and headed downstairs.

By the time she reached the main hallway, Yuzu was coming out of the kitchen and Karin had kicked her school loafers to one side and was busy putting on a pair of sneakers. Both looked up.

“Hey, Homura,” Karin said quietly. “How are you holding up?”

Homura stared for a moment then shrugged wordlessly.

Karin sighed. “I thought so.”

Yuzu looked sad and silently reached over and squeezed one of Homura's hands. When Homura looked up at her, she tried to give an encouraging smile. It came out strained.

Karin rolled her shoulders and stretched. “Put on your shoes. We need to go talk somewhere more private.”

Having expected a grilling of some sort, Homura calmly stepped forward and slipped a foot into one of her school loafers. “As you wish.”

Yuzu was about to put her shoes back on when Isshin burst into the hallway. “Girls! You're home! How was school?!”

Karin turned and directed a long-suffering grimace at the wall. Yuzu giggled awkwardly. “It was fine, Daddy. The English test was kind of tricky but I think I did okay.”

Isshin whipped his head around to look expectantly at Karin. She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I think I did okay at everything, too. Math was easier than I expected. History sucked, though. Too many dates.” She shrugged. “No point worrying about it now. The damage is done.”

Isshin laughed. “Karin! Such pessimistic optimism! How do you do it?!”

“Trade secret,” drawled Karin.

Isshin grinned. He glanced around at the girls and their shoes and became more serious. “Are you girls going somewhere? I wanted to talk with you three.”

Yuzu bustled in front of the other girls. “We're going to take Homura on a walk around Karakura. She's been in the house all day and we thought we could... talk. About... everything. In private. As girls. You know. If that's okay with you, Daddy?” Yuzu looked up at her father, vulnerable I'm-cute-and-sad-please-indulge-me face at full strength.

Isshin melted under the onslaught. “Yeah, yeah, that's fine. We'll talk after dinner though, all right?!”

Yuzu smiled, cheerful in victory. “Okay, Daddy! I'll be back in time to cook!”

They hustled out the door with Isshin's admonitions to be careful and call me if you need me at
Homura followed the Kurosaki sisters through their neighborhood. She could see that both were wondering how to start. She didn't particularly care, so she left them to it until Karin finally broke the silence when they were near a park.

“So... have you been reading the news from Mitakihara today?”

“No,” Homura looked at her feet. “It would be nothing I did not already know. I do not see any point reading about it.”

Karin frowned. “The cops are looking into it, though. They seem to think there's a kidnapper or murderer and they're looking at some of your classmates. They might question you, so you should know how to answer. It sucks, but if you answer in a way that agrees with their theories you won't draw attention to yourself.”

Homura hummed noncommittally.

Yuzu wrung her hands. “You really need to be careful, Homura. At least figure out how to explain how you know Nagisa and the other girl in case they find you with them on a security camera like with the others.”

Homura stopped and blinked in surprise, then tilted her head to one side in confusion. “Nagisa...?”

The sisters stopped, too. Karin raised her eyebrows. “What, you don't know her? She was the first one to go missing.”

Homura furrowed her brow. “No, Mami Tomoe was the first to go missing.”

Yuzu shook her head. “The news said Nagisa Momoe went missing the day before Mami Tomoe. The hospital had videos showing Mami, Saya...ka? And... um...”

“Madoka,” Homura supplied.

“Yes, Madoka! There were videos showing them go toward the place where Nagisa was last seen a little bit earlier. And then no one saw Mami after that.”

Homura's face turned thoughtful. “May I see the article, please?”

Karin pulled out her phone, brought up the article, and handed it over. Homura's control of her face slipped; the sisters watched her face shift from neutral to disturbed, then grim. They were completely lost when Homura murmured, “Ah. The hospital. Her mother died. Of course,” answering her own question.

Karin stared for a moment then swept her hands out expectantly. “Well?”

Homura returned Karin's phone and tucked her hair behind her ear. Her cool mask was back in place. “Nagisa Momoe may or may not have been a magical girl from out of town. I did not know of her. There was a Witch by the hospital's bike racks. Miki and... Kyubey—” God, she hated saying that thing's cutesy name— “monitored it while Madoka found Tomoe. It defeated and ate Tomoe.” She paused and carefully considered her next words. “Momoe was probably... overcome... by the Witch before the others found it. I did not see Momoe when I fought the Witch.”

The Kurosaki girls frowned. Yuzu teared up. “That's horrible.”
Homura shrugged and stared off to one side, melancholy.

After a moment, Karin asked, “The news mentioned some unidentified redhead. Is that girl the Kyōko you told us about?”

Homura glanced back at them. “Yes. Kyōko Sakura. Her main territory was Kazamino City. She intended to take over Tomoe’s territory after her death, but Miki contracted the day after Tomoe fell. Things between Miki and her were... messy. Sakura seemed to respect Miki at the end, though. How Sakura went from wanting to kill Miki to wanting to save her... I doubt I will ever know.”

They stood together in silence for a while until Yuzu quietly asked, “Are there enough magical girls left in Mitakihara? It seems like there are a lot of Witches there.”

“I do not know of any others, no,” answered Homura. She looked off into the distance and bitterly murmured, “I am sure... Kyubey... will contract more soon enough.” She briskly tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Not that new contractees will survive when Walpurgisnacht attacks.”

Homura belatedly realized her words could be taken in a very derogatory way when Karin drew herself up and looked indignant. She had not intended to insult potential magical girls like a snob with a superiority complex, but she didn't know how to fix the situation. Homura grit her teeth and clenched her fists in frustration. Why was talking to people so difficult?

But Karin didn't explode on her like Sayaka would have. Instead, she squinted at Homura for a moment, tilted her head to one side, and slowly asked, “What is Wall-whatever and why do you think newbies will be cannon fodder for it?”

Homura stared.

How?

Yuzu looked surprised for a moment, then eagerly joined in. “Is it something dangerous? Would it help if we come fight it with you?”

Stunned. Homura was stunned, suddenly blindsided by the prospect of courting the sisters as allies in the next timeline. They were amiable enough. If they were competent, veteran fighters—and their ease in combat against the Familiar suggested such—then—then—What if she could prevent Madoka—and Sayaka, really—from contracting, keep Mami and Kyōko alive, and bring in Karin and Yuzu as backup against Walpurgisnacht?

Her mind reeled with the possibilities. It would depend on how good they were in a real fight against a Witch. She bit her lip; it would also mean putting their lives in greater danger than they already were. Then again, whether or not they knew it, they had signed their death warrants the moment they accepted the Incubator's contract. It was a moral gray area. She seemed to live in a moral gray area these days. But even if she had to learn to fight with them, study the possibilities, figure out logistics... test them against Walpurgisnacht in this timeline as a reference for the next... Maybe...

And what if the first thing she did in the new timeline was seek out Nagisa Momoe? Was she really the Sweets Witch? Had she contracted before or after Homura's reset point? Would it be best to dissuade her from contracting altogether, or to explain the risks and lead her into making a better wish than whatever one she had regretted at her mother's deathbed? Morally, it would probably be better to dissuade her, but if the girl insisted on saving her mother, maybe she could be trained well enough to help against Walpurgisnacht.
If she could wrangle all four or five magical girls into cooperating with her... and really, Kyōko would probably be the only one who had to be convinced...

Maybe the girls in other timelines wouldn't believe what she said about the Incubator, the origin of Witches, and the truth of Soul Gems, but if she simply set up Walpurgisnacht as a common enemy to be defeated without trying to convince them of anything else...

So many possibilities she had never considered.

New hope burned in her chest.

The twins looked unsure about her. Homura swallowed hard and tried to restrain her sudden euphoria. “You do not know what you are offering. Walpurgisnacht is... massive. An enormous Witch. It is a collection of pieces of many other Witches that fuse into a Witch strong enough that it does not need a labyrinth. It is going to hit Mitakihara in about ten days and it will be like a hurricane. And it has so many Familiars.” She pursed her lips, then heavily continued, “You could very well die. For total strangers.”

Karin crossed her arms. “Risking our lives to protect people from Witches is what we signed up for. We were aware that we could be killed when we contracted. Whether we die here or in Mitakihara, it's all the same if it's for the sake of protecting people.”

Yuzu looked more frightened than her sister, but determinedly nodded her agreement.

Homura looked at Karin sideways. “If you say so. How much experience do you have?”

Karin gestured dismissively. “Over a year. We're no fledglings. We've been flying on our own for awhile now. We get more Familiars than Witches in Karakura because of the Hollows, but the Witches that do come here are nasty tricky.”

“And we fight the Hollows, too!” chimed Yuzu. “We've had a lot of practice.”

“That, too,” drawled Karin. “The Witch we're hunting right now is a stubborn one. We only ran into it once. It's been really good about hiding since. Keeps splintering off strong Familiars. How about you help us get that one out of our hair and we'll help you with this Wall-Knocker Witch?”

Homura's face twitched terribly. She tried to say something substantive, but all that came out was a strangled “Wall-Knocker?!”

Karin blinked, falsely oblivious. “What?”

Homura stared at her incredulously, worked her mouth in an attempt to speak, then burst into hysterical laughter. Not joyful laughter, but harshly startled laughter in the face of madness. Her own laughter actually frightened her. It was a brief bout, but unsettling all the same. Homura held a hand over the bottom half of her face and just looked at the ground and breathed.

The twins watched her for a long minute. At length, Yuzu quietly asked, “You were going to try to fight it by yourself, weren't you? You were going to beat it or die trying. And your friends are all gone, so without any help...” She trailed off into unhappy silence.

Homura met Yuzu's speculatively piercing eyes. It was obvious Yuzu wondered if Homura was outright suicidal or if she was simply extremely dedicated to protecting the city her friends had died for. It technically wasn't either, but the truth was too complicated so Homura chose to ignore the implied question. She straightened herself with a sniffle and brushed at her clothes.
Holding her head high, Homura pushed her hair over her shoulder and airily hedged, “I will have to see how well you fight against this Witch of yours. You have also mentioned fighting Hollows. What are they?”

Karin and Yuzu stared at her for a moment more before simultaneously turning to one another and having a silent conversation consisting entirely of the slightest of facial expressions. They seemed to agree that Karin would take the lead.

“Kyuubey said he doesn't bother explaining Hollows to most girls because they don't really show up where there are a lot of Witches. Said the vast majority of magical girls will never run into one so he doesn't see the point in talking about them.”

Oh. Another of the Incubator's “you didn't ask” topics was about to bite her. Fantastic. When would she stop running into such things?

“To explain what Hollows are... hmm.” Karin paused and stared skyward, eyes unfocused. She cast about for a moment, almost seeming to be listening or looking for something, then focused on a point in the distance before looking at Homura. “I think I need to explain something else first so it will make sense. And I want to do a little experiment. Kyubey doesn't like talking about Hollows and everything so I'm curious if other magical girls can see Pluses.”

Homura didn't bother hiding her wariness. Things Kyubey Avoids Talking About could be a horror novel, in her opinion. “Experiment? And... Pluses?”

Karin waved her hands in a placating gesture. “I promise, it's just walking down a street and finding out whether or not you see something that most people can't. Pluses aren't dangerous. We actually try to help them. I wouldn't bother but if you can't see a Plus then it might change how I explain Hollows.”

Okay, now Homura was completely lost. “If you say so,” she said doubtfully.

Karin shrugged and scratched the back of her head with a sheepish grin. “Come on. It's not far.”

The twins started walking. Homura followed several paces behind them. They crossed the park, passed an elementary school, and ended up on a quiet residential street. The twins paused as if listening, then turned and entered the courtyard of an older apartment complex. It soon became apparent that they were heading for an older man whose back was to them.

“Excuse me,” began Yuzu. “Hello, Mister. Can we help you?”

The old man turned around and regarded them suspiciously. “Get out! You don't belong here,” he sneered.

“Neither do you, now, Gramps,” Karin snarled lazily.

“Karin!” hissed Yuzu.

The man puffed up like an angry cat. “Such an impudent little—! I should—!”

“Yeah, yeah, goddamn kids, get off my lawn, whatever. We got it.” Karin rolled her eyes. “What has you hanging around, Pops?”

Anger animated his reddening face. Unable to form the words to address the brat before him, he swung an arm around and jabbed a hand at the apartment building. “That! That wreck! I told the building manager over and over that he needed to do something about the goddamn rotting guard
rails, but would he listen? No! And now look at me! And what does he do? Just patches up the stretch that finally broke. Irresponsible money-grubbing slob! Us oldsters rebuilt this country and all we ask for is a rail to help us get to our little holes in the wall without breaking our necks. Can't even do that much! Ungrateful—"

Yuzu dutifully listened and nodded along to the screed while Karin zoned out and glanced at the building dispassionately. Homura just stared.

There was a hexagonal metal plate riveted into the man's chest. A long chain trailed down from it and slithered across the dry grass toward the apartment building.

A metal plate riveted into the man's breastbone. What.

She had seen many stranger things, yes, but never outside a Witch's labyrinth. Never with a person who was acting so normal. Cantankerous, but normal. Except for the whole being riveted to a chain that tied him to a building like a dog thing.

Karin eventually interrupted the man's tirade about what he planned to get the building manager to do with a blunt, “You know you're dead, right, Pops?"

The old man turned to Karin and snarled, “Of course I do, you little snot! I'm old, not stupid!”

Karin lazily scratched her ear. “Sooo... how do you plan to accomplish anything?"

Yuzu pouted at Karin. Karin shrugged.

“'I'll— I'll haunt him! I'll haunt him until he fixes the place! If anyone else has an accident, we'll haunt him together!'"

“Hmm, hmm, I see.” Karin nodded sagely. “He won't be able to see or hear you so that wouldn't really go anywhere. It might feel great to scare the hell out of him, but how is he supposed to link it to fixing things?"

“W-well, do you have a better idea?!” he blustered.

Karin tilted her head toward her sister and fished out her phone. “Hey, Yuz, what city department would look into stuff like this?"

Yuzu brought a finger to her mouth and pursed her lips in thought. “Hmm. City planning? No, wait — code enforcement?"

“Sounds legit.” Karin tapped around on her phone a bit.

The man squinted at the girls suspiciously. “What are you doing?"

“Using the magic of the internet to file a complaint for you from beyond the grave. You're welcome. Observe my sorcery.” She started dictating aloud to herself. “Dear Pencil-Pusher. I heard this old guy I used to run into fell at his apartment complex and died. He used to tell me how terrible the safety rails and stuff were and how dangerous it was and that he was afraid he'd fall and break his neck because the landlord wouldn't do anything. When I heard he actually did fall and break his neck, I went and looked myself. The place is rickety as hell and there are other old people there. Can you have a code inspector look at the place? If for no other reason than to make the other geezers feel safer. I'll attach a picture of the wreck. Thanks.” Karin snapped a quick photo and tapped the screen. “There. Happy?”
The old man was gawking. “That was the rudest— they'll never— you just— you little delinquent —!”

“Whatever. It'll liven up the day of some poor bureaucratic minion. Your issue has been addressed, your earthly burden is relieved, et cetera, et cetera.” Karin flung her left hand out in front of her. Her Soul Gem ring flared brilliant red and manifested a katana. “Have a nice trip, yeah?” In one smooth motion, she bopped the old man on the forehead with the pommel of the blade.

“You are the most disrespectful young lady I have ever—!”

The old man abruptly glowed and burst into fragments of blue light. A black butterfly wobbled around Karin's face irritably before floating up and disappearing.

Karin stared at the sky and swung her katana up to rest against her shoulder. “Jeez, what a chore.”

Yuzu looked at her sister reproachfully. “Did you really write those things in the message?”

“Pfft. Of course not. I just made a few notes so I can write something better when we get home.”

Yuzu pouted. “That was mean, Karin.”

Karin shrugged carelessly and let her katana disintegrate into red sparkles. “He was mean to you first.”

Yuzu rolled her eyes. “I'm capable of standing up for myself, Karin.”

“I know. You're just too nice to actually do it sometimes.”

“I'm getting better at it.”

Karin patted her twin's shoulder. “Yes, you are. I'm very proud.”

“What just happened?”

Both twins broke off from their banter to look at Homura, who was confused and unhappy about her confusion.

Karin looked satisfied. “So you did see it.”

“What was that?” Homura was not unintelligent. This was like adding one and one, getting two, and still not trusting the answer, though.

“That was a Plus,” Yuzu said with a smile. “Most people call them ghosts.”

Homura stared. “Ghosts.”

“Yep! We get a lot of them here.”

Karin smirked. “Welcome to Karakura.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: “Karin's Adventures in Konso” could be its own omake series, I swear.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Thanks for the reviews! (*_*) You're so encouraging.

So Karin grabbed the exposition hat and put on a fashion show, hahaha. No guarantees I'll always update this quickly. This chapter was mostly spitting out a lot of the framework I worked out to make the two canons mesh. It was just a matter of getting the girls to explain it. What they understand of it, anyway. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The twins led Homura back to the park. They bought some drinks from a nearby vending machine and claimed a picnic table on a small hill. Homura sat across from the sisters and eyed them warily.

“So,” began Karin. “Pluses and Hollows.” She stared at her soda can seriously for a moment to gather her thoughts, then took a deep breath and looked up at Homura. “The fact that you have a Soul Gem means I don't have to convince you that souls are real, right?”

Homura nodded seriously. Karin looked a bit disappointed. Maybe she had expected a more dramatic reaction?

Karin took a deep breath. “Okay, so when you're alive, your soul is tied to your body by a literal chain, because evidently metaphors are too abstract for someone upstairs. When you die, your soul gets kicked out of your body and the chain breaks. Barring rare exceptional circumstances, your lifetime pass to that body is revoked and you can't get back in. Make sense so far?”

Homura nodded again.

Yuzu took over. “A lot of people... move on, cross over, or whatever name you give moving to the afterlife—”

“And there is an afterlife,” interrupted Karin.

“Yes, there is an afterlife. It's called Soul Society. We'll explain that more later. Anyway, a lot of people move on by themselves. But a lot of people also don't. They have regrets, or don't want to go, or are afraid, or have unfinished business. Sometimes they died so fast that they don't know they're dead. So they wander around, or stay near a certain place that was important to them. These souls are what most people call ghosts. The chain on their chests is what's left of their attachment to their bodies.”

Karin took over. “At that point, they're still pretty much themselves. Whole. But when the chain isn't attached to a living body, it starts to disintegrate from the end.” Karin's face turned grim. “When it gets to the plate on a soul's chest, the plate dissolves, too. Things get kind of vague here. That plate is connected to this part of a soul that is called the 'heart' or 'mind'. Metaphysically
Speaking, I mean. I think it's clearer to say their 'humanity'. When that's gone, the soul transforms into a monster called a Hollow. Most new Hollows are mindless bundles of instinct. Their instinct is to eat other souls."

Eyes wide, Homura asked, "Why?"

Yuzu sadly answered, "They're left with animal instinct but they can tell something's missing. They have an actual hole in their bodies that represents their missing 'hearts'. So they hurt and they're empty and all they can think to do is try to fill themselves up with Whole souls—Pluses. But they can never fill that hole no matter how many Pluses they eat."

"I think whoever came up with these terms was some kind of math nerd." Karin mused. "Think of the names like Whole souls are positive integers, therefore Pluses. Think of newer Hollows as empty or zeroes. Then there is a kind of Hollow that loses itself so much it goes into negative integer territory and becomes something called a Menos. Plus-zero-minus."

"What is a Menos, then?" Homura asked with dread.

Yuzu quietly said, "Hollows that get so hungry they start eating other Hollows. They're more powerful than normal Hollows. And the more they eat, the more powerful they get."

"O-kay!" Karin said with a sharp clap. "So. We have ghosts wandering around, and hungry ghosts running around trying to eat the normal ghosts. Things can get pretty wild if they're left to their own devices. That's where shinigami come in."

Homura tipped her head and looked at Karin skeptically. "You are saying shinigami are real?"

"Yep. Basically, shinigami are strong human souls. They come from Soul Society to gallivant around the World of the Living like ghost police. They find Pluses and help them cross over before they can turn into Hollows. They also fight Hollows and purify them. Most of the time, when a Hollow is purified, it goes on to Soul Society, too. Sometimes they were already monstrous enough in life that these creepy skeleton gates will pop up like the world's worst jack-in-the-box and drag their asses to Hell."

Yuzu shivered. "I hate those gates."

Homura stared blankly. "Hell is real, too?"

"For better or worse, yeah."

Homura frowned thoughtfully. "Why do you get Hollows and Pluses here, then? I have never seen them before."

Karin leaned back and took a swig of her soda. "That's because Karakura is something called a jūreichi. Basically, it's an area with a stupid-dense concentration of spiritual beings. There are a lot here to start with, so more get drawn in, on and on. Kyubey said that Witches mostly stick to areas with low... spiritual presence, I think. Witches mostly hunt normal humans. Hollows do hunt normal humans, but they're most drawn to strong souls because they're a more satisfying meal. Hollows are freakishly common in Karakura because of the whole jūreichi thing making even the people who can't see ghosts juuust strong enough to be extra delicious or something. A lot of people here have been exposed to the supernatural so much that they have at least some idea that weird invisible stuff is happening. Some of them may only know they suddenly feel like they should really avoid walking on a certain street or something, but they have at least some sense."

"That's kind of what I was like," Yuzu chirped. "Karin and my brother had always been able to see,
but before I met Kyubey I could only hear some and see some blurs. And I got bad feelings about places sometimes. I got attacked by Hollows a few times. It's really scary when you can't see what's attacking you.”

Karin sipped her soda and set it down. “So anyway, just that little boost makes the people who live here some kind of delicacy to a Hollow. Kyubey said that most Witches prefer the boring, normal places because it would be more difficult to mentally snare people who have more latent spiritual power. Like... Witches' magic can kind of sneak up on most people and get a Witch's Kiss on them because they have no defenses. But someone with even a small boost in spiritual power takes more effort to snag. And you know how most Witches work— quiet, hidden, pretty much trick people into serving themselves for dinner. Think of them... umm...” Karin scratched her head and stared skyward in thought. “Like... hunters versus trappers. Oh! If Hollows are wolves, Witches are spiders. Generally speaking. There is some crossover... wolf spiders, hahaha I kill myself. Karin grinned. “Anyway, Kyubey says that difference is why even potential magical girls are more likely to notice they've been lured into a labyrinth without getting Kissed and brainwashed.” Karin tilted her head. “Have you noticed a pattern like that? Kyubey told me about it, but I only have our experience to go on.”

Homura frowned and stared at the table in thought. She clearly remembered the moment in the initial timeline when she had suddenly come to her senses in her first labyrinth, some instinct startling her out of the mental grip of the Witch that had whispered soothing death to her. Had that been an innate defense before a Witch's Kiss completely bound her? And in the current timeline, she had seen a similar result when Madoka and Sayaka wandered into the labyrinth at the mall. And again, when Sayaka and Madoka weren't ensnared by the Sweets Witch. And again, when Madoka followed the flock of Witch-Kissed victims to the television station labyrinth and kept her wits about her enough to counter whatever orders the Witch had given her thralls. There had been examples in other timelines, but those were the most recent. On some level, Homura had always noticed the pattern; she had just never questioned the why of it. Little puzzle pieces shifted into place. Joy of joys, they made an answer that sparked another question.

“Yes,” Homura slowly answered after she rolled it over in her head a bit. She looked up at Karin seriously. “Are you implying there is a correlation between magical girl potential and... spiritual awareness, I think you said?”

“Mm-hmm,” hummed Yuzu. “Before you became a magical girl... well, I know you said you never saw anything, but did you ever feel anything? Did you ever walk down a perfectly normal street full of perfectly normal people and suddenly stop because you were certain something was... maybe hiding around a corner or something? Or even just felt like... like you couldn't trust your eyes when you looked at an empty space where no one was standing, and felt like someone should be there? Or someone was watching you? Things like that.”

“Especially near things like those little roadside memorials for people who got hit by a car or something. Those are dead giveaways. Ouch! Yuzu! Pun not intended!” The sisters tussled for a moment.

Homura tried to think back to the time before she went to Mitakihara. It seemed so long ago now. She hadn't gotten out much before her last surgery, anyway. But the more she thought about it...

“What about hospitals?”

The sisters blinked at her. “Oh, yeah,” said Karin. “Especially the bigger ones. Confused dead people can wander around in them if they don't cross over right away. My friend told me that a shinigami assigned to an area with a hospital in it is supposed to patrol the hospital at least once a
week to clear them out.”

“Karin!” scolded Yuzu. “You make it sound like— like— sweeping up cobwebs or something.”

“Isn't it?” Karin deadpanned.

Yuzu heaved a long-suffering sigh. “You're incorrigible.”

Homura tilted her head curiously. “What friend told you about... assignments and patrols? Do you know the shinigami?”

Karin flushed and glanced at her sister, who was suddenly grinning delightedly. “Yuzu, don't you star—”

“Karin is friends with a highly-ranked shinigami.”

“We're not here to talk about Tōshirō.”

“Just all the things he's taught you, right?” Yuzu's smile was a bit too sweet to be called a smirk, but it was sly all the same. She looked at Homura and raised her hand to her mouth conspiratorially. “Most of the fancy explanations Karin just gave come from her asking her friend the same questions.”

“Stop saying friend like it's some kind of code word, Yuzu, it's creepy. And I only asked him because Ichi-nii may be smart but he sucks at explaining spirit stuff. And that was after I practically beat it out of him with all his 'wah wah you're safer if you don't know.'” Karin glared off to the side with a pout. “Such a waste of effort. Though I guess I can't blame him if those drawings are how Rukia explained things to him.”

Yuzu looked mildly confused. “Rukia's drawings are cute. They made sense to me.”


Alarmed, Homura asked, “Your brother knows about magical girls?”

Yuzu choked on her soda and Karin's jaw dropped. The sisters snapped their attention back to their guest.

“What? No! No way!” denied Karin. “God, Ichi-nii would kill us, send us to Soul Society, hunt us down there, and give us the third degree all over again if he knew we contracted. Especially why we contracted.”

“No, he wouldn't,” Yuzu said with a calm roll of her eyes as she wiped her mouth. “He'd just put on his disappointed puppy face and make us wish he had.”

Karin considered this carefully. “Yeah, you're right. He's a total sucker for us.”

Homura eyed them both oddly. “If he does not know about magical girls, then what does he know and how does he know it?”

“Welllllll,” Karin hedged. “That's a long story. The super short version is: Surprise! Our big brother is a shinigami.”

Homura looked more confused. “I thought you said shinigami were... souls that came here from the afterlife?”
“Yep!” Karin took a swig of her soda.

“But... your brother is alive. Right?”

“Uh-huh,” chirped Yuzu.

“Then how...?”

“There's a long complicated story of family drama and diabolical experiments and all manner of spiritual shenanigans and dead-people politics and god-wannabe megalomaniacs,” Karin said while gesturing expansively with her soda, “but you can summarize it as 'Ichi-nii is a freak of nature who will get stronger and do something new every time you think you have him figured out.' He was always really, really strongly spiritually aware, but a few years ago his power just went off the charts and, hilarious as it sounds, he's stronger than a lot of dead people.” Karin grinned at Homura's bewildered stare. “This is our family's standard of normal. Evidently my brother even confuses and frustrates the dead guys. Tōshirō has a special twitchy facial expression just for when my brother pulls something weird. It's great.”

Homura tilted her head. “If your brother is so strong, why can he not sense that you are magical girls? Surely he must be able to tell you have power?”

“According to Kyubey, when he makes us magical girls all that happens is he focuses and concentrates the powers our souls already had. So spiritually aware people who knew us before we contracted felt our power get stronger and more controlled. It would be weird except the timing of the change is perfect.”

“What do you mean?”

Yuzu took over with a smile. “When we contracted, we were only two years younger than our brother was when his powers suddenly got stronger and he started seeing Hollows on top of Pluses. Then he got strong enough to fight. Kyubey says that like with a lot of things, girls mature spiritually sooner than boys. So us getting stronger was kind of expected.”

“Especially with our parentage,” Karin said with a smirk.

Homura frowned, but took the bait. “What about your parentage?”

“Oh, nothing much,” breezed Karin. “Just that our mom was spiritually strong enough to fight Hollows as an uncontracted human and the old man is a shinigami. Former captain, if you can believe it. I know I can't.”

Homura froze in shock. A moment later, she sputtered, “What? B-but— How? If he's a— a spirit, how is he a doctor here? How does he have human children? And his power— I didn't sense...” She trailed off. Actually, she hadn't bothered really paying attention to power in anyone but the twins. The whole town was like a faint buzz of magic in her senses, now that she thought about it. Isshin hadn't particularly stood out, though.

“My friend explained that,” answered Karin. “The shinigami invented these fake bodies— gigai. If they need to blend in with the living for some reason, they possess the fake bodies. Then they ditch the body if they have to fight. When Tōshirō visits me, sometimes he borrows a fake body so I won't look nuts talking to thin air and he can help me destroy other teams in soccer. He doesn't feel super strong then, either. He told me that strong shinigami have to seal a lot of their power when they come to the World of the Living and that there are special fake bodies that can seal even more. His guess is that Goat-Face has something like that.”
“Wait, your friend guesses? Didn't your father tell you about this?”

Karin snorted. Yuzu laughed. “We're waiting for Daddy to tell us. We got the basics of the situation when we got our brother to tell us about all the spirit stuff. He didn't think some of the technical stuff was important when Daddy told him and he wasn't very good at explaining some of what he did know.”

“So I asked Tōshirō, my walking shinigami encyclopedia.” Karin smiled smugly. “The old man doesn't know we know about him. We convinced Ichi-nii not to tell him. We're gonna see how long it takes him to decide to tell us and then be totally unsurprised or mess with him some other way. Ichi-nii agrees it should be hysterical.”

Homura stared at them strangely and pondered the Kurosaki family's sheer bizarreness.

“I think we got off track,” said Yuzu. “Shinigami purify Hollows by fighting them and breaking their masks with their special weapons called zanpakutō. Every shinigami— every soul— has a different weapon. They all start out as swords, but stronger souls sometimes change them into other weapons that match their personalities— you know, like magical girls have. When a zanpakutō breaks a Hollow's mask... um...”

“Math again, kinda,” Karin supplied. “The shinigami is pretty much a super strong Plus. So they stab the Hollow with all their... plus-ness... and it cancels out the... minus-ness and purifies the other soul. I hope that makes sense. Shinigami also use their zanpakutō to send normal Pluses to Soul Society by stamping them with the pomell like I did earlier. When the weapon purifies a Hollow, it then also sends the purified spirit to Soul Society. It's a neat little setup.”

“So you see,” Yuzu finished cheerily, “Shinigami are to Hollows as magical girls are to Witches. Kinda.”

Homura's mind whirled, connecting dots, asking questions, and generally feeling overwhelmed. *I wonder if they've followed that thought to its logical end. Or could the Incubator have told them about the origin of Witches? Do they know about it all but aren't saying anything because they think I don't know?* She set that line of questioning aside for another time.

“You say these— zanpakutō?” Homura said slowly. “You say our weapons are like them. If that is true, why do we have to give Grief Seeds to Kyubey? Should our weapons not purify them, if the analogy holds true?”

“Kyubey said our weapons are imperfect replicas of zanpakutō,” said Yuzu.

“Tōshirō told me that shinigami get their zanpakutō by being given a blank sword that absorbs the shinigami’s power over time,” said Karin. “So they're given something to focus their power as quickly or slowly as they need. Kyubey said that what he does when he makes our Soul Gems is force our souls to crystallize and focus our power by themselves— and very quickly. So the weapons we get are approximations of what we'll get if we become shinigami when we go to Soul Society. They're just not complete in this form. Not enough to truly purify Witches.”

“Our weapons can purify Hollows, though,” added Yuzu. “But Witches aren't Hollows.”

Homura braced a finger along her jaw line and leaned on one elbow, a vague idea bubbling in her mind. Aside from something about that striking her as plain wrong... “If magical girl weapons work on Hollows, do shinigami weapons work on Witches?”

Both sisters shrugged.
“We don't know, and Kyubey says he doesn't know, either,” said Karin. “He said that even though Witches are similar to Hollows, they work differently enough that he's never heard of a shinigami deliberately seeking out a labyrinth the way they deliberately hunt Hollows. I'm good at math, but when he starts talking inversion this and quantum that, he loses me. It boils down to Witches being so good at hiding themselves Kyubey has never heard of a shinigami finding one. Or at least not surviving finding one. He told us that, hypothetically speaking, a strong Witch could probably trap a weak shinigami.”

Yuzu put her elbows on the table and propped up her chin. “Kyubey says that's why magical girls are so important— shinigami can't sense labyrinths, but magical girls can. Magical girls protect people from the Witches. He said that a long time ago, the shinigami noticed magical girls purifying Hollows and helping Pluses cross over, and that it... didn't go very well.”

“He said shinigami get twitchy about living humans having shinigami-like powers,” Karin clarified, “and they were especially stabby about it in the past— Ichi-nii's stories back that up— so it's a neat little bonus for Kyubey that Witches tend to avoid the more spiritually-dense areas where the most shinigami are. It helps him protect magical girls. Historically, he had to worry about protecting magical girls from the Witches, the Hollows, and the shinigami.”

“Kyubey actually took a risk contracting us,” said Yuzu. “Usually, he avoids the jūreichi wherever it happens to be at a particular point in history.”

“That's why Kyubey doesn't actually come to Karakura. We have to go out of town a ways to give him our Grief Seeds.”

“We've tried to tell him that the shinigami seem to be more tolerant now, but he refuses to approach the shinigami. He saw what happened when the Quincy—a group of humans who were spiritually gifted enough to fight Hollows— a group of humans who were spiritually gifted enough to fight Hollows— wouldn't obey the shinigami.”

Homura raised a brow. “And that would be?”

“Genocide,” Karin declared bluntly. “Over two hundred years ago. Ichi-nii and Tōshirō both say the hardliners in the shinigami government that pushed that agenda all got assassinated in the last war, though, and the new government hasn't gone after those survivors they know about. Since the war, anyway.”

Regret weighed on Yuzu's face. “We wish Kyubey would work with the shinigami, but we can't blame him for wanting to protect the magical girls. He said he had contracted a few Quincy girls and he saw them get killed. I guess that stays with you.”

Homura furrowed her brow, trying to reconcile what she knew of the Incubator's methods with what the twins were telling her. Aside from the girls ascribing such foreign concepts as concern to the Incubator, she could kind of see how the two angles could mesh, but would have to think on it. However...

“If Kyubey avoids Karakura, how did he contract you?”

Karin rolled her empty soda can in circles along its rim. “That's an interesting story, actually. That Tokyo field trip we're using as cover with Goat-Face really did happen.”

Yuzu smiled sadly. “We met Kyubey at the botanical gardens.”

Homura leaned forward and held her chin in her hands. She stared intently at Karin. “Tell me.”

Karin rolled her shoulders, took a deep breath, and began to tell the story.
A/N: Picture, if you will, Ichigo trying to explain shinigami stuff, panicking, and digging out Rukia's drawings to use as a visual aid. Picture that trainwreck.

Further geekery I couldn't believably fit into a teenager's explanation of Pluses-Hollows-Menos, no matter how smart I have her: In my mind, the power levels of the categories are expressed as a parabola with a positive slope at vertex (0,0). X-axis would be “degree of wholeness/hollowness” and Y-axis would be “power level,” such that the farther one goes left/Hollow, the more powerful one gets, and the farther right/Whole/Plus/shinigami-like, the more powerful one becomes. Movement to the right would be through positive means such as training and natural growth; movement left would be due to further corruption, such as Hollows eating Hollows. It's been several years since my last math class so let me know if any of that sounds off.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
“Couldn't the class trip be to somewhere more exciting?” asked Karin. “I mean, come on. We're leaving elementary school. Reward us for not demolishing the building or something.” She sighed, one cheek puckered as she sucked on the straw of her juice box, and looked out at the sprawl of the Koishikawa Botanical Gardens. Trees were budding, bright new leaves unfurling and spreading out under the mild sunshine of an unusually early spring. Most of the trees in the arboretum were still in winter drab when seen from a distance, the swath of eerie gray-brown dotted with evergreens here and there.

“But it's interesting here! And so pretty!” gushed Yuzu. She pried apart the segments of her orange, the last item in her bento. Most of the girls' classmates were finished and wandering around now that the tour portion of the day was over.

“Hmph. I guess,” Karin conceded. “It'd be better if the cherry trees were blooming.”

Yuzu's face brightened as she swallowed a segment of her orange. “Oh! Maybe we can bring Onii-chan here for cherry blossom viewing before next school year starts! Maybe— maybe it could cheer him up? A bit?”

Yuzu looked down sadly. Karin gnawed on her straw thoughtfully. Their brother hadn't been the same since he lost his powers over a year ago. She and Yuzu had managed to coerce the stubborn boy to explain the basics of what had happened during the entire shinigami debacle, so she understood why he could no longer see or hear ghosts— no, Pluses— and Hollows. Karin understood it, but couldn't help feeling bitter that the burden to win a metaphysical war fell on her brother's shoulders when there was an entire otherworldly military that was supposed to handle that kind of thing. Her friend Tōshirō had since explained some of the failures, but even he quietly admitted it was shameful. So her brother had thrown away a core pillar of his very being for the sake of something bigger than himself. That was his choice, yes, but it was painful watching him slowly list off center for lack of anything to replace that missing pillar.

On some level, Karin and Yuzu both knew they couldn't fix their brother. The problem wasn't something they could change. It didn't stop the girls from trying their best to get their brother to live rather than just exist.

Ichigo was very, very good at faking contentment with his life without his powers. Perhaps good enough to fool himself. For now.
Karin and Yuzu, however, were very, very good at reading their brother.

The girls were certain he wasn't as well-adjusted as he tried to force himself to be. His brittleness was showing more with every passing month. But there was nothing to be done. The Thirteen Divisions had mostly withdrawn from Karakura, leaving the humans to help their savior pick up the pieces of his life. Mostly. Karin found herself bitter rather than furious only because she sometimes spotted different shinigami silently perched on light poles or rooftops looking just as helpless, frustrated, and unhappy as she felt as they watched her brother walk by without noticing them. If beings such as they looked so defeated when seeing her brother...

Well. Let them. Karin and Yuzu would never admit defeat.

Karin rolled the straw from one corner of her mouth to the other. “Yeah. And if he says no, we'll tell him we'll ask Dad and he'll drag Ichi-nii along by the collar if he has to, so he should come with just us to avoid that. I don't think it'll come to that, though. Ichi-nii's still a total sucker for us.”

Yuzu hummed in agreement around the last of her orange. The girls stood in peaceful companionship for several minutes, quietly appreciating a nearby carefully-plotted field of early-blooming crocuses, multicolored hyacinths, and snowdrops. Then Yuzu's eyes wandered toward the treeline of the arboretum.

“Hey, Karin. Isn't that Kazuya? What is he doing?”

Karin glanced over. Sure enough, her soccer teammate's back was turned to them as he took halting steps toward the trees. He stopped at the treeline and cocked his head as though listening to something. After a few moments, he walked into the trees with an oddly swaying gait.

Karin frowned in confusion. “What is he doing?” She glanced around. Finding few people, she sighed and threw her empty juice box in the trash. “Come on, Yuzu. Let's fetch the idiot before he manages to get lost.”

They put their empty bento in the stack of all the other empty ones and set out for the trees, Karin marching grumpily and Yuzu smilingly looking at the flowers. They followed the path into the wood.

“Hey! Kazuya! Where are you?” Karin shouted when they were several yards in. They heard a rustle off to their right and saw the boy far off the path, shuffling through the carpet of dead leaves. “Kazuya! You idiot! Stay on the path!” Karin growled in frustration and charged off into the trees after him. Yuzu looked up and down the empty path, made an unhappy sound, and hurried after her.

Karin caught up with her friend and grabbed his shoulder to turn him around. “Didn't you hear me? Come ba—!” She was cut off mid-word by the boy elbowing her in the chest and knocking the air out of her. Yuzu shouted her name as Kazuya shrugged her hand off his shoulder.

“Stop that,” he said with the thick voice of the half-asleep. He started to wander away again.

Yuzu hovered over Karin as she panted for a moment. Furious, Karin stood up and shouted, “What the hell do you think you're doing?!”

Kazuya came to a wobbly stop. He glanced over his shoulder at them. Distractedly, he said, “I need to go to her. She's lonely.” Deeming that all the explanation needed, he turned and resumed his walk. Karin made to stomp after him, but Yuzu held her back.

“Karin,” Yuzu whispered urgently. “What was that thing on his neck?”
Karin blinked and looked at her sister in confusion. “Thing on his neck?”

“Didn't you see it? It was like a tattoo... or maybe a really big spider.”

Karin made an incredulous sound. “What are you saying?”

Yuzu let go of Karin and wrung her hands. “I-I don't know. But Kazuya isn't acting right. And he's not talking right. I think something is wrong. Something feels weird.”

Karin squinted after her friend, who was still swaying his way through the trees in the distance. “You're right. That wuss wouldn't dare hit me.” She scowled and started following him more carefully. “Come on.”

The girls jogged after the boy and carefully approached him as he stopped in a clearing. The place didn’t seem to be anything special—three big, rotted tree stumps were piled to one side. The earth was overturned over a wide area from gardeners digging up roots. Three new trees in burlap sacks were nearby, their bases supporting an assortment of shovels, hoes, and rakes. Kazuya turned to his left to dazedly stare at... nothing, it seemed. It gave the girls a chance to see the side of his neck, though.

There was a purple mark about five centimeters in diameter stamped on his neck like a tattoo. As the girls drew closer, they saw that the main part was a solid but warped and wavy five-pointed star with a small blank normal star cut out of the center. Thin lines connected each twisted arm of the big star at their middles, implying a pentagon shape behind the star. Attached to the bottommost side of the pentagon was a small bell-like shape.

“What is that?” Karin said in an undertone. Slowly, she reached toward her dazed friend and poked the mark with one finger. She barely had time to shudder before Kazuya backhanded her in the face.

“Stop that,” he said drowsily. “It's my invitation.”

Usually, Karin would roar at the boy and charge. Instead, she held her cheek and stared at her friend in horror.

Yuzu anxiously asked, “Karin, what is it?”

“That mark. It feels like—like a Hollow. But not really. Kinda? It's weird. It feels like—It feels like—” Karin cast her mind back, trying to remember what it reminded her of. Something Tōshirō had taught her? Wait. Not quite. She landed on it: It reminded her of what she felt one wet day when Tōshirō had gotten frustrated with her practicing soccer in a thunderstorm and had finally resorted to snaring her with a binding kidō so he could haul her to shelter “for her own good.” This mark felt Hollow-like and restrictive. Even barely touching it, she could feel it try to snag her, too. Some Hollow-thing had bound Kazuya.

Karin didn't waste time explaining to Yuzu. Face determined, she slapped her hand on Kazuya's neck and did the only thing she knew could break a binding like that: She flared her reiatsu until its power exceeded that in the binding and shattered it. Kazuya's eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped to the ground, unconscious. Karin stood panting over his body, hand still outstretched.

“Karin! What happened?!”

Karin looked at Yuzu. “Something like a Hollow had him in some kind of binding spell. I broke it like I broke Tōshirō's this one time. We need to get out—”
That wasn’t very nice, a girlish voice echoed in their heads.

The sisters froze and stared at one another, eyes wide.

He was going to be my friend, the voice lamented.

“What— what’s that?” Yuzu whimpered.

It’s so lonely here.

“I— I dunno.” Karin felt hunted.

You should come instead. It will be fun.

Karin glanced around. “Grab a shovel, Yuzu.”

I’m so lonely.

“But—”

Won’t you come meet me?

Karin’s skin crawled with a sense of incoming attack. “Grab a shovel, Yuzu!”

We can be together forever!

Reality warped around them. They each managed to grab a shovel before the dead leaves beneath their feet sprouted vividly purple grass and the air was filled with the tinkling of many small bells. Several boxwood plants burst out of the earth between the girls and Kazuya, quickly thickening into an impassable hedge as tall as a ten-story building. The girls stared at it until startled by the sound of bells suddenly growing louder. Both turned and found that the arboretum had been replaced by a bizarre garden of gigantic flowers. Stems of lily of the valley formed an arched pathway, their dangling blossoms the size of lampshades ringing like wedding bells. Stalks of foxglove three stories tall jingled like sleigh bells in the breeze. Green fairies the size of cats cavorted through the air, jousting with over-sized slotted spoons of varying shapes. Chiming laughter bubbled out of their bright blue frog heads. Normal-sized calla lilies formed a green and white carpet beneath the tree-size stalks of many differently colored daffodils, irises, and poppies. In the distance, there appeared to be a forest of towering delphiniums in vivid blues and purples. Flaming clusters of sugar cubes drifted across the pale green sky like clouds. No trace of the drab woods could be found in the riot of color.

The girls gaped and instinctively huddled together, holding the shovels defensively.

“What’s happening?!” shrilled Yuzu.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” Karin was entirely out of her depth. She wondered if this was what hallucinations felt like.

“How do we get out?!”

Karin cast about desperately. She turned back to the boxwood and started madly hacking at it with her shovel. Yuzu got the idea and they quickly fell into rhythm, one striking while the other drew back. The hedge grew thicker and pushed back at them. The twins recoiled.

You can’t leave, the girlish voice said sternly.
“Why the hell not?!?” shrieked Karin.

*I'm lonely.*

“Too bad!”

*Come meet me.*

Karin's anger overtook her fear. “Oh, I'll come *meet* you, all right,” she said darkly. She brandished her shovel and turned to stalk down the surreal path. “Come on, Yuzu. I think we gotta get out through *her*.” Yuzu didn't argue. She fell into step behind her sister, carrying her shovel defensively and nervously searching the jungle of flowers for threats.

They traveled through the lily tunnel safely and emerged into a wide field of many-colored hyacinths. These, at least, were of average size. Their perfume was overwhelming. The hyacinths were corralled into oddly-shaped flower beds by knee-high boxwoods trimmed into neat hedges around gravel paths. The girls froze again, spotting movement.

In plain sight, spread out among the hyacinths, were odd antique telescopes mounted on tripods. All were facing away from the girls, toward a massive oleander thicket. Dangling beneath the telescopes, in the middle of the tripod legs, were several glass phials filled with multicolored liquids. They glittered and tinkled like wind chimes. The girls first thought the movement they had seen was due to these shiny mobiles. They were proven wrong when all of the telescopes began walking on their tripod legs. Each telescope wobbled its way to a new position, all steadfastly aimed at the oleander thicket.

“What kind of place *is* this?” whispered Karin, eyes wide. Yuzu was too afraid to speak.

The girls observed everything for several minutes. All the tangled, zigzagging paths seemed to ultimately lead to the oleander thicket. There was a stone arch around a shadowed area, implying an entry. There were some other kind of unnaturally large flowers to either side of the door, their bright colors sprawled out over perhaps six meters on each side.

Karin weighed the risks. “I think we don't really have any choice but to go to the door-thing.”

Yuzu chewed her lip. “What if the... the... *things* attack us?”

Karin mustered all the courage and bravado she could. “Then we beat them to pieces with shovels, of course. Come on.” Looking far more confident than she felt, Karin aggressively marched down the nearest path. Yuzu swallowed hard and followed her sister with a determined face, holding her shovel with a white-knuckled grip.

Their trek was uneventful. The strange telescope creatures seemed content to stare at the oleanders and made no move to stop them. As they approached the oleander thicket, they recognized the flowers to either side of the stone arch as spires of snapdragons of various colors. Each vivid blossom was about the size of a baseball.

As they neared the stone arch, Yuzu said with forced cheer, “W-well, it's really weird in here, but it's pretty, too. Don't... don't you think? Maybe... maybe we're overreacting and we just need to talk to a lonely ghost.”

The snapdragons exploded.

The girls screamed and ducked. Then they looked up at the sound of ominous waves of buzzing moving around them.
Snapdragons were still bursting from their stalks like a wave of startled crows. Each flower seemed to be the head of a hummingbird the size of a crow. Countless wingbeats hummed and buzzed as the snapdragons swarmed around the girls.


Karin shifted her grip on her shovel and eyed the birds— flowers? One flower opened and released a screech. The other flower-birds took up the screeching. Then they started diving at the girls from all directions, snapdragons opening as if pinched to allow the creatures to release tongues of flame.

“Hit them! HIT THEM! HIT THEM!” The hysterical edge made Karin's voice almost unrecognizable.

The next several minutes were a blur to Karin when she looked back on the fight later. There had been a lot of screaming and dragon-like screeches and swinging around of yard tools and the feel of feathers brushing against their faces. Karin fell back on anger to escape the fear and roared as she flared her reiatsu the best she could. She succeeded in knocking back a wave of snapdragons. From then on, she focused her reiatsu into the shovel the way she usually did with her soccer ball when she fought Hollows. Yuzu fared worse, but when Karin rallied, she did as well. Unfortunately, she wore out quickly. Yuzu fell to her knees and shielded her head with her arms, screaming. Karin staggered over to her and tried to defend both of them, but was overwhelmed by the multitude. Her swings became sloppy. Finally, there was an unlucky moment in which she completely missed her mark and left her face wide open to a screeching snapdragon. She stared with wide eyes and actually saw a flame sparking between the petals when a spiked metal ball rocketed into it from the side, trailing a chain behind it as it scattered feathers and petals. The chain went taut and snapped the metal ball back the way it had come. Karin gawked and followed its course to its origin.

An older teenage girl with long dark hair had waded into the fray, wielding a meteor hammer with deadly accuracy. Her movements as she manipulated the weapon were sharply graceful. The snapdragons abandoned Karin and Yuzu and honed in on the new threat. The girl grinned eagerly, something unhinged in her eyes. Karin wobbled down to her knees next to her sister and watched. Yuzu hesitantly sat up and joined her.

The teenager made brutally short work of the creatures. The twins had never seen such a weapon in real life. The way the girl manipulated the swift, chained weapon by looping it around her extremities and kicking strained the mind. In her hands, the projectile was like a close-quarters cannon. Within minutes, all that remained were scattered piles of smoldering feathers.

The stranger stomped on one snapdragon that was still writhing and breathing smoke. She twisted her heel as though snuffing out a discarded cigarette and turned to face the twins. The older girl wore a white sleeveless kimono top with pale silvery blue trim. Her white skirt was more Western, short and slightly flared with a lacy silver-blue petticoat peeking below the hemline. There was a minimal obi around her waist, white with accents in gray and silvery blue. It was decorated with a glittery snowflake clip. She wore white platform boots, laced in silver-blue up to just below her knees. Her ensemble was topped off by a choker and hair band in the same silvery blue, with what looked like a large snowflake-cut aquamarine nestled in a white bow on the left side of her head. It was a very cute outfit. It was a jarring contrast to the hard, predatory face of the girl who wore it.

In lieu of a greeting, the girl grudgingly said, “Well, you've stayed alive and sane this far in. And you were smart enough to arm yourselves and fight. I guess that counts for something.”

The twins just stared blankly.

_I have rarely seen anyone I have not contracted perform as well as they did, Yuki, a cheerfully_
androgynous voice echoed in their heads. The twins twitched in surprise. A white cat... rabbit... thing with red eyes and markings and a fluffy tail stepped out from behind the teenager. *You two would make magnificent magical girls!*

Karin's face twisted in suspicious incredulity. “Magical girls?”

“I don't have time for this,” the girl snapped. “Explain while I fight the Witch if you're so keen on them, Kyubey.”

*All right!* The creature smoothly walked over to the twins, regarded them for a moment, then climbed into Yuzu's lap. *Make a barrier for us, though, Yuki?*

“Hmph. Fine. Let's move. I have things to do.” The girl breezed past them and into the stone arch, idly swinging the dangling mace at her side.

Karin stared after her and flatly said, “What is going on here.”

*I can explain that!* the creature... said? Thought? *I am called Kyubey. That was one of my magical girl contractees, Yuki Yubari. Let us go watch Yuki fight the Witch. I will explain more there.*

Yuzu looked up at Karin uncertainly. Karin shrugged and stood. Kyubey scampered up to Yuzu's shoulders as she rose. They cautiously entered the stone arch and found themselves in a long, dim tunnel formed of dense walls of oleander. When they reached the end, they found Yuki standing tensely with her hands on her hips, slowly looking the place over. The twins stood awkwardly for a moment.

“Um... w-what are you doing?” Yuzu eventually asked.

Yuki didn't even turn around. “Only an idiot would run in without assessing their opponent and surroundings,” she said snidely. “That stupid idiot soon becomes a dead idiot.”

“O-oh.” Yuzu looked down at her feet.

Karin scowled. “You don't have to be so rude.”

Yuki glanced over her shoulder coldly. “You're the ones rudely interrupting my mission.”

The girls flinched.

*Yuki...*, Kyubey sighed. In their heads. Somehow.

Yuki huffed. “Fine.” She clasped her hands in front of her, then flung them out and behind her. Translucent chains of ice materialized from her palms and spread to form a faintly glowing chain link fence. “There. Your barrier.” Yuki turned to smile sweetly at the twins and cooed, “If you get out from behind this and get in my way, I'll kill you.” She turned and sauntered into the clearing, casually swinging her meteor hammer again.

The twins got their first proper view of the clearing. It was a wide, bowl-shaped garden with many terraces neatly planted with an assortment of flowers, ferns, and vines. The edges of the bowl disappeared into the massive oleander hedges surrounding the clearing. Above the oleander walls was a fancy greenhouse-like roof of many panes of glass decorated by swirls of wrought iron. The pale green sky and burning sugar cube clouds were visible through the exquisite ceiling. At the center of the bowl was an improbably large datura tree in full bloom. It was contorted oddly, ropes of poison ivy seeming to strangle it. Yuki stalked down a set of shallow stairs toward the datura.
Are you here to play with me? the girlish voice the twins had heard earlier asked hopefully.

Yuki laughed mockingly and leaped forward, meteor hammer spinning madly. When she landed on the grass, she lashed out with a foot and launched the hammer straight at the tree trunk. It landed with an ear-splitting crack of splintering wood. The tree writhed, trumpet-shaped flowers ringing like cow bells.

Mean! That hurt! I hate you! screamed the voice... the tree?

Yuki only laughed and retrieved her hammer to attack again.

The massive tree's branches shivered out of their stillness and into unnatural movement, limbs striking at Yuki like flails. Yuki stayed just within range and used her meteor hammer to strike every which way. Every few strikes, she would dart in closer and strike at the trunk again. The tree soon bent its lowest branches down like a cage. The poison ivy grew rapidly and helped shield the trunk. Yuki backed off and resumed picking off branches while looking for a weak point.

As I was saying, the small white creature said as if a tree trying to murder a girl was an everyday occurrence, Yuki is a magical girl. This place is a labyrinth. Labyrinths are made by Witches. Witches are cursed and twisted spirits who lure humans to their labyrinths to prey on them. Their presence spreads despair throughout human society. I offer a contract to girls with magical potential so that they can become magical girls and fight Witches.

“Spirits?” Karin hummed thoughtfully. “So, Witches are kind of like Hollows? And these, uh, magical girls— they fight Witches like shinigami fight the Hollows?”

Kyubey went very still on Yuzu's shoulder. After a moment its tail resumed its slow swishing. You know about Hollows and shinigami?

“You— you think we could be magical girls?” Yuzu gasped. “Like— like her?” She looked down at Yuki's ongoing battle. The girl had begun to trigger an explosion of ice with every impact of her hammer, leaving stubborn icicles on the murderous limbs. “She's so strong.”

You could easily surpass her. Your latent power is unusually high. The creature cocked its head, beady red eyes staring at Karin. It is not surprising, given you can see Hollows and shinigami. It paused again, then cocked its head the other direction. How do you know what they are? I was under the impression the shinigami developed a method to erase humans' memories of them.

“We're from Karakura,” Karin answered flatly. “They try memory-wiping people, but there's no point even trying on a lot of us who can actually see them. It may work for a few days but the modifier wears off fast.”

Kyubey sat up straight. Ah. That explains much. I avoid Karakura. It has been a dangerous place for over a century now.

“Because of the jūreichi?” Yuzu asked curiously.

Kyubey went still again. You really do know a lot! It said cheerfully. Yes. Too many Hollows and shinigami collect in one place. Thankfully, most Witches avoid Karakura, too. People there are
generally more difficult to lure into a labyrinth. Not impossible, but more difficult. I do not have any contractees in Karakura, though, so I do not know how many Witches do take the chance.

“Wait, these Witch things could be in Karakura?!” Karin asked urgently. “How could we not know about them?!”

They hide themselves in their labyrinths. You would not feel them like you can sense a Hollow because they create a pocket dimension. Most of their reiatsu is contained within these dimensions. They only expose small amounts to act as lures. The creature shifted and settled more comfortably around Yuzu's neck. The humans in the jūreichi generally have at least slightly elevated reiatsu, so Witches would have to expose more of themselves to successfully lure someone. That would put them at risk.

“O... kay...,” Karin said. “And what do they do to the people they lure in?”

Why, they kill them and eat them, of course. Kyubey said while calmly grooming a paw. That is their greatest similarity to Hollows, really. Witches sometimes eat the physical bodies too, though.

The girls stared at the creature in horror.

The splintering of wood, clanging of bells, and a chilling roar snapped their attention back to the battle. The fragments of ice Yuki had been leaving on branches all around the tree burst and shot chains of ice in every direction, binding the tree's limbs. The tree thrashed and screamed. The garden echoed with the cracking and booming of the tree ripping its roots up out of the ground to fight with.

The twins gasped as Yuki dodged and wove and repeatedly nailed the roots with her meteor hammer, leaving ice behind once again.

Kyubey just continued placidly swishing its tail. Do not worry. Yuki is a veteran. She is not particularly powerful, but she is wonderfully clever in battle. As I was saying, I do not have any contractees specifically defending Karakura. You both have great potential. If you want to defend your town, please consider making a wish and contracting with me to become magical girls!

Both girls stared at Kyubey incredulously, torn between its absurd conversation and Yuki's bizarre battle.

“Make a wish?!”

“Really become a magical girl?!”

Of course! I can not expect you to risk your lives without compensation. I have been told humans consider that the height of rudeness.

The Witch-tree shrieked in frustration. Poison ivy vines whipped out from the tree's center, seeking Yuki. The magical girl grinned fiercely and allowed the vines to ensnare her. She laughed as she was engulfed in vines and hauled toward the hidden tree trunk.

“Oh, no!”

“What is she doing?!” Karin looked at Kyubey and pointed to the battle. “Aren't you worried about her?!”

Kyubey somehow used telepathy to express the sound of clicking one's tongue. Of course not. As I said, Yuki is brilliant in battle. She takes more risks than most girls I have contracted, but the
responsibility for how she uses the powers she purchased belongs to her. Even if I had no confidence in her skills, I can not do anything if she decides to throw her life away for joy of the battle.

Karin looked disturbed. “That's— that's really cold.”

_is it_? Kyubey piped up curiously. _Humans are so contradictory. I thought free will and sacrifice were all but sacred to your people. Warriors past and present are lauded for similar decisions. What makes Yuki so different?

Said magical girl could be heard laughing eerily from deep in the crashing foliage.

Yuzu looked dismayed. “But— but she's not a soldier!”

Kyubey blinked up at them. _Is she not? She learned of a threat and chose to fight it despite risk to her life. Does that not make her a warrior?

“But— but—” Yuzu floundered.

“But she's so young,” Karin finished.

“And we're even younger,” Yuzu said uncertainly.

“So? _Human children have ascended the thrones of their countries and aided in battle and labor since ancient times. The sheltered view your people have of children in this era is still new. I do not understand the change._ Kyubey sighed. _I thought willingness to fight for a cause was something respected across age barriers. Even the Japanese are familiar with Jeanne d'Arc. She contracted with me when she was just thirteen years old. Three years later, she led armies in support of her king. Westerners now exalt her as a minor deity and respect her faith in her cause. Why is any adolescent who risks their life for a cause held to a different standard? Are their sacrifices less worthy because of their age? What of those who stand and fight when their elders fail their duties? Do their choices become laudable only if they are the last line of defense and thus arguably have no choice?

Karin and Yuzu thought of their brother, who had been a sixteen-year-old boy when he had gone to war with a man who aspired to godhood. They had no answer.

_This “childhood” concept of yours is nebulous and subjective at best. My people have observed that “childhood” is a sliding scale throughout time and generally ends when a young human can no longer be sheltered from the realities of life. Technological advancement has allowed wealthier civilizations to shelter their young longer, yes, but that is an artificial buffer which will inevitably be broken._

Discomfited, the girls were glad to be distracted by the battle once again. A brilliant flash of blue-white light flickered from deep within the foliage. Karin recognized the sensation of mounting reiatsu.

_Oh, Yuki is going to do something interesting_, Kyubey said with all the concern of someone commenting on a sale in a grocery store ad.

Thin ice chains blasted out of many gaps in the foliage. Each rapidly extended outward while developing a sea urchin-like mass of ice spikes at their ends. For one moment, the icy flails drew taut and held still. In the next instant, dozens of gigantic meteor hammers made of ice rocketed back at the central tree. To say that the tree promptly exploded would be an understatement.
The twins flinched and shielded their heads with their arms but soon found it unnecessary— any debris that managed to reach them immediately froze and shattered against the barrier Yuki had erected in front of them. The girls lowered their arms and watched as the wreckage of the garden warped and faded from view, leaving them where they had started in the clearing in the arboretum. Karin whipped her head around and saw Kazuya still unconscious in a pile of dead leaves. She faced forward again, watching as Yuki caught a silver and black pendulum that was floating down from the sky.

Yuki smirked and haughtily tossed her hair over her shoulder. Her body glowed pale blue for a moment before the light burst from her in fragments, leaving her clothed in a high school uniform. She held the black pendulum by its spindle in her right hand and held out her left hand. A pale blue egg-shaped gem set in gold coalesced in her palm. She brought the different gems together. The twins watched as murky darkness seeped from the blue gem to the black gem as though attracted by a magnet. When the blue gem shone more brightly than before, Yuki spread her left hand and let the egg disappear. She tossed the black gem and caught it, then brandished it.

“This thing drew me too far into Tokyo,” Yuki grumbled sullenly. “I need to get back. Do you want the Grief Seed now or later, Kyubey?”

*Now, please!* Kyubey said cheerfully.

The white creature jumped from Yuzu's shoulder as Yuki lobbed the black gem toward it. It flipped and a portion of its back opened and neatly caught the gem. Its back had closed again by the time it landed, both Kyubey and Yuki acting like a living creature having a trap door in its back was normal.

Yuki turned her attention to the twins, eyes narrowing as she leaned one hand on her hip. “As you can see, being a magical girl isn't for the faint of heart. You have guts, though, so you can probably pull it off.” Her voice was more stern than encouraging.

“Can— can we really become magical girls?” asked Yuzu.

*Of course!* Kyubey said happily. *As soon as you make a wish, I can make you become a magical girl right away!*

Yuki looked at Kyubey from the corners of her eyes, the opposite of enthusiastic. She looked back up at the twins. “Two things, if you want to become magical girls.”

Karin raised her brows and Yuzu looked eager for advice.

“One: Choose your wish carefully. Don't wish for something stupid you could get yourself.”


Yuki glared at her. “You'd be surprised how many idiots wish for things like cakes and puppies. Girls who make such childish, naïve wishes usually end up dead pretty quickly.”

Yuzu swallowed hard. Karin rolled her eyes but felt uncomfortable. “Fine. What's the other thing?”

Yuki moved so quickly they barely saw her. One blink they were facing the older girl a few yards away, the next blink they were both pinned to a large tree, Yuki holding them up by their collars with a bloodthirsty expression on her face.

“If you *ever* trespass on my territory, I'll come after you. If you *ever* poach my kills, I will kill you. *Painfully.*” Yuki slammed them against the tree trunk and intensified her glare. “*Do you*
understand?"

Kyubey sat in the clearing and watched calmly, swishing its tail.

The twins squawked out their understanding. Yuki dropped them. “Good,” she sniffed. She wandered over to Kazuya’s senseless form and peered at him from a couple different angles, then callously flipped him onto his back using one foot. “Looks like Little Mister Witch Lunch will be okay. Ah. Learn how to come up with cover stories for things like people being found unconscious, too. Forgot that.” Yuki straightened and watched the girls gasping on the ground against the tree where she had dropped them. “Here’s a generous bonus lesson in Cover Stories 101 from me to you: The boy was acting weird and you followed him until he fought you and passed out. Say you thought you saw the little idiot eat some berries off a plant earlier but you don’t know which one. His memories of the last hour or so should be screwy enough that he won’t be able to say any different. It should get the adults focused on freaking out about the plants and him instead of you. Got it?”

The twins hurriedly nodded.

Voices calling the sixth-graders’ names started lilting through the trees.

“That’s my cue to go,” said Yuki. She looked down at Kyubey. “If you want to recruit them, fine. But I’m not training up some babies. Explain things yourself and keep them away from me.” She didn’t wait for a response before she turned on her heel and leapt away through the trees as Karin had seen shinigami do.

Kyubey looked up at the girls. Other people should not be able to see me, but I have to go anyway. Are there train lines through Karakura?

“J-just the one,” Karin answered haltingly. “It runs from there to here.”

Good! chirped Kyubey. I can not enter Karakura, but I can wait outside of town. Perhaps two stations out of town? Whenever you can get there, I can explain more.

“Don’t you have to help Yuki?” asked Yuzu.

Do not worry, there are many of us helping magical girls. Someone else will be assigned to Yuki. So, will I see you soon?

The voices came closer. The girls looked toward them.

“Um, maybe?” Karin answered distractedly.

I will see you soon! the creature called cheerfully as it daintily hopped into the trees and disappeared the way Yuki had gone.

The twins stared after Kyubey as a teacher’s voice drew near, then looked at each other in disbelief.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
BEATRIX
The Greenhouse Witch with a toxic nature. Nurtured in isolation to be the loveliest of
flowers, she craves the attention of others. She desperately lures companions to her garden. As each companion withers when exposed to her poisonous affection, she only becomes more anxious to find another.

Minion: Chloris, whose duty is to make merry in her mistress' isolated garden. The Witch can't bear the loneliness of silence, so they are constantly laughing and making noise.

Minion: Giovanni, whose duty is to admire his mistress. Even though he is dedicated to her, he saddens the Witch by doing so from afar and carrying antidotes with him everywhere.

Minion: Giacomo, whose duty is to attack those intruders unworthy of being a companion to his mistress. Despite the Witch's intent for him, he just attacks everyone who enters. No one is worthy in his eyes.

The Witch Kiss is intended to look like a partially-opened datura blossom.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: As always, thank you for the reviews. They are so encouraging and thought-provoking. I like when you make me look at the story from a different angle. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ELF

[THE SET OF ALL TIMELINES FROM (X) TO (X+N+54)] - [14 MONTHS]

The next hours passed in a blur of desperately concocting consistent lies for the adults supervising their trip. Karin wondered if her brother and his friends had become good at lying to their teachers when Hollows interrupted their school days. If she and Yuzu became magical girls, would lying become easier with experience?

The girls didn't speak a word about what had actually happened until late that night as they lay in their beds in their shared room. Both lay on their backs, staring at the moonlight and shadows on the ceiling. Karin's hands clenched her sheets as she stared up grimly. Yuzu wrung her hands uncertainly.

Long after the house had fallen silent, Yuzu finally asked, “What are we going to do?”

Karin twisted the sheets in her fingers. “I think...” She bit her lip and shifted. “I think we need to ask questions first. I don't want to jump in head-first like Ichi-nii did with the shinigami stuff.”

“Ah.” Yuzu fidgeted. “We can—we can make a list. Of questions, I mean. And pros and cons. Then we can figure out if it’s, uh—worth? Worth doing.”

“Good idea. I think question one needs to be about that thing on Kazuya’s neck. And we need to ask about wishes. That just sounded weird.”

They fell silent for another few minutes.

“Karin?”

“Mm?”

“Do you think— Do you think I could really fight as a magical girl?”

“What? Sure.”

“I don't really know how to fight.”

“You can learn. I don't think you realize what you're capable of when you get angry and protective. You just need to be more...assertive? I think that's the word.”
“You really think so?”

“Psh. I know so.”

Course of action decided, the girls settled down to sleep.

The twins spent the next week tweaking a list of questions and thinking of an excuse to disappear for a day. They eventually settled on a one-day soccer clinic a professional player was holding five train stops out of Karakura. Yuzu's excuse to go with would be to cheer on Karin and go shopping at a fancy foreign food market in the same ward. The plan was to actually do what they said and stop at Kyubey's designated station on the way home. They deliberately waited until the last minute to ask so that their father wouldn't have any time to rearrange his schedule and come with them.

When they proposed their day out over dinner, Isshin scratched his chin.

“Hmm. I dunno. Can you chaperon the girls, Ichigo?”

Ichigo swallowed his rice and cleared his throat. “As much as I'd like to watch Karin terrorize a bunch of cocky twerps, I'm supposed to help put up a block wall for work tomorrow. The client is paying big money, so I can't skip out or Ms. Ikumi will murder me.” He took a swig of water, glanced at the girls, and looked back to their father. “They're thirteen. They know how to use trains — how far away is this thing?”

The girls perked up with hope. Was their brother going to bat for them?

“Five stops east of our station,” Yuzu said eagerly.

“The field is a block away from the station,” Karin added.

“And the market is two blocks in the other direction. And I'll stay with Karin at the soccer clinic and she'll come with me to the market so we won't be alone. Pleease?” Yuzu almost vibrated with excitement.

Ichigo shrugged. “That's not too far. It's not like they're going somewhere crowded like Harajuku or something. And they both have cell phones to call for help if they get in trouble. I think they can handle it.”

Isshin frowned. “I don't know. That's a lot of responsibility...”

“Tch.” Ichigo rolled his eyes and snarked, “They're more responsible than you are, Old Man.”

The girls glanced at each other. Best big brother ever.

“Waaah, what do you mean, Ichigooo?”

“I meant exactly what I said.”

Isshin bolted from his chair and hurled himself at the poster of his late wife. “MASAKIIIIII!” he sobbed, “OUR SON THINKS I'M A BAD FATHER!”

“That's not what I said.”

“You may as well haaaaave!”

“I meant the girls don't go bawling around like idiots all the time and keep a level head, unlike
some people.”

“Like who?!”

“Like you.”

“What?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!”

“Do you ever listen to yourself?”

“BWAAA! YOU’RE SO CRUEL, ICHIGOOOOO!”

Ichigo finally lost his patience. “GOD, WILL YOU SHUT UP WITH THE DRAMA AND DECIDE WHETHER THE GIRLS CAN GO DO SOMETHING WORTHWHILE TOMORROW INSTEAD OF SITTING AROUND THE CLINIC WITH YOU?”

“YOU SAY THAT LIKE BEING IN THE CLINIC WITH ME IS BORING!”

“EXACTLY!”

“MASAKIIIIIIIIIII!”

Eventually, the girls were allowed to go.

Ichigo walked them to the train station the next morning on his way to work. Before they parted ways, he set his hands on his hips and stared at the twins. After a few moments, he drily said, “I probably don't have to tell you this, but don't go off and do something stupid that will make us all look like idiots for thinking you can handle going places on your own, yeah?”

The girls nodded enthusiastically. Yuzu flung herself at her big brother and hugged his middle. “Thank you so much for helping us, Onii-chan!”

Karin stepped forward and didn't quite hug him, but grabbed his shirt and leaned into him shyly. “Thanks, Ichi-nii.”

Ichigo smiled softly and tousled their hair. “Yeah, yeah. You have fun today, okay?” When both girls backed off and cheered, he looked seriously at his more athletic sister. “Hey, Karin.”

“Uh, yeah, Ichi-nii?”

Ichigo grinned wolfishly. “I want to hear all about how much ass you kick at dinner tonight. Got it?” He held out a fist.

Karin laughed brightly, matched his grin with a fierce smirk of her own, and bumped her fist against his. “Mission accepted, Ichi-nii!”

“Take some video with your phone, yeah, Yuzu?”

Yuzu saluted and looked cutely serious. “Yes, sir!”

Ichigo fished out his wallet and took out a small wad of yen notes. “Buy yourself something nice at the market, okay? No point just looking and buying stuff to feed us.”

“Thank you, Onii-chan!” Yuzu squealed.

Ichigo parted ways with them. He lazily waved goodbye to them just before he turned a corner.
The girls waved back at him and looked at each other.


Their day passed in a blur. The train ride was uneventful. Karin got bumped up to play with the high school age bracket at the clinic and preened about the professional player's praise and critiques all through the trip to the foreign food market, where Yuzu was equally in heaven. Their excitement lasted until they got on the return train and soberly counted stations.

They disembarked at the designated station and looked around. It wasn't particularly crowded, the lunch rush over and rush hour still two hours away. The girls wandered around the platform, unsure what they should do.

Karin! Yuzu!

The girls startled and looked around.

Up here!

Kyubey blinked down at them from its perch on a high beam, partially obscured in shadow. The creature stood and stretched like a cat. I am glad you came! It jumped from the beam and landed lightly a few yards away from the girls. A female commuter holding the hand of a five-year-old walked right past the creature without seeing it.

Follow me! I will lead you to a more private place to talk. Kyubey trotted away, leaving the girls no real choice but to follow it.

They ended up in a large park. Circling around the playground full of mothers supervising their bundled-up little ones, Kyubey led them to a duck pond behind a stand of trees. The fluffy white creature perched on a rock in front of a bench as though holding court over the flock of bored ducks. Karin and Yuzu took the hint and sat on the bench. Ducks swarmed around their feet to beg, but lost interest when the girls didn't feed them.

Kyubey didn't waste any time. Have you decided on a wish?

“Hold up,” Karin said drily. “We haven't even decided if we're going to do this whole magical girl thing at all yet. We need more information.”

“We want to know what we would be getting into,” Yuzu said softly.

Kyubey blinked up at them owlishly. Ah. You are more cautious and mature than most girls I approach. That bodes well for your performance as magical girls. The creature settled more comfortably on the rock. I can answer your questions.

Yuzu dug in her purse and pulled out a folded piece of notebook paper. She smoothed it out on her lap and cleared her throat. “We want to start with what happened at the gardens. Kazuya acted like the... Witch? Like the Witch was calling him. And he had a tattoo-thingy on his neck that he called an invitation. What was that?”

Oh! That was a Witch's Kiss. Remember how I said Witches hide in pocket dimensions and only let out some of their reiatsu as a lure? The girls nodded. Each Witch has a unique symbol. A personal seal, if you will. A Witch may lure a human closer to its labyrinth without applying this seal to the human, but the appearance of the Witch's Kiss signifies that the victim has been completely ensnared by the Witch. They can not be reasoned with. They will use force if you interfere with the orders the Witch has given them. You could say it is a form of brainwashing. Kyubey rolled its
head thoughtfully. *I have told you that magical girls are born of wishes, yes? In contrast, Witches are born of curses. Not only do they feed on humans, they also curse humans into harming themselves or others. They can be more insidious than Hollows. They do lure humans into their labyrinths to eat them whole, but they often eat souls after they use their seals to command humans to commit suicide.*

The girls stared at Kyubey, white-faced.

“W-why?!” squeaked Yuzu.

Kyubey shrugged as best a cat-thing could. *It is in their nature to propagate despair.* It paused. *Just as it is in a Hollow's nature to consume human souls.*

Yuzu worried at her lip and Karin chewed on one cheek.

Kyubey blinked innocently. *Do you have other questions?*

“U-um, yeah,” Yuzu stammered. She shifted the paper around in her fingers. “You said Witches are spirits. Can shinigami fight them?”

Kyubey went still. *Shinigami might be able to fight Witches, but I do not know of it ever happening,* it said coldly. *They cannot detect labyrinths. I suppose a strong Witch could Kiss a weak shinigami. If it has ever happened, I do not know of it.*

Karin eyed Kyubey. “What's with the harsh tone?”

Kyubey's tail lashed agitatedly. *Shinigami would rather hunt magical girls than ask their help to find Witches. No. They would rather hunt magical girls than deign to consider that they may be ignorant of a spiritual threat.*

The girls were startled. Karin gaped. “Hunt magical girls?!”

Yes. *I have taken pains to avoid contracting girls in places with high concentrations of shinigami activity. You see, magical girls are able to perform some of the same tasks as shinigami. The shinigami have never been fond of the living sharing their powers. Humans who have stumbled into possessing shinigami powers have been executed by them. Long ago, some of my contractees were discovered and executed without an opportunity to explain their primary duties. Still later, I contracted with girls of the Quincy line of Hollow-exterminators. Kyubey cocked its head. Do you know what became of the Quincy?*

“Yes,” both girls whispered.

*I see. Kyubey watched its own tail waving, mental voice clinical. I understand the shinigami’s reasoning for the genocide. Practically speaking, at that point it was the most efficient move they could make as negotiations would have prolonged the imbalance. But the conflict with the Quincy was sparked by the shinigami’s own failures and inefficiencies. Had they applied the same effort toward bettering their own organization from the time they noticed the problem, negotiation with and extermination of the Quincy would have been unnecessary as the Quincy would have had fewer Hollows to eliminate themselves. In fact, the shinigami should have considered the possibility that their own failures created the conditions in which Quincy could evolve in the first place. If there is one thing my people have learned about human souls, it is that they are very adaptable. Given a lack of protection from a spiritual predator, it makes sense that living humans would evolve the ability to defend themselves from spiritual predators. Kyubey slid its eyes back to look at the girls sideways. My people are pragmatists. We can see that the shinigami’s operations*
are still insufficient. Had they embraced the practical strategy of using Quincy and other living humans with spiritual powers as first responders who could protect the vulnerable and summon shinigami to finish off attacking Hollows, the entire spiritual system would be more perfectly balanced than it is today. Kyubey sat up and turned its nose skyward. The shinigami are too arrogant to consider such an idea. They prefer to fool themselves into thinking they are the apex of the spiritual hierarchy. It is shamefully illogical. They are human souls, though, so I suppose it is only to be expected.

The girls looked deeply uncomfortable. Karin ground her teeth for a moment. “So, approaching the shinigami would be a bad idea?”

If you do not want to be killed, then yes, it would be a bad idea, Kyubey said mildly.

“But!” Yuzu bit her lip. Karin guessed she was reconsidering her phrasing in light of Kyubey's attitude. How would it react if it knew they were so closely tied to the shinigami? “We— we— um, heard...? Heard that the shinigami had a big war not too long ago and the old government was all assassinated. A-and humans with powers helped them win their war. Shinigami are allowed to talk to humans in Karakura who have powers now. And they even work with a Quincy boy. S-so maybe things are different now?”

Kyubey was silent for a long while. Forgive me, but I do not wish to discard centuries of necessary caution.

Before she could stop herself, Karin blurted out, “Wouldn't that make you like the shinigami dismissing a partnership with the Quincy?”

Kyubey bristled like a cat but settled down for another long period of silent thought. You are interesting. It paused again. The silence stretched. Practically speaking, you have a valid point. It stared piercingly into each of the girls’ eyes in turn. When you say you have heard about a shinigami war and that shinigami speak with humans in the jūreichi, do you mean to imply that you have spoken with shinigami yourselves?

Karin crossed her arms. “Yeah. Their whole stupid war was over some crazy shinigami traitor who wanted to conquer the jūreichi for himself, so a bunch of shinigami were stationed in the city to protect it. Even now that most of them are gone, we still talk to the guy who's technically assigned to patrol Karakura. He gets bored because so many people in Karakura have Hollow-fighting powers that half the time Hollows are busted before he can get to them. Some of the ones who were stationed there for the war visit every once in awhile.”

Kyubey tilted its head to one side. Why would a shinigami want to conquer a human city?

Karin shrugged. “Some creepy plan to sacrifice all our souls to make some thingamabob that would let him go kill God and take over, or something. I dunno how that was supposed to work. A shinigami I talked to said it could have been some bullshit fairytale the traitor decided to use as a ruse. Anyway, I've heard their government's politics about humans with powers have changed drastically in the last couple years.”

Kyubey cocked its head in the other direction. How interesting. It looked down in thought, then back up at the girls. As I told you, I am a pragmatist. Should you contract with me, you would be in a unique position to carefully question shinigami for the official policies regarding living humans with spiritual powers. Should you gather enough evidence of safety, my people may consider altering our own official policy of avoidance. The burden of proof would be quite substantial, though. Realistically, that standard may not be met during your lifetimes. You must recognize, historically speaking, that sudden political change is not always complete or permanent change.
Karin made a considering face. Yuzu frowned. “Are you asking us to spy on the shinigami?”

Spy? Hmmmmm. That depends on what connotation you attribute to the act of trying to discern whether peace and cooperation are possible between magical girls and shinigami. Kyubey swished its tail and gravely said, You do understand that contracting you would be a significant risk on my part, do you not? And that you would take on a substantially larger risk to yourselves than any of my other contractees? The girls nodded. Good. Next question?

Karin narrowed her eyes. “What are you that you can grant wishes and dish out powers like a shinigami’s?”

Hmmmmmmmmmm. Kyubey stretched and looked skyward. Do you know about other spiritual dimensions?

“You mean Soul Society and Hueco Mundo?” asked Karin. “And that creepy one you have to run through... I forget.”

Yes. There are many dimensions. My people are spiritual beings from one of those dimensions. We are essentially uniform as a race. You may think of us as spiritual catalysts, if you will. We are part of a cycle similar to the human-Hollow-shinigami cycle. As you have seen, my people consume the Grief Seeds left behind when a Witch is defeated. You could say we convert the cursed energy into neutral energy, which we then use to grant wishes and awaken the positive powers of magical girls to fight the Witches. This cycle efficiently strikes a balance of positive and negative energy in the World of the Living.

“Oh,” said Yuzu.


We technically do not “give” girls power so much as we use one kind of energy to unlock the energy already present within a girl's soul. You could say that we purchase a girl's services by granting a wish and unlocking her soul's power so that she may fulfill her side of our contract by repaying us with Grief Seeds won using that power. The degree of magnitude of a girl's wish can affect how much of a girl's power is unlocked— in essence, when a girl chooses a wish, she is declaring her value or purchasing power— how much she thinks she can “afford” to pay back with her performance. That declaration becomes an obligation once the transaction is complete. If you recall, Yuki told you that girls who make wishes for simple material items tend to fail rather quickly. This is partly due to naïveté making them unsuitable for battle, but also due to the self-limiting nature of their wishes. My most effective contractees are usually those who made the most ambitious wishes.

Now, the mechanism by which we awaken a girl's power. As I said, magical girls are able to perform some of the same tasks as shinigami. This is because they wield the power of their souls just as the shinigami do. Shinigami channel their power through their blades— their zanpakutō. The more experience and training they accumulate, the stronger their zanpakutō becomes. There is a particular power threshold at which shinigami are able to more sharply focus their power. This is called shikai. It allows the shinigami to mold their blade into a more specialized weapon. Kyubey paused and curiously tilted its head. Have you ever seen something like that in the jūreichi?

“Yeah,” said Karin. “I've seen a guy make his sword suddenly have a crescent blade on a chain attached to the hilt.”

Good! You should understand, then , Kyubey said cheerfully. Now, as living humans in material
bodies, potential magical girls do not have zanpakutō into which they may channel their power. What my people do with the energy converted from the remains of Witches is catalyze a girl's soul to crystallize its power as a self-contained focus. Each girl manifests a unique weapon that approximates the zanpakutō she would have if she became a shinigami and achieved shikai. I say “approximates” because, technically speaking, the blank blades shinigami use to channel their powers are superb foci my people can closely mimic but not completely replicate. As such, magical girl weapons are capable of purifying Hollows and sending souls to Soul Society. However, they fall short of the ability to completely purify a Witch. If magical girls were natural phenomena, this would be a fatal flaw. However, it suits our purposes in the cycle nicely.

The girls thought about that for a moment.

“Would a zanpakutō be able to completely purify a Witch?” Yuzu wondered.

My people have hypothesized that it may be possible, but due to security concerns we have not performed any tests.

Both girls hummed thoughtfully.

“Um, you said wishes can affect power. Can you give us some advice about wishes?” asked Yuzu.

Ah. I can not recommend specific wishes. It would interfere with your self-valuation more directly than my people have determined reasonable. However... Kyubey looked skyward and swished its tail for a few moments. Those contractees who make wishes for the benefit of someone other than themselves tend to be the most powerful. We do not fully understand the mechanics of that, as it would seem to be a devaluation of the self as compared to a third party and thus self-limiting. However, several magical girls I have spoken with have suggested that rather than a devaluation of the self, it is an exaltation of the value of a third party and that the degree to which a human is willing to commit sacrifices for the third party's benefit is what determines the degree of power unlocked. Our observations tend to support that hypothesis, but there are enough exceptions that we can not designate it a scientific theory.

“So the best course of action is to make a wish to help someone else?” asked Karin.

That depends upon your goals, answered Kyubey. An ambitious wish for your own benefit could work as well. Making a wish for a third party's benefit carries the risk of wishing for something they would not necessarily ask for themselves. Such wishes can be like curses in nature. In that respect, self-indulgent wishes are the safer route.

“Hmmmmmm. What kind of wishes can you grant?” asked Karin.

Almost anything save for raising the dead, answered Kyubey. Once a soul has moved on in the cycle, we can not retrieve it if we have not previously encountered it to be able to trace its energy signature. Technically, we may be able to revive someone dead only moments as the traces of their reiatsu would not have completely disappeared from their bodies or their souls may actually still be present. The occurrence of situations in which we are coincidentally present when a potential magical girl witnesses someone die and immediately contracts to wish them back to life are fairly rare, though.

“That makes sense,” said Yuzu.

Next?

“You mentioned something called a Grief Seed. What's that?” asked Karin.
Oh! Do you remember the black jewel Yuki got when she defeated the Witch? Both girls nodded. That was a Grief Seed. Magical girl weapons can not completely purify Witches, but they can forcibly concentrate their power into a crystalline structure akin to the structure my people create for the power of magical girls. We call that item a Soul Gem. You saw Yuki’s— the blue egg-shaped jewel.

“Oh. What was it that she did with the Soul Gem and Grief Seed?” asked Yuzu.

When a magical girl uses her magic to fight Witches and their Familiars, she exposes her power to the taint of the labyrinths. Grief Seeds are concentrated curses. Like attracts like, so magical girls use Grief Seeds to draw off the residual curses and purify the taint to their Soul Gems so they do not become cursed themselves. Then they give the Grief Seeds to me to dispose of safely and the cycle continues.

“Oh. I get it,” said Karin.

So! Any more questions?

The girls looked at each other, then the list, then each other.

“Um. Yeah. One last question. It's kind of stupid...,” said Karin.

What is it?

“Are you a boy or a girl?” asked Yuzu.

Kyubey's eyes twinkled in apparent amusement. Most humans refer to me using masculine pronouns. I do not have a preference. Gender is irrelevant to my kind. Kyubey looked hopeful. Have you made a decision?

“Uh, we need to think about it. This is too important to just rush into, you know?” said Karin.

I understand, said Kyubey. I suppose living in the jūreichi would instill caution in any human. If you ever decide to contract with me, come to the train station. I will be waiting.

The girls bid the creature goodbye and made their way back to the station.

Karin glanced back just before they turned a corner. Kyubey sat on the rock and idly swished its tail as it stared silently after them, eyes glimmering red in the shadows of early twilight.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Kyubey is difficult to write. It's a character with a mind for technicalities akin to the slipperiest lawyers and politicians. It claims to be emotionless in the anime, yet clearly displays some “emotions” like eagerness, surprise, interest, condescension, and curiosity. So I'm writing it as lacking empathy instead of completely without emotion. It's a fine line to walk. I hope I pulled it off.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
The girls were somber the entire trip home. They had a lot to think about. When they got home, they put the entire mess out of their minds to cheerfully recount their adventures over a takeout dinner. By mutual agreement, they only discussed Kyubey's proposal in the dead of night when Isshin and Ichigo were sleeping.

The next week passed by in the pleasant idleness of the obligation-free time between school years for the girls. They found it difficult to adjust to Ichigo not being around all the time during the break. His work at the odd-jobs shop kept him on the move, his boss mercilessly wringing every moment of use out of him while she could avoid having to schedule around school. Ichigo complained about it at length and at high volume, but he seemed to enjoy entertaining his sisters with accounts of the bizarre situations he sometimes found himself in.

One morning in mid-March found Karin sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast with her sister and father while Ichigo slept in, worn out from a day-long job of hauling furniture around and helping a client clean carpets. Karin didn't think anything of his absence until he suddenly appeared in the doorway, desperately sling-shot himself around the corner, and looked wildly around the kitchen. Everyone looked at him oddly as he darted toward a plate of onigiri and snatched one up.

“Ichi-nii?”

“I'm late!”

“Ehhh? Work today, too? I thought you had a day off,” pouted Yuzu.

“We didn't finish the carpet house, then Boss has some courier bullshit for me,” he nearly snarled. “It's like no one has ever heard of e-mail. I may as well be training for a marathon.” He hurried for the door.

Yuzu stood and put her hands on her hips with a scowl. “One onigiri isn't enough food for a day of hard work, Onii-chan!”

“No time! Bye!” The door slammed.

Isshin waved at the empty hallway and jokingly sang, “Bye-byyyye, have a nice daaay.”

Yuzu's scowl downgraded back to a pout. “He's going to run himself ragged.”
Karin hummed her agreement into her glass of juice. Sometimes she really wanted to have *words* with her brother's boss.

"Don't worry, girls. Ichigo knows how to take care of himself."

Karin hummed more skeptically. Yeah. Sure he did.

Isshin downed the last of his juice and stood. "Well, I'm late getting the clinic open, too. Have a fun morning, girls. See you at lunch."

The girls finished their breakfasts quietly. While cleaning up, Yuzu asked Karin if she had plans for the day.

"Hnnn. Tōshirō was supposed to come play soccer with me, but he texted me about something coming up at his division so I'm on my own."

"Aww. That's, what, the third time?"

"Yep. Can't be helped. It's what I get for making friends with a guy with a day job in another dimension. Ah, well," she sighed. "He's getting annoyed about it, too. Whenever he actually does manage to drag his ass over here, he's going to have a lot of steam to blow off. I'll have to make sure we go against a team I want to really crush."

Yuzu giggled. "So what are you going to do instead?"

"Ehhh, I figured I'd play video games til lunch then head out to the field and practice my shots anyway. It'll probably get old fast but I want out of the house."

"Can I come? Rika is on a trip with her family and Mayu is home sick. I'll be your ball return."

"Ha, sure."

The twins occupied themselves until lunch. Isshin came in from the clinic. They waited, but Ichigo didn't show up. Karin grumbled and took out her phone to text him.

"He says he's skipping out," she read from his reply. "They fell behind. Says he'll grab something when he has a chance." Karin wondered how much longer he could go without activating the Wrath of Yuzu.

Yuzu scowled. "He can't just skip meals like this." She stalked over to the table and set a platter of sandwiches down with a heavy thunk. "That's it, I'm making bento for him from now on. I'll put it on his shoes overnight if I have to."

*Not much longer, Karin thought. Rest in peace, Ichi-nii.*

"Ah, Yuzu, you're so thoughtful," cooed Isshin.

Karin met his eyes. She saw mutual relief that neither of them were the offender. At least he had *some* sense.

After lunch, the girls put on warm clothes and walked to the park.

"Ah, it went cold again. Guess the cherry trees won't bloom early after all," Yuzu murmured, entertaining herself by watching her breath fog the air while Karin bent to double-knot her shoelaces.
“Hmm, it's probably for the best.” Karin stood and jumped a few times to stretch. “Let's do this!”

With Yuzu's cheerful presence, Karin was able to avoid boredom for a solid hour. Eventually, the cold air and slick grass became too bothersome for her—or so she said; she actually noticed Yuzu shivering. She called it quits and bundled her soccer ball into its carrying net.

“Hey, wanna go get a hot drink? We haven't been to the café by the middle school yet.”

An hour later found the girls aimlessly strolling around town while sipping chocolatey hot coffee. They had just come in sight of the Sunflower Sewing Shop south of the high school when they caught sight of orange hair just before it disappeared behind a building.

“Was that Ichi-nii?” Karin wondered.

Yuzu's face went fierce. “If it was, I want to give him a piece of my mind. Going without breakfast or lunch! He should know better.”

God help Ichi-nii.

Yuzu set off at a trot, Karin soon on her heels. They reached the main street just in time to see their brother turn a corner farther down the road. The girls hurried through the foot traffic and turned the corner. Once again, Ichigo darted down a side street.

Karin scowled. “Is he avoiding us?”

Yuzu let out a quiet *hmph* of annoyance and threw her empty cup in a trash can. “Let's get him.”

Karin copied her and tucked her soccer ball under one arm. “Yeah.”

They set out at a run this time, determined to catch up with him. By the time they came within shouting distance, the three were nearing the high school. The girls shouted for their brother, but he didn't seem to hear them. He just kept walking, stride long yet unsure as though looking for something. Not wanting to lose him again, the girls put on an extra burst of speed.

Karin grabbed his sleeve when they ran up to him. “Dammit, Ichi-nii, didn't you hear—?” She cut herself off mid-word to dodge an elbow. “What was *that* for?!”

Ichigo blinked at the girls. After a long moment, he said, “Ah. Sorry. You startled me.” He stared at them, then turned and started walking away again.

“What the hell?! We've been trying to catch up to you and you walk away?!”

“Onii-chan, that's rude!”

Distractedly, Ichigo said, “Ah. Sorry. I have to go somewhere.”

“You have a job?” asked Yuzu.

“Sure.”

Karin exchanged a look with her sister. That was an odd way to answer.

“You can come with, if you want.”

The girls perked up and fell into step on either side of him.
“Onii-chan, you really can't run out without eating anymore. It's not healthy.”

“Sure.”

“You won't do it anymore?”

“I won't do it anymore.”

Yuzu squinted at him suspiciously. “Promise?”

“Sure.” Ichigo looked around. They were behind the high school, by an alley that ran behind some shops. Instead of heading for the shops, Ichigo turned toward the far corner of the high school property and aimed for the utility buildings.

“Um, Ichi-nii, where are you going?” asked Karin.

“I got a call. I need to do something.”

“Over there?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yeah.”

They passed the utility buildings and came to the fenced-off portion of campus the school rented out for a cell phone tower. All three looked up at the looming column.


Yuzu shivered. “This isn't funny, Onii-chan. Let's go home. I'm cold.”

Ichigo shrugged off his jacket and dropped it over Yuzu's shoulders. “Here. I won't need it anymore.”

Yuzu drew it close to her and looked up in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I won't need it where I'm going,” he said calmly. He quickly scaled the chain link fence and hopped down on the other side.

“And where the hell do you think you're going in there?” snarked Karin. This was weird even for Ichigo.

Ichigo turned to face his sisters, looking their direction without really focusing on them. Karin heard Yuzu's breath catch. Face cheerfully relaxed, Ichigo answered, “Soul Society. Do you want to come with?”

Karin reared back, baffled. “How do you expect to get there from—?!”

“I understand if you don't want to. I know you don't need me anymore.”

“W-what?!”

“K-karin.” Yuzu squeaked as a strained, keening whisper. She leaned forward and clutched at the chain link to hold herself up, knees wobbly. “Karin. His neck. Look at his neck. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

Karin looked from her sister to her brother. Just as Ichigo turned away, she saw it: a green symbol stamped on his neck. This one looked like a stylized radio tower with little zig-zagging bolts
radiating out from the top, a simple camellia overlapping its base.

*The appearance of the Witch’s Kiss signifies that the victim has been completely ensnared by the Witch.*

*No. No no no no no.*

*The humans in the jūreichi generally have at least slightly elevated reiatsu, so Witches would have to expose more of themselves to successfully lure someone.*

Ichigo no longer had even a minor buffer of his own elevated reiatsu. It was gone. He was completely open to attack. He was probably the most vulnerable person in Karakura.

*Witches do lure humans into their labyrinths to eat them whole, but they often eat souls after they use their seals to command humans to commit suicide.*

A Witch had enchanted her big brother and was going to make him kill himself before it ate his soul.

Over Karin's dead body.

Karin roared and threw herself at the fence as Ichigo walked purposefully toward the tower. She got tangled in her own soccer ball net for a moment, then dropped from the top and charged at her brother. Yuzu had never climbed a fence in her life, but Karin's movement spurred her into action. Desperation and adrenaline proved to be excellent teachers. Yuzu discarded her brother's jacket and was soon scrabbling over the fence behind her sister.

Karin sprinted up to her brother and grabbed his left arm. “Ichin-nii! Ichin-nii, stop! Listen to me!”

Ichigo glanced at her, frowned, shrugged his left arm, and used his right fist to punch Karin square in the jaw. Blood instantly filled her mouth as her teeth sliced her cheek.

*They can not be reasoned with. They will use force if you interfere with the orders the Witch has given them.*

Karin shrieked and writhed on the ground, hands holding her face. Ichigo looked down at her for a moment as though she was vaguely interesting at best, then turned back toward the tower. Karin rolled to her hands and knees and let her mouth hang open to release a stream of blood. She looked up and saw Yuzu hopping down from the fence. They made eye contact. Karin wildly pointed at their brother—*go after him, he’s more important.*

Yuzu ran right past Karin just as Ichigo grabbed the first rung of the tower's built-in ladder. She sped up and tackled him from behind, arms wrapping around his middle.

“Onii-chan! Stop it! Don't!” she cried.

Ichigo frowned again. “Let go.”

“No! Please, Onii-chan, please, stop!” Yuzu wailed.

Ichigo wiggled a bit trying to dislodge her, but she was clinging to him like a limpet and his elbows were at just the wrong angle to bring them to bear. He paused for a moment, then started to climb with his much lighter sister still weighing him down. Karin heard Yuzu squeal in terror when her feet left the ground. Her sister tried jerking back and forth to jostle his grip, but while his spiritual powers had fled his physical strength had not.
Karin moved. “Yuzu! Let go!”

“I'll fall!”

“You're only like five feet up. Let go!”

“But Onii-chan!”

“Let go!”

Yuzu complied. She overbalanced, twisted her leg, and fell on her rear.

“Get out of the way!”

Yuzu rolled aside and looked back at Karin.

Karin stood once more, bloodied and furious. She removed her soccer ball from its net and held it in preparation for a drop kick, then wound up and kicked the ball straight at her brother. It nailed him in the right shoulder and bounced away. He shook it off and climbed another rung.

Yuzu was scrambling to fetch the ball for another try before Karin's yell for it was all the way out of her mouth. She threw it back to Karin, who wound up again.

“Sorry, Ichi-nii,” she mumbled. Karin kicked the ball. Her aim was true. It hit Ichigo in the back of the head, causing him to immediately hit his forehead on a ladder rung. His body went limp in unconsciousness and he fell backwards. Yuzu managed to throw herself to the ground and slide behind him in time to keep his head from hitting the ground, too.

The schoolyard fell silent save for the girls' panicked gasps for air. Neither moved for a long minute. Then Yuzu sobbed and clutched Ichigo's shirt to drag him up into her lap more. She fussed with his hair and the nasty bruise on his forehead for lack of anything else to do. Karin staggered toward her siblings and looked down at them. It struck her that her brother looked much younger with his face relaxed in unconsciousness. She saw the Witch's Kiss still lurid against her brother's throat. Knees wobbling, she let herself fall and crawled toward her brother. Karin covered the Witch's Kiss with her palm, shuddered at the cloying, cursed feel to it, and flared her reiatsu as high as she could. The sound of shattering glass came from beneath her palm. Ichigo's neck was unblemished when Karin removed her hand. Only then did she allow herself to cry. Shaking, she draped herself over his chest and listened to his heart beating.

Perhaps fifteen seconds later, Karin looked up at the sharp sound of displaced air that heralded shunpo. Kisuke Urahara was perched on the corner of the chain link fence, the cane that concealed his zanpakutō poised to strike as he searched for an enemy. He relaxed just as Jinta and Ururu appeared, each also holding a weapon at the ready.


“What happened? I've never felt you raise your reiatsu that high. I didn't sense a Hollow.”

Karin sniffed hard and wiped her nose and mouth to stall. If *Kisuke Urahara* couldn't sense a Witch nearby when there obviously was one... Kyubey was right. The shinigami couldn't protect them from Witches. Couldn't protect her brother from Witches. And she wasn't going to piss off the only being who could give her access to the means to do so herself by snitching. “H-hollow,” she finally sniffled. She winced at the tugging against the wound in her cheek.

Yuzu tilted her head and looked at her sister out of the sides of her eyes. Karin stared back
unflinchingly. A lifetime of silent communication paid off: Yuzu would play along and talk it over later.


Karin thought fast. It was probably going to be obvious a human fist had nailed her. Well, that would shape the lie, then. Better start practicing. “It punched me. It was shaped like a p-person.”

The three from the Urahara Shop looked alarmed.

Urahara's brow furrowed. “Scientifically speaking, I suppose an Arrancar could have the sense of self and awareness of its powers to enable it to conceal its reiatsu.”

Thank you, weird spirit science, thought Karin.

Urahara looked around. “Why are you inside this fence?” He hopped down and approached the siblings, then bent and felt for Ichigo's pulse. Satisfied, he hovered a glowing green hand over the teenager's head to evaluate injuries with his dead-people magic.

“Um.”

Cover story. She needed a cover story now. But Karin's mind went blank.

“It threw me,” squeaked Yuzu. All attention turned to her. “I couldn't— I couldn't really see it very well, of course, but it threw me in here and I hurt my leg. Then Karin and Onii-chan climbed the fence. It hit Karin's face. Onii-chan... couldn't see anything, but... but he tried to help. And it hit his head and threw him against the t-tower.” She paused to sniffle. “So Karin got her ball and did that glowy thing she does.”

Karin loved her sister.

Urahara swung hard eyes back on Karin. “Did you break the mask? Did the Hollow disintegrate?”

Karin hurriedly nodded an affirmative.

Urahara sighed and stood up. “Good job, Karin. You likely saved all of your lives. You've gotten stronger.” He looked at Yuzu. “And you were able to see at least some of it?”

“Um, yes?”

“Hmmm. Both of your powers seem to be maturing sooner than your brother's did. You're girls, though, so I suppose that is to be expected.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Karin asked suspiciously.

“Girls mature faster than boys,” Ururu murmured. She glanced sideways at Jinta and expressionlessly continued, “In everything.”

Jinta scowled. “Hey!”

Urahara clapped for attention. “Let's go to the shop and get everyone fixed up. I'll take Ichigo. You kids help the girls.”

Jinta hopped down. “I'll help Yuzu!”
Karin and Ururu rolled their eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone was at the Urahara Shop. Urahara carefully healed Ichigo's head while Tessai healed Yuzu's leg and Karin's face. Jinta brought a still-shivering Yuzu some hot chocolate and fawned over her. Soon, everyone was sitting around while Urahara continued to heal Ichigo's apparent concussion.

At length, Urahara addressed the girls again. “I don't think your brother will react well if he remembers this. Him not being able to protect you, I mean.”

After a long silence, Karin responded, “I think you're right, but what of it? You wanna use a modifier on him?”

“Perhaps,” replied Urahara. “Or perhaps the concussion will have taken care of that for us. We’ll just need an excuse for how he ended up unconscious.”

Another few moments passed. “Um,” Yuzu began hesitantly. “Um, Onii-chan worked late last night and left for work without much breakfast and didn't eat lunch because he was too busy working more. He was running around town. C-could we say he passed out because of that?”

Sometimes it frightened Karin how quickly Yuzu could conjure up plausible lies.

Urahara's eyebrows lifted. He turned back to Ichigo and performed another diagnostic kidō. “Well, well. His blood glucose really is a bit low. How convenient. He may have been muddled before the attack, even.”

Karin snorted and said with forced humor, “Only Ichi-nii could stumble into a situation in which hypoglycemia is convenient.”

Urahara sat back on his heels. “Well, I think I'll leave the healing where it is. He's in no danger now and you can say he must have hit his head when he passed out. Let's get him to your father's clinic and have him treat the hypoglycemia. It'll make it all more plausible.”

Soon Urahara and the girls were in the lobby of the Kurosaki Clinic. Isshin cheerfully popped into the room but instantly sobered. Urahara played humble Good Samaritan shopkeeper with a zany smile while his serious eyes held Isshin's. Karin knew the men would have words later.

Karin and Yuzu crawled onto the gurney with Ichigo and curled up against his sides, needing the touch to assure themselves he was safe. They must have dozed off; the room was dimly lit when Karin opened her eyes at the feel of her brother shifting around as he regained consciousness. Probably confused about how he got to the clinic. She felt their father's reiatsu as a warm presence at the foot of the bed. So he was watching them. Hovering. Karin cringed internally at the worry they caused by hesitating to grasp at the power to protect their family.

They had to correct that mistake. The guilt was enough to keep Karin's face buried in her brother's side so no one could see her tearing up.

“Old Man?” Ichigo croaked.


“Um.” Ichigo paused and gave a quiet hiss of pain. “Hurts. What happened?”

“What's the last thing you remember?”
“Uhhhhhh. I got a call. I was supposed to go somewhere...? Crap, I forget. What happened?”

Isshin sighed. “The girls found you passed out on a side street when they were on their way home from the park. A shopkeeper helped bring you home. Your blood sugar was low. I think you passed out from hypoglycemia and hit your head.”

Karin curled in on herself and squeezed her eyes shut. It was a decent lie, but there never should have been cause to invent it.

Ichigo's voice sounded like he was grimacing. “I remember feeling kinda weird.”

“How hungry?” Isshin asked with dry significance.


Isshin wryly said, “I don't care if Yuzu tries to force-feed you, you'll sit and take it. You gave them quite a scare.”

“Sorry.”

Karin felt like she was so full of shame that she could physically vomit it out.

Dinner was deeply awkward that night. Yuzu cooked a feast and nearly buried Ichigo in food. Ichinii seemed to think it was a reaction to his hypoglycemia and Goat-Face seemed to think it was an after-effect of fear of the alleged Hollow, but Karin knew it was largely an expression of nerves while her sister feverishly thought about Witches and magical girls and the risks to their brother, the same as she was doing.

Everyone went to bed early for once. Karin and Yuzu lay in their room, rigid and agitated as they waited for the men of the house to fall asleep.

Finally, Yuzu blurted out, “We need to do it.”

Karin grimly stared at the ceiling. “Yeah. There's a Witch out there and Ichi-nii is a sitting duck.”

“No one can help us.”

“We have to help ourselves.”

Yuzu fidgeted with her covers. “When Onii-chan told us about becoming a shinigami, he said the chance to protect Rukia and everyone outweighed the risks. I— I think I understand what he meant now.”

“Yeah.”

There was a long pause. Finally, Yuzu asked, “What do we wish for?”

Karin chewed her lip. “Even if Kyubey could restore Ichi-nii's powers, I don't think he would. And I think he wouldn't contract us if he knew how close we are to shinigami. He hates shinigami too much. So that's out.”

“And we can't bring back Mom.”

“Mm. If only.”
Yuzu huffed. “This is hard.”

They talked about wishes until they fell asleep.

The next morning started fairly normally. Yuzu bullied Ichigo into eating a big breakfast, Isshin monologued to Masaki’s poster, and everyone went their separate ways. The girls shared a determined look, got their things together, and headed to the train station without asking for permission to travel far. If there was ever a case for asking forgiveness rather than permission, this was it.

An hour later, they disembarked at Kyubey’s station and sought his rafter. He was perched in the same place as before, apparently asleep. He twitched and looked down at them when they drew close.

_Oh, Karin, Yuzu._ He stretched languidly and stood. _Have you decided? Or do you have more questions?_

“Let’s do it,” Karin muttered.

Once again, Kyubey led them to the hidden duck pond. He perched on his rock, but the girls were too tense to sit.

“There’s a Witch in Karakura,” Karin blurted out.

Kyubey blinked up at them. _My, my. I thought Witches would naturally avoid your city and enter only rarely. To have encountered one so soon... how strange._

“It targeted our brother,” Karin continued. “He had a Witch’s Kiss on his neck. It tried to make him jump off a tower, but we stopped him.”

_Ah! Excellent work! That you can do that without contracting—I wonder just how powerful you would be as magical girls._

“Yeah, well, I guess you're going to find out.”

Kyubey sat up taller. _You have chosen your wishes?_ he asked eagerly. The girls nodded. _Excellent!_

The girls looked at each other once more. Yuzu took a deep breath and looked at Kyubey. “Our wish is to be strong enough to protect the people of Karakura from Witches and Hollows.”

Kyubey cocked its head. _You both have the same wish?_ The girls nodded fiercely. _It is essentially power for power's sake. It sounded curious._

“No, it's power for others' sake,” said Karin.

“We thought about it, and what we want is to protect people,” explained Yuzu. “That would happen no matter the wish we made, so we decided to focus on making sure we have the ability to fight well.”

“No point being magical girls if we're not strong enough to beat our enemies,” Karin finished wryly.

_I see, I see_, said Kyubey. _It is a bit unconventional, but not without precedent. I am able to grant that wish. Are you ready?_

The girls nodded. Kyubey sat tall and flung his floppy, rabbit-like ears out horizontally. The ears
expanded and arched toward the girls, the tip of each hovering over their chests. Both girls gasped in pain as pinpricks of light formed over their hearts and expanded into egg-shaped orbs. It felt like something within them was being pulled, stretched to breaking, and hurriedly sewn back together. Neither could tell if she was hearing her sister's cries or if the pained sounds were in her own head. Moments stretched into eons of agony.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. A glittering gemstone floated in front of each girl. Before Kyubey could even speak, instinct made both reach out for her own gem, a steady thrum of *mine mine mine* and need to hold it close echoing in their hearts.

*Now, open yourself and accept it,* Kyubey said with ceremonial reverence. *This is your destiny.*

The girls cradled their newly-forged Soul Gems and fell to the ground.

They regained consciousness about fifteen minutes later. Kyubey still sat on the rock, patiently watching his tail swish. The girls slowly levered themselves upright and stared numbly at their Gems. Yuzu's was yellow and Karin's was red.

Karin looked up and Kyubey and slowly asked, “What now?”

Kyubey's eyes crinkled in an apparent smile. *You can find Witches and their Familiars by observing how your Soul Gems react— the closer you get to an enemy, the brighter they will glow. Whenever you want to transform, you have only to will it. When you defeat a Witch, use its Grief Seed to purify your Soul Gems and bring it to me to dispose of.*

“How do we learn how to fight?” asked Yuzu.

*Your magic will guide you,* answered Kyubey.

“Oh, *that's* not vague at all,” snarked Karin.

Kyubey tilted its head oddly in Karin's direction. *Every girl possesses different weapons and powers. It would be unreasonable to expect me to teach infinite combinations of weapons and abilities to infinite girls. Fortunately, it is in your spiritual programming, so to speak. You will understand when you engage an enemy.*

Karin hummed skeptically, held her Soul Gem up to the sun, and squinted at it. “Whatever you say. So we wander around where the Witch had our brother and use these shinies like sparkly dowsing rods to find it?”

*Yes. Ah! It usually is not as important to other magical girls, but you should limit yourself to transforming after you enter a labyrinth. The transformation causes a surge of power that shinigami might be able to sense outside a pocket dimension. I do not want you to get caught.*

Yuzu smiled wanly. “Oh, thanks for telling us, Kyubey!”

Karin looked at Kyubey from the sides of her eyes and lazily asked, “Anything else you wanna tell us?”

*No. That is all,* it said cheerfully. *Now, go! Embrace your destinies and triumph over the Witches!*

Yuzu cheered.

“That was so hokey, oh my God,” Karin muttered.
They managed to get home in time to share a late lunch with Goat-Face and Ichi-nii, who Yuzu continued to bury in food. Ichigo griped about work but said at least he had been able to leverage the rest of the day off by telling his boss she had worked him to the point of passing out the day before. Soon Ichigo disappeared to his room to crash and their father was back in the clinic. The girls shared a significant look, told their father they were going out, and set off for the high school.

Hands shaking, Yuzu held her Soul Gem in her palm and watched it glow more brightly as they approached the cell phone tower. The girls shared a glance. Yuzu willed her Soul Gem to turn back into a ring and joined her sister in climbing the fence once more. Karin just had time to note that Urahara must have had her puddle of blood cleaned up when they heard an electrical hum grow louder in fits and starts. Visible bolts of electricity arced from tower to shed to fence.

Karin grinned with false bravado. “Oh, you know we're here, huh?” She looked around. “What're you gonna do about it?”

The top of the cell tower sparked. Electricity arced down the ladder, rung to rung to rung, and blasted the ground like a lightning bolt. A flat, translucent sigil like the one that had been on Ichigo's neck appeared floating vertically above the ground. Reality warped around its edges.

Karin turned to her sister. “Well, Yuzu, I think we're supposed to go in.”

Yuzu wrung her hands. “I'm scared.”

Karin looked down and bit her lip. “Me, too,” she said quietly. She looked up, determined. “But this thing almost killed Ichi-nii. And we can't let it get away. We made our decision. Now we have to follow through. There's no going back.” She held out her hand.


The girls marched through the portal holding hands.

The world that greeted them was chaotic. It was a jumbled cityscape whose buildings looked like cardboard cutouts. The sky was dark with acid green stars. High-tension power lines crisscrossed the sky. A multitude of telephone poles were strewn throughout at a far greater density than logically necessary. The telephone poles all listed at uneven angles. Bolts of electricity arced over the telephone wires at random intervals.

After taking a few moments to take it all in, Karin let go of Yuzu's hand and said, “Well, we'd better transform before something shows up.”

“R-right,” Yuzu agreed.

For a moment, both looked unsure. Then they were struck by an impulse that made each raise her Soul Gem and channel her power through it. Magic wrapped around them and altered their clothes. Their limbs felt stronger. The power crested and brought on a brief bout of euphoria—for an instant, they felt invincible. The power settled down and steadied, leaving the girls changed.

Yuzu's costume was golden yellow and white. It had a circus ringmaster theme, a sleeveless yellow tailcoat over a sleeveless white blouse and a low yellow vest. The coat's tails were gathered and exaggerated into calf-length skirt-like frills behind her. Her arms were clothed with shoulder-length white gloves. A lacy white collar covered her neck and shoulders, a yellow bow tie exaggerated into a rosette shape at her throat. A large citrine shaped like an inverted, rounded triangle was nestled in its folds like a brooch. A small yellow top hat festooned with curled yellow and white
ribbons was tied to her head with a white ribbon. Her ears held large citrine earrings. The outfit was completed by white leggings and low yellow heels. She held a golden whip in her right hand.

Karin's costume was red and cream. The main body was a form-fitting red sleeveless dress with a short, slightly ruffled skirt. Just beneath her bust was a red ribbon cinch. Over the skirt she wore a red kendo tare with silver rivets. Her arms bore cream detached sleeves, the billowy material with its red ribbon hems evoking a miko-like image. Red boots with silver rivets stopped just below her knees, the remainder of her legs covered by sheer dark tights. Her ponytail was tied with a puffy red bow. Ruby drop earrings, a red ribbon choker, and a ruby shaped like an inverted rounded triangle on her forehead rounded out her accessories. She held a simple katana in her right hand.

The girls looked themselves and each other over in surprise.

“Well, damn,” said Karin. “We look good. And I'm not a frilly mess.” She lifted her chin, preening. “Let's go kick some ass.”

Yuzu raised an arm uncertainly. “How am I supposed to use a whip?”

Karin shrugged, adrenaline soaring. “Dunno. I've never used a sword, either. Guess we'll figure it out.” With that, she marched down the nearest street.

Yuzu followed. “Where do we go?”

Karin stopped. She wished she was up higher so she could see better. Something sparked at the back of her mind. Before she could really think about it, she had hopped up onto one of the cardboard buildings as she had seen the shinigami do. She stopped and looked down at her feet as Yuzu shouted in surprise— Karin was probably three stories up. “Huh. How about that.” She waved and called down to Yuzu, “Hop on up! It's easy!”

Yuzu looked dubious, but was soon standing next to her sister. “Wow.”

“Yeah. Awesome, right?” Karin put her fists on her hips and looked out at the labyrinth. “Now, where do we go from here?”

The girls surveyed the nightmare world. It was much the same in every direction, save for a massive radio tower in the distance. A glass plasma globe was stuck on top of it, the arcs of energy within it sickly green.

“Well, if that doesn't scream 'villain's lair,' I don't know what does,” Karin said drily.

Karin experimentally hopped to the next cardboard rooftop. Yuzu followed her more tentatively. Soon, they were running across the rooftops easily. When they were halfway to the tower, mechanical birds began to appear on the arcing telephone lines. The farther they went, the thicker the flock became. They were soon surrounded by the clicking and whirring of tiny gears, a multitude of digitized voices saying “piroripara pirirora” in lieu of chirping. The uneasiness Karin felt about the creatures proved correct when the birds started dive-bombing them. With no time to think, the girls simply reacted. Karin's initial swings of her sword would have been more at home on a baseball diamond and Yuzu initially used the handle of her whip as a bludgeon, but they quickly began to refine their movements.

Magic-fuelled instinct thrummed through Karin. The battle was fast-paced, but seemed almost slow to her. It was as though her magic provided her with an instinctual guide, a silent voice whispering instruction and nudging her body into the correct positions with gentle hands: shift your grip like so— better if your wrist is less rigid— more force if you swing like so— stab, slash, stab, twist—
breathe— slam arm back to use hilt as bludgeon—

The running battle left a trail of broken clockwork behind them as they bounced from roof to roof. Soon, they found themselves on the last rooftops before the base of the tower. The remaining clockwork birds balked and retreated as though more afraid of the tower than the magical girls. Karin and Yuzu stood and watched the birds restlessly gather nearby, on guard as they caught their breath.

Unlike the solid column of the cell phone tower on the high school property in the real world, this tower was made of the more classic metal latticework. It looked like a cheap knockoff of the Eiffel Tower, spindly bare-bones steel reaching high in the sky. Green electricity arced over the steel at random intervals. A large plasma ball full of green arcs of energy crowned the tower. Pink warning lights pulsed at major joints of the structure. Something bulky hung clustered in the hollow of the tower just beneath the plasma ball.

Karin scratched her head. “So... what exactly are we supposed to fight? The last Witch was a tree.” Yuzu chewed her lip. “It could be the whole tower. Or maybe the glowy thing up top.”

“Hmmmmm. I wonder if we'll get zapped if we climb it.”

“W-well, all we can do is try, I guess.”

“Right. I'll go first.” Karin stretched and hopped to psych herself up. She could do this. “I guess try to grab me with that whip if I fall.”

“Umm. I don't know if I can do that.”

Karin paused and blinked her disbelief at her sister. “Sure you can. You were grabbing birds out of the air just now.”

Yuzu looked freaked out. “I don't know how I did that.”

“Well, instinct has worked for us so far.” Karin shrugged. “Here I go!”

With that, Karin leaped from the cardboard rooftop to a narrow metal beam, stumbling a few steps before regaining her balance. She shifted uncertainly, looked around, and tensed when a small arc of electricity bounced toward her along the beam. Static buzzed over her skin as it passed, but she was not electrocuted. Reassured of relative safety, she waved her sister over. Both looked up at the dim interior of the tower.

“So. Climb?” asked Yuzu.

“I guess so.”

The girls started jumping upward from beam to beam. About halfway up, they noticed a mechanical hum growing louder as they climbed. Three quarters of the way up, the interior of the tower was suddenly flooded with light, small green and pink lamps lighting in sequence from top to bottom. The girls froze as the bulky thing at the top creaked into motion. They held their weapons defensively as the thing suddenly dropped and bounced at the end of its cables like a spider on its thread.

The thing was a bundle of oversized electronics tangled together with and suspended by innumerable cords. Surge strips, CPUs, analog telephones, alarm clocks, keyboards, computer mice, speakers, cameras, cell phone chargers, fax machines, modems, routers—all were jumbled
around an enormous smart phone whose screen portrayed a glowing red eye with a flat black iris on a black background. The eye rolled around and looked at each of the girls. Suddenly, the many speakers began blasting outrageously loud fax and modem sounds overlaid with human screaming as multiple extension cords shot out of the mass, their pronged plugs sharp and crackling with electricity.

The girls winced at the ear-splitting hellnoise. Yuzu dodged while Karin sliced the plugs off the cords directed at her, ignoring the sizzling shock that ran up her arms. The Witch launched more plugs and other small electronics their way. Karin dodged and sliced. Yuzu screamed and raised her arms to block her face.

“How did you do that?!” Karin yelled.

Nothing hit Yuzu because a glowing, translucent yellow shield made of three interlocked circles hovered in front of her and blocked everything that was hurled her way. She peered over her arms, stared at the shield, and shouted, “I don't know!”

“Dammit!” Karin bounced around in the tower, dodging and weaving. “We need a plan!”

Safe behind her shield, Yuzu took a moment to really look at the Witch and how it was all connected. Karin left her to it. After some thought, Yuzu yelled, “I have an idea!”

Karin loved her sister. Always saving her ass. “Hit me!”

“Cut the cables it's hanging from! Then I'll do something, then you stab it in the eye!”

“Got it!”

Karin continued to jump around the tower, randomly darting up and slashing cables with yells of effort. Yuzu nervously shifted her grip on her whip as the Witch's attacks grew more frenzied. Just before Karin sliced the last cord, Yuzu lashed out with the whip, which extended like Tōshirō's crescent chain could, and ensnared the central smart phone that seemed to be in control. Karin cut the final cord and the Witch dropped sharply. Yuzu braced herself and held on as best she could. The Witch snapped to a stop, bounced once, then most of its bulk fell away, leaving a charger cord dangling from the smart phone like a bare spine. Yuzu then used the recoil to launch the smart phone up at Karin, who dove down to stab its screen with a furious shout. The screen shattered, red light spilling from a spiderweb of cracks.

Everything seemed to hang still for a moment before a shock wave of power blew through the labyrinth. The tower and cardboard city wavered out of existence, leaving the two magical girls back in the cell phone tower enclosure at the high school. They stared dumbly at the Grief Seed that drifted down from the sky. Karin reached out and caught it. Both stared for a minute.

“We did it,” Karin whispered in disbelief.

“We did it,” Yuzu marveled.

“We did it!” they both shouted, laughing and hugging.

Karin gripped Yuzu's hands, elated. “We can do this. We can protect Ichi-nii!”

Yuzu grinned. “We really can keep him safe just like he kept us safe!”

Karin laughed proudly. “Being magical girls is gonna be awesome.”
WITCH DATA
ISIDORA, the Digital Witch with a spiteful nature. She seems silent and harmless, but will viciously tear her enemies apart behind their backs. You'll know you've pushed her too far when she actually speaks to your face.
Minion: Gabriel, whose duty is to maintain the Witch's digital network. They do not want the Witch to punish them for a dropped signal.

A/N: Ichigo's utter breakdown when Ginjō stole his Fullbring didn't come out of nowhere.

When transformed, the twins' Soul Gems are meant to be shaped like strawberries as a shout-out to their motive of protecting Ichigo. (Side note: Their wish to protect had the side-effect of granting them greater defense/resilience, so they can take more abuse with less damage—such as not getting badly electrocuted.) Karin's costume has more traditional Japanese elements as she thinks the shinigami are pretty cool (to the point of on some level wanting to be one), and shinigami wear traditional Japanese clothes. Yuzu has a ringmaster/lion-tamer theme because she completely dominates Kon (a possessed lion plushie) and in the anime she's associated with that cat-ghost who could turn into a lion. Their theme colors come from being Karakura Red and Karakura Yellow in the joke chapters.

This Witch is a shout-out to Meru Otonashi from Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
The twins sat quietly for several minutes, allowing Homura to digest all they had told her. Homura frowned down at the tabletop, mind whirling.

The Incubator had done a masterful job of luring the girls in. It had danced around the atrocious drawbacks to the contract and made the twins feel empowered while waxing philosophical about the human race in ways designed to confuse tweens. It was oddly forthcoming on the subject of wishes, though. What did it hope to accomplish by divulging so much information? Whatever it was, Homura was furious. At this point she was so cynical about the Incubator that she wouldn't put it past the monster to have another magical girl herd a Witch toward Karakura just to push the Kurosaki girls into a corner. Homura had seen how dogged it was in trying to convince Madoka to contract once it noticed her great potential. It wouldn't surprise her in the least to find out that it had gone to great lengths to get the twins to sign away their souls.

The twins had contracted too long ago for Homura to be able to save them in the next timeline. Even though the prospect of allying with them was promising, it made her feel powerless. How many girls had sold their souls to protect the people they loved over the course of millennia? It disgusted her that the Incubator preyed upon that selflessness. Her powerlessness to stop the cycle was frustrating beyond words.

Homura didn't know what to think about the Incubator's stated origins. The Incubator had told her in multiple timelines that its race was alien. She now questioned her own interpretation. It could have been one of its many misleading statements— a spiritual race from another dimension would be alien to most magical girls, she supposed. Would have been alien to Homura herself even a few days ago. Had she fallen into a deliberate trap of misinterpreting "alien" as "extraterrestrial"? And while it still spoke of energy to the Kurosaki girls, it had apparently not mentioned countering entropy or preventing the heat death of the universe among its motives. Were the two angles mutually exclusive or did they overlap in ways she couldn't understand?

Also, this was the first she heard of an outside force hunting magical girls— if that assertion could be believed at all. One thing was certain: The Incubator's sheer distaste and wariness of shinigami to the point of villainizing them made her very, very interested in them. Call it a forbidden fruit reflex, but she found her curiosity piqued. No matter what it said to turn their attention aside, the Incubator had asked the sisters to spy on the shinigami while taking pains to ensure they wouldn't turn around and tell the shinigami information about its system. Whether the shinigami actually posed a threat to magical girls was something Homura would have to investigate. A deep, quiet part
of her mind wondered if shinigami were actually a threat to the Incubators themselves. She wasn’t sure what to do with that thought.

Homura also found the Kurosaki girls’ wish interesting. “To be strong enough to protect the people of Karakura from Witches and Hollows.” She wanted to know how broadly or narrowly their magic had interpreted it. Were they literally unable to be overpowered by a Witch? Or did they just get heightened defensive abilities? How was “strength” defined? Physical? Magical? Psychological? Did any advantage granted by the wish only apply in Karakura or while protecting someone from Karakura?

So much new information. So many new questions.

“Um, Homura?” Yuzu fidgeted. “Do you have any questions?”

Homura looked up, blinked owlishly, and tilted her head slightly. She ran through the history they had given her. It was probably nitpicking, but... “Yes. Your brother. You said he was a powerful shinigami. How did the Witch ensnare him?”

The sisters winced. Karin cleared her throat. “Well, you see... You know the big war from a couple years ago we mentioned? With the shinigami trying to keep some nutjob from sacrificing all of us?” When Homura nodded, Karin continued, “Our brother fought in that war.”

Homura frowned. “How old was your brother, then?”

“Only sixteen,” Yuzu said quietly. “He shouldn't have had to fight, but things were... complicated.”

“See, the traitor— something-or-other Aizen— had this trick he could do with his zanpakutō where, if you saw his shikai once, he could make you see detailed illusions whenever he wanted,” explained Karin. “It made him tough to beat— he'd figured out how to show the trick to a lot of the strong leaders of the shinigami over the course of decades before they knew he was rotten to the core. So they'd try to attack him and he'd not really be there, or they'd attack an ally, or they'd get attacked and block wrong because they saw his sword in a different place than it was. It was a mess.”

“But Onii-chan was young and had only visited Soul Society once,” continued Yuzu. “He never saw Aizen's shikai, and he was as strong as the captains of the shinigami. Onii-chan was the only one who could really trust what he was seeing when he fought. So he had to fight. He wouldn't let Karakura be destroyed. He protected us.”

Karin scowled down at her empty soda can. “But Aizen had this weird thing that made him keep getting stronger. Ichi-nii knew that if he wanted to beat Aizen, he'd have to use all his power. So he did. Literally. He sucked at explaining it, but he and his zanpakutō did some weird finishing move that sacrificed all his reiatsu. Other things happened, but basically Ichi-nii gave up all his power to protect us.” Her lips drew into an angry line. “So he was defenseless.”

Ah. That clarified things. Reciprocal sacrifice. Homura wondered if the twins knew they had set themselves up for a similar end. But... “Was? Not is?”

Yuzu smiled. “It took a long time, but Mr. Urahara— um, that really smart shinigami we mentioned who lives in Karakura instead of Soul Society— he invented something to help give Onii-chan his powers back.”

“Couldn't be a pill or something. Nooo, had to be a sword. That's Urahara for you,” Karin added darkly.
“All the captains and lieutenants of the shinigami helped by putting some of their power into the sword and gave the power to Onii-chan to... kinda wake up his reiatsu. Like, if his reiatsu was cold coals, they sparked it back into a bonfire.”


Homura eyed the girls. “This Urahara sounds... ominous.”

The twins looked at each other and laughed shortly. Karin smirked. “Oh, I'm sure he can be terrifying when he wants to be. I haven't seen it myself, but Tōshirō says Urahara used to be a captain. That's enough to be wary around him. Ichi-nii says he is a cheerfully sadistic trainer. He puts up a goofy front kind of like our dad does. I think a lot of it is real, though. But when he starts waving his fan and going all 'oh, whatever do you mean, I am merely an innocent shopkeeper,' he's totally trolling. And if he can find a way to startle you out of your skin while helping you, he'll do it for kicks. But he's not vicious about it and actually knows when to pitch the goofy act.”

“Stabbing someone from behind is not being vicious about it?” Homura deadpanned.

“Since it was immediately obvious what was going on, nope, not for Urahara,” said Karin. “I don't think he had planned for Ichi-nii to be in a bad situation when they gave him back his powers, so yeah, it probably wasn't in the best of taste considering the circumstances. But shinigami transfer powers to humans by stabbing them through the heart anyway so maybe he couldn't avoid being all stabby.”

Yuzu smiled wanly. “Onii-chan calls Mr. Urahara a mad scientist with a conscience. He says Urahara has done some, um...”

“Morally questionable.”

“Yeah, morally questionable things, but things Onii-chan didn't mind because he understood why he did them and would have cooperated if things were explained to him first. And he said Mr. Urahara apologized after.”

“What kind of things?” asked Homura.

The twins looked at each other.

“That's... a long story,” Karin hedged.

“So give me the short version,” Homura said bluntly.

Karin blinked at her. “Okay. Uh.” She rolled her eyes skyward in thought. “So, Ichi-nii's first visit to Soul Society was to rescue a shinigami who was in trouble for helping him by sharing her powers. Urahara knew that Aizen was bad before almost anyone else, but he didn't tell Ichi-nii and his friends about him. Or his special ability—which was really stupid, in my opinion. Or that Aizen had made the government get pissed off at his shinigami friend because Urahara had secretly tried to hide something in her soul—the special thingy I mentioned earlier that made Aizen keep getting more powerful. Aizen wanted Ichi-nii's friend Rukia because he wanted that thingy.”

Homura stared. “He hid something in her soul. Secretly.”

Karin winced. “Yeeeah. That was skeevy. But Ichi-nii and Rukia said they understood when Aizen got his hands on the thing and they saw the terrible things he could do with it. Ichi-nii said it was like Urahara and Aizen were playing chess to prevent or cause an apocalypse. Aizen wanted the
thingy to destroy the world and Urahara wanted to destroy the thingy to save the world.”

Yuzu pensively played with her sleeve cuff. “I think part of Mr. Urahara's problem is that he thinks so far ahead of everyone else that he loses track of how far behind he's left them.”

“Some of the leaving people behind is deliberate, though. Or at least a choice he makes in certain circumstances.” Karin made a wry face between a grin and a grimace. “Ha, I can feel for him with Ichinii, though. Trying to make a sixteen-year-old boy learn Soul Society politics when he had a single-minded goal of plowing his way through Seireitei, grabbing Rukia, and strolling out would have been like trying to convince a farmer to study astrophysics.”

Homura bit her cheek for a moment. “Still.”

Karin sighed and shrugged. “Still.”

A few moments passed in awkward silence as they set aside the topic of the shinigami scientist.

Homura mulled over the things they had told her and backtracked. “So, you contracted to protect your brother. When did he get his powers back?”

The girls cringed. “A couple months after we contracted,” said Karin.

Homura sat back and looked at them in surprise. “So soon?”

“Yeah. He wasn't vulnerable for long. But we managed to protect him from things together for several weeks.”

“There was a time a few weeks after we contracted when a Hollow attacked me and my brother.” Yuzu looked down in shame. “I was still new and too scared to do anything without Karin there.” She looked up fervently. “But I got better after that!” She looked down again. “But by the time I was... confident enough to fight by myself, Onii-chan had his powers back.”

Karin slapped her sister's back. “It worked out. And we bagged another Witch in that time, so it was worth it. We kept him safe when he couldn't keep himself safe. That's all that matters.”

Yuzu smiled weakly at her sister, then turned to Homura. “Any more questions?”

“Hm. None that I can think of at the moment.”

“We should head back, then. I need to start dinner.”

“Oh!” Karin interrupted. “Homura, just so you know: Hollows are our excuses for if someone senses us do something with our power. You really obviously feel powerful enough to fight Hollows, so if someone questions you while you're here, talk as though Witches are Hollows.”

“That could be a good cover story for Mitakihara,” Yuzu suggested. “If anyone here suspects something supernatural where you come from, let them think it's Hollows. Then if they look into it, they won't be able to find the Witches and will think the Hollow moved on or was defeated.”

“Hey, great idea, Yuz!” cheered Karin.

The girls set out for the Kurosaki home. Homura let the twins chatter around her as she thought.

What would happen if shinigami investigated Mitakihara?

She wondered what the eccentric shinigami scientist would make of it all if he knew what to look
for. From the story she had been told, he seemed to operate independently of the shinigami government. He could be a good place to start figuring out what modern shinigami thought of magical girls. She was wary of tipping her hand so far from her turnback point, though. Maybe she could give him a nudge a day or two before Walpurgisnacht? It was something to consider, anyway.

It had been awhile since she had so many new ideas. It was both heady and frightening.

Soon, Homura quietly helped Karin sweep and tidy the clinic as Isshin made sure the day's charts and paperwork were in order while Yuzu cooked dinner. Observing father and daughter bickering and teasing and laughing was... pleasant. Less lonely. She liked it. They were still confusing, but she liked them.

Dinner was spirited among the Kurosaki family. While Homura still chose not to speak much, she did actively pay attention to the conversation this time. The others noticed and carefully tossed an occasional question her way. Nothing personal; just little offers of involvement like wasn't that stupid? and do you think this sauce would taste good with chicken? Homura always hesitated a moment before answering and her replies were always brief, but it was improvement the Kurosaki family was generally happy with.

After they ate, Isshin cleared his throat to stop Homura and Karin from gathering the dishes. “Sit back down, girls. I want to talk.”

Homura shared a wary glance with Karin and complied.

Isshin settled his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers for a moment as he thought how to begin. He cleared his throat again and began to speak.

“I've been keeping an eye on the news out of Mitakihara on and off through the day. It doesn't look good. Especially the stuff that came out just before you came back.”

Homura stiffened and made her face shut down into blankness. She didn't like the way the man frowned at that. It wasn't suspicion, but it was close.

“The police are finding more odd things and disappearances, even in nearby towns. And the media is camped out by your school.” Isshin folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. “What I want to say is that I'm concerned for your safety should you go back to your home. If you want to stay here while the police figure things out, you are welcome in our house. At the very least through the weekend. If things don't look safer by Sunday afternoon, you can stay longer. A few days, a week, it doesn't matter. What matters is your safety.”

Homura was taken off guard. She had expected an interrogation, not an invitation.

“Now, I would want to speak with your uncle and you will need to contact your school again. Whether you arrange for leave or home study, you need to let the school know where you are. How does that sound?”

Homura opened and closed her mouth a few times before she gathered herself and bowed her head politely. “I would appreciate that very much, Dr. Kurosaki. Thank you.”

Isshin grinned slightly and sat back. “Just so you know, the girls' brother will be visiting this weekend. He just started at university a few weeks ago and comes home on weekends. He'll get here tomorrow afternoon and leave Sunday evening. Will that be a problem?”

Homura shook her head. “No, sir.”
“Bah, you don't need to sir me,” Isshin laughed and waved her off.

Karin was grinning and Yuzu positively beamed. “Thank you so much, Daddy!”

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly. How long had it been since Homura took the time to sit down and just snack and watch anime? The first time Karin tucked a stick of Pocky in the corner of her mouth and held the box out to offer her some, Homura was vividly reminded of Kyōko. When Yuzu sat with her and coaxed her into a halting conversation while Karin enthusiastically battled video game monsters, she thought of Kyōko once again. She suddenly wished she could introduce Karin and Kyōko—sarcastic, blunt, aggressive, tenderhearted beneath the surface, gamers; they'd probably get on like a house on fire. Whether that would be entertaining or terrifying was anyone's guess.

Hypothetical meetings between the two danced at the edge of her mind as she readied herself for bed. Still, from the time Isshin had made his offer of refuge to the moment her eyes slipped shut, her mind buzzed with a steady thrum of possibilities. Isshin had given her the perfect excuse to stay in Karakura and investigate the potential opportunities presented to her. She would be a fool not to seize it with both hands.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Oh, hey, look, the rest of this chapter just fell together. INFODUMP! Plus Urahara and Kurotsuchi being... Urahara and Kurotsuchi.

PMMM CANON NOTICE: Characters mentioned from Kazumi Magica only refer to certain parts of their plots. DON'T WORRY IF YOU HAVEN'T READ THE SPINOFF MANGA. (They are available online if you Google them, though.) For now, I'm just using the spinoff characters' disappearances and deaths to make the situation look more serious. If I actually bring them into the plot-- and I have my hands full so I'm not sure yet if I will-- it will be off in the future and I'll explain everything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Interesting.”

Kisuke Urahara stared at his computer monitor in fascination, idly snacking on candy in its blue glow. Something odd was definitely happening in and around Mitakihara. He could tell that much from the feverish press coverage. Kisuke pored over the existing articles during lunch, memorizing the known facts, the speculation, and taking notes on the strangest angles to look at. At first blush, it looked like something sinister but entirely human was going on up north. However, Kisuke refrained from drawing any conclusions as yet. He set about researching Mitakihara area history and demographics while he waited for the local authorities and press to gather more information. His own network of spiritual sensors didn't extend anywhere near Mitakihara, so he attempted to acquire relevant data via remote access to the Twelfth Division's databases. Evidently they had upgraded since his last foray because his presence was flagged and he ended up engaged in a thoroughly entertaining hacking-battle-slash-chat with Mayuri Kurotsuchi himself for the entire afternoon.

Really, he had no clue human emoticons would infuriate the man so much. Bless the internet.

At some point— dinner time, coincidentally— Kisuke abruptly decided to quit playing with Kurotsuchi and turned to the local news over the past several months looking for anything strange. Spotting Hollow activity among mundane news could be difficult, but you could find some if you knew what to look for. He was currently trawling conspiracy theory and supernatural web sites for mentions of Mitakihara and Kazamino; such sites were often exaggerated and way off base, but sometimes steered one toward information unavailable or dismissed by mainstream media.
username: BakaBakenekoKyo

subject: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

Hey you guys you know that thing with all the ppl waking up in a tv station with ammonnia and bleach like they were gonna commit suicide together but they don't remember getting there? Something like that happened to me up in Asunaro like 5 weeks ago. I posted about it back then. [link] I was wandering around this abandoned inn in the old part of town with my camera to see if I could catch any orbs or something. A lot of ppl here stay away from the place cuz it feels weird. The place felt really creppy, like someone was watching me. I started to feel dizzy by the stairs. I must have blackked out because next thing I knew I was on the 2nd floor in a dusty room. I was on the floor with my back to a window and a girl was taking a curtain cord off from around my neck and saying stuff like everything would be alright and I was safe. I kinda freakked out all over her. I was weak so the girl helped me get out. I never saw her again. The next day I noticed the memory card was gone from my camera. The girl didn't look like the pictures of that Madoka girl who saved the tv station ppl but she did kinda the same thing. It just seems weird.

username: deathlyhallowed

subject: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

I live further south in Shinchi. Earlier this month I was filming with nightvision camera in an old warehouse on old pier that isn't used anymore. There are lots of stories about it being haunted by sailors ghosts but I never found anything until last time. It felt super creepy-crawly and I felt like someone was gonna grab me you know? I remember feeling dizzy and my vision going weird. Next thing I know some girl is dragging me onto the beach. When I was done throwing up water she said she saw me jump off the pier. I started bawling cos I'd never do that — I saw my little cousin drown once and even though he lived it was terrible I never wanna die that way — and I was coughing lots still so she said shed help me get to the road and get help and she said she'd say she saw me FALL off if anyone asked her. So she got me to the street and someone called for an ambulance and she disappeared before it came. I still had my camera strapped to my wrist but of course it was wrecked by seawater. So I dunno what happened but all this stuff made me think of it again. Is there ghosts that make people try to kill themselves?

username: ghostlyscholar101

subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

Perhaps some kind of vengeful ghost, or even a demonic entity? I wonder if possession is involved. I'd suggest going back to these locations with a larger group to investigate, but if the possessing spirit is homicidal, that may not be wise.

username: BakaBakenekoKyo
OMG You think maybe I was possessed?! Wow. I don't know if that's cool or terrifying. How many ppl can say they were possessed? Trying to make me hang myself was evil tho.

username: deathlyhallowed
subject: re: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

like hell am i going back to that pier. someone else can go if they want. i can give a map. but srsly, ill stick with ghosts that DON'T make me try to die a horrible death thanks

username: yuureiseeker
subject: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

I live in Kazamino City. In March I was in a burned out restaurant that had exploded a year ago but no one ever bought. The owner died in the fire. People say it's haunted because they found out the owner was trying to burn the place down for insurance money to pay a loan or something and he screwed up and killed himself too so his angry spirit haunts the place. I was wandering around trying to catch some EVP when I felt dizzy and faint. My sight went black. When I came to, I was in the empty lot behind the car repair shop next door, sitting on the ground covered in motor oil. A girl had her hands around mine and was shouting at me and shaking me to wake up. When I did she let go and I found out I had my cig lighter out and had been trying to strike it. So I had doused myself in oil and was in the process of lighting myself on fire.

username: BakaBakenekoKyo
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

OH MY GODD

username: deathlyhallowed
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

HOLY SHIT MAN WTF

username: yuureiseeker
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

I still don't know where that girl came from. It was dark but I could tell she was
wearing a frilly dress. It seemed out of place. I think I passed out again. When I woke up again, the girl was hosing me off. I don't really remember how I got home or where she went.

username: ghostlyscholar101
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
Did you pick up any EVP?

username: yuureiseeker
subject: re: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
Negative. Just the sounds of me scuffling around and muttering to myself between the sounds of doors and drawers. I guess when I was nabbing oil from the mechanic shop. I don't remember that. And the girl yelling at me to wake up.

username: paranormalcy
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
I have encountered some messed up stuff in my time but that is just f***ed up man. We got some creepypasta shenanigans all up in here.

username: gravewatcher44
subject: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
Whys it always a girl helps the suicidals?

username: BakaBakenekoKyo
subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
“suicidals” is rude

username: yuureiseeker
subject: re: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination
valid question tho
username: Kitsune-chan9

subject: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

Oh hey did you read the news that just came out about that hostess lady who woke up with the three missing girl's and she thought they saved her from suicidding? That she kinda remmbered being on top of the building but doenst know how she got down by the girl's and her shoe's were gone? That was freakkyyyy.

username: paranormalcy

subject: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

Yeah, I just read about it. There's a new update— the cops went there to investigate and found the shoes on the edge of the roof. The building had junk on the floors but the woman's feet weren't injured from walking down barefoot. Sooo...???

username: deathlyhallowed

subject: re: re: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat

Kisuken raised an eyebrow, tabbed back to the main news site, and refreshed it.

Oh. There had been quite a few updates since he last looked. Before he logged out— and he did have accounts on many paranormal sites just because— he replied to the thread.

username: SoulCandy

subject: re: Mitakihara Mass Hallucination

Does anyone know of any other incidents like this? Can you upload any recordings you made? It sounds really interesting.

That done, he opened a new packet of gummy candies and read the news.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

AUTHORITIES RELEASE SKETCH OF MYSTERY GIRL IN MIKI CASE
Mitakihara Municipal Police released surveillance footage and an artist's rendering of the mystery girl known to have been staying in the room where Miki Sayaka (14) was found dead yesterday evening. Hotel Nikko Mitakihara employees worked with forensic sketch artists through the night to produce the image seen at right.

Estimated age: 14-16 years
Build: slender/athletic
Estimated height: 155-160cm
Hair color: dark red
Eye color: dark red
Clothing: Almost always seen wearing cutoff denim shorts, a sea green zippered jacket with white hood and cuffs, a short black undershirt, and brown knee-high boots. Her waist-length hair has only been seen tied up into a ponytail or half-ponytail with a black ribbon.

Hotel employees report that the girl kept to herself and went out for extended periods at all hours. They say she avoided staff and could be brash or rude if drawn into conversation, but she tipped housekeeping and room service well. Housekeeping reports that the girl frequently left a mess of empty food bags and wrappers in her room for cleanup each morning. The housekeeper assigned to her floor for the morning shift noted that usually, the girl would be gone and leave the room to be cleaned up by nine. Unusually, the girl left the “do not disturb” placard on the door on the morning she was last seen leaving the hotel. Sayaka Miki's body would be discovered roughly nine hours later when the room was opened by security as a precaution due to a minor fire which spread smoke throughout that floor. (See: Laptop Battery Fire Leads Hotel Security to Dead Body [link])

Police Spokeswoman Mura once again emphasizes that the mystery girl is considered a person of interest and a potential victim. Though unidentified, the girl is designated as missing, the same as Mami Tomoe and Madoka Kaname. Anyone who knows who she is or has seen her in the past two weeks and especially the past two days are asked to call the tip line at XXX-XXXX.

A TANGLED WEB!

MYSTERY EXPANDS AS ADDITIONAL DISAPPEARANCES DISCOVERED
GIRLS ALSO MISSING/DEAD IN NEARBY JURISDICTIONS

ARE STRANGE SUICIDES RELATED?

April 22, 20XX 05:00 PM

The collaborative investigation between Mitakihara Municipal Police and the Kazamino City Police Department has rapidly turned up disturbing developments on an unexpected scale.

The initial focus of the joint investigation was to obtain surveillance footage of the purchase of the prepaid credit card used to reserve the Hotel Nikko Mitakihara room in which the body of Sayaka Miki (14) was found yesterday evening. The card was purchased with cash at a convenience store in western Kazamino City. Video quality is poor, but appears to show the unidentified red-haired girl from Hotel Nikko Mitakihara's lobby security cameras making the purchase. The card was not found among evidence collected at the hotel room. A transaction history for the card shows purchases of food and toiletries before and during the girl's stay at the hotel, both in Kazamino City and Mitakihara. Police are investigating the sites of each purchase in hope of learning more about this girl.

Another aspect of the joint investigation was the fingerprints tied to the hotel room and two “break-and-bust” ATM robberies in eastern Mitakihara. A long string of identical robberies has been found to have taken place throughout Kazamino City over the last fifteen months. The Kazamino City fingerprints match the Mitakihara fingerprints. In all cases, something rapidly destroyed the embedded security camera from above before the machine was pried open with something large and sharp.

A distressing series of similar disappearances and deaths of girls between the ages of eleven and sixteen has been discovered in Kazamino City. While it is unknown whether all cases are related, there are striking similarities among them.

The body of Bethany Michaels (14), daughter of a United States Marine who relocated to Kazamino City with his family to be an English teacher after discharge from his duties in Okinawa, was discovered collapsed in front of the altar of a Catholic church on the morning of April 14th, hands folded in prayer. Her body had obviously been beaten pre-mortem, but coroners determined that her wounds should not have been fatal. Her cause of death remains undetermined. As with the missing Kaname and dead Miki, her parents reported that Michaels had displayed increasing signs of distress over the week before her death. In another similarity, her Bible study classmate Marina Sakamoto (14) went missing the same night.
On the morning of April 3rd, the remains of Saki Yamaha (16) were found on a carousel at a local theme park. As in the Miki case, no security footage shows how she gained entry to the park. Cameras within the park are largely focused on vending stalls. Similar to the Momoe case the next day, the entire video system suddenly failed for several hours overnight. Yamaha's body was discovered by a park cleanup crew shortly after dawn. Autopsy found no injuries and no apparent cause of death, as in the Miki case. She was thought to have been depressed after an altercation with her boyfriend and had been missing since lunchtime on April 2nd. The boyfriend told authorities that the carousel was a sentimental place for the two of them. This may explain her ultimate location, but her cause of death remains a mystery.

Noriko Chiasa (16) was last seen on March 29th. She is the class representative for her first year high school class. Meticulous and responsible, Chiasa was known to be dedicated to her office to the point of obsession. Investigation found that many of the “late club meetings” she told her parents about seemed to not exist, though. It is unknown what she did instead during that time. Chiasa's parents reported that their daughter seemed to become gradually more agitated and tired. Some prodding of her classmates revealed irritation with Chiasa's micromanaging and an admission of a confrontation in a classroom the afternoon she went missing. No one has seen her since she stormed out of the school, upset. Police initially designated her case as a runaway, but they are reconsidering it in light of similar circumstances in the Miki case.

There are also several cases which don't fit the pattern of the missing and dead girls, but which have some similarities to the Mitakihara television station mass-hallucination near-suicide event.

On April 17th, security footage from a subway station shows a businessman wander in around midnight and walk off the platform onto the tracks. The only two witnesses were a pair of intoxicated men, but video corroborates their story that the man seemed to be distracted by something unseen. The surveillance cameras then malfunctioned. The witnesses say the businessman appeared to not even notice the train approaching him. He was killed on impact. Investigation found no history of mental illness, no drugs or alcohol in his system, and no explanation for his apparent mental state. Coworkers said he had left their late meeting happily satisfied with their work with a cheerful declaration that he'd buy donuts for the team in the morning. Not typical suicidal behavior.

On April 6th, a young couple with no history of mental illness was walking toward the homeless shelter they usually volunteered at. Friends saw them approaching from several blocks away and noted that both looked at an alley to their left as they seemed to hear something, then detoured into it. When they didn't show up before the shelter opened for the evening, the friends went to investigate. The couple was found sitting against a wall under a broken window. Each had apparently slit their own wrists with
broken glass and were in a dreamlike state. Their friends acted quickly and saved them. When the couple recovered in the hospital, neither remembered anything after leaving their house.

On March 27th, a group of three high school girls was walking home when they detoured from their usual route. An ice cream vendor they walked past stated that they all seemed to be in a trance, none of them acknowledging his greetings as they usually did and wandering through the park with a swaying gait. Worried, he kept an eye on them. When he saw them trying to scale a fence between the park and a steep drop into a drainage canal, he sprinted over, dragged them down, and called emergency services when they kept trying to climb over. Police found the girls in a dreamlike state which slowly lightened into confusion. Upon examination in a hospital, none of the girls were found to have any mind-altering substances in their systems. All three didn't remember anything after they turned away from their usual route.

All of this is disturbing just among Mitakihara and Kazamino City, but it gets worse. Detective Misako Ishijima of Asunaro, the jurisdiction just north of Mitakihara, contacted Mitakihara Municipal Police to disclose a series of missing and dead girls in Asunaro. Detective Ishijima has been collecting such cases as a side project while on the force. Her files go back years and encompass over fifty cases— twenty-seven in the past year alone— prompting a casefile scramble in Mitakihara and Kazamino City. Detective Ishijima cites a heightened frequency of such mysteries in the last four months. Here are but a handful of the disappearances:

On March 24th, the parents of Sumire Akane (14) discovered that their daughter was missing when she didn't appear for breakfast. Her window was found open, her bed unslept in. Police deemed her a runaway. Akane's parents adamantly denied this conclusion, saying their daughter had been happy and successful: A member of the South Middle School soccer club, Akane had recently been promoted to a starting position and was by all accounts thrilled and eager to compete. Her parents and friends insisted she wouldn't walk away from her dream come true— she had worked too hard for it.

Kaede Hinata (15) disappeared on March 10th. That afternoon, she urgently excused herself from choir practice at North Middle School to “run an important errand” she had forgotten. While she was never seen after her departure, police did find her school bag on a park bench about a kilometer from the school. Her wallet and phone were inside it. Authorities suspected abduction, but could find no evidence.

On February 2nd, Kanna Hijiri (15) disappeared from her bedroom overnight. A popular student at the exclusive Kyōzō Academy, Hijiri was known to be a cheerful girl and indulgent older sister to her younger twin sisters. However, friends and family noted that Hijiri rapidly became distant and erratic during the week before her
Best friends Yūri Asuka (14) and Airi Anri (14) disappeared from the same location on the evening of January 28th. Asuka was a competitor in the annual Asunaro Iron Chef competition at the Asunaro Dome. Anri was in the audience to cheer her on. The first sign that something was wrong came when Asuka failed to appear on stage for the final cook-off. Witnesses later identified a photo of Anri and agreed that they had seen her wander out the door and through main hallways, obviously worried and looking for something. As is becoming a worryingly common theme, the video surveillance system crashed for about forty minutes. Neither girl has been seen since.

While there have been many disappearances in Asunaro and its northern outskirts in the last four months, there has only been one unsolved case of a girl dying mysteriously in that time. On December 21st, Michiru Kazusa (14) was found dead in her home. The girl had returned to Asunaro from her overseas boarding school to be with her grandmother as she died back in November, then decided to take the rest of the semester off to put her grandmother's residence in order. Her mother, out of the country on business, allowed it. Things seemed to go smoothly until that day in December. Neighbors reported hearing a loud sound in the afternoon, but at first thought nothing of it as there was a thunderstorm in the area. Neighbors coming home from work later were the first to notice something amiss—part of the roof had been blown off. Upon investigation, Kazusa's body was found prone on the floor below the center of the hole in the roof. Authorities initially suspected a lightning strike, but the body showed no sign of electrical burns or any other cause of death and expert analysis of the home did not support the theory. The roof had obviously exploded outwards, but no cause for this could be found and there was no explosion trauma to Kazusa's body.

While every metropolitan area has its share of runaways, disappearances, and deaths,
the sheer concentration of these occurrences in the last several months is extremely disturbing. What was once thought to be a problem focused in Mitakihara has expanded to the entire metro area. Our press organization has reached out to neighboring population centers such as Soma and Sendai for information. Both show an exponentially smaller incidence of similar disappearances and deaths relative to population and no unexplained cases of attempted suicide followed by amnesia.

Whatever is at the root of this, it seems to be local. We pray this mystery is solved swiftly.

Until then, keep tabs on your daughters, Mitakihara.

MITAKIHARA DISAPPEARANCES: NEW WITNESS EMERGES

ENCOUNTERED MISSING GIRLS TOGETHER ON MARCH 25TH

April 22, 20XX 07:03 PM

A witness whose name has not been released approached the authorities claiming to have seen Sayaka Miki (14), Madoka Kaname (14), and Mami Tomoe (15) together before the three went missing. The witness, a young woman employed as a restaurant hostess, claims to have encountered the girls during a mysterious episode akin to the TV station “mass hallucination” event.

Late on the afternoon of March 25th, the witness recalls taking the train to her usual stop, getting a drink from a vending machine, and becoming distracted on the walk to the restaurant. She remembers feeling like she was supposed to go somewhere important and walking the opposite direction of her place of employment. The woman claims she blacked out, but that she has a vivid memory of standing on top of a building and seeing the sunset. The next thing she knew, she was on the ground in front of the abandoned Yunichiya Textiles office and manufacturing facility in the south of town. She was in her stocking feet, shoes nowhere to be found, and was being cradled by a girl she has identified from recent newscasts as Mami Tomoe. She realized she had nearly jumped off the building and broke down in horror. Tomoe allegedly consoled her. The witness says two schoolgirls who looked like Kaname and Miki stood nearby. The witness claims to not remember how she got to the ground floor, but says she had guessed that the girls must have coaxed her down. However, her shoes remained missing and her stockings were not torn from walking through an abandoned building.

Authorities were dispatched to investigate the scene of the alleged sighting. “Even if it's too late to track the girls from that point, we are very interested in the impulsive attempted suicide with blackouts and amnesia in people with no history of mental illness, as in the television station case,” said Spokeswoman Kuroe Mura. “We will
survey the scene and have confiscated the vending machine from which this witness obtained a drink before she began to feel strange. Nearly a month has passed since the incident so I wish to caution the public that we may not find anything. However, I also strongly urge the public to come forward if you have had a similar experience in which you found yourself in a dangerous situation with little memory of how you got there. We won't be able to identify a pattern if people are too ashamed or frightened to come forward. Should anyone come forward, the Mitakihara Municipal Police guarantee anonymity for the duration of the investigation."

Police remain uncertain whether the missing girls knew something about these mysterious incidents or were present by coincidence, but for now the two cases are being treated as potentially linked.

*Updated April 22, 20XX 7:38 PM*

Initial reports from the Yunichiya Textiles investigation confirm that the hostess' red shoes were found near the edge of the rooftop. Apparent sun and rain damage seems to corroborate that they have been up there for a month. The hostess will begin testing like the TV station victims tomorrow.

Kisuke sat back and rolled the last gummy candy around in his mouth as he thought. Curious. Especially when combined with Isshin's claim of the spiritually aware girl bearing residual Hollow reiatsu being aware of disappearances and deaths before they were publicly known. Hmm. Something interesting lay there.

Dead bodies with no apparent cause of death, particularly in the numbers cited, could certainly indicate Hollow activity. Knocking a soul out of a living person to devour it often left no marks on the physical body. He wondered if the two dead girls who had displayed signs of a fight— Bethany Michaels with her obvious injuries and Michiru Kazusa with her badly damaged house— had been spiritually aware enough to defend themselves.

If the culprit was a Hollow— or multiple Hollows— the way the missing Mitakihara girls were tied to disappearances and thwarted suicide attempts added credibility to Isshin's hypothesis about them being spiritually aware. Similar to how once upon a time he had gone back and cross-referenced the filming locations for Don Kanonji's television show and the appearance of new Hollows— he had found the celebrity medium to be a previously unrecognized cause of accelerated Hollow development. Kisuke pondered the girls' known involvement and wondered if something similar was at play. Were they Fullbringers? Did their high reiatsu draw Hollows in and endanger others? There was no way to know without more research, so he set that train of thought aside.

The mysterious suicides and thwarted attempts were strange. The online testimony of similar occurrences at places thought to be haunted was another red flag. Suicide would expose the souls for Hollows to devour, but brainwashing or whatever was being done seemed too complicated for most Hollows to bother with— most would dive in for a meal instead of toying with prey. There were powerful anomalies like Shrieker and Grand Fisher, of course, who delighted in manipulating the living and luring prey to their own deaths. More highly evolved and intelligent Hollows such as Adjuchas and Arrancars could be capable of such a thing. Hollows usually left a trail of bodies, though. More bodies than were being found, anyway. And their predations were usually noticed by Twelfth Division before their body count got this high, even if they could hide their reiatsu. Kisuke himself had designed the algorithm to flag unusually frequent use of small-scale Gargantas. Unless
the predator was intelligent enough and knowledgeable enough of shinigami procedures to avoid using Gargantas for travel in a small area, the detection threshold should have been exceeded in mid-March at the latest. Especially if the suicides and the disappearances were caused by two different Hollows.

What an interesting—if thoroughly morbid—puzzle.

If this was the work of, say, a highly intelligent Arrancar with a unique ability and a sadistic stalker or serial killer's mindset... Well. The Mitakihara area was in deep trouble. Assuming evidence of Hollow activity could be found.

Which brought him back to Twelfth Division and Mayuri Kurotsuchi.

Kisuke smirked and cracked his knuckles. “Ahhh, I guess there's nothing for it,” he said with false regret.

Midnight deep in the bowels of the Twelfth Division labs was Mayuri Kurotsuchi's favorite time and place to be. If he could be said to have a favorite anything, that is. It was much quieter with most of his lackeys away in bed, just a skeleton night crew on duty to observe the global reishi and Garganta monitors and the occasional round-the-clock experiment. Mayuri got his best work done when all the noisy morons were asleep. He wrought masterpieces in the night. The lack of interruption was magnificent.

“Captain Kurotsuchi.”

Mayuri grit his teeth at the sound of his lieutenant's emotionless voice. “What have I told you about interrupting my experiments, you disobedient simpleton?!”

“To only do so at non-critical moments if and only if the subject is apocalyptic or interesting, Captain Kurotsuchi.”

Mayuri sneered down at his project and tweaked a wire. “And what have you deemed so important as to interrupt me?”

Nemu paused. It was the only hint of her trepidation before she tonelessly answered, “Kisuke Urahara has called. He requests an audience.”

Mayuri hurled a scalpel at Nemu. She dodged her head expressionlessly as the implement twanged into the wall behind her. “You fool! I have no interest in speaking to that contemptible miscreant!”

The PA system snapped and whined before a voice crackled over the speakers. “Waaaahhhh, Mayuriiiiinn, you break my heart.”

Mayuri's eye twitched dangerously, veins bulging at his temples. “How dare you hijack my communications system?!”

“How? Aha! Well, I must say, your communications aren't nearly as well-protected as your databases,” Urahara's cheerful voice bubbled from above.

Furious, Mayuri made a mental note to rectify that.
“Aaaanywhooo~” warbled Urahara. “I come bearing something interesting and a request for help.”

“Denied.”

“Aww, but I didn't even get to the good part.”

Mayuri always hated his former captain's ability to express a pout in his voice. It forced him to picture the moron's ugly face making its ugliest expression. “There is never a good part with you.”

“I'm hurt.” Urahara sniffled for a moment, then sobered. “In all seriousness, Captain Kurotsuchi, I think you'll find this interesting. It's possible I've simply stumbled upon a human serial criminal of some sort, but the preponderance of testimony suggests something spiritual. A Hollow or other spiritual being may have figured out how to evade your sensors. Whatever it is seems to have a preference for pubescent girls. That, and I'm looking at a curious set of circumstances which indicate there may be a Hollow which has learned how to cause humans to attempt suicide, sometimes en masse, followed by amnesia if they are unsuccessful.”

Mayuri grimaced and reluctantly lifted his head. Okay, that did sound mildly interesting. However... “Are you slighting my sensors?!”

“Not at all, Mayuriiiiin, not at all! I've peeked at them a few times over the years. I find your improvements of excellent quality. Unless you've destroyed them since the last security upgrade, I have the utmost confidence in them~!”

Nemu stared blandly at her captain, who was frothing with rage.

“In fact, I have so much confidence in them that I am very curious to see what sort of data they have on an area near Soma, Japan. My own sensors don't extend that far north, you see. I am but a humble shopkeeper, after all.” Urahara's voice downshifted from cheerful to ominously sly. “I don't doubt that your sensors are superb. But if something creative or new is out there that you don't yet know to account for... that would be fascinating, wouldn't it?”

The lab fell into near silence once more, Urahara waiting while Mayuri resentfully tinkered with his experiment as he thought. He drew the silence out as long as he could before snapping, “What sort of evidence do you have to give you reason to bother me with this?”

“I sent a detailed report to your lieutenant, if you'd like to glance at it.”

Mayuri snaked his gaze to his lieutenant. Nemu held up a tablet, which Mayuri snatched from her grasp. He ordered her to tidy up his project space and strolled from the lab to his private office, reading rapidly. His lips drew into a sneer when he heard a crackle signifying Urahara had jumped to the PA in his office. The buffoon had sense enough to stay quiet while he read, at least.

At length, Mayuri tossed the tablet onto his desk. “This could mean anything, you dolt.”

“I am aware that it could mean a lot of things, some of them mundane. But checking the local data should be simple and something among it could prove interesting, don't you think?”

Mayuri only dignified the question with a grunt. “There isn't a report on the girl Shiba told you about.”

“I haven't examined her. Isshin is going to tell Ichigo to get the girls to my shop tomorrow or the next day so I can do a passive scan. We don't want to alarm her if she doesn't know about shinigami.”
Mayuri rolled his head and cracked his neck irritably. “You're soft and Shiba is an idiot.”

“Perhaps. But correct me if I'm wrong: That metropolitan area has only become densely populated in the last couple decades. It used to be uninhabited swamp. Theoretically speaking, its spiritual density should be mid-level and not conducive to producing many Pluses or Hollows. Newly dead souls should mostly slip right through to Soul Society. Even if this girl is as aware as Isshin claims, it could be possible she's never encountered a Plus or shinigami.”

Mayuri grimaced. “Technically speaking, I suppose. Though if there are as many spiritually aware whelps there as you seem to think there are, that would indicate something accelerating... the increase of density of... hmmm. A shift in spiritual density should appear on a sensor array, but if the denser souls are consumed when they reach critical mass, and consolidated... pubescent girls would be an ideal target as they approach spiritual maturity... but the energy...” He stared at a wall, thinking.

“Uwaa, you're brilliant! But don't worry, Mayuriiiiin! If you're too busy, I'll take a vacation up in Mitakihara and figure it out myself~”

Mayuri rolled his eyes at the transparent attempt at reverse psychology. “I'll have Akon look into this tomorrow. Send a report on the girl when you can.”

“Okay!” chirped Urahara. “Pleasant dreams, Mayuriiiiiin!”

The PA system crackled and went dead. Mayuri stared at it for a moment, then turned to his computer.

He had a communications security system to rewrite.

Chapter End Notes


This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Homura sat sleepily in her futon as the Kurosaki girls were getting ready for school. She stared up at the cloudless blue sky beyond the window's glass.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and Madoka was dead again.

But this time was different. It felt less horrible on this lovely Saturday morning. Madoka's death hadn't been meaningless this time. It had seemed so, yes, but it had driven her to an entire assortment of new possibilities for saving Madoka and keeping the other girls alive while protecting Mitakihara—and enough time left in this cycle to actually explore them. She could almost convince herself that this was Madoka's gift to her. Irrational as that was, it was a comfort.

Breakfast was pleasant. Homura still held back, but was more comfortable being among the Kurosaki banter. The twins soon ran off to school and Homura was left with Isshin again. Fortified with copious amounts of coffee, the two began the task of contacting the adults in Homura's life. While she didn't show it, Homura was terribly amused by Isshin's dismay with the communications circus involved in actually speaking to her uncle. It had been the equivalent of at least a few years since Homura had bothered trying, so it was a novelty to her instead of a special Hell.

After the third secretary put them on hold for the fifth time, Isshin turned to Homura with a disheartened face. “Doesn't he have a personal cell phone?”

Homura shrugged. “He does not tell me where he is and has different cell phones for different business destinations depending on roaming fees. He is very frugal about such things so he has more to spend on entertainment. If he has an internet-based method of contact, he has not given it to me.” She glanced down at the swirl of cream lazily circling her coffee and haltingly added, “I think he prefers to be difficult to contact. By me, at least. I am to call his home office and have them patch me through. Eventually. Or they relay a message that I am to consult with his lawyer in Tokyo.”

Isshin frowned disapprovingly. “That's ridiculous. He should be taking care of you. Someone should be taking care of you.”

“My parents and grandparents are dead and my only family is my uncle,” Homura explained. “He is rarely in one place for even a solid month. Mother said it is easier for him to hide his girlfriends from each other that way.”
Isshin choked on his coffee.

Homura raised a brow at him and waited for comment, but resumed when the man just stared. “Until recently, I could not travel due to my illness even if I wanted to. Fortunately, I prefer my apartment. It is quiet and I do not have to deal with my uncle's latest assistant hovering all the time. As if it would make a difference to him.” She shook her head and closed her eyes as she lifted her mug to her lips. Why the hell had that slipped out? There were far worse things to be bitter about. Homura glanced up at Isshin through her eyelashes and saw something fierce glinting in his eyes.

For a moment, Homura flashed back to her mother's outrage when she discovered her daughter was being bullied for being excused from gym class. Just as quickly, Homura averted her gaze into her coffee cup and forcibly quashed the memory.

Thankfully, the secretary came back on the line before Isshin could prod that sore spot any more. They did end up being referred to the lawyer. Isshin's face was sour as they made that call. Homura didn't pay attention to the adults' businesslike conversation about her temporary living situation and its cause. That exchange still went far more smoothly than talking to her school. Evidently they were buried in media questions and parent demands about security measures. They eventually agreed to call back on Monday if she wouldn't be attending.

When they hung up, Isshin and Homura looked at each other and shared a moment of pity for the poor school secretary. Further conversation was forestalled by a patient relentlessly ringing the clinic buzzer. The rest of the morning passed in a blur. Before they knew it, the twins were home from their half-day at school.

Yuzu cheerfully announced, “We passed all our tests!”

Isshin let out a roar of pride and swept Yuzu into a hug and twirled her. “Daddy's so proud! Victory ice cream tonight!”

Lunch was a lively affair, the twins even coaxing Homura into comparing their tests with where her school's classes were in the same subjects. It passed quickly. Soon, Isshin returned to the clinic and the girls set out to wander around town, Karin bringing her soccer ball along in a net. Homura wasn't sure what the sisters intended to do, but they seemed to urgently want her to follow them.

A few blocks from the clinic, Karin said, “We want you to see a Hollow. Maybe fight it. So you know what we're talking about and can be more convincing when you talk about Witches as if they're Hollows. That okay?”

Quite rational, really, and it dovetailed nicely with Homura's wish to investigate. “Yes.”

“It's been a few days since we last saw a Hollow,” said Yuzu. “There's no guarantee we'll find one, but we're overdue for one.”

“We'll just hang out until we sense one, yeah?”

Homura nodded and made a quiet sound of agreement.

“Now, when we do find one, the trick is to not transform. You know how to strengthen yourself and jump around without transforming, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how to channel your reiatsu— your magic— through other objects to fight with them?”
Homura thought of her experiments with making fuel trucks move to use as mobile bombs against Walpurgisnacht. “Yes.”

“By the way, what is your weapon?” asked Yuzu.

“A shield.”

Karin made an incredulous sound and demanded, “That little circle you had on your arm?!”

“Yes.”

“Huh. That must be interesting to use offensively,” Karin said with a cringe.

Homura hummed, wryly reflecting upon her initial dismay at figuring out how to actually fight. “It has an unlimited storage capacity, though, so I also collect and use guns and bombs.”

The twins stopped and looked at Homura with wide eyes.

“Real guns?” Yuzu asked.

Homura raised a brow and mildly said, “You saw me holding a gun the first night, did you not?”

“Oh,” Yuzu said faintly.

Karin sputtered. “Well—now you mention— I—”

“You forgot that I had a gun,” Homura said flatly.

“No! I thought it was a magic gun!”

“Oh.” Homura supposed that made sense.

Yuzu just kept staring. “Real guns?”

“Where do you get guns and bombs?!” Karin demanded shrilly.

“I steal the guns from the yakuza and I make the bombs myself. And I took some grenades from the JSDF.”

The sisters gaped.

Karin whistled. “Damn, you're way more gutsy than I pegged you for.”

Homura tilted her head.

“I don't mean that as an insult. It's just that you're so quiet and polite. The thought of you stealing weapons and throwing bombs around is mind-boggling.”

Yuzu's lips quirked up as she finally shook her surprise. “Beware the quiet ones, huh, Karin?”

Karin barked a laugh. “Yep!”

Yuzu pursed her lips. “You can't use guns and bombs on Hollows, though, even if you channel your magic through them. Hollows don't have labyrinths, so you'd look like you were shooting at nothing and probably hit bystanders. And the police would come. That would get messy.”

Homura hummed an agreement. “I will think of something.” She thought for a moment, then
hesitantly confessed, “When I first became a magical girl, I channeled my magic through a golf club. I can do something like that again.”

Karin laughed long and loud. “A golf club?!”

Yuzu shook her head, smiling. “You're one to talk. You use a soccer ball.”

Karin snickered and grinned. “True, true. Whatever works, right Homura?”

Homura found herself smiling slightly. “Yes.”

They walked in companionable silence for a couple blocks. Then Karin idly asked, “Do you play much soccer?”

Homura hummed quietly. “I do not think I have ever played it.”

Karin stopped and gaped at her, aghast. “Never?!”

Homura flushed. “I wanted to. But until I had my surgery over the winter... until I used my magic to heal myself more... Well, I could not. And I was busy after I became a magical girl. If we have not done it in gym in the last few weeks, I have not done it at all. We are on a track and field rotation now.”

Karin looked appalled for a moment before her face abruptly shifted into bright-eyed determination.

Yuzu smiled. “Ah, now you've done it.”

“I'll teach you!”

Karin's enthusiastic shout startled Homura so much she actually jumped. Yuzu smothered giggles. Homura faltered, her old self peeking through the cracks of her mask. “B-but I thought we were looking for Hollows?”

Karin grinned fiercely. “I've been fighting them with a soccer ball since long before I became a magical girl. If we sense one, we can get to it fairly quickly. May as well have fun til one shows its ugly face. Come on!” She took off at a run.

Homura looked to Yuzu, who shrugged and followed her sister at a jog. At a loss, Homura tagged along.

The following hour turned into soccer boot camp. It was awkward for Homura at first, but Karin's enthusiasm eventually bore her up. When Homura was focused on learning the game, lost in angles, running, velocity, the bright spring sunshine, and the smell of freshly-cut grass, she was able to put aside her troubles, however briefly.

Homura had lost track of time when she skidded to a halt mid-play. She sensed a strange magical signature that reminded her of the feel of a labyrinth collapsing— of tearing out of the nightmare dimension and reentering reality. It made her shudder. The twins also stopped and looked toward the source of the feeling.

“Garganta,” murmured Karin.

“What?”

“A door Hollows use to get from their dimension to ours,” explained Yuzu. “Come on. It's not far
Karin grabbed her ball and net, then the girls ran out into the neighborhood. Three blocks later, they rounded a corner into an alley and stopped. Two Hollows roughly the size and shape of large dogs had trapped a small boy. He must have been spiritually aware because he looked right at the monsters and cowered in terror as they growled.

“Okay, this is real simple,” Karin lectured. “The trick is to break the Hollow's mask. Watch.” She whistled sharply. When the Hollows turned, she wound up and drop-kicked her soccer ball straight into one of their faces. The glowing ball shattered the Hollow's bone mask. The Hollow convulsed and began to disappear, seeming to become more humanoid before vanishing completely as a butterfly rose into the sky.

The second Hollow hesitated for a moment, then overcame its surprise and leapt at the girls. Desperate for a weapon, Homura saw a piece of rebar in a pile of trash that must have come from someone's remodeling project. In one smooth movement, she swooped up the metal bar, flooded it with her magic, and swung at the Hollow's face as its jump carried it toward her. The mask broke with a resounding crack before the monster evaporated like its companion.

Homura blinked at the empty space, still brandishing the glowing iron rod. Yuzu stepped forward to comfort the little boy. Karin grinned and slapped a hand on Homura's shoulder. “Good job.”

Just then, there was a whoosh of displaced air above them. The girls looked up and saw a burly man sporting a large brown afro and black traditional clothing wielding a sword. After a moment, he lowered his weapon with a frown and complained, “Leave something for me to do for once, Kurosaki.”

Karin smirked and shrugged. “Not our fault you're slow, Afro-man.”

The man pursed his lips and one of his eyebrows twitched in irritation. Karin noticed Homura looking at the man with trepidation. “Oh, Homura, this is Afro-man.”

“Zennosuke Kurumadani!” the man insisted.

Karin ignored him and plowed on. “He's the shinigami assigned to patrol Karakura.”

Unsure what to do, Homura opted to nod a polite greeting at him.

Kurumadani looked dismayed. “Another person who can see spirits? This town, I swear—”

“Aww, but you have like the easiest assignment ever, Afro-man! Make it a vacation!”

The shinigami didn't dignify the suggestion with an answer, sheathing his sword and leaping away.

Without losing a beat, Karin stepped toward Yuzu and called over her shoulder, “Let's get this kid home and get back to our game, yeah?”

On a rooftop a mile away, Kisuke Urahara lowered his field glasses.

So the girl did know how to fight Hollows. Was even capable of defeating low-level ones with a
single blow. And he had glimpsed her considerable strength when her reiatsu momentarily flared while wrapping the rod in the violet light of her power.

“My, my. The Kurosaki siblings befriend the most interesting people.”

Ichigo entered his house in mid-afternoon and carelessly shed his backpack and duffle in a heap by the door.

“I'm hooooome,” he called. No one replied. He cast out his senses; the old man was in the clinic with a normal person and the girls were... probably at the soccer field, from what he could tell of direction and distance. In the opposite of a hurry, he grabbed a snack and flopped onto the couch with his phone.

An hour later, Isshin charged into the house and hurdled over the back of the couch. “ICHIGO00 —!”

Ichigo jabbed both legs up and kicked his father into a ninety-degree turn, whereupon he bowled over a (previously glued together) lamp on his way to the far wall. “Hey, old man.”

Isshin stood sharply, straightened his tie, and asked, “Have a nice trip?”

“Eh. It was a train ride. Trains are trains.” Ichigo swiped the screen of his phone a few times.

More seriously, Isshin asked, “Did you get the stuff I emailed you?”

Ichigo's eyes peered over his phone darkly. “Yeah. Looks bad. Find out anything else from the girl's family?”

Isshin made a disgruntled face. “That poor girl. All she has is some globe-trotting ladies' man of a rich uncle who refers her to his lawyer for everything. Evidently he didn't find the situation serious enough to deal with himself— or even to talk to his niece to make sure she was all right after fleeing in fear of her life. So she's been left to deal with this all alone. It's criminal.”

Ichigo scowled, then tried to reassure them both. “Well, Inoue went through a lot while in basically the same situation and she ended up okay.” Barring certain eccentricities, but whatever. He was hardly one to talk there. “It does suck, though. Have you heard anything from Urahara?”

“Kisuke called to say he got Twelfth looking at the Mitakihara area.”

“How'd he pull that off?”

“God only knows. He sounded delighted. I hope I don't see Kurotsuchi for awhile.”

Ichigo snorted. “I think everyone thinks that all the time.” He put down his phone and gave his father a measured look. “You sent me all that stuff for a reason. What kinda goal're you giving me, old man?”

Isshin sat in a chair and tented his fingers. After taking a moment to gather words, he started thinking out loud. “I'd like you to try to talk to Homura.” Ichigo raised a brow. “Whether or not you realize it, you are good at drawing people out. Getting them to open up and rely on others. No matter how I look at it, I'm certain this girl knows some vital information and just doesn't have any
faith in the adults she could talk to. I can't blame her, considering her family situation. She's plainly more open even just to simple conversation when the girls are around—she clams up if she's with just me. Becomes a very polite brick wall. You're at that magical in-between place where you aren't a kid but you're not quite an adult yet.”

“Hey.”

“I'm hoping she'll open up to you if you just... be yourself.”

Ichigo's lips quirked sarcastically. “Be myself, huh?” He drifted off in thought for a moment, then refocused on his father. Isshin was sitting hunched, hand holding his chin and covering his mouth while he looked concerned. Ichigo tilted his head. “There something else?”

Isshin looked a bit surprised, settled, bit his lip, and quietly answered, “She reminds me of you.”

Ichigo's brows screwed up incredulously. “Haaaa? I thought you said she's quiet, reserved, and unfailingly polite.”

Isshin looked at Ichigo searchingly while biting his thumb. After a moment, he clarified, “I mean you when you were nine years old.”

Ichigo's face instantly went grim and flat. His heart dropped. “Oh.” After a long silence, he asked, “That bad, huh?”

“Trying to act normal but actually a guilty, grieving mess beneath the surface, all while walking around with as much reiatsu as a seated officer? Yes.”

Ichigo lay back, closed his eyes, and blew out a deep breath. “I'll try.”

“That's all I can ask of you, son.”

After a long few minutes, Ichigo asked, “As much reiatsu as a seated officer, huh?”

It was Isshin's turn to blow out a deep sigh. “Mid-range, at my best guess. It's difficult to tell. Unlike you, she appears to have her power tightly controlled. Rather like your sisters.”

“Well, that's one thing she has going for her, at least.”

“Yeah. So anyway, I was thinking maybe tomorrow you could take the girls out. Have fun. Find an excuse to stop at Urahara Shop for candy or something on the way home.”

“And whyyy am I leading an innocent girl into Sandal-Hat's clutches?”

“So he can do a passive scan of her. Figure out how much reiatsu she really has, if that really is Hollow reiatsu on her. It may help narrow the investigation—give Kisuke a sample signal to try to trace up in Mitakihara.”

“Side effects?”

“None. He's done it to your sisters a few times. They're fine. Never noticed.”

Ichigo turned and gave his father a look. “Do you have any idea how sleazy that sounded?”

Isshin barked out a laugh. “Well, I guess. Your sisters have—”

Both men abruptly turned and stared beyond the far wall, sensing a Garganta. They felt the girls
move toward the source instead of away. Ichigo cursed, threw himself to his feet, and readied his badge.

Isshin grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

“What the hell?!”

“Just wait. I sense Kisuke. Hold on.”

They sat tensely as they tracked the Kurosaki girls' progress. Their movement stopped, then Karin's reiatsu flared in a short, sharp burst. Immediately thereafter, a reiatsu signature Ichigo had never felt before flared beside her. It was like a brief, dizzying flash of cold starshine, then sharply dropped, hesitated, and completely retracted into itself. The Hollow reiatsu was gone.

“What the hell.”

Isshin scratched the back of his head and sighed. “Well, I guess that answers that question.”

“What?”

“Whether or not Homura knows how to fight Hollows.”

“Wait, that was her?!”

“Yuuup.”

Ichigo whistled long and low. “She felt damn near lieutenant-class. Not quite, but near that. And Karin's at that level, too.”

“Yeeeah. That's more than I expected.” Isshin ruffled his hair irritably. “Now I'm really worried about what Homura's been through. That felt practiced and controlled. No wobbliness as though inexperienced. If she's that strong and something up north overpowered her, killed her friend... or friends....”

“Then something's really fucked up up north.”

“Yeah.”

Ichigo scrubbed his face with his hands. “Ugh, can I have a solid year in which I both have my powers and there is no ominous spiritual crisis. Please.”

Isshin slapped his back. “Sorry, son. Seems to be a family curse.”

“Dammit.”

Homura followed the sisters home after another two hours— two hours!— of running around playing soccer, breathless and somehow lighter than she had felt in awhile. She was capable of performing amazing physical feats as a magical girl but the novelty had worn off. Having the stamina to run around in civilian form made her feel free. When all of this is over and everyone is safe, I want to play soccer with Madoka and everyone, she thought impulsively. Strangely, the frivolous goal felt... buoyant. Something to aim for beyond Madoka surviving Walpurgisnacht in
one piece physically, mentally, and spiritually. A more cheerful goal than plain “avoid death and corruption.” Something to work towards rather than fight against. And, actually, the first time in many cycles she dared think of what could happen beyond Walpurgisnacht.

As they approached the Kurosaki Clinic, Homura slowed. She sensed a kind of magic she had never felt before. It was as if the clinic contained a banked wildfire that was somehow dark; like a bonfire on a hot summer night under a full moon, somehow comforting despite being wrapped in shadows and at risk of burning out of control. Warm and inviting but not to be trifled with.

“Onii-chan is here!” squealed Yuzu.

“C'mon, Homura!” Karin called happily.

Homura jogged after them. *Is that their brother I sense?!* she thought. *They said powerful, but this is... this is...* She was at a loss for words even in her own head.

The sisters entered the house, kicked off their shoes, and hurried down the hall with Homura on their heels. In the living room, they threw themselves at a tall, lean young man in his late teens. He laughed and ruffled their hair as he said, “What's this? I was only gone for a week.”

“But you were gone and now you're back, Onii-chan! We're happy!” cheered Yuzu.

The young man laughed again. “If you say so. It's good to see you, too.” He looked up, saw Homura, and tossed her a lazy salute. “Yo.”

Homura's cheeks pinked. She faltered, uncertain whether to wave back or bow politely. An awkward hybrid of the two won the day. “U-um, hello,” she squeaked. His body language and face broadcast casualness, but his eyes were attentive—a sort of sharp curiosity as if he was trying to see through her, but not maliciously. The juxtaposition threw her, especially combined with the moonlight-and-embers magic that emanated from him. His power felt like it had weight to it—as though the air was thicker in his presence. It was something she had only really noticed with Walpurgisnacht and Madoka—though the Witch was an all-encompassing weight of dread and Madoka's power felt like bright spring sunshine and the softness of rose petals.

“Ichi-nii, this is our friend, Homura,” said Karin. “Homura, this is our big brother, Ichigo.”

Ichigo smiled crookedly at her and nodded a greeting. “Nice to meet you, Homura.”

Homura wrung her hands and bowed slightly. “Nice to meet you, too, um... Mister... Kurosaki...?”

Ichigo pulled a face. “That's my old man. Ichigo's fine, really.”

“Okay.” Homura looked down at her feet. Somehow she felt like her old, shrinking violet self with braids and glasses in his presence—like she actually wanted to hide behind those old shields of hers for a moment. Like he was very big and she was very small. She wasn't sure what to think of that.

Ichigo stood back and eyed all three girls evenly. Even the sisters tensed under his evaluation. Mildly, he said, “I've been home for a few hours now.”

The girls stared blankly at the apparent non sequitur. Then Karin cringed. “Oh.Oops.”

The other girls looked at her as Ichigo drawled, “Yeeeah, 'oops.' I thought I told you to stop running toward Hollows when there is a perfectly capable shinigami stationed here.” His eyes shifted to Homura. “That goes for you, too. Stay safe if you can.”
Homura startled. *How—?*

"You sensed the fight," Yuzu guessed.

"Mm-hmm."

"I can't believe you just referred to Afro-man as capable, Ichi-nii."

Ichigo shrugged. "Eh. He's improved. Give him a chance to do his job."

Karin stared flatly at her brother. "He's slow, Ichi-nii, and you know it."

"Still faster than he was when I first ran into him."

"That's pathetic."

Ichigo shrugged again.

"You sensed us fighting the— the Hollows?" Homura asked in surprise.

"Yep." Ichigo raised his brows speculatively. "Felt like you were pretty damn efficient. You have experience?"

Oh, hey, there was the question the twins had implied would come eventually. "Um. Uh. Yes?"

Ichigo tilted his head curiously. "The old man said you're from Mitakihara. You get a lot of Hollows up there, then?"

Homura stared at him like a deer in headlights, rapidly wondering which tack to take to cause what effect. She hadn't decided how involved she wanted to get shinigami yet or how to do it! She wouldn't flail awkwardly while she scrambled for an answer. Would not. She was calm, cool, and collected. Definitely not a small child being questioned by a casually suspicious babysitter. *Forget plans.* Her eyes darted to Karin's. *What is the most logical answer?* she thought at her. Without the Incubator's presence, her attempt at telepathy failed. The *one* thing it was good for—!

Karin must have read her face correctly, though. Quietly, she murmured, "Please don't ask her a lot of questions about Hollows, Ichi-nii. Homura's not used to other people knowing about them and her friends...." Karin bit her lip and directed a significant and honestly apologetic look at Homura before softly finishing, "Her friends were hunted and eaten."

Off balance from being questioned before she could make a plan and unprepared for the bluntness of the declaration—*hunted and eaten hunted and eaten eaten eaten eaten eaten eaten*—Homura didn't have to fake the hard flinch that immediately overtook her, nor the reflexive screwing shut of her eyes as memories of various timelines assaulted her: Mami's head being bitten off by the Sweets Witch. Madoka crushed in the Mermaid Witch's fist, being lifted toward its armored mouth. That timeline in which the Shadow Witch strangled Sayaka and absorbed her into its many vines. The time the Box Witch's minions tore Madoka limb from limb and started feeding her pieces into their mistress' monitor-body while Madoka scre—

Homura startled violently at the feel of hands on her shoulders.

"Breathe. C'mon, breathe. In and out."

She gasped deeply, unaware of having stopped, and opened her eyes.

Ichigo had both of his hands on her shoulders, grip firm. His face was a picture of concern and

He had no idea. She really wasn't. The dam broke once more. “M-Mami. It bit her h-head off and ate h-her,” Homura randomly blurted, on the edge of hyperventilating. “And Muh— Muh— Muh — it crushed her in its ha-and—!” Tears burned her eyes and throat. She sobbed once and gasped reedily again, closing her eyes.

The twins blanched. Homura hadn't shared those details before.

Ichigo rubbed her shoulders. It reminded Homura of her parents soothing her after nightmares. “You're safe. Shh. Keep breathing. We'll help you stop them. You're safe. We'll help you sort out Mitakihara. You're safe.”

Exhaustion was insidious and crept about her heart. All the things she didn't want to admit she felt came tumbling out. “I'll n-never be safe,” Homura mourned. Caught up in old trauma, her new hopes felt distant. “I try and try and try and they keep d-dying. I keep trying to save them but we'll never be safe and it'll n-never end.”

She was speaking about far more than the current timeline.

Homura tried not to react to the alarming thread of darkness— dangerously soul-deep despair— that whispered through her magic. It made Homura's blood run cold. I can't despair, I can't despair, I can't despair— not now! As though regaining consciousness in the midst of drowning, she mentally thrashed for something to bear her up. Anything.

Ichigo gave it to her.

“It will end. It will. Look at me.”

Homura looked up and found his eyes boring into hers, burning with righteous fury and fierce protectiveness.

“Listen. You don't have to fight by yourself anymore. I don't know what it is you have had to deal with exactly but you have survived it. You've clawed your way through hell, come out on the other side, and found people who can help. We'll figure this out. We're here to pick you up and help you now. You're not alone. We'll keep you safe and help you stand up stronger.” Ichigo squeezed her shoulders, face pained for her. “We can't bring your friends back, but we'll free their souls from whatever is hunting the girls where you live, got it? Even if all you can do for them is free their souls so they can move on, that's still a very important thing to do. They may be— may be dead now—” Ichigo took a deep breath and Homura closed her eyes again— “but you can still help them that much. We'll help you free them and save their souls so they can move on and find happiness in the next world, yeah? And keep that thing from hurting anyone else.”

Homura peeked up at him through puffy eyes. “How?”

Ichigo's mouth slid into a sharp, almost predatory grin. “I have a lot of friends who are very good at fighting things that go bump in the night and hate seeing kids hurt. I promise you, once we figure out what's going on, whatever is skulking around up there won't know what hit it.” His face softened back to warm sympathy. “And you and your friends will be free— in different ways, maybe, but free.” He squeezed her shoulders again. “How does that sound?”

Homura stared up at him speechlessly. She knew he couldn't possibly be speaking about her true situation— her endless cycles of trying to save her best friend— but it felt like he was. The prospect of help was... she didn't know how to describe it. Homura was afraid to hope for it lest she
be disappointed. But now, finding potential help when she had gone so long struggling through plans and fighting and learning by herself... it could be such a relief if she could get it.

She wanted Karin and Yuzu's help. Wanted their brother's help. Wanted someone to help her figure out what to do. One of the things she had found herself resenting throughout the cycles was that figuring out how to resolve the cosmic mess that was this spring in Mitakihara was left to her, a fourteen-year-old girl who had spent half her life in hospitals or bedridden at home. It wasn't fair. Ichigo didn't know the depth of the situation, but he expressed agreement all the same. Those fierce, protective, sympathetic eyes....

Homura decided then and there to try to get Ichigo's help in the next timeline. She still wanted to see him fight because life had taught her to be extremely cautious, but she thought that his sheer power and apparent morality would make him a welcome ally. The weight of the world was oppressive on her slender shoulders. That moonlight-and-embers power felt like it had accepted her and turned its burning outward—toward those who threatened her. The feeling of safety was new. She liked it.

After a long minute of staring at Ichigo while her mind ran in circles, Homura whispered, “That sounds good.”

Ichigo grinned, squeezed her shoulders one last time, and ruffled her hair. “Good.” He bit his lip and seemed to debate with himself, then make a decision. “I know a guy who may be able to help look into things up there. I can take you to see him tomorrow if you like.”

*He probably means that shinigami scientist the twins told me about,* thought Homura. She wrung her hands and fidgeted, looking at her feet and wondering how going to that man so early could turn out.

Ichigo misinterpreted her body language and softly said, “Or you can talk to me and I can talk to him. Think about it, okay?”

Homura nodded, allowing her uncertainty and vulnerability to remain visible on her face. Maybe he'd be more inclined to keep the scientist away from her if he thought she was afraid. She didn't want to end up on an exam table. Who knew what a shinigami could do to her powers?

The front door closed loudly in the distance. Ichigo glanced toward it and back at Homura in time to catch her slam her emotional floodgates shut with sheer force of will. She dammed her heart up once more and made her face instantly smooth into an aloof façade as she delicately wiped the tears from her cheeks. She had a lot of practice convincing people everything was fine.

Ichigo looked unnerved and alarmed.

Isshin frolicked into the room with his arms full of takeout bags and two big pails of ice cream. He gleefully announced, “Dinner and victory ice cream for my girls!” He looked around the room at the twins' stricken faces, Ichigo's hands on Homura's shoulders, and Homura's tear-swollen eyes—*curse their betrayal!*—and immediately sobered. “What's wrong?”

Homura brushed Ichigo's hands from her shoulders and stepped back. “Nothing, Dr. Kurosaki,” she said coolly.

The Kurosaki siblings all stared at Homura in disbelief. She felt an odd pang of regret; she had just startled them with a messy panic-attack-slash-meltdown and there she stood acting like it hadn't happened, perfectly poised. The only thing that betrayed her polite mask was the evidence of earlier tears.
Curse her tears! Why couldn't she control them better?!

Everyone stared at Homura until she raised one eyebrow and calmly asked, “I thought we were going to celebrate for Karin and Yuzu?”

“Uh, y—, um, yeah,” Isshin stammered as he watched his children stare at her like she had three heads.

Homura smoothed her skirt. “I think ice cream sounds very good. I have not had any in quite awhile,” she said demurely.

Deflect, deflect, deflect.

Ichigo turned to his father and made one of the more incredulous faces Homura had ever seen.

“Let's— um— let's go have dinner!” Yuzu said with forced cheer. “The sooner we're done with dinner, the sooner we can have ice cream.”

“Yeah,” Karin said awkwardly.

Well, at least the girls had her back. Sweet of them.

“I can help set the table,” Homura quietly volunteered.

“U-um, okay, come on,” Yuzu said. The girls all left the room.

Homura glanced back over her shoulder and saw Ichigo turn to his father and mouth, What the hell was that?

Isshin shrugged exaggeratedly and mouthed back, How should I know?

They weren't as willing to accept her mask at face value as the other adults she knew. Bothersome.

Homura spent the rest of the evening pretending the drama hadn't happened with such force that the Kurosaki family was gradually dragged in her wake and returned to normal. In other words, rowdy and loud. Evidently Karin took after her brother. Interesting. Homura managed to have a mostly pleasant evening.

She couldn't pretend away the memories in her dreams that night, though.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: OMG, Thank you for all the reviews! Now that I have my basic foundation laid, the story should start moving more. Thanks for sticking with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SECHZEHN

TIMELINE X+N

Akon trudged into the Twelfth Division labs at dawn on Saturday, clinging to his large thermos of coffee for dear life and already itching for a smoke. He sat at his desk, pressed a button, and watched his computer boot up as he savored sweet, sweet caffeine. Peace in the lab. Yes.

When his captain materialized from the shadows like a ghoul, Akon didn't even flinch. “Good morning, Captain.”

Kurotsuchi looked more irritable than usual—must've pulled a third all-nighter. He carelessly tossed a tablet onto Akon's desk. Rude. “After your initial rounds, your project for the day is to study this evidence and research the relevant areas in our databases. Double check the integrity of any sensors involved. Report anything interesting to me.” With that, Kurotsuchi went his way. Akon stared after him.

Well, that was ominously vague.

Curious but also in possession of a healthy sense of self-preservation, Akon set aside the tablet and went through his daily start-up routine as ordered. Thinking ahead, he set up several diagnostics to run on various sensor arrays before the bulk of the workforce showed up and slowed scans down.

After an hour of checking on various experiments and specimens, Akon finally sat down with the tablet. At first he didn't understand why the hell he had been given articles about missing human girls, but he slowly became engrossed by the details and speculation about the patterns formed by them which Urahara had included in his notes. Akon went through everything a second time, outlining a research plan. After mid-morning rounds, lecturing someone regarding lab fire prevention after a spectacular pink blaze, and lunch, Akon sat down to research in earnest. The more data he looked at, the more he frowned.

That couldn't be right.

But the more he looked, the more all the various points of investigation agreed. What they agreed upon made no goddamn sense, but that many independent points of confluence was hard to argue with. Time for independent confirmation.
Akon went to the Spiritual Wave Measurement Lab and approached Rin Tsubokura. More considerate than his superior, Akon got Rin's attention then stood back and silently waited for him to finish what he was doing. Five minutes later, Akon gave Rin a blank research outline with no context as a control. Rin eyed him curiously but Akon refused to elaborate.

Four hours later, Rin appeared in Akon's doorway sporting an uncharacteristic scowl.

“‘Yes?’”

“‘This makes no sense.’”

Akon sat back. “I'm not the only one, then. Any ideas?”

Rin looked down at his tablet doubtfully. “I suppose that sector of the remote sensor array could be compromised. I ordered Kajiura's team to manually inspect it and overhaul it. I don't really think they'll find anything, though— the likelihood a cluster of errors this dense would go unnoticed for almost thirty years is very small.”

Akon leaned on one elbow and propped up his head. “What do you propose, then?”

“On-site readings,” Rin said, pursing his lips. “The portable reishi analysis machine has more delicate capabilities than the wide-scale sensor array. I'd... like to confirm these readings before you report to Captain Kurosucci. Have proof that it's not long-term shoddy maintenance.”

*Keep his department alive and sane if possible*, Akon translated. “Are you volunteering?”

“Yes.” Rin looked up, worried. “I've done it before. I'll have to devise a pattern for taking readings first, though. During the Winter War I had actual battle sites to target in Karakura. That made it easy.”

Akon rocked his office chair. “There are potential sites of disturbances in the information I held back. I'll forward it all to you. Submit your plan tomorrow and I'll approve your field research senkaimon permit with third seat authority. Keep it quiet for now.”

Rin bowed. “Yes, sir.” He looked up. “If some kind of disturbances brought your attention to this, do I— uh, do I need an escort?”

Akon grunted. “I'll arrange something.”

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Ichigo turned off the television and stealthily rose from the couch at two in the morning. The evening had become something of a game-night-slash-slumber-party while his sisters tried to cheer up their friend. Ichigo had been glad to contribute— hey, if his bickering with Karin over her *totally unfair* actions taken in a video game entertained Homura, who was he to take that from her? The girls had eventually fallen asleep together during a movie, all cuddled together among pillows and blankets on the floor. He watched them for a minute— his sisters, bless their hearts, looked like they were trying to protect Homura in their sleep while she curled in on herself— before turning toward the kitchen.

He smelled tea. The old man had stayed up late to talk.
Ichigo entered the kitchen, looked at Isshin sitting at the table with two steaming mugs, and gestured toward the clinic. Isshin raised a brow and followed him. Ichigo gently closed the door behind them. They settled in Isshin's office.

“Sorry, didn't want to wake them.”

“I understand. Sooo, what the hell happened while I was out?”

Ichigo heaved a sigh and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “Pretty sure I saw a fourteen-year-old girl have some kind of panic attack or PTSD episode then brutally suppress it the moment she noticed an adult was approaching.”

Isshin winced. “Your faces make sense now.”

Ichigo rubbed his eyes. “Seeing a kid like that— a girl the same age as Karin and Yuzu— seeing her just stop breathing then hyperventilate and cry... God.”

Isshin silently pushed a mug toward his son. Ichigo took it gratefully.

“How much did she tell you?”

“Not a lot, but what she did tell me... That poor girl.”

Isshin's dread was visible. “How much liquor am I going to want to numb my rage at the world?”

“A lot. Hell, I want a lot. And to smash things. I want to smash a lot of things.”

Isshin sat back and took a deep breath. “Tell me.”

Ichigo carefully put the tea mug down on the desk then gripped the arms of his chair in twin strangleholds. “Something crushed one of her friends in its hand and ate the body of another friend after biting her head off. Homura implied she's seen more than that— said she keeps trying and trying and trying to save 'them' but 'they' keep dying, no one will ever be safe, least of all her, and 'it' will never end.”

Isshin covered his face with both hands and hunched forward. It was a rare sight for Ichigo; it wasn't often his father had to focus on breathing and staying calm instead of exploding in parental rage.

A good five minutes slid by in tense silence before his father could bring himself to speak. “Learn anything else?”

Ichigo blew out a deep breath. “I think you're right about her being skittish of adults. Authority figures? I dunno. She got withdrawn and jittery when I brought up seeing Urahara tomorrow.”

“Why'd you tell her? Kisuke was just going to do a passive scan.”

Ichigo shrugged. “It made sense at the time. I had kinda talked her into letting me help her so I thought I'd go for it— get her to feel like she was taking control of things by seeking him out herself, you know? But I think I went too fast for her there. My bad. But I offered to be a go-between so hopefully she'll cooperate once she's had some sleep.”

They sat in silence a few moments before Ichigo hesitantly continued. “I've been wondering all night... about her friends....”

Isshin raised a brow. “Yeah?”
“Are there Hollows that eat physical bodies as well as souls? Because it seems like if a Hollow had knocked her friends' souls out then... you know... there should be bodies left behind.”

Isshin frowned. “There were several reports of dead girls with no apparent cause of death.”

“Yeah, I looked at the articles on my phone again when the girls were watching movies. But Homura said 'Mami' was beheaded and eaten and she's still listed as missing. She couldn't get out the second friend's name, she was hyperventilating so hard, but it started with an M. The only one that fits is the missing Madoka girl. Where are their bodies?”

“That's a good question. Something bizarre is happening up in Mitakihara.”

Ichigo looked at his father darkly. “When Urahara figures out what's going on up there, I want you to tell me so I can kill the bastards myself.”

Though grim, Isshin smirked. “Oho~, that attached already?”

Ichigo scoffed. “As if you aren't.”

“You got me there, son.”

Ichigo looked at the ceiling for a minute, thinking. “I wonder if she's a Fullbringer.”

“What makes you think that?” Isshin asked with raised eyebrows.

Ichigo rocked his head back and forth. “It doesn't seem quite right, but that's the thing that makes the most sense. You said you noticed that Hollow reiatsu, right? Well, when she was upset it kinda... rose to the surface, I guess. But she immediately reined it in. Fullbringers have Hollow-like powers so that would match, but then again, her reiatsu didn't feel Hollow-like when we sensed her fight earlier. My second guess would be a Visored with an Inner Hollow that got near the surface when she was distracted by her freakout, but I don't know how the hell that could be possible.”

Isshin stroked his chin. “Well, Aizen was conducting secret Hollowfication experiments on souls for decades. I suppose there could be some wandering around unnoticed if Twelfth didn't find all of his records in Hueco Mundo.”

Ichigo stared at him with flat trepidation. “There's an option the world could do without. If that turns out to be the case, I'm busting into his dungeon to curb-stomp him.”

Isshin sighed tiredly and rubbed his eyes. “Well, all we have for now is speculation. We'll just have to see where tomorrow takes us. Let's go to bed.”

Ichigo hummed his agreement and followed his father into the house. As they made for the stairs, they heard a soft whimper. They checked on the girls and found Homura shifting restlessly in her sleep.

“Nightmares,” Ichigo said softly.

Isshin frowned and cautiously approached the girls. He bent, lay his hand over Homura's eyes, and murmured something. Homura's tense body relaxed. When he returned to Ichigo, his son looked at him questioningly.

“Hakufuku,” Isshin said under his breath. “A kidō usually used to cause people to go to sleep in such a way that it makes their memory of the time right before the spell is cast rather vague. It's essentially a gentle sedative.” Both men looked at the girls. “I don't like to do it but I think she
really needs a solid night's sleep.”

Ichigo hummed in agreement. They said good night to one another and parted at the top of the stairs. That night it was Isshin and Ichigo who lay awake worrying instead of Homura.

Homura woke more refreshed than she had in... probably years. When Yuzu crawled away to start putting about in the kitchen, Homura rolled onto her back and drowsily stared at the ceiling. She felt... mellow was a good word, she thought. Pleasant. Her eyes were drooping again when she heard a shout from upstairs followed by a window slamming closed and a scream outside.

Homura sat up swiftly, ready for a fight. Karin reached up and grabbed the back of Homura's nightgown and yanked her back down into the blanket nest. “Calm down. The men in the household are just doing their morning greeting ritual.”

“W-what?”

The front door slammed open and closed. Isshin wobbled into the hallway and stopped between the kitchen and living room. He dramatically leaned on the kitchen doorjamb and wailed, “Yuzuuuu! Big brother is being meeeean to Daddy agaaain!”

Karin covered her eyes and grumbled, “My father is a five-year-old.”

“You should know better than to attack him in bed, Daddy!” Yuzu's voice chided.

“I was just saying good morrrniiiiing,” sobbed Isshin.

“ACT YOUR AGE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD,” Ichigo shouted down the stairs.

“B-but Ichigooooooоооооо!”

“CAN YOU AT LEAST PRETEND YOU'RE AN ADULT WHILE WE HAVE A HOUSEGUEST?!?”

“B-but I AM an adult!”

“I'VE MET TEN-YEAR-OLDS MORE MATURE THAN YOU!”

“MASAKIIIIIIII, OUR SON IS SO CRUEL!!!!! WAAAAH!”

“For god's sake, old man, it's sunday morning! Some people want to sleep in! SHUT THE HELL UP!”

A thrown shoe rocketed down from the landing and pelted Isshin in the side of the head.

“MA-SA-KIIIIIIII! OUR SON IS A SURLY, VIOLENT, REBELLIOUS YOUNG MAAAN! WHAT DO I DOOOOO? WHERE DID I GO WROOOOONG?!”

“SHUT UP OR I'LL SHOW YOU SURLY AND VIOLENT!”

“WAAAAAH, YUZU, BIG BROTHER IS THREATENING DADDY!”
“That's nice, Daddy,” Yuzu chirped.

Isshin wandered away, bawling.

Karin sighed and glanced at Homura, who was frozen in confused shock. “Kurosaki men are loud idiots with bizarre habits, Homura. It's just a fact of life. Accept it and move on or you'll go insane.”

“But— but they were fighting. Weren't they?”

“It's how those numbskulls show affection. Ichi-nii says it probably comes from Dad's family back in Soul Society. Apparently they're known for brash eccentricity and explosions.”

“Eccentricity.” Homura stared doubtfully. She wasn't even going to touch on explosions.

Karin snorted. “I know, right? Understatement of the century.”

After a lively late breakfast, Ichigo lured all three girls out of the house with the promise of a movie and lunch on him. Homura literally could not remember the last time she had been to a theater. She thought it was something animated— maybe with her mother? An early Madoka? Whatever. Guilt crept up on her for doing frivolous things instead of, say, stealing more weapons for her stash. But she really wanted to find out more about Ichigo and shinigami, and in order to do that she had to go with on the outing.

The fact that it felt good to slow down a bit and do something that didn't involve life-and-death decisions risking her friends' lives and souls was shamefully boxed up and hidden in a dark corner of her mind.

When they were wandering around the park with dessert crêpes from a vendor's cart, Ichigo gently broached the topic of Homura's problems. “Homura, have you thought about seeing the friend I told you about?”

Homura's eyes shiftily darted from one of his sisters to the other before glancing at him and away again. “Is it the man Karin and Yuzu said is a shinigami scientist?”

“Yeah, I guess that describes him.”

Homura fidgeted. “I do not want to be experimented on.”

“I don't think anyone does,” Ichigo said wryly. “But he won't do anything to you without your permission. He just wants to see how strong you are and ask you some questions.”

“He already knows about me?” Homura worried.

“Yeah. I think he saw you and Karin fight yesterday.”


Her brother rolled his eyes.

“What kind of questions?” asked Homura.
“Things about Mitakihara, about the things you've been fighting, that kind of stuff,” Ichigo replied. “I won't let him do anything to you and if the questions get too upsetting I'll make him stop. Is that okay?”

Homura nibbled on her crêpe and frowned doubtfully for a long minute, thinking. She was still a week away from her turn-back point. If the shinigami got involved, could they stop her from going back somehow? No one knew her power, though. If she kept that quiet and was careful with what other information she gave, it could be tactically useful to see how the shinigami handled things. If they decided to capture her, she could play her trump card and freeze time to escape. It would probably be more suspicious to refuse to be questioned anyway.

Homura tentatively answered, “All right... I suppose.”

Ichigo smiled slightly and ruffled her hair. “Good. I know it's hard. I bet grownups haven't reacted well if you've ever said anything about it before.”

Homura thought of one early timeline when she had still been childishly naïve in which she had gotten desperate and gone to the police. It hadn't ended well. She nodded slightly.

“You won't have to worry about that with Urahara. He's a shinigami, so you won't have to convince him you can see spirits and stuff. And Karin, Yuzu, and I will be with you.”

That wasn't what she was worried about, but Homura played along and forced her shoulders to relax a bit as though relieved. She was very aware of the twins carefully watching her, too. Probably wondering if she could stand up to questioning without revealing them all. “I'll try,” Homura said quietly.

Ichigo patted her shoulder. “You're brave. Let's finish these crêpes and go visit Sandal-Hat's shop.”

Kisuke was trawling supernatural forums and vaguely tracking the Kurosaki siblings and the mysterious girl when a senkaimon opened in the front yard and a familiar reiatsu emerged. Expecting him, Kisuke got up and double-checked the stack of supplies that had been ordered then went into the public portion of the shop. There he found Tenth Division Captain Tōshirō Hitsugaya.

“Welcome, Captain Hitsugaya!” Kisuke sang. “I have your order all put together.”

Hitsugaya nodded his head respectfully. “Thank you.”

“You know you can just look at Twelfth's data for this, right?”

“Mm. I've looked at it,” replied the captain. “The cold data doesn't necessarily represent how well my subordinates are handling their assignments. I want to watch them in action from the concealing gigai and see if any would benefit from splitting or consolidating duties.”

“Ah, so responsible,” Urahara cooed.

Hitsugaya rolled his eyes. “Speaking of Twelfth.” He raised an eyebrow and held out his hand. A small USB stick was in his palm. “Twelfth Division's third seat asked me to give this to you. He said it contained information you had requested and to tell you that he has initiated a more thorough
investigation, the results of which he will convey to you when available.” He wasn't entirely successful in keeping curiosity off his face.

“Ah, thank you, Captain Hitsugaya,” Kisuke said, taking the storage device from him. “If Akon is digging deeper, this data should be very interesting.” He noticed the cluster of reiatsu he had been monitoring turn toward the shop. “If you'd like to hear what this is about, go ahead and hop in your gigai and I'll brief you. We have a guest coming. I need to question her but I hear she's skittish. If you want to participate, don't be all frowny and intimidating.”

Hitsugaya inclined his head curiously and stepped into the back room. Yoruichi in cat form sauntered between his ankles and made him stumble. Hitsugaya grumbled and kept going.

“Ah, Yoruichi! My favorite kitty-cat!” Kisuke crowed. “Is curiosity killing you?”

The cat rolled her eyes. “You can put it that way, I guess.”

Kisuke grinned. “Want to listen in and be a cute, comforting kitty for the traumatized girl?”

Yoruichi stretched and yawned. “I suppose.”

Homura knew they were near their destination when her skin began to tingle at the close proximity to a great deal of magic. Reiatsu. Whatever. When the Kurosaki siblings turned into a gate, she stopped in her tracks. She was only vaguely aware of Ichigo and Karin bickering with a boy with shockingly red hair.

The quaint little shop made her nervous. As if it housed something that should be monumentally threatening but was currently laying at ease. Strangely, it brought to mind a photo she had once seen of a black leopard lounging in a tree at night—all lithe muscle and killing power wrapped in velvety soft darkness, utterly calm and secure in its ability to fight anything that challenged it, relaxed yet aware. Actually, there were a few distinct magical signatures with that feeling. Maybe this wasn't the smartest thing to do, after all.

Yuzu slipped her hand into Homura's. “They really are nice,” she said. “They can be weird and enthusiastic like Daddy, but they mean well.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “If they go to Mitakihara and figure everything out, maybe we can prove to Kyubey that shinigami are better now.”

Homura swallowed and nodded. She followed the siblings into the courtyard.

A blond man with a goofy face wearing an odd combination of olive green jinbei and a striped bucket hat emerged from the shop. “Welcome, welcome!”

“Yo, Sandal-Hat,” Ichigo said with a lazy wave.

“Come on in!” the eccentric cheered, disappearing into the shop.

Ichigo raised his brows at Homura. “Ready?”

Homura nodded and stepped forward.

Homura followed Ichigo through the shop and into a back room with a table set for tea. A white-
haired boy sat at the table wearing a neutral expression. His teal eyes were curious as he peered at them over the lip of his teacup.

“Tōsh!” Karin exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

His eyes slid to Karin. “I'm going to be surveying my subordinates at their posts. Make sure I have them allocated efficiently. Urahara told me about what's going on. I thought I'd listen in.”

Karin smirked. “Aww, what a responsible old man you are. Such a good example for your little ducklings.”

The boy rolled his eyes.

The strange man clapped his hands. “Okay, introductions, introductions!” He turned to face Homura and bowed with a flourish. “I'm Kisuke Urahara, humble proprietor of this little shop.”

Homura wondered why everyone but Yuzu rolled their eyes. Wait— hadn't Karin said something about I am a mere shopkeeper being some kind of red flag? Hmmm.

“This kitty who thinks she's queen of the shop is Yoruichi,” Urahara said, indicating the cat lazing on a cushion in the corner. It looked at Homura and swished its tail. “And this young man is Tōshirō Hitsugaya.”

The boy bowed his head and murmured a greeting. So this was the “highly ranked shinigami” friend the twins had spoken of. Great, now the shinigami command structure would know about her. If they didn't already, that is. Homura wondered if he was in one of the false bodies Karin had mentioned. His magic — reiatsu, reiatsu — was faint but undeniably present and unexpectedly icy.

Ichigo cleared his throat. Homura startled. “Oh. I am Homura Akemi.” She bowed. “I am pleased to meet you.”

“It's nice meeting you, too, Miss Akemi,” Urahara replied. “Come, sit. I hear you have some distressing problems. Let's see what we can figure out about the situation, yes?”

They all sat around the table. Homura sat between Yuzu and Ichigo. Homura's eyes kept sliding to the cat as tea was served. It was watching her intently and Homura could distinctly feel that it had magic — reiatsu. Really, “magic” was so much easier to remember.

“Oh, do you like my cat? She's such a snobby little thing.” The cat growled just loud enough to be heard. Urahara laughed. “She knows when I'm bad-mouthing her.”

Homura looked across the table at Urahara. She paused for a long moment, looking between him and the cat, and wondered if she was being tested. Slowly, she replied, “That is not a cat.”

Several eyebrows were raised.

“You're very perceptive,” the cat said in a deep voice.

Homura blinked in mild surprise, but otherwise just tilted her head curiously. The shinigami gave her odd looks. Ah, a mistake — now they probably wondered why she simply accepted that a cat could speak. She was too used to the talking cat-rabbit-thing that was Kyubey.

“I'm a shinigami like Kisuke and the boys. I have the ability to turn into a cat,” Yoruichi said. She tilted her head. “Do you know about shinigami?”
“Karin and Yuzu explained them to me,” Homura answered calmly. “Can all shinigami turn into cats?”

The prospect worried her. She could be followed without noticing. Maybe. Well, maybe not; Homura could sense the “cat’s” magic. That would be a dead giveaway.

Yoruichi laughed. “They wish. No, I'm special.”

Homura stared at the cat. Was that the truth?

Ichigo glanced aside darkly and grumbled something under his breath.

Yoruichi’s gold eyes zeroed in on him. “I heard that.”


“Stalker,” Karin muttered.

“You were quite efficient. May I start by asking how you came by that experience?”

So he was going for big questions right out the gate. Fantastic. Homura looked down and made a show of fidgeting with her teacup while she hurriedly thought through her answer — how to keep it accurate and mostly truthful but vague while weaving together events from varying timelines to make a more solid story. She rifled through everything the twins had told her about reiatsu and Hollows to balance it out. The others patiently waited for her.

Homura took a deep breath and tried to channel the way her former, meek self would have spoken. Something between the old her and new her; soft-spoken, but not too timid. “I suppose it began when I was in the hospital. For my heart condition,” she began hesitantly. “I began to feel like something was watching me. I saw things out of the corner of my eye. I sometimes heard... chains rattling. The doctors said it was ICU delirium, but Karin and Yuzu said it could have been me starting to sense spirits.”

Urahara hummed. “Probably. It could have started with delirium making you more vulnerable to spiritual stimuli and... snowballed from there.”

Some part of Homura relaxed. He was strengthening her story. She spoke a bit more confidently. “It happened more when I started school in Mitakihara. Some of the girls in my class felt... I do not know. Different. Now I know I was sensing their magic.”

“Magic?” asked Hitsugaya.

“That is what we called it,” Homura said as though defensive. “We did not have anyone to explain things to us. We had to figure it out ourselves. I did not know the word reiatsu until I came here and spoke with Karin and Yuzu at length.”

Hitsugaya nodded his understanding.

“So.” Homura paused, considering her words. She thought of the news articles about people seemingly compelled to commit suicide and decided to weave in her experience. “One day when I was on my way home from school I felt... weird. Depressed. When I was crossing a bridge, I felt strange... dreamy... and heard a girl's voice saying I would be better off dead and I should just die. But the voice was in my head. And not my usual... thinking voice. It was not me.”

She glanced up at those gathered around the table. They stared at her, rapt.
“The voice urged you to commit suicide?” Urahara asked.

Homura nodded.

He leaned forward on his elbows, fascination plain on his face. “And what stopped you?”

Homura looked back down at her cup. “I kind of just... woke up. Like when you are very tired and catch yourself as you are falling asleep just before your head hits your desk. But when I woke up, there was a monster.”

“Was the monster a Hollow?” asked Hitsugaya.

Homura fidgeted and shrugged. “I suppose? Everything looked really strange still. I think I was... hallucinating, maybe?”

“Looked weird how?” asked Yoruichi.

“Um... warped? And crooked. The ground was not flat. And the Arc de Triomphe was there, but wrong. And the sky was all twisty red swirls. Like— like Van Gogh's Starry Night, but wrong.” Homura wondered what they would make of that description of her first labyrinth.

Yoruichi glanced at Urahara, who was frowning in thought.

“How did you get away?” Ichigo asked softly.

Homura's hands tightened around her cup. “Mami saved me.” And Madoka, but that wouldn't fit with the rest of her cobbled-together story. “She used her magic... um, reiatsu? She used it to make glowing ribbons to tie things up and shot... blasts of magic at the monsters until they disappeared.”

“Monsters, plural?” Hitsugaya asked with a frown.

“Ah, y-yes,” Homura stammered as she cringed internally. “There were... they looked like scribbled drawings of people on... parchment, maybe. They were... staggering toward me, but Mami lassoed them all before they could reach me. She bound them to the Arc de Triomphe and destroyed them all at once.”

Urahara raised his eyebrows. “That's quite advanced.”

“Mami told me it took her almost two years of practice to get as good as she was.” Not a lie.

“So this has been happening for at least two years,” Hitsugaya observed, eyes keenly watching her.

Having so many sharp eyes trained on her was making Homura's skin crawl with anxiety. Her chest tightened.

Homura nodded. “So Mami took me to her apartment. She explained about how only some girls can see the monsters and that the girls who could see them had magic. She said she thought it was our duty to protect the people who cannot see them.”

“That was quite noble of her,” Urahara said quietly. “Only girls could see these monsters?”

“Yes. But it seems like anyone can get... hypnotized, I suppose... like I was. Even boys and men.”

Urahara sat back and stroked his chin, staring at the ceiling while thinking intensely.

“What happened next?” Ichigo asked.
“Mami taught me how to fight,” Homura answered. “Madoka and Sayaka are— were— in my class. They had magic, too. Mami began to take them with to fights to show them how to use magic. I... did not like that. M-Madoka is— was— a very good friend. I did not want her to fight. I want...ed her to stay safe. But Mami thought I was jealous of Madoka because she has— had more magic than me.”

The shinigami glanced among one another. Homura wondered why that seemed to disturb them so much.

After a pause, Ichigo gently said, “I know this is hard, but... what happened to your friends? Like, in the articles, it seems like something went wrong at the hospital. Can you start there?”

Homura fiddled with her teacup and sipped from it to buy herself time to arrange the gruesome facts in her head. If her hands were genuinely shaking at the memories, so much the better for her performance. When she put her cup down, Yuzu slid her hand into Homura's and squeezed.

Ichigo's hand was a reassuringly warm weight on her back. She took a deep breath, thinking of the article about the hospital incident. Even though she had lived through similar events countless times, she found speaking about what had transpired extremely difficult. This was why her modus operandi had become repress, repress, repress.

“Madoka told me that when she and Sayaka left the hospital, they found a monster by the bicycle racks. Sayaka hid and monitored it while Madoka retreated to find Mami. They did not think they could fight it themselves. I sensed the monster and came from another direction. I tried to make Madoka run away to stay safe, but Mami became angry and used her magic ribbons to tie me up. Then Mami fought the monster by herself. She tied it up and shot it but it did not die— a bigger monster came out its mouth a-and bit Mami's h-head off and ate her body.” Homura swallowed hard; she should be used to that memory by now, but wasn't. No matter how she tried, she still always heard the phantom wet crunch of flesh and bone in the Witch's jaws. She hated it. “The ribbons disappeared w-when she died and Madoka and Sayaka were scared so I fought it. I won, but...” She shrugged unhappily.

Everyone was respectfully silent for a minute. Quietly, Urahara said, “My apologies, Miss Akemi. Did the... monster... knock Mami's soul from her body and eat it, or did it eat her body and all?”

“It ate her in her body,” answered Homura. “There was nothing left.”

Urahara, Hitsugaya, and Ichigo looked deeply disturbed.

“This Sayaka and Madoka,” said Yoruichi. “They escaped?”

“Yes,” answered Homura. “Madoka was afraid and did not want to fight. But she saw another girl from our class acting strangely the next day and followed her to the TV station. She stopped the people from hurting themselves, but the hidden monster attacked her. Sayaka was closer and reached her first. She decided to fight since Mami could not anymore. She saved Madoka with her magic.”

“How so?” asked Urahara.

“She used a baseball bat like Karin uses a soccer ball,” Homura explained— lied— smoothly.

Urahara hummed and Hitsugaya nodded.

“The articles said Sayaka became erratic before her disappearance,” said Urahara. “What happened there?”
Homura shifted and frowned. “Sayaka was fighting too much. She was getting worn out and she was upset about some boy. Then Kyōko heard Mami had died and came from Kazamino to fight monsters. She and Sayaka had a... really bad first meeting. So they kept fighting each other, too.”

Urahara frowned. “I don't recall reading about a Kyōko.”

“The articles call her the mystery redhead from Kazamino. She came to Mitakihara about a week into April. Kyōko used to be Mami's partner. She was harsh with Sayaka because she thought Sayaka was not taking things seriously—that she was getting off on playing the hero.”

“Didn't her family report her missing?” asked Ichigo.

“No. They are dead,” Homura bluntly answered. “Kyōko's father was a Western preacher. When he found out about her powers, he thought she was a witch... who had cast a spell on everyone... and tried to kill the whole family in a murder-suicide to escape the spell. But Kyōko survived. She has been on her own ever since.”

Most of those present stared at Homura in horror.

“Her dad— her dad tried to kill her?! Just because she had high reiatsu?!” Karin demanded.

Homura nodded. “He killed her mother and sister, tried to kill Kyōko, set the house on fire, and hanged himself.”

More dumbfounded, disgusted horror all around.

“This... this Kyōko...” Hitsugaya hedged. “Is she still...?”

Homura took a deep breath. “She is dead. And I guess I am the only one who... misses her.”

“Oh. I'm so sorry.”

Everyone sat numbly for a couple minutes. Yuzu snifflled.

“How... how did she...?” Karin tried to ask.

Homura looked down at the table and debated how much detail to go into. She wanted to toss the shinigami a clue, but it could be information shocking to the twins if they didn't know the truth about Witches. At length, she decided the gamble was worth it. If the twins freaked out and botched things past saving, she'd stop time and run like hell. Maybe try a different approach in the next timeline.

“Sayaka became... twitchy. Edgy.” Homura started carefully rotating her teacup in little turns, focusing on the repetitive movement. “Even Kyōko became concerned about her. After Sayaka ran away, Kyōko and I would run into her when we went to fight monsters. She was fighting sloppily and using her magic to make her body stronger so much it obviously tired her, but she refused our help every time. Sayaka acted more and more obsessed and aggressive every time I ran into her. Her magic... even her magic felt darker and heavier. Then the night before I came to Karakura, Kyōko ran into her in the train station. Everything just... fell apart.”

Homura bit her lip and forced herself not to look at the twins. Everyone silently waited for her to continue.

“I do not know what they talked about, but Sayaka... broke. She... Her body fell down and her soul floated up and turned into a monster.”
There was an audible series of gasps around the table. Homura glanced up. Karin and Yuzu were stark white and utterly still. They understood what she was implying.

Witches were fallen magical girls.

They hadn't known.

Homura couldn't stand to look at them. She looked down at her cup and pressed on. “Kyōko did not— did not really understand what happened. I felt it happen. When I got there, Kyōko was running away from the monster, carrying Sayaka's body. We just— just ran away.” She swallowed. “Kyōko took Sayaka to her hotel room. I think she used her own magic to keep Sayaka's body... fresh. She thought she could find the monster and, um, convince it to calm down and turn back into Sayaka.”

Homura looked around at everyone's faces. The shinigami looked like they knew exactly how badly wrong everything would go. Odd.

“I thought Sayaka was a lost cause because of the other monsters we fought and that the only thing we could do for her was put her out of her misery. I said as much. So Kyōko went behind my back to convince Madoka to go with her to try to get through to Sayaka. That is why Madoka did not go to school.” Homura couldn't help the frustrated anger that slipped past her mask. She clenched her fists. Everyone remained silent.

Homura grit her teeth. “I left class when I figured out Madoka was not coming and may have gone after Sayaka... Sayaka's monster. But by the time I found the fight—” Homura closed her eyes. “Sayaka's monster had M-Madoka crushed in its hand and Kyōko... I think Kyōko thought that she would turn into a monster someday, too, so she used all of her magic— she had fiery magic— she used it to take all of them out at the same time. There was nothing left of any of them except Sayaka's body in Kyōko's hotel. They just... burned up in front of me. I did not know what to do, so I just got on a passing train and rode.”

Homura refused to look up in the ensuing dead silence until Yuzu began to cry and cling to her, her magic carrying an undercurrent of fear. When Homura did look up, she found Karin staring at the table with blank, wide eyes, Ichigo and Tōshirō looking pained and angry, and Urahara looking grim. Yoruichi's face was unreadable, but her feline ears were laid back flat against her head.

No one spoke for a long time.

Ichigo was the first to find words. “I'm so— so sorry you had to go through that. Never— you should never have—” He faltered in frustration.

“My condolences, Miss Akemi,” Urahara said gravely.

Homura's face remained stonily blank, but she inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment.

“Forgive me,” he continued, “but I would like to ask one favor of you.”

Ichigo directed a murderous glare at him, silently telling him to back off. Homura appreciated it.

“What?” Homura asked with tired caution. Staying calm and coherent was getting exhausting.

“I don't have any more questions for you right now,” Urahara reassured her. “I have a large map of the Mitakihara metro area. Would you be willing to mark the locations of your fights for us to investigate?”
Homura tilted her head and stared blankly as she thought. She decided she didn't see how it could hurt. “I suppose.”

“I appreciate it, Miss Akemi.” Urahara looked her straight in the eye. “We'll figure this out and put a stop to it.”

Forty minutes later, Kisuke and Yoruichi watched the last of their guests leave. Kisuke sat tapping his folded fan against the table, thinking. Early evening shadows slowly stretched across the floor.

“She's a very good liar for someone so young,” Yoruichi finally commented.

Kisuke hummed. “Very good at stretching the truth. Smart enough to stick to the truth with some adjustments instead of making up falsehoods from whole cloth. The only thing I can definitely pin as changed is the timing of her learning to fight. I'm impressed.”

“Oh?” Yoruichi asked. “I didn't catch that. Do tell.”

“I saw her fight yesterday,” he explained. “That was far more than a month's worth of experience. She's very polished.”

Yoruichi hummed.

“Much of the other stuff rings true, though.” Kisuke looked down at the map of Mitakihara and Homura’s neat writing dotting it here and there. “I do think she knows more about these 'monsters' than she's telling us. Quite the interesting puzzle. I need to read Akon's report.”

Yoruichi sniffed. “You're like a dog with a bone now, aren't you?”

Kisuke laughed, gathered the map, and headed for his lab.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please review and further enable me ;)

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks for the reviews! I'm getting excited about the next few chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**SIEBZEHN**

**TIMELINE X+N**

The walk back to the Kurosaki Clinic was hushed and worried. Homura was afraid she had said too much or said something wrong. The twins were probably afraid of the implications of Homura's information for them. Ichigo seemed worried about all the girls in general and at a frustrated loss. Like he wanted to fight something but didn't know what to lash out at. It was an expression and magical feeling Homura had often encountered with Sayaka and Kyōko when they were about to go off like loose cannons. It put her on edge.

When they got home, the girls seemed to be in a hurry to get upstairs. Ichigo quickly grabbed Homura's shoulder. “Hey.”

Homura turned to him, startled, and half-expected to be yelled at. Was he going to lash out at her for lack of other targets, like Sayaka and Kyōko? She tried to be non-threatening. “Yes, Mr. Ku—um, I-Ichigo?”

Ichigo ruffled her hair with a wan smile. “I know how hard that was. I'm proud of you. You girls go do your... girl things... and try to relax a bit, okay? Urahara will figure it out.” He looked past Homura to his sisters. “Don't worry about cooking tonight, Yuzu. I'll take care of it. You two keep Homura company, okay?”

Yuzu, still pale, nodded silently. Ichigo heaved a deep sigh behind them as they hurried upstairs.

Karin ushered the other girls into their room and shut the door. She leaned back against it and stared into the room. Homura stood in the middle and Yuzu wrung her hands off to one side.

“What— What— What was that?!” Karin demanded. “You made that part up, right? Tell me you made that part up. Please.” She didn't have to explain what part. They all knew.

After a long silence in which Homura forced her face to remain expressionless, Yuzu whimpered, “Please, Homura. Please explain. Did you mean— Did— Did Sayaka turn into a W-witch?”

Homura opened her mouth, paused, and frowned before quietly saying, “Yes.”

Karin looked like she had been stabbed. She sagged against the door. Yuzu's knees wobbled and she plopped down on her bed. Homura's heart twisted.

“Does... does it happen to all magical girls?” Karin nearly whispered.
Homura met her eyes then looked away. She couldn't stand the expression on Karin's face. “Those who are not killed first, yes. Eventually.”

Karin and Yuzu closed their eyes and tried to make sense of the world. Homura remembered the feeling well. At least they didn't find out by witnessing a magical girl's fall.


Homura primly sat in a desk chair and smoothed her skirt, trying to project calm for the twins. “You know that when we fight in labyrinths, they taint our Soul Gems, yes? And that we must cleanse them with Grief Seeds?”

“Yeeeah,” Karin said suspiciously.

“This is because if our Gems become too corrupted and we start to slip into despair and insanity, our Gems turn completely black and transform into Grief Seeds. Our souls are reborn as Witches. Then the cycle continues with newly-contracted magical girls who will defeat us and become Witches in turn.”

“I thought that if our Gems got dark it just meant our magic would be weak,” Karin said dully.

“K-kyubey didn't explain any of this!” cried Yuzu.

“Kyubey is a manipulator,” Homura said harshly, face stone cold. “The Incubator race preys upon us. They claim the magical energy they harvest from our souls is used for a good cause, but I do not care. Dishonesty is dishonesty. It claims to have no concept of deceit, but I do not believe it. I did not find out about the Incubator's motives until after I had contracted.” Homura paused for a moment, considering her earlier story. “That is why I did not want Sayaka and Madoka to contract. But no one ever believes me when I warn them. The wish and magic are too attractive.”

Yuzu covered her face with her hands and cried.

Karin slid down to the floor and laughed darkly. “It makes sense. It makes so much sense. I should have seen it. He tore our souls out. Our souls. Of course we'd have a fancy kind of Hollowfication. Of course.” She looked up at Homura with a humorless grin. “We really made a deal with the devil, huh?”

Homura looked down at her lap and didn't disagree.

“How long do we have?” Yuzu sniffled.

Homura shrugged and pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “That depends on how often you fight, how clean you keep your Soul Gem, and how rational you can stay. Theoretically, you could go on indefinitely if you take care of your Soul Gem and do not fall to despair. That... does not happen often, though.”

Karin laughed grimly again.

“What— What happens to us when we die? Do we go to Soul Society?” asked Yuzu.

Homura was silent for a long time. “If you mean human death, like getting hit by a car or dying of cancer, that cannot happen to us. As long as our Soul Gems are intact and not overly corrupted, our bodies are invincible. Our magic can overcome any wound or illness. If our Gem is too corrupted when we are grievously wounded, it tries to heal our body but the strain makes it turn into a Grief Seed.” She tilted her head sadly. “We have two possible ends: Transforming into a Witch or
complete soul destruction by the shattering of our Soul Gems.”


They sat in silence for several minutes as the twins processed everything.

“Okay. Okay. Plans,” Karin said with forced calm. “Priority one is hunting down that goddamn sneaky Witch so we can cleanse our Soul Gems. We've gone too long without.”

Homura looked up curiously. “How long has it been since you cleansed your Soul Gems?”

Karin laughed again. It was getting disturbing. “Probably two months.”

Homura's eyebrows jumped to her hairline. “How have you not—? I mean—”

“How have we not turned?” Karin finished. “Good question. I dunno. Maybe because we don't get new Witches every other day like in Mitakihara? And when we use our powers to fight Hollows without transforming, it doesn't muck up our Gems as quickly as prancing around in a labyrinth.”

Homura frowned. “May I see your Gems?”

Karin got up and crossed the room to sit by Yuzu. Each held out her left hand and materialized the egg-shaped jewel that her soul had been condensed into. Homura slid the desk chair over to look. Both were worryingly murky, but Yuzu's more so than Karin's. Homura frowned and materialized her own Gem next to theirs. Oh, hey, hers was as bad as Yuzu's. They weren't in immediate danger of turning, but their state was concerning. Well, that explained a few things about her instability the last few days— or so she chose to believe. Great. Fun times for everyone.

How the hell was Yuzu so cheerful and put-together with that much corruption? Indomitable optimism?

Briefly, Homura pictured Madoka managing to smile at her in the timeline where the two of them had defeated Walpurgisnacht together and lay near death and final corruption among the ruins of Mitakihara. Madoka had smiled while purifying Homura's Gem even as her own was dark and cracking.

Homura forcibly shoved the memory aside.

“Yeeeah,” Karin drawled. “We need to bag that Witch or we're fucked.”

“Karin!”

“Is this really the time to scold me for cussing, Yuz?”

Homura pursed her lips, then sat back and let her Soul Gem turn back into a ring. She closed her fist and opened it again, summoning the Mermaid Witch's Grief Seed to her hand. The twins startled.

“Holy shit, where did you—?” squawked Karin. “Oh. Oh. You had it before. That's right. Where... oh....” She trailed off and looked pained.

“Is that... is that Sayaka?” Yuzu whispered.

Homura hummed. “It should be good for two uses. Here.” She offered it to the twins.
Both reared back. “What? No, no way,” said Karin. “She was your friend. We can't accept that. Use it yourself.”

Homura really, really had not been Sayaka's friend in this timeline. She had been ready to kill the stubborn girl when she wouldn't see reason and use a damn Grief Seed. Sure, killing her would have ended her suffering before she could turn into a Witch, but Homura had been nothing but a cold-hearted liar with murderous ulterior motives in Sayaka's eyes.

“She would have wanted to be useful and save other magical girls,” Homura said quietly. “That is the kind of magical girl she was. You two use this Grief Seed and I will use the one we get from the Witch you have been hunting.”

Both twins frowned hard. Everyone was quiet for a minute.

Karin darted her eyes between the Gems and the Seed. “Two uses, right? You and Yuzu use it. I'll use the one from the Witch we're gonna... put out of her misery. Yours are darker than mine, anyway.”

Yuzu turned to her sister. “But Karin—”

Karin stared Homura in the eye. “We owe you for telling us about this. It changes things. You've just let us know we can't afford to be careless. You may have put off our deaths. Thanks. So you and Yuzu share.”

Homura stared solemnly at Karin, her respect for the girl increased. Homura touched the Grief Seed to Yuzu's Soul Gem with a little clink. Darkness seeped out of the citrine, leaving it sparkling golden yellow once again in a matter of a few seconds. Yuzu sadly murmured her thanks and cradled the Gem to her chest.

Homura sat back and cleansed her own amethyst Soul Gem. When she was done, she held the Grief Seed out to Karin and gravely said, “Here. There's a little left. Not enough, but it will be better than nothing.”

Karin nodded and held her Gem out. The ruby brightened slightly, but the Grief Seed was spent. Homura tucked it back into storage to sit in stasis until she could do something with it.

After an awkward silence, Karin cleared her throat. “So. Plans. We need to hunt after school every day. Dad let Ichi-nii ditch school all the time, but he knew what was going on. I don't think we'll be able to get away with that.”

Homura tilted her head. “We just...” She trailed off for a moment, then corrected herself to something they would appreciate. “Sayaka just bought us time. You are not in immediate danger. Skipping school should be unnecessary. I will find an excuse to leave the house during school hours and search. If we do not find the Witch by Friday night, then we can leave for Mitakihara the next morning and get a Grief Seed there before Walpurgisnacht appears on Sunday morning.”

Yuzu bit her lip. “If Walpurgisnacht is many Witches put together... that means it's a lot of magical girl souls who fell into despair put together, right?”

“I suppose so.”

Yuzu's face hardened into determination. “We need to free them.”

Homura frowned. “You must know that if we defeat it, it will become a Grief Seed. All we can do with Grief Seeds is give them to the Incubator to be converted into raw energy. Otherwise, they
just re-spawn.”

“At least that would end their suffering, though,” Karin said resentfully.

“No,” Yuzu said with a scowl. “We won't give Walpurgisnacht's Grief Seed to Kyubey. The Incubator. Whatever.”

“Eh? What else could we do?” Karin asked while Homura looked confused.

Yuzu sat straight, crossed her arms, and declared, “We give it to Mr. Urahara.”

The other two girls stared.

“What?” asked Homura as Karin grinned and said, “You're a genius.”

Homura looked back and forth between the sisters. “Why?”

Karin smirked. “If anyone can figure out how to help those souls—and ours—it'd be Urahara. He's a nosy troll, but he's brilliant when it comes to everything having to do with souls and spirit stuff.”

Homura frowned. “We still do not know how he and other shinigami will react to magical girls.”

“So we find out,” Karin said breezily. “You were tossing out clues, right? We have a week to see if Urahara’s smart enough to figure something out and hightail it if everyone decides to grab the pitchforks and torches. And I doubt it will come to that.”

Homura remained unmoved. “You are far more optimistic than I.”

“No, we believe in Ichi-nii,” Karin asserted.

Yuzu nodded. “Onii-chan won't let the shinigami come after us.”

“And even if they were given orders, a lot of the shinigami command structure really likes Ichi-nii. Like, to the extent that a handful defied orders and deserted to help him on a personal mission during the war and all of them helped him get his powers back. And the fact that Kyu—the Incubator tricks girls into contracts should work in our favor with the current, more reasonable leadership. We're victims. We should be able to redirect any bad reactions toward that little bastard.”

“I bet we could take Sayaka's Grief Seed to Mr. Urahara right now and everything would be fine,” said Yuzu.

Homura grit her teeth and shifted uncomfortably. “You are proposing taking an enormous risk.”

“Can't win big if you don't bet big,” Karin argued with a shrug.

Homura chewed her lip and looked down, thinking. “Perhaps,” she said hesitantly. She looked up at them fiercely. “But I do not want to take that risk until after we fight Walpurgisnacht.” Not a lie. She wanted to see where everyone's cards fell in this timeline before approaching—or not approaching—them in the next.

“That's reasonable,” said Yuzu with a satisfied nod. “We just have to hang in there for a week, right?”

Homura nodded agreement.
Ichigo went into the kitchen and went through the motions of preparing dinner on autopilot, mind spinning.

No wonder Homura was traumatized.

There were some little things that niggled as not quite adding up, but he couldn't pin down why he felt that way. And he still didn't know what kind of powers the girl had. He wondered what other details she had glossed over that would explain how close to the vest she played her cards.

What worried him the most was her calm as she had said, “I thought Sayaka was a lost cause... and that the only thing we could do for her was put her out of her misery.”

Lost cause. Put her out of her misery. Brr.

In that moment, there had been something distinctly weary and not-childlike in her face. Something distant and bleak. He could see it even in profile. In that moment, she had seemed much older than she appeared. It was disturbing.

Ichigo wanted to introduce whatever had beaten her down like that to Zangetsu. Have a... chat. With lots of stabbing and explosions.

Isshin wandered into the kitchen and leaned against the doorway to watch his agitated son cook. Ichigo noticed him but kept working, darkly itemizing a list of little things Homura had said that earned whatever mysterious enemy was out there an extra Getsuga Tenshō to the face.

When Ichigo reached a point where he had nothing to do but stand and wait while things cooked, Isshin spoke up. “That bad, huh?”

Ichigo turned to his father. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, too angry to actually speak coherently. He covered his face and forced himself to calm. Through grit teeth, he ground out, “On top of everything she already told me, she saw that Sayaka girl's soul Hollowfy and the unidentified redhead from the articles use all her fire-type reiatsu to burn the Hollow and herself out of existence even though the Hollow used to be her friend. And the reason the redhead hasn't been reported missing is her father found out about her powers a while back, decided she was a witch, and tried to fucking kill his whole family to escape some kind of imaginary curse. So of course the poor girl with powers was the only survivor and there's no one to miss her but Homura. Of course. I don't fucking understand people sometimes. I really don't.”

Isshin sighed heavily and sat in a chair. “Unfortunately, those with powers are so alien to the general population that I don't think the fear response will ever be wiped out. It's hard to handle when you come across violence because of powers. Poor kid.” He cocked his head. “Did Homura say what her name was?”

“Kyōko.”

Isshin hummed and nodded. “A good name. Kyōko. I'll have to look at the pictures of her again, memorize her face. A girl brave enough to face a friend-turned-Hollow and go down in flames after a life like that... she deserves to be remembered by more than just Homura. Sounds like she'd
make one hell of a shinigami someday.”

“Yeah,” Ichigo said, downcast.

“I'll get the rest of the details from Kisuke, son,” Isshin said tiredly. “We'll just have to keep the girls happy tonight.”

“Uhhhh. About that,” said Ichigo.

Isshin raised his brows.

“Karin and Yuzu took Homura's story hard. Like, really hard. Pale and scared hard. Hearing what happened to some girls with powers like they do... I think it shook them.”

Isshin closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “Thanks for the heads up. We'll just have to do our best.”

“Mm.”

The first thing Kisuke did was transcribe the meeting, which he had recorded, and scan the map Homura had annotated to send it all to Akon for independent evaluation.

The second thing he did was actually study the map. Akemi's tiny handwriting labeled multiple points with things like “Mami saves Madoka & Sayaka,” “Mami, Sayaka, Madoka save woman,” “Mami dies,” “Madoka saves group, Sayaka saves Madoka,” and so on with dates. Most recent and most interesting were the labels on the train station (“Sayaka turns/dies”) and a lot across from the station (“Kyōko & Madoka die”). Everything was exceptionally neat except for the words “Madoka die.” Kisuke inferred that Madoka was the person Akemi was closest to. That her hand would shake for her and not the others implied a deep bond. Strange, for only having known her a month. Unless that was a lie. Something was off with Akemi's timing, so that could be part of it. What was most curious about the map was that all of Akemi's marks were within Mitakihara proper. She hadn't labeled anything in Kazamino, Asunaro, or Shinchi. Either she was lying by omission or there were independent pockets of disturbances she didn't know about.

Next, he researched the story Akemi had told about the ill-fated Kyōko. It took some digging without a family name, but he eventually found a series of articles about the Sakura family murder-suicide with arson. It was a tragic family history— all four nearly starving when the father was ejected by the church for preaching contrary to doctrine, the turning of the family's fortunes with a sudden surge of believers helping the man build his own church and congregation, followed by an equally sudden descent into alcoholism featuring public rants that his eldest daughter was a witch who had cursed his family and enchanted the congregation. As Akemi had said, it had culminated in the father attacking his family, setting the house on fire, and hanging himself. A follow-up article mentioned that when Kyōko Sakura was released from the hospital into foster care, she immediately ran away. He looked up the missing persons casefile and found it still open. So that part had all been true, unfortunately.

Third, he took a break from the material from the interview so he could look at it with fresh eyes later. Instead, Kisuke devoured the data Akon had sent him. It was almost exactly the opposite of what he had expected. Fascinating. He loved when that happened. Kisuke decided to set it aside and wait until the field investigation could corroborate the information.
After dinner, Kisuke watched the video of the interview over and over and over, taking notes. Places where the girl had paused and changed her words. Places where she avoided everyone's eyes. Things she had said that didn't quite match up with each other. Things that stuck out as interesting. What had been said— and especially what had been left unsaid.

Akemi never gave an actual description of a monster. When directly questioned, she hedged on whether or not it was a Hollow, choosing to instead focus on her surroundings. Then she didn't mention further hallucinations with other monsters. The closest to a physical description of a monster was that the monster that had killed Tomoe had done so by way of a larger entity emerging from its mouth. That was curious in and of itself.

Her description of waking from the suicidal compulsion sounded a lot like when a disorienting kidō was cast on someone strong enough to shake it off, though. That was interesting, especially combined with hallucinatory visuals. An area-effect kidō trap of some kind, or a Hollow-like approximation of one? It would make sense— Akemi, reiatsu strong enough to resist a spell, came to her senses, but others with low or no reiatsu would be ensnared beyond return without outside help. Which sounded like what the girls in the area were trying to be. Interesting. Actually, a soul forcibly overcoming such a spell could act as a catalyst to accelerate spiritual maturation, which would explain the girl's rapid acceleration from seeing things out of the corner of her eyes to total visibility and ability to fight. Was that what was happening with some of the other girls?

Kisuke felt like two huge clues lay hidden in the purported facts that only girls could see the monsters— supported by the forum posts one commenter had summed up with “Whys it always a girl helps the suicidals?”— and that the monsters ate the physical body as well as the spiritual. Yet there were some bodies left behind. Unsure what to make of it yet, he noted it and scribbled a bunch of question marks and stars around it. Something important was there. He could feel it.

What was most disturbing was Akemi's description of Sayaka Miki's decline. It sounded like she had begun to Hollowfy while still alive, which should not be possible with an intact Chain of Fate. Which begged the question: Had her Chain of Fate been intact? Then there was the fact that Akemi had been so careful in how she phrased Miki's fall. She looked as though she gave a great deal of thought before deciding to say anything. That strongly implied she was hiding something about Miki. But what? He scribbled more question marks and stars.

Then there was Akemi's choice of words when talking about Miki. “Lost cause” and “put her out of her misery.” It was strange for a fourteen-year-old to have the logical objectivity to make that kind of call— to completely write off the possibility of recovering her friend. Kisuke had known shinigami who didn't acquire that detachment until they had decades of experience. Seeing it in such a young girl was chilling. It was like something had gutted the girl's youthful optimism and left a veteran shinigami behind.

That... That could be important. Kisuke chewed on his pen and stared at the ceiling.

Akemi definitely had more experience wielding her reiatsu than she was claiming. The passive scan he had performed on her showed even distribution and regulation implying conscious control. That took time to accomplish so flawlessly, especially while as stressed as she seemed to be. There had been Hollow-like reiatsu tainting her own, but the scan was inconclusive on the question of whether it came from her or was residue of an attack. Whichever it was, it was dormant beneath the majority of her reiatsu. Considering the tale of Sayaka Miki, he was worried.

And why had Akemi looked something between ashamed and apprehensive when she looked at the Kurosaki girls after saying that Sayaka had turned? Actually, why had all three girls looked like they were having a completely separate conversation in that moment? Kisuke took a second to
mourn that the Kurosaki girls weren't open books like their brother. When they wanted to, each was capable of using her known personality as a mask to hide what she really—

Wait.

He looped the video of Akemi telling the story again. Watched the Kurosaki girls closely when she said Sayaka's soul had turned into a monster.

Terror.

While everyone was focused on Akemi, they had met one another's eyes with a lightning-quick glance of sheer terror, looking like each had figured something out. They immediately looked away from each other and visibly tried to control their facial expressions. Akemi had looked at them apprehensively; when she saw their faces, she avoided their eyes. But she had focused completely on the girls, as though speaking to them instead of her interviewers.

What subtext had the Kurosaki girls picked up on that no one else was privy to? And why hadn't they said anything?

Kisuke's mind raced. He kept circling back to the information possibly being a revelation of a threat to them. After a moment of thought, he reluctantly pulled up the results of the scan he had performed. Its scope had recorded everyone in the room, but he had only looked at Akemi's results. It had been about a year since he had reason to scan the twins. Click, click, click, he was looking at the scans of all three girls side-by-side.

Well.

The Kurosaki girls were shot through with the Hollow-like reiatsu, too.

Kisuke scrubbed his hands over his face. This... complicated things. To say the least.

Dinner at the Kurosaki household had been awkward and stilted, the girls solemn in the face of Isshin's increasingly ridiculous attempts to entertain them. Ichigo finally distracted them by grasping at straws and asking if the girls had done their homework. The ensuing panic had looked like normal academic desperation, but hid the girls' determination to not get detention in the coming week so they'd have time to hunt. Even Homura got involved, helping them with a couple assignments because her own school was a bit ahead of theirs. Crisis averted, the Kurosaki men breathed a sigh of relief.

Homura woke on Monday morning to a shout in the room next door, followed by a window slamming shut and a scream outside. She sat up rapidly, ready for a fight—


Yuzu drowsily sat up. “Wait. Why is Onii-chan still here?” When Homura raised an eyebrow at her, she clarified, “He's supposed to go to the dorms on Sunday night so he's there for his Monday morning class.”

Karin stretched lazily. “We'll have to ask.”
They asked him at breakfast. Ichigo froze and looked like a deer in headlights. “Uh... I got an e-mail saying that my morning class was canceled, so... yeah....”

Karin rolled her eyes. “You suck at lying, Ichi-nii.”

“You shouldn't skip classes, especially this early in the school year!” scolded Yuzu.

Ichigo shrugged and looked away. Instead, he offered to walk them to school on his way to the train station. Homura wondered if he had stayed out of concern for his sisters.

“Excuse me,” Homura said politely. “Is there a library on the way? I did not bring my textbooks, but I want to study so I do not fall behind my class.”

Ichigo looked surprised. “Oh, uh, yeah. If you come with I'll point you down the right street. Will you be able to find your way back here?”

Homura nodded. “I will put the address in my phone. And the clinic phone number in case I still cannot get back without help.”

“Sounds cool,” Ichigo said agreeably. “You okay with that, old man?”

Isshin scrutinized Homura. “Are you sure you're okay being alone? After everything that happened....”

Homura tilted her head. “Have there been deaths and disappearances here?”

“No that I know of.”

Homura shrugged. “I should be fine, then.”

Isshin dragged one hand down his face in blatant exasperation. “Let me write a note for you to carry in case a cop stops you for truancy or something. And I'll give you my library card.”

Half an hour later, Homura and Ichigo parted ways with the twins and turned toward the train station. They walked in companionable silence until they reached the library.

“Hey, Homura.”

“Yes?”

Ichigo pulled out his phone. “Tell me your number. I'll text you and you can save mine. I want you to call me if you run into something you can't handle.”

Homura blinked up at him. “But you go to school an hour away.”

“There are closer people I can call, plus I have ways of traveling quickly. Actually, wait, I'll text you Urahara's number, too. Call him first—he's closer. You can still call me if you need help, or... or if you want to talk or something.” Ichigo scratched his neck and looked embarrassed. “I dunno if I'll really be able to help you, but I can always listen, yeah? Oh, and if the old man gets too ridiculous, call or text me and I'll handle it.”

A few minutes later, Homura watched Ichigo as he walked away. He turned and waved lazily as he went around a corner. Karin and Yuzu had told her Ichigo was the best big brother ever. She could see why they said it now.

Homura spent the morning in the library, but not going over school subjects. Instead, she studied
Karakura itself with its many oddities in recent years and checked the news from Mitakihara. Evidently there was a furor over another girl going missing overnight, this time just inside Shinchi. Something about a third-year high school girl who had leadership positions in both band and orchestra. Homura had never noticed that before. She hadn't cared about the news in previous timelines, though. If the missing girl was a magical girl, she had to be a ferociously tenacious one. Living to start third year of high school was something Homura believed was nearly impossible once contracted. That was positively ancient for a magical girl.

Homura returned to the clinic in time for lunch, figuring Isshin was the type to come hunting for her if she didn't show up. After lunch, she made a show of reading a library book about literature at the front desk of the clinic until the girls came home. The girls put away their school bags and absconded with Homura, telling their father they needed to have some fun. The girls led Homura to the train station.

“This Witch has a thing for trains,” Karin explained.

“We've only ever found it... her and her Familiars by train tracks,” Yuzu added.

Karin's eyes unfocused and she tilted her head around. Homura realized she was casting about with her magic the way Homura sought magical girls in Mitakihara. After a minute, Karin announced, “Urahara's crew are all at the shop. Goat-Face is in the clinic. Afro-Man is way to the northeast, probably beyond the high school. We're clear.”

The hunt was on.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Just want to mention I'm using Shino and Ryūnosuke from the beginning of the Thousand Year Blood War arc of Bleach in this chapter. However, as I am ignoring that actual plot, they have not been to Karakura.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ACHTZEHN

TIMELINE X+N

The map and transcript Urahara had sent to Akon delayed Rin's departure to nearly noon on Monday due to adjustments in research sites and arrangements for escorts. Not wanting to raise any alarm, Akon approached the captain of the Thirteenth Division to request a pair of unseated officers who were good but needed more experience in the World of the Living to escort a scientist conducting an experiment. Captain Ukitake had cordially agreed, smiling though his eyes were sharp. He may as well have said, “I'll cooperate, but you had better not be throwing my subordinates into the lions' den. Or else.” As always, Akon wondered how the most senior captains in the Thirteen Court Guard Divisions managed to so casually project threats wrapped in good cheer.

Rin emerged from a senkaimon flanked by two young shinigami, Shino and Ryūnosuke. All three stood in the air and appreciated the bird's-eye view of the city.

“It's so pretty!” Shino said in surprise. She shaded her eyes and looked around. “I've never seen buildings like that!”

Rin smiled. “I'll take some pictures between tests. I wonder what all those glass towers will look like when they're lit up at night?”

Ryūnosuke craned his neck to take in the city. “Ehhhhhh? This city is bigger than I thought it was. The mission brief said it's classified as Level—”

Rin laughed loudly and awkwardly. “We'd better get to work!” He looked down. They had emerged from the senkaimon just above the train station in the central part of town. He pointed down at it. “The first test site is there, then we'll cross the tracks to that construction site over there.”

“What are we even doing, Department Head Tsubokura?” asked Shino. “The brief just said we're escorting you.”

“Ah, just call me Rin. It's easier,” Rin said while waving his free hand. The other was holding a huge bundle slung over his back. “And I'm taking some readings from the sites of some disturbances for further study.”
“What kind of disturbances?” Ryūnosuke asked curiously.

“Ah, it would take too long to explain. Come on, let's go.”

They landed on the platform unnoticed. Rin set the bundle down, rummaged, and took out something that looked like a big snail mounted in a metallic dowsing rod. The snail had a single antenna, upon which was a spinning radial.

“What the hell is that?” asked Shino while Ryūnosuke cringed away.

“Just a sensor. Please excuse me while I work,” answered Rin.

The two escorts were soon bored as Rin wandered around, casting about the building unseen by the lunchtime commuters. When he reached a bench on the far platform, he frowned at his snail-thing and returned to his bundle to fetch a bulky thing that looked like a giant slug with three eyes and another radial. Also, it had claws. Big claws. Rin carried it over to the bench and carefully set it down. It promptly began spewing paper, its claws acting like the recording pens of a seismograph. Whatever it was doing apparently fascinated Rin, but the two escorts didn't understand a jot of it. They stayed there for well over an hour before Rin packed up the giant slug, retrieved the dowsing snail, shoved the bundle at Ryūnosuke, and wandered across the tracks while looking at his handheld sensor. The construction site across the way began boring as the workers were lounging around or gone for lunch. So of course Rin spent a good hour wandering around the place, then another hour with the big sensor on a particular catwalk. At least the workers were back to doing interesting things to watch by then.

Around three that afternoon, Rin stood straight and stretched. “All right, two down, thirty-seven to go!”

Shino and Ryūnosuke shared a glance. This was going to be a loooooooong mission.

High on a construction crane, a white creature watched the shinigami with expressionless red eyes as its fluffy tail swished in the shadows inside the support frame.

Karin, Yuzu, and Homura returned to the clinic after an afternoon spent fruitlessly wandering in the areas near the railroad tracks. Whatever Witch was out there, it was very good at hiding. While Yuzu cooked dinner and Karin vented her frustration on video game enemies, Homura pulled up articles about trains on her phone. Her hope was that something she read would spark an idea of where to look. She had wanted to go hunting at night like she did in Mitakihara, but the twins had indicated that would be a last-ditch tactic because their father might sense them moving around town. If not him, then the people at Urahara Shop. It left a sour taste in her mouth but Homura supposed potential allies were worth some patience. And really, she hadn't realized how constantly exhausted she had been until she slowed down this weekend. It seemed fitting that she would go into what would potentially be her most promising timeline well-rested and renewed.

Monday night passed much like Sunday night had, and Tuesday in turn passed much like Monday.
Until that afternoon, when the girls found a labyrinth.

They were walking in an alley between a grocery store and the train tracks when their Soul Gems suddenly glowed. They continued cautiously until they found the orange pumpkin/clock sigil that had appeared in the train station. As the girls walked through, the alley abruptly disappeared and was replaced by the demented subway station full of clocks Homura had found when she first arrived in Karakura. Again, it didn't have the heavy sense of presence a true labyrinth held.

“Another damn Familiar,” Karin complained.

Yuzu sighed. “We can't afford to let it mature into a duplicate of this Witch. We need to kill it.”

Homura stepped forward. “Karin, only transform if it is absolutely necessary. Minimize the risk to your Soul Gem and save it for fighting the Witch.”

“Got it,” Karin agreed unhappily.

Homura and Yuzu held up their Soul Gems and let their power loose, clothes transforming into their battle costumes. Homura drew a handgun from her shield and Yuzu summoned her whip. Her face went cold and focused. “Let's make this quick.”

They navigated the winding maze of subway tunnels by the violet light of Homura's Soul Gem. Homura found the labyrinth unusually complex for a mere Familiar. Whenever they actually found the Witch, it was sure to be a pain to fight. They were just getting sick of the reverberating ticking of the countless clocks when they emerged into a subway station like the one they had fought in the week before. Mismatched clocks on the walls, mechanical wreckage all over the ground, and a bizarre turnip-headed scarecrow dressed as a train conductor spinning around on its pole on the platform as though dancing. They stood and stared at it for a minute.

“We can do this quickly,” Homura said calmly. “Yuzu, restrain it. I will shoot.”

Yuzu nodded firmly and jogged away. Karin stayed just out of sight, face and body language awkward. Homura stalked around the platform, gun held down but at the ready. The two fighters made eye contact. Yuzu lashed out with her whip and ensnared the Familiar, crushing the scarecrow's fairy wings with the golden cord. The turnip blew on its whistle, creating an ear-splitting shriek of—

_Click_. Time stopped.

Yuzu was frozen mid-wince. Karin was a statue covering her ears. Homura positioned herself so neither sister would be caught in friendly fire and methodically emptied the Beretta's entire magazine toward the Familiar, bullets freezing in midair split seconds after she fired them. Satisfied, Homura remained in firing position and allowed time to resume its flow.

All fifteen bullets impacted the turnip head at the same time, causing it to explode.

Homura tucked the gun away and released her transformation before the labyrinth could disintegrate. Yuzu followed suit out of habit, still in shock. When they reappeared in the alley, Karin, who had been gaping, squawked, “How the hell did you do that?! I didn't even see you move!”

Homura elegantly tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Practice,” she said coolly.

“How many Witches have you fucking fought?!”
Yuzu looked scandalized. “Karin!”

“Too many,” answered Homura.

“We need to get home,” Yuzu interrupted before Karin could escalate. “I need to start dinner.”

Karin huffed but immediately fell into step beside her sister. Homura followed.

“You need to teach me how to move that fast, goddamn.”

“Karin!”

“I believe you would call it a trade secret,” Homura smoothly replied.

Karin barked out a laugh. “I like you.”

Though she didn't show it, Homura found herself pleased.

Kisuke was absently keeping track of the three girls wandering around town while cataloging the various relevant stories he was finding on supernatural message boards into a spreadsheet when their reiatsu suddenly disappeared. He sat straight and cast about more thoroughly. Gone. His pen dropped from his mouth as he stood quickly. A passing thought struck him; he grabbed a reiatsu-concealing cloak and donned it as he leapt out of the shop toward the last place he had sensed the girls.

Sensing from a distance while distracted was imprecise. The best Kisuke could do was figure they had been in the general area of a train crossing. His phone jangled loudly in his pocket. Isshin. Kisuke whipped it up to his face, barked, “I'm on it, wait for intel,” and hung up.

He cast about for the girls' reiatsu again. Nothing. He looked around a radius of about a block. Nothing. So he perched on a building, rummaged in his pockets, and pulled out something that looked like a small tablet. Its function was similar to the dowsing snail Twelfth Division used, but more portable. Kisuke cast about for anything unusual.

Using the sensor, he found an anomaly near a grocery store. He reached out his senses. It was as if there was a slight weakness in the fabric of reality. How curious. He'd never felt anything quite like it before. Similar to a Garganta, yet not. After hopping over to a building behind the grocery, Kisuke squinted and saw something like a faint heat haze. He hadn't had much time to look at it when suddenly the air rippled and the three girls appeared out of nothing. The visual distortion immediately disappeared.

Kisuke stayed back and frowned in thought as the girls chattered and left. A few minutes after they were out of sight, he hopped down to the alley behind the grocery and approached the source of the distortion. He took readings as quickly as he could. From this close he could sense the faintest of Hollow-like residue. It was slight enough that Kisuke never would have noticed it in this Hollow-infested town if he hadn't been specifically looking for something in that exact place.

Fascinating.

Really, what had the Kurosaki girls gotten themselves into?
“Have we done something wrong?” Shino asked rhetorically from her perch on a burnt-out restaurant in southern Kazamino City. “Is Captain Ukitake punishing us? Because this feels like punishment. Death by boredom. There isn't even anything to fight here. I haven't sensed a single Hollow. Why does this guy even need an escort?”

Ryūnosuke scratched his temple nervously. “At least it's an easy mission.”

“Boring. Easy is boring.”

“Um... at least it's almost dark? We'll get to see Mitakihara all lit up again.”

Shino sighed dreamily. If nothing else, the mission was worth seeing the center of the human city lit up like a sparkling fairy kingdom at night. All those fanciful glass towers with their multicolored lights were visually dazzling. There was nothing of the like in Soul Society.

“Hey, guys!” Rin called up from an empty lot behind the automotive repair shop next door. “I'm ready to move on!”

Shino stretched. “Thank God. At least these Kazamino stops have been shorter than the Mitakihara ones. C'mon.”

Both escorts jumped down to the scientist. Rin was looking at a map, first checking off a small circle representing their location, then tracing his finger to the southeast and stopping on the next marker.

“Okay, we're going to the coast, here, in Shinchi. We'll spend the night there, then swing back to the west to the border of Shinchi and Mitakihara.” Rin folded the map and collected his things.

“The coast?” asked Shino. Her eyes sparkled and she held her hands to her cheeks. “I've never seen the ocean before! Ooh, I'll be able to watch the sun rise over the sea!”

Ryūnosuke glanced aside and wryly muttered, “You say this mission is boring, but you keep acting like a tourist on vacation.”

Shino promptly punched her friend in the face.

Glowing red eyes watched the shinigami's antics from the shadows under a car parked behind the mechanic's shop.

Isshin sat at the kitchen table and drummed his fingers on its surface, forcing himself to remain seated instead of charging out the door to hunt down the girls. He had been paying more attention
to their reiatsu signatures and noticed them blip out of existence for fifteen minutes.

_Fifteen. Entire. Minutes._

A quarter of an hour.

An _eternity_.

His restraint had been sorely tested. Only Kisuke's words held him back. _Wait for intel_ became his mantra. Isshin strained his senses and waited for... anything. _Anything_. Wait for intel. Any time now. _Wait for intel._

Isshin drew a shuddering breath when the girls' reiatsu blinked back into existence. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes in relief. The trio moved nearer to him; he realized they were coming home and set about calming himself. The call that came from Kisuke helped. Mostly.

“They're safe,” Kisuke said.

“You don't sound sure of that, Kisuke,” Isshin said doubtfully.

“They're unharmed and in good spirits,” his friend clarified.

“And?” Isshin prompted.

“Annnnd I don't understand what I saw. Yet.”

Ominous. But they could deal with that later. His girls were almost home.

Isshin thought he had done a pretty good job of looking normal until the girls came into the room and reacted to whatever his face looked like with fleeting trepidation before smoothing their expressions.

It absolutely did not help that all three of them had wisps of that Hollow-like reiatsu coming off them. Not visibly, but Isshin sensed it. An epiphany struck him: Karin and Yuzu knew _much_ more than they were letting on. Were _much_ more involved than they had said.

And didn't trust him enough to tell him. It made him ill.

Isshin couldn't help but glance at the portrait of his late wife and wonder, _Masaki, would they have told you about... this?_  

“What's with _you_, Goat-Face?” Karin drawled.

Isshin frowned. “Did anything happen while you were out? I mean... you were gone longer than I thought you would be.” He managed to not wince at his own clumsiness. Somehow.

“Ha? We stay out this late a lot. The sun isn't even down.”

“Yeah, Daddy,” added Yuzu. “We were just walking around with Homura.”

Isshin directed a level stare at each of the girls in turn, desperately trying to see through them. They didn't crack. His Parental Interrogation Gaze had no effect on them. He gave up and forced his face to imitate manic cheer. “If you say so!”

The sisters glanced at each other. Great. They knew he knew something. Fabulous. So much for playing dumb.
Homura broke the tension by asking if Yuzu needed any help preparing dinner. Yuzu looked devious and got all three of her “assistants” plopped down at the table dicing vegetables and peeling carrots before they knew what was happening.

Isshin was bantering good-naturedly with Karin when Yuzu gasped, “Oh! Homura! I forgot to tell you! I washed your uniform. It's such a pretty uniform!”


Isshin glanced up from his half-chopped daikon, back to the daikon, and snapped back to Homura when his mind processed what he had seen. The girl's paring knife was embedded in the base of her left thumb. Deeply.

He stood sharply, immediately activating doctor mode. “Yuzu! Clean towel!” Yuzu dug in a drawer as Isshin ordered, “Homura, don’t take out—”

Homura removed the knife. The wound bled profusely.

“—The knife. Ahhhhhhhhh, nooo—”

“It is not serious,” Homura tried to calm him.

“That had to have hit bone... severed a tendon? Ah, you're going to need stitches—” Isshin grabbed the towel from Yuzu and wrapped it around Homura's hand. She blinked up at him, entirely too calm for someone who had nearly severed her thumb at the lowest knuckle. Why wasn't she screaming or crying?

“That will not be necessary,” Homura demurred. As if he had offered her surgical dressing for a paper cut. As if any treatment would be more of an inconvenience than the wound itself.

“No arguing. To the clinic!”

Homura sighed, held the towel and followed him. Isshin felt her reiatsu rise and do... something. He threw a strange glance at her over his shoulder as they went down the hall. What was that? What was she doing?

Once in an exam room, Isshin prepared sutures and first aid supplies, cleaned the wound, and found... a slice. Not even a serious one. More like a long, deep paper cut. He blinked.

That couldn't be right.

“I told you it is not serious,” Homura said quietly.

“But—” Isshin frowned in confusion. He had seen how deep the knife was before Homura removed it. “But... so much blood....”

“Sometimes shallow wounds bleed the most, correct?”

Isshin looked up into Homura's eyes. She was completely placid, showing no signs of pain or panic. For a moment, her stare felt like the obligatory patience an adult showed a small child who was disagreeing because they didn't understand something. Like she was waiting for him to catch up with her.

“Uh... yeeeah,” Isshin agreed, face baffled. “Let me just... get the butterfly bandages.”

When he was done dressing the wound, Homura thanked him politely and strode from the clinic.
with the dignity of a queen.

What the hell.

That wound should have been bone-deep and done damage to the tendon. It also should have been extremely painful. Was her calm due to shock? He didn't think so. All he could think of was how Homura had raised her reiatsu for the duration of the walk to the clinic. What had she been doing? How had the wound clos—

Healing herself. She had been healing herself.

That was an advanced technique that stymied many shinigami, and this fourteen-year-old girl just casually did it without looking at the wound? And she had no visible reaction to the pain when he doused the wound in disinfectant. Even his battle-hardened son would snarl when his wounds were disinfected. It was if she had no pain reaction at all. The only sound she had made was mild surprise.

What the hell.

Tuesday night passed into Wednesday morning. Kisuke was once again absently tracking the three girls, factoring Isshin's call about Homura's apparent healing skills into his dossier on her, when he sensed her move away from the library well before lunch. Curious what she was up to and short on new information, Kisuke grabbed the reiatsu-concealing cloak, wrapped himself in an illusory kidō, and skipped across the rooftops to find her.

Kisuke found Homura about two blocks from the train station. He stood on a tall building and watched as she paced the sidewalk for the length of a city block, turned toward the tracks, went back the way she came alongside the actual tracks, then exited at the beginning of the city block on the opposite side of the tracks. She then repeated the pattern, zigzagging her way down the railway corridor. It was quite obviously a search pattern. What was she looking for? Another disturbance? And what was she holding in her hand and watching like a compass?

Frowning, Kisuke hopped buildings to get closer and pulled out binoculars. Cupped in the girl's left hand was an egg-shaped amethyst set in a golden cup-like stand that conformed to the egg shape of the gem. The gold was embellished with decorative filigree and a small, diamond-shaped amethyst was attached to the crown of the large gem. It somewhat reminded him of a Fabergé egg. The girl maintained a steady pace, completely absorbed in staring at the jewel. Was it some kind of sensor? Crystals were terribly useful for such things, after all.

Kisuke followed her along the train tracks for over an hour. She followed the rails into the next city over, but didn't get very far before a store owner putting out the trash in an alley facing the tracks spotted her.

“Hey, kid! The hell are ya doing in there?! Ya got a death wish?!”

Homura looked up and just blinked at him, face disinterested.

“Aren't ya supposed to be in school?!”

Homura ignored him and started walking again.
“Hey, brat! I'm talkin' to ya!”

The girl's mouth turned down into an irritated frown.

“I got a cop buddy out front who's gonna wanna talk to ya! Hey, brat! C'mere before I call the cops on ya for truancy!” The man leaned in the back door of the store and hollered, “Heeey, Mataro! There's some brat walking the tracks!”

Kisuke almost missed what happened next. Homura glared at the man's back and pursed her lips disdainfully. The gem flared with violet light and disappeared as she called up her reiatsu in a tightly-controlled manner, manifesting a round, silver buckler on the wrist of the hand that had been carrying the gem. Just as he thought she might attack, she disappeared. There one instant, gone the next. Kisuke cast about for her. After reaching far, he found her... almost back to the train station, veering south toward Kurosaki Clinic?

How?

Because that had not been shunpo. Or any flash step technique that he knew of, shinigami, Quincy, Arrancar, or Fullbringer. With those, his decades sparring with Yoruichi had won him the hard-earned skill of being able to detect the path the quarry took while in motion between Point A and Point B even if he couldn't see it. It was an automatic thing for him now. But there was no trace of whatever path Homura took. She had just blinked out of existence and appeared elsewhere.

Kisuke frowned and turned back toward Karakura. He'd be gleeful over the riddle this girl posed if the Kurosaki girls weren't somehow tangled up in it as well.

Wednesday afternoon found the shinigami research mission just inside Mitakihara, about a mile north of Shinchi and a few blocks south of Mitakihara Middle School. Rin set up the large slug sensor on the flat roof of a tall office building and was soon completely absorbed in his work. Shino and Ryūnosuke perched atop the roof access shack. Trying to stave off boredom, they began playing a game of *I Spy* while taking in the view and watching for enemies.

Forty minutes later, both escorts shivered.

“You feel that?” Shino asked, looking around.

“Yeah,” Ryūnosuke answered, frowning. “What was that?” He turned toward the scientist. “Hey, Rin, did you—? Eh?”

Shino turned to look. “Hey, Rin! What was that?”

Rin stood with his back to them, head tilted back slightly as though looking at the sky. The creepy device at his feet had stopped printing. He showed no sign of having heard them.

Shino cupped her hands around her mouth and called, “Heeeeeeey!”

Frowning, Shino scoffed and hopped down to Rin's level. Ryūnosuke followed her. As they...
approached the scientist, both noticed their vision blur and felt disoriented.

Shino marched up to Rin. “Hey!” She stood in front of him and waved her arms. “Hellooooo?”

No response. Rin stared blankly into space, eyes unfocused.

Ryūnosuke joined her, worried. “Is something wrong with him?”

Shino squinted at the scientist. “Hey, what's on his neck?” She reached out for the blurry patch of pink.

Both escorts shuddered, a chill running up their spines.

A smug girl's voice airily said, *He's joining my marching band. You should, too. We can play music forever!*

Ryūnosuke swayed, dizzy and confused. “But... I don't know how to play anything....”

*That's fine! If you join me, you'll learn in no time!*

“But...”

Shino blinked hard and shook her head. “What—?” She repeated the action. “Ryūnosuke, snap out of it!”

Ryūnosuke blinked at her dreamily. “Shino...?”

*I'll teach you how to play your own funeral march!*

“Wake up, idiot!” With that, Shino hauled off and punched him, then drew her blade.

Ryūnosuke stumbled then straightened, holding his cheek. He looked more coherent. “W-what's going on?”

Eerie girlish laughter and the rattling of a snare drum keeping time echoed around them as reality warped and faded away.

Chapter End Notes

**WITCH DATA**

?????

?????

Minion: Jakob, whose duty is to keep everything on schedule.

A/N: I've finally rolled this boulder to the top of the hill. Time to send it crashing down the other side ahahahaha~

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
*hums cheerfully, cracks knuckles* Let's get this party started.

When the world stabilized around the shinigami, they were somewhere completely different. They were at one end of a massive, steep arena with thousands of seats filled with a wide variety of stuffed animals. Spotlights and searchlights of various colors pierced the night sky. At the far end of the field was a giant plush love seat with a heart-shaped back. Huge sweets of all kinds were strewn about it. Upon it sat a skeleton in a pink marching band conductor's suit complete with tall hat, tapping a sharp baton in time with the snare drum.

Fweeeeee fweet! Fweet! Fweet! Fweet!

A whistle blew an introduction followed by booming drumbeats and horns blasting a fanfare. Rin continued to stand in a daze, but Shino and Ryūnosuke looked down and noticed that the space between themselves and the skeleton was filled by a marching band positioned to put on a field show. The band was made up of identical wind-up dolls with braided brown yarn hair and button eyes. Each was crowned with a skull and a fluffy pompom. Their marching and formations were perfectly synchronized.

Shino and Ryūnosuke were still gaping in shock when the big skeleton lifted its free hand to make a beckoning motion. Rin immediately marched forward. The band's formation parted to allow him to pass.

“What are you doing?!” shrieked Shino. She turned to Ryūnosuke. “Draw your sword, idiot!”

“B-but what's going on?!” Ryūnosuke whined as he fumbled with his zanpakutō.

“Hell if I know! Rin! Hey, Rin! Wake up!”

Shino stepped forward aggressively. The band immediately closed ranks, a row of sousaphone players sliding in front. They simultaneously blew a long, low note with such force that the two Thirteenth Division shinigami were blown off their feet and into the concrete wall of the arena. The band advanced on them.

Gasping, Shino climbed to her feet and glared at Ryūnosuke. “Get up! Fight back! Multiple target defense, like Lieutenant Kuchiki taught us!” She began muttering the incantation for a kidō.

Ryūnosuke wheezed and levered himself up with a wince. “First Way of Destruction,” he gasped as he held up his free hand. “Shō!” he yelled, jabbing his hand forward, using the entire palm instead
of the usual fingertip.

The first three lines of dolls were pushed back several yards, toppling into one another. Before they could recover, Shino finished her incantation with, “Sixty-Second Way of Binding: Hyapporankan!” A pale blue lance materialized in her raised free hand. She hurled it at the dolls. The advanced spell was intended to immediately replicate itself into a hundred lances which would immobilize multiple enemies. However, Shino was still young and inexperienced, so her spell only produced around four dozen rods. Even so, the toppled dolls were immobilized and an obstacle course was formed to delay the rest of the enemies. The two escorts took a moment to steady themselves, panting.

“Mission objectives,” Shino said sharply, “Retrieve Rin.” She glanced aside at the sensor slug. The importance of the data it contained struck her hard. If Twelfth had been looking for whatever the hell this was, that sensor was priceless. “Protect the data.” Shino stared forward, scowling. “Ideas?”

Ryūnosuke bit his lip and scrubbed blood from his eyes. “I don't think I can run or move around much. Something in my left leg is grinding and there's something wrong with my hip. What if we put the sensor against the wall and I stand in front to defend, and you get Rin?”

“Because that will be so easy.” Shino spat blood and a tooth on the ground and thought. “You're the one who said the mission was too easy.”

Shino cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders. Breathing hurt like hell; cracked ribs? “Shaddap.” She pointed her finger at the big slug and muttered, “Fourth Way of Binding: Hainawa.” Sparking yellow energy danced from her fingertips and lassoed the device. She hauled it to the wall and canceled the spell. “Right. Hold your ground, Ryūnosuke.”

“Be careful!” Ryūnosuke called as Shino darted forward with shunpo. He drew a deep breath and steadied himself as the musical dolls began to push through the makeshift barrier he and Shino had created.

Rin was already halfway across the field, the marching automatons smoothly parting in a wave around him as he progressed and flowing back into place behind him as though liquid. Shino hopscotched across the band, jumping from head to head over the crowd. Ahead of her, three rows of dolls knelt to expose a fourth row of clarinet players who simultaneously lobbed their instruments like javelins, each trailing glowing pink musical notes in its wake.

“Shō!” Shino called out, cutting the spell's incantation short. It diminished the spell's power, but served its purpose and knocked the clarinet-javelins off course. Shino kept running across the band. Two big drums suddenly came spinning at her from forward and to either side. With her next step, she launched herself vertically to avoid them. The drums exploded upon impact with one another and blew her back a bit. She grit her teeth, landed on a doll's shoulders so hard it crumpled beneath her, and slashed the other dolls nearby while she recovered from her landing. They collapsed with the sound of rattling bones.

Panting angrily and fending off dolls with her blade, Shino stood and snarled, “Ye lord! Mask of blood and flesh, all creation, flutter of wings, ye who bears the name of Man! Inferno and pandemonium, the sea barrier surges, march on to the south! Thirty-First Way of Destruction: Shakkahō!”

The spell, powered by a full incantation and rage, blasted a smoking path through the ranks of the dolls. Shino wasted no time and rushed through it with shunpo. When she neared the end of the
extended blast crater, she threw another Shō in front of her and used the collapsing dolls as a foothold to get above the band again. Shino saw Rin when she was about three quarters of the way across the field. Face determined, she screamed, “Fourth Way of Binding: Hainawa!” Once again the yellow energy struck out, this time lassoing the errant scientist and yanking him off his feet.

Shino had a single moment to revel in success before the big skeleton leaned forward from its throne and stabbed Rin through the chest with its sharpened conductor's baton. Rin showed no reaction, as doll-like as the marching band. Shino watched in horror as the skeleton tugged at the end of her spell, snapped it, and lifted Rin toward its skull. The skull's jaw opened, then the skeleton put the end of the baton in its mouth, bit down, and ate Rin whole like the last dango on a skewer.

Shino had never seen death in battle before. She froze in terror until a doll stabbed her in both shoulders with a pair of drumsticks. Shino shrieked and dove forward, hitting the ground hard and immediately moving into a leg sweep to trip the dolls around her.

We need to escape with the sensor, Shino thought frantically. She'd have to fight her way back the way she had come. Was there an exit there? Not that she had seen. Glancing up at the skeleton, which was slowly moving to stand, she wondered if they needed to defeat the ruler of whatever twisted domain they had fallen into in order to escape. How could the skeleton be defeated, though? It felt a lot like a Hollow, but didn't have a bone mask. It was made entirely of bone, though. Maybe if she broke its face? That would be like breaking a mask, right? It was her only idea, so she went with it.

Shino charged forward, repeated her Shō-skip-jump technique, and took progressively higher leaps. When she reached the end of the band, she launched herself up at the skeleton's face with a roar, blade at the ready. The skeleton swatted her like a fly, batting her back across and through the entire band until she was mere yards from a tiring Ryūnosuke. His swordsmanship and kidō were getting weak. Shino writhed, rolled to her elbows and knees the best she could—poorly—and screamed in agony as she threw up. She started hacking and dizzily wondered if the blood was from her lungs or stomach as she distantly heard Ryūnosuke scream her name. The hand that wasn't a shattered mess scrabbled around the ground for her blade, but it was lost.

Suddenly, all the dolls stood still and held their instruments in the air. The shinigami watched in confusion as the instruments formed a stream in the air and flew toward the now standing skeleton, the dolls collapsing when their instruments were gone. The instruments were caught up in flowing, glowing pink musical staves and were soon bound to the skeleton. There was an overwhelming flash of light which dimmed to reveal that the skeleton had transformed.

The skeleton itself had shrunk and its uniform had turned red and featured images of bones, making it a skeleton wearing a skeleton suit. Its skull had sharpened and gained pointed sunglasses and its body had extra appendages that looked like wing bones, a pair at its shoulders and a pair at its hips. It was perched in a glowing crevice in the center of a bizarre heart-shaped machine. Shino deliriously wondered if Rin could have identified it had he been alive to see it. It hovered in the air using thrusters that spewed pink light. The skeleton raised its conducting baton and jabbed it at the shinigami as though ordering an army to advance. It blasted the arena with a sonic attack strong enough to crumble the stands and blow the shinigami into the cracked concrete wall once more.

Shino and Ryūnosuke fell to the rubble crumpled and broken. They lay there and looked at each other in fear, unable to move.

Thanks to their burst eardrums, they never heard the barrage of recorder-shaped missiles coming.
A white creature perched on the roof access shack and calmly groomed its fluffy tail. After awhile, it tilted its head as though listening to something, then stretched and hopped off the roof. There was no longer anything to observe.

Homura didn't recall ever having so much trouble tracking down a Witch. She figured she'd wait until Friday to push the subject of doing a night hunt.

In the meantime, Homura was having the most pleasantly mundane week she'd had in years. Sure, she was still hunting Witches, plotting how to save Madoka, and trying to not reveal her true powers, but she was also sitting around a table going over homework at night, eating meals in a family setting, helping with chores, and was often in the presence of an adult who actually demonstrated concern for her without being clingy. That last one was something rare for her. Her uncle was one extreme while her parents had been the other. The only other adults to be moderate were Madoka's parents in one timeline during which Homura had stayed at their house. Maybe it was because they weren't actually related? She was still unsure how to handle it, but it was mostly nice. She had even made new friends for the first time in dozens of timelines. It was something she hadn't allowed herself since the timeline in which Mami had found out about Witches in the worst possible way and plunged into homicidal insanity. But the twins, while upset, had rolled with the punch and stood to fight on—possibly even more determined than before. Strange. The whole situation was surreal on many levels. But it was novel and generally pleasant, so Homura cherished it despite the uncertainty.

On top of everything else, Karakura was an Incubator-free zone. That made it heaven on earth even with the presence of Hollows. The absence of beady red eyes following her and trying to figure her out was a relief.

Speaking of Hollows, Homura encountered one herself during her wanderings on Wednesday afternoon soon after having lunch with Isshin. She was pacing the tracks again when she felt that strange magic Karin had called a Garganta followed by the presence of a Hollow magical signature. Reiatsu. Whatever. It was actually very close to her. Karin had said people with higher reiatsu attracted Hollows; Homura wondered if she should expect to see more Hollows as she wandered around with her soul out in the open.

Homura allowed her Soul Gem to return to ring form, summoned her shield, and waited. A Hollow soon peered around the corner of a building ahead of her, sniffed, and moved into full view. It looked like a lithe, bipedal dinosaur about eight feet tall, bearing a spiked tail and a mask that looked like a fossilized dinosaur skull. Its short arms extended into leathery vestigial wings, uselessly small. A hilariously lurid shade of orange showed through the fossilized bones decorating its body. It cast about and locked onto her. Homura raised her shield and stood her ground, face set in a hard frown of concentration. The Hollow screeched and advanced on her rapidly. She readied her shield, left arm held horizontally in front of her face as she bent her knees and leaned forward. At the perfect instant, Homura used a magic-enhanced leap to jump up and meet the oncoming Hollow while swinging her shield in a tight, backhanded arc. The glowing metal impacted the side of the Hollow's mask with the perfect velocity, causing cracks to spiderweb across its face. Homura used the point of impact as a fulcrum to spin in a clockwise circle and brutally slam her magically-hardened right elbow into the center of the mask before she could fall back to the
The Hollow gave one final shriek and dissolved, its shape becoming more human as it faded. Homura stood and watched the black butterfly rise into the sky, ferrying the freed soul to the afterlife.

Homura smiled slightly. That actually felt really rewarding.

Kisuke sat on the edge of a tall building some distance away, absently rolling a stick of Pocky around in his mouth and swinging his legs while he watched Akemi with high-power binoculars. When the girl gave a satisfied little toss of her hair and resumed her mysterious search, Kisuke lowered the binoculars and sat back.

Now *that* had been something approximating shinigami shunpo. Completely different from however she had moved that morning.

So she could manifest a weapon. A shield was unconventional, but hey, every soul had different priorities. Zanpakutō could be rather revealing in their form sometimes. Psychologically, the girl was definitely guarded. Was she also very protective at her core? He wished she had held still enough for him to really look at the decorative designs on it. And it was interesting that he should instinctively relate her weapon to a zanpakutō. He’d have to poke at that more.

Moving on. How were the jewel, the ring, and the shield related? Was the base form the ring, and it turned into whatever tool the girl needed? Was there a set number of things it could turn into, or was it more versatile? The jewel had transformed into a ring before she manifested the shield, but it had then glowed with the same purple light as the shield appeared. Her hand had been hard to focus on from his angle so he didn't know if the ring was still on her finger as she fought. If they were all the same item, did what he had witnessed imply that the tool had to return to a base form before assuming another? That would be inconvenient. Also, an interesting check on her power.

And he hadn't felt a trace of the Hollow-like reiatsu rise in battle.

So many questions, so few answers.

Homura met the Kurosaki sisters outside the gate to their school as they had agreed to that morning. The three bought drinks from a vending machine and repeated their eastbound search of the railway corridor. Another day, another bust. It was getting seriously annoying. When they reached the edge of town without finding anything, Karin snarled and kicked a rock.

After visibly forcing herself to calm down, Karin grudgingly said, “May as well detour up to Urahara Shop as long as we're this far over. Make it look like we're not hiding anything with our wandering around.”

The other two girls had no objections, so the trio wandered northward. When they entered the little courtyard, they found a boy practicing swings with a baseball bat while a girl diligently swept the front porch.
“Hey, Ururu,” called Karin. The girl nodded a greeting at her, eyes sliding to Homura in curiosity. “This is Homura. We were here the other day, but I don't think you got to meet.”

Homura and Ururu murmured quiet greetings and bowed politely. Karin started to walk to the shop.

“Oh! Kurosaki! Not gonna introduce me?!” bellowed the red-haired boy.

“Why would I introduce anyone to you, Jinta?” Karin drawled.

Just as the boy looked like he would burst with rage, Yuzu waved and cheerfully said, “Hello, Jinta!”

The boy immediately backed down and looked bashful. “Uh, hi, Yuzu. H-how are you?”

Karin and Ururu looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

When the girls entered the shop, they found a mountain of a man tending the counter. Homura couldn't recall ever seeing such a tall person.

“Hi, Tessai,” the twins said.

The big man nodded cordially and said, “Good afternoon, Karin, Yuzu.” He dipped his head at Homura. “Good afternoon, miss.”

Homura was gravely returning his nod when Urahara swept in from the stock room. “Hello, hello, hello! What can I help you girls with?” he sang. He waved his fan around, indicating shelves. “Hollow-repellent key chains are buy two, get one free today! Once opened, each is guaranteed to work for a whole month! Available in five different mascot designs! Also, imported European candy is half-off due to overstock!”

Karin started out uninterested but perked up. “Are those Italian Glitterati things included in the sale?”

“Of course!” Urahara waved his fan at one particular shelf.

Karin crowed “Score!” and rushed over to it.

Urahara looked at Homura as though searching for something. She stared right back at him, unfazed. Urahara tipped his hat to her. “You've had quite the week, Miss Akemi. As an apology for my slow progress in this investigation, please help yourself to whatever you want from the candy section. Consider it a gift.”

Homura tilted her head and kept staring. She wondered if he was being genuine. He was hard to read. It unsettled her.

“C'mon, Homura!” Karin called. “Usually I'd say don't take candy from strangers——”

“Heyyyyy.”

“—But Urahara stocks the good stuff and can't mess with it because he sells it to the normals, too.”

Urahara pouted dramatically. “You wound me, Karin.”

Karin rolled her eyes. “Psshyeah, right. Come on, Homura!”
Homura slowly walked over to Karin, glancing over her shoulder at Urahara. She was uncomfortable leaving her back open to him. Karin grabbed her hand and yanked her over to the candy. “Choose!”

Homura stared blankly at the literal wall of candy.

Yuzu leaned forward and smiled over her tins of Flavigny anise drops. “Do you have a favorite foreign candy, Homura?”

Memories of her late mother taking her to a fancy candy store on the way home from the Nutcracker ballet every Christmas swam up into her conscious mind. “Marzipan,” Homura said softly. Just as softly, she immediately tucked away that set of memories. She knew better than to dwell on them these days.

The sisters made identical hums of thought as they searched the shelves. Karin jolted and darted a hand out. “Aww, yeah, he has it! This is it, right?”

Homura hummed agreement and gently took the box from Karin. She stood by the door with her box of marzipan and stared at Urahara while the sisters purchased their own candy. Urahara stared evenly back at her.

She really didn't know what to make of the man.

When the girls were gone, Kisuke went to his lab to look up the results of the passive scan he had run a second time to verify the previous results. He was understandably quite surprised to see that the results were very different from Sunday. Yuzu and Homura were completely free of the Hollow-like reiatsu, while the concentration of it in Karin's soul had lessened. Kisuke frowned and scratched his head.

He really didn't know what to make of those girls.

When Homura approached the gate of the twins' school on Thursday afternoon, she found Karin's white-haired shinigami friend already leaning against the wall. She slowed, unsure whether she should stay or leave. It would probably be suspicious to leave, she supposed, so she stepped up to the gate and positioned herself across from him with a quiet, “Hello.”

He glanced up from his cell phone, apparently in the middle of texting. “Good afternoon,” he said politely. “How are you... holding up?”

Homura looked down and smoothed her skirt demurely while she decided how to answer. “Well enough, I suppose. Karin and Yuzu are good company.”

The shinigami hummed in agreement. “I'm glad to hear it.”

Both stood in companionable silence until the bell rang, neither feeling a particular need to talk to
the other. They were aloof in the face of the students streaming out the gates until the Kurosaki sisters approached.


“That's not a real word, Kurosaki,” Tōshirō drawled. He nodded hello to Yuzu.

“It's a word if I say it is,” Karin said snobbily.

“Who died and made you god-queen of the dictionary?” Tōshirō asked, mildly caustic.

“Who said you could go back to calling me Kurosaki? Brr, Tōsh, I feel the chill.”

Tōshirō lazily rolled his eyes and Yuzu giggled. Homura felt like some kind of inside joke had just gone over her head.

Karin smirked. “Hey, Homura, you remember my buddy Tōshirō, right?”

“Hitsugaya,” Tōshirō corrected without much enthusiasm, as though knowing he was already defeated.

“Tōshirō,” Karin reaffirmed with a glare his way. “He's kind of a stick in the mud, but he's a decent guy. Great at soccer, at least.”

Expression flat, Tōshirō droned, “Stop, you're making me blush.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Hitsugaya,” Homura murmured with a bow.

Tōshirō nodded. “Likewise.” He turned to Karin and held up one hand to draw attention to Homura. “Do you see how easy that was, Karin?”

“ Eh,” Karin replied with a careless shrug. Tōshirō sighed.

The four began walking away together. When they were an acceptable distance from other people, Yuzu asked, “How did your mission go, Tōshirō?”

Tōshirō’s face twitched, probably at the informality. “It went well. I think I only need to split one patrol area into two. The officer there is handling the increased population all right but I'd feel better about it if he wasn't pushing himself quite so hard. He has done his duty quite well under duress so I'm going to give him leave when I split the patrol in two and let him choose which half he wants to serve in after he's rested.”

“Ooh, you're such a considerate commanding officer, Tōshirō,” Yuzu said sunnily.

Tōshirō blushed slightly and scratched a cheek with one finger. “Anyway, I finished sooner than I had expected so I have a few days left in the World of the Living. I figured I'd use it as a little vacation. Play some soccer or something.”

“Aww, yeeeahhhhh,” crowed Karin.

Witch hunting was abandoned for the day in favor of hours on a soccer field. Karin had scrounged up her soccer buddies (or minions, as Tōshirō muttered to Homura under his breath) to fill out some teams. Having been ill much of her life, it was the first time Homura had ever participated in a team sport. She could see why it was so popular now— it was fun. Even if Karin's minions were distasteful little trolls. It would be so much more fun if Karin's minions were replaced by the Mitakihara magical girls. Homura's earlier thought about playing soccer with everyone when she
finally won became more solid in her mind's eye.

It would happen one day. Absolutely. She had to have faith in that.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
MARCIA
The Conductor Witch with a sassy nature. Her personal mission is to always put on a good show. Even battle is symphonic for her.
Minion: Cecelia, whose duty is to perform perfectly.

A/N: Witch Marcia is a fairly direct cameo of Nonon Jakuzure from Kill la Kill. She actually has a bizarre battle form I didn't have to tweak much to make into a Witch.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
When the scientific expedition to Mitakihara failed to make a third status report in a row by noon on Thursday, Akon grew uneasy. If it was a communications malfunction, Rin was experienced enough to know to withdraw immediately. Akon tried remotely activating the emergency tracking beacons in the soul phones of all three mission participants, but was unable to connect to any of them. That was monumentally worrying. He tried sending Hell Butterflies. Nothing. None of the options were pretty; something had gone wrong.

After reporting to his captain, being raked across the coals for loss of equipment and manpower, and receiving an order to “clean up his own mess,” Akon chain-smoked three cigarettes to get up the nerve to face Captain Ukitake and confirm that yes, he had apparently thrown the man's subordinates to the lions.

Akon was waiting in the Thirteenth Division offices when Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki returned from mid-afternoon training of their subordinates. Ukitake took one look at Akon and his face went grim. He gestured for the scientist to follow him. The three ensconced themselves in the captain's office, Kuchiki standing next to her seated captain, Ukitake setting his elbows on the table and peering at Akon over his laced fingers.

“Report.”

Akon straightened. “Sir. The expedition led by Department Head Tsubokura has failed to complete three consecutive check-ins. Not only do they not answer when hailed, the tracking system cannot even locate their Soul Phones. Any of them. Attempts to reach them with Hell Butterflies similarly failed. The entire team is tentatively declared missing.”

Captain Ukitake frowned. “Your brief indicated that your only concern was potential low-level Hollows due to low spiritual density of the area, a task suited for unseated soldiers.” The Was that a lie? went unspoken but understood.

Akon pursed his lips. “The mission was to verify the spiritual density readings, as it had been brought to our attention that there is a discrepancy between the population growth of the area and its spiritual density. Based on speculative calculations done since, it is possible that our recorded figures were erroneous.” Implying that the area could be more dangerous than thought.

Ukitake's eyes narrowed. “To what degree?”
Akon stared the captain in the eye. “Figures on record indicate Level Two density, but population statistics imply the density should be closer to Level Six. The initial readings Tsubokura reported corroborate Level Two, but there were higher unexplained anomalies in the area.” He was so screwed.

There was silence for an excruciating two minutes while the captain just stared at Akon until he wanted to crawl into a cave and hide with a pack of smokes. Akon was pretty sure the captain was deliberately drawing out the silence to make him squirm.

“You should have requested seated officers for this, Third Seat Akon,” Ukitake said evenly. “Possibly a full protective detail."

Honestly, people who could stay calm when infuriated were terrifying.

Akon swallowed thickly. “In retrospect, I do not deny such, sir.”

Elbows still on the table, Ukitake tapped his thumbs together in thought. “I presume your captain has been informed and authority to resolve the issue has been delegated to you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your plans?”

Akon’s already grim face became more so. “As the oversight was mine, I will personally investigate the movements of the missing party myself rather than risk other subordinates. I am here to formally notify you of the situation and offer to be subordinate to whatever search party you may deem appropriate. Sir.”

Ukitake arched one eyebrow, glanced at his lieutenant thoughtfully, then looked back to Akon. “As the danger of the situation is unknown—” Akon winced internally at the jab—“my lieutenant and myself shall accompany you. I officially request a detailed dossier on the original mission so as to better understand the situation.”

“Yes, sir,” Akon replied. He held out two file folders while bowing. “I took the liberty of procuring copies for yourself and your lieutenant.”

Ukitake glanced at Rukia and gestured toward the folders with his chin. Kuchiki silently retrieved the files, face professionally cold.

“How long do you need to gather supplies and delegate your duties?” asked the captain.

Akon blew out a heavy breath. “I delegated before I came here. An hour should do.”

Ukitake nodded. “We will meet you at the gate in an hour, then.”

Akon bowed deeply with a sharp, “Yes, sir!” and beat a rapid retreat.

So screwed.

When the three girls returned to the Kurosaki Clinic for the evening, they were surprised to find Ichigo lounging on the couch with a textbook in his hands and a capped highlighter bouncing in
one corner of his mouth.

“Ichi-nii! You're home two days early?!” exclaimed Karin.

That made Homura wary.

“Yuuuup,” Ichigo drawled, highlighter impeding his speech. “Ad a test 'stead o' lecture, no lab t'morruth, Thaturday's review. figgerred I'd just c'mere.” He stopped, removed the highlighter from his mouth, and carefully used it to mark a line of print, then used the pen as a bookmark as he looked up at the girls. “Hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all, Onii-chan!” Yuzu gushed.

“Great,” Ichigo said. He looked past his sisters. “Hey, Homura. You hanging in there?”

Homura nodded silently. What else did he expect her to do? Say no?

Ichigo smiled slightly then glanced between all three girls and looked smug. “I talked the old man into taking us all out to dinner. Requests?”

The sisters squealed. “Pho! Pho!”

Ichigo grinned. “How did I know you'd say that?” He looked at his sisters' friend. “You like pho, Homura?”

Homura tilted her head. “What is... fuh?”

The twins gasped and looked scandalized.

“Sacrilege!”

“Heresy!”

Ichigo rolled his eyes. “It's Vietnamese food. Noodles, meat, broth. Pretty basic stuff. Some greens and sauces on the side. You game to try it?”

“Oh.” Homura blinked at the twins, who were looking at her eagerly. “Yes, that will be fine.”

The sisters cheered and did a double high-five.

Once Isshin had closed the clinic, the family set out for a pho place they liked with Homura trailing along uncertainly. The entire evening was much wilder than Homura was used to for a trip to a restaurant from the time they closed the door of the house through the walks either way and the meal. She was swept along in the family's loud banter and raucous laughter, even finding herself smiling a bit when all three Kurosaki siblings played that Ichigo was the adult in the party and Isshin good-naturedly played up his role as a petulant man-child. It was an evening full of giggles and melodramatic cries of, “We can't take you anywhere!” and trying new food. When they went home, everyone gathered around the dining table to share desserts and giggle through homework.

When Homura settled down for bed that night, she actually felt comfortable. Warm inside. The Kurosaki family wasn't her family, of course, but they were the closest thing she had had to one in many years. It was uncertain whether she could get as close to them in the next timeline, so Homura carefully ran through her memories of the evening. She savored them and permanently inscribed them upon her mind. Such pleasant, comforting experiences had become a precious rarity
in her bizarrely looping life and she'd be damned if anything tore the memories from her.

“The team's final communication originated here on Wednesday at zero-eight-hundred hours,” Akon explained to the commanding officers of Thirteenth Division as they stood in the sky over a long-abandoned pier in Shinchi. He dodged around a screeching seagull. “Department Head Tsubokura reported that they had spent the night here after examining the site and finding no currently extant anomalies. He notified me that their plan for the day was to complete a westerly sweep through Shinchi, veering north into western Mitakihara.”

Captain Ukitake frowned at the seaside city, its buildings in silhouette against the sunset as the ocean darkened behind them. “Do you know how much of Shinchi they intended to cover?”

“No, sir. It was subject to whether the Department Head found anything worth investigating.”

Captain Ukitake hummed. “We will follow their proposed path, starting with a wide sweep of Shinchi. Rukia and I will use our senses looking for our subordinates while you use your equipment to look for anomalies. If we don't find anything by zero-two-hundred hours, we will set a camp and sleep in one-hour shifts, then resume our search, moving north into Mitakihara. Understood?”

Kuchiki and Akon both barked, “Yes, sir.”

Captain Ukitake stared into the twinkling early evening lights, face determined. Akon knew that if his subordinates were still out there, he would find them.

Come Friday morning, Ichigo accompanied all the girls to the gate of the middle school. It was obvious to him that all three were trying to figure out why, but he kept his mouth shut. Ichigo shooed his sisters into the school gate and beckoned for Homura to follow him. He pretended he didn't notice the wary look she exchanged with Karin and Yuzu before they parted. Anxiety made his heart flutter in time with the quiet steps behind him. He knew he would soon be walking a very fine line with her and he couldn't afford to screw up.

Stop yer worryin', King, the Hollow sneered. It's you. Even if you do fuck up it'll somehow be the right way to fuck up.

Ass, Ichigo thought at him on reflex. He felt the Hollow curl its lip in disgust; however, that was still pretty damn encouraging from him, so he added, Thanks.

Positive reinforcement, they called it. Right?

The Hollow scoffed and retreated.

Ichigo took Homura to a café, bought them both some fancy coffee, and led her outside again. They stood drinking for a minute; Ichigo only realized he was staring at the girl while he tried to figure out his approach when her neutral expression pinched into a frown somewhere between
wariness and annoyance.

He was going to make this a disaster if he thought about it any more. So Ichigo drew a deep breath and said, “Come on. Let’s go somewhere more private. I want to talk to you about... what’s going on.” He tilted his chin to urge her to follow him and turned and walked away.

Homura stood still for a moment, uneasy, then cautiously followed him. When she caught up to him, he pretended to have not noticed her hesitation. They walked in silence, eventually ending up by a lonely bench on a river embankment. Ichigo sat and once again remained neutral in the face of Homura’s hesitation and choice to sit as far from him as possible. They sat quietly for a long while. He hoped she would say something, give him an opening, but she was stonily silent and gave him nothing to react to. It was all on him.

At length, Ichigo said, “I'm not really very good about being all nuanced when I talk. Subtle just isn't my thing. So if I get blunt or whatever, I don't mean anything negative by it. Call me out on it if I make you too uncomfortable with what I'm saying, okay? I won't be angry.”

Homura eyed him suspiciously. “...All right.”

“Okay.” Ichigo took a deep breath. He tried to choose his words carefully. “I've been texting the old man to see how you and the girls have been doing this week. He says you keep switching between opening up and withdrawing. While he doesn't understand what happened to you, he raised three kids and is good at reading people. He is very convinced that you feel guilty somehow.” Ichigo turned and looked directly at Homura. Seriously, he asked, “Do you blame yourself for what happened to your friends?”

Homura flinched and looked away before she could stop herself. And it was obvious that she tried to stop herself.

Ichigo sighed softly. That was all the answer he needed. “It's not your fault,” he said quietly.

“Yes, it is,” Homura said dully. Her face was tired and her eyes looked far away. She was seeing something in her mind's eye and it wasn't anything good.

What happened to you?! Tell me! he wanted to shout.

“What makes you think that?” Ichigo asked neutrally. He waited out her long silence, calmly watching the river and sipping his coffee as Homura fidgeted with her cup. His goal was to nudge her into talking without putting pressure on her. It was less direct than he usually addressed things, so he hoped he didn't suck at it.

Homura pursed her lips and looked at the ground. It was plainly a subject she usually tried to avoid thinking about, much less talking about. Like his mother's death had been for him.

Was it difficult to express in words? Was she trying to be careful of keeping her story straight? Really, in her place, Ichigo could see himself refuse to speak of... whatever the problem was. He knew the feeling all too well. So he tried his best to channel Yuzu: to be inviting, non-judgmental, and sympathetic. Tried to draw her in. Desperately hoped Homura actually found herself wanting to talk to him. Otherwise, they had nothing to go on. Nothing.

Homura eventually settled on a vague, “They died because of my actions and inaction.”

“Oh?” He would not cheer in relief that she actually answered. Would. Not. After taking a drink, he casually asked, “Did you make the monsters kill them?”
Homura sat up straight and looked at him with wide eyes. “No!”

“So, what, you think they were in danger because of you?”

Homura frowned.

“Not quite, huh?” Ichigo turned his face skyward and thought. He reflected upon himself throughout the years. “Then do you feel like you weren't strong enough to help them and they would have lived if you were stronger, faster, smarter, whatever? That if you had just been the perfect fighter, you could have saved them?”

Homura cringed hard. It said everything, really.

Ichigo sighed and leaned back. “I see.”

“It's true, though,” Homura blurted. Words rushed through her lips with increasing speed and pressure. “If I had done everything right, they wouldn't have been in danger, wouldn't have needed to fight—”

“But is that a realistic thing to expect of yourself?” Ichigo interrupted.

Homura whipped her head around to look at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Did my sisters tell you I fought in a shinigami war?”

Homura became more confused. “Yes? They said you beat the leader of... the enemy?”

Ichigo hummed. “I did, but I didn't do it alone. I don't think I could have pulled it off on my own. I had help every step of the way.”

Homura frowned. “But Karin and Yuzu said you're very powerful and a very good fighter.”

“I am, I guess; or maybe just stubborn and lucky,” Ichigo said while scratching the back of his neck. “But I got that strong with the support of my friends and allies. There were several times when friends saved my ass when I was defeated. There were a lot of skills I was taught that I wouldn't have known if I was on my own. Power is useless if you don't know how to apply it properly. Even if you do know how to use your power perfectly, you may still fall short of your goals. They called me the strongest shinigami. But did you know I didn't strike the final blow on Aizen?”

Homura blinked and looked lost. “You didn't?”

“No,” Ichigo said wryly. “But I was strong enough to weaken him to the point that Urahara was able to trap him.” He looked at Homura. “I was at the peak of my strength, in perfect harmony with my zanpakutō, matching my opponent blow for blow, and I still needed help from a friend. Now that I'm a bit older, I find that applies to most challenges in life. When you and your friends rely on each other, you all face challenges knowing someone has your back. That's priceless. When you try to fight on your own, it's much easier for something to sneak up on you. It may be an enemy, it may be exhaustion, but whatever it is, you set yourself up to be blindsided later.”

“But—” Homura faltered.

“There's only so much one person can do. You can't be everywhere at once. My point is this: You can't expect to be able to solve everyone else's problems—to protect everyone else—all by yourself. That was a hard lesson for me to learn myself. I still have trouble with it. You did the best
you could with the knowledge and experience you have. It's not your fault that it wasn't enough. It won't bring those girls back, but from now on you have allies. Wherever you go from this point in your life, you can call on us to support you when you face a problem that you struggle to handle yourself. If this mess is anyone's fault, it's whatever is behind these monster attacks. Second place would probably be the shinigami—I think they really dropped the ball, here.”

Homura stared at him for a long time. “But—but the w-monsters. I was there. They died because I—I—”

Ichigo hummed contemplatively. “Did you summon them?”

“What?”

“Did you summon the monsters yourself?”

Homura furrowed her brow. “No.”

“You have no control over whether dangerous spirits show up to prey on people and how other people react to them,” Ichigo reasoned.

“But—” Homura pursed her lips and looked down unhappily.

Ichigo considered his next words carefully. It was something he didn't like to talk about, but if it could help the girl.... “I do know how you feel, though,” he said quietly.

Homura looked up at him with blatant offended disbelief and suspicion. She thought he was being trite.

Ichigo took a deep breath and looked at the river. “For a long time, I blamed myself for my mother's death.”

Homura’s eyes widened and she inhaled sharply.

“I was nine. She was walking me home from karate practice in the rain. I saw a girl on the bridge by a broken rail and ran to her. I didn't know it was a spirit. I blacked out and woke up with my mom lying on me, dead. A few years ago I found out she died protecting me from a Hollow that used a lure that could look like a person.” He turned his empty cup around in his hands. “I also found out my elevated reiatsu attracts Hollows. Put one and one together... I thought it was obviously my fault.” He shrugged.

Homura’s mouth opened and closed a few times before she settled on a wavering frown.

“But it wasn't.” Ichigo turned to look her straight in the eye. “My father tried to convince me of that for a long time, but I didn't get it. Not until I got older and learned more of how the spirit world works. I had no control over whether a Hollow showed up. I was untrained, unaware of my power, and young. If there was any failure, it was on the part of the shinigami, who had known of that Hollow for decades and failed at taking it out. I should have been able to rely on their protection. In their absence, there was no way a nine-year-old human could realistically expect to defend against a decades-old Hollow.”

“But—but I know how to fight the—monsters—” Homura objected.

“Sure. But it sounds like there are so many monsters up there that a single middle school girl can't reasonably be expected to defend against them all. Probably not even a lot of middle school girls, working together or not. None of you should have had to fight. The failure isn't on your part, but on
the force behind the attacks and the organization that should have found the problem and protected you.”

Homura stared. Like she was reasoning out what he had said. Still, she looked at him doubtfully.

Ichigo sighed lightly. “I know I probably can't convince you of all that right away, but I think you'll get it someday. Until then, know that no one blames you and the girls and I will be there for you when you need us, yeah? Our old man, too. Okay?”

Homura's cheeks pinked and she looked down again. “Okay.”

Ichigo grinned sympathetically and ruffled her hair like he did with his sisters. “I think it's almost time for the girls to get out. Let's pick them up and go to lunch, yeah?”

“Mm.”

Well, she hadn't said much, but it hadn't been a complete disaster. He'd take what he could get.

Mid-afternoon found Akon, Lieutenant Kuchiki, and Captain Ukitake finishing up a brief stop to eat. They were perched on an apartment building from which they could look three blocks down the street and see the media vans that were camped out in front of the Kaname residence.

“Vultures,” Lieutenant Kuchiki muttered.

Her captain gave a solemn hum of disapproving agreement, then sighed. “Let's get moving.”

The three shinigami put their supplies away and slung the small packs over their shoulders. They spread out so they were just in sight of one another and continued their search. They veered east through the suburbs until they encountered the train station, then followed the tracks northwest until they had doubled back to a park. From there, they crossed the tracks and combed through the more densely populated residential condo towers. They were considering sweeping east again when Akon suddenly drew to a halt, staring at the sensor in his hand. The leaders of Thirteenth Division were soon at his side.

“Akon?” asked Captain Ukitake.

Akon furrowed his brow and waved the sensor back and forth. “There's some kind of... weakness in the spiritual structure of the World of the Living nearby.” Distracted, he used shunpo to go in a few random directions with the sensor before settling on a direction to move. He stopped himself and looked up at the captain. “Your orders, sir?”

Captain Ukitake frowned. “Proceed with caution. Retreat if you encounter anything dangerous. Lieutenant, prepare for battle. We may flush something out.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lieutenant Kuchiki drew her blade, as did her captain. The three descended, bouncing along the maze-like corridors between residential towers until they emerged into a clearing that contained a park. All three looked around cautiously before Akon landed on the ground and cast about. His sensor led the three of them to a currently unoccupied concert shell.
“Whatever it is is up on the stage, I think,” Akon said quietly.

Captain Ukitake narrowed his eyes. “Something does feel... off.” He glanced at his lieutenant. The two of them quietly jumped up by the stage's floor lamps. Akon followed them warily when nothing ambushed them. He pointed to where the sensor detected the anomaly.

“I think I see it,” Lieutenant Kuchiki said quietly.

They all stared. There was a telltale ripple in the air at center stage. It looked like heat haze despite a lack of heat. At certain angles, a wave of pink light faintly wove through it in an indistinct pattern.

“What is this, Akon?” asked Captain Ukitake.

“I... I don't know, sir.”

“It feels like,” Lieutenant Kuchiki started, then hesitated. “Both like there's something there and nothing there. If that makes sense.”

Captain Ukitake hummed. “Well, fortune favors the bold,” he said. Then he stabbed at the anomaly with his zanpakutō before Akon could even brace himself.

The anomaly suddenly flared, a pink sigil snapping into focus. It was taller than the captain and looked like a translucent drawing of a winged skull over a wreath or laurel of four-petaled flowers. The three shinigami stared.

“Whyyy does that feel like a Garganta?” Lieutenant Kuchiki asked slowly. “Only... not really a Garganta?”

The Thirteenth Division shinigami turned to Akon. Akon was fascinated but confused and held his hands up in a gesture of being at a loss.

Captain Ukitake looked to the sigil once more. “It does feel like a doorway between worlds.” He tilted his head and thought. “Akon, if the investigation party went through a doorway like this and ended up in... Hueco Mundo or somewhere else, would that explain why you can't locate their phones?”

Akon rolled his shoulders, face tight with concentration. “Yes, actually. I only broadcast the emergency signal to the World of the Living. That wouldn't get any results if they weren't in that dimension.”

The captain frowned. “Can you tell anything about what is on the other side of this... doorway?”

Akon knelt and rummaged in his pack for some cord. “It's unconventional, but this should work.” He tied the cord to the main rod of his dowsing snail and used a silent Shō spell to propel it into the portal. After a tense few minutes, he hauled it out. The sensor was thankfully intact. Akon fiddled around with it. “Whatever is in there, it's crawling with Hollow-like reiatsu. Much stronger than the residual traces Tsubokura reported on Monday. It should be habitable, though.”

They stared at the anomaly for another minute or so while the captain thought. He nodded decisively. “Right. We're going to go in. Report our status to Twelfth before we go, Akon. Request that the Captain Commander be notified of everything should we fail to report within two hours. Upon my authority.”

“Yes, sir!”
After lunch, Ichigo gave each of the girls some money and told them to get a treat or see a movie or something.

“Where are you going?” Yuzu asked.

Ichigo shrugged. “I have some things to check up on. Make sure Ms. Ikumi hasn't worked her new assistant to death, maybe stop by some friends. And I want to see if I need to light a fire under Sandal-Hat's ass to get him to figure things out faster. I don't think you really need to be there for that.”

All three girls squinted at him suspiciously.

“You mean you don't want us there,” Karin corrected him.

Ichigo shrugged. “What of it?”

Karin scowled. “Why shouldn't we be th—?!”

“Drop it, Karin,” Yuzu ordered. Karin's mouth snapped closed with a click and she looked at her sister in surprise. Yuzu gave her brother an even stare. “You're trying to protect Homura, aren't you? You don't want her upset by results or buried in questions.”

Ichigo sighed. “You are terrifyingly perceptive, Yuzu.”

Yuzu smiled sunnily. “You're just easy to read, Onii-chan!”

“D'aww, Ichi-nii's a big softie,” crowed Karin.

Ichigo barked out a laugh and mussed her hair. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go have fun.”

Ichigo stood and watched them walk away for a few minutes, noting Yuzu's gushing declaration that they should show Homura Naruki City (across the entire town from Urahara Shop) and how his sisters flocked on either side of Homura (like bodyguards).

Ichigo rolled his eyes fondly. Yeeeah, suuure, he was totally the only softie protecting the girl. Uh-huh. Riiight.

The three shinigami cautiously stepped through the portal. While they had thought themselves prepared for anything and half expected to end up in Hueco Mundo, they were surprised by the bizarre world they found themselves in. They were at one end of a steep stadium whose seats were filled with stuffed animals. The wall and seats behind them looked like they had been recently broken and put back together again, cracks studded with pieces of duct tape like stitches. The stuffed animals in the reconstructed portion of the arena each had several bandages on them. Akon spotted the heavily-damaged reiatsu analysis sensor, but was wary of approaching it. Rukia nudged her captain after looking a distance away from the sensor. She pointed to a stretch of repaired wall with dried streaks of blood, a large patch of charred grass, and the bloodied remains of Shino's
distinctive lily-pad-like hair ornament. The survey party had most likely met a violent end.

On their other side was a wide field filled with a marching band made of dolls. The grass between the shinigami and the band was pockmarked; the Thirteenth Division officers narrowed their eyes, recognizing the remnants of a tactic they taught their subordinates for defense against multiple threats. So the band was dangerous rather than decorative. At the far end of the stadium, a gigantic human skeleton in a pink band conductor's uniform tapped a baton, directing the rattling sound of snare drums keeping time from somewhere within the band.

“Akon?” Captain Ukitake asked tensely.

“No clue,” Akon replied, looking around in confused fascination.

“Sir?” said Rukia. When her captain looked at her expectantly, she continued. “This feels like a combination of Hueco Mundo and that weird... dollhouse-world I was pulled into by the Fullbringer Riruka Dokugamine.”

Captain Ukitake raised an eyebrow in interest and looked to Akon.

Akon shrugged. “We didn't receive sufficient data to do any kind of evaluation or comparison of the abilities of the Fullbringers.”

Fweeeeee fweet! Fweet! Fweet! Fweet!

A whistle and booming drums drew the shinigami's attention to the band, which began to march toward them. The Thirteenth Division officers immediately performed the same tactic their subordinates must have, but with much greater effect. Rukia cast Shō in a wide arc in front of them. Captain Ukitake then curtly spoke the shortened incantation for Hyapporankan and impaled the first dozen rows of dolls with lances of blue light, pinning them to the ground.

Determined to wipe out the small army before him, the captain then snapped, “Fifty-Seventh Way of Destruction: Daichi Tenyō!”

Three quarters of the field shattered and levitated, throwing the marching dolls into disarray. Captain Ukitake used the spell to launch the broken debris at the big skeleton at the end of the field. The skeleton shrieked, streams of glowing pink musical staves rapidly flowing from its mouth to weave a barrier in front of it. The pieces of earth and the dolls caught up with them broke against the shield. Still shrieking, the skeleton stood and made a sharp upward gesture with its conductor's baton. Discarded instruments from the field levitated and flowed toward the skeleton on more pink musical staves which then bound them to the skeleton. The mass glowed with a bright pink light that formed a heart before breaking into sparkles, leaving a smaller skeleton dressed in red perched in a glowing crevice in the bizarre, heart-shaped machine's center. It hovered on pink thrusters and broadcast the sound of an orchestra warming up at a gradually increasing volume from a bank of giant speakers.

Akon, standing guard over Rin's abandoned sensor, blurted, “Oh, shit, I think that's an LRAD!”


“SOUND CANN—!”

Akon's answer was completely drowned out by a blast of music so loud it further shattered the ground and ruptured their eardrums before they could react. The three shinigami grimaced and blocked their faces with their arms but managed to keep their footing by bracing themselves with their reiatsu, which was much stronger than the first team's. Each of the three managed to get an
Enkōsen kidō shield up moments later to decrease the onslaught, but the damage had already been done. They stood resolute while the glowing pink musical notes, inert dolls, and field debris blew into and around their shields. The blast ceased after what felt like an eternity.

Captain Ukitake tried to speak to his team, but saw their ears just as bloody as his own probably were. He pantomimed to Akon to protect the sensor. Akon looked confused, then brightened in realization and nodded. Next, the captain glanced at his lieutenant and made standard hand signal orders to her, watching for her reply. She nodded, then glanced over his shoulder with wide eyes. Captain Ukitake looked back at the massive sound cannon. A turret full of giant recorders had unfurled from its base and began to spin. He had no idea what they were for until the recorders all burst forward, propelled by pink, rocket-like energy.

Though he could no longer hear his own voice, Captain Ukitake roared, “Eighty-First Way of Binding: Dankū!” The huge pane of translucent reishi materialized just in time to block the missiles, which exploded against it spectacularly. The captain then met his lieutenant's eyes with a hard glare, nodding at her to begin their attack. It was time to end this.

The two officers leapt in opposite directions and rushed along the top of the wall between the stands and the field, each rapidly muttering a different high-level kidō incantation. The strange creature hesitated, unsure of which shinigami it should target. When the two officers were not quite parallel with the monster, they shouted the final words of their spells.


Hit from two sides by an overwhelming amount of power, the monster screeched and blew to smithereens. Its pieces disintegrated into pink sparkles in mid-flight. Moments later, the nightmare world wavered around them and faded. Akon dove toward Rin's sensor, wrapping his arms around it as the pocket dimension collapsed completely.

The three shinigami found themselves back on the stage of the concert shell in the park, spread out in a wide triangle. As they panted, a silver spindle containing a black jewel floated down to the ground between them. All three stared at it, then each other.

Captain Ukitake and Rukia didn't need their ears to understand Akon's enthusiastically mouthed What the hell?! and heartily agree.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Once out of view of Ichigo, the three girls detoured toward the railroad tracks yet again. This time they proceeded west, crossing into Naruki City. They were seven city blocks in when their Soul Gems began to glow faintly. They followed the tracks another two blocks until they were facing an overpass where the road went above the tracks. Wary of the tunnel, the girls veered around it to see if the Witch was further on. Unfortunately, their Gems led them back to the overpass.

Karin huffed, let her Gem turn back into a ring, and put her hands on her hips. “I swear to God, if we defeat this Witch and immediately get hit by a train I will be pissed,” she grumbled.

Yuzu sighed. She threw her hands over her head and did a warm-up stretch. “We’ll have to be careful when the labyrinth collapses.”

Homura coolly said, “Let’s get this over with,” and entered the tunnel, Soul Gem brandished before her. The other two girls nodded and followed her. Halfway through the tunnel, the amethyst flared and the orange pumpkin clock sigil appeared before them. When the trio entered the portal, they found yet another surreal subway station. This one, however, had sprawling branches of blooming jacaranda growing along the ceiling in addition to the industrial wreckage and clocks. Dozens of painted lady butterflies darted about the lavender flowers. There was also a heavy presence in the air.

“Finally!” Karin said. “Only took forever to find her.” She held up her Soul Gem. “Let’s do this.”

All three magical girls transformed and summoned weapons. After a minute of consideration, they cautiously set out along one of the tunnels.

“Homura,” said Yuzu, “The last time we found this Witch, we had to go through several areas like the one with the scarecrow-thing. We managed to get to the center of the labyrinth, but there were a lot more Familiars. The Witch ran away when we were too busy fighting them.”

“Neither of us has much of an area-of-effect attack,” Karin griped.

Homura hummed. “I have some ideas.”

“Oh?” Karin said archly. “You have some tricks up your sleeve? Or in your shield, I guess.”

“Grenades, bombs, assault rifles, and such,” Homura confirmed calmly.
Karin gaped, then laughed. “You're a walking arsenal, huh?”

“I suppose.”

Karin slapped a hand on Homura's shoulder. “Glad you're on our side, then!”

They soon found themselves in a subway station like the ones they had found before. It was a bit different, though; the omnipresent jacarandas decorated the ceiling and there were a dozen turnip-headed conductor scarecrows spinning around on the platform in an intricate pattern.

Yuzu sighed. “Even more than last time. We'll get worn out before we get to the Witch again.”

Homura made a thoughtful noise and put her handgun back in her shield. “I will take out as many as I can with a gun, then you two run in and pick off the leftovers.”

Karin looked at her skeptically. “How are you going to take out a bunch of Familiars by shooting one at a time? They'll swarm— holy shit, is that a machine gun?!”

Homura held up the FN Minimi and checked its ammunition box as the sisters stared with wide eyes. “Yes.” She lifted the gun to firing position. “Are you ready?”

Karin sputtered, then collected herself and made a still-incredulous sweeping gesture at the Familiars. “After you, Lady Shoots-a-lot.”

Homura's lips quirked up, then she went serious again, stepped forward, and methodically sprayed bullets at the turnip heads. Several exploded, leaving only four. She lowered the gun so its muzzle faced the ground. “Go.”

The two sisters leapt forward. Karin sliced Familiars in half with her katana while Yuzu lashed out with her whip, turned sideways as she jerked the Familiars to her, and bashed in their heads with the butt of her whip by slamming it backwards as each creature flew toward her.

As the last Familiars disintegrated, Karin gleefully crowed, “Sweet.”

The girls continued through the subway tunnels, using the same strategy every time they came to a subway station. As they progressed, each station housed more Familiars and butterflies than the last and the scent of jacaranda flowers became much more cloring. After more than half an hour, they came out of a curve in the tunnel and saw that the next archway was larger and far more ornate, indecipherable runes etched in the bricks.

“This is it,” said Yuzu.

The trio carefully approached the tunnel exit and peeked around its sides. Before them was an enormous brick chamber. Instead of a subway platform, the cavern housed a sprawling train switch yard with tracks that snaked around and into adjacent tunnels. There was more variance in the size of the clocks on the walls, ranging from pocket watches to cuckoo clocks to ornate grandfather clocks. Around the perimeter of the cavern were the trunks of jacaranda trees which formed a fragrant lavender canopy over the room and branched out into the tunnels. Crystalline high-heeled shoes filled with burning embers dangled from the branches and glowed like lanterns. A huge bell was suspended from the very center of the ceiling. Beneath the bell, all the various train rails converged into a train turntable. The areas between the tracks were studded with randomly-placed pumpkins connected by vines made of wire. Upon the center point of the entire room sat the Witch.
The Witch's base was a huge jack-o'-lantern that took up most of the space on the turntable. An over-sized vintage plaster mannequin was affixed to the top of the jack-o'-lantern from the hips up, lifeless eyes staring vacantly. A gauzy black ballroom skirt flowed down from its waist and encircled the pumpkin base except for the glowing jack-o'-lantern face; jacaranda flowers decorated its waist. It wore a black bodice and its stiff arms were covered with black elbow gloves. Atop its head sat the cut-out lid of the jack-o'-lantern, its thick stem making it resemble a top hat. A mourning veil trailed down from the pumpkin-hat. The entire ensemble was completed with an upside-down pair of painted lady butterfly wings at the mannequin's back. The Witch was not facing the girls directly, but was turned about fifteen degrees away from them.

The Witch was surrounded by a different sort of Familiar than the turnip-headed fairy conductors. Clockwork creatures made of bare gears and metal whirled around the floor of the chamber in an intricate waltz. The vaguely-female Familiars bore short pseudo-skirts made of jacaranda branches trailing flowers; their partners wore pumpkin-lid top hats on their heads. Their dancing carried them around the rail yard pumpkin patch without tripping.

"Okay," Karin began, matter-of-fact. "We know the dancing thingies can make their hands turn into bayonet-things to slice with. They keep spinning so the room may as well be a gauntlet. We didn't manage to get to the actual Witch last time so we have no clue what it— she— does."

Homura hummed in consideration as she surveyed the cavern. This Witch was living up to her expectations of trickiness and complexity. Technically speaking, she could freeze time and walk right up to the Witch and kill it. That wouldn't give her any intel on how well the twins fought, though. After all, Walpurgisnacht was formidable and had its own army of Familiars. She settled on reducing the number of combatants, observing the sisters' performance in mêlée combat, then seeing how well she could work with them to take out the Witch.

Homura ducked back into the tunnel, followed by the sisters. Karin and Yuzu watched curiously as she set down the machine gun and rummaged in her shield. Homura pulled out her hand and made a neat stack of ammunition belts for the machine gun. That done, she dipped into her hoard and pushed a frag grenade at Karin. "Here."

Karin grabbed it automatically, then gaped at it with undisguised dread. "UH."

Yuzu stared at the grenade in her sister's hands, then squeaked when Homura pressed one into her hands as well. "W-w-what are we supposed to do with these?"

Homura blandly arched an eyebrow, palming a third grenade for herself. "Attack the Familiars, of course."

Karin was stuck on, "UHHH."

"But— but we've never even seen these in real life!" Yuzu squealed in dismay.

"It is quite simple," Homura began. She then gave them a quick lesson on their use. "Now, we will enter the chamber; one of you will go left, one of you will go right, and I will take the center. We will enhance our speed with magic, go as far from the entrance as we can in one jump, throw the grenades, then jump back to the doorway for cover before the grenades detonate. Then we can form a united front to defend this doorway. We can save some energy and let the Familiars come to us. They will be easier to hit if they group up. I will use the machine gun to take out more, then we can go for mêlée combat."

"Good plan," Karin said. "We just can't lose track of which door to run back to." She had a point—there were dozens of identical arches around the cavern.
Homura hummed, absently shoved her grenade at Yuzu (who squealed), reached into her shield, and pulled out two little red spheres with fuses.

“What are those, cherry bombs?” asked Karin.

“No. They are colored smoke bombs you can get from firework stands. I got a lot to use as signals with my friends.” It seemed so long ago, now. Homura carefully stepped outside the arch, set a smoke bomb about fifteen feet away on either side of the door, lit them, and retreated.

As Homura retrieved her grenade from Yuzu, Karin asked, “Why so far from the door?”

Homura smoothed her hair behind her ears and calmly explained, “If they were any closer, we would be blinded or choked by the smoke. Having two lets you aim between the two points if you get confused out in battle.”

“Oh!” Yuzu said with understanding. “Like when you're swimming at the beach and they put up flags so you know where the edges of bad currents are so you stay in the safe water!”

Homura had never actually been swimming in the ocean, so she just shrugged and agreed. It made Yuzu more confident to know something and sounded reasonable enough. “Are you ready?”

The Kurosaki sisters fiddled around with their grenades, obviously reciting Homura's lesson in their heads. Karin took a deep breath and looked up with a grimly determined grin. “Let's do it!” Yuzu nodded agreement, face drawn in concentration.

“On three,” said Homura. Each of the girls got her grenade ready. “One... two... three!”

The girls launched themselves from the door with the magical girl version of flash step. They landed, pulled the pins and lobbed the grenades, then immediately spun and dashed for their door. The concussive blast of three nearly simultaneous explosions made them stumble on entry. Homura kept moving through it, picking up and readying her machine gun as the sisters yelped. All three girls surveyed the cavern as the smoke from their grenades dispersed.

“Awesome,” Karin marveled while her sister's eyes went wide in disbelief.

There were three large craters spread around the half of the chamber directly in front of them. Pumpkin fragments and twisted metal remnants of Familiars were strewn all about. About a third of the Familiars had been destroyed. Others staggered around, damaged. The intricate waltz they had been engaged in fell apart into spinning chaos. The sisters grinned a bit smugly as they readied their weapons for whatever the retaliation would be.

GONG!

The huge bell at the apex of the chamber pealed out once, deafeningly loud. A series of clunking, squeaking, and grinding sounds heralded the slow, clockwise rotation of the central turntable. The Witch was turning to face the girls.

“Uh... this seems... bad,” Karin commented.

“It didn't do that last time,” Yuzu said uncertainly.

Homura scowled as the turntable jolted to a stop with a loud clunk. The Witch's mannequin arms rose as stiffly as a doll's. The remaining Familiars straightened, transformed their hands into bayonets en masse, and whirled toward the girls.
“I'm going with yeah, pretty damn bad,” Karin said urgently.

Homura gave a quiet hmph and brought the gun to bear. Karin didn't have a chance to sass at her before their tunnel was filled with the reverberating sound and flashing of rapid gunfire as Homura mowed down the charging Familiars. The twins flinched and clapped their hands to their ears.

When Homura paused to reload while Yuzu threw up a glowing shield made of three interlocked magic circles, Karin snarled, “Dammit, Homura, give a girl some warning before you shoot a fucking machine gun like right next to her ears!”

Homura snapped the ammo tray closed. “My apologies,” she said, not sounding sorry at all.

“Suuure, you're s—”

Karin was cut off by another volley of gunfire. She rolled her eyes powerfully and watched the Familiars falling all over each other in their mindless determination to attack in the face of automatic gunfire.

GONG!

Karin scowled up at the big bell. “The hell?”

As Homura paused to reload again, Karin twisted her fingers in her ears and looked behind them. “Are my ears fucked up or do I hear someth— OH, SHIT!”

Karin and Yuzu turned and desperately fought a gaggle of Familiars which must have gone into other tunnels to approach them from behind. Homura gripped her gun with her left hand and desperately reached into her shield for a grenade. “Behind me!” she screamed. To their credit, the sisters obeyed her immediately. Yuzu was even observant enough to see what she was doing and throw up one of her shields to seal the doorway as soon as Homura's grenade passed her. It focused the resultant explosion entirely against the horde in the tunnel.

GONG!

That was all well and good, but the girls had now been forced out into the open. Plans were discarded as the three formed a circle and focused on taking out as many Familiars as they could. When Homura's Minimi next ran out of ammo, she dropped it, pulled out a Beretta and wielded it left-handed with support from her right for close quarters shooting, then started pulling out and throwing grenades into the surrounding mob with her right hand whenever she reloaded the handgun. Karin attacked the Familiars that approached her with surgical precision, lopping off heads and bladed arms with every swing. Yuzu had a more difficult time in battle, but developed a pattern of snagging enemies' bladed hands together with her whip then hauling them in close so she could kick their heads off their fragile necks with her high-heeled shoes.

GONG!

The girls weren't sure how long the mêlée lasted. It certainly felt like forever. Homura blew through more ordnance and ammo than she ever used against anything save for Walpurgisnacht. A ring of debris from destroyed Familiars gradually piled up around the girls. Instead of getting tall enough to protect them, it simply gave the remaining Familiars a height advantage so they could attack from slightly higher up— where the girls would have more trouble defending.

“We need to move!” shouted Homura.

“Oh, yeah, duh!” Karin replied. “Plans?”
“Let's make a run for the wall,” panted Yuzu. “We can have the wall at our backs.”

“Let's choose one the creeptastic Witch isn't facing,” Karin added. “Dunno what fresh hell she's gonna unleash.”

Homura surveyed the wider area next time she threw a grenade, analyzing everything. “Let's go to the wall ninety degrees to the Witch's left.”

“You got a reason for that?” asked Karin as she lopped off yet another clockwork head.

After emptying another magazine into the faces of the attacking automatons, Homura said, “A guess. The Witch spun clockwise and has a clock theme. If it can only turn clockwise, we will have more time to react to it moving.”

Yuzu made a sound of understanding and Karin laughed. “We got a smartypants over here, Yuz!”

“I'm not complaining!” Yuzu cheered as she kicked in another face.

“I could be wrong,” Homura hedged after her latest grenade exploded.

“Only one way to find out!” shouted Karin. “Ready?”

Homura and Yuzu sharply answered, “Yes!”

“On three! One... two... three!”

The magical girls jumped to the top of the pile of clockwork parts, flared their magic around them in a brief aura to push back their attackers, and flash-stepped to the wall in question. They pressed their backs to the wall and took the opportunity to catch their breath while the minions whirled in directionless confusion at their disappearance.

“Faaaaantastic!” Karin drawled. She rolled her shoulders and got in a ready position. “Round three. Bring it!”

It was easier to fight with their backs to the wall— no worry that the fighter behind them could miss something and let them get hit in the back. Homura stood between and slightly farther out than the sisters then pulled out a second FN Minimi. She sprayed a deluge of bullets at the Familiars with the pre-loaded gun, then stepped back and let the sisters pick off enemies while she fed the machine gun another ammunition belt. The twins would step back when Homura gave a sharp shout to announce she was ready to shoot again.

Once again, a deep series of clunking and grinding drew their attention to the Witch. Its turntable had begun to rotate again.

“Clockwise,” Karin said with amusement. “Well, I'll be damned.”

“You're great at this, Homura!” Yuzu gushed.
“You would have figured it out yourselves,” Homura demurred.

Karin snorted with self-deprecation. “Maybe if we miraculously wiped out a ton of Familiars before we could get worn out. And I do mean miraculously. I've never seen a Witch with this many Familiars before. Well, so many dangerous Familiars.”

In the next few minutes of harried but comfortable teamwork, Homura fleetingly wondered what fate befell the sisters in all the previous timelines. Considering the state of their Soul Gems when she met them and how this particular Witch seemed to finally be something too big for them to handle by themselves....

That train of thought was shoved to the back of her mind.

GONG!

“Oh my God, will you SHUT UP with the bell!” Karin snarled at the labyrinth in general.

When they had whittled down the Familiars to about three dozen, Homura said, “Ideas for attacking the Witch?” Satisfied with the sisters' teamwork and performance against Familiars since Walpurgisnacht's tended to space themselves out more than the ones in this labyrinth, she wanted to see how well they did against a Witch.

“If I can get up top of that big pumpkin I could slice the doll part either down the middle or across the waist,” Karin offered after a minute of glancing at the Witch between enemies.

“We need to be careful,” Yuzu said. “We don't know what kind of attacks it uses—or even if the doll part is a decoy. What if the Witch is really inside the jack-o'-lantern?”

“Right,” Karin said tersely. After another minute of thought, she offered, “How about I try to get up and attack the doll, and you and Homura cover me? Yuzu, be ready to shield or snag me, and Homura, be ready to shoot at any surprises. Sound good?”

Homura and Yuzu agreed.

GONG!

It only took a few more minutes to wipe out the last of the Familiars. The girls took a minute to catch their breath while Homura switched her machine gun for a semiautomatic rifle. They watched the Witch's steady progress as the turntable rotated. With some nodding and pointing to coordinate their attack, Yuzu stayed where she was while Karin and Homura ran to their left. Homura stopped when she was directly to the Witch's right side; Karin kept running until she was directly behind the Witch. Once in place, she got into a ready position and nodded at Homura. Homura looked to Yuzu; she also nodded her readiness. Homura pointed her rifle toward a tunnel off to one side so her signal shot wouldn't rebound and hit anyone, then fired the gun like a starting pistol. Karin took off at a sprint and leapt up toward the pumpkin.

GONG!

The bell clanged again when Karin's foot made contact with the jack-o'-lantern's upper curve. By the time she had taken a second step and swung her katana, the mannequin's arms had dropped ninety degrees to be parallel to the ground—one in front and one in back—and long serrated blades popped out all along the length of its arms. Then the entire mannequin rapidly spun clockwise at the waist even as the turntable remained slow.

Yuzu's three-ring shield snapped into existence to Karin's right even as she kicked herself into a
vertical jump in an attempt to avoid the blades. The leading edge of the front blade struck the shield and jarred to a halt, snapping the arm off in the process. Karin turned the falling velocity of her jump into a downward attack toward the mannequin's head, but the jacaranda branches around its waist shot up and extended in a counter-strike. Eyes wide, Karin slashed at the branches. While she did cut some, others grabbed her ankle and threw her away so hard that the brick wall of the cavern cracked around her impact.

GONG!

Homura aimed for the mannequin's head and shot several bursts. The plaster cracked, but the jack-o'-lantern lid top hat slid to the side of the head that faced Homura and acted as a shield. The turntable continued to rotate. Homura scowled.

“Karin!” Yuzu shouted.

Karin staggered to her feet, still glowing from flaring her magic to soften the blow then heal some of the damage. “I'm good, I'm good!” she wheezed.

The turntable and jack-o'-lantern ground to a loud halt with a sound like the tumblers of an old lock clunking into place.

GONG!

The Witch's mouth dropped open like a marionette's and uttered a train-whistle-like wail. Hundreds of glowing glass shoe lanterns exploded simultaneously, showering shards of glass and blazing embers in every direction and plunging the cavern into darkness lit only by the face of the jack-o'-lantern and the multitude of butterflies which began to glow orange as they wafted among the jacarandas at the ceiling. The girls all held their arms to their faces to protect their eyes from the unusual shrapnel. The shards hadn't all hit the ground yet when the cavern was filled with echoing sounds of cracking, booming, and tearing. When they opened their eyes, the girls found that the train tracks that crisscrossed the switch yard were being ripped up from the ground, curling and flailing around the Witch like tentacles.

“Now would be a good time for a Plan B!” Karin screamed urgently.

Homura frowned hard as the rails curved around the Witch in an intricate, spiraling cage. This was one of the most complex Witches she had ever fought. I may actually need to stop time and take it out myself, she thought.

The Witch raised its remaining arm. The bell at the apex of the chamber pealed over and over as the mannequin dropped its arm like a guillotine. The train tracks around it made the sound of metal against metal and shot railroad spikes in every direction with the speed of a machine gun. The ping! of shattering glass reached Homura's ears just before she stopped time. Pain radiated from the multiple wounds spikes had left behind where she had been shot, only two still lodged in her body. Okay, she could manage that.

Homura looked around and discovered that though her wounds were not grievous, she had still reacted an instant too late: The pieces of Yuzu's Soul Gem were frozen in the midst of supernova, her eyes already empty.
WITCH DATA
CYNDIA, the Pumpkin Witch. It is in her nature to be tardy. She always leaves things until the last minute and would probably be late to her own funeral.

Minion: Jakob, whose duty is to keep everything on schedule.

Minion: Charles & Charlene, whose duty is to dance.

A/N: Ruh-roh. :D

Witch Cynthia's concept is a combination of Cinderella and the Vocaloid song/video “Mrs. Pumpkin's Comical Dream.” Plus a few other things punning on the name Cynthia. When I first saw InuCurry's art for Witches in PMMM, I immediately thought of the art in that video. As a bonus, the main character in that music video is what Cynthia's magical girl form would look like.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Homura stared at the yellow constellation that had been Yuzu's soul in numb disbelief. Witnessing the destruction of a Soul Gem was something that would never become less horrifying with repetition.

She should have stopped time and bombed the Witch out of existence from the start. Then Yuzu wouldn't be... like this. It didn't matter that Yuzu's death would be undone when she next folded time back on itself— that didn't make the here and now any easier to deal with. Homura could have prevented this, but hadn't. She had been too interested in how useful the girls would be in the next timeline. Guilt ate at her and made her feel monstrous.

After a few minutes of staring blankly at Yuzu, Homura turned to Karin. The dark-haired girl had managed to get her arms up, crossed over her face to protect it. Rail spikes and wounds studded her body— three in her arms, one in her ribs, another straight through the area just above her left hip. Generally, injuries a magical girl should have little trouble recovering from. Homura glanced back to the other side of the room. Yuzu's death was going to be the most critical wound and there was nothing she could do about it.

Homura blinked owlishly and looked down at herself. She removed the spikes from her left shoulder and right thigh in absolute detachment, absently holding them out to one side and letting them go to hang in place as she scrubbed at blood that had trickled into her eye from a head wound. Homura looked around at the many rail spikes frozen in mid-flight, she reached into her shield and retrieved the old golf club that had been her first weapon. She slowly made her way to Karin by tapping individual spikes to allow them to continue on their trajectory— physical contact with Homura, even indirect, negated the time-freezing spell. It took forever to get to Karin, but it was an acceptable if inadequate penance. She made the spikes that had already passed Karin finish their journeys into the ground and wall, then stared at Karin as she debated what to do.

Homura finally pursed her lips and grabbed Karin's shoulders. Karin's scream continued from where it had left off until Homura tugged her backwards.

Homura physically forced Karin to turn and face her and the wall. “My power is actually to stop time,” she murmured as she plucked spikes from Karin's arms and made sure to maintain physical contact.

“That's a thing?” Karin asked in a daze. She stared at her arm wounds as her magic worked to heal them.

“Yes. And time will freeze for you again if you stop touching me.”

“Oh. Okay,” Karin said, looking pretty sure that having a railroad spike pried out of her hip should hurt a lot more than her magic was letting her feel. It reminded Homura of the face Madoka had made in the early timeline in which Homura had to pry an ice skate out of her bel—

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Karin blinked dazedly. “Oh. Did you help Yuzu already?”

Homura paused, face bent and obscured by her hair. After a long silence, Homura heavily said, “There is nothing I can do for Yuzu.” It sounded like an admission of guilt.

“What's that mean?!” Karin asked urgently. She wheeled about and sought out her sister.

Even from a distance, it was obvious that Yuzu's Soul Gem had exploded. A railroad spike hovered perhaps a centimeter from the now-empty brooch at her throat. Homura knew that the pretty battle costume would evaporate as soon as she let time resume.

The raw sound of anguish that left Karin's throat would haunt Homura's nightmares.

Karin tried to dash to her sister, but froze as soon as she moved away from Homura. Homura chewed her lip, slid in front of Karin, and caught her after tapping her to let time resume for her. Karin fought to get past her, screaming her sister's name. Homura hugged her hard, at a loss. “Shh. Shh. I'll take you to her. I'll take you. Hold my hand.”

Karin keened but took her hand and allowed herself to be led like a child. Homura bent to retrieve her golf club and navigated the cavern as she guided Karin behind her. When they finally neared Yuzu, Homura again made the spikes around and behind her finish their trajectories. Karin fell to her knees next to her sister, still holding Homura's hand. They both stared at Yuzu, whose final expression was one of surprise. Karin gingerly reached out and grabbed the yellow frills that waterfalled out from the tails of her sister's costume.

Time immediately resumed for Yuzu. The spikes that had been going through her waist and knee rocketed out behind her and froze as soon as they cleared Yuzu's body. The frills turned into light and disintegrated in Karin's hand as Yuzu began to fall backwards. The body froze again, so Karin crawled closer and wrapped her free arm around her sister's waist. Yuzu's body finally fell against Karin, who took one look at her sister's dead eyes and wailed.

Homura let go of Karin, unable to bear the sound. She simply stood in place for awhile, covering her face with her hands and breathing.

This was her fault. She should have been faster. Should have been more aggressive with the Witch. Should've should've should've. Always should've.

Homura forced herself into blankness and turned to face the Witch. Her face slowly shifted into cold fury. She backtracked through the path she had made, then used the golf club to navigate to the turntable. After a long, calculating glare, she started retrieving things from her storage.
Pipe bombs and glass bottles filled with kerosene lobbed into all the jack-o'-lantern openings. Grenades thrown up at the mannequin. Multiple RPGs fired up at the distant ceiling because seriously, fuck that bell. Three ammunition belts worth of bullets from her machine gun aimed at the mannequin's head. Pipe bombs all around the base of the giant pumpkin and its cage of rails.

Homura was well aware that she was engaging in overkill, but she didn't give a damn. The thing had killed Yuzu. Kind Yuzu with a loving soul like Madoka's. Homura wanted to blow up everything.

Homura stalked back to Karin and positioned herself between the girl and the oncoming railroad spikes, then lifted her shield to a defensive stance, flared her magic around her in a violet flash, and allowed time to resume. Karin's wailing was punctuated by the staccato clangs of spikes ricocheting off Homura's shield before it was completely drowned out by a cascading series of explosions. The destruction of the jack-o'-lantern was grimly satisfying, but the labyrinth didn't waver until the RPGs reached their target and shattered the bell with a deafening clang.

Turned out Yuzu was right to worry about a decoy: The actual Witch—or perhaps the Witch's core?—was the bell. Of course it was. Homura could have walked into the chamber, fired RPGs at the bell, and been done with the whole mess without even fighting the Familiars. Bitter anger made her blood boil, made her pulse rush in her ears. Of course. Of course. Yuzu was dead for nothing. Just another failure to enter in her ledger of screw-ups.

Homura shielded Karin until the labyrinth completely collapsed, then slowly lowered her shield when she found herself back in the train underpass. She dispassionately caught the Grief Seed as it drifted down from above.

Karin had devolved into quieter keening, rocking her dead twin's body. Homura faltered, then approached her and gently lay a hand on her shoulder. She didn't bother trying to say anything—Homura knew better than anyone that there were no words that could relieve her grief. They remained like that for several minutes as Karin slowly came to her senses. Homura was startled when the girl sat up, scrubbed her face, and looked determined. She shuffled around, slid her arms around her sister, and lifted her into a fireman's carry as she stood and looked both angry and desperate.

“What are you doing?” Homura asked hesitantly.

Karin shifted Yuzu's weight on her shoulders. “I'm taking Yuzu to Urahara. He'll help her.”

“Karin... Karin, she's gone,” Homura said quietly. “Her Soul Gem—”

“Urahara's smart and knows soul stuff. He'll bring her back.”

There was something wild in her eyes that worried Homura, but she didn't have time to think about it before Karin took off, flash-stepping in the direction of Urahara Shop. All she could do was follow the girl across the rooftops, Grief Seed gripped tightly in her palm.

She had a dreadful feeling this was going to get very messy very fast.

A meeting convened in the Urahara Shop early in the afternoon. Kisuke, Hitsugaya, Ichigo, and Isshin gathered around the table in the back room to discuss the mystery of Mitakihara and Homura
Akemi while Tessai and the kids minded the shop. Yoruichi perched on her usual cushion in cat form, observing them all.

“What’ve you got, Kisuke?” Isshin began.

Kisuke tapped his closed fan on the edge of the table. “Something several magnitudes more complex than I initially suspected,” he said.

“That's not ominous at all,” Yoruichi said drily.

“First, I would like to note that if you haven't been keeping up-to-date with the news out of Mitakihara, you should know that at least four disappearances have happened since Miss Akemi traveled to Karakura: one girl in Shinchi and three girls in Asunaro. Therefore, I am less inclined to believe she is involved with whatever force is causing the incidents. I'm keeping my mind open to that possibility, though, as we have no way of knowing if she has defected from a larger group of accomplices.”

Ichigo and Isshin frowned disapprovingly, but didn't say anything. Everyone else remained neutral.

“Now that that's out of the way, I'll get into particulars,” Kisuke continued. “After exhausting the information from human sources, I requested data on the area from Twelfth Division. My initial suspicion was that, given the population growth in the Mitakihara metropolitan area in the last thirty years, the spiritual density of the area should be about mid-level— on an exponential scale, of course— but that the presence of so many teenagers with spiritual abilities might indicate that some force was artificially inflating the density figures there. However, the data proved my hypothesis completely wrong. Instead, density figures remained only slightly higher than they were when the area was first settled after wetland drainage and land reclamation. This should be impossible given the length of time humans have been gathering there in significant numbers. There should be a natural if slow increase in density as more souls gather in one place and influence one another into spiritual strengthening, no matter how minor. I suspect that something is artificially depressing the spiritual density while selectively allowing individual spiritual growth. This is quite a contradictory situation— when a soul strengthens beyond a certain threshold, it begins to slightly affect the souls around it via... a form of unconscious resistance training, if you will. Multiple individuals demonstrating spiritual awareness should indicate a gradual cascade of spiritual strength through the community. That's not happening. Selective strengthening without spillover implies direct interference, though I currently do not know what form that interference would take.”

“Something Hollow, though, right?” asked Ichigo. “I'm no expert but the way Homura described that Sayaka girl sounded like she Hollowfied.”

“That is the second conundrum, yes,” Kisuke admitted. “Though it cannot be declared with any certainty that the interference itself is Hollow in nature, something about the procedure appears to be related to Hollowfication.”

Isshin narrowed his eyes and grimly said, “You're thinking an experiment like Aizen used to do.”

Like the one Isshin himself had interrupted and become entangled in the night Masaki Kurosaki saved his life.

“Possibly,” Kisuke said quietly. “There is a certain strangeness about it all. My scan of Miss Akemi did detect the Hollow-like residue that you described, Isshin, but the readings don't quite match the known range of Hollows. All measurements are slightly more... intense.”
Ichigo scowled. “Meaning?”

“The energy is Hollow, yet not quite Hollow at the same time. Something a bit different.”

“What kind of difference?” asked Hitsugaya.

“It's hard to say,” Kisuke hedged. “Moving back to Miss Miki, the description certainly did sound like a Plus gradually declining into a Hollow state.”

“But she was alive,” said Hitsugaya. “That should only be possible if a Chain of Fate is detached from the body, correct?”

“True,” said Kisuke. “However, we have no way of knowing whether or not her Chain of Fate was intact. We do know her soul maintained its basic structure because she was reportedly able to fight the Mitakihara 'monsters' with her ‘magic’. When taken in the context of complete Hollowfication at a later point and her only beginning to fight a few weeks ago, one can infer that she manifested powers akin to a shinigami or Fullbringer via some form of outside modification.”

Isshin raised his eyebrows. “Are you implying something may be trying to artificially create living shinigami like Ichigo?”

“Perhaps,” said Kisuke. “Hypothetically speaking, someone could try to create living shinigami by severing the Chain of Fate of a spiritually aware person and forcing the soul to cope or go Hollow, thus forming a shinigami-Hollow hybrid. Probability would lean toward most subjects going Hollow. Perhaps their aim is to create Hollows which could cause mayhem while partially disguised within a human body. I do know that this hypothetical entity can't be using the Hollow soul transfusion procedure Aizen used to experiment upon the original Visored unless they have a mediatory artifact similar to the Hōgyoku— without a counter, souls subjected to a Hollow transfusion slip into Soul Suicide. I would lean toward them not having such an artifact unless they are grossly incompetent at using it, though— Aizen was able to turn Tōsen into a flawless hybrid, after all.”

“Someone could be making mistakes learning how to use such an artifact,” Hitsugaya suggested.

“True,” Kisuke allowed. “However, the gradual decline seems to imply that the Hollowfication is not a sudden process as when the Hōgyoku or transfusion is used. I only have anecdotal evidence to go on, though. I will say that whatever hypothetical entity conducting whatever hypothetical experiment is knowledgeable enough to target young girls as they approach spiritual maturity. Their souls enter a period of being extremely malleable and adaptable to change at that point, which most girls experience within a similar age window. It's more difficult to pinpoint when individual boys will hit spiritual maturity.”

“Girls approaching spiritual maturity may also be easier to convince to do things just by virtue of being younger,” Yoruichi commented. “Boys tend to be older when they mature spiritually. Even a couple extra years could lend them just enough life experience to be warier. Whoever or whatever is doing this may be capable of appearing innocuous or trustworthy to a young girl.” She cocked her head. “On the other hand, they could be intimidating and coercive to young girls.”

“Reasonable,” Kisuke admitted after a moment's thought. He carefully switched gears. “All of this conjecture is, of course, based upon taking Miss Akemi's testimony largely at face value. And I am certain that she is at the very least hiding details.”

Ichigo scowled. “What makes you say that?”
Kisuke tented his fingers and considered his words. He had to tread lightly; it looked like Ichigo had already taken the girl under his wing. Kisuke prepared to face obstinate defense from him. “I have experience with interrogation and reading people from my time in Second Division. She was very careful with her words. Most obvious was her evasion of actually describing one of her monsters. That was a skillful deflection. I do know she was outright lying about how much experience she has using her powers.”

Hitsugaya raised his eyebrows, Ichigo continued scowling, and Isshin nodded. “I have to agree with that one,” Isshin said. “The way she casually healed herself without even looking at the wound told me as much—there's no way she could master that in a month or two. She also showed little reaction to having wounded herself or feeling pain.”

“Yes, and I've seen her fight twice,” Kisuke continued. “As I told Yoruichi, she is very polished and controlled. Also tactically intelligent. In addition, I have seen her manifest a weapon.”

Everyone around the table expressed surprise.

“What kind of weapon?” asked Hitsugaya.

“Oddly enough, a buckler,” said Kisuke. “A small shield attached to her left forearm. She used it offensively as a bludgeon. What I find even more interesting is that she manifests it from a ring on her left hand, but that ring can also turn into an object I have yet to identify. It looks like a large, egg-shaped amethyst set in a gold stand. I followed her after she left the library—which I think she is using as a ruse to get away from you, Isshin. She wanders along the railway corridor, holding this egg and watching it like a compass or sensor of some kind.” Kisuke looked around the table and debated whether or not to mention to Kurosaki girls' involvement. He decided against it because he didn't know if Ichigo in particular could feign ignorance if he knew his sisters might be in danger. Kisuke didn't want to show his hand to the girls just yet. “I suspect she is looking for a curious rift in the spiritual structure of the world—”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ichigo asked skeptically.

“Let me back up. The other day I sensed her reiatsu wandering around and suddenly disappear. Concerned for her safety, I sought her in the general area of where I sensed her last. Finally, I resorted to using a sensor to look for anomalies in the area. I had just discovered...a sort of weakness in reality complete with visual distortion of light, if you will, when Miss Akemi suddenly appeared at the site and the weakness disappeared.”

Isshin stared at him grimly. Kisuke had been vague about what he had seen that day. He knew the father had just confirmed that his daughters were directly involved in the mess. Isshin kept his mouth shut after glancing at his son, though.

“Again: What do you mean by weakness in reality?” asked Ichigo.

“Imagine the spiritual energy of the world as a cloth. Doorways into and out of it such as senkaimon and Garganta are like holes with zippers that can be open and shut. This felt like a portion of said cloth...hmm. You know how when you wear a pin or button, there is often an apparent hole when you remove it? But then it usually closes up as you wear the clothes and the threads shift back into place?” Ichigo nodded hesitantly. “That's what this felt like in the aftermath. That there had been a hole and it was shifting shut. An additional oddity was the faint presence of Hollow-like reiatsu at the site of the anomaly.”

After a long silence in which everyone processed the explanation, Yoruichi asked, “That begs three questions, really: One, why would she be looking for such a thing? Two: Why and how does she
disappear at the anomaly? And three: If this thing she's looking for is similar to what she knows from Mitakihara, why haven't we noticed anything in our own back yard?"

“The first question, I am unable to answer, though I would like to think Miss Akemi is trying to counter whatever is going on,” answered Kisuke. “The second, I only had a brief time to feel the anomaly, but I would guess that it is a doorway like a Garganta, though I do not know where it would lead. As for the third, I did some research.” Kisuke tapped his fan on a small stack of notes. “While there haven't been cases of missing or mysteriously dead girls in Karakura, there have been several brief periods during which similar suicides or deaths occur. For example, eight months ago there were four drownings in the same bend of the river in two weeks. The past two months have seen three suicides and four pedestrian accidents along the railway corridor in Karakura and the cities directly to the east and west of us. The two survivors don't remember the time leading up to their injuries.”

“And Homura is searching by the train tracks,” Isshin said heavily.

There was a lull in conversation as everyone mulled over the information and guesswork.

“An expedition was dispatched to Mitakihara on Monday, was it not?” asked Hitsugaya. “Has Twelfth relayed any information to you?”

“...About that,” Kisuke hedged.

Everyone looked at him with varying degrees of dread. Ichigo muttered, “That doesn't sound good.”

“Yes. Well.” Kisuke cleared his throat. “The original research party consisted of Department Head Rin Tsubokura and two unseated soldiers from Thirteenth Division as escorts.”

“The 'original' party?” Yoruichi asked morbidly.

“While they made their scheduled reports on Monday through Wednesday afternoon, they failed to make the next three scheduled reports. Third Seat Akon broadcast a signal to activate the emergency beacons in their Soul Phones, but was unable to connect with any of them. Attempts to contact them via Hell Butterfly also failed.”

“Ohhh, shiiiiit,” Ichigo said grimly.

Isshin tiredly scrubbed a hand over his face. “Reaction?”

Kisuke tapped his fan against his chin. “Yesterday, Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki deployed to Mitakihara with Third Seat Akon to perform reconnaissance and attempt retrieval.”

Ichigo had opened his mouth to ask a question when the back door was kicked in and Karin hurtled into the room in a strange red costume, then crashed onto the table and dropped Yuzu next to her. Kneeling on the table, she lunged forward and grabbed Kisuke's black haori in both hands and desperately shrieked, “HELP HER!”

Everyone looked down at Yuzu as Akemi silently landed on the back porch and watched dolefully. Yuzu was in her middle school sailor uniform, which was normal. Not normal were the multiple large puncture wounds around her body and the glassy, vacant look in her open eyes.

Isshin and Ichigo shot up to their knees and yelled, “Yuzu!” while Hitsugaya and Yoruichi stared at the body with wide eyes.
Isshin shuffled to the end of the table, sat on it sideways, and reached for his daughter's face. He lightly slapped her cheek a few times. "Yuzu! Yuzu, sweetheart, can you hear me? Yuzu, Daddy's here, I'll help you, I'll help you, it's okay, baby, it's okay." He continued to ramble and search her for an obvious life-threatening injury. When he found none and noticed she wasn't breathing, he shifted position and started chest compressions. "Ichigo!"

Years of assisting in a clinic had Ichigo slide into place to do rescue breathing before he could even think about it through his shock.

Karin shook Kisuke again when he didn't respond. "DO SOMETHING!"

Kisuke knew what he would find even before he reached around Karin and hovered a hand over Yuzu's upper chest, but he initiated the diagnostic kidō anyway. Finding no soul, he glanced at the other people in the room before looking back to the Kurosaki family's feverish attempts to revive their youngest. With a heavy heart, he quietly said, "I'm sorry. She's gone."

"No! No, she's not!" Ichigo yelled between breaths, tears streaming down his cheeks. "C'mon, Yuzu!"

"No, no, come on, baby, come on," Isshin said in a faltering voice as his compressions became less professional and he started to choke on tears. "Please, baby. Please come back. Come back to Daddy."

Kisuke reached around Karin to put a hand on Isshin's shoulder. Gently, he said, "Isshin. You can tell her soul isn't in her body. I'm sorry, but she's gone."

Isshin gave up on compressions and threw himself across his daughter, howling in grief. Ichigo fell back jerkily, sitting hard a bit away from the table like an abandoned marionette. He stared at his little sister's unseeing eyes in paralyzed horror. Yoruichi, Hitsugaya, and Akemi helplessly watched the family tragedy unfolding before their eyes.

"NOOO!" Karin shrieked madly as she clawed at Kisuke. "YOU'RE LYING! YOU'RE LYING! SHE'S RIGHT HERE! HELP HER!"

Kisuke drew back his hand to place it on Karin's shoulder, worried about her hysterical rage. "I'm so sorry, Karin. There's nothing I can do."

Karin half-crawled, half-flailed back across the table and staggered to her feet. She took a few steps, tangled her hands in her hair, squeezed her head, and screamed. And screamed. And screamed. Hitsugaya scrambled to his feet and stepped to her side, hands awkwardly fluttering over her before settling on her shoulders and squeezing. If Karin noticed, she didn't respond. She just kept screaming, eyes wide and unfocused.

Tessai, Jinta, and Ururu charged into the back room, ready for battle. They took in the tableau in a single glance and gasped. Jinta stumbled forward, moaning, "No, no, no, no, no."

Kisuke turned to the ruined doorway and fixed a calculating stare on the bloodied girl from Mitakihara, who was standing clutching something that felt like concentrated Hollow reishi while wearing a strange purple and white costume with that odd little shield on one arm. Her face and reiatsu were overflowing with regret. He waited for her to look at him, then evenly asked, "What happened?"

Akemi frowned, pursed her lips, and opened her mouth. Then she startled and darted her eyes over to the remaining Kurosaki sister. "Karin! Your Soul Gem!"
Kisuke looked Karin's way and saw Hitsugaya turn to him with wide eyes full of alarm as Karin began to radiate Hollow reiatsu. Akemi hurried to Karin and grabbed her arms to force the girl to face her. A strawberry-shaped jewel on Karin's forehead shimmered with red and black energy.

“Stay still!” Akemi cried, holding up a small black jewel set in silver. “I'll purify—!”

Karin smacked Akemi's hand away and screeched, “NO!”

Akemi looked shocked. “What?!”

“NO!” Karin shrugged Hitsugaya's hands from her shoulders and staggered a few steps back until she hit the wall, returning her hands to her head as though holding it together. Her eyes were crazed. “NO!”

“You'll turn!” Akemi yelled desperately.

“I don't care! I don't care! That thing killed Yuzu! I won't touch it! I won't touch it! I don't care! I'd rather die! I'D RATHER DIE!”

Everyone had gone quiet to stare at her, so the series of cracking noises that emanated from Karin were clearly audible. No one managed to even utter her name before the gem at her forehead flared, burst into red and black light, and reformed into an egg-shaped jewel set in tarnished gold. The red costume disintegrated around her, leaving her in her school uniform for a brief instant before her eyes went dull and her body fell slack as the corrupted red jewel exploded.

The sheer force of the explosion and the dark gale it initiated sent the unprepared occupants of the room rocketing backwards. The contents of the room went with them, furniture and tea set and light fixtures shattering against the buckling walls while the people gasped for breath after their impacts. Tessai managed to grab Karin's lifeless body and shelter it from the waves of reiatsu that washed over them all. It was like being caught in a violent hurricane of Hollow reiatsu. It was intense and awful—then suddenly stopped. The group recovered and surveyed their surroundings.

They definitely weren't in Urahara Shop anymore.

Kisuke darted in front of Akemi with shunpo, drew his blade, grabbed her by the wrist that bore her shield and a purple gem which was now shaped like a diamond, and held his blade to her throat in one smooth motion, face hard.

“Explain. Now.”

Homura's mind froze, then immediately switched to racing. Whether or not Urahara knew exactly what he had done, he had effectively nullified her ability to retrieve a weapon or escape from him by freezing time. She was trapped. If she wanted to survive to make another attempt to save Madoka, she might have no choice but to talk.
A/N: I am so sorry, Isshin. (u.u)

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Do I need bodyguards? *shifty eyes*

By the way, a bearskin is the tall hat worn by the Queen's Guard-- the British soldiers with the red coats and tall black hats. The term seems uncommon in the US.
Akemi swallowed hard and glanced over to Karin. This time Kisuke let her stare for a solid minute as the sight of her friend's dead body and devastated family obviously made her waver.

“I'm waiting,” Kisuke finally prompted.

Akemi looked up at him, mouth opening and closing as she grasped for words. Evidently, she decided whatever risk there was in talking was outweighed by the risk of having her throat slit or her weapon stolen. She cringed warily and blurted, “I heard shinigami hunt people like me and Karin and Yuzu. But we were tricked into it, I swear.”

Kisuke raised his eyebrows. In his peripheral vision, he saw everyone turning to stare at them. “And what kind of people are you?”

Akemi looked at him anxiously but straight in the eyes. “Magical girls.”

Silence.

“Come again?” Kisuke asked.

“Magical girls.”

“You're fucking insane,” snarled Jinta.

“Jinta!” Kisuke barked without taking his eyes off the girl. The redhead got the message and backed off. “What are magical girls?” Kisuke asked. Jinta muttered darkly until Ururu silenced him with a kick to his shin.

Akemi swallowed and glanced at the sword. “There is a race called Incubators. They find strong girls— um, spiritually aware girls?— and trick them into making contracts in exchange for granting a wish. If you accept the contract, an Incubator turns your soul into a Soul Gem—” her eyes darted to the amethyst on her hand— “and you can transform and be strong and get a magic weapon. Karin said the Incubator told her it is an imitation of a zan... zan...?”

“Zanpakutō,” Kisuke finished in morbid fascination.

“Yes, that.”

From behind the girl, Yoruichi said, “That doesn't explain what just happened and whatever the hell this place is.”

Akemi tried to look behind her but was too wary of the sword to turn. “When we contract, the Incubator says we have to fight monsters called Witches to pay back our wishes. But it doesn’t tell us that if our Soul Gems become too corrupted from fighting or we fall into despair, our Soul Gems turn black and we turn into Witches ourselves.”

After a pause, Kisuke slowly asked, “Are you implying Karin's soul just turned into one of these... Witches?”

“Yes.” Akemi screwed her eyes shut. “I'm sorry. I wasn't fast enough... I should have... stopped....”

There was a long silence as everyone either struggled to believe her or connected some unmentioned dots. Kisuke let go of her and withdrew his blade but didn't sheathe it. “Where are we?”

Akemi pulled her shield arm against her body and fingered the jewel on the back of her hand as
though checking it for damage. “The Witch's labyrinth.”

“Which is...?” Yoruichi snapped.

“A kind of... pocket dimension, I suppose. Every one is different. They always have something to do with what was important to the magical girl before she fell. The Witch hides inside. If you do not defeat the Witch, it wanders around spreading its despair and madness—”

“Causing people to feel compelled to commit suicide,” Kisuke extrapolated.

Akemi nodded silently, then hesitantly continued, “Karin's soul was strong. This Witch could claim a lot of victims. We need to defeat it before it runs away.”

Kisuke quietly said, “You mean 'put her out of her misery’?”

Akemi looked away from the echo of her own words.

Frowning in thought, Hitsugaya cleared his throat. When he had their attention, he asked, “What happens when you 'defeat' a Witch? Are they purified like a defeated Hollow?” His voice rose with tentative hope at the end.

Akemi looked down at her feet. “No. The Witch's labyrinth and body disappear. All that is left is the Soul Gem. But it turns black and becomes a Grief Seed instead.” She opened her hand to show them the object she had been clutching the entire time. “They cannot be purified.”

Kisuke reached over and gingerly took the black and silver spindle from her. He felt her watching him hold it up and scrutinize the fine details of the silver filigree, but he was preoccupied by the thoughts rushing through his mind. “What do you do with them, then?” Kisuke asked with some distraction. When Akemi didn't answer immediately, he looked at her. She was the picture of reluctance. Everyone began to look like they dreaded her answer. The silence dragged while Akemi refused to look at anyone.

“Homura?” Isshin said hollowly. She hesitantly looked at him. He was holding Karin's body close, face lost. “Please.”

Akemi shifted unhappily. “A Grief Seed can be used to purify a magical girl's Soul Gem of corruption. A few times if it was a strong Witch.”

After another pause, Kisuke prompted, “And then?”

Akemi wet her lips and looked up at him as though both ashamed and angry. “The Incubator eats them, supposedly to convert them into raw energy.”

The unseen black fire that was Ichigo's power flooded the chamber with rage. “WHAT?!”

Akemi flinched, wild eyes seeking him out. Whatever experience she had with spiritual happenings, it seemed she was unused to others throwing their power around when emotional. “That's how it's been for millennia! But Karin and Yuzu—!” She faced Kisuke again. “I didn't think there was any way to do anything else, but when Karin and Yuzu found out they'd been tricked, they said they wanted to tell you, Mr. Urahara—they said they thought you might know how to free the souls... or something.” Akemi looked at her feet, face wretched. “I... I talked them into waiting until after we dealt with something on Sunday because I was worried the shinigami would come after us. I'm sorry.”

After a long, distraught silence shared by everyone in the room, Kisuke calmly said, “So. In
summary, there is a race swindling girls into selling their souls for... 'wishes'... so they can farm
them and harvest their spiritual energy. Yuzu and Karin fell into the trap and are now at the
system's end stage. Defeating the being at the heart of this maze will condense Karin's soul back
into a jewel, like this—” he held up the Grief Seed— “at which point I will have an opportunity to
help her with my expertise. Correct?”

Akemi blinked up at him, taken aback. “Um, yes.” She looked cautiously hopeful. “You... you
think you can do something?”

Kisuke seriously stared at the Grief Seed again, eyes narrowed. “I would need to do some testing
and call in some help, but I have some ideas, at least. Do you have any more of these... Grief
Seeds, you called them?”

Akemi looked stunned for a minute before her eyes lit up with determination. “I have Sayaka's. It is
full because we used it to clean our Gems. Is that okay?”

“Perfect,” he said quietly. He glanced at the others and ordered Tessai to put a stasis kidō on
Karin's body to keep it from decomposing. Kisuke then met Akemi's eyes with equal
determination. “We can speak of particulars later. It seems our first task is to navigate this
dimension and reclaim Karin's soul. I presume you have a good deal of experience in such
matters?”

Akemi nodded firmly. “Yes.”

Kisuke tucked the Grief Seed into a pocket and swept his free hand around the room in invitation.
“Do advise us, Miss Akemi.”

The girl eyed him a bit suspiciously, but turned to face the others. She was met by a wall of grimly
determined faces. Ichigo levered himself to his feet and angrily scrubbed tears from his cheeks.
Hitsugaya watched her with heavy-lidded eyes, jaw tight. Isshin's face seemed to be trying for
encouragement but failing to pierce his sorrow. Jinta looked sour but was swinging his huge club
experimentally while Ururu and Tessai looked grave. Yoruichi sauntered over to Isshin in cat form,
expressionlessly sitting near the man who was cradling his daughter's unoccupied body. Akemi
just stared at them as though not used to being looked to as an authority on anything— or being
taken seriously at all, really. That didn't bode well. She didn't do anything until Kisuke stepped up
and rested a hand on her shoulder.

When she looked up at him, Kisuke turned one corner of his mouth upwards in a sympathetic
smile. “Start by telling us what to expect.”

“Right,” Akemi faltered. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then breathed deeply and
looked up at the assembled fighters. “Right. Every labyrinth is different. Sometimes the Witch is
near the surface, but the Witch usually hides deep within. You can never assume you will not have
to fight your way to the center. The Witch...” she frowned, searching for a word. “…Splinters off
small pieces of itself to guard the labyrinth. These are called Familiars. They usually have some
sort of task. Some are docile, but others will attack. They can take very, very strange forms. For
example, I have seen Familiars that were giant cotton balls with black mustaches attached to giant
butterflies that acted as their legs. They looked harmless but could manifest thorny vines from their
eye sockets. The vines were armed with giant scissors.”

Everyone looked at her weirdly. Akemi shrugged helplessly in reply. Kisuke got the feeling she
thought there was no way to communicate the sheer bizarreness they were about to encounter.
Ominous.
“When we do reach the center, don't necessarily take the Witch's appearance at face value,” the girl continued. “Some are simple, but sometimes Witches have multiple stages or employ decoys.” Akemi bit her lip. “The Witch the three of us were fighting before... we thought it was the mannequin stuck into a giant jack-o'-lantern that was spinning in the middle of the room like a clock. It turned out its core was actually the big bell hanging above it. We did not find out until after it had pulled up all the train tracks and shot us with railroad spikes.” There were another utterly bizarre few sentences for the them to struggle through. “So... so, be aware of your surroundings. Anything can attack you. I have seen a child's messy drawing of an airplane shoot exploding crayons.”

Kisuke rubbed his chin. “It sounds like an individualized manifestation of madness.”

Akemi tilted her head. “I suppose.”

“Well, then!” Kisuke said as he turned away to look around with a flourish. “I wonder what sort of obstacles we'll face here.” He glanced around the room they occupied, which seemed to be the lobby of a museum, though the posters were covered with a fascinating scrawl of unrecognizable runes and piles of books teetered in the dim corners. Kisuke looked over his shoulder at the group. “Ichigo, use Kon. Captain Hitsugaya, ditch the gigai. It's an acceptable loss.”

The young men complied, Ichigo having begun carrying Kon in Soul Candy form to take his place during emergencies while away at college. The Mod Soul blinked and quickly took in his surroundings. “Uh... what the hell?”

Akemi's eyes went wide as she silently looked from one “Ichigo” to the other Ichigo. So she had never seen anything of the like? Interesting.

“Not now, Kon,” Ichigo grit out.

Kon whipped around to him and started to sass back, but Ichigo pointed over his shoulder. Kon saw Isshin solemnly lifting Karin's lifeless body and faltered speechlessly, then turned to angrily face front. “Whatever the hell's going on, I'm in.”

“Good,” Kisuke said curtly as Akemi kept goggling at Kon and Ichigo. It would have been cute in other circumstances. “Yoruichi, stick with Isshin. Isshin, can you handle running and jumping in the gigai?” After Isshin's answering nod, Kisuke continued. “Kon and Jinta, center. Tessai and Ururu, rear guard. Miss Akemi and I will take point. Ichigo and Captain Hitsugaya, flank.”

The party assumed a rough diamond formation and looked to Akemi, whose face mutely slid into a distant battle mask. She did an about face and focused on the entry to the rest of the labyrinth for the first time. It was mahogany with ornate decorative carvings, gold-plated runes adorning the lintel. Akemi approached the door and examined the hinges and knobs; it would open inward and one of the knobs featured an exaggerated keyhole. She stepped to one side and cautiously bent to peek through. She stepped back, frowned, and tried the knob. Locked, of course.

“Allow me,” Kisuke murmured.

Akemi raised a brow and stepped aside. Kisuke walked up to the door and hovered one palm over the keyhole. An orb of Shakkahō's red light manifested within the locking mechanism and broke it with a muted explosion. Akemi was fascinated.

“Be ready,” she ordered, hand inside her shield halfway to the elbow as she kicked the door open.

The door folded inward on silent hinges. The huge room beyond was lit only by gas lamps and wan
moonlight from windows above. It looked like a very old and eccentric library that had hosted a photographic stalker. There was a wide open area before a bank of book cases of varying heights arranged into an apparent maze, the tomes within ranging from ancient to modern. The air above the entire chamber was strung with interwoven garlands made by pinning photographs to cords using large mousetraps. The open floor entry was filled with different tables hosting chemical baths, incomplete books, and stacks of photographs. Giant, termite-like translucent insects Kisuke recognized as booklice industriously scurried about, their juvenile wings laying along the backs of the brown monks' habits they all wore. Each had a monocle over one beady eye. They diligently worked at various tasks, some seeming to be developing photos, others pasting photos into albums, writing at antique scriveners' desks, or assembling books. Others carried books, photos, and albums to teetering stacks along the edges of the room; still more took items from the disorganized stacks and carried them into the maze of shelves.

“What the fuck,” Kon said for the entire group.

Akemi didn’t bother answering or explaining the absurdity of labyrinths again. Instead, she professionally surveyed the room and declared, “I would prefer to move along a wall and try to go over the maze rather than through it.”

“I agree,” said Kisuke. “These creatures seem docile, but I worry about having a large number of them at our rear should that prove misleading.”

“Best to test them while we have a doorway and walls to use as cover.” Akemi finally withdrew her hand from her shield and ignored the startled sounds behind her as she raised a handgun, aimed at the nearest Familiar, and shot it. The creature fell down and dissolved into a puddle of glue in an empty habit.

Kisuke blinked his surprise. His mind whirled with questions. Sound strategy and... conventional weaponry?

The party tensed for a counterattack that never came. The rest of the library drones continued about their business.

“Where the hell did you get a gun?!” Kon yelled.

Akemi calmly looked back at him. “I store weapons in my shield.”

Fascinating.

Kon sputtered. “But where did you get it?! You're like fourteen!”

“That is not important,” Akemi said breezily as she faced the front again. “I think the left side looks best.”

“Hmm, that side of the maze does look more even on top,” Kisuke agreed, pretending to completely ignore the mundane weapon in the girl’s hand. “It may be dangerous in a way we can't see yet, though.”

Akemi nodded and eyed him appraisingly. Kisuke hoped he could use this as a chance to build a rapport before his inevitable interrogation. It would make their lives easier. Time to look like he totally knew exactly what he was doing without barking orders or belittling her. If she felt like she was in charge, she might talk more. Maybe. Plus he itched to see what a bona fide magical girl was capable of.
The party set out, moving along the left side of the room at a measured pace. They tried to avoid interrupting the booklice, but took out several that mindlessly tried to walk through their formation. The other drones still took no notice of them. Kisuke, Akemi, Ichigo, and Hitsugaya were the first to leap to the top of the book case that formed the outer wall of the maze. They warily stood ready for battle for a couple minutes while surveying the area for threats. The rest of the group ascended when they gave the all-clear.

It was difficult to guess how far the maze extended because of the garlands of poster-sized photographs blocking their sight. Even the top of the maze was laid out in a tricky manner, book cases of differing heights looking like a series of platforms. Particularly tall book cases occasionally formed barriers to progress. Kisuke and Akemi surveyed the layout and turned to one another. Akemi silently pointed out the path she wanted to take. Kisuke looked back at the maze with narrowed eyes, then nodded in agreement. The party proceeded cautiously, weaving through photograph garlands and hopping from book case to book case. The furniture grew wider as they went.

Hitsugaya curiously peered over the edge of a book case when they were deep within the maze. “Hey. The book cases aren't just wider, they're bigger overall. The ground is sloping down, so they're technically getting taller, too.”

Kisuke and Akemi looked down when they reached a corner. The scientist hummed in interest. “What a clever way to force misperception of depth at the beginning of the maze.”

While stopped, they all took a moment to really look at the hanging photographs. Most of them seemed to portray recognizable moments in Karin's life. There were several of her in the odd red costume she had been wearing earlier, often accompanied by Yuzu in yellow. Kisuke assumed those photos had actually happened. There was even one of Karin, Yuzu, Ichigo, and Homura smiling and eating crêpes. However, some of them appeared to be things that had never happened — an older Karin wearing the Japanese women's soccer team uniform and grinning widely; Karin and Hitsugaya in summer yukata, both looking five years old as they happily played soccer in front of the ridiculous Shiba workshop; Karin in the shinigami academy uniform; and —

Kisuke got a bad feeling as soon as he saw Ichigo swallow hard at the sight. There was a photo of the twins smilingly wearing Karakura High School uniforms, presumably for the first time. Their middle-aged mother stood behind them, beaming proudly with her hands resting on her daughters' shoulders. That was going to be a blow, Kisuke just knew it.

Ichigo shakily reached up, clasped a corner of the photo, and gently tugged it free from the big mouse trap's bait lever. The mouse trap snapped shut on his fingers and the line twanged sharply. Everyone froze and looked around them as library ladders shot up and fell against the edges of the book cases with a loud series of clacks that cascaded through the room.

“Oh, good job, Kurosaki,” Hitsugaya said acidly.

“How was I supposed to know?!” Ichigo squawked as he tried to shake the mouse trap off one-handed.

“They're literally traps, dumbass,” Jinta sneered as he raised his club in anticipation of attack.

Ichigo's embarrassed sputtering was cut off by the crunching ascension of papier maché housecats the size of tigers. Each one had plastic googly eyes and wore epaulettes and bearskins over a nun's wimple and veil. Their claws were small chainsaws.

“Karin's even screwier in the head than I thought,” Jinta muttered. Ururu casually butted the
muzzle of her spirit cannon against side of his head from behind as everyone briefly glared at him.

Jinta's lack of tact was soon forgotten in the ensuing mêlée. The three leading shinigami used their ranged attacks to devastating effect, filling the air with bright red and blue light and ice as Akemi carefully fired headshot after headshot, her reiatsu spiking as she imbued bullets with her power. Tessai shielded Isshin and Karin's body as Ururu fired her shoulder-mounted spirit cannon into the horde behind them. Yoruichi warily watched the battle from Isshin's shoulder to see if she would be needed. Jinta crushed cat heads like piñatas with his iron club on one side while Kon did his best to fend off attacks with speed and powerful kicks on the other, but the chainsaws made it difficult. The entire defense began to feel futile when they noticed that the flow of new cats wasn't stopping.

“We cannot afford to stop here,” Akemi shouted curtly. “We need to keep going.”

“Running battle!” Kisuke barked loudly. “Akemi, fall back. Tessai, shield the formation. Ichigo, Hitsugaya, alternate attacks with me as we run. Ready?”

“Yeah!”

The party took off at a run, Kisuke navigating the maze as the three in the lead took turns attacking. Benihime's scarlet fireworks, Zangetsu's brilliant crescents of light, and Hyōrinmaru's glacial dragon construct formed a brutal waltz as they plowed through the chainsaw-clawed cats ahead of them. After a very long ten minutes, the group skidded to a halt on the last book case. Kisuke called out directions for the fighters to turn and defend against the cats while he and Akemi evaluated the next phase of the labyrinth.

There was a large open space as there had been at the entrance to the room. While this area did feature the photograph garlands, it was also dense with red security lasers, caution tape, barbed wire, chains and ropes featuring various “no trespassing” signs in Japanese, English, German, and bizarre runes. The wall had a door at its base that was nowhere near the height of the book case cliff they stood on. It was too far away to make out any special features.

Akemi looked to Kisuke. “Straight down, then break a straight line to the door?”

Kisuke hummed. Her analytical and strategic strength was admirable. And so young! “Straight across at the base would be the shortest distance to have to break up the defenses,” he agreed.

At Kisuke's direction, the party descended along various empty pockets against the wall of the book case. After a hard landing, the spread-out fighters carefully regrouped. They looked up at crackling and hissing from above and found the papier maché cats entangled in the vertical defenses. The lasers caught some on fire; many were ripped and snagged on barbed wire. Some stubbornly tried to force their way down, jumping onto their ensnared cohorts and pawing through openings as they struggled downward. The ropes and caution tape were no match for the chainsaw claws; they mostly had to navigate the chains and lasers.

“Let's not wait for them to get through,” Yoruichi drily suggested.

Kisuke raised one palm toward the far door and silently cast a large Shakkahō. The red bolt tore through everything in its path and blew out the door. The group darted through the tunnel in the defenses, dodging around the lasers which were all that remained. They reached the door just as the first two cats dragged themselves to the ground.

Hitsugaya spun to one side. “I'll get the door!”
As soon as Tessai and Ururu cleared the door, Hitsugaya jabbed Hyōrinmaru forward and launched a larger version of his dragon construct at and through the gaping hole. It took out a handful of cats before it jammed in the door. Hitsugaya kept piling on the ice until the entire entry looked like a glacier. He paused to see if the Familiars would break through, then relaxed with the others.

The group took the opportunity to catch their breath as they surveyed the new room. It was a huge marble chamber with high vaulted ceilings. The entire room had a leftward curve; if there was a door, it must be around the bend. The floor was black and white tile neatly laid out in a pattern resembling the patches of a soccer ball. Unusually bright moonlight poured in from a series of large skylights. The otherwise empty room's walls were decorated with large murals roped off with velvet cords, used art supplies abandoned at the baseboards.

“An art gallery?” Kon asked in bewilderment. “How the hell did we get into an art gallery?”

No one answered him. They reformed their diamond and carefully progressed, most trying not to look at the murals too much after some cursory glances. They were abstract scribbles in various mediums at the beginning of the room but gradually gained form like a child learning to draw. Kisuke's eyes darted over to the murals occasionally to focus on the runic script that was scrawled in random places. Ichigo and Isshin seemed to recognize some of the crayon, marker, and chalk pictures; perhaps from when small versions drawn by Karin's tiny hands had decorated the refrigerator. The art evolved from unidentifiable to stick figures to awkward attempts at perspective and portraiture as they proceeded around the gradually spiraling corridor. By the time a door was in sight, the images on the wall were cartoonish but recognizable drawings of people in Karin's life.

Akemi abruptly stopped just before the door with a sharp gasp. Everyone followed her eyes to a life-size colored pencil drawing. A doll-like figure that was definitely meant to be Akemi in her school uniform stood smiling in the center of a group of five girls. The other four girls had identical generic faces but individual hair. All wore the same uniform, holding hands and smiling. Those who had done research on Mitakihara in the past week recognized the other girls by their hair from missing persons photos. After a moment, Kisuke lay a hand on Akemi's shoulder and tugged her back to reality. She cleared her throat, tossed her hair, and approached the door while trying not to look as shaken as she clearly was.

The tall mahogany door opened easily. This made everyone suspicious instead of relieved. They found another gallery. This one had individual exhibits behind velvet rope. Four were snowmen with soccer balls for heads, each with a different silly face painted on in a different color. Each had cleats, soccer jerseys, and orange cones piled at its base. One had a goal cage behind it. Another exhibit was a haphazard pile of baseball bats and metal clubs that had red paint poured over it. Next to it was a display of rocket launchers, white boxing gloves, and brooms. As they followed the bend, they passed a collection of many different lion plushies; a mountain of candy with partially concealed razor blades glinting in the moonlight; a stack of teapots, tea strainers, and teabags with a tray of burning incense; a pile of rabbit plushies and art supplies; and a curious arrangement of guns, grenades, clocks, and golf clubs.

Everyone was uncomfortable when they passed through the next door. This time the room was much smaller, but its entire contents seemed to have a unifying theme. Hitsugaya took one glance and swallowed hard. Scrolls of old-fashioned ukiyo-e artwork dominated the wall space, images of lotuses, crashing waves, and snowscapes scattered around the room. The two largest pictures were a masterful ink drawing of a serpentine dragon coiled through storm clouds and a landscape of a brilliant sunset on the opposite wall. Any empty space was studded with meticulously pinned and labeled dragonfly specimens in a variety of colors and sizes. At the base of all four walls were neatly sorted inkwells, papers both plain and written upon, cell phones, soccer balls, and snow
globs. Several of the party glanced Hitsugaya's way, but he steadfastly stared at the door at the far end of the room with his jaw clenched.

The group entered the next room even more hesitantly. No one liked the pattern that was emerging. They tried not to look at the art, but failed when Isshin quietly rasped, “Masaki.”

Large Impressionist paintings in gilded frames adorned the walls. Each featured a cheerful if blurry female figure. In one she was garbed as the goddess Artemis in flowing robes, her moonlit silver bow drawn on an unseen enemy. In another she was some manner of summer fairy queen, gauzy yellow frills floating around her with a gold crown and daffodils in her loose hair; she held a bouquet of sunflowers in her arms. One featured her as a young ballerina à la Degas, perched in arabesque at the center of the top of a set of Libra's scales; one dish held white sand and the other held black while a shadowy figure held her waist to keep her balanced. Finally, there was a painting done in the style of a Madonna with child, the seated woman surrounded by her flowing skirts; three small children slept with their heads on her lap as she serenely smiled down at them from beneath her halo. The floor was strewn with sweets, storybooks, and flowers. Several different bows and arrows were propped up in all the corners. A big, fancy crystal chandelier shone rays of sunny light throughout the room.

Kisuke turned back at the far door and seriously said, “Isshin. Ichigo.”

Isshin sniffed and blinked. “Let's go. Let's go.” Kisuke looked to Ichigo. The teenager nodded mutely, tearing his eyes away from the last painting with effort.

The next room was larger and eerily lit from above by a glowing ceiling fresco diptych of two crescent moons, one glowing blue and one glowing red. The room was divided down the center. The blue side featured a line of suits of armor in varying historical styles. Swords, bows, and quivers were mounted on the walls above and around them. A string of repeating numbers trailed across the top of the wall—1215—running the entire length of the room. At the center of the wall was a pedestal with a glass case; within it, a crown sat on a plush black cushion. A white hobbyhorse was visible just behind the pedestal, leaning on a wide pile of CD cases and books. The red side of the room had a row of samurai armor, the wall behind them practically wallpapered with medical supplies and weights. Across from the crown display was a medical exam table. Upon its paper covering was a giant scalpel whose handle had been wrapped like a katana's hilt. A collection of rainbow clown wigs was thoughtlessly shoved in a corner.

Ichigo and Isshin gravely glanced at each other, then Karin's empty body, then the far door. They dreaded the next room—it would probably center around Yuzu. It was going to be more of a stab to the heart than a punch to the gut, especially with the question that lay heavy on their minds:

Where was Yuzu's body?

Kisuke cautiously stepped through the next door and waved the others through. The Kurosaki men tensed and stepped through into... a long, plain white hallway. Everyone stared.

“Well, that was abrupt,” Yoruichi muttered.

The party moved carefully, uncomfortably aware of the loudness of their echoing steps. They passed through the next door into a small white room. The far wall was covered by a rolling, gray metal grate like those used when stores close for the evening. Kisuke looked around at everyone and gestured for Kon to lift it while the rest of the fighters prepared to defend. When they proceeded into the next white room, Kon warily opened the accordion-style black wrought-iron gate on the other side. In the next room they found what looked like a submarine door complete
with spinning wheel in the center. Kon looked at Kisuke incredulously, but the scientist just waved for him to open the door. The next room was larger and featured a massive bank safe. Red security lasers crisscrossed the room. Caltrops and barbed wire were spread across the floor. The room was wallpapered with No Trespassing signs in multiple languages. A single line of large runes was engraved upon the door of the safe, a handful of gold coins and large rubies littering the floor before it.

“This is it,” Akemi said decisively.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

?????

?????
Minion: Jerome, whose duty is to catalog new pieces.
Minion: Cyril, whose duty is to rid the library of mice.

A/N: Karin's labyrinth is so unusually/obviously personalized due to her wish and obsession with protecting specific precious people, like her family and friends.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Upon reentering Soul Society with Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki, Akon immediately leapt into shunpo and raced to the Twelfth Division grounds ahead of them. The scientists of the Shinigami Research and Development Institute paused in their duties to scurry out of their way and watch the bloodied party with fear or curiosity as they descended into the more secure labs near Captain Kurostuchi’s office. Akon barked an order to a mousy young scientist who scrambled away to fetch something. When they neared a particular door, Akon set the damaged sensor on the ground and carefully took the small containment kidō Captain Ukitake was maintaining around the spindle that had floated down when the pocket dimension had collapsed. Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki stood outside as Akon placed the strange little gem into an isolation room. As he closed the door, the mousy scientist brought three tubes and handed them to her Third Seat, then hovered to await new orders.

Akon popped the cap off the tube and poured two small ampules into his palm. He pantomimed to Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki to copy him, then pressed them into his ears. All three grimaced at sharp pain, but could hear again almost immediately.

“What was that?” Lieutenant Kuchiki asked as she winced through the pain while rubbing her ears.

“Rapid repair for tympanic membranes,” Akon answered. “It’s not uncommon for us to blow our ears with an explosion.” He turned to his subordinate and pointed at the damaged sensor. “Get this down to the Spiritual Wave Measurement Lab now. I want this salvaged and studied as soon as possible.”

“Um, sir?” the scientist said nervously as she lifted the sensor, “Uh, where is Department Head Tsubokura?”

Face grim, Akon replied, “Probably dead.”

The scientist gaped, then fled.

Akon was scrubbing his hands over his face and considering his next move when Nemu Kurotsuchi slid into view. She eyed the trio for a moment, taking in their roughed-up appearance. “I see the retrieval mission encountered complications,” she said placidly.
Akon snorted derisively. He tiredly rubbed his neck as the Thirteenth Division officers silently watched. “Tsubokura and the escorts are most likely dead, though we found no bodies. The portal I reported earlier led to some bizarre pocket dimension with some weird thing that turned into a giant LRAD. When the LRAD-monster was destroyed by Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki, the dimension collapsed. The damaged sensor array is on its way down to be salvaged. Other than that... well, look.”

Nemu calmly peered through the viewing window and the spindle in the containment field, then turned back to Akon and raised one eyebrow.

“It fell out of thin air when the pocket dimension collapsed. It feels like the energy of the dimension hyper-condensed into a single object. It also happens to feel a lot like Hollow reishi.”

“I would like Captain Kurotsuchi’s input on this situation,” announced Captain Ukitake. His eyes were hard as Nemu looked his way. “I read the reports. Something isn't right in Mitakihara. I don't want to assume we eliminated the only threat. Something is capable of evading detection while preying upon humans and unseated shinigami. If it can hide from your broad-scale sensors, we have no way of knowing how many of these things are out there without direct involvement. This needs to be investigated now.”

Nemu stared at the captain for a moment before dipping her head. “I will inform Captain Kurotsuchi.”

Captain Ukitake nodded decisively, then turned to leave. Three steps away, he turned back. Jaw tight, he added, “Also inform your captain that I am reporting the situation to Captain-Commander Yamamoto, so he should expect to hear from First Division soon.” Everyone present translated it to This isn't something I'll let your captain avoid because it's not interesting enough. Let him know I'm willing to sic the old man on him.

The Thirteenth Division officers left. Akon was itching for a smoke— he hadn't seen combat in years and the adrenaline crash had hit him headlong— but he saw the way his superior was eyeing him. She was going to make him explain it to their captain. Great.

Akon had a migraine by the time he sufficiently explained everything to his captain. He was about to flee and acquire smokes and coffee when a Hell Butterfly fluttered in. Kurotsuchi, far more interested in the little black gem, relayed an order to immediately recall Captain Hitsugaya from the World of the Living for a captains’ meeting that evening. Well, at least the Captain-Commander was taking the mess in Mitakihara seriously. Making a phone call to Captain Hitsugaya should be simple enough.

Fifteen minutes later, Akon listened to a recording of Captain Hitsugaya's clipped tone professionally asking the caller to leave a message for the tenth time. It was unlike Hitsugaya to turn off his phone and let it go straight to voicemail. Uneasy, he dialed Urahara's Soul Phone.

“Hello, my shinigami friends! I'm currently unavailable! Am I inventing something? Doing an experiment? Selling candy? Giving cream to stray cats? Who knows?! Try again later, hahaha!”

He dialed Urahara Shop.

“Hello, hello, hello! Urahara Shop is currently closed! If you'd like to place a special order, please leave a message! If not, try calling again tomorrow!”

He dialed Kurosaki Clinic.
“Hello, you've reached the Kurosaki Clinic. If this is an emergency, please hang up and call for an ambulance. The clinic is currently closed—”

He dialed Ichigo Kurosaki's Soul Phone.

“Yo. I have this thing on vibrate and will ignore the call if I'm in class, so just keep calling until I pick up if it's an emergency. If it's not urgent, you know what to do. Later.”

He dialed Ichigo ten times before trying the teen's normal cell phone. No answer. Tried Captain Hitsugaya again. Still no answer. Frustrated, he dialed the Soul Phone Urahara had given to Ichigo's Quincy friend.

Click. “Ishida speaking,” said an annoyed voice.

“Uryū Ishida, correct?” asked Akon. At a peevish affirmative, Akon leaned forward on his terminal and continued, “This is Akon, Third Seat of the Twelfth Division. I'm sorry for bothering you, but I am trying to contact Captain Hitsugaya, Kisuke Urahara, or Ichigo Kurosaki. Do you know where they are?”

After a pause, Ishida suspiciously replied, “Kurosaki returned to Karakura yesterday. I would assume he and Urahara are there. I have neither heard from nor seen Hitsugaya in months.”

Akon chewed his cheek. “I've tried calling all of them, even Urahara Shop and Kurosaki Clinic. Everything goes straight to voicemail. Are you sure you don't know something?”

The line went quiet for a moment, then the sound quality changed as the Quincy switched to speaker phone. A feminine sound of confusion and a deep murmur faintly came over the line. Probably Ichigo's other friends.

“Certain. Why are you trying to reach them? What's going on?” Ishida asked tensely.

Pursing his lips, Akon replied, “There has been an incident in Mitakihara. I am attempting to recall Captain Hitsugaya from his mission for a captains' meeting.”

Before he could continue, Orihime Inoue's voice worriedly chimed, “Mitakihara? Does this have something to do with that poor girl Ichigo said is visiting his sisters?”

Cold sweat beaded on Akon's face. The lack of communication was like the Mitakihara expedition all over again. That many powerful figures being out of contact was unlikely to be a coincidence. What the hell was going on?

Akon checked the sensor data for Karakura and found nothing unusual for the town—a strong hollow signature had spiked by the shop and had been extinguished almost immediately, but that happened every few weeks. All he could think of were the Mitakihara portal only detectable at close range and Urahara's report on the strange girl from Mitakihara. Correlation was not causation, but a feeling of dread crept up on Akon regardless.

“Mister Akon?” Inoue said when his silence dragged on.

Akon scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I honestly don't know. But we lost the Mitakihara research team to an enemy unlike anything I've ever seen.”

After a short pause of quiet murmuring that turned into hurried footsteps and distant doors opening and closing, Ishida coldly demanded, “Tell me everything. We'll leave for Karakura on the next train. We can be there in an hour.”
Akon debated what to say. Screw it, may as well give Kurosaki's comrades-in-arms enough information to avoid being killed when they inevitably flocked to their de facto leader's side.

Ten minutes later, Akon tiredly hung up. He reluctantly picked up the office phone and pressed his captain's extension. As expected, the man snarled at him for interrupting his study of his new toy. Akon rubbed his temples and said, “Sir, I think we may have another situation.”

So screwed.

“Any last minute advice, Miss Akemi?” Urahara asked as he solemnly examined the room.

Homura pursed her lips, doing the same. “It is difficult to say. The overall theme of the labyrinth could mean the Witch will be defensively strong, but it could also mean that it is more vulnerable to attack once the labyrinth's defenses been breached. We may be able to tell more once we see what form the Witch has taken, but even its appearance cannot be trusted.”

Urahara nodded thoughtfully. “Well, there are rather more lasers than I care to dodge. No need to be tidy— let's just destroy the walls they're coming out of.”

Homura watched their techniques with interest as Urahara and Mr. Tsukabishi blasted opposite walls. Fascinating. But Urahara caught her watching them and must have seen her interest, because he reacted with... curiosity, perhaps? But he shook his head and looked away without saying anything. Instead, he directed Ichigo to one side of the vault door and stood by the other side himself. Both wedged the tips of their blades into the seam of the vault door and charged their attacks. They successfully blasted the door open. They dodged as the door fell toward them, then resumed their diamond formation to cautiously enter.

They found a limited space in what seemed to be a very large cavern, if the distant, shadowed ceiling was any indication. Stacked treasure chests formed walls that were about three meters tall, densely adorned with caltrops and razorwire. Crisscrossing razorwire formed a woven ceiling between treasure chest walls. The wide path was forcibly narrowed by neat, waist-high stacks of gold and silver ingots. Fancy jewelry, ceremonial weapons, and ancient artifacts were in glass display cases on the flat surface of the bulwark of precious metals. The only source of illumination was the amassed riches, all softly glowing.

“*Do not* touch anything if you can help it,” Homura said coldly. “The treasure may be traps like the photos were.”

The group carefully followed the hallway in a curve with a slight downward slope. It took almost ten minutes to near the end. They paused to brace themselves before exiting the brighter doorway, then slowly crept out.

The overall cavern was enormous and glittered with treasure. The riches were piled up against the inner circle of treasure chest walls and strewn all over the ground. Everything glittered with gold, silver, and jewels. The chamber floor sloped downward from the walls, but changed course and rose into a wide hill of gold, silver, gemstones, books, weapons, sculptures, framed artwork, dolls, photo albums, and scattered skeletons of ancient creatures. Atop the hoard was a massive exhibit pedestal bordered by velvet rope and an over-sized museum placard featuring a line of large runes. Presiding over the entire chamber was a draconic figure of composite parts: A triple-size
tyrannosaurus rex skeleton with golden chain mail over its ribs and proportionately large red birds' wings erupting from where the dinosaur's forelegs should have been. Improbably large rubies were lodged in its eye sockets and glowed ominously.

Everyone stopped and stared, many in disbelief.

“That's... that's supposed to be Karin's soul?” Hitsugaya said just above a whisper, horrified.

Homura glanced at his pained face and looked toward the Witch again. She didn't want to look at the Kurosaki men. “Yes.”

Isshin numbly slid down onto his knees, transfixed by the form his daughter's soul took when twisted by despair. Ichigo staggered out in front of the group in shock, speechlessly stumbling down the hill of coins as Homura called out for him to stop. He ignored her in favor of painfully shouting his sister's name, his weapon held loosely as his world narrowed down to a single point.

The skeletal dragon bellowed, its roar interwoven with a tortured, furious scream that sounded like Karin. It beat its wings and stamped its feet.

Mr. Tsukabishi reacted faster than any of them, throwing a large magic shield over their heads as heavy objects fell from the ceiling. Most appeared to be anvils, but several large glass objects shattered against the spell. Ichigo wasn't as lucky, finding himself trapped in a glass bell jar with a neat runic label. He startled and tried to break out, but there wasn't enough room to swing his blade and the glass seemed to accept his power as an energy source to glow by rather than be compromised by it. The young man looked from his sister's monstrous soul to the retrieval party in dread.

The anvils had scarcely slammed into the ground when they rose once more, sprouting horse legs. They cavorted ominously, each draped with gold chains bearing glittering rubies. Homura shot one and scowled as her bullet simply ricocheted off the anvil. Urahara muttered a phrase and swung his blade, bright red energy lashing out and cleaving an anvil in two. One nearby turned, bucked, and fired its rear legs at the group as some bizarre horseshoe rocket. Urahara sharply drew his left arm up and silently cast a round magical shield to deflect the projectiles.

Homura was getting more and more curious about the variety of magic they used. It seemed extremely versatile.

Another fight broke out, anvil-horses charging the group or launching their legs. Hitsugaya focused on immobilizing them with ice as they charged or fell from above, then leaving them for others to pick off between their own enemies. The fake Ichigo resentfully withdrew behind Tsukabishi's shield, finding his kicks useless against solid iron. He stood protectively over Isshin, who seemed to have distanced himself from reality to stare at his daughter's face with his head bowed. Jinta focused on trying to take out the horse legs with his club, gritting his teeth whenever he connected with iron just wrong and the impact painfully resonated through his bones. Ururu fired her spirit cannon in every direction but Ichigo's. It was chaotic, but Homura found herself impressed by how well they handled themselves under the onslaught.

Her experience with the Pumpkin Witch fresh in her mind, Homura opted to ignore the Familiars in favor of the Witch. She could shove bombs into its jaws but the chain mail niggled at the back of her mind and made her think that its weak spot would be the portion protected by armor. Face set in determination, Homura put her Beretta in her shield and darted away from the group with flash steps, nimbly weaving her way through the enemies while using her shield to bat away horse legs. She ignored the dismayed shouts from the fighters and scaled the central treasure heap in several
jumps, landing on the mahogany platform. The Witch snarled and turned to face Homura head-on as she pulled an RPG launcher from her shield, swung it up to her shoulder, and fired a grenade at the center of the golden chain mail at close range.

The grenade exploded on impact and blew apart the front of the armor. The dragon hunched forward, beat its wings, and blew fire at Homura with an enraged roar. Homura reacted without thinking, dropping the launcher, freezing time, and leaping to one side to avoid being roasted alive. She brought her shield up and flared her magic around her as she let time resume. When the smoke cleared, Homura stared dumbly while several of the fighters across the room cried out in horror.

Without its chain mail, the dragon's rib cage was exposed. Within it was Yuzu's body, bound to the dinosaur skeleton's spine at heart-level with many strings of pearls. It was dressed in a billowing yellow princess dress, white-gloved hands clasped over its breast and secured in place by a strand of citrines. The dress' sunny frills swayed with the Witch's every movement, as did the little veil attached to the conical hat on the corpse's head.

The Witch took advantage of Homura's momentary shock to spin and swipe at her with its bony tail. She got her shield up in time, but was swept off her feet and sent airborne. Homura angled herself for a decent landing but her direction suddenly changed after an impact in midair. Looking to the side, she found herself snagged in Hitsugaya's free arm as he brought them to a halt and set them on one of the treasure chest terraces. He looked at her, face pained, and quietly said, “Let's end this.”

Homura's face hardened and she nodded firmly. Both looked back to the mountain of treasure, where the dragon roared and breathed fire in random directions in a display of anger.

Hitsugaya adjusted his grip on his blade. “Can you get back up there yourself?”

“Yes. You have a plan?”

“I'll freeze her... it... in place from behind. Try to... to blow h-its head off with that thing you used,” Hitsugaya said heavily.

Homura nodded again. “Be ready to grab Yuzu's body when the Witch fades or it will disappear with the labyrinth.”

Hitsugaya swallowed, worked his jaw, and nodded slowly, eyes darting to Yuzu's doll-like corpse. His face shifted into something cold and businesslike as he steeled himself. “Ready?”

Homura nodded at him with newfound respect. “Yes.”

Both took off at high speed. Homura landed in front of the Witch to get its attention while Hitsugaya landed behind it. He shouted and lashed out with his blade. Icy dragon constructs burst from the sword and wrapped around the Witch's tail and legs as Homura pulled a new RPG launcher out of her shield and readied it. The Witch beat its wings and shrieked in fury, turning its head to breathe fire at the shinigami. Hitsugaya made a shield of ice with a shout. Homura had a clear shot at the unprotected side of the Witch's neck. She froze time for a moment to perfect her aim, then released her hold on time as she pulled the trigger.

The grenade exploded against the skeleton's cervical vertebrae and completely severed the head. Homura immediately dropped the spent launcher and readied a second in case the Witch hadn't been killed, but it proved unnecessary. The dragon's bird wings exploded in a flurry of feathers as the skeleton fell apart. Hitsugaya leapt up and caught Yuzu's body as soon as it began to fall, golden frills dissolving and transforming back into her school uniform. A moment later, the world
wobbled and the labyrinth completely collapsed.

The entire party found themselves in the ruined back half of the Urahara Shop. They looked around in surprise as Homura sadly watched the Witch’s Grief Seed drift to the floor.

Freed from the bell jar, Ichigo dropped his blade and mutely crawled toward the silver and black spindle with jerky movements. His hands shook as he held them over the gem that radiated Karin's warped magic. Ichigo made a choking sound and carefully cupped his hands around the Grief Seed, then lifted it to stare at it. He was silent for a long moment, then roared with enraged grief.

Homura's heart ached. As always, she didn't need to be a Witch to inflict despair and suffering on good people who actually had something left to lose.

The occupants of the wrecked Urahara Shop numbly stood or sat in the aftermath. After a pause to get his bearings, Tōshirō stepped forward and carefully laid Yuzu's body on the floor in front of her father. Isshin's reaction was delayed, but the man soon put Karin's body beside her sister's and sat staring at his daughters with one hand covering the bottom of his face as he struggled to cope. Something in Tōshirō cringed at the sight of his former captain's state of desolate heartbreak. The man was completely undone and Tōshirō didn't know how to fix it. Urahara solemnly approached Isshin and lay a hand on his friend's shoulder. Ichigo stayed where he was, curled up on his knees as though shielding Karin's Grief Seed while his shoulders silently heaved.

Tōshirō, Ichigo, and Urahara's phones shrilled notifications for missed calls all at the same time.

"That can't be good," Yoruichi said ominously.

The Mod Soul pulled Ichigo's phone out of his jeans and looked around the group for instruction. Urahara motioned for Kon to stop as Tōshirō tiredly flipped his phone open and looked at the notices. “Twelfth Division,” he said dully. He opened a text message which announced his orders. “Urgent, unscheduled captains' meeting tonight to hear Ukitake's incident report and Kurotsuchi’s initial findings.”

“Sounds like things went to Hell up north, too,” Yoruichi said quietly.

Tōshirō scrolled down, reading multiple missed call notices and increasingly concerned texts. He sighed and pressed the callback button. The call was picked up almost immediately. “Hitsugaya reporting,” he said tonelessly. Tōshirō stared at the Kurosaki sisters' bodies as Akon spoke rapidly on the other end of the line. “We're fine. I understand. I will return just before then. There's been... an incident here. We need to figure out some things.” Twelfth Division's Third Seat stammered an objection, but Tōshirō cut him off with a weary, “The things from Mitakihara are also in Karakura. We are dealing with a crisis. We have a lead. I'll report what we figure out at the meeting.” He didn't bother waiting for a reply, ending the call and closing his phone.

Urahara straightened, face businesslike. “Ichigo. Let me see the Grief Seed.” Ichigo huddled around it more. “Let me try to help her, Ichigo.”

Ichigo sniffed and shuffled to his feet. He placed the Grief Seed in Urahara's palm gently, then hovered his hands over it as one would a sacred object. “Please,” he rasped, looking up at Urahara desperately.
Urahara lay his free hand on Ichigo's shoulder. “I'll do my best.” He was prudent enough to avoid making promises he wasn't sure he could keep. Ichigo nodded his understanding and shuffled over to his father. He sat next to Isshin and joined him in silent despondency.

The sight was jarring for Tōshirō. Everything about this was wrong on so many levels that he felt frozen in the moment, unable to react. How was he supposed to react? His best friend and her sister were dead, the savior of Soul Society needed an entirely different kind of salvation himself, and Tōshirō’s old father figure was utterly broken. Wrong wrong wrong. The worst thing was that he didn’t understand.

Someone did, though, he thought as he eyed Homura Akemi. The girl was bloodied and exhausted and looked dead inside, but she had answers.

Tōshirō wanted answers.

Urahara breathed deeply, assessed the room and its occupants, then barked orders. “Kon, Jinta, Ururu, clean the place up as much as possible. Yoruichi, keep an eye on them.” He indicated the surviving Kurosakis with one hand. “Tessai, make them some tea then write an incident report.” He gave Tsukabishi a significant look as he said it. Tsukabishi nodded in understanding; Tōshirō had a feeling there would be sedatives in the tea given to Isshin and Ichigo. “Captain Hitsugaya, Miss Akemi; if you would come with me, please.”

Akemi warily obeyed, recognizing the order hidden in the suggestion. The way she looked at Tōshirō told him she understood that he would be behind her specifically to keep her from fleeing. She followed the scientist through more corridors than the little shop should have been able to hold until they ended up in a combination lab and office.

Urahara crossed the room and indicated a chair at a desk. “Please, sit, Miss Akemi.”

Akemi approached the table as though walking toward a guillotine. She sat primly as Urahara wandered across the room. She was obviously conscious of Tōshirō’s sharp eyes watching her every move from the door, but she didn’t squirm. A shinigami at her front, a shinigami blocking the exit, and no idea how they would react in the wake of the tragedy, but she remained calm.

That took guts. Especially given she thought shinigami would hunt her kind. Tōshirō hoped she wanted them as allies now that they had fought by her side. He hoped she felt the twins' precious people deserved an explanation.

Above all, Tōshirō wanted to know how to save the Kurosaki girls— and who would be feeling Hyōrinmaru’s wintry wrath.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
ALEXANDRIA, the Hoarding Witch with a protective nature. She will shield her treasures from all threats and preserve them forever in her museum fortress.

Minion: Eligius, whose duty is to trample thieves.

A/N: This hurt to write. OTL
This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for the lovely reviews!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FÜNFUNDZWANZIG

TIMELINE X+N

Kisuke carefully put the two Grief Seeds into secure containers, sat at his desk, and politely asked Akemi to excuse him for a few minutes while he tended to a task. They all knew it was an order to stay where she was while Kisuke rapidly typed out notes and questions about the entire debacle. Akemi played along, nodding and murmuring for him to take all the time he needed—a perfect guest. The clacking of the keyboard was the only sound in the tense atmosphere for a good ten minutes. Finally, Kisuke sat back and scrubbed his face with both hands, then sighed deeply. He dropped his hands looked at the bona fide magical girl sitting rigidly in his guest chair.

Kisuke chose to remain silent and just observe Akemi for awhile. Her mask of calm was admirable for one so young, but the emotions she tried to hide were betrayed by slight twitches and frowns. The girl was keenly aware that Hitsugaya was leaning against the door to their side not solely out of interest but to keep her from escaping, her eyes unhappily darting to him and the visible hilt of his sword now and then. If Kisuke was interpreting her disapproving glances at his computer correctly, she didn't like that he had documented anything. Her ankles were crossed and her hands were clasped in her lap in apparent passivity, but her knuckles were white. Ah, she was consciously trying to look non-threatening. And his long, wordless scrutiny was starting to unnerve her. Good.

Kisuke clapped his hands with false eagerness. “Well!”

Akemi startled like a frightened bird. Good.

He straightened and rolled closer to the desk. “I think we won't get anywhere until I address your concern about being hunted by shinigami. I beg your pardon, but I've never heard of magical girls outside of fiction, never mind missions to hunt them. If you would explain why you think shinigami would hunt magical girls, I may be able to put your fears to rest.”

The girl stared at him, considering. “I only know what Karin and Yuzu told me last week,” she hedged.

Kisuke nodded pleasantly. “That's fine. Do tell.”

Akemi pursed her lips. “They said that what the Incubator does to make us magical girls imitates what zan...pakuto?” Kisuke nodded. “We would have if we went to... Soul Society? And became shinigami.” She paused to look at him for a reaction. Kisuke displayed nothing but polite interest. “That our weapons aren't perfect copies, but they can purify Hollows and help souls cross over.” Akemi eyed him again. He still didn't react. “Karin said the shinigami don't— didn't?— like it
when humans can... do shinigami things. The Incubator said shinigami execute humans who get powers. It mentioned some kind of genocide?” She peered up at him in inquiry.

“The Quincy?” Kisuke asked. Akemi nodded. He scratched his chin. “Unfortunately, yes, though there were extenuating circumstances.” At Akemi's skeptical look, he added, “Their methods were outright destroying the souls that made up Hollows instead of purifying them and sending them to Soul Society. There were attempts to make peace, but they fell through. I will admit it was largely due to shinigami arrogance. We've all had our hubris thoroughly shoved in our faces since then, though.”

Akemi tilted her head thoughtfully. “In the war? Karin said her brother defeated the enemy and the shinigami changed their minds because he was human and shinigami and Quincy, yet still helped them. But Karin and Yuzu did not want to mention their ties to shinigami so the Incubator did not believe them when they said relations had improved.”

Kisuke blinked and raised his eyebrows. “That's... vastly simplified, but— wait, the girls know all that?”

Hitsugaya scoffed from where he leaned on the door and quietly said, “If you thought the girls wouldn't succeed at prying anything out of Kurosaki after all the strange things that happened in the war, you're either a fool or have never met them.”

Kisuke thought for a moment, then conceded the point with a nod. “Anyway, yes, Ichigo and his allies changed several important minds in the military and the bureaucracy was completely replaced. While still conservative, they are far more moderate. The official stance toward humans with powers has been relaxed. As long as they don't damage and destroy souls, prevent souls from crossing over, or show hostile intent, the Thirteen Divisions will leave them be.” Kisuke sat back. “Do magical girls have hostile intent?”

“No!” Akemi blurted, then immediately said, “Well....” The shinigami raised their eyebrows.

Akemi pursed her lips. “Not toward anyone in particular. As a whole. But there are magical girls who will aggressively defend their territory. Especially from other magical girls.”

Kisuke frowned. That was actually really surprising. “Against their own? Why?”

Akemi quickly averted her eyes. He waited her out. She used a clinical voice to answer, “Grief Seeds are in high demand and limited supply. Some girls team up and share, but others do not. If they are not with someone, they are usually against everyone.”

Harsh. “And what kind of magical girl are you, Miss Akemi?”

The girl pursed her lips and stared at him coldly. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“On if another magical girl threatens my friends.” She frowned mulishly. “I am not worried about losing territory. I can easily get new Grief Seeds elsewhere.”

Kisuke hummed in thought to stall. Her attitude bespoke confidence in her abilities and experience. Not necessarily to a delusional extent, considering her performance in the labyrinth. He set aside fact-checking her self-evaluation until later. Deciding to be cruelly blunt to catch her off-guard, he casually asked, “Do you have any plans for causing an apocalypse or something in your anger now that you've failed and your friends are dead?”

Akemi recoiled as though slapped, white-faced. She nearly rose from her chair to indignantly shout...
something, but her eyes went wide and she snapped her mouth shut with a click of her teeth. The girl sat back hard and stared at him wildly, plainly realizing she had underestimated how dangerous he was with words.


Kisuke took his hat off and dipped his head. “My sincerest apologies for the cruel words, Miss Akemi. I needed to startle a genuine reaction out of you. If I am to assist you and advocate for you, I must be able to assure my peers of your lack of ill will. In my position, I am obligated to take measures to ensure my allies’ safety. I hope you understand that.”

Akemi squinted at him suspiciously and resentfully grit out, “The only being anyone needs to worry about me always hating and wanting to kill is the Incubator.”

“Good. I believe you.” Kisuke nodded genially, making a mental note of the interesting qualifier she had used. He wondered if that little “always” was a conscious choice or a Freudian slip. Whichever it was, he needed to convince her to set aside her newly heightened suspicion for cooperation. Her friends were dead, so they would make poor levers, but—yes. Never use the stick when the carrot will suffice. Kisuke met her eyes and seriously said, “Should the information you provide lead us to determine this ‘Incubator’ is a threat which preys upon human souls, would you be willing to assist in its elimination?”

The girl blinked. Tilted her head in skepticism. Tried to keep a straight face. Failed to hide the eager sharpness in her eyes. “I have tried to kill it many times,” she said carefully, her face sliding into that of a hardened veteran several times her age. “It has many bodies. Possibly a single consciousness. I have lost track of how many I have destroyed. It always has replacements. I have conflicting information regarding what it really is and where it comes from. It claims to have been causing this cycle for millennia.”

“And it preys on the souls of innocent girls,” Kisuke added smoothly.

Akemi nodded, eyes steely.

“I will take great pleasure in unraveling the net this being has caught you all in.” Kisuke let his eyes get heavy-lidded, his face easing into grim craftiness. “And I do so love a challenge.” He put his hat back on. “First order of business is to see if I can salvage Karin and Yuzu's souls, though.”

Akemi shook her head mournfully. “Yuzu's soul no longer exists.”

Kisuke and Hitsugaya tensed.

“What do you mean?!” Hitsugaya demanded. “You gave a Grief Seed to Urahara—!”

“That is not Yuzu's soul.”

Kisuke rolled over to the lab table and opened the containers to feel their reiatsu. One was definitely a twisted version of Karin's. The other... was definitely not Yuzu's. He looked up at Hitsugaya, surprised. “She's right.” He frowned. “How did I not notice...?”

Akemi’s face relaxed into sympathy. “You were very good, but everyone's first labyrinth is very disorienting. And you were distracted.”

Kisuke scowled. “No excuse.” He closed the containers and rolled back to the desk. “Where is her soul?”
Akemi frowned. “I told you: It no longer exists.”

“Explain.”

She paused, then held up her left hand to show him the diamond-shaped amethyst on its back. “When magical girls transform, their Soul Gems do, too. They usually become some kind of ornament.” She withdrew her hand and visibly debated how much to say.

“Miss Akemi,” Kisuke said softly. “From their name, I presume Soul Gems are critically important and you don't want to make yours vulnerable.” Akemi looked surprised. “But incomplete information can slow or kill my investigation. I need to know.”

Akemi frowned uncertainly and glanced warily at Hitsugaya. The young man straightened and growled, “I want to destroy whatever did this to Karin and Yuzu. You're our only lead. No one in this shop is going to let anything happen to you. I'll be your representative at the captains' meeting. We need as much information as possible to shorten the investigation and figure out how to handle this.”

After another minute of consideration, the magical girl sighed. “A magical girl's Soul Gem is literally her soul condensed into crystal. As long as our Gems do not become too corrupted, we can recover from and fight through any injury because the damage is separate from us—our bodies may as well be puppets once we contract. The greatest weakness in this system is that destruction of the Soul Gem is literally destruction of the soul.” Akemi's voice quieted. “Yuzu's Soul Gem was shattered by a railroad spike this afternoon. That Grief Seed is the soul of the Witch who killed her.”

Hitsugaya sagged against the door and stared blankly at the ceiling. Kisuke closed his eyes and rubbed them with one hand. “You're certain?”

Akemi nodded. “I saw the shards dissolve.”

“Right. Okay. Well.” Kisuke dropped his hand, breathed deeply, and changed course. He couldn't afford to dwell on the implications yet. “Karin's soul, then.” He snagged a pad of paper and plopped it on his desk. Ready to write, he turned a piercing gaze on Akemi. “I want you to tell me everything you know about Soul Gems and Grief Seeds, magical girls and Witches. Even things you are uncertain about or oddities you've observed. Save the story of what brought you to this point for later.”

Akemi drew a steadying breath and began to speak.
A muscle jumped in Uryū's jaw. “What are we doing here?! Twelfth Division called us because none of you would answer your phones! And what is going on here?!”

“Oh.” Kon listlessly looked into the gaping hole in the shop. “I don't really understand everything, but we fought some weird-ass monsters and Karin and Yuzu are dead, but Urahara's gonna try to fix them.”

“What?!” hissed Uryū as Chad and Orihime rushed into the shop. Kon just shrugged and went back to hauling debris.

Uryū caught up with Chad and Orihime, who had drawn up short at the sight of their friend and his father sitting in shell-shocked defeat by the bodies of the Kurosaki sisters.

Orihime held her hands over her mouth and made a tearful sound of dismay, then charged forward. “Ichigo! I'll heal them!” Two of her hairpin fairies glimmered and darted to the girls, fluttered around them, and made a glowing shield. Yuzu's wounds and pallor were undone, but the girls remained lifeless. Orihime's fairies returned to her and spoke in voices that sounded like chimes to everyone else. “But— but why—?"

Ichigo looked up at her with painful slowness. He stared at her dully, eyes glassy. “Their souls aren't in their bodies.”

“What are they?” Orihime asked worriedly.

Ichigo's only reply was to speechlessly sink his face into his hands and shake his head. It was one of the more disturbing things his friends had seen.

Yoruichi slunk around from behind Isshin and murmured an order to follow her. She took them aside and explained the afternoon in broad strokes. Orihime cried through most of the report while Uryū and Chad reacted with horror. They were spared having to think of something to say by the appearance of Urahara, Hitsugaya, and the dark-haired actual real-life magical girl.

Ichigo remained morose, but Isshin blearily looked up at the shopkeeper. “Kisuke, you bastard, you had Tessai drug us.”

“Of course I did,” Urahara said unrepentantly.

Isshin stared for a moment, mumbled, “Thanks,” and went back to watching his daughters as though he might see them suddenly draw breath again if he watched long enough.

Urahara looked around the room. His eyes sharpened. “Ah! Miss Inoue! Just the talented young lady I wanted to see!”

Orihime sat ramrod straight and stared at him intensely. “Can I help?!”

“Quite possibly. I would prefer to do a bit of study and explain things to you instead of throwing you into a situation blindly. I need to be sure I understand what's happening.”

Orihime clenched her fists and made a face of earnest determination. “I'll do whatever it takes!”

Urahara smiled faintly. “I had no doubt that you would.” He looked around the assembly more seriously. “Captain Hitsugaya needs to leave to make a report at a captains' meeting. I am sending an official request for him to be stationed here afterward. I need to study Miss Akemi's information and do some tests. In the mean time, everyone is staying here tonight and everyone needs to eat. Tessai, Ururu, please prepare a meal. Yoruichi, please go to the clinic and fetch some things for
Isshin and Ichigo.” The black cat trotted down a hallway. “Jinta, prepare a room and futon for the Kurosaki family to stay in for now. Everyone else... just... do whatever. Clearing debris would be nice but you can just sit with the Kurosakis if you want.” Urahara exchanged quiet words with Hitsugaya before the captain departed, then retreated to his lab.

Uryū stood and looked at the Kurosaki men for a long minute as he tried to reorient himself to a world where they could look so beaten. He couldn't, so he wandered over to the gaping hole in the wall to busy his hands with something so he wouldn't feel useless.

It didn't work, but at least he didn't have to see Ichigo's face.

Homura stood awkwardly, unsure what to do. A dark-skinned woman with her dark hair pulled up in a ponytail strode out of a hall. Homura blinked. She knew that magical signature. “Yoru... ichi...?”

“In the flesh,” Yoruichi drawled humorlessly. Her human voice was drastically different from her feline form's voice.

“Um.”

“What?”

Homura looked down at her hands, which were clenched in her bloodied lavender skirt. “When you go to the clinic, can you get me something?” Yoruichi raised a brow in inquiry. “Yuzu washed my uniform and stacked it all on her dresser. It has a cream blouse and black skirt. Can you get it for me? I want to change out of this—” she indicated her costume— “but if I do, I'll be wearing Yuzu's dress. I... I don't think I can do that.”

Yoruichi's face softened and she let out a puff of air. She rested one hand on Homura's head. It was strangely comforting. “Got it. I shouldn't be gone long.”

Left alone, Homura desperately wanted to hide in a closet and forget the day had happened. But she didn't feel she deserved that respite when her... her friends— she had made more friends and gotten them killed a week after meeting them—! She shook her head. Her friends lay dead and their family was devastated. All because Homura had prioritized their usefulness over their safety.

Homura approached the Kurosaki family as though walking on eggshells and slowly knelt across from the men, dead girls between them. When they noticed her, she dragged herself down into the deepest bow she could manage. She held the position and said, “I'm sorry. I should have— I should have been better— I should—” Her voice choked off. She swallowed a sob. “I'm so sorry.”

Isshin and Ichigo slowly looked up at her. A minute later, Ichigo rasped, “What did I tell you about always blaming yourself?”

Homura raised her head to look at him, confused. “W-what?”

Ichigo scrubbed his face with both palms, stared at the ceiling to gather himself, and tiredly looked at Homura once more. “What did I tell you about expecting to be able to handle everything yourself?”
Homura blinked, then sat up and stared. “But... but I wasn’t by myself. And I held back in the fight. I could have ended it before— before—” She looked down at her lap, miserable.

“Why did you hold back, then?” Isshin asked hoarsely. One by one, the others in the room started watching the conversation.

“I— I was s-selfish,” Homura said, unable to look at him. “There— there is going to be an attack on Mitakihara on Sunday. Karin and Yuzu said they would help me. I— I was holding back to see how well they fought. I did not want to take them to fight Walpurgisnacht if they were not strong enough to have a chance. But I underestimated the Witch and ruined everything. I should have known better.”

The men stared at her for a long minute. Eventually, Isshin slowly said, “The three of you were fighting creatures in a maze like the one we were in?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Three untrained fourteen-year-olds against some kind of nightmare army?”

Homura knit her brows and peeked up at him through wet eyelashes. “Yes, sir. But I have a lot of experience. I... did not take the fight as seriously as I should have.”

Isshin paused to search her face. “You were trying to find out if you needed to protect them from something stronger?”

Homura squirmed. “Yes? But I didn't protect them from the Witch right in front of us.”

Isshin scowled. “If anyone failed to protect my girls, it was me. I'm their father. I should have noticed something well before now.”

“All of us who are older and have powers should have noticed something,” Ichigo added firmly.

“You shouldn't have to be responsible for the outcome of battles like this,” said Isshin.

“But I am,” Homura argued. “I was there and I did not fight to the best of my ability.”

Isshin sighed. “You made a mistake trying to protect the girls from the big picture instead of focusing on the small picture. It's a trap even experienced warriors can fall into.” He looked her dead in the eye. “Given your age, your good intentions, and having seen the kind of opponents you're up against without formal training... I forgive you.”

Homura stared at him incredulously. “You're... you're not angry at me?”

“How can I be? You're caught in the same trap as my girls. And if I understood you right, this would have happened eventually whether you were here or not,” Isshin said heavily. “If you hadn't been there, we may never have known what happened. Instead of wallowing in guilt, focus on moving forward. Cooperate with Kisuke. Help him try to save their souls. Share information about whoever the hell did this to my baby girls so we can destroy them.”

Both Kurosaki men stared at Homura with fire in their eyes. It was catching. She sat straighter, her expression firmed into resolve, and she nodded. “All right.” Silent tears still trailed down her cheeks.

Isshin sighed sadly and held an arm out. “Come over here.” Homura looked at him uncertainly. He beckoned her again. She shuffled around the girls and was coaxed into kneeling between the
surviving Kurosaki family. Isshin took her hand, patted it, and looked at the twins again. Ichigo put an arm around her shoulders and shakily took a deep breath.

All they could do for now was wait for word from Urahara and Hitsugaya. It felt minutely better to not have to wait alone.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter brought to you by FEELINGS.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: *heart* I broke 100k words. I am stunned. I didn't know I was capable of writing this much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SECHSUNDZWANZIG

TIMELINE X+N

“It’s not like Shiro-chan to be late to anything. Especially something this important,” Lieutenant Momo Hinamori murmured to her captain with a worried frown. They stood in the First Division meeting hall with the other captains and lieutenants, the meeting having been escalated to a joint gathering of commanding officers.

Shinji Hirako, reinstated captain of Fifth Division, made a small *hrm* of unhappy agreement. “I don’t like it.” The past few years had led to him developing more than a passing acquaintance with the young captain through the boy’s sibling relationship with his lieutenant. Knowing the obsessively responsible kid, Shinji thought Momo's concern valid. He glanced down the line to the contingent from Twelfth, which included its third seat for the special occasion. “Oy, what'd the kid actually say when you called him?”

Akon bowed his head in respect. “Sir. That there was an ongoing incident in Karakura, that the 'things' from Mitakihara are also in Karakura, and that he has identified a lead for the investigation.”

Rangiku Matsumoto, lieutenant of Tenth Division, frowned at her captain's empty spot. She was about to comment when the meeting hall's doors swung open and admitted her young superior. “Captain!” she called out in relief.

Hitsugaya stopped at the foot of the two rows of officers and bowed shortly. “My apologies for my tardiness.”

Captain-Commander Yamamoto grunted neutrally. “I trust you have information to make up for it?”

Hitsugaya straightened. “Yes, sir.”

Yamamoto silently gestured to the empty space in the rows. Hitsugaya strode over to his place. It was obvious to everyone that something had gone very wrong—the boy looked haggard and tense, holding himself too rigidly. No one commented, though, and the meeting commenced with a firm stamp of Yamamoto's staff.

Akon stepped forward and reported the chain of events that had led to the initial survey party and their disappearance. Next, Ukitake reported the batshit crazy events his party had experienced in
Mitakihara. By this time, all officers save for those from Eleventh were disturbed to varying levels. Then Captain Kurotsuchi took over.

“I have completed an initial examination of the recovered object,” the mad scientist announced. “Testing of energy characteristics most closely aligns with those of an Adjuchas-class Hollow soul, but is not an exact match. Its material structure is of crystallized reishi. Further testing is necessary. I have yet to determine its origin or function.”

“I can answer that,” Hitsugaya said heavily.

All eyes turned to him. “How so?” Yamamoto asked with narrowed eyes.

“The girl who fled from Mitakihara to seek shelter with the Kurosaki family explained the basics after the incident this afternoon,” Hitsugaya explained. “If she is to be believed, I think we’ve stumbled upon a long-term atrocity that has escaped our notice for far too long.”

Shinji did not like the kid's use of that word. Brat had too big a vocabulary and too much sense to use “atrocity” lightly.

“'Atrocity' is a strong word,” Third Division Captain Rōjūrō Ōtoribashi commented warily. Count on good ol' Rose to notice that, too.

Hitsugaya took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “According to Homura Akemi, that jewel you found is called a Grief Seed. It is the end stage of a predatory process by which an entity she calls the Incubator tricks girls on the verge of spiritual maturity into selling their souls in exchange for a wish. When they make a wish and agree to the contract, the Incubator tears their souls from their bodies and somehow condenses and crystallizes them in a way that grants girls imperfect access to the zanpakutō they would have if they became shinigami after death. This item is called a Soul Gem. Girls who complete this contract are then called magical girls.”

“Magical girls. You're kidding,” Hirako said flatly, disturbed.

Hitsugaya glanced at him but otherwise ignored his outburst. “In exchange for their wishes, the Incubator obligates magical girls to use their power to fight dangerous, soul-eating entities called Witches. The creature Captain Ukitake's party fought was a Witch.”


Hitsugaya slid his eyes to him. “It gets worse.”

Dread began to creep through Shinji's veins. Momo's brother was not one to exaggerate.

Hitsugaya continued. “Witches hide within pocket dimensions called labyrinths. When they are defeated, the Witch condenses into a Grief Seed, as Captain Ukitake witnessed. When magical girls fight within labyrinths, the... darkness and madness of the dimension, I think, taints their Soul Gems. This manifests as cloudiness or darkness of the Gem. Magical girls use Grief Seeds to draw off this taint. The Incubator instructs them thus far. However, what the Incubator fails to tell potential contractees is that should their Soul Gems become too tainted or should they fall into despair, their Soul Gems will turn into Grief Seeds and the girls will become Witches themselves. It is a process that seems to be similar to Hollowfication. Magical girls are unaware of a method to purify Grief Seeds. The Incubator tells the girls to surrender Grief Seeds to it for 'safe disposal,' but Akemi somehow got it to admit that it consumes Grief Seeds— souls— to convert into raw energy.”
“Fascinating,” Captain Kurotsuchi said gleefully.

“Vile,” Captain Ukitake snapped with a sharp glare at the scientist, who ignored him.

“I'll have to experiment... perhaps...? Yes, yes—”

Yamamoto thumped his staff once again to draw everyone's attention. His eyes were opened into angry slits. He glared at Kurotsuchi then turned back to Hitsugaya. “That certainly qualifies as an atrocity, if it is true,” the old man rumbled. “What convinced you of the authenticity of the girl's claims?”

Hitsugaya swallowed and looked angry. “Today we discovered that Karin and Yuzu Kurosaki contracted with the Incubator shortly before the Xcution plot last year.”

“Kurosaki?!” several voices muttered.

Shinji pressed his lips together so hard they hurt. If Ichigo's family was involved—

“What?!” Rukia Kuchiki gasped. Shinji remembered that she had bonded with the girls when she stayed at the Kurosaki residence during the war.

“We discovered this when Karin, in some kind of costume, brought Yuzu's body to Urahara Shop for help. Yuzu was dead— Akemi says she saw her Soul Gem be destroyed by the Witch they had been fighting. Karin... couldn't take it. She went mad in despair and turned into a Witch in front of us. We... we had to go through her labyrinth and...” he took a steadying breath, “put her out of her misery.”

Sounds of shock, dismay, angry muttering, and horror echoed through the hall once more.

“Oh, Captain,” Matsumoto murmured sympathetically behind Hitsugaya. The boy stoically didn't acknowledge her.

Poor kid, Shinji thought to his zanpakutō, Sakanade. He knew of the world-crossing friendship from his lieutenant's teasing of her brother— and knew how happy Momo had been that the boy had actually managed to make a friend at all. What concerned Shinji more, though, was what this was doing to Ichigo. Both as a friend who gave a damn and as a fellow Visored who knew that such a brutal blow could affect the kid's control of his Inner Hollow.

“You witnessed it?” Kurotsuchi asked delightedly. “You must come to my lab and tell me everything. What it looked like, what it felt like— I simply must know! Did you bring it with you?”

“Silence!” Yamamoto roared over Kurotsuchi's morbid curiosity and the noise of the room in general. Everyone shut up, though Kurotsuchi didn't look happy about it.

Hitsugaya swallowed and worked his jaw. “Urahara is compiling a report and studying the Grief Seeds Akemi gave him in hope of salvaging Karin's soul. He requested that I be stationed there as our official liaison because Akemi seems to have accepted my presence. She is skittish around shinigami because Karin and Yuzu told her shinigami used to execute magical girls.”

“How can that be?” Captain Retsu Unohana of Fourth Division asked with her brows furrowed. “Several of us have been with the Thirteen Divisions since its inception, myself among them. This is the first time I've heard anything about this cycle or... 'magical girls'.”
Hitsugaya glanced at her, then the room at large. “Apparently, the powers and weapons granted to magical girls enable them to perform certain shinigami tasks such as Soul Burial and cleansing Hollows. Akemi claims the Incubator told the Kurosaki girls that in the past, shinigami have reacted poorly to the living having such powers and moved to execute them without full investigation. The Incubator claimed to have seen the Quincy genocide firsthand through contracting Quincy girls and said all of this in a way to convince the twins to not tell any shinigami about their contracts. Whether or not it's entirely true, I do not know.”

The four oldest captains remained expressionless. “I see,” Unohana said neutrally for them all, neither admitting or denying anything from the dusty past.

It wouldn't surprise Shinji if it was true. At all. He glanced at his fellow Visored and knew they agreed. They had seen that knee-jerk rejection up close and personal a century back.

He had precious little information, but Shinji couldn't deny he wanted to take the side of the “magical girls” on principle alone.

“The Kurosaki girls did counter that narrative with their own disagreement about the current state of affairs,” Hitsugaya said uncomfortably, “so Akemi does seem to at least partially trust myself and the shinigami in Karakura. Urahara thinks that if he can reverse the damage to Karin's soul, Akemi will solidly align herself with at least those at Urahara Shop. And she is very interested in seeking and destroying this Incubator she speaks of. That will work in our favor.”

The Captain-Commander sat back and thought. “Captain Ukitake, Mitakihara is your jurisdiction, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

The old man tapped a finger against his staff for awhile before focusing again. “Captain Kurotsuchi, you will continue to study the Grief Seed in your possession and confer with Kisuke Urahara about the progress you each make. Choose five subordinates who are versed in the use of the sensors to go investigate Mitakihara and its surroundings. Captain Ukitake, design a search pattern for the area. You will be in charge of five reconnaissance teams. Each team is to be headed by a lieutenant and the officers of their choice. Lieutenants Kuchiki, Abarai, Hisagi, Kira, Hinamori, assemble and brief squadrons to be deployed as soon as Captain Ukitake's plan is sent to you.”

“Ah, sir,” Hitsugaya interrupted.

The old man raised one brow at him. “Yes?”

“The recon teams need to know that the Witches can have mental effects on people both within and outside their labyrinths. They are the origin of the strange suicides reported in Mitakihara. According to Akemi, their madness and despair is... contagious, in a way,” Hitsugaya said with a frown. “The less powerful the soul, the more powerful a Witch's influence is. At its worst, a Witch can inflict something called a Witch's Kiss— an apparent tattoo on the neck that indicates the Witch has taken total control of a subject and intends to compel them to kill themselves and expose their souls to easier consumption. The binding can be removed by putting a hand on one and flaring your reiatsu as though breaking a binding kidō. Or so Akemi said Karin told her. I would suggest that recon teams include only seated officers.”

Shinji's skin crawled. This was Aizen levels of slimy evil.

The Captain-Commander's other brow rose to join the first. “Duly noted.” He glanced around the
room. “Your teams will consist of highly seated officers. No one who goes on this mission is to wear anything that would obscure the neck. Be alert.” The lieutenants chorused their understanding. Yamamoto turned to Hitsugaya once more. “You are to be stationed with Kisuke Urahara and Homura Akemi. Learn as much as you can and convince her to keep cooperating. Pursue her if she attempts to flee.”

“Captain-Commander,” Second Division Captain Soi Fon said curtly. “Should we not take this girl into custody and interrogate her rather than coddle her?”

Shinji managed not to roll his eyes, but did curl his lip in disgust. Soi Fon had no goddamn idea how kids worked. Especially powerful brat teenagers who had been fighting without assistance from anyone worthwhile. He'd never met this Akemi kid but he'd bet his hair that she was stubborn as a mule and would rather die than talk in Soi Fon's care. Kid had to be Ichigo-levels of stubborn to survive.

Yamamoto glanced Soi Fon's way. “I would prefer to save that for a last resort. As long as she is cooperating, I see no reason to give her cause to believe the narrative this Incubator has given her about us. Besides, Urahara and Shihoin are with her. They will shift tactics if necessary.”

Meaning that the two former Second Division officers would know when to switch from sweet talk to thumb screws, so to speak. Accurate.

Soi Fon made a sour face but said no more.

Yamamoto looked around the room, then slammed his staff on the floor. “You will deploy tomorrow. Dismissed!”

Isshin woke groggily on Saturday morning, uncertain of how he came to be on a futon in a way that his experience pinged as someone having knocked him out. Probably with kidō, since he felt no pain. Then the horror of the day before descended on him. He rolled upright and desperately looked for his daughters.

His girls lay side-by-side on a futon in the middle of the room, slightly glowing with the energy of Tessai's stasis kidō. Faces relaxed, bodies and hair neatly arranged, they looked like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty indulging in a shared nap. But they were too still, too breathless— too dead.

Isshin choked on a sob and held his head in his hands, forcing himself to breathe normally. Kisuke would help them. Patience. He needed to be strong for his family no matter how crushed his heart was.

Isshin dragged himself into a sitting position and glanced to his side. Seeing his son mercifully sleeping, he looked around the room. Homura was also asleep, but she had propped herself into a sitting position in the corner. Her arms hugged her legs, her chin resting between her raised knees. She looked melancholy even in sleep. Isshin wearily rubbed his face and pinched the bridge of his nose while he tried to sort his thoughts.

He thought of the testimony Ichigo and Kisuke had relayed to him earlier in the week and combined it with what he had learned since his girls—. It made him sick. He wondered what other horrors Homura had seen— what horrors his daughters had seen. What horrors other people's daughters had seen.
Isshin had hated Ichigo's involvement with the Winter War despite understanding its necessity; Aizen considered his son an experiment and absolutely would not have left him alone. Isshin had grinned and borne it to the end, then sworn he would at least protect his younger children from such traumatic and demanding experiences. The failure was a pervasive ache throughout his being. The thought of his girls secretly running around fighting for their souls both broke and burned his heart. His bitterness and rage—at the mysterious Incubator, at the world, at himself—was held in check only by the hope of reversing the damage to his girls' souls. He could remain nominally calm as long as the option of saving his daughters was still on the table.

Still, Isshin dearly wanted to know what this Incubator looked like so he could accurately imagine his options for revenge.

Isshin looked up when there was a light tapping at the doorway. Yoruichi leaned against the frame, face neutral. “Hey,” she said quietly. “Time to get up and eat.”

“I'm not really in the mood.”

“You didn't eat last night. You need something.” She spoke more loudly. “Hey, kids, wake up. You need to eat.”

Homura startled awake and looked surprised that she had fallen asleep. Ichigo groaned, looked around, choked on a mournful sound, and lurched upright as he realized the previous day had really happened. Ichigo's breath caught in his throat. He moved to do something, to yell something, to do anything but sit idly by as his sisters lay dead. His motion was halted by his father's heavy hand on his shoulder. Ichigo looked at him quickly. “Dad—!”

Isshin gripped his son's shoulder harder, trying to ground him. “We have to be strong and rational. We need to keep it together so we can help however Kisuke needs us. For the girls. Do you understand?”

Ichigo took several ragged breaths, tipped his head back to face the ceiling, and gulped. “Yeah,” he breathed. “Yeah. For the girls.”

After a minute of inaction, Yoruichi prodded them to leave to get breakfast. Homura looked unhappy and the Kurosaki men looked torn.

“We can't— We can't just leave the girls all alone...,” Isshin said in a voice that became small and trailed off.

“I'll watch them,” a voice said heavily.

The newly awake people looked around and found Kon in the lion plushie he usually possessed when visiting the Kurosaki house. Homura looked confused as the men frowned harder.

“I'll be fine,” Ichigo said stubbornly.

Kon heaved an irritated sigh and brandished one paw at the young man. “Get your ass out there and eat something. You won't do Karin and Yuzu any good if you pass out from hunger, idiot. So go eat and drag some answers out of that damn mad scientist buddy of yours.”

Ichigo gaped silently. Isshin took a deep breath with closed eyes then patted his son's shoulder and murmured, “He's right. Come on. Kon will take care of them. They're like his own little sisters, too, now.”

“Shut up,” Kon growled without any real heat.
The entire assembly of employees and guests formed a miserable breakfast party. Tōshirō fit right in when he showed up and gloomily sat near his former captain without saying a word. They were nearly done when Kisuke shuffled into the room. He blinked owlishly at them all and blurted, “Oh. Breakfast. Morning. Right.”

No one commented on what an exhausted mess he looked. The scientist was disheveled and missing his hat. There were dark circles under his eyes and he had yet to shave. His body was unhappy about his all-nighter, but his eyes were still sharp. Everyone perked up in hope.

“Got anything, Sandal-Hat?” Ichigo asked.

“I just might,” Kisuke answered. “Clear the table.”

“Shouldn't you eat, too, Mr. Urahara?” Orihime asked.

Kisuke waved her off. “Tessai's been forcing me to eat every few hours. I'm good.” He put a briefcase down and settled at the table as the shop's employees scrambled to clean up. Kisuke took a deep breath and clapped once. “Okay! I don't think any of you care about the sciencey particulars just now, correct?”

“Get on with it,” Jinta snapped.

“Right.” Kisuke opened the briefcase and pulled out something that looked like a smart phone and three glass cylinders that each contained a Grief Seed. “I've studied all three Grief Seeds. I think I understand their basic structure. I'd like to ask you some questions, though, Miss Akemi. Perhaps ask for some demonstrations.”

Homura nodded, face blank. “All right,” she said cautiously.

“Good.” Kisuke fiddled with the smart phone-like sensor device. “Would you mind transforming for me? I'd like to record the energy readings.”

Homura narrowed her eyes and agreed. Orihime gasped, “Eh?! But if it's like in anime, she'll be naked and sparkly! You shouldn't see her naked!”

Everyone blinked and stared at her. Some of the boys blushed. Homura blandly said, “It does not really work that way.”

“Oh.”

Homura remained seated and brandished her left hand. Her ring burst into violet light and reformed as an egg-shaped jewel. Isshin swallowed hard—it was notably dull.

“I'm ready.”

Kisuke frowned. “Your Gem is sullied. Perhaps this should wait until after—”

“It is fine,” Homura interrupted. “It would have to be much darker than this for me to turn.”

Isshin wasn't sure he wanted to know how familiar she was with a Soul Gem's limits. Or how she came by that knowledge.

“If you say so,” Kisuke said doubtfully. He pressed a button. “Whenever you like.”

Violet light flashed along Homura's body and uniform like fluid fire, leaving behind a clean copy of the battle costume the party had seen the day before. The shield materialized on her forearm at
the end. Homura looked at Kisuke with a businesslike frown while the other occupants of the room reacted in various ways. “Are you satisfied?”

“Hmm? Yes, yes, quite.” Kisuke tapped the screen for several minutes, apparently playing with the new data. Everyone sat still and watched him until he finally looked up. “Last night you explained about how this Incubator separates girls' souls from their bodies and a sufficient distance between the body and the Soul Gem could temporarily sever the soul's connection to the body, which can be restored via physical contact between the two. Correct?”

“Yes,” Homura said edgily as the others looked uncertain and troubled. The magical girl tilted her head and tensely asked, “Do you mean to ask for a demonstration of that?”

“I understand it's a heavy thing to ask of you, Miss Akemi,” Kisuke answered soberly. “I wouldn't ask if I didn't have an idea I wanted to test before doing anything to Karin's Grief Seed.” He watched her chew her lip and look at him with suspicious eyes. “I propose that you give your Soul Gem to someone you trust to return it so they can move the appropriate distance.”

Everyone could feel an edge of anxiety in the magical girl's reiatsu. She pursed her lips and practically clawed the table as she stared down and thought. Finally, she lifted her arm and willed the diamond on the back of her hand to turn into its egg form. Homura held it up to Ichigo, face tight in a way that suggested suppressed fear. Still confused, Ichigo delicately took it into his hands and looked between the girl and the scientist. Homura scooted back from the table and tried to sit still, but was betrayed by pallor and a slight tremor.

Isshin felt sick. She was submitting to experiments on her soul despite obvious fear. It made him sick.

Kisuke leaned forward and gave Ichigo two smart phone-like devices. “Give one to Miss Akemi. Take the other yourself.” He pointed out the back door, which had been restored by Orihime's power. “Slowly walk away. Aim to go at least...” he trailed off and looked at Homura.

“One hundred meters,” she finished curtly.

“Oh... kayyyy...?” Ichigo said uncertainly.

Isshin tried to keep his breath even. His son wasn't getting what was going on. Wasn't picking up on the risk Homura was trying to downplay. And Isshin couldn't bring himself to speak lest he be ill. He wanted to stop them. But he wanted the information. But he didn't want to harm Homura. But he wanted to save his girls. But Homura was one of hi—

Homura solemnly looked up at Ichigo as he stood. “Just put it in my hand after.”

“Right. I guess.” Ichigo looked at Kisuke. “Should I start?”

Kisuke nodded. Still confused but at least understanding he had been entrusted with something incredibly precious, Ichigo left the building and moved out of sight. Everyone silently watched the nervous magical girl as she knelt rigidly. Isshin wanted to scream. A few minutes later, Homura's costume glowed with violet light and burst away, leaving her school uniform. The smart phone slipped out of her hands with a clatter and she slumped to one side.

Isshin reacted the quickest, scrambling to her side and rolling her to face upright. The sight of her vacant eyes and slack face hit him like a ton of bricks. It was the third time in less than a day that he had seen one of his gir—

“Isshin. Calm down,” Kisuke said, looking at his sensor screen with interest instead of minding the
“Calm?!” Isshin shouted. “She's not breathing!” He moved to start chest compressions, the thought of losing another girl unbearable. “Homura!” He never ever ever ever should have allowed this. *Never.* He was a monster. He couldn’t lose ano—

“Tessai, restrain him before he breaks her ribs,” Kisuke said distractedly. “Jinta, go yell for Ichigo to come back.”

Tessai had Isshin pinned to the floor when Ichigo rushed in, took one look, and shouted, “What did you do to her?!”

“She was right. Distance did sever the connection between her crystallized soul and her body.” Kisuke chewed on a pen while looking at energy readings with fascination. *Damn him.* “Go ahead and put the Soul Gem in her hand like she told you.”

Ichigo hurried to kneel and gently lay the amethyst in Homura's slack hand. The magical girl immediately resumed breathing with a little gasp and a flutter of her eyes. She levered herself upright with a huff and immediately found herself crushed in a desperate hug by Isshin. Before she could react, he shoved her back at arm's length and scrutinized her. “Are you okay?!”

Blinking owlishly at the concerned faces around her, Homura said, “Yes, I'm fine.”

Isshin wilted in relief and shakily smoothed her hair back. “Good. Good. I'm sorry. Good. You're okay. It's okay. Good. I'm so sorry.” He wasn't even sure what he was saying.

“Were you aware of your surroundings?” Kisuke asked. He ignored the frustrated looks sent his way.

“No. That is how it works,” Homura said, pulling away from Isshin and reaching for her teacup with a tremble. “I hope you got the information you needed, Mr. Urahara. I do not want to repeat that anytime soon.”

Isshin glared daggers at Kisuke, willing him to back down.

“Of course, of course. That was more than adequate,” Kisuke replied. “How interesting.” He set his device down and looked at her curiously. “Your Soul Gem seems to behave in a manner similar to Soul Candy— no, a Mod Soul. The main functional difference is that skin contact is enough for the soul to assume control of the body. Soul Candy and Mod Souls require actual consumption.”

Homura tilted her head in confusion. Others made faces of varying levels of understanding and interest.

Kisuke noted her confusion and explained. “Soul Candy and Mod Souls are artificial souls invented by shinigami to possess empty bodies, be they natural or artificial. Soul Candy is generally used by shinigami who have been assigned to blend into the World of the Living while in a false body called a gigai. Its function is to eject the shinigami from the false body and assume control of it while the shinigami attends to business so there is no panic about mysterious dead bodies coming back to life.” He raised a brow in inquiry; she nodded her understanding. “Mod Souls are similar, but they were specifically designed for combat while in human bodies. You met Kon yesterday— he is a Mod Soul with enhanced leg strength and speed. All artificial souls generally assume the form of a capsule when not in use. Your Soul Gem seems to approximate that pill state, but is far more sophisticated.”

Homura stared at him for a moment. “Is that a good thing?”
“As it happens, yes,” Kisuke said with a small grin. “Theoretically, if I succeed at purifying Karin’s Soul Gem, I should only have to put the Gem in her hands to revive her.” Hope colored everyone’s faces at the pronouncement. “I do have one more test I want to do. More like an observation. And I would like Miss Inoue to participate.”

Orihime threw her hand skyward as though volunteering in school, eyes shining in eagerness. “Yes! I’ll help!”

“Good!” Kisuke chirped. He waved a hand at the three cylinders containing Grief Seeds. “All right, this one is Sayaka’s, correct?” Homura nodded. “And it is ‘full’ or ‘spent,’ as you and the twins used it to cleanse your Gems as much as possible.” Homura nodded again. “And this is the Grief Seed you acquired yesterday, yes?” Homura nodded. Kisuke’s eyes wandered to Homura’s Soul Gem and back to her eyes. “No one has used it, so you should be able to draw off the taint in your Gem, correct?”

Homura hummed and held out a hand for the Grief Seed, understanding what he wanted to observe. “Do you want me to use the smart phone again?”

“If you would,” Kisuke said politely as he gingerly placed the Grief Seed in her hands. “Lay the phone on the table and your Gem on the phone. Miss Inoue—”

“Yes?!”

“—Have your Shun Shun Rikka watch what happens when the taint is drawn off of Miss Akemi’s Soul Gem. I want you to understand the process. My hope is that observing how the contamination is removed naturally will assist your fairies enough to be able to amplify the process to reject all the contamination from a Grief Seed and turn it back into a Soul Gem.”

Orihime’s eyes went wide in hopeful understanding. “Oh! I get it!” She gestured at her hairpins. “Ayame, Shun’ō, come out and watch!”

The hairpins flared gold and two small figures darted out from the ornaments. Their appearance and language were indistinct to the others at the table, but they hovered near the Soul Gem as directed.

Homura tipped the Grief Seed against her cloudy Soul Gem with a little clink. Everyone watched as darkness gathered and seeped out of the amethyst like iron filings drawn to a magnet. Soon, the Soul Gem was a more brilliant purple than it had been. Homura withdrew the Grief Seed, going still when the two fairies darted after her hand. She held the Grief Seed rigidly as the fairies flitted around and chattered, then swooped back to the Soul Gem. After a few cycles, they zoomed back to their mistress and fluttered around her head.

Orihime clapped delightedly. “They think they can do it!”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Kisuke tried to clamp down his mixed feelings and anxiety. Orihime's power was miraculous, yes, but even she had limits. She sometimes didn't know her limits. So much was riding on whether her Shun Shun Rikka would be effective and he had to be ready to change course for varying degrees of success or failure at a moment's notice. He needed to make their group attractive to Akemi. It would make his life so much easier if she was a willing participant.

He knew what he would have to do if she tried to leave. And that his actions would piss off everyone but Tessai and Yoruichi. Hitsugaya could go either way. The young captain had his orders but he had a personal stake in the situation and a protective streak that rivaled the Kurosakis'. He was a wildcard.

Everyone made hopeful sounds as Akemi returned the Grief Seed to Kisuke, who hummed and looked at it thoughtfully before putting it away. “Do they have any comments about the items?” he asked.

Orihime looked at her fairies expectantly. After some chattering and chiming, Orihime looked back to Kisuke. “They say it might be pretty draining because it'll be complex—they have to reject the contamination and the transformation. Something about the crystal structure being different between the two? They won't know for sure until we try. But they mostly understand how the Soul Gems and Grief Seeds are the same and how they're different, so they should be able to work with it.” One of the fairies chattered. “Oh, Ayame says thanks for having them watch that. It was very helpful. They won't have to waste energy figuring out the best way to do it.”

“You are quite welcome, Ayame!” Kisuke said, making a show of preening. “Would you like to take a look at Karin's Grief Seed right now?”

“Sure!” Orihime cheered.

Kisuke put away the Pumpkin Witch's Grief Seed and removed Karin's from its container. He delicately set it on the table. Orihime held her hands out.

“Sōten Kisshun: I Reject!”

The two fairies floated on opposite sides of the Grief Seed. A translucent gold shield snapped into place over it. Black reishi drifted up and dissipated against the shield like smoke. Isshin and Ichigo gripped the table and leaned forward, staring intensely at Karin's soul. Fifteen minutes slipped by.
before the black stone shifted color to have muddy traces of red. Sweat beaded on Orihime's temples as the color slowly progressed from opaque dark carnelian to mildly translucent dark garnet. It gained more clarity over the next twenty minutes, shifting to a dark spinel before crimson light blossomed from the crown of the Grief Seed and flowed downward around the silver spindle like flower petals. There was a pulse of energy as the hollow space filled with red reishi. The silver, strawberry-shaped decoration atop the Grief Seed shimmered and filled out with ruby light, the metal shifting from silver to gold. Gold settings burst out and wrapped down the egg-shaped ruby, met at the bottom, and filled out along the bottom to form a golden cup. After one last pulse of light, Orihime's fairies disengaged their shield and wobbled back to their tired mistress.

Kisuke allowed himself to breathe again. Best case scenario achieved. Time for a break before plotting revenge.

Isshin burst into tears while Ichigo broke into relieved laughter. Everyone made celebratory and relieved sounds. Akemi, however, stared with eyes wide as saucers. Flummoxed. Bewildered. Awed. Dumbfounded. Still reeling in apparent disbelief, Akemi shakily reached out and hovered a hand over the Soul Gem. Everyone could sense that it was Karin's reiatsu, strong and pure. Akemi's mouth opened and closed, unable to put what she was feeling into words.

“Well, Miss Akemi,” Kisuke said with a grin. “Now it should only be a matter of reuniting the Soul Gem with Karin's body, correct?”

Akemi stared at him speechlessly for a long moment before nodding jerkily. Ichigo leaned across the table and happily lifted the Gem with reverent hands. Isshin was already in the hall on his way to the spare room the girls were in. Everyone followed in an excited jumble. Isshin lifted Karin's body and cradled it in his lap as Tessai canceled the stasis kidō. Ichigo approached, held his breath, and lay the Soul Gem in his sister's limp hand.

Karin immediately drew a breath and fluttered her eyelids. Isshin sobbed and held her close, rocking her like he had when she was small. Karin's breaths continued to come in gasps. Isshin pulled back to look at her. Karin's eyes jumped from person to person before landing on Yuzu's body. Her face slowly contorted, hands shakily rising to her head.

Karin screamed.

Kisuke's best case scenario slipped from his grasp.

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Thirty-five grim-faced, fully briefed shinigami stood in neat ranks near Seireitei's main senkaimon. It was quite the unusual sight, most missions being of a much smaller scale. The five chosen lieutenants stood at the head of the lines of each of their personally selected teams, each with a Twelfth Division scientist already delegated to it. They deployed over the Mitakihara train station as soon as Captain Ukitake issued their orders, then split up to cover their assigned areas. The gloomy skies suited their moods, all subdued and wary for a threat they might have little warning of.
Red eyes in expressionless faces stared skyward from multiple locations.

Kisuke projected concern and confusion while he tried to figure out just how big a disaster this was going to be and how it would affect Akemi's cooperation.

Isshin struggled to hold Karin still as she thrashed and sobbed while hyperventilating. “Karin. Karin, sweetie, it's okay, you're safe, shhh, you're safe.”

“Am not! Am not!”


Karin threw her head back, mouth open wide, and took wheezing gasps as she stared at the ceiling. When she had downshifted into loudly crying, she clung to her father and babbled, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry Daddy, I'm so sorry, oh my God I'm sorry!”

Isshin rocked her and soothingly said, “You have nothing to be sorry for, sweetie. Just keep breathing.”

“B-but I tried to hurt everyone and Yu-yuzu-uu is d-dead and oh my God she was inside me oh my God!” She clutched her chest as though to tear out her heart and started hyperventilating again. “Yuzu, Yuzu, Yuzu—!”

Kisuke and everyone else in the room froze at her words.

Uryū's eyes turned to Akemi. “I thought you were all unaware when disconnected from your bodies?” he asked in an undertone.

Akemi helplessly shrugged and held up her hands, wide-eyed and completely at a loss. These were uncharted waters.

“My guess would be disconnection by distance causes dormancy while the active nature of the Witch was accompanied by some awareness,” Kisuke said with a frown.

“Oh my God I was a Witch oh my God!”

Kisuke cringed. “Oops.”

Isshin tried to keep Karin pinned to his chest as she kept wailing, but she struggled against him. She dropped her Soul Gem, broke free for a moment, and lunged for her sister, but Isshin was able to get his arms around her and pull her back against his chest, still facing out and wailing.

“Bring her back, too!” Karin cried. “You brought me back, bring back Yuzu! Do it!”

Kisuke saw Orihime's uncertain glance and covered his face with a hand to massage his eyes. This was spiraling out of control.

“DO IT! DO IT NOW! WHY ARE YOU WAITING?!”

“Hey, Urahara,” Ichigo bit out, using the his actual name for once. It pained Kisuke. “Just get out
Yuzu's Grief Seed so we can help them both, yeah? They'll help each other.”

In the ensuing silence, the various witnesses gradually became aware of Kisuke, Hitsugaya, and Akemi avoiding eye contact with everyone else.

Isshin looked to Kisuke in confusion. “What are you waiting for, Kisuke? Get out Yuzu's Grief Seed.”

Kisuke's heart dropped. He should have explained the situation earlier. It had been cruel to not put upper limits on his friend's hope. Now it would look like he intentionally deceived them all. Great. How to spin this?

Karin sagged back and devolved into a disturbing mix of sobbing and humorless laughter.

Kisuke still hesitated. Bluntness would be... unkind.

“There isn't one,” Akemi said in a strained voice.

“What? You gave it to Sandal-Hat back in the place,” Ichigo said with confusion.

“That wasn't Yuzu's,” Akemi answered, looking like she was facing a firing squad. “That was the Grief Seed of the Witch who... who destroyed Yuzu's Soul Gem.”

A heavy silence filled the room. It was like everyone in the room was holding their breaths and staring at Akemi. Kisuke's throat burned as he swallowed his shame that the fourteen-year-old child had gathered the nerve to say it to Ichigo and Isshin's faces before he did.

Isshin turned to Kisuke. “She's wrong, right? You have Yuzu's soul, right?”

Kisuke regretfully said, “Isshin—”

“You have her soul for Inoue to fix, right? Get it out. This isn't the time for your pranks.” Isshin's face was slowly drawing into horrified, desperate grief once more. It was an expression Kisuke hadn't seen since he told the man he was unable to retrieve his newly-dead wife's soul from the Hollow that had eaten her.

“Can't glue it back together if the pieces are all gone!” Karin lilted through her tears with an edge of madness that suggested her alternative contribution was endless screaming.

Ichigo looked back to her, alarmed. “Karin—”

“Can't put the puzzle back together if you burn up all the pieces! Just ashes, ashes everywhere!”

Isshin tried to peer around his daughter's head to see her face. “Karin, sweetie—”

“Ashes won't make pretty pictures anymore they just blow and blow and blow away—”

“What— what the hell? Karin? Karin, look at me!” Ichigo called out as he shuffled in front of her on his knees.

“Yuzu's soul was pretty glitter sparkle-sparkle and it blew and blew and blewww away and wouldn't let me caaatch iii-iii-iiit!” Karin slipped into tired, moaning wails, shoulders hitching with each sob.

Ichigo flinched hard, then whipped to Kisuke with a question plain on his face. Kisuke met his eyes and solemnly affirmed, “Yuzu's Soul Gem was destroyed before the girls showed up in the shop
yesterday."

Isshin went white, closed his eyes, and tried to keep calm while tightening his grip on his surviving
daughter. Ichigo whispered a broken little “What?”

“Yuzu's soul is gone,” Kisuke said softly. “I'm sorry. I can't bring her back.”

It killed him to say it. He generally tried to protect the Kurosaki family from the fallout of Aizen
dragging the parents into spiritual experiments. He had redoubled that promise to himself after
Ichigo's sacrifices— sworn that at least the twins would be kept safe. Now he had to admit failure.
Again.

Deep within his Inner World, his zanpakutō stirred and sighed, *You will be of no use if you wallow,
Kisuke.*

Right. Move through it. Kisuke willed his thanks to Benihime. She just sighed again and gave the
impression of shaking her head over her embroidery hoop.

Orihime gasped loudly and threw her arms forward. “Sōten Kisshun: I Reject!”

Confused, everyone cast about for what she was reacting to and followed the fairies to where
Karin's Soul Gem lay on the floor. The ruby was darkened and actively dimming. The shining
golden shield appeared over it and siphoned off the darkness.

“But she hasn't been in a labyrinth!” Hitsugaya shouted.

“So, what, it's gonna keep going dark until she's happy again?” Jinta asked incredulously with a
pained look at Yuzu. “Because I don't think that's going to be happening anytime soon.”

“Not exactly,” Akemi answered.

“I'll just keep helping her until she doesn't need me to,” Orihime said with a determined pout as her
fairies returned to her.

“Inoue... I don't know how wise that is,” Sado said quietly. “You're pale.”

“This part was easy! The other part was the hard part,” Orihime insisted.

“Ichi-niiiii-iiiiii-iiiii,” Karin sobbed. “Don't be mad at Homuraaa, 's not allowed, not, not, not—”

Ichigo turned tearful eyes back to her. “W-what? Why would I—?”

Karin's voice varied from a moan to an enraged shout and back again as she answered, “She tried
and did her secret thing and stopped everything click-click-freeze but thAT BITCH SHOT US SO
FAST we were already hit when she stopped the claahhh-hahhh-hock.”

Everyone else had been still and silent, so the whisper of Akemi shifting her feet was plain to those
near her. Beside her, Kisuke instinctively reacted with swiftness befitting his former position in the
Second Division and clamped his hand around her right wrist just as her shield burst into being on
her left arm. The rest of her battle costume quickly followed. He was aware of a click and a rattle
as he looked at the girl's face and saw she was frightened and deathly pale. Kisuke kept his eyes on
the girl and expected the others to help restrain her, but no one moved.
Eyes wild, Akemi turned toward him, twisting her body to face him while swinging her free arm back. She leaned back and tugged her captured wrist hard; he turned to face her properly and tightened his grip to keep her anchored, which he immediately realized was her plan as she used the resistance to generate torque and propel her shield arm up at him in a forceful arc. Kisuke easily caught her wrist, of course, but immediately found himself with no open hand to block the taser aimed perfectly at his chest. She must have dropped it into her hand from her little bag of tricks on her backswing. An instant too late at twisting her wrist to ruin her aim, he did manage to flare his reiatsu in defense soon enough to mitigate most of the damage and pain the attack should have caused him. A strong electrical current sizzling through one's body was far from enjoyable in even a mild application, though. He grit his teeth and rode it out, having experienced far worse in his years in covert ops.

When Akemi realized her escape gamble had failed and gotten her doubly caught instead, her face truly fell into panic. She wildly fought against Kisuke's iron grip on both of her arms but was unable to move them at all. Kisuke twisted her wrist more to force her to drop the taser. It fell, but the cartridge separated from the main body of the weapon so weight didn't pull the darts out of his chest. Bothersome.

Kisuke blinked rapidly. After shaking his head out and smacking his tingling lips experimentally, he said, “That was terribly rude of you, Miss Akemi.” He cleared his throat and worked his jaw a bit. “Clever, and excellent quick thinking, but terribly rude.”

“Let me go,” Akemi breathed.

“No.” Kisuke looked down at the two wires trailing their way up to the darts embedded in his chest. “Ah, Yoruichi will never let me live this down,” he lamented.

Neither shall I, Benihime murmured.

Kisuke quashed his urge to sigh deeply. He looked back at the girl. “You could have killed me with one of your guns, you know.” Not really, but she didn't need to know that.

“I don't want to kill you,” Akemi said impatiently, though everything else about her screamed of fear. “I just want you to let me go.” She kept pulling.

“Oh, really?” Kisuke said with exaggerated interest, tightening his grip and turning to the rest of the group. “Hey, everybody, what do you think I should— do...?”

Literally everything and everyone in the room but he and the magical girl were impossibly still. The world's color had a faded, washed out quality and a bluish cast. Several people were frozen mid-blink. Karin's anguish was a silent tableau. The dropped taser was suspended in midair halfway to the floor. The surreality distracted him for a brief moment.

Akemi capitalized on his inattention immediately, using his grip on her wrists to brace herself while she pivoted on her right leg, sharply drew her left knee up across her chest, and brutally drove the heel of her boot into the side of Kisuke's kneecap. It dislocated with a loud crack as she summoned a hunting knife from her shield, its blade stabbing out at his hand and succeeding in slicing him from the middle of his thumb to a few inches up his wrist before losing momentum and falling away. She must have expected him to let go of her in surprise and pain and topple over. Instead, he grunted with the pain and shifted his stance to balance mostly on one leg, slid his injured right hand up her arm, and tore the shield from her wrist, skinning her left thumb to the bone with the clasp in the process. He slung the disc away with little thought.

Akemi screamed as the world around them reanimated. She desperately lashed out with the same
leg, trying to kick him in the groin, but he grabbed her ankle and lifted her leg to throw off her balance. She tried to punch him with her bloody hand, but his height advantage and her awkwardly bent angle let him dodge easily.

Benihime projected respect for the girl's tenacity. He would never hear the end of this.

To the rest of the room's occupants, Kisuke and Akemi went from solemnly watching Karin's reawakening one moment to facing each other, each balancing on one leg as Kisuke held Akemi's arm and leg up in a bizarre ballet pose in the next as a bloody knife and a taser fell to the floor and Akemi's shield rocketed into a wall and dissolved in violet sparkles. It was all topped off with Akemi— inexplicably in her costume when she hadn't been a moment earlier— ineffectively beating one violet-encased fist against Kisuke's chest from an awkward angle as she wobbled on her free leg.

“What the hell just happened?!” Jinta screeched into the stunned silence.

How the hell could Kisuke salvage this?

Karin switched out hysterical sobbing for creepy hysterical laughter.

Kisuke peered around the room as though surprised, pretending to completely ignore Akemi's continued assault. “Oh, my. Well, this is awkward.”

“Your talent for understatement will never cease to amuse me,” Yoruichi droned. “What the hell, Kisuke?”

“What, indeed,” he replied to everyone's immediate annoyance. After a minute of analytical thought in which the captured magical girl struggled with increasing desperation, Kisuke faced her. “I'm guessing this is what Karin meant when she said you stopped the clock? You can stop time, or do something similar enough to it to be functionally the same?”

Sounds of surprise, disbelief, and amazement murmured through the room. Akemi didn't reply; she just kept fighting to get away.

“But physical contact with you must negate the technique. Otherwise, you would be gone already, wouldn't you? And it must have something to do with your shield. Time resumed when I disarmed you. Am I on the right track?”

Akemi was going to break her own wrist and ankle if she fought his grip any harder. He could feel the bones in her wrist creaking under her skin. Careful, careful.

Kisuke tilted his head. “Tessai said he overheard you apologizing to Isshin for holding back in battle. Is this what you meant? Not using this technique soon enough?”

The girl flinched.

He had her.

Kisuke turned pensive. “This is how you move around so quickly, isn't it? You freeze time and don't let it start again until you're safely away.” Upon further reflection, he said, “Ah, that's how you dodged the Witch's fire in the labyrinth, isn't it?”

Akemi stared at him with the wild gaze of prey cornered by a predator. Now he had to turn this whole thing around.
“Honestly, I can understand why you would want to hide this. The prospect is terrifying and there are far too many people who would want to use you for their own gain. It was actually quite wise of you to hide this,” Kisuke said conversationally. “You did a good job of concealing this up until now. I respect that. I never would have guessed this just from sight. I thought you might have some form of teleportation. That would have been interesting. This is amazing.”

“Please don’t experiment on me,” Akemi rasped frightfully, eyes suddenly tearful.

Kisuke frowned in surprise. What?

Akemi turned her face to the others and cried, “Don’t let him experiment on me!”

“Urahara—!” Ichigo gasped out. The others looked at Kisuke in outrage.

The wily little—

Benihime crooned her interest, then added, You would be a fool to underestimate this one, Kisuke.

Indeed, he thought. His entire grasp of the situation was shaken. He had to regroup. Until then, he had a role to play.

Kisuke blinked innocently, leaned back, and released the girl's ankle. “Of course not. Not without your permission. You'll want to avoid the current captain of the Twelfth Division, though. He's less scrupulous.”

A long silence stretched between them as they looked at each other. Akemi manifested a new shield but didn’t use it, just eyed the scientist and his grip on her arm suspiciously.

“What are you going to do to me?” Akemi asked coldly. She had already discarded her mask of vulnerability; or was it the other way around? Had she masked her vulnerability?

“Do?” Kisuke hummed. “I don't plan to do anything to you. Unless you run away— then I will seek and restrain you.” He looked her in the eye seriously. “You are our only coherent—” by which he meant most sane— “source of information on the magical girl system and this Incubator you spoke of.”

“I'm co-oh-herent, you-ou asshole!” Karin protested between ragged gasps.

No one really wanted to touch that.

“The shinigami government—!” Akemi protested.

“Will hurt you over my dead body,” Ichigo interrupted with a snarl.

“Captain Hitsugaya?” Kisuke asked politely.

After a moment, Hitsugaya carefully answered, “I don't see how the specific niche abilities Akemi acquired through her victimization are directly relevant to reports about this Incubator and the magical girl cycle in general. For now. Not unless she moves to use said abilities against souls in general or the Thirteen Divisions in particular. Or if all magical girls can stop time.”

Karin laughed harshly. “Homura's a special snowflake.”

“Then I don't see reason not to be... reserved... in reports. Kurosuchi is already creepily fascinated by this whole thing.” Hitsugaya looked at Akemi with the stern countenance of a military officer. “Should I perceive you as a threat or should your power become worrisome, I may choose to
privately inform the Captain-Commander of it. I think he would see the wisdom in keeping such an ability out of the written record and public knowledge. At our meeting last night, he specifically said he trusted Urahara and Shihoin’s judgment with you. I agree. For now.”

After a pause to consider her words, Akemi said, “As long as the shinigami government is aligned against the Incubator instead of magical girls and I am guaranteed safety from experiments or confinement, I will cooperate.”

She would make a good lawyer when she grew up with phrasing like that, honestly.

“Agreed,” Hitsugaya said, inclining his chin briefly.

*That was too easy,* Kisuke thought. He watched the girl's face, which had smoothed into calm neutrality. Something was off. Why would she fight so hard only to easily give in without an extended argument?

There was a long, awkward pause after Kisuke released Akemi’s wrist. No one quite knew what to say. Orihime directed her fairies to heal Kisuke and Akemi's hands and Kisuke's knee. Kisuke picked the taser darts out of his chest.

“She managed to *dislocate your knee and tase you,* Kisuke? *Really?*” Yoruichi said incredulously.

“She tricked me,” Kisuke whined childishly, deliberately trying to ease the tension in the room.

“Pssh. All that time in your lab's made you soft.” She gave Akemi a thumbs up. “Congratulations on getting one over on Kisuke. He needs to be smacked down once in awhile.”

Akemi seemed to correctly interpret their little scene as *We have no hard feelings about your violent escape attempt.* Or at least pretended to rather well.

“So...,” Yoruichi drawled after another minute of awkward silence. “Stopping time. That must be... interesting.”

It was quite alarming, actually. Especially in the hands of a child.

“I wish you could turn it back,” Karin sniffled, calmer than she had been, if only due to exhaustion. “Maybe we could... Yuzu could...” She closed her eyes and covered her face, shoulders shaking. Isshin hugged her close.

Akemi pursed her lips and said nothing, eyes darting to the floor to the wall to the ceiling to the window— anywhere but at a human face.

Several of the room's occupants looked at each other, finding her reaction strange.

“So...,” Orihime blurted with wide, innocent eyes. Akemi's eyes slid to Orihime, seemingly against her will. “Can you turn time back, too?”

Kisuke stared at Akemi. The prospect was... *alarming* wasn't a strong enough word.

Akemi didn't answer, face stonily blank. Her lack of a denial drew everyone's attention again.

“H-homura?” Karin asked, voice wobbling with hope.

Akemi frowned and looked at a wall, shifting uncomfortably. She still didn't deny it.

Karin pried her father's arms off of her, flailed to the floor, and crawled to Akemi, her legs too
shaky to stand. She knelt in front of Akemi and grasped the girl's purple skirt in white-knuckled hands. Her face was transfixed as though looking up at a goddess. “Can you?” she whispered. “Can you go back in time and save Yuzu?”

Akemi looked down at her friend's tear-streaked face, bit her lip, and seemed to decide to throw her lot in with them. “It's... not that simple. But maybe.”


“You've gotta be fucking kidding me,” Jinta muttered.

Karin tightened her grip on Akemi's skirt and tugged. Crying, she asked, “Can you go back and tell me and Yuzu not to contract?”

“No.”

“You just fucking said you can go back in time,” sneered Jinta.

Homura glanced his way. “I can't go that far back.”

“Then what's the point?”

“How far back can you go?” Kisuke asked quietly as his mind rebooted and immediately overclocked.

Overclocked. Ha.

Akemi turned back to Kisuke. “March sixteenth. A bit over six weeks.”

Kisuke tilted his head. “That's awfully specific.”

Akemi stared back. “Yes.” She didn't elaborate.

“That's far enough to save Yuzu, though!” Karin said quickly. “Will you do it?! Will you go back in time?!"

Isshin and Ichigo held their breaths, looking at the girl hopefully. Kisuke drilled his eyes into her and wished he could read her mind.

Akemi shifted unhappily. When she spoke, her voice was subdued. “It is not so much a matter of if I go back, but how much I will be able to do next time I go back.”

Kisuke's mind tripped on that last phrase. Next time?

“There are so many variables that it is extremely difficult to achieve a desired outcome,” Akemi continued. “I have already failed my mission in this timeline again.”

“Again?” Isshin murmured with dread.

“What mission?” asked Yoruichi.

Akemi closed her eyes. “To get Madoka... and as many of my other friends as possible through the last six weeks and tomorrow's attack alive, sane, and without turning. Preferably keeping Madoka from contracting.”

There was a long silence as everyone thought through the implications of her stated goals— that
her friends died, went insane, or turned into Witches, over and over.

Kisuke delicately asked, “How many times have you repeated the last six weeks trying to save them?”

Akemi didn't answer immediately. At length, she dully said, “I lost track somewhere in the forties. That was awhile ago. I do not bother counting anymore.”

“Oh my God,” Ichigo whispered. A lot of Homura's strange behavior began to make sense to Kisuke—and others, it seemed. Isshin closed his eyes for a moment and scrubbed a hand across his face.

“Even just forty times...,” Uryū said, gaping. “Forty times six weeks... that's four— no, four-and-a-half **years** on its own!”

Akemi shrugged apathetically. “The concept of 'years' does not hold much meaning for me anymore.”

“How are you still **sane**? demanded Uryū. “How have you not **given up**?”

Akemi glared at him with steel in her eyes. She chose to ignore his concern for her sanity. “As long as there is a chance to save Madoka, I'll never give up. I don't care how hard it is. I don't care how many times it takes. I don't care if I have to take care of all the Witches in Mitakihara and defeat Walpurgisnacht by myself. I **will** save her.”

Uryū stared, stunned speechless. Akemi had no way of knowing, but she had sown seeds of respect among all of those present.

*She is ours, now, Benihime whispered slowly. The Kurosakis will have nothing less. She is already their kin in spirit, therefor she is now ours to protect. And—*

This was it. Kisuke's chance to completely undo his failure to protect the Kurosaki girls. This was it.

He **could not** fuck this up.

Karin let go of Akemi's skirt and sat back. “You're **serious** about taking Walpurgisnacht down by yourself, aren't you, you crazy bitch?” Akemi just frowned down at her. Karin tilted her head and hollowly said, “You're a fucking self-defeating masochist.” Akemi's frown turned into an offended scowl.

“What is Walpurgisnacht?” Hitsugaya asked with a frown.

Akemi waved her hand dismissively. “It is not important. I can handle it.”

“Bullshit,” Ichigo snapped.

“She told me it's a giant Witch without a labyrinth that's gonna drop on Mitakihara like a hurricane-bomb tomorrow morning,” Karin said. She looked Akemi in the face unrepentantly. “And she said the Witch is so big because it's a Witch collection like a Menos Grande is a Hollow collection.”

Alarmed, everyone stared up at Akemi to see if she would deny it. She didn't. Ichigo screeched, **“Not important?!”**
Akemi shrugged. “I am abandoning this timeline tomorrow. I was going to see how well Karin and Yuzu fought with me in hope of teaming up with them and Mami and Kyōko next time. Perhaps the five of us would be enough to take out Walpurgisnacht. But I cannot do that now. The outcome of this timeline's fight no longer matters. I will not bother returning to Mitakihara before my turnback point.”

“There's a specific point you travel back from? Every time?” Kisuke asked. He patted down his haori in search of the pen he had... probably left in the other room. His mind raced feverishly. This was it. This was *it*. *This* was his lever. He'd help her with the threat to her charges, she'd help him with the threat to his charges. A package deal. Mutual benefit.


“Excuse me,” Tessai interrupted. “Forgive me, but this is an awkward place to have such a discussion. Both by available space and... other reasons.” By which he meant Yuzu's corpse, which they had been talking over the entire time. Oops. “Perhaps we should move back to the table?”

It was generally accepted as a good idea, so everyone trickled out of the room. Kisuke and Akemi paused at the door to see what the Kurosaki family would do. They looked torn.

Kon jumped down from the shelf he had fled to in the initial stampede of people. “I still don't really understand what the hell is happening, but you'd better go deal with it if there's a chance of helping Yuzu. I'll stay with her.” That said, the plushie waddled over to Yuzu's head and plopped down. He patted her hair with one paw. “See? She won't be alone. Now scram. Figure out how to fix this.”

Isshin and Ichigo stood and helped Karin up. Ichigo then scooped up Karin's Soul Gem as Isshin helped Karin wobble into the hallway. She froze in the doorway and refused to move for a minute, tearfully staring at her twin. Then she scrubbed her face angrily and croaked, “Let's go figure out how to save Yuzu and fuck up Walpurgisnacht.”

Kisuke wasn't even going to have to convince anyone to do this. They had already decided. They just needed to work out the details.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
ACHTUNDZWANZIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: You've been so patient with me. Thanks! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACHTUNDZWANZIG

TIMELINE X+N

Isshin wandered back to the main room behind everybody, unable to stop gripping his daughter's arm so tightly she would probably bruise. If Karin noticed, she didn't care, which was terrifying. Everyone settled around the table in Urahara Shop's back room once more. Ichigo set Karin's Soul Gem on the table where Orihime could see it—just in case. The surviving Kurosaki sister curled up in her father's lap for comfort. Isshin was both gladdened and sickened by her seeking his touch; it was incomprehensibly out of character for her. She had even called him Daddy for the first time since... God, he couldn't even remember. She had been tiny. It was more evidence of how thoroughly her experience had broken her.

He would not vomit. Would not.

God, he wished Masaki was with them.

Kisuke reappeared from down the hall with a voice recorder and a notebook. Once he was situated, he turned to Homura, who was in her school uniform once more. The girl sat across from him, between Ichigo and Isshin. Tessai had served tea, so she was fiddling around with her cup.

Kisuke cleared his throat to call the meeting to order. He looked Homura straight in the eye. “Okay. I think what we need is for you to tell everything from the beginning. That will probably answer a lot of our questions without our having to ask.”

“Everything?” Homura asked with a frown.

“Well, obviously not over forty timelines' worth of events. Tell how this all began. I'm very interested in the original timeline. Give important highlights from there on.”

“...All right.”

Isshin steeled himself. The story was probably going to be awful. Over forty repetitions... what had Homura endured? She implied her friends turned repeatedly; had Homura felt what he felt when he saw Karin's soul explo—?

Engetsu hushed him and soothed him with balmy summer moonlight.

Homura took a deep breath. “In the first timeline, Mami and Madoka saved me from a Witch two weeks after I transferred to our school. The Incubator— it looks cute and calls itself Kyubey to
seem harmless— said I had the potential to be a magical girl, but I was too afraid to contract. I went with them to fights sometimes. It all seemed very straightforward. Then Walpurgisnacht came.” Homura paused and stared into her teacup, then breathed deeply again. “I followed Madoka and Mami. It seemed wrong for them to be risking so much to protect the city with no one to... appreciate them, I suppose. I thought I could contract and help if things went badly, but I froze when Mami was killed. I tried to stop Madoka from fighting by herself, but she said it was her duty. She did it— she defeated Walpurgisnacht— but she died. That is when the Incubator came to me again.”

Kisuke's eyes narrowed. “It waited for your greatest moment of weakness and desperation and exploited it.”

Homura nodded. “I contracted. I wished to redo my meeting with Madoka, except I would be strong enough to protect her like she had protected me.”

Isshin tiredly palmed his face and shook his head. Such an innocent and earnest wish. It was something he could see a nine-year-old Ichigo do in the aftermath of his mother's death. Some monster had taken advantage of that broken heart.

“I immediately went back in time,” Homura continued. “I woke up in the hospital the day I was to be released to start school.”

“March sixteenth,” Kisuke guessed quietly.

“Yes.”

Kisuke scratched his chin. “So your time travel is in your head? That is to say, at mind level, writing over your soul or memories at that moment, in a way?”

“I suppose,” Homura said with a shrug. “I have never cared about how it works.”

Kisuke hummed and scribbled on his notepad.

“So what went wrong that time?” Yoruichi asked.

“We did relatively well in that timeline,” Homura continued. “Madoka and I defeated Walpurgisnacht and survived.” No mention of the other girls. Isshin was afraid to ask. “But then Madoka turned into a Witch. That is how I found out about the origin of Witches.”

Those around the table grimaced, shook their heads, or just looked angry.

“So you went back again,” said Yoruichi.

“Yes.” Homura pursed her lips, face somewhere between frustrated and mournful. “I tried to warn everyone. No one believed me. I suppose no one wanted to believe me. Then Sayaka turned into a Witch in front of us and we had to... put her out of her misery.”

There was that phrase again. Isshin hated it.

Homura was silent for a long time, grimly staring at her tea.

“I take it your friends... didn't handle it well?” Uryū said delicately.

Homura closed her eyes. “Mami went insane.” She wrapped her hands around her cup and squeezed. “Mami... she uses magical guns and magic ribbons. When we were standing in the train
station after the labyrinth collapsed, Mami restrained me with ribbons so I could not stop time for her and shot Kyōko's Soul Gem. A one-shot kill.”


Homura sighed. “She was crying and shaking. She said something like 'If Soul Gems become Witches, then we have no choice but to die.’” She wet her lips. “Madoka stopped Mami from shooting me by shooting Mami’s Soul Gem with her bow and arrow.”

Orihime held both hands to her face, eyes shimmering with tears. “Oh— oh, Homura—”

Isshin mentally reached to Engetsu for help staying grounded. He couldn't allow himself to express his helpless anger. He didn't want Homura to misunderstand it and Isshin could count on his zanpakutō to seethe for him now that they were reunited. He didn't know how he survived their years of separation while stabilizing Masaki's soul. Engetsu took his fury, converted it into lunar fire, and stored it for future use.

He was going to need to fight something soon if Homura kept talking.

Homura deliberately ignored Orihime— and everyone's reactions, really. “Madoka and I defeated Walpurgisnacht again. We were laying in the ruins, both of us about to become Witches, when M—madoka used her last Grief Seed to save me.” Homura swallowed hard. “She asked me to go back in time and keep her from contracting at all. I said yes. Then she—.” She cut herself off and hunched forward.

“Madoka turned into a Witch again?” Ichigo asked gently.

Homura shook her head and covered her face, unable to speak.

Ichigo carefully lay a hand on her back, worried. Glances were shared around the table— what could be worse? Isshin didn't want to know, but felt obligated to listen. Homura deserved to be heard and have her burden shared. She had carried it herself for too long.

“Miss Akemi?” Kisuke prompted gently.

“M-madoka didn't want to become a W-witch, and there was still t-time left before I could go b-back.” Homura drew a ragged breath. “S-so she asked me to sh-shoot her Soul Gem. And I d-did.”

Isshin closed his eyes again and leaned back with a deep breath through his nostrils, trying to control his rage at what fate had befallen the girls; Engetsu was enough to rein it in. Barely. With great effort. If Ichigo made a similar effort, he failed badly, sad outrage at what the girls went through flooding the room. Face unreadable, Karin silently slid out of Isshin's lap, crawled to her friend, and wrapped her arms around Homura's shaking shoulders.

His daughter was still capable of empathy. Karin was still there. Thanks to Homura opening up to them with her greater knowledge instead of taking off at the first opportunity and leaving them to fend for themselves. Homura had risked herself and ended up revealing her greatest secrets because she cared about helping Karin. She did hard things— unfathomably difficult things— because she cared.

Tell her, Engetsu whispered. She needs to hear it.

“You did the right thing,” Isshin said thickly. He opened his eyes and found Homura looking at him, tense and baffled. Like it had never occurred to her someone might think that. Isshin felt like he had aged twenty years since the previous afternoon. He looked her in the eye and tried to project
empathy instead of anger. “Knowing what she would go through, thinking there was no way to save a Grief Seed, and knowing that you would soon undo it all... you did the right thing. The hard thing, but the right thing. You spared her that pain, however briefly.”

“But—”

“Shut up,” Karin muttered darkly. “I know what it feels like when it h-happens to you now. You did the right thing.” Her fingers curled into Homura's arms as she whispered, “She was better off that way.”

Isshin's rage collapsed in on itself as something in his heart shriveled up and died.

After a suitably tactful, long pause while Homura pulled herself together again, Kisuke said, “Is there anything you want to add from additional timelines?”

Homura sniffled and thought. “I ha-have come very close to succeeding at at least saving Madoka several times, but whenever I've gotten Madoka to tomorrow alive and uncontracted, she ends up doing some combination of dying, contracting, and turning while I'm fighting Walpurgisnacht. Various things happened that made me learn things I told you about Soul Gems and the Incubator. Otherwise, it's been... a lot of combinations of the same thing, really. People die or turn in different ways, but it's the same set of patterns. Except everyone died early this time.”

Everyone was quiet for awhile as Kisuke tapped his pen and stared blankly at his notepad. Eventually, he asked, “Have you ever had any help dealing with all of this?”

Homura shifted. “Sometimes I can convince Mami and Kyōko to cooperate. I tried going to the police once early on when I was still stupid. That ended about as well as you would expect. The social worker was kind, but....” She trailed off and shrugged sullenly.

The cops probably thought she was delusional, Isshin realized. He could see that triggering psychological tests galore. He both did and didn't want details of whatever disaster had ensued.

“I wouldn't say stupid,” Kisuke mused. “Naive, perhaps, but understandably so. It makes sense to seek help from authority figures when you are overwhelmed by something dangerous.”

Homura made a disdainful sound, obviously still thinking she had been stupid. Kisuke and Isshin sighed.

“Let's cut to the chase,” Yoruichi said frankly. “Are you going to come for us for help next time around?”

“I had considered it,” Homura hedged. “But none of you will remember any of this. I would be a stranger telling you strange things.”

Kisuke rested his elbows on the table and wove his fingers together. “Tell me, Miss Akemi: Does whatever you store in your shield travel back in time with you?”


The scientist hummed and stared at the ceiling in thought. “That makes things much easier.”

“What do you mean?”

Kisuke eyed her keenly. “We have until tomorrow morning to amass as much evidence as possible, come up with things to give you to convince our other selves you are telling the truth, and cram it
all into your shield, of course.”

Homura stared at him, eyes wide.

“Hmmm, I want to investigate why you can't take Grief Seeds with you and how your shield works — it's all terribly fascinating— but I suppose another me will have to study that. I'll have to write down some notes.” His lips curled faintly with mischief. “I wonder if it would be easy or difficult to solve a riddle a future version of you wrote.”

“...You know, Kisuke,” Yoruichi drawled, “Somehow it feels like I should only be surprised it's taken you this long to stumble upon a way to mindscrew yourself.” She disregarded her friend's pout in favor of weighing Homura with a measured glance. “Assuming we get stuff together to convince our... past, future, other, whatever selves to cooperate with you, would you come to us?”

Isshin tried not to hold his breath waiting for her reply. If she agreed, he could save all of his girls —

—And this “Incubator” shall taste our flames as did the Grand Fisher, Engetsu growled.

Homura's mouth opened and closed speechlessly for several moments as she thought. She still wanted the three Kurosaki siblings as allies; she wasn't sure of the others. While she was still unsatisfied that she knew enough about the shinigami and their allies to truly say she trusted them, there were several huge mitigating factors: They fought well in labyrinths. They seemed able to apply science to the situation in a way that could reap future dividends if they were allowed to investigate further. It sounded like there was an entire army she could point at Walpurgisnacht. But the most priceless advantages an alliance with them could reap would be the ability to purify Soul Gems without Grief Seeds and the ability to reverse the Soul Gem's transformation into a Grief Seed. That alone could break the chains that kept her tied to the Incubator no matter how much she hated using its methods to stay sane.

It would be folly to ignore the shinigami's capabilities in the next timeline. But it could be equally foolish to throw herself into their arms without reservations. Caution would have to rule the day.

She trusted the Kurosaki family. They seemed to have her best interests at heart in addition to their shared hate of the Incubator. She felt reasonably sure they would behave the same way in a new timeline, especially if she could prove how badly wrong this timeline had gone for them. They were just that frank, honest, and empathetic.

But what of the scientist?

He seemed genial enough, but Homura was absolutely certain that was a sugar coating over cold steel. Candy and razor blades, just like in Karin's labyrinth. Kisuke Urahara was frightfully perceptive, unusually insightful, insatiably curious, and better at getting her to admit things than she was comfortable with or confident she could resist. He could be a valuable ally or a terrifying enemy.

Homura decided to table that issue until she could think on it in private. Instead, she pursed her lips and said, “My concern would be the involvement of the shinigami military.” Her eyes strayed to Hitsugaya, who frowned but didn't respond. She looked back to Urahara. Her uncertainty and distrust was equal for both the scientist and the shinigami captain, but she didn't want to admit it
because the others seemed to trust him.

Urahara's eyes narrowed slightly; how many lines had he just read between? "A legitimate concern," he allowed with an inclination of his chin. "If you start on the wrong foot with them, it could get quite bad. Second and Twelfth Divisions would be far more heavy-handed than me, should the Thirteen Divisions have no context and want your information. Cooperating with me—with us here in the shop—will be your path of least resistance, as our affiliation with the Thirteen Divisions is informal and we are thus not entirely obligated to obey orders from them. And the Captain-Commander often seems comfortable with having Captain Hitsugaya lead special teams in the World of the Living, so he can help minimize bad reactions in Soul Society."

Yes, Urahara had read between every single line and was answering both concerns with one reply.

"How can I be sure he won't react in the exact opposite way?!" Homura objected, pretending she didn't notice. "Hitsugaya is a military leader—!"

"He is," Urahara conceded. "He is also personally involved through his relationships with the members of the Kurosaki family and capable of nuance and discretion." Homura suspected he was also speaking of himself. "Isshin was once his commanding officer, Ichigo is a comrade-in-arms, and the girls are his friends. He has spine enough to express disagreement to his military peers and defaults to treating unknowns with dignity while investigating them instead of automatically condemning them in a snap judgment. While he can be very exacting and even merciless in battle, he is capable of independent thought and morality and applies such harsh qualities only when appropriate. And Hitsugaya, like many shinigami, has expressed distaste for Captain Kurosaki’s methods. Should you show yourself trustworthy and responsible to him and appeal to his sense of decency about not wanting to end up in Mayuri's labs, I'm fairly certain your little secret won't find its way into an official report unless there are dangerous extenuating circumstances. Even then, such a report would be discreet and directly to the Captain-Commander to mitigate the chance of others in the command structure deciding to do things to you on their own. Am I correct in this assessment of your character and likely actions, Captain Hitsugaya?"

Hitsugaya, sour-faced, looked like he couldn't decide whether to be flattered or insulted. He reluctantly nodded with a frustrated sigh.

"How are you a hardass and a softie at the same time, Tōsh?" Karin muttered distantly as she stared into space, almost as though talking to herself while still lethargically draped around Homura's shoulders. "I've never understood it."

Hitsugaya shifted uncomfortably. No one knew how he could answer that—or if he was even meant to answer that at all. He settled for an uncertain frown.

Urahara cleared his throat. When he had Homura's attention again, he continued. "I believe the Thirteen Divisions' reaction, absent the circumstances that have happened in the last week, will depend on how you approach them. I can be a liaison for you— or if he was even meant to answer that at all. He settled for an uncertain frown.

"What he means," Yoruichi interrupted with a smirk, "is that he's pretty decent at talking circles around them and turning a situation to his advantage. Nine times out of ten, he can convince the captains it's wise to let him be the point person for handling local oddities. That odd time out is when the captains insist on there being an official presence, in which case they usually shove Hitsugaya at the problem and make him deal with Kisuke. Or Rukia Kuchiki if the weirdness doesn't merit a captain's attention. Right, Caaaaaaaaptain?"

Hitsugaya grumbled his agreement while pinching the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache.
“And Kuchiki is like one of the family around these parts,” Yoruichi added with a lazy grin and gesture around the room. “If you go to the Kurosakis first, then come to us at the shop, we can handle how to break it to the higher-ups among the shinigami.”

Homura frowned and tilted her head. “You want me to go to the Kurosakis first? Not you at the shop?” At Yoruichi’s nod, she asked, “Why?”

Yoruichi, Urahara, and Isshin all exchanged glances before breaking out in grim laughter. Even Karin managed a dark snicker. Ishida and Hitsugaya sighed deeply. It made no sense to Homura.

“Why, Miss Akemi!” Urahara lilted from behind a fan that mysteriously appeared in his hand to hide a sharp grin. “The first thing you should know about dealing with the Thirteen Divisions—and supernatural conflicts in general—is that having Ichigo Kurosaki on your side is the best life insurance policy you could ever acquire!” He waved his fan at the young man, who looked unamused. “Honestly, the best thing you can do for yourself in any timeline is get Ichigo on your side.”

Homura looked around at all the baffling expressions of general, sometimes reluctant agreement. “Why?”

“Ichigo is obnoxiously powerful and bizarrely influential among shinigami,” Ishida explained with a strangely resentful respect. “If the Captain-Commander got... overzealous... and decided to move against you in any way, he'd have to plow through a lot of people who aren't directly under his command to do so because Kurosaki is inexplicably good at gathering allies.” He gestured at the people in the room. “He'd have to throw his subordinates against Kurosaki's allies and Kurosaki himself—and much of the shinigami command structure hold Kurosaki in high regard, so giving such an order could sow dissent in the ranks.”


Ishida pushed his glasses up his nose. “Trust you to be completely unaware of how your antics affect shinigami politics even though you can spout Shakespearean politics for days,” he sneered. “Hey!” Ichigo looked around. “Tōshirō, is that true?”

A muscle twitched in Hitsugaya's cheek. He scowled at Homura. “Is he going to remember any of this beyond tomorrow?”

Homura warily shook her head. “No.”

Hitsugaya closed his eyes and sighed forcefully. “Yes. Heaven help me. Your power and social influence are the proverbial elephants in the room among Seireitei authority figures. Everyone knows they're there; no one wants to talk about them.”

Ichigo blinked, still surprised. “Oh.”

“Yamamoto must thank God every moment of every day that you are the friendly idiot you are, Kurosaki,” Ishida sniped.

Ichigo scowled. “Hey!”

“It pisses off Soi Fon, doesn't it? Doesn't it?” Yoruichi asked with poorly suppressed glee. “Ichigo's a real bee in her bonnet, isn't he?”

Hitsugaya snorted. “Yes.”
Yoruichi and Urarah cackled. Tsukabishi cleared his throat disapprovingly.

“Ahem. Yes. Er. Anyway,” Urarah said, slipping back into seriousness. “Given a way to convince us to cooperate and shelter you from any bad reactions by the Thirteen Divisions, will you come to us for help?”

Again, Homura opened and closed her mouth speechlessly. It was all so overwhelming. She had wanted help, yes, but hadn't expected anything on the scale they were offering. It could turn out very well, but it could also complicate everything with more variables than she was prepared to handle.

“Homura,” Ichigo said firmly. When she looked up at him, he offered her a pained smile. “You don't have to do this alone anymore. We'll help you. We'll help you save everyone— Mami, Sayaka, Kyōko— and Madoka and Yuzu.”

Homura couldn't help the dismayed frown that revealed her misgivings. “There are just so many potential variables and complications to add....”

“I think you've been scrambling to cover too many angles by yourself,” Isshin said quietly. “Let us step in and help you help them.”

“Juggling fifty flaming batons is less likely to end in disaster if you have more than your own two hands to do the juggling,” Yoruichi drawled.

Homura closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Everyone stayed respectfully silent, recognizing the weight of the decision she was making. That was encouraging. Eyes still closed, she firmly said, “Yes. I'll do it. I will seek you out.” She opened her eyes and solemnly looked from person to person. “Please do as much as you can to ensure your past selves cooperate.”

Among the sounds of general agreement, Urarah loudly smacked his folded fan on the table. “Okay, okay, okay! Listen up!” He tapped the fan tensely, gray eyes hawk-like as he gave out orders. “Everyone is to write down as much as they can remember about where they were and what they were doing from at least the week before March sixteenth to the present. I want Miss Akemi to be able to pick a good time to contact us as we will likely have no time to work that out before the turnback point. I will collect all of these diaries or calendars for Miss Akemi's reference. Next, all of you are to write something to your past selves to convince them to cooperate. Mention how badly this has all gone, mention deeply personal secrets, package up unique trinkets, I don't care as long as it would convince another you they're not being pranked. Write them out by hand— I want your past selves to recognize your handwriting. I will then use a reishi sealant on the envelopes or boxes or whatever you put together—”

“Say what?” interrupted Ichigo.

“Think of it as an old-timey wax seal,” Yoruichi said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It'll seal whatever it is with some stuff that will be imbued with your reishi. It's done for top secret communication to ensure integrity of information and source identification. You'll be able to tell you're the one who sealed it and no one else has opened it. There's also the more complicated option of setting a reiatsu key so only the intended recipient— you— can open it. So your stuff could be private from Homura, too.”

Homura didn't like that. The technique sounded fascinating but she did not like the prospect of being unable to fully access something in her shield. And it could easily be used to convey directions to work against her. It made sense strategically to convince the others, but still.
“Yes, yes,” Urahara said impatiently. He slapped his closed fan into his open palm. “My duty will be to amass and organize as much of the relevant data as possible. As a bonus, that will be enough to convince another me on its own.” He looked at Homura. “What is our deadline?”

“Approximately eight o’clock tomorrow morning, to be safe,” Homura answered curtly. “Walpurgisnacht descends around that time. My turnback point is roughly an hour afterward.”

“There are five recon teams in the Mitakihara area right now,” Hitsugaya said with a frown. “What do we do about them? Do we warn them? Do we warn anyone?”

Urahara frowned. “Telling the Thirteen Divisions about the time travel will cause unnecessary alarm and be too distracting to Twelfth. Dealing with them will slow us down. Really, we probably don't have to warn them about Walpurgisnacht, either. Anything that happens in Mitakihara tomorrow will be undone, anyway.”

Hitsugaya looked doubtful. “Even if it's to be undone, leaving them to be surprised by a massive enemy doesn't seem... ethical.”

Homura eyed him and considered what Urahara had called the shinigami's sense of decency. Hmmmm.

Urahara hummed and smacked his fan in his palm. “I'll contact Twelfth later. I'll give them an edited brief about the situation in exchange for more of their sensor data. It should give them time to warn the recon teams but not enough to really pick at the threads of the report, so to speak.”

Hitsugaya inclined his chin in acknowledgment and Homura noted that the scientist had taken his concern seriously despite his youth. Hmmmmmm.

Urahara turned to Homura. “While everyone else is writing to their past selves, your job is to write as much as possible about Walpurgisnacht, magical girls, and the Incubator as you can without even hinting at time travel. If you know anything because of repeated experience, find a way to lie and explain it with something different. Got it?” Homura nodded seriously. “I'll send that off to Twelfth when you're done so they can stay busy playing with it, then I'll include a copy in our little time capsule.” He went quiet and stared into space, eyes unfocused as he thought through the many things they needed to do.

“Have any more marching orders for us, Kisuke?” Yoruichi asked when he didn't say anything for a minute.

Urahara cocked his head to one side and frowned. “No.” He glanced around the room with hard eyes and smacked his fan on the table again. “Whatever you do to prepare, be back here by midnight. Dismissed!”

Homura watched everyone chattering and dispersing and rummaging for supplies. She had forgotten what it felt like to be part of a team with a plan.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: As promised. :3

Note for PMMM-only readers: "Sado" and "Chad" are the same person. Yasutora Sado is referred to by his nickname, Chad, by very few people. If they think of him as or call him Chad, they're very close. Except Karin; she gets special privileges for being Ichigo's little sister who has thought him cool since they fought a Hollow together when she was like 10.

Some of the girls from Kazumi Magica appear in this chapter. Vague spoilers for the end of that manga ahoy. If you haven't read the manga, no worries. You don't need to know anything deeper about them than what I'm showing: They're magical girls who have been through hell, know about the Witch thing, and are persevering despite it.

The entire manga is online if you do want to read it. Beware plot-breaking powers doled out like Halloween candy hahahaha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Urahara Shop was closed for the day as it hosted a dozen people working on the strangest essay assignment ever. They staked out different parts of the shop. Ichigo, Uryū, Orihime, and Chad claimed a spare room so they could coordinate to figure out where they had all been in the jumble that was their life in a shared condo between two different colleges in a big city. Tessai, Jinta, and Ururu holed up in the stock room. Yoruichi had stalked down the hall after Urahara as he returned to his lab. Karin's father had retreated to the spare room that held Yuzu's body with a pen and a spiral notebook.

Karin hadn't been able to bring herself to go back to that room to stay near him, so she sat at the dining table with Homura and Tōshirō. Her Soul Gem was a shiny little centerpiece at their table—everyone had insisted she leave it out where its status could be monitored so Orihime could be fetched to purify it if need be. It was irritating. The jewel was pretty, but she didn't want to look at it. The Soul Gem felt like a curse now. She looked down at her paper but couldn't focus enough to write much, so she watched her friends. Homura was industriously typing on a laptop Urahara had provided to her. The slight changes in her facial expressions as she typed particular passages was sufficiently distracting for awhile, but Karin got twitchy so she looked at Tōshirō. He was scowling at a notebook, sometimes scrawling things before glaring and scratching them out, other times looking deeply sad and tired. It was more depressing than watching Homura, so Karin watched Homura until she got too twitchy to sit still.

Karin abruptly stood. Her friends looked up at her in worried surprise. Tōshirō opened his mouth to
say something, but Karin interrupted him and blurted, “Toilet.” He shut his mouth so fast she wondered if he had literally bitten his tongue. The thought entertained her until she got to the bathroom. She didn't do anything there but shut the door and stare at a wall with the lights off. The dim, silent stillness and lack of worried glances burning against the back of her head calmed her. The lack of outside distraction allowed her mind to dwell on the memory of her sister’s corpse strung up inside her own rib cage, though, so it was a wash.

Eventually, Homura came and knocked on the door to check on her. Karin scrubbed the tears from her face and followed her friend back to the dining room. Instead of approaching the table, she veered off into the kitchen with vague words about food that she immediately forgot. She stood in the kitchen and looked around blankly while scratching her ribs, not really sure why she had gone in there.

When Tessai walked in five minutes later, the drawers and cabinet doors were in disarray as Karin shuffled through a selection of utensils. Rather than startle, she slowly looked up at him and blinked owlishly. After a pause to make sure the knives were all still in their block— rude—Tessai asked her what she was looking for.

Karin blinked some more, wondering the answer to the question herself, and looked back at the drawer. She held up a simple nutcracker— two steel arms connected by a hinge. “Do you have walnuts?” she blurted. “I really want walnuts. I need to— I want—” She faltered.

Tessai eyed her as he carefully began closing cabinets. “No need for the nutcracker. I have some shelled walnuts in a jar—”

“No!” Karin objected with a childish pout. “I wanna open them.”

“Why?”

Karin fidgeted, held the nutcracker lever up by one side and rocked it so she could watch the loose side clack back and forth like some novel invention. “Can't sit still. I gotta do something.”

Tōshirō wandered into the kitchen, probably concerned by her long absence. Worrywart. “Are you okay, Karin?”

Her reply was flat and without inflection. “Tessai wants me to eat walnuts without shells but breaking shells is the fun part and I want to do it but he won't let me but I want to do it and you can't crack shells when walnuts are already shelled the shell is all gone how are you supposed to shell them?” Click-squeak-click-squeak-click-squeak. “Tessai won't get me walnuts.” Her tone said Can you believe the service in this place?! Karin used her free hand to reach across her chest and scratch her arm before rolling her shoulders. She felt uncomfortable in her own skin, felt like her eyes were hollow as the sockets of a bare skull. Did she even have eyes? Must, if she could see. Maybe. Hm.

Tōshirō just stared. It was kinda funny. “Uh, what?”

Her reply was flat and without inflection. “Tessai wants me to eat walnuts without shells but breaking shells is the fun part and I want to do it but he won't let me but I want to do it and you can't crack shells when walnuts are already shelled the shell is all gone how are you supposed to shell them?” Click-squeak-click-squeak-click-squeak. It was a pleasant sound.

“Oh... kaaaay...?” Tōshirō looked at Tessai. They thought she was too distracted by the tool to notice the silent conversation they had with furtive facial expressions that expressed concerns for her sanity. It was as touching as it was dumb. They cared.

Maybe they'd care enough to get her some goddamn walnuts.

“We have a small amount of whole walnuts in the shop,” Tessai said slowly. “Why don't you go sit
at the table while I get them? If you want more than we have, I'll send Jinta out to buy some.”

Score!

Karin put her nose up snobbily and wandered out of the kitchen with an airy “If you would, Tessai.” Like an aristocrat condescending to a servant. God. She’d lost a sister and her eyes felt like rocks; getting her some walnuts was the least they could do for her.

What the hell? Lieutenant Renji Abarai thought as his team reached the center of the bizarre house of mirrors they had entered upon detection of an anomaly in far northern Asunaro. Fighting their way through the maze that took distinctions between things like “walls and floors” or “up and down” as vague suggestions had been weird enough, but here they were in a cathedral completely made of stained glass and cracked mirrors. The icing on the cake was the demented living kaleidoscope monster of shifting stained glass on the other side of the chamber. Stranger still, it was getting its ass handed to it by girls in beribboned costumes.

“Uh, your orders, sir?” one of Renji’s subordinates prompted when they had been standing in the same place for two minutes.

“Hold your positions,” Renji ordered distractedly. He had half thought Hitsugaya was out of his damn mind at the meeting— or perhaps hoped so— but here were real-life magical girls fighting a living nightmare before his very eyes. Renji analyzed how the girls fought. They moved fluidly, anticipating one another's moves with the ease of frequent teamwork. He wasn't sure what the hell the bespectacled girl in white and indigo was doing wielding a big book in battle, but something like kidō occasionally spewed from its pages so he decided to ignore the part of his brain that screamed it was the stupidest weapon ever. The orange-haired girl wearing an orange, white, and black equestrian outfit without jodhpurs was randomly darting in to kick the shit out of the monster with her spiked boots. Colored glass would explode in all directions, leaving metallic fr...
other two girls and brought her big staff to bear once again.

The shinigami all remembered their briefing: *Some magical girls will aggressively defend their territory. Proceed with caution.*

Everyone stood still as statues in the sunset, no one wanting to touch off a fight. Finally, Renji slowly raised his empty hands to his sides and firmly called out, “We don't want to fight you.”

Poofy managed to look worried, confused, and hopeful at the same time. Bookworm and Carrot-Top squinted suspiciously. Bookworm in particular had the sharp look of someone analyzing everything she saw in minute detail. “Who are you?” she snapped.

“Lieutenant Renji Abarai of the Sixth Division of the Thirteen Court Guard Divisions.” He nodded a respectful greeting.

“That means nothing to me,” Bookworm said coldly.

“We're shinigami.”

“Say what now?” blurted Carrot-Top.

“Ehhhhhhhhhh? Really?!” Poofy asked excitedly, red eyes wide with curiosity. “Shinigami are real?!”

“Yeah.” Renji drawled, his lips twitching as he was distinctly reminded of Orihime Inoue. “This is where I go all ‘Whaaat, magical girls are real?’ and we all stare dramatically as the episode ends, right?” He tipped his head westward and smirked. “We even have a sunset in the background.” Renji could *feel* the confusion in his officers— they hadn't spent as much time blending into the World of the Living as he had during the war. He had long felt that temporary assimilation would serve him well as time went by. Here he was, being proven right. Hell yeah.

Poofy burst into giggles. She dropped her staff— which dissolved into white sparkles— and clapped with delight. Carrot-Top and Bookworm looked torn between grimaces and affectionate eyerolls. Poofy clasped her hands behind her back and leaned forward playfully. “What'll happen in the next episode, Mister Shinigami?”

Renji noted that while her face was cheerful and warm, her eyes were watching him keenly and she stayed behind her friends. So she wasn't *completely* naive. He approved. “Pretty sure we'll have a peaceful conversation about why us shinigami are here now when we haven't been before,” he answered with a shrug. “Talk about how we're here to figure things out and help you, that kind of stuff. Hopefully end with us being friends who work together to protect the people with no powers while we figure out how to stop Witches from appearing so girls like you don't have to fight.” Lure cast; would they bite? Did they know? The intel he read overnight said most magical girls didn't.

All three girls went utterly still. Poofy's face went carefully serious. Bookworm and Carrot-Top looked grim. The atmosphere on the roof became tense once more.

Bookworm scowled. “Do you even know where Witches come from?”

Renji crossed his arms over his chest. He was pretty sure they knew, but just to be sure.... “Yup. A magical girl from Mitakihara stumbled upon a shinigami and told him about Soul Gems, Grief Seeds, and Incubators.”

Hatred burned in Bookworm's reiatsu so fiercely it showed in her blue eyes. “You know about the Incubators? What they do to girls?”
“Yep.” He kept his face grim. “It's sick. The shinigami brass are pissed that they've managed to sneak around messing with souls for so long.” Renji tilted his head. “The magical girl who provided our intel said most magical girls don't know where Witches really come from. How did you learn?”

“The hard way,” Carrot-Top said bitterly.

“There used to be seven of us,” Poofy said sadly.

Renji sighed and closed his eyes. “I see.”

“Why do shinigami care about the Incubators?” Bookworm demanded.

The lieutenant looked to her and let his frustration show. “We're guardians of human souls. We protect them from corrupted spirits and help them pass on. We should have stopped the things from messing with souls like they are. It's a failure we want to correct.”

“To save your wounded pride?” Bookworm said scathingly.

“To an extent, I guess,” Renji admitted. “For some more than others. For me, I just think it's sick. There was a mess south of here where a human ally of the shinigami lost one sister to a Witch and another sister to becoming a Witch. I knew the kids a bit and their brother is a good friend. It's personal for me.” His captain would probably censure him for being so frank, but he let his instincts lead him. The girls obviously had personal grudges against the Incubators. Putting himself on equal footing with them seemed the smart thing to do to get them to cooperate. “If there used to be seven of you... well, I'm guessing it's extra personal for you.” He waited, giving them a chance to respond, but they all just looked at him with the kind of thousand-yard stares he saw on the survivors of Hollow-hunting missions gone catastrophically wrong. Seen-your-buddies-torn-apart-and-eaten wrong. It was unsettling to see the expression on the faces of such young girls. Renji nodded slowly. “Sooo... how do you feel about stopping this Incubator thing?”

“We tried,” Carrot-Top snapped, obviously frustrated. “They just sat back and waited for us to get tired and fail.”

Bookworm looked mournful. “As long as we have Soul Gems, we'll need to fight Witches and use the Incubator to keep from falling ourselves. Trying to defy that system from within brought only insanity and death.”

Poofy had nothing to say, but she averted her eyes as her face fell into melancholy. She reached up and brushed a white-gloved hand against one of her silver jinglebell earrings like it was a sacred object.

Renji reached up and dug one finger under his bandanna to scratch his temple. “Well, no promises, but we have some people looking into ways of reversing the damage to Soul Gems without whatever that thing is.”

Shock. “What?! Really?! We tried that! What have they found?! Are you sure?! When will it work?!”

Renji held his hands up and waved them in a cautioning gesture. “Whoa, slow down. No promises. The scientists looking at Grief Seeds and Soul Gems have ideas, but nothing concrete yet. They're the most scary-smart shinigami around, though, and a magical girl is helping them. So cross your fingers, I guess.”

“Is it Mami?” Poofy asked hopefully. “Mami's from Mitakihara, and she's really helpful and nice! I
"Bet she's helping!" She smiled and bounced expectantly.

Renji thought back to the intel dossiers. "Uh... Mami Tomoe?"

Poofy looked completely lost. "I dunno?"

Carrot-Top looked dismayed. "Kazumi, what are you on about? Who's Mami?"

Poofy— Kazumi— pouted cartoonishly. "Mami is the magical girl who saved Mmeeeее. She looked embarrassed for a moment, then laughed. "She had curly blond hair and wore yellow and made guns fall out of her hat and protected M-me with ribbons and called her attacks in Italian and —"

"Oh. That one," Carrot-Top said with a bit of dull surprise.

"She's so cool!" Kazumi gushed. She turned to the shinigami with stars in her eyes. "Mami's the one helping, right? Right? I wanna help, too!"

Renji stared blankly, unsure how to proceed. Carefully? Dodge. "Uh, the name of the magical girl helping us is Homura Akemi."

Kazumi mumbled a crestfallen, "Oh."

Bookworm eyed the shinigami carefully. "You mentioned a Mami Tomoe, though. What of her?"

Dammit. Busted. Renji sighed. Deflection wasn't his strong suit. "The intel from Akemi listed a Mami Tomoe as killed in action. I dunno if we're talking about the same girl, though."

Kazumi teared up and looked heartbroken. Renji really didn't know how to handle that.

Bookworm sighed and lowered her polearm, then let it dissolve entirely. Stepping to Kazumi's side as the girl began to cry, she looked back at the shinigami. "I'm Umika Misaki. This is Kazumi Subaru—" she squeezed Poofy's shoulder and was promptly wrapped in a hug— "and this is Kaoru Maki." Carrot-Top waved silently. Umika shared a significant glance with Kaoru, then turned back to the shinigami. "Let's continue this at our house instead of this rooftop. I think we're going to be talking a lot and we may as well be comfortable."

"That's nice, yeah," Renji said, scratching his head. "Your parents won't notice you talking to invisible people?"

"You're invisible?" Kaoru blurted. "But you're right there!"

Umika looked interested at that point, but let it slide. "Our parents are overseas. We manage."

"If you're sure, yeah," Renji reluctantly agreed. Their intel could be priceless. But the assignment.... He glanced at his team. They were tired from a day of patrolling and would have to strike camp soon anyway. "We'll have to report to our superiors before we go. We already lost one team to a Witch before we knew what they were; no use letting the commander think he's lost another."

Umika inclined her head regally. "That is acceptable."

Renji eyed the three girls, two hovering around and comforting the third, as he dug out his Soul Phone. Poor kids.
Beady red eyes watched the encounter from atop a nearby apartment building. The creature's white ears flattened back like a displeased cat's as the magical girls led the shinigami across the rooftops.

The sky outside the windows of Urahara Shop was brilliant orange. Homura was absently chewing one nail while editing her censored pseudo-text on all things magical girl. Hitsugaya was tiredly copying his most acceptable rough draft of a long letter to his past self. Karin was completely absorbed in messing around with walnuts.

Mr. Tsukabishi had sent Jinta out to buy a large quantity of the nuts when it became apparent that the repetitive task of cracking them, eating the insides, and making a pattern out of shells on the table was unexpectedly soothing for the girl. Karin had pulled her Soul Gem closer to her edge of the table and built an intricate design around it. She alternated shells between upright and upside-down, stacked some, and so on, making ever-widening rings around the Gem's golden pedestal. Homura and Tōshirō had long since come to tolerate the constant squeak-CRACK of the nutcracker. They sat in wordless near-silence for a long time.

Out of the blue, Karin conversationally said, “I'm sorry I hit you, Homura. And I'm sorry I blew fire at you guys.” squeak-CRACK

Homura and Tōshirō froze and looked up at her, dreading what they would see. Karin just kept calmly cracking and arranging walnuts, face mostly aloof. squeak-CRACK

“That wasn't you,” Hitsugaya mumbled as he glanced away.

“Yes, it was. I even remember doing it. So I'm sorry.” squeak-CRACK

Hitsugaya looked like he might protest again, but Homura spoke up first. “We forgave you even before the labyrinth had collapsed.”

After a long pause, Karin murmured, “You two are good friends.” Said friends looked at her again, but she didn't take her dull eyes off her project. squeak-CRACK

An uncomfortable silence dragged on for a few minutes. Karin eventually took a deep breath and asked, “Homura. When you go back in time, everyone will be better, right?” squeak-CRACK

Homura blinked and looked up at her. “Yes.”

Karin looked like she was thinking about that answer. “Even if their souls were destroyed, they'll come back?”

“No.” Homura guiltily avoided eye contact by watching the girl's hands work. “Yuzu's soul will be just as it was on the March sixteenth you remember.”

Karin bit her lip, but still kept her eyes on the nutcracker. “W-will they remember any of it?” she asked in a wobbly voice.

Homura closed her eyes. “No. When I go back, it will be as if nothing after that point had ever
happened. I am the only one who remembers anything.”

After a few shallow breaths, Karin whispered, “That's good.” squeak-CRACK

Homura's heart hurt. It really wasn't good— for her, anyway. But for Karin— “Yes.”

They fell back into silence, Homura and Hitsugaya reluctantly returning to their tasks when it seemed Karin had drifted off into her own little world again. Ten minutes later, Karin quietly said, “I'm really sorry about this.”

squeak-crack-PING!

Alarmed, Homura and Hitsugaya looked up in time to see Karin's Soul Gem shatter in the nutcracker.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
ROSAMUND, the Glass Witch with a vengeful nature. She will never forgive the one who killed her beloved. She sees that person's face everywhere, though, so she will never forgive anyone. It is almost enough to distract her from blaming herself.

A/N: Uh, Merry Christmas?

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I hope everyone had a restful week. Or at least a non-disastrous one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**DREIßIG**

**TIMELINE X+N**

It took a moment for Homura's brain to push through shock and kick into gear. With a cry of dismay, she materialized her shield as quickly as she could and immediately froze time. Her first thought was to fetch Orihime with the time-stop intact, see if maybe the Soul Gem could be repaired by her godlike power. Then she looked at Karin's face.

"I know what it feels like when it h-happens to you now."

Karin's eyes had already gone blank once again, but what caught Homura's attention was the expression on her face. The girl had apparently shattered her own Soul Gem while deliberately looking straight at Homura in expectation that her friend would try to save her. Karin's empty eyes bored into Homura from an expression of haunted pleading.

"She was better off that way."

Homura understood the implied request—let me die—but recoiled from it. She was overcome by white-hot rage—how dare Karin do this in front of her like this, knowing what she had seen? How it had hurt her? Homura wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her fiercely. But she reined herself in.

"I tried to hurt everyone and Yu-yuzu-uu is d-dead and oh my God she was inside me oh my God!"

Because really, she understood why Karin would make that decision. Homura momentarily put herself in Karin's place, imagined remembering a twisted version of herself so protective of Madoka that she dragged her corpse along into her nightmare world of her own creation and—Unbearable.

So Homura couldn't blame Karin for coming to this decision. Her anger left as suddenly as it had come, leaving behind exhaustion. She sat back and dully stared at her friend. After taking a minute to clear her head a bit and brace herself, she let time resume.

Hitsugaya rose to his knees with a wordless shout as Karin's body slumped onto the table through the evaporating shards of her Soul Gem and scattered walnut shells in every direction. He hurried around the table, urgently calling Karin's name. Her body was doll-like when he lifted and turned her. Desperate, he looked at Homura and the shield on her arm. “Akemi! Stop time! Get Inoue!”
Sounds of alarm drifted into the room from various points in the shop as people registered the sudden disappearance of Karin's reiatsu. Homura stared numbly at Karin's slack face. “I tried. I was too late.”

“INOUE!” Tōshirō roared as the sound of people running echoed through the building.

Orihime actually shoved Ichigo out of her way at the door as she engaged her Shun Shun Rikka at a run. The fairies streaked across the room and formed their glowing shield over Karin and Hitsugaya. Nothing happened. A fairy chimed something sadly, causing Orihime to cry, “Keep trying!”

Urahara entered the room, surveyed it with a glance, and locked onto Homura. “What happened?”

Homura blinked at him, still in shock. She slowly pointed at the abandoned nutcracker. There was no sign of Karin's Soul Gem. Urahara's mouth turned down. Mr. Tsukabishi put a hand over his face and slowly shook his head. Isshin ran into the room, calling his daughter's name. He pushed past his son, who had stopped in his tracks at the sight of his sister. Isshin knelt beside her as Orihime tearfully disengaged her fairies.

“What happened?” Isshin demanded breathlessly.

Hitsugaya's mouth worked for several moments before he could stammer, “Karin— she— Soul Gem— she— s-suicide.”

Ichigo gasped behind him as Isshin covered his mouth and hunched tensely. Isshin took a few deep breaths and straightened. He held out shaking arms; Hitsugaya shifted Karin's body into them. Isshin held her close and rocked her, breathing hard but otherwise too emotionally battered to express anything.

In Homura's head, she heard echoes of the conversation that morning—*it was the right thing to do*—and wondered if he felt complicit in his daughter's suicide. *Homura* felt complicit and *she* hadn't said anything like that. It was one thing to say those words in abstract and an entirely different thing to hold his daughter's body after she sought the same end. The injustice of it all burned in Homura's chest, rose in her throat, escaped from her mouth.

“This won't happen next time.”

Homura's voice rang clear in the silence. Attention turned to her. She clenched her fists tightly, mouth drawn tight as she controlled her breathing and felt like she was facing a firing squad. “This won't happen next time,” she repeated. “She won't remember this, you won't remember this, and it won't happen next time. It won't.”

She was trying to convince herself as well as them, but Urahara was the only one who looked like he knew that. Thankfully, he held his tongue. He just nodded curtly and looked around the room. “As sad as this is, we have to move forward with our tasks so we can ensure it doesn't happen in the next timeline.”

“What?” Ichigo snarled. “Just like that?! *Your sister deliberately destroyed her own soul, please go finish your essay*? Really?!”

“Cold,” Jinta muttered in agreement.

Isshin took a deep breath and gently stood. “I'll keep writing,” he croaked, then carried Karin's body down the hall gingerly as though every step made him ache.
Ichigo wavered uncertainly, angry and powerless. Sado gripped his shoulder and grounded him. “The best thing you can do to save her is continue the project,” Sado murmured. Ichigo covered his face, nodded jerkily, and staggered back toward the room the friends had been using to collaborate. The three flocked around him supportively.

Homura would not be jealous of Ichigo and his friends. Not in this situation. Would not.

(He was.)

The others trickled back to where they had come from until only Homura, Hitsugaya, and Urahara were left in the room. Gloom settled over them. Hitsugaya avoided meeting their eyes as he had with everyone who had already left; Homura stared Urahara straight in the eye and tried to disguise her uncertainty with defiance—dared him to call her out for her empty bravado.

He chose to comment on neither. “Miss Akemi, Captain Hitsugaya, have you completed your assignments?”

Hitsugaya mumbled something and shuffled back to the table, subdued, then picked up his pen and began to write unsteadily. Homura nodded and answered, “I am satisfied with it for now. I presume you wish to review it before you forward it?”

“Indeed, I do,” Urahara murmured.

Homura felt his eyes follow her as she fetched the laptop. She tensed up and moved stiffly, retreating into an armor of formality and aloofness. Urahara looked like he was going to ask her something, but thought better of it. Instead, he murmured his thanks and suggested she rest. Homura ignored him and sat across from Hitsugaya, hands neatly folded among the walnut shells on the tabletop. She would have dismissed him from her presence if she could.

Urahara must have realized it. His lips quirked up briefly in dark amusement at her before he retreated to his lab, leaving her with Hitsugaya once more.

The shinigami and the magical girl sat without speaking for a long time, the scratching of Hitsugaya’s pen the only sound in the room as Homura sat still and expressionless as a statue. Brilliant sunset dimmed into twilight, but the whole building remained hushed.

“How do you do it?” Hitsugaya suddenly asked Homura.

Homura blinked and took a moment to regain her bearings, having been quite lost in thought. “Do what?”

“She's my best friend,” Hitsugaya said dully. He obviously meant Karin. “She died in front of me two times in two days and I just watched both times. I fought her twisted soul. We brought her back, but we still lost her.” He hesitantly turned his eyes toward Homura and searched her face. “How do you stand it?”

Homura tipped her head in question. Neither of them was sure whether or not she was being deliberately obtuse.

Hitsugaya pursed his lips. “Seeing your friends die over and over. The same ones over and over. You think you’ve saved them then they die again. And you keep going on. Just twice is.... How do you bear it?”

Homura looked away from his haunted face. There were many answers she could give. That she distracted herself planning how to tweak the next timeline; that she lost herself in weapons heists
and cheap takeout and physics and ballistics; that she made herself sleep at night by forcefully imagining one of her rare memories of a Good Day over and over until her consciousness faded. Instead, she quietly said, “I don't know.”

Homura pulled herself upright around midnight, blearily realizing she had fallen asleep on the table. Across from her, Hitsugaya tiredly ran his fingers around the edges of the letter he had written, though he didn't appear to be reading it. The others were gradually assembling with papers and notebooks; some carried small items in their hands. No one spoke. Everyone just sat or stood silently and listened to the rushing of wind in the eaves until Urahara arrived with several packages.

The scientist looked around the room and nodded. “Let's get to work.”

It took a long time to seal everyone's letters and objects one at a time as most of them needed to be taught how to do it with their own power. Homura watched with interest. She wondered what significance some of the objects held but thought it would be rude to ask as even Urahara spoke in a subdued, quiet murmur in the atmosphere of melancholy. The expressions on their faces as they relinquished cherished objects was enough to convince her that they had selected important things that would catch their past selves' attention. After several people took their turns, the process gained the solemn feel of a ritual.

It was nearly two in the morning when Urahara finally sat back and looked at the stack of neat packages on the table. He was the only one to fill multiple packages, mostly with research. Everyone watched him with tired eyes. Urahara turned to Homura. “You can store them now.”

Homura nodded once and materialized her shield on her arm. One by one, she carefully picked up packages and slipped them into the shield's mysterious interior as Urahara watched with keenly interested eyes. When she was done, she looked up at the scientist and waited for him to explain the next step of his plan, if he had one.

The folded fan appeared in Urahara's hand again. He lightly tapped it in one palm. “Now. Walpurgisnacht.”

Homura tensed. “Yes?”

“I read your little treatise. Well done, by the way. Anyway, I'm curious about how you phrased something.” Homura tilted her head inquisitively. “You wrote 'Walpurgisnacht is said to be a massive Witch associated with severe weather phenomena and natural disasters.' Can you elaborate on that for us?”

“Of course.” Homura relaxed, finding the question much easier to deal with than expected. She smoothed her skirt and organized her thoughts. “While the Incubator gave that vague description in an early timeline, I have found it to be invariably true. The Japan Meteorological Agency always reports a supercell bearing down on Mitakihara from the sea and orders evacuations to shelters around seven or seven thirty. Walpurgisnacht doesn't have a true barrier, but the supercell around her kind of acts like one. As the storm approaches, a parade of Familiars appears. It looks like a carnival. Then Walpurgisnacht descends and starts destroying things.”

Urahara looked at the ceiling and scratched at the stubble on his chin. “When I submit the data to
Twelfth, I'll suggest they monitor a fifty kilometer radius for coinciding spiritual and meteorological irregularities. Maybe they'll be able to intercept the Witch before it makes landfall.” He looked down as Homura opened her mouth to say something. “I know it will be undone when you go back, but it will be good to know if the Thirteen Divisions can pull that off. I'll stay in contact with them.” Homura blinked, shut her mouth, and nodded. Urahara tapped his fan against the edge of the table thoughtfully. “I checked the weather before I came up. A lot of Japan is seeing storms of one kind or another developing. I'll write a script or something so I'll only get notifications for whatever happens near Mitakihara.”

After a long silence, Ichigo impatiently asked, “What do we do now?”

Urahara sighed. “Try to get some rest, I suppose.”

Jinta scoffed. “Like that's gonna happen.”

Renji woke to the shrill of his Soul Phone around four in the goddamn morning. He rolled over on one of the futons the magical girls had set out in their living room for his team and groggily took the call.

“Abarai. What.”

By four-thirty, Renji was completely awake and on edge.

He texted the two sentries he had set on third shift atop the roof and woke the rest of his team. Umika came downstairs in sleepy confusion as the shinigami gathered to be briefed. She looked to their leader and noticed the grim set of his face. “Is something wrong?”

Renji swiped a hand through his hair and sighed. “I think you had better get your friends down here. We got some weird intel about a Witch and I wanna see if any of you know something.”

Umika frowned but nodded and retreated up the stairs.

Everyone was finally alert and functional around five, drinking hot cocoa Kazumi had insistently shoved at them. Renji relayed what Twelfth had told him and turned to the magical girls, who all looked disturbed, and asked what they knew.

Umika frowned at the floor and slowly said, “I know I've heard the name before....”

“Kyubey said it,” Kazumi blurted.

“Eh?”

Kazumi’s eyes were wide and earnest. “I heard him. He said it. When he named Dawn of Hyades. He said something like 'Is that the legendary Walpurgisnacht?’ and then said no.”

“And whaaat is Dawn of Hyades?” Renji asked.

The magical girls all shifted uncomfortably. Kaoru took a deep breath. “It's a long story, but the short version is there was someone who managed to fuse a bunch of Witches into one big one.”

“We beat it by combining our magic,” Umika added.
“Well, that's encouraging,” Renji muttered.

“You need to go protect people from this Walpurgi-Witch, right? Right?” Kazumi asked.

Renji raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, we're gonna rendezvous with the other teams and set up a defense.”

Kazumi made a determined face and clenched her fists enthusiastically. “We'll help!”

Surprised, Renji said, “What? No. You shouldn't have to fight anymore. You're kids.”

Kazumi pouted but Umika scowled. “Kids to you, but we've fought a huge Witch before. And my power could be useful.”

Renji skeptically drawled, “What's this great power?”

Kaoru smirked as Umika inclined her chin and said, “My magic book reads my opponents and tells me about them— what they're focused on doing, motives— sometimes their weaknesses.”

Renji stared for a minute, then sighed. That was just too damn useful to pass up. “Fine. Whatever. We need to get ready. The rendezvous is in an hour.”

Kazumi cheered, then stood and declared, “Let's make breakfast!”

“Uh, do we really have time...?” the team's scientist asked.

The cheerful girl laughed and threw her arms wide. “Of course! We'll work together to make it go faster and the food will give us plenty of energy for beating the big Witch! Cooking together makes us friends!”

Umika and Kaoru looked thoroughly amused at their friend's antics and the bewildered expressions on the faces of the shinigami.

Sunday morning in Karakura dawned on a gloomy drizzle that steadily turned into a windy, bitter downpour. Homura sat on the back porch holding a cup of hot tea as she stared at the rain, stuck in a melancholy nostalgia. As badly as it had ended and as much hope as the future held, she would be sad to leave the people in this timeline. They would be the same people in the next timeline, yes, but they wouldn't know her, wouldn't have shared time with her. That erasure of bonds was why she had learned to not branch out and make more friends in the various timelines— it hurt to leave them behind and be the only one to know what they could have been.

Lost in thought, she startled when Isshin shuffled up and sat beside her. He offered her a pained smile, face wan with dark circles under his eyes. She wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't slept at all.

Isshin silently contemplated his own cup of tea for awhile. “It's almost seven,” he said quietly. Homura hummed acknowledgment but otherwise didn't respond. “I wanted to talk to you before you... go.”

Homura turned and eyed him cautiously. “What about?”

“I'm sorry.”
Surprised, Homura asked, “What for? I'm the one who—”

“No,” Isshin cut her off firmly. “I understand your actions. I don't blame you. I want to apologize for expecting you to take on a heavier burden when you go back. You've had so many problems with just your own circle of friends. You've been fighting a battle that should never have fallen to you in the first place. It's selfish of me to want you to intervene for my girls on top of that.” He gave a little self-deprecating laugh. “And yet, I still want you to do it.” He shook his head. “I'm sorry for that. If I could go back with you, for you... I'd do it in a heartbeat. You don't deserve any of this. And it must be terribly lonely.”

Homura was stunned. Isshin searched her face and smiled sadly. He reached over and lay a hand on her shoulder. “For what it's worth, this 'me' thinks of you as an honorary Kurosaki. Hopefully, other 'me's will, too.” His lips quirked and he squeezed her shoulder. “You're my third honorary daughter, you know. Rukia, Orihime— now you. My children seem to collect you for me under the strangest of circumstances. I can't complain.”

Homura tried to respond but was at a loss for words. Her vision blurred and she couldn't even swallow properly.

Isshin glanced over his shoulder at the sounds of the rest of the shop waking up and moving around. He turned back to Homura and lifted his hand from her shoulder to the side of her head. “Look at me. Listen to me, Homura. I might not get a chance to say this later.” She looked up at him. His eyes were fierce. “You are brave. You are strong. You are good. Never forget any of that. Live that. Keep on spitting in the face of fear and despair. You'll get through this. You will. I believe in you. We all believe in you. Got it?”

Homura took a deep breath and nodded, face determined. Isshin grinned sadly, ruffled her hair, and drew her into a one-armed hug as they both resumed watching the rain in silence.

The various teams of shinigami stationed themselves at strategic points throughout Mitakihara proper, each just barely in view of the other. Three battle-ready magical girls stood beside Renji and searched the skies. It was a miserably wet and windy day. They all stood tense, waiting.

Waiting.

A single pair of red eyes observed the shinigami from within the camouflage of construction scaffolding on a high rise condominium.

No one in Urahara Shop really knew what to do that morning. Everyone was as listless as Homura herself. Mr. Tsukabishi and Ururu made breakfast on autopilot. They all nibbled disinterestedly at
their food, listening to the steadily worsening storm outside as they sat at the table tensely waiting for Urahara's tablet to beep a notification about an evacuation order for Mitakihara. When nothing had happened by seven thirty, eyes started darting toward Homura. A sense of heaviness and dread pressed down on them.

At ten minutes to eight, Urahara frowned and picked up the tablet. He tapped around its screen and frowned harder. “There are no severe weather warnings for Mitakihara. Stormy, yes, but nothing serious on radar.”

Homura's face twisted in confusion. “That's impossible.”

“Does Walpurgisnacht come in every timeline? In a storm every timeline?” asked Yoruichi.

“Yes. Always,” Homura said.

“What's different?” Urahara asked tensely.

Homura looked back to the scientist in surprise. “What?”

“What's different about this timeline? How does this timeline deviate from any you've experienced before?”

Homura thought for a moment and answered, “Karakura. I never went to Karakura before. I never even left Mitakihara before.” She looked down and thought. “But... Madoka has never died before today, either.”

Mr. Tsukabishi rubbed his chin. “And Madoka was very powerful, correct?”

Homura nodded with pursed lips.

Yoruichi hummed unhappily and glanced at Urahara and back. “How powerful?”

Biting her lip, Homura answered with deliberate vagueness. “It is hard to say for sure. It has been awhile since I really felt her fight.”

Urahara's eyes narrowed. “You mentioned that she and you together were enough to defeat Walpurgisnacht in some timelines and that she beat it herself in at least one,” he pressed.

Homura shifted and glanced away. After a long pause, she quietly said, “There have been timelines when she contracted during the battle, killed Walpurgisnacht with one shot from her bow, and immediately turned into an even more powerful Witch.”

Everyone stared.

“Just how fucking powerful is she?!” demanded Jinta.

Homura shrugged and reluctantly answered, “Several times more powerful than me, when she gets in the right mindset.”

Everyone kept staring. Homura wondered what that meant to them. Whether any of them were foolish enough to think they had seen her go all-out.

Yoruichi leaned back and squinted hard at Homura. “Madoka can one-shot Big, Bad, and Ugly as soon as she accesses her powers for the first time. Zero training. Zero experience.”

“Yes.”
“So she's the second coming of Ichigo,” Yoruichi concluded.

“God help us all,” muttered Ishida.

Before the entire conversation could derail, Mr. Tsukabishi cleared his throat and asked, “Is it possible this Walpurgisnacht is only attracted to Mitakihara when Madoka is there? Like a Hollow looking for a strong soul to eat?”

Urahara and Homura blinked and tilted their heads in similar expressions of surprised thought.

“Now, there's an interesting hypothesis,” Urahara murmured.

“I do not know,” Homura admitted after some thought. “It is a conglomeration of Witches and it behaves differently than other Witches.”

“You mean the laby—”

Isshin cut himself off as everyone in the building shuddered at the sudden weight of a terrifyingly strong magic.

“The hell is that?!” Ichigo shouted as Homura went stark white and scrambled for the back door. Heedless of the confusion behind her, she ran out into the storm in her stocking feet and searched the skies. Immediately drenched, she slogged her hair out of her face and ran around to the front of Urahara Shop. She slid to a stop in the mud at the gate.

Fluffy pink poodles the size of camels wore golden saddles and bore catlike riders while hauling circus wagons in a parade. Pink and green elephants trumpeted as they marched down the street pulling something along in the air by many dozens of carnival pennants. Stuffed animals cavorted in the low mist between their feet.

In the distance, an enormous shadow in the sky.

Walpurgisnacht had come to Karakura.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: HAPPY NEW YEAR?!?

D:
I swear Kazumi is that cheesy in canon. Also that her manga has a big thing with cooking and eating together before battles. I think it’s a “let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die” kind of thing.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Reading everyone's theories about what's happening is SO FUN. Thank you for the lovely reviews. Here, have a toy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TIMELINE X+N

Homura stood transfixed in horror as Walpurgisnacht loomed in the distance. How?! Why was it here?!

More importantly, why the hell did it feel more powerful than in every other timeline she had experienced?!

She only became aware of the others catching up to her when Jinta yelled, “The fuck is all this?!”

“Walpurgisnacht,” Homura whispered.

The others followed her gaze to the shadow in the sky. Its massive gears gradually became more distinct through the cloud cover.

“I thought it's supposed to hit Mitakihara?!” cried Orihime.

Homura swallowed. “It is.”

“Has it ever appeared elsewhere?” Urahara asked tensely.

Shaking her head slowly, Homura answered, “Never. Never.”

“Does the thing follow you instead of the other girl?” Jinta asked angrily.

Homura kept shaking her head. “I don't know. I don't know. This is wrong. It shouldn't be here. It shouldn't feel this powerful. It's all wrong.”

Many of the others eyed her sharply. “What do you mean it shouldn't feel this powerful?” asked Yoruichi.

“Just that,” said Homura. “It feels so much... heavier. Darker. Like... like there's so much more of it than I've ever fought.”

“Fabulous,” droned Yoruichi.
“Our past selves will have to figure that one out,” Urahara said firmly. “We have an hour to delay it until Miss Akemi can go back in time.” He used his cane to abruptly shove Ichigo and Isshin out of their bodies and turned to the magical girl as they recovered without complaint. “Advice about how to fight it would be appreciated, Miss Akemi.”

Homura gathered her wits and stood upright. Her face went hard as she spoke. “The doll at the bottom can inflict damage, but the Witch's core is the biggest gear. It can blow fire, create wind, and levitate buildings to use as bludgeons. If it is threatened, it releases Familiars that look like silhouettes of magical girls. They can fly and attack in a lot of different ways.” She bit her lip. “But... be careful. It's behaving differently. I don't know if anything else will be different.”

The others looked from her to Walpurgisnacht, who was now close enough to see in more detail. It looked like a floating set of gears above and below one massive, spinning cog. A pole extended downwards from its center. Attached to the pole was a huge, upside-down doll-like figure that looked like a porcelain mannequin in a square-necked purple Tudor dress with a tight white corset and billowing purple skirts that parted around the cog and flared out to the Witch's sides. The mannequin's head was sheared off just above where eyebrows should have been, leaving a flat top. A divided headdress was perched on the head behind its ears; an expansive veil wafted about it in the gale. Its only facial feature was a mouth outlined in lurid red lipstick. An intricate mandala of many shifting colors glowed faintly behind it.

Yoruichi smirked and cracked her knuckles. “Well, let's get to work!”

Homura transformed and pulled a grenade launcher from her shield. Mr. Tsukabishi rolled his shoulders and looked like he was making plans as he squinted at the Witch. Jinta and Ururu ran back to the shop, probably to fetch their weapons. The others spoke tersely to one another and began to leap skyward.

Urahara stepped over to Orihime and Homura forward and grabbed their shoulders. “You two stay back.”

Orihime only frowned but Homura was outraged. “Don't coddle me! I know how to fight!”

“I am well aware of that, Miss Akemi, and I do not doubt your prowess” Urahara said evenly. “But the entire goal of this battle is for us to delay Walpurgisnacht until your turnback point. If you were to accidentally get caught in the crossfire of so many combatants at once... well. All will be lost, as they say.”

Homura's mouth clicked shut. She hated it, but could acknowledge logic.

Urahara turned to Orihime. “Go to the other side of town and find a good vantage point. I want Miss Akemi to observe the fight so she can report our performance to our other selves for improvement. Shield her if an attack gets past us. Her survival is our top priority. Don't stop to heal anyone even if they're dying— they'll be fine in the next timeline. Focus only on protecting Miss Akemi.” Orihime nodded her understanding.

Urahara stepped past them, glanced back over his shoulder, and doffed his striped hat. “Meeting you has been very interesting, Miss Akemi,” he said with a wry grin. “I suppose I'll see you in the next life, as it were.” He jumped up to the rooftops before Homura could respond.

Homura pursed her lips and kicked a rock. The only time she ever sat out the fight against Walpurgisnacht was in the first timeline, before she had contracted. Not fighting it was surprisingly infuriating.
Orihime patted Homura's shoulder as she allowed her fairies to drift around them. “He means well.”

Homura grit her teeth and huffed. “I know.” It didn't stop her from resenting being benched. Face dour, she shoved the grenade launcher back into her shield.

Orihime smiled sympathetically. Like she knew the feeling all too well. “Let's go.”

Twelfth Division's Spirit Wave Measurement Lab was full of tired staff, all subdued but determined in the wake of their department head's death in the field. They worked industriously to sift data from the five recon parties as it came in while a select few struggled to salvage the damaged sensor Ukitake's team had recovered. Akon stood in for Rin, supervising the department's efforts straight through the night. He was nursing his fifth thermos of enhanced coffee when several of the department's alarms blared dire warnings all at the same time.

Akon startled and dropped his coffee but immediately caught it. Scientists scurried to their stations with a chaotic urgency akin to an anthill poked by a stick. When they started looking at screens and gasping, Akon shouted, “Hiyosu, status!”

Hiyosu looked at his superior over his shoulder, wide face pale and eyes bulging more than usual. “Massive Hollow-like reiatsu in Karakura. Wave forms appear to be extremely amplified Witch frequency.”

“Classification?” barked Akon.

Hiyosu glanced at his screen again and looked back to Akon in disbelief. “Well beyond Vasto Lorde Arrancar class.”

Akon's brows shot up to his hairline. He opened his mouth to speak, but looked around in confusion as the alarms stopped. Then an entirely different alarm started shrieking.

Before Akon could ask anything, Hiyosu numbly said, “On-site sensors are offline. Possibly fried. Wide-scale sensor data interpretation interface for Japan and Korean peninsula has frozen. Either it's exceeded our processing power or the script has a bug that cripples the program past a certain threshold we couldn't reach in beta. Possibly both.”

“This didn't happen during the Battle of Karakura back in the war,” Akon thought aloud. That had been the most intense gathering and slinging around of reiatsu in the World of the Living since the Twelfth Division's computers had been invented.

“But we anticipated that event and streamlined—” Hiyosu perked up and turned toward the room at large and specific stations to shout, “Shut down global sensor arrays! Shut down Soul Society arrays! Shut down Hueco Mundo arrays! Shut down Precipice World arrays! Keep Mitakihara mission data up! Leave only those arrays that include Karakura and Mitakihara! Shut down Soul Phone communications and monitoring outside Japan! I want every non-essential application killed now!”

Their lieutenant ghosted into the room and joined Akon in standing behind Hiyosu and watching him forcibly disconnect the Japan/Korea data stream, dig into the analytic program, and begin to reinsert exclusion scripts developed during the Winter War so he could try to restart the application.
The fighters arrayed themselves in a battlefront directly in Walpurgisnacht's path. They had barely settled on positions when a short girl with her blond hair in rough pigtails wearing a red tracksuit with a sword slung across her back appeared next to Kisuke in a burst of shunpo.

“Why, hello, Hiyori,” Kisuke said mildly to his former lieutenant.

“Don't give me that, Baldy,” she snarled. “What the hell is going on?!”

“We seem to be having a bit of a crisis.”

“No shit.” She aimed a jump kick at him. He dodged, as usual. “What did you do this time?!”

Kisuke turned to look at her with a fake pout, noting the other Visored who had chosen to stay in the World of the Living after the war arrayed behind her. Of course they would notice something like this. “Why do you assume this is my fault?”

“You're the resident mad scientist. It's either you or Ichigo, the resident trouble magnet. You have a longer history of bullshit and we felt some kind of Hollow clusterfuck at your place on Friday.”

Kisuke gave a little laugh. “Believe it or not, it's neither of us this time.”

“Bullshit.”

“There's no time to explain.” He pitched his voice loud enough for Lisa, Love, and Hachi to hear. “The monster can blow fire, make wind, and levitate buildings to use as weapons. The biggest cog is the heart of the monster. It can break off minions to act independently. We need to kill it or keep it occupied for an hour or so.”

“What happens in an hour?” asked Lisa.

Kisuke scratched his cheek. “Ah, let's say our secret weapon will be ready then.”

“Let's say',” Lisa droned skeptically.

No trust. Honestly.

“No time to explain!” Kisuke shouted as he dodged a carnival pennant that shot past his head.

Lisa sighed deeply and drew her blade.

“Ranged attacks on the gears!” Kisuke shouted as he raised his hands and started chain-casting kidō.

The sky lit up as a volley of attacks converged on Walpurgisnacht. They impacted in a series of explosions that continued as the defenders repeated their attacks until their fallout completely obscured the Witch. The debris and incoming attacks were abruptly scattered by a gout of
multicolored fire as the doll portion opened its mouth and started laughing in an eerily distorted woman's voice. It blew a jet of flame at the line of defense, which was deflected by overlapping Dankū shields courtesy of Tessai, Hachi, and Kisuke. While they were distracted, Walpurgisnacht emanated a whirlwind and snapped off the top halves of downtown Karakura's high-rises with frightening ease. It levitated them and their flaming debris around it as a defense and lobbed one massive construct of steel, concrete, and glass at the defenders horizontally. The defenders were forced to scatter with various forms of flash step as the improvised weapon fell and crushed three entire city blocks.

How has that child survived this opponent so many times? Benihime marveled in Kisuke's head as he stared at the disaster area. How has she fought this alone at all?

She did say it's more powerful this time, Kisuke thought.

This is precisely what she described, Benihime countered. Casting aside towers like stalks of flax. She has faced this degree of destruction before.

And here I thought I had stopped underestimating her, Kisuke admitted ruefully. And it's too late to add that to the time capsule.

Tessai flared his reiatsu several times in quick succession to draw the defenders' attention to him. He made arm signals which Kisuke, his longtime friend, and Hachi, his former lieutenant from the kidō Corps, recognized. They all cast the Ninety-First Way of Destruction: Senjū Kōten Taihō from three different directions. Walpurgisnacht was enveloped in a brilliant pink explosion.

The squinting defenders were taken by surprise as broad beams of purple reiatsu lanced out from the pink light. Several of them were hit by beams and sent flying. The beams fragmented and formed reishi constructs shaped like faceless magical girls. The living silhouettes were an ever-shifting mass of a purple and pink nebula pattern studded with stars. Gleeful giggles emanated from them from the moment they took shape and began to spin and dance.

Kisuke remembered Akemi's words: “If it is threatened, it releases Familiars that look like silhouettes of magical girls.”

Somehow, that fourteen-year-old magical girl had managed to make this being perceive her to be as threatening as fourteen experienced, high-powered combatants used to coordinating attacks.

I really, really underestimated that girl, Kisuke thought.

The Familiars swarmed around each combatant. Some bore shadowy weapons; others held magic wands and shot beams of the same purple energy they were made of. Mêlée battle quickly got messy, looking more like an air war dogfight than close combat. The Familiars were fiendishly fast, flickering from place to place with a carefree, mocking grace that soon began to grate on the defenders. The giggling shadows coordinated their attacks, those with weapons rushing in to force defenders to block so those with magic wands could take potshots at them while they were busy. The defender would then be forced to dodge, often taking minor damage while unable to inflict much in return.

Yoruichi, “Goddess of Flash,” had no such trouble, though. She kept pace with the Familiars and matched them move for move as she fought using only her body as a weapon. Shadow after
giggling shadow fell by her hand, swift punches and kicks popping them like soap bubbles and leaving a trail of purple glitter behind her. Seeing Yoruichi's success, Ururu chose to hold her shoulder-cannon in reserve and fight with powerful blows from her limbs with the occasional use of the cannon as a bludgeon. Likewise, Sado was managing to punch through the Familiars that ventured close to him to try the same pincer tactic with his Brazo Izquierdo del Diablo while blocking attacks from the wand-wielding Familiars with the shield form of his Brazo Derecho del Gigante. He was mostly able to dodge the various blades and polearms as he sought openings to punch the Familiars on attack, but steadily collected wounds from those few attacks that got through.

Tōshirō scowled, released his zanpakutō into its shikai state, and started slinging flocks of icicles in wide arcs around him as he darted through the sky. Effectively stabbed about a dozen times each, the Familiars caught in his attacks burst apart into purple glitter. Ichigo and Isshin released their own blades and lobbed their respective Getsuga Tenshō attacks at the Familiars that swarmed after them. Kisuke, Tessai, and Hachi developed a routine of casting Hyapporankan into the giggling mobs to immobilize them then follow up with devastating destructive kidō.

Uryū was constantly on the move, unable to take the time to prepare more than simple single-arrow attacks among the chaos— archers really had no business being in the thick of things. He hit nearly all his targets once he grew accustomed to their movements and never failed to negate the magic wand beam attacks when directed at him, but he had little effect on the overall battle apart from some... unique results when he did land a direct hit. No one else had really noticed in the heat of battle, but Uryū's mind was racing with ideas.

Just as the horde seemed to thin out a bit, Walpurgisnacht changed its behavior. It hovered in place, rotated on its axis in the center of its ring of floating wreckage and fire, and switched out its creepy laughter for singing scales like a ghostly soprano. A thrum of power passed through the sparkling haze of purple glitter, which re-condensed back into the giggling magical girl silhouettes they had been before their defeat.

Uryū wasn't sure who it was who snarled “son of a bitch!” at high volume, but he agreed with the sentiment as Walpurgisnacht's unhinged laughter returned.

However, the regrouping of the Familiars allowed him the moment to do something he had been trying to set up for what felt like forever. Uryū drew back his bowstring, paused for a moment to gather extra reishi, and loosed a small volley of Licht Regen arrows as a test, tightly controlled so they wouldn't hit his allies. The blue-white projectiles impacted the formation of the Familiars. Those that suffered direct hits to the torso were consumed in white embers like tissue paper in a flame. Nothing was left behind—not even the purple, glitter-like reishi.

That was surprising enough for Karakura's defenders, though it made sense considering Quincy powers. Then Hiyori made her enraged return to the battlefield.

Having been flung all the way out of town by the initial salvo and stunned against a tall building, Hiyori returned beyond furious and charged into the fray with her blade already released into its serrated cleaver form as the reconstituted Familiars attacked. She hacked Familiars in half without bothering to keep her distance or even defend herself, uncaring of the injuries she sustained in her blind charge. Each of the bisected shadows broke into purple sparkles, but the little clouds immediately drew to a central point where the shadow-girls's hearts would have been, changed colors, and coalesced into egg-shaped gemstones that immediately hatched and set Hell Butterflies free to drift heavenward. Kisuke saw it amid the renewed chaos and actually missed a step in his shock, losing his hat, an ear, and an inch of his shoulder to a giggling shadow. Hiyori, unaware of the significance of the result and further provoked by incessant giggling, kept hacking until
Walpurgisnacht's mannequin head turned and blew a gout of fire at her. She had sense enough to retreat from that, at least.

Uryū saw a chance. He drew another Heilig Pfeil and shouted, “Kurosaki!” as he aimed at Walpurgisnacht's head through the mob.

Ichigo appeared at his side immediately. Quick on the uptake, his eyes darted between the bow, the Familiars, and the doll and said, “I take it I'm going in when you shoot?” He wiped out the first wave of giggling shadows that rushed their way with a Getsuga Tenshō.

“Go bankai and follow right behind my arrows,” Uryū barked. “See if you can take the head off that thing and stop the fire and replacements!” He amassed more energy into his Heilig Pfeil.

Ichigo nodded grimly and raised his sword arm. He braced it with his free hand and incanted, “Bankai. Tensa Zangetsu.” Blue reiatsu flared around him and bled into a blackness that glowed red. When the light cleared, Ichigo's loose kosode had become a snug cloak that flared out behind him and his wide black blade had narrowed. He crouched in a starting position. “Ready.”

Uryū immediately loosed a wider barrage of arrows. Ichigo used the enhanced speed of his bankai to chase in their wake as they eliminated the Familiars between him and the Witch. Walpurgisnacht's head turned and blasted multicolored flames at Ichigo, but he just flared his reiatsu and charged straight through the blaze. He emerged on the other side singed but intact, already charging his blade with a Getsuga Tenshō. Ichigo roared as he wound up and lopped off the mannequin's head with a single slash.

The laughing stopped.

Homura followed in Orihime's footsteps as she led them west, first running then taking to the rooftops. Karakura was eerily still even for a stormy Sunday morning. Homura was disturbed to find most humans they encountered unconscious. It was as though everyone had simply dropped in place, some causing minor traffic accidents, more littering the sidewalks with bodies and umbrellas, others sprawled across cafe tables. They ran into a conscious person every couple blocks, but they were often lone children. Teenagers seemed very drowsy and weighed down and little children sat by their parents and cried in confusion. Orihime looked distraught about running right past them, but pass them she did.

“What happened to them all?” Homura called over to Orihime.

Orihime looked surprised that Homura didn't know. “That Witch's reiatsu is too dense for most souls to stand. Even stronger souls like those in Karakura. The ones who are awake are strong enough to resist it.”

“Ah.”

“Orihime! Is that you?!”

Both running girls glanced down at the street. A dark-haired girl in a karate gi was leaning against the doorway of a dojo looking ill.

“Ah! Sorry, Tatsuki, I'm busyyyy!” Orihime shouted. She kept running, so Homura did as well.
“Tatsuki” followed along in the street until she was more surefooted, then joined them on the rooftops. She kept up with them but it obviously took great effort for her to use her magic to propel her through jumps. Homura gauged that she had powers, just not on the high end of the scale like most of the people she had met in Karakura.

The young woman didn’t bother saying anything until Orihime had them skid to a stop on a five-story office building in Naruki City. After taking a minute to breathe, Tatsuki turned to look east for the first time. She stared in disbelief. “Damn, Hime, who did Ichigo piss off this time?!?”

“It's not his fault!”

“That's what you always say! He's always in it up to his eyeballs!”

“No, Tatsuki, really— it's not his fault!”

“Sure.”

Homura gasped. The older girls turned to her. She was watching the distant battle with military-grade binoculars.

Tatsuki screeched, “Where'd you get those?!”

Orihime quickly added, “Do you have more?”

Homura shifted and held her binoculars in her left hand and used her right to reach into her shield and pull out a second pair and blindly hold them out in Orihime's general direction.

Tatsuki stood by and sourly looked between the battle and the two spectators as Orihime tensely explained the abilities of shinigami and allies. Then there was a bright pink flash like a bomb going off and the distinct sound of many windows shattering as the sound caught up with the light. Tatsuki sighed. “Is there even going to be enough of this town left for the shinigami to cover up?”

Homura noted that the young woman seemed familiar with shinigami activities despite her low power. Interesting. She had more important things to think about, though.

Homura and Orihime ignored Tatsuki and continued to mutter questions and answers at one another as they watched the battle. After awhile, a shockwave of Walpurgisnacht’s heavy reiatsu hit them. Homura braced herself and kept watching.

“You didn't say it could revive the little ones,” Orihime said worriedly.

Gaping, Homura said, “It's... it's never done that before.”

“Oh,” Orihime squeaked.

A bit later, both cried out in surprise.

“What?!” Homura gasped. “What?! Are those—?! Are those—?!?”

Orihime fiddled with the focus on her binoculars. “Butterflies?!” she finished in confused shock. “Like... like when...” She lowered her binoculars and looked at Homura with wide eyes. “Like when shinigami purify Hollows. With their zanpakutō. Their souls.... Oh my God.” Tremulous hope brightened her features. “Homura—!”

Homura’s mouth opened and closed. She was stunned speechless.
There was a way to snatch the souls of magical girls back before the Incubator could consume them.

Her mind couldn't focus on one idea for more than a second, racing and trying to apply the new knowledge to various scenarios. Orihime resumed her pose with the binoculars, explaining things again with more cheer. Tatsuki seemed to have no idea what was going on, but trust that if Orihime had shifted gears, something good must have happened.

“Oh! Ichigo and Uryū are going to work together!” Orihime gushed happily.

A moment later, both spectators made sounds of happy surprise. For one breathless second they saw the potential for an actual defeat of Walpurgisnacht— if a shinigami could get close enough to behead such a crucial portion of the Witch's offense, surely they could handle the rest!

Then they cried out in horror as everything went to hell.

Walpurgisnacht's severed head fell from its shoulders and was consumed by the black flames of Ichigo's Getsuga Tenshō. Ichigo regained his footing and was about to lunge for the mannequin's supporting pole when its neck exploded in multicolored flames and wide beams of starry purple reiatsu. The force of the blast threw Ichigo down into and through the roof of his old high school. Walpurgisnacht's laughter was replaced by unholy shrieking as Ichigo jumped out of the rubble and wobbled to a fallback position to get his bearings. A multitude of carnival pennants shot out from the raw neck wound and stabbed into all of the Familiars. Rainbow flames and starry purple reiatsu raced along their strings and enveloped each Familiar in shifting light that burst away to reveal dozens upon dozens of Witch sigils. They were so dense that all of the defenders were caught in a different sigil.

“What the shit, Urahara?!” Hiyori shrieked.

There was no time to answer. Those who knew about Witches had a moment to dread what would follow before they all disappeared from the battlefield.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
ZWEIUNDDREIẞIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: Your reviews and theories bring me such delight. Thank you.

The Witches in the next couple chapters are a mix of anime canon, Kazumi canon, and my own creations. Some of the labyrinths from anime canon are fleshed out from watching videos of the Battle Pentagram PMMM video game on YouTube. This is especially true of Elsa Maria, for whom I took extra liberties on top of what was done in the game.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ZWEIUNDDREIẞIG

TIMELINE X+N

One second Jinta was in the air over Karakura; the next, he found himself floating upside-down in some kind of giant snow globe with carousels stacked on top of one another revolving around the outer edge, each pixelized horse bearing a TV screen with a test pattern and illegible pixel script. The water glowed with a soothing blue light that reminded him of the ambient light of a TV screen at night. Bubbles rose upwards as snow gently drifted down. At first he only heard dainty music, but then girlish laughter rang out above him. Looking up, he saw a flock of cut-out etching prints of artists' reference dolls each with a single angel wing and a halo. Some of the things had TVs where the y should have had heads. The y were all fluttering around a big CRT computer monitor that had long, black, cartoonish pigtails on its sides. It seemed to use the long hair as wings or flippers. Jitter images flickered on its screen.

Alone with a Witch and its Familiars, Jinta summed up his situation with a low, “Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit.”

He wondered why the hell he could breathe underwater. Or was he really underwater? It both did and did not feel like when he went in a swimming pool—he was buoyant, but there was no water resistance when he moved. Whatever. Things needed smashing and he was good at smashing things.

As he wound up to swing at the first of the winged Familiars that dove at him, the screens of all the carousel horses flickered and changed from a test pattern to looping video of many of his memories of Yuzu and Karin. There were occasional images of happy times, but they only served to make all the rest of the screens featuring his newest memories worse in contrast.

dead in her father's arms. Yuzu laying dead on a futon like a sleeping princess. Karin looking at the room of people listening to Homura from her father's lap, face haggard and eyes hollow. Karin gleeefully needling him over something or other. Karin lying dead among walnut shells. Yuzu smiling at him while holding groceries.


It was traumatic, yes. It made him feel uncomfortably guilty and frustrated and inadequate. But Jinta reacted as he reacted to many threatening things that got past his armor of bravado and hurt those he loved: An enraged thirst to beat the hell out of anything available overtook him. And there were a lot of things available.

More of the doll-like Familiars the size of grown men jerkily crawled out from behind the carousel borders and bubbled out of the Witch's monitor. Jinta grit his teeth and jumped up to meet them, his first swing knocking limbs and heads off various minions. They kept attacking him and trying to grab him with greedy hands until he managed to completely break them apart. Another wave of dolls rushed him as he tried to angle himself for the Witch. As he was countering them, the big computer monitor drifted down past him while laughing at him with the tinniness of a recording being played from a phone.

Fucking laughed at him.

Jinta flared his reiatsu as high as it would go to bowl the jointed dolls over with his power and used shunpo to get to the side of the labyrinth. He bashed in the screen on one of the carousel horses without looking at it, keenly following the Witch with his eyes as two of its winged Familiars held it on opposite sides and pulled it back up toward the top of the snow globe in a spiral while it chimed with laughter. Jinta snarled, kicked off from the carousel at an upward angle, turned like a swimmer as he crossed the entire labyrinth. He landed hard against another carousel layer and rebounded upward at high velocity. The crunch of glass and plastic as his iron club smashed into the Witch and the Witch rocketed into the opposite wall was viscerally satisfying.

The Witch wobbled away from the carousel wall in dizzy circles and bled a color test pattern as the dolls that had been carrying it turned on Jinta. He dispatched them easily, doll parts flying in every direction. The Witch's monitor sizzled and arced then spewed more Familiars. After brutally dissembling them, Jinta saw one of their heads floating in a perfect position; he instinctively swung at it like it was an oversized baseball and sent it careening into the Witch's broken screen—and straight out its back in a shower of plastic, glass, and color test-patterned blood. Jinta leapt down and nailed the monitor with one last mighty swing. It crashed into a carousel horse and shattered completely.

Jinta stood and panted as the carousel collapsed around him, uncaring of the Grief Seed that floated where the Witch had been.

“What the flying fuck?” Hiyori wondered aloud as she suspiciously inspected her surroundings.

She definitely wasn't in the skies above Karakura anymore. The floor was purple and lavender checkerboard tile. The sky was a washed-out pink strung with garlands of paper snowflake cutouts and curly ribbons that didn't seem to be fastened to anything. Old-fashioned zoo cages with vertical bars were scattered around, each made of white wrought iron and supporting a pedestal above it. In
the distance there was a broad circus ringmaster's dais made out of a similar cage. Atop it was the most bizarre creature Hiyori had ever seen— and that included the new high bar her standards of weirdness had reached during the battle so far. It was like some kid had mashed things together to make something vaguely doll-like. Its head was a giant brass whistle decorated in filigree, the mouthpiece positioned as a snout. Hiyori wasn't sure what the hell its rabbit-like ears were actually made of, but they reminded her of two zipper-pull tabs stuck on the sides of the whistle. The main body looked like a poofy lavender bodice and sleeves; one arm ended in a large hand and the other tapered off into a whip with a weighted flail at the end. The torso ended in ruffles at a structure that took the term “cage crinoline” literally, a series of curved vertical bars resembling a wide-skirted dress while forming an enclosure for something small shivering inside it. There were more ruffles at its base and the whole thing was perched on a pair of stubby legs that ended in catlike paws. All told, it didn't look particularly threatening. It was more ugly-cute than anything. Something Hiyori could see Mashiro buy and call art to make Rose and Kensei twitch.

“Where the hell am I.” Hiyori looked around listlessly. “So, what, am I supposed wreck this place? Is there even anything here? Can I just get the hell out? What the hell.” She scowled harder. “If this is Urahara's idea of a prank I'll ram my shoe down his throat. Ass.”

Seeing nothing else to do and thinking of the weird giant doll-thing... “outside”? … Hiyori sighed in aggravation and started marching for the strange creature that emanated the most Hollow-like reiatsu. “Can I leave if I chop you to bits?” she wondered aloud.

The creature startled as though frightened by her words and shrilled its whistle while cracking its whip. Purple cats appeared from every direction, walking out from behind things that should have been far too narrow to conceal them. They were cute but had no mouths.

Hiyori had zero patience left. No way was she going to wade through a sea of cats to do anything. The small Visored willed her Hollow mask into existence, charged a red Cero, and launched it at the weird construct. Its torso blew apart, whistle and whip and frills flying every which way.

The cats were very unhappy about this. They looked at Hiyori with slit eyes, opened previously unseen mouths, and yowled at her as one. Oh, hey, they did have mouths. Hiyori just hadn't expected them to be placed vertically in the centers of their foreheads running up to the tops of their heads and filled with shark teeth. Nope.

Hiyori lost track of time in the ensuing brawl, her world consumed by fur and claws and teeth as she hacked at the unending feline swarm. It was surprisingly difficult to fend off the tiny army. Every time she destroyed three, five more would shred into her clothes and skin. She could feel blood running down her back and legs from the abuse her back took— she couldn't swing her damn sword at her own back so the little bastards really laid into it. Flaring her reiatsu gave her a brief respite by blowing the cats away from her, but they pounced right back even angrier than before.

So here she had gone from some poorly-understood but epic battle to getting mauled by a herd of fluffy house cats. Mauled by cats. Hiyori could hear Shinji's mocking laughter in her head.

Hiyori roared and turned to the remains of the whistle-creature. From what she could see between the constant shifting of furry bodies attacking her, the whole thing had fallen apart and revealed the little creature she had seen huddled within the cage: A cartoonishly cute purple bunny. The structure around the bunny had summoned the cats. It would make sense for the bunny to be related, too, especially since the cats were herding her away from it.

That bunny was dead meat.
Hiyori kicked, slashed, and screamed her way through the cat army. When she got close, she flared her reiatsu to blow the cats back and darted up to the bunny, which quivered and cringed and looked up at her with tearfully terrified doe eyes. It was too frightened to move.

Hiyori sneered and cleaved it in two.

She didn't know why the hell it turned into a girl then turned into a goddamn purple Easter egg then turned into a Hell Butterfly, but at least it got her out of the ridiculous zoo.

Tōshirō frowned at the labyrinth around him, hazy gray shapes shifting in the light filtering through the frosted glass panels of the many overlapping, colorless rose window frames that surrounded him. The shinigami glanced at his sword arm and found that despite the apparent diffused light he was in such deeply black shadow that only the faint glow of his own reiatsu gave his form any definition. He looked up. And up, and up, and up. Sloping, softly glowing white paths decorated with artfully swirling white briar patches trailed upward, interspersed with grand white marble staircases that floated in the air unsupported. The rose window walls, if they could be called such, were constantly drifting and rotating in different directions, forms twisting like tree branches and adding to the uneasy atmosphere. Upon closer scrutiny, the upward path seemed to wind around a large, curved white structure. Far, far up, there was a horizontal extension that ended with a red glow, the only independent color he had seen yet in this monochrome world. Tōshirō stretched out his senses; the Hollow-like reiatsu felt strongest there, too. That was probably where he was supposed to go, then.

While Tōshirō urgently wanted to get back to the battle outside, he forced himself to remain cautious—his past experience had taught him brutal lessons about rushing into battle without forethought. So he began to carefully ascend the path. This labyrinth had the intrinsically big feel characteristic of cathedrals. A combination of the imagery, the sudden jarring change of scenery, and knowing he had essentially been dragged into some girl's nightmare made his skin crawl. Like he was intruding somewhere sacred. Like fighting his way out would be desecration. Somehow, fighting Witches was infinitely more disturbing than fighting Hollows he knew had also started out as plain souls. He knew from Karin's labyrinth how deeply personal they could be. Whether or not he understood the significance of what he saw, Tōshirō knew he was touring a soul laid bare. As a private person himself, the thought appalled him.

He could see vague movement along the path above, dark shapes shifting as though on patrol. It was a long path that would take a while to fight his way through. Frowning, Tōshirō thought to his zanpakutō spirit, *I want to do this as quickly as possible. Bankai and fly up? It's wide open... I think.* He couldn't look up for too long as there was a bright white light shining from the distant apex of the labyrinth.

Hyōrinmaru shifted in unease deep in Tōshirō's soul. *It seems too simple.*

Tōshirō hummed unhappy agreement. *I want to try. We'll just have to be careful and fall back to the path if necessary.*

The dragon rumbled and rose to the surface of Tōshirō's soul.

“Bankai. Daiguren Hyōrinmaru.”
Ice burst into existence from the shinigami's back. Wide dragon wings made of ice unfurled around Tōshirō. He looked like he had an ice sculpture of an Eastern dragon wrapped around him protectively, a long tail trailing down from the wings, ice flowing down his right arm and ending in a dragon's snout over his hand creating the illusion of the dragon holding the sword in its teeth. His feet and free hand were clad in icy armor shaped like dragon claws. Tōshirō glowed with the blue-white light of his reiatsu, his ice shining past the shadows he had been engulfed in.

Tōshirō gave a great flap of his wings and launched himself skyward. He flew around the central paths in a wide circle, spiraling up the labyrinth while wary for attack. The briar patches on the main path got larger and wilder as he ascended. When he judged he was halfway up, the white briars developed into actual trees. He soon encountered sprawling, jagged branches. With a swing of his sword, he shot a dragon construct made of ice at the branches above him. He managed to get through the first barrier, but as he prepared to destroy the next set of dense branches, they came alive and shot toward him with rapid, jerky growth. Tōshirō wrapped his wings around him and let the sharp branches hit and shatter themselves, then opened his wings and released a wide arc of ice before him to meet a third wave of branches. Once frozen solid, Tōshirō lashed out with Hyōrinmaru's tail and smashed them.

So he progressed, fighting for every inch of ascent, trying to only spend time fighting those branches directly in his path. It came as a complete surprise when branches he had passed reversed direction and shot at his back. The dragon armor protected his spine and vital organs, but his sides and legs were pierced through many times. Hyōrinmaru roared in fury in Tōshirō's head as they harshly snapped their wings up and down to break off the branches. More branches closed in from all sides; the shinigami became the epicenter of a wild winter storm in his efforts to fend off the encroaching projectiles. Out of the corner of his eye, Tōshirō saw something black—actually, multiple somethings—scrabbling up into the pure white branches like spiders. He instinctively lashed out at them with a blast of ice without really looking at them.

We need to retreat to the path. Hyōrinmaru sounded as frustrated as Tōshirō felt. We should not have to defend from below if we are on solid ground.

We hope, Tōshirō thought darkly.

We hope, Hyōrinmaru agreed.

Tōshirō managed to turn toward the central path. He jabbed his sword straight out. A wide, powerful bolt of ice lanced out from the blade in a straight line for the path. Tōshirō shattered the ice with a thought and dove through the impromptu tunnel with the fastest combination of shunpo and flight he could manage. He hit the ground hard and immediately expanded his ice wings to curl them around him in an armored dome. Tōshirō took the opportunity to breathe deeply and regroup.

Well, we ascended more than halfway, Hyōrinmaru said sourly. That is something, I suppose. Tōshirō got the distinct impression that his dragon was offended by being forced out of the sky—by trees of all things.

Tōshirō panted and looked through his ice dome, watching and listening as the sharp briar branches endlessly peppered his wings and tried to chip them away. They weren't strong enough to overcome his ability to regenerate his wings by pulling the moisture from the broken pieces back into the main structure, though. The black things were crawling around the dome, too, but the ice distorted Tōshirō's view enough that he couldn't see what they were.

He looked down and assessed his injuries. The shorn ends of white branches protruded from the backs of his legs and left arm. Most worrisome was a wooden spike lodged in his side that managed to pierce all the way through to his front. The sharp tip protruded a good six inches out
from the fleshy space just above his left hip.

Wonderful.

*Take it out. I do not trust it,* Hyōrinmaru said tensely. *Take them all out.*

Tōshirō scowled doubtfully at the biggest wound. *Blood loss—*

*Kidō will not work fast enough. I will freeze it. We do not need to worry about internal aftereffects — Akemi is going to undo all of this soon.*

Tōshirō blinked and drew up short in thought. That... could actually work in their favor. They could afford to take risks they usually couldn't. Freezing parts of his own body and continuing to fight was something he could do— had done— in dire circumstances, but thawing and recovery could be troublesome even for an ice spirit. If he didn't do it just right, he could be uselessly sidelined in the Fourth Division infirmary if this mess turned into a war. If he didn't have to account for that....

*Do it,* Tōshirō thought.

The shinigami grimaced as his dragon froze the flesh around the branch, then yanked the spike out. Hyōrinmaru prodded him to get the smaller ones. Tōshirō thought the sharp pain from several wounds was due to the ice his dragon had formed around the more bothersome branches, but was proven wrong when he yanked on what was essentially a wooden stake in the back of his right thigh and removed it with great difficulty. He actually screamed as it tore loose. Sensing Hyōrinmaru's alarm, Tōshirō looked at the spike instead of tossing it away.

Roots.

*Hell no.*

Matching pain lanced through his lower left leg. Something moved in his left arm.

"FREEZE THEM!" Tōshirō screamed aloud.

Hyōrinmaru was doing so before Tōshirō had even finished forming the words. After a few minutes of frantically plucking glorified splinters with roots out of his extremities, Tōshirō was furious. His left leg was stiff from the knee down due to the extent of the freezing his zanpakutō had been forced to do there. Same for his right thigh and upper left arm. Shifting his weight from one leg to the other just caused pain in different places, though favoring his right leg made his torso wound hurt less. But Tōshirō was a shinigami captain; he was no stranger to pain. This was nothing compared to what he endured during the Winter War. This pain just made him more driven.

After another moment of testing his weight and movement, Hyōrinmaru sheathed Tōshirō's body in more extensive ice armor beneath his uniform. *Let us finish this,* he growled.

Tōshirō got in a ready position and made his wings explode outward with a thought. The sheer number of ice shards mirrored the attacks of the branches and shredded them. He jumped into the best shunpo he could manage, cutting down anything in his path. Hyōrinmaru partially reformed their ice wings, but kept them smaller to enable his shinigami to move more freely on the ground and pulled moisture behind them in a shimmering trail in case they needed the wings to shield.

Tōshirō quickly found that the spider-like black shapes he had seen earlier were disembodied hands taller than he was mincing around in pairs on their fingertips. He slashed through them as he
rushed past, jumped out from between pairs that tried to clap closed on him, and dodged around energy attacks they shot at him by pointing and mimicking a gun. Sometimes new ones would fall from above and try to swat him like a fly, but an arc of ice kept them from landing a hit. Fighting and glorious adrenaline took his mind off the pain as he relentlessly pressed upward along uneven white ground and intricate white tile and elegant white marble steps.

As he ascended, the path and central structure became more shadowed. By the time he reached the top, they were pitch black. A final staircase rose along the central structure and led him to a rounded platform that stuck out as the structure continued upward. When Tōshirō stepped forward and looked up, it became obvious that he had climbed an enormous statue of a crowned woman, its head still towering above him. In context, he realized he was standing on the statue's horizontally extended arm. At the far end, the arm ended in a fist holding up a massive red monstrance. A shadowy figure knelt as though in prayer at the juncture of hand and wrist. It looked like a girl with hair made of loose vines and fused legs that transitioned into widespread roots, hands clasped reverently before her bowed head. The Witch was completely black. Beyond the monstrance, a stationary rose window emanated harsh white light.

Tōshirō wished the Witch had a less human silhouette. In retrospect, he was glad Karin's Witch hadn't been humanoid. The Arrancar he had fought in the Winter War had been human in their own way, but had actively and deliberately been trying to kill shinigami. Witches, he gathered, were madly lashing out in mindless pain. A more human appearance made a Witch more difficult to fight—it was easier to see the girl whose soul had been distorted and feel pity.

Akemi had been right to use the words “put her out of her misery.”

Tōshirō steeled himself, surveyed the area, and charged at the Witch’s apparently unprotected back—he figured there must be some kind of defense and wanted to draw it out into the open from the start. He was proven correct when the loose roots at the base of the Witch thrust into the ground. Black, snake-like Familiars sprouted from the ground in neat, garden-like rows and lashed out for the shinigami from either side while small branches sprouted from the Witch's back and spread to look like the silhouette of ragged angel wings. Tōshirō slashed the first wave of Familiars in half. Their bodies fell to the ground and writhed before disintegrating in shadowy clouds. A second wave immediately followed the first, whiplike bodies with the heads of many different animals slavering at the chance to tear him to shreds with their teeth. Too close to defend, Tōshirō dodged around them—straight into the branches suddenly growing from the Witch’s back with explosive force, accompanied by a grinding and groaning of wood that sounded uncomfortably like a tortured human wail.

Eyes wide, Tōshirō thrust his sword forward and shouted, “Ryūsenka!” in hope of either shattering the branches or delaying them for the two seconds it took for the full extent of Hyōrinmaru's wings to materialize around him once more for protection. He ended up getting a combination of both, a good deal of thick branches snapping off when contact with his blade caused ice to blossom explosively. Those branches remaining slammed into his wings and bore him skyward. Tōshirō allowed the Witch to throw him and even propelled himself backward with it, hoping that he could avoid being badly stabbed by moving the same direction as the attack. The smaller side-shoots of the branches sheared off against his icy armor. When the branches reached their greatest extent, Tōshirō beat his reformed wings and continued to move back and up. He perched on the giant statue's crown and looked down at the Witch.

The Witch had an entire jagged tree sticking out of its back. It was black and enormous, making the kneeling figure look like a little girl sitting by a felled redwood. The branches stayed still for a few moments, then shivered and incrementally withdrew to the Witch until they were once again
the seemingly harmless ruined wings on its back.

Tōshirō frowned in thought. Rushing at it from behind and hacking at it would probably end with him badly injured or dead. Those branches were no joke and the Familiars were extremely maneuverable. Its back was just too well-protected. Ideally, this Witch would be best handled by a team working together, one to draw attention to the back and the other to sneak attack the front. But Tōshirō was alone.

Well, not completely.

Hyōrinmaru perked up in interest. They conferred for a minute. *I like this plan*, the dragon said smugly.

*It's a gamble*, Tōshirō demurred.

*A reasonable gamble, considering.*

A minute later, the shinigami dropped from the statue in a full stoop, body shimmering as he silently conjured multiple ice dragon constructs to snake out and meet the Familiars head-on. Dragons with maws full of icicle fangs crushed the heads of the first line of defense while the shinigami rocketed past them and shot a bolt of ice straight at the Witch's back. The Witch responded with another explosion of monstrous tree limbs. The shinigami didn't bother to dodge, instead being run through multiple times and carried back in the onslaught until he completely shattered.

His ice clone destroyed, Tōshirō allowed his concealment kidō to lapse as he dove for the Witch's unguarded front from atop the red monstrance. His true blade stabbed the Witch in the heart. For the briefest of moments, Tōshirō was face-to-face with the Witch. Unexpectedly sane brown eyes opened and stared at him in surprise before the Witch burst into particles of shimmering red light and coalesced into a Soul Gem as the cathedral wavered out of existence.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

H.N. ELLY (Kirsten), The Box Witch with a covetous nature. She is a staunchly reclusive witch. Anything she covets she locks away within glass. The thoughts of her prisoners are laid bare, but one can strike her thoughtlessly without problems. Minions: Daniyyel & Jennifer, whose duty is transportation. Anything they touch becomes easy to carry.

RITTERRÜSTUNG VON HEULSUSE, The Beastmaster Witch with an anxious nature. She presents herself as commanding figure who kindly relies on her whistle instead of her whip for training because all her pets obey her commands. Behind this facade, she weeps because the one she truly wants to command is fate, but it will not obey her. Minion: Esra, whose duty is to perform tricks.

ELSA MARIA, the Shadow Witch with a self-righteous nature. She continually prays for all of creation and drags all life equally into her shadow without breaking her posture. One hoping to defeat her must know the blackest anguish.
Minion: Sebastian, whose duty is to blindly believe.
Minion: Julia, whose duty is to compel prayer.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: ********** IMPORTANT BLEACH CONTINUITY NOTE **********
re: Ichigo's zanpakutō
For the purposes of this story, the zanpakutō developments from the Thousand Year Blood War manga arc have not happened. Zangetsu's blade looks as it does at the end of the Lost Agent arc. As for the spirits within it, well...........

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TIMELINE X+N

Usually, Akon would be extremely conscious of being observed by multiple captains as he worked, would feel their stares as an itch between his shoulders as they watched and expected scientific miracles to fall from his fingertips. Instead, he was part of such a frenzy that he barely noticed captains filing into the control room until the Captain Commander himself graced them with his presence. The frantic technicians flinched as one at the feel of his very unhappy reiatsu, but kept working. If anything, they worked even harder. Nemu coolly nudged Akon aside and took over the terminal he had claimed beside Hiyosu, her hands smoothly continuing to rewrite code much faster than Akon was capable of. Oh, he was good— he had to be very well-rounded to get to Third Seat — but he was more a physical sciences kind of guy. Nemu probably dreamed in code compared to him. Akon looked around and found that his subordinates were doing their jobs excellently... leaving him nothing to do but observe and wait. And answer questions.

“Report,” rumbled Captain-Commander Yamamoto.

Akon looked around. “Captain Kurotsuchi—?”

Without even glancing at him, Nemu murmured, “Our captain is engaged in a delicate experiment upon the Grief Seed in our custody.” She fell silent, obviously handing the responsibility of reporting to Akon. The Captain-Commander expectantly raised his brows at Akon, who took a deep breath.

The Third Seat was only a few sentences in when Hiyosu interrupted with a loud, “Japan/Korea data interface restored!”

It was probably quite rude, but Akon ended his report and wheeled around to look at the screens. “Status?”

“Still lagging at minimal functionality. Better than nothing. I'll pull up the map.” Hiyosu went still. After a moment, he looked at Akon and said, “Uhhhh.” He tapped a series of keys that put his screen on the main monitor.
Everyone looked at it. Busy scientists glanced, blanched, and turned back to their work. The captains stared. Most of them didn't know what they were looking at except that it was a map of Japan with random colored blotches.

Captain Hirako, having lived in the World of the Living for an extended period, whistled lowly. “I'm guessin' this works like human weather radar, but for spirit stuff? Scale'a blank is good, green ain't too bad, and red is really bad?”

“Yes,” Akon replied distractedly.

Captain Hirako scratched his head, face considering. “So that red, purple, and black hurricane-thing over Karakura is seriously bad news.”

“You could say that,” Akon strained.

“What is it?” asked Captain Ukitake.

“I don't know, but it is a Witch wavelength,” Akon replied. “We think. Massively amplified—beyond Espada class, even— but more Witch than Hollow. We were still tinkering with Witch calibration when this happened.”

“I thought a Hollow hurricane was supposed to drop on Mitakihara,” Captain Muguruma grumbled, crossing his arms in annoyance. That part of the map was clear.

Akon blinked, thought, and looked back at the screen. “Oh.”

“What 'oh'?” drawled Captain Kyōraku.

“I wonder if this is that rumored Walpurgisnacht thing Urahara reported.”

There was uneasy silence for a moment. Nemu broke it with a cool, “Mid-range on-site remote operations partially restored. Stationary sensors inoperable. Deploying surveillance drone.”

While waiting for further word from Nemu, the Captain-Commander turned his eyes back to Akon. “Were you able to contact our assets in Karakura?”

“No, sir,” Akon answered grimly.

Yamamoto grunted. “Keep trying.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Video,” Nemu announced. She tapped a few keys and took over the main screen. “Drone is approximately fifteen kilometers from the center of the disturbance.”

The image wasn't the best, but the Karakura skyline was recognizable. The video jittered and shivered from clarity to static and in and out of focus at random intervals. Above Karakura was an inverted doll-like figure hanging from a series of cogs that were roughly as far across as all of downtown Karakura. Hundreds of small figures were darting through the air, the flashes of reiatsu-based attacks glimmering among the confusing mess.

“It looks like a damn alien invasion,” Captain Hirako said incredulously. “Mothership, dogfights, an' all.”

“A mother-what now?” Captain Kyōraku asked in morbid curiosity.
Captain Soi Fon glared at Shinji. “Have you withheld knowledge of an enemy, Hirako?”

“Fiction, Soi Fon,” Captain Ōtoribashi interrupted with a deep sigh. “He's referring to a popular opponent in human fiction.”

Akon wondered if the reinstated Visored were tired of the culture gap still driving a wedge between them and other shinigami after over two years back in Soul Society.

Before Soi Fon could snap a reply, the screen flared brightly and went blank.

“My fuckin’ eyes,” snarled Captain Zaraki. His tiny pink-haired lieutenant giggled from her perch on his shoulder.

“Mid-range sensors offline again,” Hiyosu reported unhappily. “Aaaand the Japan/Korea data interface has frozen again.”

Nemu's fingers flew over her keyboard as all the technicians tensely tried to reconnect with the World of the Living. A breathless ten minutes later, Nemu manged to hobble the drone up onto a building, turn it in the correct direction, and get a shaky visual of Karakura once more.

Something like a multicolored bonfire was raging at the base of the giant invader. The air below, which had been dense with flying combatants, was clear of everything but hundreds of colored circles. Except for the dancing flames, all was still.

No sign of any surviving defenders.

Captain-Commander Yamamoto scowled. He turned to the door and began to leave. He glanced at his Captains, eyes hard. Akon held his breath.

“Deploy.”

It took several moments for Isshin's eyes to adjust to the sudden dimness of the cavern he found himself in. The first thing he noticed was an overpowering smell of sweets—chocolate, cinnamon, vanilla, that indescribable scent that meant that something containing a great deal of sugar had been baked to perfection. When he could see properly, he was immediately disturbed.

Though the ground and walls felt solid, they were brown with swirls of white that reminded him of chocolate cake with white icing drizzled onto it. A closer look convinced him that at least half of the icing was actually gauze bandages haphazardly strewn about. Everything the cavern contained seemed to be a twisted hospital scene. Red and blue tubes were draped along the ceiling in a manner that suggested blood vessels, but they connected a great number of IV bags that also hung from the ceiling. Each bag had a stamp on it that looked like a pink mouse wearing a white nurse's cap. One side of the long hall was divided into uneven staging areas like those in emergency rooms, each stall separated by shoddy pink railings and giant surgical scissors that had been stabbed into the cake floor. The staging areas were numbered out of order and each featured a crude bed made out of a dessert—flans, cupcakes, tiramisu, even a gelatin mold. Upon each “bed” sat lanky nurses wearing pink dresses and white nurse caps. Instead of faces and hair, their heads featured uneven concentric white and blue rings that looked like they had been scribbled with blue ballpoint pen. The heads bobbed on their necks as they... well, it was hard to say they looked at
Isshin when they had no eyes, but they seemed to turn in his direction.

The nurse Familiars lurched to their feet and approached the former shinigami captain, shrieking without mouths and wielding clipboards, syringes, IV poles, scalpels, and other medical items. They fell to Engetsu's blade fairly simply. Isshin heard squeaking and turned just in time to see several creatures hurry further into the labyrinth. Not seeing any other choice, he followed them.

The dim cavern wandered in every which way but straight. The path was lined with giant sewing needles stabbed into the cake floor with thick thread draped through their eyes. Syringes varying from small to giant, filled and empty, were jabbed into the walls and floors along with surgical pins, tweezers, scissors, and even bandaids. Whatever creatures were nearby managed to stay out of sight but the steady squeaks they made betrayed their presence. Giant desserts were littered throughout— chocolate chip cookies, Belgian waffles, rock candy, slices of pie, eclairs— a sugar addict's dream amid the ominous medical equipment.

Isshin finally saw what the squeaking creatures were when he rounded a corner and found a chamber lit in garish overhead hospital lights. This area strongly favored donuts and jellybeans. Strewn among them were giant glass vials. Some of them contained medicine, others candy, still others held surgical instruments. Hurrying around the bottles were bulbous... things... as tall as his hip with pink stick legs. They were black with red spots. While their faces were the same featureless rings the nurses had, these creatures also had droopy purple mouse ears, pink mouse tails, and squeaked like mice. Isshin mentally dubbed the Familiars the Mice From Hell. They seemed non-threatening up until Isshin realized he was surrounded by them. He swung Engetsu back just as they all pounced.

The skirmish was sloppy, the sheer concentration of enemies making it difficult to do anything fancier than repeatedly slash around him. They didn't seem to be able to do much harm to him on their own, but as a mob they seemed determined to bury him. Whether they meant to suffocate him or stall him, Isshin couldn't say. Whichever it was didn't matter anyway— he had a fight to get back to outside.

Isshin flared his reiatsu to repel the Mice From Hell just enough for him to shunpo to the top of an upright stick of Pocky while charging a Getsuga Tenshō on his blade. He paused for a moment for the mice to regroup then slung the burning moonlight at the entire pack. He clinically repeated the attack several times. There was a cacophony of rodent screeches, but it soon died down. Isshin stayed where he was until the air cleared; nothing was left but the scent of burnt sugar.

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The shinigami dropped from the cookie stick and extended his senses before cautiously moving toward the strongest source of Hollow-like reiatsu. He soon found a door. Its hinges creaked as he slipped through it and shut it behind him. The new area was even dimmer than the initial maze. The only source of light was a hazy white mist that glowed softly around a collection of big, free-floating glass medicine vials with the same strange contents he had seen in the others. He looked down and couldn't see much of his own feet in the blackness. Looking forward, he didn't see a solid path. Just darkness and the occasional row of soft white dots that could be anything.

The moonlight power Engetsu held within Isshin's soul waned to a crescent, the zanpakutō spirit as taut with unease as his master.

Isshin cautiously stepped forward and found solid ground. He wanted to shunpo through the section as quickly as possible but was wary of doing so when he couldn't see what he might land on. So he walked the hall of vials with a measured pace, constantly waiting for the invisible floor to give out under him. It was anticlimactic when he reached a glowing white door with chocolate bars on it.
On the other side of the door was an area littered with more sweets leading up to a bridge through darkness. It was black with large pink polka dots and warped pink railings. The absolute quiet was getting unnerving—at least when the mice had been squeaking, he had known they were there. Isshin didn't know what to expect. He settled for crossing the bridge on foot, on alert for attack from any direction.

Birthday candles as big as streetlights flared to life in the darkness on either side of the bridge as Isshin walked. Medicine capsules fell from above like snow while warm will-o'-the-wisps floated upward. Candies and desserts and dead Mice From Hell dangled from the distant ceiling on the hooked ends of surgical sutures. Though on a mission, Isshin found his mind wandering, comparing this labyrinth to—the one he had seen before. The significance of the items in—the one he had seen before. The juxtaposition of sweets and hospital miscellany provoked several ideas about what struggles the soul at the center of the labyrinth had faced in life. One thought led to another until he had the disconcerting realization that he was walking through the soul of some other father's daughter. Some other father's daughter had been manipulated into selling her soul and becoming... this. He had known it, yes, but thinking in those terms made it all so much worse.

Engetsu waxed, warm summer moonlight reassuringly settling on Isshin's shoulders in the eerie dark. Thirst for justice thrummed through them.

At the end of the bridge, Isshin found himself on top of a cliff that looked like frosting. He cautiously approached edge and peered around the new chamber. Mice From Hell were marching along ledges made of messily stacked strawberry charlotte layers. Isshin searched the room and saw a door on the far end. He glanced between it and the marching mice, calculating. The things hadn't seemed particularly fast or smart and he really did need to get this over with as soon as possible. Mind made up, Isshin sprinted across the room with shunpo and wrenched the door open as the mice screeched and started tumbling down to confront him. He slammed the door shut, cast a quick temporary barrier, and looked around. Barring a door with a giant slice of fruitcake wasn't something he ever thought he'd do, but hey, it worked.

So he advanced, rushing through chambers with as little fighting as possible. He hit a snag with another hall full of the disturbing nurse Familiars, but they didn't slow him much because he managed to take out most of them with a wide Getsuga Tenshō launched straight down the hall. It wasn't long before he found himself in a small, round room whose walls were made of Neapolitan cake and featured a door with a black silhouette of the stamp he had seen on IV bags, cookies, and medicine jars throughout the labyrinth. The words “chocolate flavor” were obvious, but a long word was scribbled beneath it in illegible runes. There was a big cupcake on either side of the door with giant hors d'oeuvre forks jammed in their pink frosting. He could sense that the Witch was on the other side of the door—the Hollow-like reiatsu was sharply more powerful as he approached. On the one hand, he was pleased to have gotten through the labyrinth unscathed. On the other... Isshin frowned.

Too easy.

Suspiciously easy, considering—considering the difficulty reaching the center of—of his daughter's labyrinth.

...He hoped he had sufficiently expressed his limitless rage toward the Incubators for putting his baby through that when he had written his time capsule contribution. He wanted to ensure that his past self would be just as wrathful as he felt without his girls having to suffer and without Ichigo and him having to live through the horror and grief.

Anyway. Back on track: The Witch beyond the door. Homura had obliquely implied the Witches
varied in strength and ability to snare victims, so perhaps this Witch was just weak. Call him paranoid, but what he sensed beyond the door didn't feel weak. Tense, Isshin opened the door and stepped through it.

The area beyond the door was immense and dim. From what he could see, it was a wide plain littered with more gigantic desserts. When he craned his head back to look up, he saw distant white sparkles. Not liking this one bit, he adjusted his grip on Engetsu and cautiously stepped forward.

The cavern echoed with the sound of a cellophane bag of cookies being jostled as a cluster of multicolored sparkles in its center revealed a tea table and pair of chairs with ridiculously tall legs. Bright white icing oozed down the cavern walls and gradually lit Isshin's surroundings. The plain turned out to be the top of a giant frosted cake. Isshin glanced down and wiggled a foot. The surface was mostly firm, but had a mud-like slipperiness beneath a hard crust—buttercream. As the light improved, Isshin saw that dozens of the tall tea tables were scattered around the chamber at varying heights and angles.

Isshin snapped his head up as the sound of a cellophane bag being torn open came from above, accompanied by a burst of Hollow-like reiatsu. The lights brightened still more as a pink... mouse plushie? wearing a red and black cape, a black mantle with pink polka dots, and a loose-sleeved brown shirt fluttered down from the ceiling and landed on one of the chairs at the central tea table. It was definitely the Witch, but with its white face, rosy cheeks, and blue button eyes it looked like a stuffed animal his Yuzu would dote upon. If Isshin had to do a threat assessment on appearance alone, he'd rate it a zero on a scale of one to ten.


Isshin grunted agreement and leapt up onto the nearest tea table. Wanting to get it over with quickly, he darted from table to table with shunpo until he was higher than the middle table and launched himself straight at the plushie, Engetsu's blade thrust out before him.

The pink plushie fell aside at the last moment and fluttered toward the ground like a fallen leaf.

Isshin looked at the Witch strangely as he turned in midair and flared his power through his blade to burn off the remains of the wooden chair, then slung a Getsuga Tenshō at the plushie. Its seemingly random fluttering twisted aside at the last moment. It plopped to the ground haphazardly, as though discarded by a distracted child. Isshin landed on a shorter table and threw a flurry of the same attack, herding the plushie toward a giant slice of cake. When it was trapped against the improvised wall, Isshin sped in close with a Shakkahō spell gleaming in his fist and punched the plushie's body. There was a small explosion and a sound of tearing fabric as the doll's simple, straight line of a mouth opened.

Engetsu's alarm had Isshin jumping backwards with shunpo before he even knew what he was reacting to. Something bulged forth from the toy's mouth, illogically enormous compared to that which contained it. First came a round white face with doily-like scalloped edges, mismatched eyes with multicolored rings in their irises, a conical nose like a party hat with a puffball on top, and two winglike moth antennae— one blue, one red. It was followed by a long black body that just kept coming.

At first Isshin thought the creature that emerged like a tasteless canned snake prank and ballooned hundreds of times larger than the little plushie was laughably cartoonish. Then it opened its mouth.

Teeth, teeth, and more teeth.
In one frozen moment of clarity, Isshin remembered the audio file Kisuke had sent him of Homura's initial interview.

"Then Mami fought the monster by herself. She tied it up and shot it but it didn't die— a bigger monster came out its mouth a-and bit Mami's h-head off and ate her body."

He had no way of knowing if this was the Witch that had eaten Mami Tomoe, but the mental image of the goofy face opening its mouth full of horrific teeth as the gentle girl in the missing persons posters stared at her oncoming death did something profound to him. Hardened him.

The Witch soared after Isshin as he kept moving backwards, crazed eyes tracking him as it followed. Isshin lobbed a Getsuga Tenshō into the cavernous mouth. The creature's head exploded, but the mouth peeled back farther as another face burst out of it. Isshin scowled and dodged around the chamber, stalling by forcing his pursuer to weave between the tea tables. He doubled back and slung a Getsuga Tenshō at the Witch's midsection, completely slicing it in two. Again, a new body emerged from the mouth of the damaged one.

So it behaved like a disturbing hybrid of nesting dolls and a hydra. Okay.

The Witch's silly face morphed into rage, apparently as frustrated as its opponent. It rolled its coils like a snake, swishing its tail hard to snap tea tables apart at their bases to be rid of obstacles. Isshin withdrew as far as he could, reassessing the cavern and considering his options as the Witch's destructive tantrum continued. He watched its undulating body and had an idea, but....

"I'm not as fast as Yoruichi," Isshin mourned to his zanpakutō spirit.

"Very few are," Engetsu said drily. "We're fast enough, though."

Isshin's lips quirked humorlessly as he jumped into action. He appeared a distance in front of the monster and threw a weak Getsuga Tenshō in its face— just enough to get its attention. He led it on another chase, this time down low around the giant sweets— more solid obstacles than the tea tables. Isshin lured it to a cluster of Piroulines jutting up out of the buttercream floor like a copse of trees and drew it into a rising circle around them. It dogged his heels as they completed one revolution and dove after the shinigami as he dropped sharply left and down behind a Pirouline. The Witch plowed into its own long body face-first. Its eyes blinked comically as it wobbled in a daze and its party hat nose fell off. It didn't even see Isshin coming until the shinigami's blade was hilt-deep in the space between its eyes.

Isshin warily maintained his finishing strike pose and watched the Witch's body glow milky mauve-white and break apart into sparkles. His eyes were drawn back to his blade by a quiet gasp.

Engetsu's hilt was flush against the chest of a small girl with wavy white hair. Her wide eyes faded from the surreal multicolored rings of the Witch to natural hazel. She looked as surprised as Isshin felt.

He knew her face from the Mitakihara articles: Nagisa Momoe.

Nagisa's eyes teared up. Her mouth moved as if to speak but she broke apart and vanished, sparkling white reiatsu condensing into a white Soul Gem as the cave of sweets melted away.
In an instant, Ichigo went from a stormy morning sky to a clear night sky dotted with acid green stars. The disorienting transition felt eerily similar to the many times Riruka and Yukio had admitted him to their Fullbrings, each of which had tossed him into a world completely controlled by its creator. That was disquieting enough without the creeping sense that he should know this place. That he recognized the feel of it at some level but couldn't quite place it. He had no memory of the bizarre cardboard town and its absurd number of telephone poles and high-tension power lines patrolled by arcing electricity. Still, the place gave him the creeps. Stranger yet, he could sense the unease in his usually implacable zanpakutō spirit.

Zangetsu?

Summer moonlight filtered through churning clouds. *I do not like this place*, the spirit commented in the younger tone of his bankai form. *This place... I hate it.* Strong words for such an aloof spirit.

Get the fuck outta here, King, snarled Ichigo's Inner Hollow. He sounded unnerved beneath his anger.

Well, that was ominous.

Uneasy, Ichigo looked around from his vantage point in the sky. “Can only do that if we defeat the Witch. I think.” He spotted a menacing radio tower in the distance. “Well, if that doesn't scream 'villain's lair,' I don't know what does,” he said drily.

Ichigo rolled his shoulders uncomfortably and descended to the city, leaping through the deserted streets by using the power poles as stepping stones to conserve energy. He had plenty to spare, of course, but better safe than sorry. There was still a massive enemy to fight when he got out of this place and Captain Unohana wasn't around to restore his reiryoku like she had during the war.

As he progressed, he began to pass clockwork birds perched on wires and cardboard buildings. They rustled their wings with a whirring of tiny gears and mechanically droned "piroripara pirirora" in lieu of birdsong. All at once, the flock mobbed him. The birds weren't particularly threatening on their own and were fairly simple to kill by slashing around with a Getsuga Tenshō charging his blade, but reaching talons and pecking beaks occasionally landed a hit and drew blood. The running battle left a trail of broken clockwork behind him as he bounced from roof to roof. Soon, he found himself on the last rooftops before the base of the tower. The remaining clockwork birds balked and retreated as though more afraid of the tower than the shinigami.

The radio tower was made of classic metal latticework. It looked like a cheap knockoff of the Eiffel Tower, spindly bare-bones steel reaching high in the sky. Green electricity arced over the steel at random intervals. A large plasma ball full of green arcs of energy crowned the tower. Pink warning lights pulsed at major joints of the structure. Something bulky hung clustered in the hollow of the tower just beneath the plasma ball.

Ichigo frowned up at it. “What am I supposed to attack? Is the Witch inside? Is the ball the Witch? Is the whole tower the Witch? The one outside is gears and stuff....”

Don't matter, the Hollow said. *Destroy the whole mess ‘n get the fuck outta here.* He gave Ichigo the distinct impression of a threatened cat with its hackles up. Disturbing as hell— the Hollow was usually eager to run into danger and gleefully cause mayhem. Still more disturbing, Zangetsu echoed the same feeling. It made Ichigo's skin crawl.

Eager to get out get out get out, Ichigo swung his arm back and charged his signature attack. He roared as he launched it and felt oddly relieved as the crescent of energy split the tower in half from top to bottom. The mood was short-lived. Thick electrical cords snaked out of the collapsing tower.
and reached in every direction like a monstrous collection of tentacles. Ichigo prepared another attack but was forced to defend when several sizzling cables whipped his way like anacondas. He dodged around and countered innumerable cables as his ears rang in the shrieking cacophony of fax machines, modems, and distorted human screams. His bankai-enhanced speed was all that kept him from being captured. It became obvious he needed to shake off the relentless cables if he wanted to figure out his next move.

Ichigo dove down into the cardboard city once more and zigzagged through the streets. The huge cables stabbed down from above, missing him and piercing the flimsy building façades. He thought he was doing pretty damn well until he rounded a corner and plowed headlong into a makeshift net of smaller power lines that had been diverted from their poles and woven together.

Trapped.

Ichigo flared his reiatsu and tried to wrest himself free, but it only made the cables tighten. His reiatsu was channeled away by the conductive wires. He was breathless when the big cables descended and dragged him skyward again. Zangetsu and the Hollow were furious at his binding, but before they could react, their triad of power hitched at a sudden sense of déjà vu.

“I got a call. I need to do something.” He was drawn dreamily forward, heeding a call as undeniable as gravity.

Ichigo startled and blinked. His head swam. “The hell was—?” He cut himself off at what he felt from his dual spirits— they were both appalled, dread threading through their link. What the hell, guys?! No answer.

Within the sideways city of skyscrapers that formed Ichigo's Inner World, Tensa Zangetsu and the Hollow watched aghast as cracks spiderwebbed through the windows of the top three stories the eighteen-story building that held Ichigo’s memories of the time they lay dormant in his soul. The sixteenth floor of that one building was the only place in their shinigami's mind they had been unable to access. Neither spirit knew what lay within. The pane of glass at the very center of the sixteenth level crumbled completely and left a gap. Green sparks fizzled in the dark hole.

The cables dragged Ichigo back toward the wreckage of the tower. The cracked plasma sphere sat atop the rubble, green and pink energy arcing angrily. The tower had been reduced to electrified, twisted metal. As he approached, half of the cables doubled back and reached down into the wreckage. They went taut and hauled up a jumbled mess of oversized electronics. Surge strips, CPUs, analog telephones, alarm clocks, keyboards, computer mice, speakers, cameras, cell phone chargers, fax machines, modems, routers— all were tangled around a particularly large smartphone whose screen portrayed a glowing red eye with a flat black iris on a black background. The eye rolled around and looked at Ichigo.

His own voice came as though from a great distance. “Here. I won't need it anymore.”


A digitized female voice rang in his head. mine mine mine mine mine—

He was trapped in a Hollowified girl's soul, ensnared in cable-snakes, and facing a tech trash heap that was using goddamn Siri to telepathically chant in his head because God knew he couldn't physically hear anything but screeching fax machines. And here he had thought his weirdness scale would forever be topped by Aizen turning into a butterfly monster.

mine mine mine mine mine—
“I’m not yours!” Ichigo snapped.

Silence. Even the fax and modem sounds died. Then every monitor and screen among the mess of electronics flared to life with static. The digitized voice said, *i have wanted you for a long time and i got you i had you but you were taken from me*

Ichigo’s face screwed up in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?! I’ve never been here in my life!”

Modems trilled angrily. *almost you were the only one who came when invited and you were mine you bore my mark and they took you from me mine mine mine mine mine*

Figuring out what the insane soul was talking about was hard when he was also struggling to break free of his binds.

“I won’t need it where I’m going,” he said calmly. He promptly climbed... something. It was gone. *those girls won’t take you from me this time mine mine mine mine mine*

Ichigo shook his head, trying to think clearly. Disoriented, he asked, “What girls?” aloud.

More shrill modems and faxes, this time accompanied with more agitated thrashing of cords. *tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs*

The various screens snapped into focus on different video clips of girls. Ichigo froze, eyes wide.

His sisters.

*Ichigo turned to face his sisters, looking their direction without really focusing on them. Everything seemed so remote and floaty and pleasant since that idea first wandered across his mind. Face cheerfully relaxed, Ichigo declared his destination. “Soul Society. Do you want to come with?”*

Surveillance camera footage of Karin bearing a katana while wearing the red costume he had seen so briefly before she turned into a Witch right in front of him. Images of Yuzu in a frilly yellow costume, face cutely serious as she figured out how to wield a whip. The two of them bouncing around in metal latticework. *tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs tHoSe gIrLs*

“I understand if you don’t want to. I know you don’t need me anymore.”

Ichigo felt dizzy and sick. Had he not been suspended by cables, he may have even fallen over. Within him, Tensa Zangetsu and the Hollow’s horrified rage intensified as green sparks sped the breaking of the windows and released suppressed memories. They felt foreign and familiar at the same time.

*Karin sprinted up to him and grabbed his left arm, screaming at him to stop and listen to her. Ichigo glanced at her, frowned, and shrugged his left arm. She didn’t let go. Karin didn’t understand. Karin wanted to stop him from moving on. He didn’t have time for this. So he used his right fist to punch Karin square in the jaw. Karin shrieked and writhed on the ground, hands holding her bloodied face. It was sad that he had to do that, but it really couldn’t be helped. He needed to go. The Voice that spoke soothing death in his head the same way Zangetsu used to advise him in battle said so.*
Ichigo craned his head up and looked at the tower he planned to jump from. Jumping would solve all of his problems. The Voice had said so. Peacefully determined in a way he hadn't been in sixteen months, he grasped the ladder's first rung.

In Ichigo's Inner World, the entire top three floors of the cracking building exploded and launched shrapnel in every direction.

Ichigo dry-heaved, his vision fluctuating in dizzying time to the skull-busting headache that felt like he had taken several blows to the head. He had been lured, convinced to commit suicide, had cheerfully begun his attempt in front of his own sisters, and had attacked one of the precious people he had vowed to protect. He was only alive because his sisters had somehow risen to the challenge of saving him. They weren't costumed in his memories. But they were costumed on the screens showing their battle. Had they contracted because he—?

As Ichigo neared blacking out in shock, his blade's spirits leaped skyward in his Inner World with their faces twisted in rage.

They had failed to protect their charge. They had slept through the entire incident, deep in the abyss that had once been filled with Ichigo's power. While they were sleeping, their shinigami had been preyed upon, nearly devoured, had become a threat to that which he fought to protect, had been marked as property of another spirit. And they hadn't known.

Those girls were mean they were so mean they took you away when you were MINE and came back and hurt me TheY ArE MeAn gIrLs i hOpE ThEy dIe DiE dIe DiE dIe Unforgivable.

you are mine now mine mine mInE MiNe mInE

Like hell.

The dual spirits worked in concert. Tensa Zangetsu enveloped Ichigo's psyche in warm moonlight and dragged him deep within their rapidly flooding Inner World to protect his mind before he went mad. The Hollow rose to the surface of their shared soul, their body's eyes bleeding into black and gold as a bony mask formed on their face. The mask had scarcely completed itself when its teeth tore open to allow the Hollow to bellow a wordless challenge before screaming, “KING DON'T BELONG TO NO ONE BUT ME!”

The Hollow's reiatsu burst around him in a black and red nimbus, incinerating the cables that bound him. The fight that ensued was the very definition of “one-sided.” The Hollow was vicious and relentless, a monstrous cross of berserker and tactician with a single-minded goal of destroying the thing that had tried to claim his shinigami as its own. The Witch threw everything it had at him, but he lobbed black Getsuga Tenshō crescents into each wave of oncoming electronics as the Witch fled behind them like a frightened spider. Dodging behind the tower wreckage did little good—the Hollow just sliced through girders like grass and kept coming. With his devastating speed and strength, the Hollow soon had the Witch whittled down to a sparking mess of tightly-knit broken electronics. The Hollow hauled his arm back and prepared to slice it in two. In a last desperate effort, the Witch made a cable whip from behind him and ensnare his sword hand at the apex of his backswing.

The cable wasn't strong enough to hold him back by a long shot but the very fact that the Witch dared to try to restrain him—cage him, claim him—pushed the Hollow to new levels of fury. The red stripes on the bone mask broadened as it grew forward-pointing horns and its mouth opened again. As it shrieked, red light gathered between its horns, condensed, and shot forward as a
Hollow's signature attack—a Cero.

The ball of red light blasted straight through the giant smart phone's eye, glass and tech guts exploding violently as something solid launched out its back. The Hollow snapped the cord around his wrist and pursued the thing that had been knocked back. He found it writhing among ruins: a shifting, vaguely human-shaped mass of wires, circuitry, and electrical tape shedding green and pink sparks as it made a keening sound and bled brilliant green antifreeze.

Without a moment's hesitation, the Hollow shifted his grip on his sword and plunged it into the mass. He shrieked as he stabbed it over and over, not bothering to stop when the whole construct glowed green and formed a magical girl with bright green hair in two thick pigtails. The last thing the terrified soul saw was the demonic gold glow of the Hollow's eyes peering out of the dark holes of its mask as it shrieked and stabbed her face. Then she burst into green light and reformed into a green Soul Gem.

The Hollow cleaved the Soul Gem in two and howled in triumph as the labyrinth evaporated.

A lightninglike surge of power sizzled in the sky north of Karakura and rapidly expanded into a glowing pink rectangle. It spread wide, its glow fading as a long series of shoji panels manifested in front of it. The shoji split in the middle, panels sliding to either side to form a large doorway. Black butterflies fluttered out over the shoulders of many high-ranking officers of the Thirteen Divisions.

The reinforcements had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

CHARLOTTE, The Witch of Sweets. Her nature is tenacity. She desires everything. She will never give up. Though she is capable of creating infinite amounts of any dessert she desires, she is unable to make the cheese that she loves most. One could easily catch her off-guard with a piece of cheese.
Minion: Pyotr, whose duty is to search for cheese.
Minion: Polina, whose duty is to nurse the cheese when the cheese is sick or hurt.

ISIDORA, the Digital Witch with a spiteful nature. She seems silent and harmless, but will viciously tear her enemies apart behind their backs. You'll know you've pushed her too far when she actually speaks to your face.
Minion: Gabriel, whose duty is to maintain the Witch's digital network. They do not want the Witch to punish them for a dropped signal.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Kisuke could be forgiven for the impatient sigh he heaved as he got his bearings in the labyrinth. He had worked through two nights in a row with only a catnap before dawn. The attack was unexpected and he was just done. The part of him that would never cease to be an excellent Second Division officer and stealth operations master came out not to play, but to get the job done. The labyrinth was more complex than he really had the patience for, but he cleared it methodically. The giant rose bush Witch at its center was bulky and awkward, its most dangerous aspect being the versatile thorn vines and scissors it could summon for attacking at a distance. It was an annoyance to counter, but he managed it. More interested in speed than finesse, he released Benihime and used her energy attacks to overwhelm the giant tree-blob-butterfly monster.

Kisuke ignored the Grief Seed falling out of the sky where the Witch had been to assess the battlefield above Karakura. Multiple fighters were just plain missing. Whether they were dead or still trapped, he didn't know. Best to assume their firepower to be lost. Hiyori was boxed in by multiple Witch sigils she was smart enough to not just charge into but looked like that patience would soon die. Jinta wasn't far from her, squinting at sigils and looking murderous. A sigil off to Kisuke's right evaporated and left behind Captain Hitsugaya and a Soul Gem which immediately hatched a Hell Butterfly that drifted away on the wind. Hitsugaya cast about until he made eye contact with the shop owner. Kisuke couldn't help but notice the young captain looked much the worse for wear; that and his active bankai implied Hitsugaya had received a formidable opponent.

Another sigil shattered. Ichigo emerged with his Hollow mask on. The mask was one of its more evolved versions featuring horns, which was worrying. Ichigo bellowed and charged forward—straight into another sigil—and disappeared. Okay.

Yoruichi, a cat once more, landed on Kisuke's shoulder with a snap of displaced air. “That might be a problem,” she muttered. “I think he's completely berserk. That's at least the fifth one he's plowed into trying to get to Walpurgisnacht.”

Kisuke looked the way Ichigo had come. Sure enough, there was a path cleared of sigils. “Huh. I wonder what set him off. His control is usually much better than this.” He glanced at Yoruichi then back to Walpurgisnacht. “Didn't expect you to go kitty on us mid-fight.”

Yoruichi scoffed at the implied question. “It's easier to dodge around the things when I'm small.”
She huffed. “Have a plan?”

Kisuke hummed and looked at Walpurgisnacht. A multicolored wildfire raged beneath the headless mannequin portion. Otherwise, it was just rotating in place with no minions flying about. He was too experienced to write it off as defenseless. Homura had said the core of the Witch was its cogs. Go for them? They’d need a massive, preferably coordinated attack to affect such a large opponent. And he didn’t want to go through more labyrinths to get to it. It would waste too much time while Walpurgisnacht would have free rein to possibly attack widely enough to take out Homura, who he could sense was not as far away as he would have liked. At least she hadn’t jumped into battle. He was grateful for—and impressed by—her restraint. Anyway, he had a problem to solve and no sigh could adequately express his blend of frustration and exhaustion.

Several things happened all at once:

Isshin reappeared in the sky just as Ichigo broke out of the labyrinth he had dived into.

Ichigo—or his Hollow, it seemed—stood in place, his reiatsu seething with frustrated killing intent, and charged a massive black Getsuga Tenshō. The attack blew through the sigils obstructing his path and obliterated the mannequin portion of Walpurgisnacht and about a dozen of the main cog’s teeth.

The main cog of the Witch’s assembly span much faster.

Ichigo leapt forward to attack, but was snared by another sigil.

A senkaimon from Soul Society opened roughly five kilometers north of the main battle. The defenders who were outside labyrinths and in their right minds recognized a number of captain-class reiatsu signatures emerging from it.


“How unlike him,” Kisuke said distractedly, staring at the Witch. “I wonder what intel Twelfth managed to pick up. It must be quite alarming to provoke this level of response.”

Yoruichi rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

Kisuke glanced at the shinigami reinforcements, who seemed to be assessing the situation. How long until Homura's departure? How long did he have to keep the shinigami from being able to confront her? He didn’t want to take the risk that them restraining her would ruin her time travel ability. He flicked his eyes to the cat on his shoulder. “Care to take a kittygram to our kindly old grandpa?”

Yoruichi snorted. “I suppose. What am I saying?”

“Go to Isshin and snag his phone, then take it to the Captain-Commander. Speaker phone, please. I'll take it from there.” The black cat flickered away without replying. Kisuke pulled his own phone out of a pocket and frowned at the time.

The Soul Society contingent held position in the stormy sky on the Captain-Commander’s orders. Whatever had changed between their last video and their arrival had resulted in several defenders
being accounted for. Kisuke Urahara's reiatsu was distinctly present. Yamamoto chose to give the man five minutes to relay information to him since the enemy didn't seem to be actively attacking anything. Best not to rush in with no intel and make a bad situation worse if they could avoid it.

Without warning, a black cat alighted on top of Soi Fon's head. The captain's first instinct was to stab her small zanpakutō upwards, but she froze when she recognized the reiatsu of the person she most admired. “Y-yoruichi—!”

Yoruichi dug her claws into her protègée's scalp and thrust her face forward and up to draw attention to the phone in her mouth. Yamamoto only had to glance at his lieutenant to prompt the man to dart forward, retrieve the phone, and relay it to his captain. The phone immediately began to ring.

“Speaker phone, he said,” Yoruichi called out. The old man raised one bushy brow, decided that would be most efficient, and accepted the call.

“Kisuke Urahara,” he rumbled.

“Good morning, sir! It's so kind of you to visit. Lovely weather we're having, yes?”

Yamamoto closed his eyes. It was like the man had a pathological need to be obnoxious. “You failed to report.”

“Well, I've been a tad busy, sir.”

“I see,” Yamamoto said drily. In the distance, the Kurosaki whelp broke free of a sigil, roared, and launched a black attack that completely broke a smaller gear below the main cog. Girl-shaped beings of starry reiatsu and dancing flames swarmed out of the bonfire beneath Walpurgisnacht and mobbed him. “What is Kurosaki doing?”

Entirely too chipper, Urahara replied, “Going completely berserk, from the look of it.”

Off to Yamamoto's left, Kenpachi Zaraki cackled in appreciation while his lieutenant cooed over the whirlwind of violence around the young Visored in the midst of the battle. Zaraki's third seat grinned and his fifth seat started murmuring as though giving an art critique.

He was too damn old for this. “What happened?”

“Well, he's had a rough couple of days, what with the whole dead sisters thing—”

“You know that's not what I mean,” Yamamoto said without emotion. He suspected the scientist was stalling for some unknown reason and did not like it one bit. “Report.”

Yamamoto waved his captains closer to listen to the scientist's briefing on the enemy's abilities. He clinically observed everything in the general vicinity as the former exile spoke. Extensive property damage, mass casualties among the humans, sketchy guesses at best for motive and enemy... a total disaster even without the added headache of the rapid dissemination of information and photos among the living these days. It was a logistical nightmare. Things had been so much simpler even a century earlier.

“Therefor, I propose a coordinated attack on the central structure,” Urahara concluded. “It is actually quite fortunate you came. We should have enough combined firepower to do this.”

Yamamoto grunted agreement. “We will surround the Witch. Those with powerful ranged attacks will use them, then those with heavy melee attacks will rush in from below. We'll brute force it.
Stay far enough below the enemy's position to fire upward. Minimize collateral damage if possible. Avoid bankai if possible to minimize soul suffocation of the humans below.” He slid his eyes to the captain of Second Division. “Except for you, Soi Fon. I want you high in the sky and ready to fire your bankai at it if it tries to flee. Your lieutenant may accompany you.” He made eye contact with the other officers around him as Soi Fon looked sour but nodded. “If that occurs, I expect the rest of you to do your utmost to protect the city from debris.”

“Sounds like a plan!” the scientist chirped. “I'll call Captain Hitsugaya to tell him and Yoruichi will relay the plan to the oth— ooh, Hachi's back! Great!”

“Thanks for volunteering me, Kisuke,” the cat droned.

“You're welcome!” Beep! Call disconnected.

It was times like this that made Yamamoto glad Urahara had declined the invitation to return to Seireitei. Just the thought of dealing with the man on a daily basis was maddening.

“Who are they?” Homura asked seriously as she peered at the newcomers with her field glasses. They were just far enough away for the visual aid to be useless for seeing their faces.

“The captains and some of the lieutenants of the Thirteen Divisions,” Orihime answered cheerfully. “You can always tell a captain by their white haori with their division number on their back. Lieutenants have an armband with their division number on it.”

Homura hummed her understanding. “Anything basic I should know about them? How to tell who's who? How to avoid making them hate me?”

“Ummmmmmmm.” Orihime lowered her binoculars and put a finger to her chin, looking upward in thought. “Captain-Commander Yamamoto is an old man with a really long beard. He's very serious and wants people to be respectful and responsible and obey rules.”

Not unexpected, given his rank.

“Captain Soi Fon is the lady captain with short hair. She likes respectful people who follow rules, too. She doesn't like Mr. Urahara. And Tessai told me to never say bad things about Yoruichi in front of her because she likes Yoruichi a lot.”

Reasonable.

“Captain Zaraki is a really big man who loves to fight. He wears an eye patch, but both his eyes are fine. His patch is special—it helps him control his power. He'll like you if you can show him strong enemies to fight. His lieutenant is a little girl named Yachiru. She has pink hair and loves fighting, too. Captain Zaraki doesn't like when people are mean to her. They're nice and good in a fight but you need to lead them places instead of giving them directions 'cause they'll get lost.”

Simple enough.

“Captain Unohana is the lady captain with really long hair she braids in front of her. She's a healer. She's very calm and nice. I've never seen her angry, but my shinigami friends said even other captains are afraid of making her angry. So I guess if she likes you, maybe shinigami who don't
like you will leave you alone? She likes people who are nice to her division members and don't make a mess or a lot of noise in her hospital. Rukia said she likes flowers.”

She could work with that.

“Stay away from Captain Kurotsuchi. He's a mad scientist. His zanpakutō is poisonous so don't get cut by it at all, ever. Uryū says his lieutenant keeps an antidote with her, though. That captain is easy to spot because he always wears funny hats and black and white face paint like rock star.”

Homura lowered her glasses and gave Orihime a weird look.

“Oh! Captain Komamura is very nice, but he looks kinda surprising. He's a big dog-man. Wolf-man? So maybe try to act like the dog part is no big deal.”

Homura's brow twisted at the absurdity.

“Hey,” Tatsuki interrupted. She was squinting through the rain with her hand shielding her eyes. “I think they're gonna do something.”

Both girls raised their binoculars once more. The shinigami contingent had spread out in a wide circle below and around Walpurgisnacht. Most of them, anyway—a man with formidable magic and a very long gray beard remained where the group had first appeared. Their commander, Homura realized.

The girls looked up as they sensed a pulse of power up high, but couldn't see anything through the storm. “That was Captain Soi Fon,” Orihime commented. Homura made note of what that captain's magic felt like.

The sky suddenly lit up with the flashes of multiple ranged attacks. It was mostly a continuous barrage of extremely powerful shinigami magic. A cloud of cherry blossoms, of all things, swirled around the main cog counter to its spin and ground the gear teeth down like a lathe. Ichigo's berserk Hollow apparently had enough wits about him to take a hint and throw his own Cero and black Getsuga Tenshō into the mix. The attacks abruptly stopped on some signal the distant girls couldn't see, but their explosions hadn't yet cleared when several figures rushed toward Walpurgisnacht. Most obvious, a gigantic, ghostly disembodied arm stabbed an enormous translucent sword into the cogs, which made an unholy screech of metal on metal. A burly shinigami launched forward and up as a veritable comet of yellow reiatsu with such strong bloodlust that the girls shuddered at it despite being far away. Similar glowing shinigami followed, blazing rainbow trails as they dodged under and up past the less dense concentration of Witch sigils directly beneath Walpurgisnacht. The Witch shuddered.

The three girls whipped their heads away from the scene, recoiling from a painfully bright explosion.

Kisuke blindly threw a kidō shield up in front of him with one hand and used the other to hold a strong healing kidō over his closed eyes. He blinked and squinted as soon as he thought he’d be able to see.

Walpurgisnacht had broken down into a dense cloud of multicolored reishi spinning like a miniature hurricane, a million points of light floating in a beautiful spiral. The many Witch sigils
that studded the sky glimmered and collapsed into glitter that drifted toward the cloud with its spin. Awed shinigami watched in wonder as the cloud tightened its rotation like a nebula of precious gems. The reishi formed a large globe, then continued to condense smaller and smaller as it spun, shifted through different colors, and glowed more and more brightly. Its power multiplied as it became more concentrated. The sphere shone like a small star.

Kisuke's relieved smile slowly fell while others stayed curious. His eyes widened in recognition.

Hōgyoku.

And unless he was mistaken, one far more perfect than either of those created by himself and Aizen.

Homura made her magic heal her eyes with a thought and stared at the newborn star in the sky. Wings seemed to sprout from its top and curled down protectively, cast in shadow by the sheer intensity of light shining behind them. Her eyes widened in recognition. She lowered her binoculars and took a step back, slowly shaking her head in confused denial.

Tatsuki was cussing about her eyes somewhere off to her left. Orihime's fairies chimed off to her right, followed by a sigh of relief and a gasp of delight. “It's so pretty!” She bounced excitedly. “They did it!”

Homura just kept shaking her head and dropped the binoculars altogether.

Orihime noticed and frowned in doubt. Turned to look at the apparent miracle. Tentatively gauged the feel of its magic. Blanched and looked like she recognized it.

Urahara landed on the rooftop with a snap, eyes wild in his bloodied face. He strode to Homura and roughly grabbed her arm. “Forget the plan! This changes everything! Go straight to me as soon as you get back! Tell me Walpurgisnacht can turn into a Hōgyoku!”

Homura blinked up at him and knit her brow. “A Ho-what?”

“Mister Urahara, should a Hōgyoku have wings?” Orihime asked with a shaky voice.

Urahara pivoted and looked skyward. The shape must have appeared behind him in transit. He frowned in confusion. “Wings?”

Homura's confusion mirrored his, but for an entirely different reason. “Those aren't wings,” she said dully.

Everyone looked to her. “Homura?” Orihime asked. “W-what are they?”

The “wings” expanded still more. Homura just stared in disbelief.

She knew that shape. *Hated* that shape. Had seen a small version of the same thing around the glow of countless newly-forged Soul Gems as false bunny ears extended and grabbed at girls' souls with greedy fingers.

Whatever a Hōgyoku was, the Incubator was the one making it.
“Miss Akemi,” Urahara prompted tensely.

“That's the Incubator.”

Silence as Tatsuki was completely lost and Urahara and Orihime breathed sharply and stared at the light show.

“Even worse,” Urahara said lowly. He looked at Homura again. “You must tell me that the Incubator can make a Hōgyoku. It changes everything.”

Homura scowled and squirmed her shoulder out from under the man's hand. “Why? What does it do? It looks like it's making a Soul Gem from here.”

Urahara froze. His eyes went unfocused and darted around, giving him the look of figuring out something momentous on a blackboard only he could see. “Oh. Oh.”

Homura leaned away from him. “What?”


Homura looked to Orihime, who was equally at a loss.

Any chance for explanation was ruined by the new whatever-it-was-called firing lances of magic in every direction. The sky over Karakura became dense with shimmering strands like lasers or tracer fire in a pattern like a grand firework. Those at melee distance were shot through before they could even register what was happening. Mid-range combatants had a moment to try to shield, but couldn't react fast enough. Only those who remained in long-range position managed to get barriers up, and they were sorely tested by the onslaught. Many failed completely.

On the rooftop in Naruki City, the three with powers reacted immediately. Kisuke threw a kidō shield in front of them. Orihime's fairies flew out and made a big triangular shield of translucent gold behind it. Akemi braced herself and leaned forward, brandishing her shield, but held back her power for the moment. For an endless minute, all they could hear was the staccato bullet-like sound of the beams ricocheting off Kisuke's shield. Before long, though, the wall of light began to crack. Jagged lines spiderwebbed out from impact sites. Kisuke poured everything he had into the spell and held until it shattered. Orihime stepped forward and threw all of her strength into her shield as Kisuke took a knee, slow to recover due to the sheer number of massively powerful kidō spells he had used in the long battle. Orihime's shield soon became chipped and pockmarked. Sweat poured down the girl's face and her hands shook.

“Hold out as long as you can, Orihime!” Kisuke shouted. The air was so thick with projectiles that Akemi wouldn't be able to flee even if she stopped time. There was just no dodging them. Time, time, they needed time! He glanced at Akemi. “How long??”

Understanding his intent, Akemi glanced at the sand timer in her shield, gauged her magic, and bit out, “Four minutes!”

Kisuke grit his teeth. He and Orihime were probably going to die protecting the girl.

So be it.
He centered himself and prepared to cast another kidō when Orihime's shield failed. It collapsed before he was ready, though, and Homura stepped in front of him, thrust her shield forward, and flared her brilliant purple reiatsu to protect the two of them. Kisuke stared up at her as Orihime and Tatsuki fell, pierced by the lances. He was torn between being furious at her for risking herself when she was their trump card and surprised that she bothered to protect him.

Of course, the attack stopped then. They looked around and found that the entirety of Karakura and Naruki were linked to the Hōgyoku by rays of shimmering light. To their side, the beams piercing Orihime and Tatsuki burst and bound them as though in harnesses. It made no damn sense until the rays retracted and tore the girls' souls from their bodies, snapped their Chains of Fate, and drew the slack-faced souls skyward.

“What's happening?!” Akemi demanded, the most panicked Kisuke had heard her.

Kisuke staggered to his feet and stared. As far as he could see, human souls were being reeled up from the streets and buildings toward the Hōgyoku and the Incubator that was apparently above it.

“Mister Urahara? Mister Urahara?!”

As the souls were drawn along, they broke down into indistinct orbs of reishi that made Kisuke deliriously think of hitodama. The reiatsu of many shinigami blinked out of existence. Kisuke supposed they had been snared and absorbed, too. The light of the many souls gathered like Walpurgisnacht's remains had. The Hōgyoku flashed bright indigo. The gathered souls rapidly condensed, the light they cast shifting into brighter and brighter gold.

A Hōgyoku.

A Jūreichi.

A hundred thousand souls, give or take.

“I'll be damned,” he said, shaken.

“What?” Akemi demanded as she lowered her shield. “What's happening?!”

“It actually made a King's Key.” Kisuke distantly registered that his voice sounded like dull surprise. He couldn't quite believe the words as they fell out of his mouth.

Homura glanced between him, her shield, and the distant glow that faded a bit and looked more like a shining object than a ball of light. “A King's Key is—?”

“The only way to gain entrance to the Soul King's Realm,” he answered, falling into automated lecture mode. “The Soul King is the linchpin of existence. It regulates the flow and balance of souls among all the dimensions.”

A sound that was not truly sound at all reverberated through the atmosphere, the tumbling of ancient locks turning.

“If the Soul King was to be destroyed, reality would collapse. Were it replaced, its replacement could shape the worlds as it wills.”

Akemi’s face contorted in horror.

Kisuke turned to look at her, dread plain on his face. “I think the Incubator is a much bigger problem than any of us ever thought possible,” he said blankly.
Reiatsu flared up in the cloud cover. The huge golden missile that was Soi Fon's bankai screamed toward the King's Key. One of the oversized Incubator limbs shielded it while the other battered the missile away with enough force to counter its homing properties. The resulting explosion obliterated eastern Karakura. The Incubator's limbs settled into an offering position, holding the King's Key to the heavens. Storm clouds were suddenly propelled away from it, forming a perfect circle of blue morning sky with the King's Key in its center like a small sun. The air around it shimmered like a heat haze as a sharp clunk sounded and the city directly beneath was crushed flat under the severe pressure of immense reiatsu.

In the northern sky, an old man watched almost his entire command structure crumble before him. All life in the city was a complete loss and an enemy was trying to breach the King's Realm.

There was nothing left to lose. Best to end things quickly.


Homura sucked a sharp breath in through her teeth at the sudden, intense heat. Steam rose around her as the fallen rain evaporated. She was startled out of her stare when Urahara shook her arm. She looked at his face and found it desperate and near-crazed.

When he had her attention, Urahara pressed, “You must describe all of this to the other me. All of it. Hōgyoku, King's Key, all of it. What it looked like, what it felt like, everything. This isn't just about saving your friends anymore.”

Buildings began to smoke. Trees and telephone poles nearby spontaneously burst into flame. Homura wobbled on her feet and blinked. It only took several moments for her to feel like she had been wandering beneath a desert sun for weeks.

“Go back in time now,” Urahara said urgently.

Homura looked at her shield. “I can't yet!”

Fire raged in the city center, the inferno spreading outward as everything was baked so dry it all became kindling. It hurt to breathe. The air smelled of ashes, burnt rubber, and charred meat.

“Go now!”

Flames blossomed in the sky where a small figure met the Incubator's limbs and incinerated them. The Hōgyoku strobed like the world's largest flash grenade and instantly regenerated the limbs.

“I can't!” Homura shrilled and desperately watched the sand trickle through her timer.

Urahara fell to his knees. “You have to,” he rasped through parched, bleeding lips.

Homura's breath came in painful little gasps as she struggled to remain conscious— a battle Urahara lost. She didn't bother paying attention to the battle in the sky, instead using every ounce
of will she had to focus entirely on her shield's sand timer. Her legs fell out from under her as she concentrated her magic on countering the damage being done to her body long enough to survive to the turnback point. To conserve magic, she disengaged what she thought of as her pain buffer and arched into the agony of something that went far beyond any sunburn with a rough scream. Her battle costume had just begun to smoke when she felt the last grain of sand fall. Homura blindly grabbed the edge of her shield, ignored the sizzle of her bare skin against super-heated metal, and sharply twisted it into a complete inversion.

She had never been more glad to hear that familiar click.

The world around her stopped. Everything was utterly still for a long second. The golden shaft and hellish plume in the distance were rendered more terrifying by the extra frozen instant to really look at them. Then reality shattered around Homura like so much glass and she was hurtling backwards, fragmented images spinning around her like a kaleidoscope as she lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Let's~ do~ the time~ warp~ again~!

I would like to take a moment to thank you for reading this far. Your responses have been wonderfully encouraging for me. I never expected this degree of response. Thank you so much! See you on the story's first anniversary~! ;)

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy first birthday to this baby. *throws confetti*

Someone asked for clarification of my chapter subtitles. They are intended to be algebraic expressions labeling the different timelines. It's a mathy tie-in to the mathy title of the fic and is useful for flashbacks.

X = the variable representing the first PMMM timeline we are aware of (I think it's unlikely Homura would be the first girl in history to make a time travel wish. Therefore, we don't know how many timelines have existed before PMMM's first anime timeline.)

N = the variable representing the unknown number of repeated timelines Homura has personally lived through

X+N = the timeline in which Homura goes to Karakura for the first time

whatever number is added to that (X+N+1, X+N+54, etc.) = the number of repeats Homura causes after going to Karakura for the first time

Therefore, Timeline X+N+5 would be the fifth timeline after the one in which she went to Karakura for the first time. And so on.

I hope that clears things up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ZWISCHENSPIEL

TIMELINE X+N+54

Kisuke's tea had long since gone cold by the time Homura finished her description of the first timeline in which they had met. Tessai had long since given up on any pretense of standing in the background and joined them at the table with Jinta and Ururu. The four Urahara Shop residents stared dumbly at the girl, who remained cool and poised.

“Holy fuck,” Jinta summarized.

“A threat on the lives of the Kurosaki girls, you said,” Kisuke murmured morbidly.

Homura hummed and traced one finger along the rim of her empty teacup. “I may have understated the severity of the problem to begin with.” She mused that she had spent far too much time with the scientist— she was picking up his habits.
“Just a bit,” Kisuke said drily, one corner of his mouth quirking into a slight smile. “You seem more familiar with us than that one timeline would suggest.” He looked Homura in the eyes. “How many repeats have you done since then?”

“This is the fifty-fourth repeat.”

More dumbstruck staring.

“Why so many?” asked Ururu.

“That's a long story. Much of the detail would be best studied in the documentation I've collected, but I will give a summary,” Homura answered. “Then you can just show the others the video.”

“What video?” Kisuke asked with a straight face.

“You have surveillance on this room that you turn on when something interesting is happening,” Homura said calmly. She looked up at three particular spots in the room— hidden cameras— and twiddled her fingers at them. “You've taped me every single timeline. You may as well make use of it.” She turned to Tessai as Kisuke stared at her in surprise. “May I have more tea, please, Mr. Tsukabishi? Your rooibos blend is excellent.”

FÜNFUNDREIßIG

TIMELINE X + N + 1

Homura’s eyes snapped open and she bolted upright in bed, gasping for breath, still certain, for a moment, that she was being crushed by heat that had a physical weight, suffocating, burning—


Back in the hospital. Yet another March sixteenth.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, Madoka was alive again, and Homura was having a panic attack.

The world was suddenly a more dangerous and confusing place. Homura was newly aware of even further depths of atrocity in the world of magical girls. Aware, but with very little understanding. Not understanding was a loss of control that frightened her. She was safe for the moment, at least. She hoped. God, what if she wasn’t? What if— Shut up, brain, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!

Homura flopped back on the hospital bed and blindly reached for its controls with the ease of long practice. She lowered the bed flat and tilted her head back to help her body gulp in more air with every gasp. She wanted to curl up but forced her arms to rest on the pillow by her head, elbows out, to keep her chest open. Every breath tested the ache in her chest left over from her heart surgery. When her breathing finally eased, she slowly drew her hands over her eyes and tried to order her thoughts. It was extremely difficult. It felt like her mind was trying to run in every direction at
once. The first coherent thought she settled on was *It's a good thing I'm off the monitors*. A flock of nurses concerned about her racing heartbeat would have been an unwelcome complication.

It took longer than she would have liked to center herself, but she eventually did— just in time to float through her discharge on a cloud of exhaustion. Homura let the clerk from her uncle's lawyer's law firm handle everything without paying attention. Room packed and papers signed, she actually slept on the drive to her townhouse. The clerk got her settled and this time around was concerned enough to offer to stay the night. Homura waved her off after compromising, allowing the woman to get dinner for her. The click of the lock as Homura shut her out was a great relief, but she stood with her hands flat on the door and leaned into it. She inspected the grain of the wood until the sound of the adult's car had receded into the distance.

Homura turned, leaned back against the door, and slid down to the floor. She went through a familiar routine. First, she manifested her Soul Gem. It was dim and cloudy from using so much magic to survive the end of the timeline. Looked like a Witch hunt was in order. Second, she used the Gem's magic to completely heal her heart beyond the scope the surgery could manage. Third, she listlessly removed her glasses and tossed them aside before using her magic on her eyes until they, too, were better than human medicine could achieve. Next, she usually ate and immediately went on a weapons heist to restock. She had far graver things to worry about this time.

A creature of order, Homura dug out a fresh notebook and tried to organize and plan. It helped her feel more in control. She stared at the blank page for a long time, unable to find a place to start. So *much* had happened. Half an hour passed before she hesitantly put pen to paper. She started by sketching out a rough social structure map about how the Karakura fighters and the shinigami military were related, then started listing major facts.

Karakura was an Incubator-free zone. Most of the time. Probably.

The Incubators were deceptive about far more than she had thought.

Shinigami were real and could be aimed at Witches and Incubators.

The history between magical girls and shinigami was in doubt in her mind because she didn't believe a damn thing the Incubator said anymore.

Shinigami could purify Witches and revert their Grief Seeds into Soul Gems so they could pass on without being collected by the Incubator.

Inoue Orihime could purify Soul Gems without a Grief Seed, revert Grief Seeds into Soul Gems, and revive magical girls. She should probably take pains to keep the Incubator from learning about that.

There was much more to Walpurgisnacht's offense and defense than had ever been apparent before. Why had so much about it changed?

The Incubator was capable of making objects that freaked out shinigami and could break into... heaven??????

There were terrifying implications to a shady creature such as the Incubator gaining access to that... dimension??????????

Urahara had made some kind of mental connection between one of the objects, Soul Gems, and wishes, but hadn't elaborated.

Whatever had countered the Incubator at the end with the fire and heat (who/what???) was
frighteningly powerful and not to be crossed.

And so on. She wrote down as many new terms and explanations as she could remember. She finished the list with “Hogoku(sp???)” and “King’s Key?????” Even though she had more question marks and unknowns than answers, seeing it all laid out was soothing. It got her mind back into a logical sphere apart from the shocking near-apocalyptic rending of the heavens she had witnessed.

After some thought, Homura concluded that the threat of the Incubator doing whatever it had shown itself capable of was equal to or greater than the danger to Madoka from contracting. Her goal had always, always been to save Madoka no matter what. It looked like she'd have to save...the world? ...in order to save Madoka.

Fine. She'd pull it off or die trying. Madoka was worth it.

Now what?

Homura sat back and stared at the notebook in a pool of light from the nearest lamp in her midnight townhouse, pursing her lips and tapping the pen on the paper. She knew the original plan. And she knew Urahara had said to scratch the plan and go straight to him with warnings of doom. But did she trust him? Entirely, unreservedly?

She thought of his casual interrogation games, of his uncanny ability to read and react to her so quickly.

No. But.

“I won't let him do anything to you and if the questions get too upsetting I'll make him stop.”

“Having Ichigo Kurosaki on your side is the best life insurance policy you could ever acquire!”

“Kurosaki is obnoxiously powerful and bizarrely influential among shinigami.”

“Honestly, the best thing you can do for yourself in any timeline is get Ichigo on your side.”

“The shinigami government—!” “Will hurt you over my dead body.”

She trusted Ichigo Kurosaki. And the rest of the family, but the young man seemed to have the most leverage over everyone she still couldn't rule out as a threat. So. How to proceed? She had Ichigo's phone number, but if she went straight to him and outed everything in a way that would reveal Karin and Yuzu with no warning, the girls might not be cooperative. With as much as she realized she still didn't know, she didn't need to give anyone in Karakura reason to resent her.

That settled it. Go to the twins first, seek Ichigo and Dr. Kurosaki through them, then approach Urahara from behind a fourfold shield of Kurosaki integrity. She'd work out the details in the morning. First things first: Homura needed a Grief Seed to clean her Soul Gem— and offer to Urahara, she supposed. Then she needed to restock her arsenal.

Homura pulled the ribbons out of her childish braids and unwound them as she planned her next hunt and weapons heist.

Homura woke late the next morning, nightmares of burning Soul Gem tornadoes still dancing
behind her eyelids. She spent most of the day nibbling leftover takeout while studying the calendars and diaries the others had made for her. Ichigo and his friends were settling into their condo. The Urahara Shop staff was doing Urahara Shop things. Yoruichi was amusing herself by finding cat-haters in Yokohama and being obnoxious to them. Captain Hitsugaya was running his division in Soul Society. Dr. Kurosaki was running the clinic and the girls were starting school.

Good all around. It was a Thursday, though, and Ichigo wouldn't be in Karakura until Saturday. And none of his other friends had returned to Karakura so early. She'd have to do something about that— she needed at least Orihime to be there. And the guy with glasses— Ishida?— had seemed sharp-witted and done something strange with that bow. She wanted to know more about him.

Homura packed, called Mitakihara Middle School to fake-timidly say she would be absent for extra recovery time, and headed to the train station to get lost in the evening southbound commute.

Homura spent Thursday night in an unoccupied apartment on the northwest edge of Naruki City, hopefully far enough from the railway corridor to not be surprised by the Pumpkin Witch and her Familiars. She also hoped the distance between her and Urahara Shop would let her magical signature blend into the masses of other, weaker magic. Reiatsu. Whatever. Whether it would work was in question— even at such distance, the spiritually-inclined people she had met in the previous timeline formed a constellation of brighter signatures throughout the city. Hopefully her presence being unfamiliar to the locals would let her escape attention instead of attract it.

After hemming and hawing over how to initiate a meeting, she decided a direct approach was best. Mid-afternoon found Homura calmly waiting at the gate to the twins' school in her Mitakihara uniform and carrying her book bag to look like she had come directly from a different school. Aside from a few curious glances, she was largely ignored as she monitored her once-friends' magic. The two met and headed for the gate. Seeing their happy faces which she had so recently seen slack in death was a source of both hurt and hope. She took a calming breath.

“Karin, Yuzu,” Homura called pleasantly as they drew near. The girls stopped and looked around. Homura gave them a little wave. “I hope you don't mind me coming early. I really wanted to talk to you.” Karin and Yuzu looked confused until Homura tossed her hair over her shoulder with an exaggerated movement, flashing her Soul Gem ring and pulsing her magic ever so slightly. Homura stared directly into Karin's eyes and smoothly said, “Then I thought I would help you find the thing you lost by the train tracks.”

The sisters stared from her face to her ring. Karin glanced around cautiously. “Uh, yeah. Right. The thing.”

Homura offered a tight smile. “Where would you like to talk?” Let them at least control the setting.

The sisters exchanged significant looks and leaned together to murmur a quick plan. Karin lifted her chin and nodded to one side, then took the lead. Yuzu trailed behind Homura. Both sisters were obviously tense and expecting an attack— their first encounter with a belligerent magical girl had really stuck with them. They led her to a park in Naruki City. Smart— wide open space where neither party would be blocked from fleeing and far away from Urahara Shop. The girls led her to the far end of the park, out of sight of the playground. Homura calmly sat at the decrepit wooden picnic table they found there and smoothed her skirt as the sisters decided their positions. Yuzu perched sideways on the opposite bench and Karin plopped onto the table itself. Also smart—
neither wanted obstacles blocking their legs if things went badly and they needed to fight. Homura made a point of crossing her ankles under the table and primly folding her hands together on its top in a bid to look nonthreatening.

The Kurosaki sisters stared at Homura. “So,” Karin finally said. “What brings you to Karakura and how do you know who we are?”

“Did you follow us last time we met Kyubey?” Yuzu asked with an uncharacteristically hard face.

“No,” Homura answered Yuzu first. She glanced back to Karin. “My name is Homura Akemi. I am from Mitakihara.” Both sisters raised their brows. “I am not here to fight you. I came to help you and ask for help. I know my story will sound very far-fetched but there really is a set of major crises approaching.”

“Oh?” Karin drawled as she leaned on one hand. “How far-fetched? It'll take a lot to impress us.”

Homura steadied herself. “It starts with the fact that I have time magic. I can freeze time to fight and even go back in time. This is not the first time I have met you.”

Karin outright laughed incredulously while Yuzu looked skeptical but worried. Homura clenched her fingers together and frowned. Even dozens of repetitions didn't take the sting out of reactions like Karin's.

Karin wiped a mirthful tear from her eye and took in Homura's stony countenance. “Wait, you're serious? I thought you were breaking the ice so whatever's really going on will look reasonable.”

Homura pursed her lips. “No. I am quite serious.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it.”

“I can prove my time-stopping ability to you in a labyrinth. I know you prefer to avoid notice from your family and the shinigami.”

The sisters tensed. Yuzu frowned. “Kyubey could have told you that.”

Homura took a deep breath. “You contracted a year ago to save your brother, Ichigo. Your father and brother are both shinigami. Your brother lost his powers after a shinigami war but regained them after you contracted. Something about a sword.” She looked at Karin, whose eyes were wide. “Tōshirō Hitsugaya is your best friend. He is a shinigami captain.” Homura glanced between the two. “You did not tell— Kyubey any of this because you thought— he would refuse to contract with you due to a history of magical girl conflict with shinigami.” She raised her brows and waited for a response.

Both Kurosaki sisters gaped. Karin's mouth opened and closed but words failed her. Yuzu was pale. Homura decided to let it sink in instead of giving them more information while shocked.

Yuzu was the first to pull herself together. “If you time-traveled to see us, something... something really bad happened, didn't it?” She chewed her lip nervously.

Homura hummed sadly. “Many bad things. I still do not understand them all, though. That is where I need help.” She stared at them evenly. “The explanation of the basics is going to be hard on you, though.”

“You think so, huh?” Karin drawled, unable to completely hide her uneasiness behind casual bravado. “Hit me.”
Deep breath. Their reaction hadn't been disastrous last time, but you never knew. Start delicate.
“The— Kyubey has not been entirely honest with you. Is not honest with with the majority of girls it contracts. Not until it is too late.”


“Too late for you to back out of the contract. It does not explain the consequences of the creation of a Soul Gem.”

Karin and Yuzu exchanged a look. Karin hazarded, “The consequence is that we have to fight Witches.”

Homura bit her lip. “What is a Witch?”

Karin's face twisted in confusion. “You're a magical girl and you don't know that?”

“Let me rephrase,” Homura said with less patience. “Where do Witches come from?”

Dumbfounded silence. “We... we thought they were a kind of Hollow only girls can sense,” said Yuzu. “Um, do you know what Hol—?”

“Yes, you taught me about Hollows in the last timeline,” Homura replied. “And they may very well be a kind of Hollow. No one had the chance to really investigate last time. But Witches are formed from a specific kind of soul.” After a moment of blankness, horror slowly dawned on Karin's face. Homura plowed on. “If our Soul Gems become too corrupted and we start to slip into despair and insanity, our Gems turn completely black and transform into Grief Seeds. Our souls are then reborn as Witches. Then the cycle continues with newly-contracted magical girls who will defeat us and become Witches in turn.”

Fear and horror flooded their magic. Karin was still and silent, eyes wide. Yuzu started to hyperventilate as she thought about it. Tears welled in her eyes. Karin held her hands to her face took a few deep breaths, and scrubbed her hands up and down her face. She stopped with her hands at her jaw, head tilted up to stare sightlessly at the sky.

“I thought that if our Gems got dark it just meant our magic would be weak,” Karin said dully. She looked down and massaged her temples. “It makes sense. It makes so much sense. I should have seen it. He tore our souls out. Our souls. Of course we'd have a fancy kind of Hollowfication. Of course.” Her face went dark and she looked at Homura, eyes hard. “We made a deal with the devil, didn't we?”

“K-kyubey didn't explain any of this!” cried Yuzu.

Homura scowled. “Of course it did not. It only explains enough of the system to lure girls into contracting. It says it has no concept of deceit, yet it constantly lies by omission to achieve its goals.”

“And those goals are...?” Karin asked darkly.

“Harvesting our corrupted souls to collect energy for the greater good, supposedly,” Homura answered quietly. “But the end of the last timeline suggests something... far more sinister. Possibly the creation of a... tool or weapon. I am not sure exactly what it was.”

Yuzu leaned over the table, cradled her face in her hands, and sobbed. Karin seemed to be in too much shock to really react. Homura, reminded of Madoka's usual reaction, hesitantly reached over and brushed her fingers across Yuzu's wrist. Yuzu tearfully looked up at her. Just like Madoka did
Homura faltered for a moment, then steeled herself. “Be strong. We will overcome this.” She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

Yuzu sobbed again. “How?!”

Another deep breath. This was bombshell number two. “First, we go to your father and brother and get them on our side. Then we approach Mr. Urahara. Then we approach the shinigami.”

The sisters recoiled. “But Kyubey said shinigami—!” Yuzu gasped.

“Do you really believe anything that creature says anymore?” Homura snapped. Yuzu flinched and wilted. Homura's face softened. “In the last timeline, I had to approach them. They took it well. Except for the fact you were tricked into selling your souls. All their anger was directed at the Incubator, though.”

“Incubator?” Karin said with a furrowed brow.

“Kyubey is just a cutesy name that creature uses to sound harmless,” Homura explained. “It is short for Incubator. In-cue-bay-tor.”

Karin's lip curled in disgust. “That's not creepy or suspicious at all,” she said sarcastically.

Yuzu wiped her tears. “How can they help us?"

Homura settled back once more. “I did not meet any of you until the very end of the last timeline, so they did not have time to do much, but they figured out a great deal with what time they had. They identified several lines of investigation to pursue. And they figured out that Orihime Inoue can purify Soul Gems without using a Grief Seed and can revert Grief Seeds back into Soul Gems. As long as she is on our side, we should not have to worry much about turning.” After considering for a moment, she added, “And if things do go poorly, I can always travel back in time again to undo it.”

Both sisters lit up with hope.

“The shinigami were furious when they found out what the Incubator has been doing right under their noses. Especially your friend, Captain Hitsugaya,” Homura continued with a nod Karin's way. “The end of the timeline was... chaotic. Mr. Urahara figured out something at the end but did not have a chance to explain it to me. He told me to describe everything that happened to him—the him in this timeline. I guess he thought this him would understand what he figured out just from that.” Homura pursed her lips and tapped her fingers on the table as the twins parsed the strangeness of the sentence. “Everyone who found out that I can time-travel wrote letters to themselves to make them believe me. I need your help to gather everyone so we can figure things out and make plans before the situation deteriorates.”

“Deteriorates how?” asked Karin.


The sisters went white again. “That... would be bad,” Karin said for lack of anything else.

“What happened?” Yuzu asked.
Homura sighed. “I would rather explain it only once and to everyone at the same time, if you do not mind. It is complicated.”

Karin scratched her head. “I guess I can respect that.” She sighed deeply. “So, what’s your game plan?”

“I thought we would somehow convince your brother and his friends to all come here, then tell them and your father the basics before anything else. Mr. Urahara was tricky with his questioning last time and I want your father and brother there to rein him in if necessary. We will have to find ways to contact Captain Hitsugaya and Yoruichi to get them to come to the meeting.”

“Urahara can do that,” Karin said with a dismissive wave.

Homura nodded. “Then, once everyone is briefed and Mr. Urahara has a chance to study the research material his other self gave me, we will hunt the Witch by the train tracks together so they can all experience a labyrinth. Beyond that... I do not know.”

“It’s a good start,” Karin declared. She looked to Yuzu. “Ichi-nii will come running if we say we’re in trouble. That part should be easy.”

Yuzu nodded, slow-burning anger replacing her distress. “Onii-chan and Daddy won't let anything happen to us. Let's do it.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Isshin had a long day at the clinic, hands full juggling household burns, flu season's last hurrah, and painstakingly plucking light bulb shards out of a woman's foot. He was glad to finally turn the sign to closed and join his girls in the house. As he approached the kitchen, he noticed a third, unfamiliar reiatsu with his daughters—power on par with Karin's, if not greater. All three signatures felt... tumultuous? Hmm. When he rounded the corner into the kitchen he found a girl he had never seen before peering over Yuzu's shoulder at the stove, paying serious attention to an apparent cooking lesson. Karin was lounging at the table by a stack of closed text books and completed homework. Unusual—the girls usually waited until after dinner to do that.

“Well, hello, girls!” Isshin called with a grin.

The three looked up at him. Yuzu said, “Hi, Daddy!” and Karin said, “Hey, Dad. 'Sup?”

Dad. Not Goat-Face. If that wasn't a sign something was wrong, he didn't know what was. He kept smiling. “Busy day at the clinic. Ah, I'm so glad to see your lovely faces at the end of a long day! Makes all the burns and stitches and snot worth it!” Karin rolled her eyes, but it seemed forced. Yuzu gave a strained giggle. The new girl looked up at him with a melancholy frown and something like regret. Worrisome. “I see you brought home a friend! Hello, I've never met you before,” Isshin said cheerfully. “What's your name?” If he hadn't already been alert for signs of something wrong, he may have missed the brief flash of hurt that crossed her face.

The girl stepped away from the stove, bowed politely, rose, and brushed long dark hair over her shoulder. “I am Homura Akemi. It is a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Kurosaki,” she said gravely.

“So formal!” Isshin laughed. “Don't worry about that. It's nice to meet you. Make yourself at home.”

Homura's face stayed serious. “Thank you, sir,” she said in a distantly polite tone.


“Oh?” Isshin decided to try to argue anyway. See if he could tease out what was going on. He looked at the solemn girl. “Won't your parents miss you?”

“My parents are dead,” Homura said in the tone most people used for disinterested talk about the weather.

Awkward. “Ah, I'm sorry.” The girl shrugged slightly. “You must live with someone who will miss you for dinner, though?”
“No.” Homura tilted her head and watched him keenly. “My uncle is out of the country on business most of the time. I live by myself and usually eat takeout.”

Isshin frowned hard. “That's no way for a girl to live. Someone should be taking care of you. You're too young to be on your own.”

Satisfaction briefly crossed Homura's face before she shrugged again and looked away dispassionately. Strange. Karin squinted at him with her I Am Judging You face. Yuzu glared with the fierce heat of twin lasers. They clearly wanted him to drop that subject and shut up. Ouch.

Isshin sighed. “I'm sorry. Of course you're welcome for dinner.”

Homura murmured something conciliatory and went back to observing Yuzu's skills. Yuzu sniffed that dinner would be ready in ten minutes. Isshin mumbled something and shuffled away to go change out of his work clothes. He nearly felt dismissed from his own home.

Dinner was stilted. The girls tried to make conversation about school subjects, but were obviously on edge. Isshin noticed the small looks directed at him in quick flashes—wariness, dread, and what might have been shame from his daughters; inexplicable sadness and caution from Homura. The longer the meal dragged on, the more raw Isshin's nerves got. When all three girls furtively hurried to busy themselves doing dishes, Isshin just sat and openly stared at them while trying to figure out what was bothering them. His presence? Schoolgirl drama? Something else?

Karin noticed his stare and defensively snapped, “What are you looking at, Dad?” before going back to drying plates with a rough turn.

Dad again instead of Goat-Face. He didn't like it. “Is something wrong, girls?”

Their stillness was as absolute as it was sudden. Three faces turned to him and looked like deer in headlights.

Isshin scowled his concern. “Don't bother trying to deny it. Something has you all nervous. Are any of you in trouble?”

The girls traded cautious glances. Yuzu looked to her father and spoke for them. “We need to talk to you, Daddy.” She and her sister looked grim with shades of the guilt they had shown when they had broken something when they were small. Homura's face had gone unreadable and her reiatsu felt forcibly calm.

What had his girls gotten into? What did this other girl have to do with them?

Isshin rubbed his eyes and sighed. He waved at the table. “Sit down, girls. Let's hear it out.”

They quietly gathered at the table. He couldn't help but notice that all three clustered together on the side of the table opposite him instead of surrounding it like during their meal. Was it intentional or subconscious? Setting themselves in opposition to him? Using the table as defense? They sat and looked at him uncertainly. Everything about their behavior had his alarm bells clanging.

After a minute of staring, Yuzu took a deep breath and began, “We didn't mean for it to get... bad. We thought we were doing something good, but we got tricked.”

Well, that was both vague and parentally terrifying. “Tricked into what, sweetheart?”

“First, we know you're a shinigami, Dad,” said Karin.
Isshin's mind screeched to a halt. “What?”

“So we know you can help with spirit stuff.”

“What?”

Karin rolled her eyes. “We've known for awhile. Get over it.”

“Bwuh— How long?” He thought he had been so thorough about hiding that.

“Since the end of the war, Daddy,” Yuzu answered.

“You know about the war?” he asked, surprised.


Isshin pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He should have known.

“Anyway, we kinda got ourselves into a big spiritual mess. Can you ask Ichi-nii to bring his friends home with him?”

Disturbing. “What kind of mess?”

“A really big mess,” Yuzu answered guiltily.

“Define really big.”

His girls shifted uneasily and looked at each other. Neither wanted to really broach it.

Homura clinically explained, “We have all been tricked into selling our souls for access to imperfect shinigami powers to protect the people we care about.” Isshin turned to her in horror. The twins looked down at the table, not wanting to see the face he made. Homura boldly stared straight into his eyes. “The being who tricked us approached us when we were at our most vulnerable. The contract was not presented to us honestly. The terms of the contract were not fully explained. Without intervention, we will eventually... I think the term is Hollowfy. Then the being who tricked us will eat our souls.”

Pasty white, Isshin thought he would throw up. His girls—

“I approached Karin and Yuzu because I gained access to key information about the being's plans and the... abilities of your son and his friends, as well as one Kisuke Urahara and the shinigami of Soul Society,” Homura continued in a way that reminded Isshin of his former Third Seat giving an after action report. “I have reason to believe it would be wisest to explain the basics to you, your son, and his friends before approaching Mr. Urahara and the shinigami in general.”

Isshin furrowed his brow. “Why?”

Homura glanced away uncomfortably then looked him in the eye again. “We have information that makes us think the shinigami government has been... harsh with girls like us in the past. And that Mr. Urahara can get... aggressively curious. Especially in light of certain details.” She pursed her lips and searched his face. “I... I think you and your son will react better. Just in case the others do not react well. You both are strong and I have heard your son is very influential.”

Isshin stared at her, mind whirling. She had openly outlined a desire to use one set of people as a physical and social shield against another. A politically sound strategy. Her neat, logical plan bespoke someone older than she looked. Tōshirō had been the same way, but he actually had been
a much older, slow-aging spirit so it made sense. Who was Homura Akemi, really? And how did she know about... well, everything?

He sighed deeply and palmed his face. The girls silently let him think. After a couple minutes of racing thoughts, Isshin straightened and tiredly searched their faces—all three of them. “Why... why would you agree to such a thing?”

Karin bristled. “Ichi-nii was in danger!”

“He almost died, Daddy!” Yuzu cried.

“What?!”

“We were the only ones who could find the things attacking him! Even Urahara couldn't sense one when he was right on top of it!”

“We had to protect Onii-chan like he protected us!” Yuzu finished tearfully.

Sometimes Isshin cursed the selfless protective streak of the combined Shiba and Kurosaki bloodlines. “What are you talking about? Your brother can take care of himself.”

“Now, yeah. But not last year,” Karin said bitterly. “We barely managed to save him without the powers. And that was just getting him away from the danger. The Witch could have hunted him down again if we didn't contract and take care of it.”

“You're talking about witches now?” Isshin asked, lost. “Black cats and broomsticks...?”

“A technical term for beings similar to Hollows,” Homura interrupted. Isshin looked to her. She was disturbingly calm. “The being that tricked us is called the Incubator. When we contract, our access to our powers makes us magical girls.”

“What.” Could this get any more absurd?

“When magical girls deteriorate and... Hollowfy..., they become Witches. Witches exist in a pocket dimension and lure victims with low spiritual power into either entering their labyrinth whole or committing suicide, then devour their souls. As far as I know, only magical girls can detect Witches.”

Isshin stared hard, gears whirling in his head. His eyes shifted to his daughters. “Lures victims with low spiritual power...,” he murmured.

“We contracted a year ago when a Witch snared Onii-chan and tried to make him jump off the cell phone tower by the high school,” Yuzu said quietly.

“A year ago,” Isshin said blankly.

“The time we told Urahara there had been a Hollow and Ichi-nii tried to help fight it, but he forgot because of a concussion and we all passed it off as him being stupid and getting hypoglycemia,” Karin explained. She looked down. “We lied. We had to fight Ichi-nii and knock him out to stop him from climbing and....” Her lip quivered. “We couldn't leave that Witch on the loose.”

Isshin's face dipped down, eyes unfocused as he stretched his memory and went over what he remembered of the alleged Hollow attack. “A year ago,” he echoed dully. “You... you sold your souls a year ago.” And he hadn't noticed. He'd just thought their reiatsu had matured. What kind of father was he if he didn't know the difference? On top of that, if they were to believed, he had
nearly lost his son, too. Feeling much older, he turned back to Homura. “Why did you... contract?”

Face mulishly cool, Homura said, “To save my best friend’s life.” Matter of fact. Zero regret. A shiver of muted rage in her reiatsu. Hopefully for whatever had endangered her friend or tricked her instead of at him for asking. She sat straighter and lifted her chin imperiously. “I think it would be most efficient if we refrained from further detailed explanation until your son and his friends arrive.” End of subject.

Isshin looked at his daughters. They had both adopted stubborn faces to match Homura’s, though theirs were less sure— following her lead. Yuzu chewed her lip and dipped her chin. “Are... are you mad at us, Daddy?”

He was an absolute hurricane of jumbled emotions, but— “No, baby.” Just tired, protective, and angry at the world— and himself. He rubbed his eyes and sighed, then looked up and held out his arms. “Come here, girls.” The sisters rose and hurried to him. The family clung to one another anxiously. “We'll figure this out,” Isshin murmured as Yuzu's shoulders hitched with suppressed sobs. Isshin laid his cheek on Yuzu's head and made comforting hushing sounds. His eyes wandered to Homura, who was watching them expressionlessly.

The girl was functionally alone in the world. She was dealing with this mess alone. Isshin's heart went out to her. He lifted one arm and held it out in invitation, the father in him wanting to help her. Homura's eyes darted from his hand to his face, then looked aside resolutely. She sat still with her hands folded in her lap and looked at the poster of Isshin's late wife, face unreadable.

“Ishida! For the last time, stop moving my stuff!”

“Stop leaving it in stupid places, then, Kurosaki,” the Quincy retorted waspishly.

Chad sighed as he tuned his guitar in the living room. Orihime blithely kept arranging books on shelves.

“They're not stupid places! They make perfect sense!”

“To an idiot, maybe.”

“What?”

Chad strummed a few notes. Still off. Next time he traveled so far, he'd carry the instrument himself. Baggage handlers had no respect for fragile packages.

An ear-grating ringtone shrilled through the condo. “Dammit, what does the old man want now?” Ichigo grumbled as he jogged into the living room and scooped the phone up off the coffee table. “What?”

His father didn't greet him obnoxiously as usual. “Ichigo,” he said solemnly.

Ichigo's face automatically fell. “What's wrong? What happened?” His worried tone caused his three friends to stop what they were doing and look at him sharply.

Isshin sighed. “The danger isn't immediate—"
“Danger?!” Ichigo twitched as Uryū darted up and made hand gestures that implied if Ichigo didn't switch to speaker phone, he'd take the phone and do it himself. Ichigo complied to get the Quincy out of his face.

“Yes,” Isshin said tiredly. “Do you have classes tomorrow?”

“No if there's trouble,” Ichigo replied immediately. “What's going on, Dad?” His father was silent for a long minute, which instantly told all four teens it was something grave. Isshin generally wasn't one to shut up.

“It's your sisters—”

“What? Are they hurt?”

“No, no, they— well— they're okay for now, but— it's difficult to explain—”

“Did something attack them?!”

“No— well, depending how you look at it—”

“What happened?!”

“It's complicated, plus I don't have all the information myself yet. They don't want to explain everything in full until you get here. That worries me— what they told me is terrible enough.”

“Cut the vague crap, old man! What did they tell you?!”

A rustling came from the phone, Isshin apparently scrubbing his face tiredly. “Karin and Yuzu were tricked into selling their souls.”

“WHAT?!” Ichigo roared. The phone creaked in his hand. His friends reared back, wide-eyed. “WHO?! WHO TRICKED THEM?!”

“Ichigo—”

“I'LL FUCKING KILL THE BASTARD!”

“Ichigo!” Isshin snapped.

“What?!”

“Calm down. I need you to focus. You won't accomplish anything if you can't stay calm long enough to figure out who we're going to be destroying.” There was murder in his quiet growl.

Ichigo gestured frustration with the phone, put it on the table, and collapsed onto the couch with his head in his hands. “How did this happen?” he asked brokenly. “How could we— how could we not—? They're supposed to be safe now.”

“I know, son,” Isshin sighed. “What's done is done. We need to move forward.”

Ichigo took a shaky breath as Chad lay a supportive hand on his shoulder. “Right. Right.” After a silent minute to gather himself, he looked up at the phone. “What now?”

“Now we get the girls to tell us their story,” Isshin answered grimly. “There is an odd thing. They brought home a girl their age I've never seen or heard of before who also got tricked. She said she approached the girls because she heard about you and your friends, your abilities and influence.
She wants us on her side in case Kisuke gets carried away with his curiosity or the Thirteen Divisions react poorly."

"My influence?" Ichigo asked, confused. "What influence?"

Uryū sighed deeply. "Kurosaki's ignorance aside—"

"What?"

"—How would a random girl your daughters' age know about social politics in Seireitei?"

"That's what I want to know," Isshin answered. "Have any of you heard of her? Her name is Homura Akemi."

Ichigo's friends made thoughtful sounds. Ichigo stared flatly at the phone. "You know me and names, old man."

"Girl with long dark hair and violet eyes. Very well-controlled reiatsu that feels like... actually, it's difficult to describe. Makes me think of night, though. And kind of... spinny? The way she speaks makes her sound older than she looks. Very serious."

"Nope," Ichigo answered immediately. He looked at his friends. "You guys?" They murmured negatives.

Isshin sighed. "I had hoped there was a simple explanation. We'll have to tease it out of her, I guess."

"If there's someone besides Karin and Yuzu who got tricked, does that mean there are more out there?" Orihime asked worriedly.

"I don't know. There's a lot I don't know. Just... come home tomorrow so we can figure this out."

Ichigo stood, determined. "We'll come right now."

"There aren't any trains until tomorrow," Chad murmured.

Ichigo's face fell, then he squinted suspiciously at the phone. "You called this late on purpose."

"Yep," his father replied. "I want the girls to sleep so they can't try to get out of questions by saying they're sleepy. They won't sleep if you and your reiatsu are here."

"What?"

"Kurosaki, your reiatsu is so angry the neighbors are probably waking up feeling like something's going to jump out at them in the dark," Uryū explained drily. "There's no way your sisters will sleep if they sense that." He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "It wouldn't be a problem if you had even a modicum of control."

Chad frowned disapprovingly at Uryū as Ichigo sputtered.

"So I'll see you tomorrow?" Isshin asked.

Ichigo growled. "Yeah, we'll take the first train in the morning." After he ended the call, Ichigo just sat with his head in his hands.

Orihime carefully sat next to him and wrung her hands. "We'll all help, Ichigo. We'll help them."
Ichigo looked up at his friends, whose faces were grim but earnest. “Yeah,” he said. He scrubbed his face and drew a deep breath. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
SIEBENUNDDREIßIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks for your continued support~

Regarding the number of timelines yet to come: I won't be depicting every single one. Hopefully, this chapter and the next will give you an idea of how I plan to gloss over some repetitive stuff to avoid boredom. But there are Plot Reasons for the high number. Not entirely Bad Reasons. Just... Reasons. *shifty eyes*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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SIEBENUNDDREIßIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Isshin was up long before the girls. He hadn't exactly slept much, mind whirling as he forcibly restrained his instinct to call Kisuke immediately. Part of him wondered if the scientist actually had noticed something off and just not told him. Kisuke played his cards close to the vest so it was a distinct possibility. He didn't know how he felt about that, so he tried to ignore it. Instead, he raked through his memories of the past year for signs of strangeness in his girls. It frightened him that he couldn't think of anything beyond what he had assumed was maturation of their powers and increased speed of defeating Hollows.

Isshin was haggardly staring into a mug of cold coffee when his son barreled into the house as though expecting a battle. His friends were more subdued as they followed him.

Ichigo met his father's eyes and demanded, “Where are they?”

Isshin blinked slowly. “Up in their room.” When his son moved to charge up the stairs, he firmly ordered him to stop. “Sit down. We need to plan how to handle getting them to tell us as much as possible. If you let them see how angry you are, they'll think you're angry at them and clam up.”

“I am angry at them,” Ichigo snarled. “They should've known better!”

“Like you knew better than to agree to let the first shinigami you met stab you in the heart in hope of getting the power to save your family?” Isshin said lowly.

Ichigo flinched, taken off guard. “Th-that was different!”

Isshin rubbed his eyes. “It may not be, from what little they told me.” He gestured for everyone to sit.

Ichigo's face fell into confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Just... please sit down, son,” his father said tiredly.
Homura bolted upright in her futon and looked around wildly. The sun was dawning, the birds were chirping, Madoka was alive again, and somewhere nearby, Ichigo Kurosaki was furious.

Karin and Yuzu exchanged panicked glances, instantly awake. “We're so dead,” Karin said dully. Yuzu wrung her blankets in her fists. “W-what do we do?”

Homura just looked at Karin with wide eyes. While the darkness and violence she had sensed in Ichigo during the final battle was absent and his magic wasn't as heavy, the anger in the burning moonlight was more intimidating than a lot of Witches she had faced. Conscious rage almost always wielded a sharper blade than the mindless lashing-out of Witches.

Karin grimaced. “I guess we get dressed and go meet the firing squad,” she said reluctantly. “If we avoid him, he'll only get angrier.”

Ichigo's magic began to decline into horror as they heard the distant murmur of their father's voice. Karin and Yuzu winced. “I wonder what Daddy is telling him,” Yuzu said nervously.

Within Ichigo's Inner World, Zangetsu and the Hollow stood stark black and white against the gray of the stormy sky and its reflection on the solid part of the sideways building that represented Ichigo's memories of the time when the spirits had been sleeping. The Hollow sprawled down on the surface and carefully slid over to peek within the cracking glass of the sixteenth story, the only place in their shinigami's soul the spirits had been unable to access. The Hollow went still, then sat up and looked at Zangetsu, enraged.

“I'm gonna fuck someone up over this,” he snarled.

Zangetsu hummed agreement, their intertwined nature allowing him to see what was within as well. “Revenge later. Ichigo comes first,” he said coldly.

“Tch. You think I'm stupid or somethin'?” the Hollow growled resentfully as he stood and slung rain-soaked hair from his brow. He whipped his copy of Ichigo's blade off his back and released its bandages with a whirl of cloth. “The things I do for King,” he sneered halfheartedly as the cloth extended at his will and sped off to wrap around the compromised level of the building. When the building was bandaged, the Hollow heaved the blade over his shoulder. “Hmph. Knew there couldn't be anythin' good in there.”

Both spirits looked up as the rain poured even harder. Zangetsu sighed.

“Fuckin' rain,” the Hollow grumbled. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted skyward, “Calm the fuck down, King! Sad's not gonna do nothin' but piss me off! Get angry again! Angry's great! I can work with angry!”
“Shut up, Ichigo’s morose voice echoed around them.

“I'm tryin' to help, dumbass!”

Just... just shut up.

“Fuck you!” the Hollow sneered as he made rude gestures at the sky.

Zangetsu closed his eyes and prayed for patience.

Karin, Yuzu, and Homura trod down the stairs with leaden steps. They cautiously rounded the wall into the kitchen. Everyone looked up at them. Ichigo's friends were pale. Ichigo himself looked devastated. They all stared at each other for a long minute.

Ichigo's mouth opened and closed a few times before he was able to speak, voice choked. “This... you did this because of me?”

Karin's face went troubled. “Ichi-nii, it's not—”

“It's not your fault, Onii-chan,” Yuzu finished in distress.

“I... I remember a little bit, now,” he said haltingly. “A fence... my jacket....” He swallowed hard and roughly continued, “Punching you in the face, Karin— I'm so sorry—”

Karin scowled. “You weren't yourself, Ichi-nii.”

“The Witch told you to do that,” Yuzu added.

Ichigo made a sound of frustration. “I should've been able to fight off... whatever it was—”

“You couldn't without your powers, Ichi-nii,” Karin said matter-of-factly. “And it's not your fault you lost your powers. You thought we were worth risking yourself when we were attacked. We thought you were worth risking ourselves when you were attacked. Yeah, we screwed up by not going straight to Urahara. But you pretty much did the same damn thing.”

“I'm the one who's supposed to protect you,” their brother protested.

“But is that a realistic thing to expect of yourself?” Homura asked hesitantly, drawing everyone's attention as she spoke for the first time. She looked a bit surprised at her own words.

Ichigo blinked and startled. “What?”

“Is it realistic to expect yourself to always be able to protect your sisters from everything?” she repeated slowly, as though considering the words herself. Ichigo's mouth turned down into a troubled frown. Homura tilted her head and stared at him with piercing eyes in an expressionless face. “If I understand correctly, it was necessary for you to sacrifice your powers. It is only logical that others should want to protect you when you gave so much to protect them.”

Ichigo's face looked uncertain. “But—”

Uryū pushed his glasses up his nose. “Kurosaki, you ran off and took on an entire military
organization to protect Kuchiki because she gave you the means to protect your family. You have no room to complain. Let it go and deal with the now.”

Ichigo's mouth clicked shut. He blinked several times, then covered his face and heaved a deep sigh. “Right. Right.”

Yuzu shifted worriedly. “Are... are you still mad, Onii-chan?”

Ichigo looked up. “No,” he said, subdued. He sat straight and stared at them seriously. “Thank... thank you for saving me.”

Yuzu's lip trembled. She hurried to her brother and hugged him. He hugged her fiercely in return. Karin followed after a moment, more timid than usual.

Isshin watched his children cling to each other. It tugged at his heart. His eyes wandered over to Homura, who was watching them with a blank face. She noticed his gaze and solemnly stared back, eyes distant. When he frowned worriedly, she looked away.

Homura regally avoided looking at anybody during their awkward breakfast of simple oatmeal and raisins. The Kurosaki girls tried to delay the inevitable by moving to clear the table, but Sado headed them off and stared at them until they sat down, then collected the dishes himself. The sisters sat on either side of Homura, their fidgeting contrasting sharply with her prim aloofness.

“All right,” Isshin began after a tense silence. “I didn't tell your brother much. And you didn't tell me much. Start at the beginning.”

Ishida opened the voice recorder on his phone and slid it across the table. Yuzu took a deep breath. “It started on the field trip to the botanical gardens last year. Karin's friend was acting strange, so we followed him. He hit Karin when she tried to stop him. We noticed there was a funny symbol on his neck. When Karin touched it, he hit her again.”

“The thing felt like a Hollow version of this binding kidō Tōshirō once used on me,” Karin explained.

“Why the hell did he bind you?” Ichigo asked with a scowl.

Karin rolled her eyes. “Because he's a stick in the mud who didn't want to play soccer anymore because of a little lightning.” Her brother slowly palmed his face. Karin shrugged. “Anyway, I broke the binding and then we got sucked into this other dimension where everything was crazy. I mean green sky, flowers the size of trees, fairies with frog heads, walking telescopes, whatever. There was a voice in our heads that said it wouldn't let us leave, so we went looking for it. That's when we got attacked by the fire-breathing hummingbirds with snapdragon heads.”

Everyone stared. Ishida frowned skeptically. “Are you sure you weren't hallucinating?”

Karin rolled her eyes again. “Yes. God, just listen to the story.”

“We were starting to lose when an older girl showed up,” Yuzu continued. “She was wearing a cute dress and saved us from the... creatures.”
“Totally demolished them,” Karin added.

“There was a little white animal with her. He... it... explained that Yuki was a magical girl and we could be magical girls too, if we wanted.”

Eyebrows went up around the table. Ishida's doubt intensified. “Magical girls?”

Homura narrowed her eyes at him. He had seemed so... not this annoying last time.

“Yes. Magical girls. Let us finish,” Karin grumbled.

Yuzu glanced at her sister, then around the table. “It said that it could grant wishes, and that in exchange we had to use our powers to fight these... Hollow-like creatures called Witches it said shinigami couldn't sense.”

“We said we wanted to think about it,” Karin said. “So we met with him— it— a couple weeks later to ask questions. It said that magical girls use weapons that are copies of zanpakutō, and that shinigami didn't like that and killed them. So it said to never let a shinigami know about magical girls. It made its point by saying it saw the Quincy genocide firsthand because it contracted some Quincy girls.”

“Quincy magical girls. Right,” Ishida said sarcastically.

Ichigo turned on him. “Are you calling my sisters liars, Ishida?!”

Ishida pushed his glasses up his nose and narrowed his eyes at Ichigo. “The Quincy would have noticed.”

“You and your goddamn all-knowing Quincies,” Ichigo snarled.

“You're part-Quincy, too,” Ishida snapped.

“I don't claim to know everything spiritual, you ass! And I wasn't raised Quincy!”

“Maybe you'd think more critically about your sisters claiming to be anime magical girls if your mother had taught you—”

Rage flooded Ichigo's reiatsu. “Are you really bringing my mother into this, Ishida?!”

Everyone jumped at the sound of hands slamming onto the table as a chair screeched on the tile. They looked at its source: Homura, standing with indignant fury. “Stop being so childish! You're wasting time!” she shouted. Her face twisted in distressed disappointment in the moment before she declared, “Magical girls are real!”

Violet light flashed over her body, materializing her costume with a high flare of magic. She realized her mistake when Ishida drew his glowing bow on her by reflex, perceiving her action as an attack. Homura froze time, huffed at the inconvenience—and her own impulsive loss of temper—and strode around the table. After examining his magic bow and considering things previous Madokas had gushed to her about angles and aim and reaction time she had figured out while practicing with her rose branch bow, Homura stepped into Ishida's blind spot and dropped the stop.

“Put that down,” she scolded from behind him.
Ishida reeled and loosed his arrow before he had finished turning—

Homura stopped time again. She eyed the arrow; it was similar to one of Madoka's, yet very different. She was tempted to snatch it out of the air to examine it with her own magic. It probably wouldn't be wise to display that she could do that, though. At least with what she was doing, it would seem like teleportation to everyone. For now.

Also, the arrow was on a trajectory closer to hitting her than she had expected. Did he have more experience with a bow than Madoka? Hmmm. Probably. Something to think about.

Homura went back to her original spot at the table. She was probably being petty, but she wanted Ishida to take her seriously. If it took a display of power making him twist around like a fool, so be it.

Time resumed.

"Ishida!" Ichigo shouted.

"Stop that," Homura snapped condescendingly as Karin and Yuzu flashed with red and yellow magic in front of her.

"Stop this!" Yuzu cried tearfully.

Karin, her clothes replaced by her red and cream costume, scaled the table and tackled a stunned Ishida from the front as her brother slammed into him from the side. Yuzu, wearing her frilly yellow and white costume, threw her hands forward as she backed toward Homura and cast a shield of three interlocked yellow circles. Ishida struggled, tangled in the limbs of the other two siblings.

Homura stared in surprise. She hadn't expected those three to jump to her defense like that. They had just met.

"STAND DOWN!" Isshin roared as he stood so forcefully his chair clattered away behind him. Everyone froze and looked at him with wide eyes. No one moved. Isshin glared authoritatively at them all. "Everyone, back in your seats," he ordered. They just stared. He narrowed his eyes and leaned on the table menacingly. "Now."

Karin had said he used to be a captain in the shinigami military; this was the first Homura could really see it being true. Everyone scrambled back to their seats like scolded puppies. They silently fidgeted under Isshin's heavy gaze, the three magical girls watching his reaction to their transformation warily. Homura, mouth set in a stubborn line, suspiciously slid her eyes Ishida's way every few seconds.

"Now," Isshin said more calmly, though still standing above them. He waved at the costumed girls. "Are we all satisfied that, at the very least, magical girls are real?" His eyes bored into Ishida's. The older teens all nodded hurriedly. Isshin crossed his arms and scanned the faces at the table. He righted his chair then sat with a nod and gestured at the magical girls. "Please continue, girls. There won't be any more... problems."

Karin and Yuzu hesitantly resumed their tale, relating the basics of the magical girl system and the honeyed words the Incubator had said to convince them to contract. It took some prodding to get them to describe the incident with the Witch that had ensnared their brother. The people hearing the full story for the first time sat through it in rigid, horrified silence. Sado lay a hand on Ichigo's shoulder to ground him when his breaths got shallow and he looked like he would be ill.

"That was awfully convenient," Ishida said quietly when the girls stopped talking.
“The hell you talking about, Ishida?” Ichigo asked sickly.

Ishida glanced at him. “I mean your sisters were undecided and it just so happened that their brother was the first Karakura attack they were aware of. It got very personal very quickly. Conveniently quickly for this... Incubator.”

Orihime bit a nail. “You think Ichigo was targeted on purpose?”

“It would not surprise me,” Homura answered, speaking for the first time since her outburst.

Karin frowned. “I don't think we told it anything about Ichi-nii.”

Homura hummed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “The specific target may be a coincidence if it really does avoid Karakura, but herding a very strong Witch to the area is something I can see it do. It is extremely manipulative, especially when it comes to convincing powerful girls to contract.”

Isshin rested his elbows on the table and knit his fingers together. “Tell me more about this contract.”

So Homura coolly laid out the overt terms, unsaid terms, and unexplained implications of every facet of the contract as her audience listened with growing dread. “Of course, the vast majority of contractees either never learn any of this or learn of it too late to be useful. These secrets are closely guarded for all the Incubator claims to have no concept of deceit.”

“How did you find out, then?” Orihime asked innocently.

Homura pursed her lips. “It is complicated.”

“How do you even figure into all of this in the first place?” Ishida asked. “How did you three meet?”

“That is also complicated.”

“You're not very helpful.”

Homura scowled at the Quincy. “I'm a veteran. I've learned from experience. I've met other magical girls. I've seen them die. Seen them turn. Karin and Yuzu must be very good or very lucky to have survived a year without doing either. They—”

“Please don't redirect attention away from you, Homura,” Isshin said mildly. Homura twitched and darted her gaze his way. He watched her closely. “They're very relevant questions.” She blinked and just kept staring at him with slight surprise. Isshin tilted his head, considering. Karin and Yuzu fidgeted.

“She's right,” Karin blurted. When everyone looked at her, she stubbornly continued, “It's complicated. She's convinced us of the problems and how she knows them. But she knows some other stuff that might make the shinigami flip out even more than the contract. We only know a bit of it, but....” She shrugged uncomfortably.

“We all thought you should know before the shinigami do,” Yuzu added quietly. “So that if they... um....”

“Go full Spanish Inquisition on us,” Karin supplied in an edgy tone.
“Right,” Yuzu stammered. “So you can keep them from doing... that. We want to help. We'll answer questions about the stuff and help without any of... that.”

“What kind of stuff?” Isshin asked, brows knit in concern.

Homura stared at him coldly for a minute, glanced around the table, then focused on Isshin again since he had taken the lead. “Regarding the possible goals the Incubator has for collecting our souls this way in the first place.” A silent moment passed as she waited for them to react, but they all just watched her expectantly. “My information regarding the intersection of the magical girl system and the shinigami system is... fragmented,” she conceded. “I only recently learned of the shinigami myself. I need to relay vital information to Kisuke Urahara so he can investigate further. Just the vague outline I know is frightening enough.”

“And that is?” prompted Isshin.

“The Incubator claims to be harnessing the spiritual energy generated by our souls in defiance of the law of conservation of energy to delay the heat death of the universe by countering entropy on a cosmic scale.”

Everyone stared blankly.

“However, I now have my doubts about that. I have acquired information that it is actually preparing some kind of... tools or weapons. I'm unclear exactly what their purpose is.” Homura steeled herself. “I was told to mention the words... ah, Hogoku? ...and King's Key.”

Sharp inhalations sounded out around the table from everyone who had been involved in that shinigami war.

“Hōgyoku?” Orihime whispered for confirmation. Homura nodded at her.

“Who said that? Who told you to say that?” Isshin asked in a hoarse whisper.

Homura looked down. “It is... complicated.”

“Is there anything about this that isn't?” Ishida said in a weakly sarcastic undertone.

“No,” Homura answered bluntly, taking his words at face value. She tilted her head down and surveyed their faces from behind the curtain of her bangs. She didn't like to admit not knowing something, but better to ask them than someone as tricky with words as Urahara. “What is a Hōgyoku?”

Isshin massaged his brow. “As Kisuke explains it, it's an item made by collecting pieces of many souls and fusing them together. It looks like a round jewel. It has the power to realize the deepest desires in people's hearts and grant extraordinary power to those who master it.”

Homura frowned deeply and thought of the realization on Urahara's face as he murmured wishes when she had said the process looked like Soul Gem creation at the end of the timeline.

Disturbing.

That was something to dwell on later, though. “So, you see why we came to you first?”

“Yes,” Isshin sighed. “Second and Twelfth would be.... Getting us to understand first then take it to Kisuke was smart.” He looked at her sharply. “How did you know what order to do this in to get the best outcome? This implies you know a lot about our relationships.”
Homura frowned mulishly. “It is—”

“Complicated?” Isshin said drily.

Homura nodded once. “I will explain, but I think it would be most efficient to do so in the presence of Kisuke Urahara.”

“And his crew,” added Karin. “And we need to get Tōshirō and Yoruichi to come.”

Ichigo frowned. “Okay, Yoruichi I kinda get, but why Tōshirō?”


Yuzu tried to laugh and weakly said, “It's complicated.”

Isshin rubbed his eyes and sighed again. “Okay. I'll call Kisuke.” He looked up at Homura. “You realize you're asking for a decent chunk of trust while stonewalling us, don't you?”

“I am aware,” Homura replied with a dignified lift of her chin. “I very much appreciate it.”

“Right,” Isshin said wryly. “Well, I'll call Kisuke. You kids do whatever. Stay home from school, girls. I'll call you when he gives me word that he's managed to round everyone up.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Tōshirō Hitsugaya was in a foul mood. His lieutenant had procrastinated on multiple reports he needed for his monthly expense report. Goading her through them had shot his nerves even before he had to rush through the compilation and submit it to First Division at the last possible moment. Now Matsumoto was slumped on the office coffee table over a magazine, whining about the cold from the windows Tōshirō had deliberately opened to annoy her while he went through incident reports.

The woman's unhealthy habit of gleefully pushing people's buttons was going to bite her one day.

The curtains suddenly swished. A black cat appeared on Tōshirō's desk. He was nearly startled out of his chair. “Dammit, Shihoin!” he sputtered.

Matsumoto swerved upright delightedly. “Kitty!” She waved when Yoruichi glanced over her shoulder. “Hi, Yoruichi! Wanna go out for drinks?”

“Maybe some other time, Ran,” the cat drawled. “I'm here on business.”

“Oh?” Matsumoto cooed.

Yoruichi turned back to the captain. “I need to speak with you in private, Captain Hitsugaya. I have sensitive information for you.”

Tōshirō raised a brow at her seriousness. He glanced at Matsumoto. “You are dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Matsumoto pouted dramatically, though her eyes were sharply concerned. “But—”

“Matsumoto. Out,” he snapped.

The two shinigami silently listened to Matsumoto's footsteps fade away with distance, then looked at each other.

“You need to come to Urahara Shop as soon as possible,” Yoruichi began.

“Why?”
“The Kurosaki girls have gotten caught up in some kind of spiritual mess. They've told their family and Ichigo's friends part of it, but they're all stonewalling Kisuke on what the problem actually is until you and I get there.”

Tōshirō frowned, concerned for the girls. “Why me, though?”

The cat dipped her head and looked up at him with heavy eyelids. “According to Kisuke, they think you are the Thirteen Divisions officer who will react the most sensibly.”

Meaning the girls had entangled themselves in something that could piss off a lot of the older command structure into overreacting and they wanted their friend to be their inside advocate. Joy.

Tōshirō pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Give me about an hour to wrap up my work so no one comes looking for me.”

“See you in an hour, Captain,” Yoruichi drawled. She was gone with a whisper of the curtains.

Tōshirō stared at his paperwork and sighed.

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Homura focused on her teacup as everyone endured the tense silence while they waited for Captain Hitsugaya to arrive. Her heart was fluttering, adrenaline singing through her veins as she considered the many ways the meeting could go wrong and tried to ignore Kisuke Urahara's curious looks. The Kurosaki family had arrayed themselves around her defensively, one sister on either side of her and their brother and father serving as human bookends beyond them.

Everyone looked up as they sensed the atmosphere shift outside. All but Homura recognized the feeling. To Homura, it felt like a much neater, brighter version of the gateways the girls had called Garganta. Then the power dimmed and left only Captain Hitsugaya's chilly magic.

“Oh, great, he's already annoyed,” Karin said morbidly. “This will go well.”

The young man was already frowning when he entered the room and swept his eyes around the table. He raised a brow at Isshin's presence— Homura remembered that he was in on the Kurosaki sibling plan to pretend the girls didn't know their father's heritage. The captain glanced back to Karin and stared flatly. “What did you get yourself into this time?”

Karin looked down and to the side, face red, and didn't reply. Lack of loud objection to his tone seemed to worry him.

“Please take a seat, Captain Hitsugaya, and we will begin.” Urahara waved at the table, which was quite surrounded as Homura had insisted everyone from the shop should be present. She had stubbornly refused to explain why when asked.

Homura allowed Isshin to describe the basics so she could focus on watching the reactions of the listeners. She noticed that Urahara took notes studiously while Yoruichi's gold cat eyes rarely looked away from her. Homura stared right back.

“All right,” Urahara said when Isshin was done. “I know you girls described the specifics in detail earlier, but I'd appreciate hearing it from you instead of secondhand.”
Karin drew breath to speak but Homura cut her off. “Ishida took a voice recording. It will probably be easiest to listen to that and ask questions afterward. To make sure we do not leave anything out by accident.”

Urahara peered at Homura as though considering a puzzle. She suppressed her discomfort and raised a brow at him in challenge. He finally tilted his chin in assent. Ishida set up the phone. Urahara took notes as everyone looked more and more disturbed. Yoruichi still watched Homura while the girl kept assessing reactions.

When the recording was over, Homura calmly asked if anyone had questions. Urahara, face gone from curious to grim at the mention of the artifact he had spent decades trying to destroy, answered, “Not at the moment. I want to hear the rest of this... complicated story.”

Homura tented her fingertips over the table thoughtfully. “I think my explanation will be taken more seriously if I first transform and demonstrate my main magical ability.”

Urahara perked up in interest. “I want to see you transform anyway. Please feel free to do so.”

Homura nodded and moved with deliberate slowness, not wanting to be perceived as a threat again. She held out her left hand and made her Soul Gem manifest above her ring with a thought. After a pause for everyone to get a good look at it, she triggered her transformation with a burst of purple light.

“Holy shit, you weren't kidding,” Jinta blurted.

Homura glanced at him sideways. “Of course not,” she sniffed. She looked to the rest of her audience. “To best demonstrate my ability, I need us to be a human chain. You can only see it if you are touching me or something else that is touching me.”

Several people looked suspicious, but Yuzu immediately clasped Homura's outstretched right hand, grabbed Isshin's hand on her other side, and glared around the table until everyone was complying — even Yoruichi, who perched on Tessai's broad shoulders. Homura raised her shield and triggered its magic with a thought. Three circles on its surface irised open to show glass-covered cavities, two small ones holding different volumes of bright violet sand, the large central circle containing clockwork. After a click and a whir of gears, the colors of the world around them faded away and the birdsong from outdoors fell silent.

After a pause, Jinta sarcastically asked, “So, what, you suck the color out of everything? That's reeeal useful.”

Homura glared at him and turned to Karin, the only person with a free hand. “Pick up your teacup. Hold it up high.” Karin dubiously complied. “Now drop it.”

Eyebrows raised around the table. “It'll spill,” Karin objected.

“Do not worry about that,” Homura said with a dismissive wave of her shield hand. “Just drop it.”

“If you say so,” Karin said.

Karin dropped the cup. It fell about six centimeters before its color faded and it stopped in midair. Everyone stared.

“What,” Hitsugaya said flatly.

“Put your hand under it and raise it until you are holding it again,” Homura instructed.
Karin glanced at Homura and did so. The cup settled in her palm and regained its color. “What.”

“Lift it again,” Homura ordered. When Karin had done so, she continued, “Now pour it out quickly.”

Karin squinted at her suspiciously but did so. The small amount of tea left in the cup streamed from its rim. When free of the cup, the liquid froze in place. Most of the audience looked dumbfounded. Urahara and Mr. Tsukabishi looked fascinated.

“How would you classify this ability?” Urahara asked.

“I can stop time,” Homura replied. She reached up and took the teacup from Karin's numb fingers and positioned it beneath the stream of tea.

“How interesting,” Urahara said with delight.

“I suppose,” Homura said distantly as she lifted the cup until it made contact with the blob of tea, which immediately reanimated and fell into the cup with a slosh.

“That's how you got behind me earlier, isn't it?” Ishida asked with astonishment. “I didn't sense you move, but you did....”

Homura hummed and nodded. Urahara looked intrigued and asked, “Now, what does this have to do with your explanation?”

Homura straightened and pushed her hair behind one ear as she waved at everyone to drop their hands. “I have a related ability that I cannot demonstrate.”

“Miss Akemi?” Urahara prompted.

“Many of the questions I am certain you have about me and what I know can be explained by way of my time travel,” Homura explained. “This is the second time I have met all of you. I insisted upon the presence of everyone here because you were the people directly involved in the events that transpired who also knew I could time travel.” She ignored various sputtered questions. “Your future selves gave me evidence and letters to inform you of what happened and corroborate my story.” Homura looked up at Urahara. “You gave me a compilation of the research you were able to perform in the week I knew you.”

Orihime clapped her hands excitedly. “What is the future like? Are there flying cars?”

Homura frowned at her in disapproval, but noticed the older girl's face still looked tense. Trying to lighten the mood? “I only came from six weeks from now.”

“Oh,” Orihime said disappointedly.

“What is the future like, though, Miss Akemi?” Urahara asked genially, though his eyes were hard. “Surely there was a reason for you to return to this point in your past.”
Jinta looked from face to face in disbelief. “Wait, we're believing her? Just like that?”

“Of course not,” Urahara said cheerfully. “But I am willing to give her the benefit of the doubt—for now.”

Everyone watched Homura expectantly but she just frowned down at her tea.

“You said something about a Hōgyoku and a King's Key,” Isshin prompted. “Is the Incubator trying to make one?”

Homura lifted her face and pursed her lips. “I saw them.”

“This Incubator?” asked Hitsugaya.

“That, too,” Homura answered. “But I am talking about the Hōgyoku and King's Key.”

Silence.

“What do you mean, you saw them?” Urahara asked quietly.

“I saw the Incubator combine hundreds of Soul Gems to make something the other you said was a Hōgyoku. Then it used that to steal the souls of everyone around Karakura to make something that shone gold. The other you called it a King’s Key.” She examined the pale faces around the table. “By the time I left, I think the only survivors were myself, the other Mr. Urahara, the Incubator, and the shinigami with the—” she bit back terrifying because she didn't want to show fear—“formidable fire magic. Everyone else was killed or absorbed.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “The other Mr. Urahara may have died right before I came back. I was catching fire so it is a bit of a blur.”

“You were catching fire,” Isshin echoed numbly.

“Everything was,” Homura said with a nonchalant shrug.

“Why aren't you burned, then?” Jinta asked skeptically.

“My time travel is... mental, I suppose,” Homura explained. “I always wake up in bed on March sixteenth.”

“So, like loading a game from a save point after you screw up?” Karin asked.

“I suppose,” Homura answered. It was an accurate analogy, but not one she particularly liked.

“What you mean by 'always'?” Sado asked quietly.

Homura frowned sourly. “This may be the second timeline in which I have met all of you, but it is not the second timeline overall. I have repeated the same six weeks dozens of times trying to get everything right.” Homura sat straighter and regally glanced around the table. “Your other selves assured me of your cooperation. I would like to proceed as quickly as possible.”

Everyone sat in silence for a couple long minutes as Homura sipped her tea in a forced bluff of calm. “Right,” Urahara said slowly. “I think our next step should be to consider this evidence you brought back with you.” He tilted his head. “I am curious how you brought anything back with you if your time travel is mental, though.”

Homura hummed. “My other ability is to store items in my shield.” She raised her arm to show the shield. “The items within come back with my magic—except for Grief Seeds. They disappear. I
did acquire one the other night, though.” She reached into the shield and pulled out a Grief Seed, then leaned forward to set it on the table. Urahara reached over and gingerly picked it up to look at it curiously. Homura was quiet for a minute while everyone watched Urahara, then asked, “Would you like me to distribute the evidence?”

Urahara looked at her seriously. “Please do.”

So Homura started retrieving items from her shield—envelopes, notebooks, small boxes, even a couple scrolls that went to Yoruichi and Mr. Tsukabishi. When she was done, she sat back and watched everyone scrutinizing their time capsules from the future.

“Where are ours?” Karin asked.

Homura went still. Yuzu frowned. “Homura? Why didn't you get ours out?”

Homura dipped her chin and looked at her tea. “You... didn't give me any.”

Yuzu tilted her head in confusion. “Why not?”

Homura bit her lip. Urahara raised a brow. “Miss Akemi?”

Mouth turned down into a hard frown, Homura looked at Urahara instead of the girls. She did not want to see their faces. “By the time the other you learned enough to come up with this plan, Karin and Yuzu were already dead.”

Sharp gasps came from the Kurosaki family. Karin rasped, “We... we died? Like... before everyone else?”

Homura nodded silently.

“H-how?” Yuzu squeaked, grasping for her father's hand again.

Homura was quiet for a moment. Still looking at Urahara instead of the girls, she said, “Yuzu's Soul Gem was destroyed in the fight against the Witch stalking the train tracks. Karin tried to get you to save Yuzu. When you could not, she despaired and turned into a Witch.” Homura glanced at Karin as the girl made a strangled sound. “Everyone here—except Ichigo's friends, that is—was caught in her labyrinth. We retrieved her Grief Seed. We discovered Inoue can revert the Grief Seed into a Soul Gem and revived Karin.”

“I thought you said I died,” Karin whispered, clutching her brother's hand where it rested on her shoulder.

“You did,” Homura answered. “You remembered turning into a Witch and fighting us. Trying to kill us. And... other things.” She really did not want to discuss Yuzu's corpse. “When you—she?—found out I would be going back in time and this you would not remember it, you—the other you—committed suicide by shattering her own Soul Gem to escape the memories,” she finished heavily.

The Kurosaki family looked stricken. Ichigo gripped Karin's shoulder tightly, knuckles white. Isshin let go of Yuzu's hand and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close in a protective gesture. Everyone else sat in stunned silence.

“That won't happen,” Ichigo said roughly. “It won't. We won't let it.”

Homura met his eyes, weighed his expression, and quietly said, “Good.”
Urahara grimly gathered his pile of evidence. “Study what Miss Akemi gave you. Miss Akemi, please brief Karin and Yuzu on what you expect us to learn of the events that transpired. We will reconvene this evening for further discussion.”

Everyone reached for their time capsules with varying levels of dread.

Kisuke carefully set his boxes on the work table in his main lab and methodically removed the multiple complex kidō seals he supposed his hypothetical future self had placed on them to prevent tampering. He thought over the meeting as he worked. On one level, the communication of information by recording had been efficient. On the other hand, he would have preferred to have the girls repeat their testimony in person so he could have compared the two recordings for discrepancies and signs of deception. The swift abruptness of Homura Akemi’s insistence on referring to the recording could mean many different things. She was well-controlled, spoke as though she was older than she looked, and whatever her motives were, she had successfully redirected the course of the meeting in a way that allowed her to observe everyone else instead of being scrutinized herself. She hadn’t been perfect about it, of course— especially in the face of two former officers of the Second Division’s covert operations— but it was impressive for someone so young.

If she was as young as she looked. He wasn’t ruling out anything yet, especially given the claim that magical girls could continue in perpetuity given enough Grief Seeds to purify themselves with. And the time travel, if that really was true. He was leaning toward it being true given some of the kidō on the pile of time capsules Akemi had given him. Several of his own personal designs were used. No one save Tessai and perhaps Yoruichi should have known about any of them.

Finished with the initial unpacking, Kisuke took the Grief Seed out of his pocket and sat at his desk. He studied it for a few minutes, then reluctantly put it in an isolation jar to investigate later. He then rolled over to his work bench and exchanged the jar for the opened time capsules. His own untidy scrawl had numbered each small package in the order in which they should be opened. Item one was a notebook. Within it he found a long letter to himself written in several of the ciphers he and Yoruichi had invented for private correspondence when they were the Soul Society equivalent of teens, all in his own handwriting and describing multiple incidents from his life that only he should know. Thus convinced of the time travel portion of the magical girl’s story, Kisuke moved on to the second package: A thumb drive containing multiple research abstracts in varying degrees of completion.

Kisuke rolled back to his desk, loaded the files, and cracked his neck, settling in to read as much of the summarized findings as possible.

Kisuke was neither surprised that no one was particularly hungry when they reassembled that evening not that everyone still ate the meal Yuzu had spontaneously cooked to keep calm through Akemi’s more detailed story anyway. Everyone was tense; some, tearful. Isshin kept staring at Akemi with a searchingly haunted expression. It made her squirm uncomfortably. The silence stretched through the entire meal; the gathering and washing of dishes was unsettlingly loud in the
hush. They finally settled and exchanged looks, always glancing back to Akemi. She remained
impassive.

Kisuke cleared his throat. “So. Is everyone convinced of Miss Akemi's time travel claims?”
Everyone nodded or murmured assent. Kisuke focused on Akemi. “The data you gave me is both
fascinating and disturbing. The concept of this Walpurgisnacht construct is worrying. I gathered
that you collected the time capsules before its descent—or whatever ended up with the Incubator
in possession of a King's Key. Please relate what you know of the events after the time capsules
were created.”

Akemi took a deep breath and obliged. She seemed surprised and a bit impatient that describing
what had happened took a long time, her audience asking pointed and detailed questions that raked
over the details from every angle while Kisuke scribbled everything on his notepad. It was quite
late when Kisuke was satisfied.

“I think that's it for now,” he said soberly as he flipped through the pages. He looked up at them all
with flinty eyes. “Try to relax for a day or two while I go over my data in depth. I'll send you all
digital copies to look at if you like.”

“Relax. Right,” Karin said edgily.

Kisuke heaved a tired sigh and opened his mouth to speak, but Akemi cut him off. “I do not have
time to relax. We need to hunt the Witch along the train corridor and I need to get back to
Madoka.”

Kisuke blinked passively at the stubborn set of her jaw and considered his words carefully. “Miss
Akemi, having you nearby and available to assist my investigation is crucial. This will help your
Madoka in the long run.”

Akemi scowled. “You can call me on my phone.”

“Perhaps later, once I am more confident about the nuts and bolts of this system,” Kisuke conceded
with a frown. “I want you able to be physically present to test things and talk through hypotheses.
Possibly demonstrate your abilities more thoroughly.”

Eyes narrowed, Akemi answered, “You have Karin and Yuzu to figure out how magical girls
function.”

“Ah, but you have more detailed knowledge than they do,” Kisuke said as he leaned back and
made a bit of a show of rolling his shoulders and stretching his neck while shuffling papers. “Your
repeated experience makes you a valuable asset. A rich source of information who can possibly
answer hypotheticals by virtue of proposed scenarios having actually occurred in one of your loops.
And I think such knowledge would be best communicated in person.” He folded his hands on the
table and calmly looked in her eyes. “If you go back right away, you may fall into repeating a
pattern that hasn't worked for you in the past. They say one definition of insanity is repeating the
same process over and over and expecting different results. Let me look into this and see if there's a
way to break your friend out of this cycle—or at least a method that you haven't tried. Hopefully,
we will build a plan to eliminate this Incubator and save all girls in addition to your friend.” Kisuke
cocked his head. “You said the previous timeline was the first in which Madoka died before the
final battle, correct? And that she was partnered with the veteran, ah... Mami Tomoe, for a bit
before you became involved, yes? That should give you a few days' leeway in which you can be
fairly certain she will be safe.”

Akemi scowled. “She will probably contract in that time. I need to dissuade her.”
“Do you?” asked Yoruichi. She flicked an ear and languidly swished her tail. “We know our little Orihime can purify Soul Gems—”

“Uh-um,” Orihime said nervously while waving a half-raised hand a bit as though interrupting a teacher. “I— I have an idea. Um.” She thoughtfully pressed one finger into her chin. “If... If I can reject the transformation from Grief Seed back into Soul Gem, do you think I could reject the creation of a Soul Gem back into... a normal soul, I guess?”

Everyone stared at her, dumbstruck.

“That is certainly an excellent line of inquiry for us to investigate,” Kisuke finally said with intrigue.

Yoruichi gave her head a little shake and got back on point. “Anyway, if you know Madoka will be fine aside from contracting, it should be safe to leave her to fend for herself for a few days. You said she can one-shot that doomsday combo Witch— I don't think she'll be a pushover. Especially if she's teamed up with that veteran girl.” The cat tilted her head back and looked at Homura askance. “Don't you think?”

Akemi pursed her lips unhappily. After a minute of thought, she sourly conceded the point with an inclination of her chin.

“We're forgetting something,” Uryū said. Everyone looked at him. “How much are we telling the Thirteen Divisions?”

“I think I should verbally report this to the Captain-Commander,” Hitsugaya said slowly. “Especially in light of the King's Key intel— unless he's holding something back, it seemed unclear whether the method Aizen found would work. He should know that it does. Plus, he can order resources for our use without having to explain anything to subordinates.”

Several people made thoughtful noises. Akemi looked at him sideways. “Are you certain he won't order some sort of preemptive strike against magical girls? Us in particular?”

Ichigo scowled. “I'd like to see him try.”

The shinigami and Quincy exchanged significant looks, but kept quiet about Ichigo's influence on operational decisions among the Thirteen Divisions. Akemi frowned, but made no further objections.

Hitsugaya turned to Kisuke. “What sort of plan should I tell him we have?”

Kisuke drummed his fingers on the table. “A day for me to read through more of the research and poke around in general. We'll seek this Witch by the train tracks tomorrow evening. I'll analyze any data we collect. Beyond that, who knows?”

Hitsugaya nodded acceptance. Everyone pulled back from the table. Ichigo's friends and Akemi drifted away with the rattled Kurosaki family. Hitsugaya returned to Soul Society after a melancholy glance at his best friend's retreating back. The residents of Urahara Shop silently watched them go.

Tessai stood and glanced at Kisuke. “I'll get some coffee brewing.”

Kisuke murmured his thanks. He was going to have a long night.
A/N: That feeling when you have to create and refer to multiple calendars to keep track of what your characters are doing when. :T

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Tōshirō reentered Soul Society, vaguely nodded at the Kidō Corps guards at the main senkaimon, and jumped into shunpo. It was nearing eleven at night, but he knew the Captain-Commander and his lieutenant would probably still be in their office. Sure enough, the windows of the main office of First Division were lit up. He alighted in the courtyard and approached at a measured pace, clutching his time capsule notebook and the duplicate of his unique sash medallion as his mind whirled with ways to spin the situation in a way that wouldn't bring Second or Twelfth Divisions down on the magical girls.

Lieutenant Sasakibe met him in the hall outside his superior's office, having sensed his approach. The older man's aristocratic features looked troubled. He bowed slightly as Tōshirō nodded a greeting to him. Brows knit, the lieutenant said, “Good evening, Captain Hitsugaya. It is quite unusual for you to visit this late.” Why are you here? was implied.

Tōshirō frowned. “I have extremely sensitive and very troubling information to report to Captain-Commander Yamamoto. I request a private audience with him at his earliest convenience.”

Sasakibe matched his frown. “I will return shortly.” Then he ducked into the office door and disappeared. A couple minutes ticked by while Tōshirō stared at a wall and thought. Then the lieutenant returned and ushered him in.

Tōshirō silently stood in front of his commander's desk while the old man finished writing on whatever document he had before him and Sasakibe withdrew. For once, Tōshirō was glad for the delay while Yamamoto completed his task. It let him think.

Yamamoto finally put down his brush, carefully set his papers aside, folded his hands on his desk, and looked at his youngest captain. “You have information for me, Captain Hitsugaya?”

Tōshirō snapped to attention. “Sir. I request a barrier on this room before I speak.”

The old man raised his bushy eyebrows and opened his droopy eyes further. He, too, snapped alert, aware that this captain would not ask such lightly. A few silent hand gestures later, a kidō barrier encased the room to prevent eavesdropping. “Report.”

“There is a situation in the World of the Living,” Tōshirō began. “Though it currently has ties to
Karakura and the Kurosaki family directly, it seems to be part of a wider network of predation on the souls of young girls."

Yamamoto knit his brows. “Explain.”

So he did. In a clipped tone, Tōshirō laid out the basic structure of the magical girl system and the Kurosaki girls’ involvement in it. Then he carefully mentioned Homura Akemi’s role in approaching them and describing the parts of the system the Kurosaki girls hadn't known about—and the threat of the Incubator creating a King's Key.

The commander narrowed his eyes. “And how does this girl know all this? The existence of the King's Key is a guarded secret. This Incubator obviously takes pains to hide all the information the girl claims to have. How is she privy to such intelligence?”

Tōshirō took a deep breath. “Well, Captain-Commander....” He pursed his lips, choosing words carefully. “Akemi is... an anomaly among magical girls, I suppose. One whose abilities can be extremely useful, but potentially exploited to disastrous results if the wrong sort find out about her. She is aware of this and takes pains to obscure her most powerful ability from the Incubator. I also think Central 46 and Second Division would be... unhappy about her. And Twelfth would be overly happy about her. But her willing participation is crucial to any counter-strategy we formulate. In my opinion, that is.”

Yamamoto stared hard. “She is the reason you requested the barrier.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Continue.”

“Sir.” Please be reasonable. “Akemi's wish gave her time-manipulation powers.”

Yamamoto scowled fiercely. “Time-manipulation is forbidden—”

“Among shinigami,” Tōshirō finished.

The old man looked furious at his interruption. “Captain Hitsugaya—!”

“Sir!” Tōshirō barked. “Please look at this objectively! Akemi is not under the authority of Soul Society. Her abilities have enabled her to gather valuable intelligence and turn back time when the Incubator succeeded at killing most of the Thirteen Divisions command structure and creating a King's Key over Karakura—”

“What?!” Yamamoto roared.

“Her description of the end of the last timeline—”

“She can time travel?!”

“Yes, sir.” Tōshirō did not like the tic in the old man's eye. “Her description included what sounded like it could have been your bankai. It would make sense—all souls in Karakura consumed, Thirteen Divisions command decimated, an enemy breaking into the King's Realm, everything on fire—”

“How can you possibly believe any of this, Captain Hitsugaya?” the Captain-Commander practically spat.
Tōshirō pursed his lips— there was derision at the very idea of any of his story, yes, but that was poorly masking a military leader's dismayed anger at the prospect of sustaining such a crushing loss to an enemy he hadn't even known existed. Skeptical, but taking him seriously. He could work with that. “Sir. She demonstrated her ability to selectively halt the effects of time. As for proof of time travel...” He looked down at his notebook and ran a thumb down its spiral-bound spine. “Apparently my future self was one of the few people to know of Akemi’s most powerful technique. This other me wrote... a letter of sorts. To me. His past self. Whatever.” He looked up at Yamamoto, eyes serious. “It’s in my own handwriting. There is no way anyone but me could possibly know some of this.”

Yamamoto narrowed his eyes. “You never know what spies have overheard, Captain.”

“Unless spies have learned how to observe interactions between a shinigami and their zanpakutō within their Inner World, I am quite certain that is not a viable option to explain this,” Tōshirō rebutted with a stubborn scowl as he waved the notebook for emphasis.

Yamamoto was silent for a long minute, reiatsu smoldering as the solar dragon within was prodded awake. Then he breathed in deeply and forcibly exhaled from his nose with his eyes closed. He folded his hands on the desk again. “Describe the end of this... timeline.”

Tōshirō recounted the last week of the previous timeline as detailed in his notebook and Akemi’s testimony. The banked fire of Yamamoto’s reiatsu rose up as Tōshirō spoke, his power like coals shifting and flaring as he listened to the tale of the fall of Karakura— and, essentially, the Thirteen Divisions— to Walpurgisnacht and the Incubator. Tōshirō stood firm before his commander’s fury, Hyōrinmaru’s icy wings enveloping their shared soul to shield him from the old man’s seething dragon-flame reiatsu. The old man was silent for a long time, eyes closed as he thought. Tōshirō knew better than to disturb him.

“We were routed,” Yamamoto heavily said at long last.

“Yes, sir,” Tōshirō answered, voice subdued.

Yamamoto sat back and massaged his temples with one hand as he heaved a sigh. “And this... time-manipulator,” he said. “You are being cautious in how you speak of her. How do you see her involvement from here on?”

“Akemi is our failsafe should we be unable to stop this enemy from achieving its goals,” Tōshirō answered without hesitation. “Her alliance with us could be critical in averting disaster. We cannot afford to alienate or neutralize her.”

“Kept in my possession.”

Yamamoto sat back and squinted, eyeing his subordinate keenly. “She is an independent power.” She can take steps we legally cannot.

“Yes, sir. Quite like Kisuke Urahara’s group, or Ichigo Kurosaki’s group.” We have a collection of powerful wildcards already— what’s one more? ” She shows a significant degree of trust in the Kurosaki family and is... mostly cooperative with Urahara.” She’s not as much of a loose cannon if former captains of the Thirteen Divisions are observing her. “I think it would be wise to allow those ties to bind.” If she develops trust in our allies, we could benefit from it.

Yamamoto looked sharply at his youngest captain and considered his words for several minutes before shifting topics without voicing an opinion. “Am I to presume Kisuke Urahara is investigating how the events on the final day can be explained and what can be done to prevent a repetition?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Would I also be correct to presume that he requests I grant him resources above questioning by the other Divisions?”

“Yes, sir. And that I be your direct liaison. We think it would be best to keep all of this off-the-record until we know more, plus Akemi seems to have a marginal degree of trust in me. Urahara would like to initially limit her exposure to other shinigami in hope of her coming to trust me more.”

The old man grunted and stared at his desk as though the solution to the situation was engraved in the grain of the wood. At length, he said, “To appease the time-manipulator into remaining cooperative if another timeline is required, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir. If Twelfth, Second, or Central 46 get to her and... to be quite frank, tear her apart looking for answers, we lose our advantage in having her as a willing ally and probably break ties with the Karakura contingent in so doing. Akemi would then have the option of turning back time and convincing the Karakura contingent to not trust or involve the Divisions in any way, leaving us with no involvement and no information about the threat.”

“Hmm.” Yamamoto scratched his beard and looked up at him, eyes keen. “The other Urahara advised her to get him and the Kurosaki family on her side before doing anything else, didn't he?”

“Yes, sir.” Tōshirō twitched, uncertain of the old man's opinion of that maneuver. He generally did not like when subordinates or allies dodged around him. “Though apparently the other him told Akemi to scrap the plan and run straight to him as soon as she went back.”

“Oh?” the Commander lifted a brow. “Yet she did not. By your own testimony, she delayed.” He narrowed his eyes at the Tenth Division Captain. “She deviated from the new plan to safeguard her own survival by gathering other allies first, then revealed her information in increments designed to minimize disbelief and poor reactions.” He tilted his chin. “And remained on guard while doing so, to the extent that she easily outmaneuvered the Quincy boy.”

Tōshirō regretted the admission at once. It made the girl look sneaky. Or worse, defiant. “...Yes, sir.”

Yamamoto stared at him and tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. He finally settled on a reaction, nodding once and saying, “Good.”

Blinking in surprise, having fully expected to have to defend the girl's actions, Tōshirō stammered, “S-sir?”

“Good,” Yamamoto repeated, arching one brow. “She can think strategically, shows caution in who she trusts, and has well-established self-preservation instincts— unlike some.” Some being a particular orange-haired young man. “This girl may have certain emotional challenges given her youth, but she is at least mature enough to be nuanced in her behavior and anticipate consequences. That is heartening, considering we may be at her mercy if we don't resolve this before she turns back time to a point where no one allied with us knows of her or the threat she has so much information on. It makes her less likely to be swayed by an enemy before we can notice.” He leaned back. “If we are to secure her cooperation in any further timelines which may emerge, we need to give her reason to think our aid is worth seeking over any risk she perceives in so doing. She needs to see that the consequences of not having our help are more dangerous than approaching us. Preferably, she should develop an outright positive attitude toward cooperating with us. In short, Captain: Make her like us.”
Tōshirō couldn't help but stare. The old man, once so set in his ways of absolute adherence to the law, was willing to bend the rules. In a cold and tactical way, yes, but still far more than he once would have gone. Kurosaki really *had* made a difference when he plowed through the Thirteen Divisions.

“Make no mistake, though, Captain Hitsugaya,” Yamamoto said gruffly. “I view Akemi as a potential asset. Should she become a liability or a threat....” He let the sentence hang for a moment, allowing the silence to imply all manner of things. “Urahara and Shihoin may be nigh uncontrollable, but they should be able to do a proper threat assessment of the girl and overpower her if necessary. If they do not, you are to take action to protect Soul Society and the King’s Realm.”

Tōshirō bowed his head. “I understand, sir.”

The old man nodded sharply in return. “Good. Consider yourself assigned to this case. Do not inform your lieutenant of the particulars as yet. If you require additional resources, request them of me directly. Do not speak of this on any phone line which may be monitored by Twelfth Division. Report directly to me and only to me.” Yamamoto dispelled the barrier with a careless wave of one hand. “You are dismissed.”

Tōshirō hurried away as quickly as was polite, already considering his options.

Isshin found himself fervently grateful that Sado and Orihime were among the Kurosaki house guests. In their own ways, each had herded his shell-shocked children into a video game tournament. They hit their stride and finally became distracted enough to enjoy themselves at midnight. They were still going strong at three. He didn't have the heart to tell them to quit and go to bed— what did getting to bed at a reasonable hour matter when faced with the possibility of complete soul death? When trying not to dwell on their once-endings, on how much of their futures rode on Kisuke Urahara's intelligence and the determination of a fourteen-year-old girl? Not much, in his opinion. Let them exhaust themselves with something pleasant. At this point, he'd support anything that would chase away his girls' nightmares.

His girls.

Isshin sat at the kitchen table all night, thinking. He ran his fingers over the notebook that had been in his time capsule. Occasionally re-read particular passages and scrubbed his face with his hands. Pasted a brittle smile on his face when anyone came in for drinks or ice cream. But he spent most of his time turning two small silver objects over in his hands. One was an heirloom of sorts he usually kept safe in his nightstand: the first true Quincy cross charm bracelet his late wife had received when she was ten years old. A relic of the old Kurosaki line— the same Quincy cross a teenage Masaki had used to save his life so many years ago. Holding it was a comfort to him in his wife's absence. He had become familiar with every millimeter of the charm and its chain since her death. Every scratch, every dent, every scuff. The other item had been enclosed in his time capsule: an exact replica of Masaki's one-of-a-kind talisman.

Sighing deeply, Isshin said, “Ah, Masaki.” He looked up at the poster of her joyous face. “I wish you were here to help us through this.” Isshin stared at the poster with an unfocused gaze, rolling the twin Quincy crosses in his hands like rosaries as he tried to think.
The noise in the house gradually tapered down into quiet as the teenagers fell asleep one by one. Still, he kept his vigil. Having heard the story and read his other self's version, he had no illusions that he would find anything but nightmares of shattering rubies and being unable to revive his daughters. Of his Yuzu, doll-sized perhaps, dressed up like a dead princess inside Karin's bare rib cage.

On that note, it had been quite thoughtful of Homura to omit that detail from what she told his girls. He half wished his other self hadn't written of it. But then, it helped stoke a limitless rage deep within him. That was probably his other self's intent. Anyway, he liked the girl's withholding. It spoke of concern and empathy to him. His other self was right—Homura was very restrained in how she displayed emotion, but it was there if you bothered to look for it.

Isshin was surprised when Homura padded into the kitchen just before five with an empty glass. She looked equally surprised to see him. Homura blinked a few times and looked at the open notebook on the table.

“Ah, I am sorry to interrupt you,” she murmured. “I thought you were asleep.”

Isshin grinned wryly. “No problem. I probably should be sleeping. Then again, so should you.”

The girl slightly twisted her lips to one side. “Probably.” She just stood in the doorway and stared. “Excuse me,” she said as she began to withdraw.

“No,” Isshin said firmly, straightening in his seat. The girl turned back to him in surprise. “No,” he repeated. “Please come in. Sit.”

“Oh, I was just a bit thirsty—”

“Water or tea or what?” Isshin asked as he stood.

“That really will not be necessary,” Homura objected.

Isshin looked at her. “Please, sit. Water, tea, soda...?”

Homura hesitated, then carefully approached the table. “Just water is fine.”

“Right,” Isshin said as he took her glass, filled it, and returned to the table. Homura accepted her glass with a murmured thanks but stared at him uncertainly. He sat and stared calmly back as she kept her eyes on him while she sipped. It was like convincing a skittish deer to eat from your hand without fleeing. Isshin was also distinctly reminded of the wary faces his girls made when he called for a family meeting out of the blue.

His girls.

“The other me wrote about you,” Isshin began with a nod to his notebook. “About things he wanted to say to you.”

Homura's cautious expression shuttered into aloofness. “I do not presume to expect you to think of me the same way as your other self. It would be unfair to you,” she said without affectation.

“Ah, so I did talk to you,” Isshin said with a faint smile.

The magical girl pursed her lips. “Yes. But as I said—”

“Thank you.”
Homura drew up short and blinked in surprise. “I'm sorry?”

“I said thank you,” Isshin repeated earnestly. “Thank you for taking on the project of saving my girls. You should be the last person responsible for their well-being but for whatever reason, you opted to take on that burden when the ones you carry are already so heavy. So thank you.”

Homura's lips curved into a troubled frown as she sat back. “I deserve no thanks. My time travel in itself has saved no one. The situation with Walpurgisnacht and the Incubator—this King's Key—is not selfless.”

“I understand you have bigger fish to fry,” Isshin said with a dismissive wave. “You decided to contact us before that... that apocalyptic mess.” He steepled his fingers together and peered at her appraisingly. “If I—and that other me—if I'm right, you've been burned by seeking help in the past. It was brave of you to agree to this even before you knew how much it involves the shinigami. So thank you.” He stared directly into her eyes. “My household will always be open to you. In any timeline. Just give me the notebook again.”

Homura flushed and floundered about a bit, then looked down at her water. “I—I don't deserve any thanks,” she insisted.

“Stop saying that,” Isshin said with a disapproving frown. “You stumbled your way into the most thankless of jobs and you're trying your best. Have been trying your best past the point where even a lot of adults would have given up. That's admirable. So thank you.”

Cheeks pink, Homura was quiet for a long time. “You're—you're welcome?” she said uncertainly.

Isshin grinned tiredly and stood. “Thatta girl,” he said proudly. He reached over the table and ruffled her hair. She squeaked and looked up at him in owlish surprise. As he walked past her, he paused to lightly clasp her shoulder. “Fill your cup and go crash with the rest of the hooligans. I'm going to bed. We both need to sleep.” He tapped her forehead with one finger. “You gave that sharp brain of yours a real workout today, Miss Social Strategist. Go give it a rest. Good night. Morning. Whatever.”

Isshin could feel her confused stare at his back as he disappeared up the stairs.

The teenagers had crashed hard and didn't start waking up until noon. Yuzu dragged Karin into the kitchen to make brunch. Ichigo hastily insisted guests not help, eyes darting to Orihime with something near fear. His other two friends agreed. Odd. The older teens blearily tried to engage Homura in conversation. She was curled up in the corner of the couch with a blanket over her shoulders, blinking at them drowsily and mostly staring, but occasionally gave brief answers. Then Yuzu came back and announced brunch with a wan smile. Everyone stood.

Ishida smoothed his rumpled clothes. “I need to go do some research.”

Yuzu directed her smile at him. “Please stay for brunch.”

“Ah, I need to try to finish before Urahara finishes his—”

“You can't study on an empty stomach.” The brunette's smile intensified. “Please stay for brunch.”
“...Right. Brunch,” Uryū stammered, cowed.

Isshin was sitting at the table when they entered. He nodded at them as they sat down. The meal was awkward, stilted attempts at idle chitchat failing until Karin finally gave up on talking about mundane things.

“So, Homura,” she began curiously. “How much stuff fits in that shield of yours?”

Homura blinked slowly and peered at her strangely. “I have yet to find a limit.”

“Wait, seriously?” asked Ichigo.

“Yes.”

“Cool,” Karin said. She leaned forward. “So, what, it’s like a black hole in a bag? A bottomless pit?” She looked at her brother. “Ichii-nii, can Urabara make me something that does the same thing? Maybe a backpack?”

Ichigo knit his brows. “Why?”

“Just think of all the soccer equipment I could carry!”

After a long, deadpan stare, her brother said, “I should have known you would say that.”

Karin rolled her eyes and turned back to Homura. “What kind of stuff do you carry in it?”

Homura shifted a bit uncomfortably. She didn't want to make things serious again by bringing up her arsenal. “Ah, a bit of everything, really.”

“Ahh! Your suitcase!” Yuzu said with sudden understanding. “You didn't have one when we brought you home but you had one that night. Is that where it was?”

Homura nodded quietly.

Ishida narrowed his eyes, considering. “Is the suitcase bigger across than your shield?”

Homura stared at him, face blank, and did not reply. She was not liking his scrutiny this time around.

Karin answered for her with a popping “Yep!”

The Quincy hummed thoughtfully. “Is there a size limit on what you can store?”

Homura turned her attention to her plate, ignoring his question in favor of the remaining fruit. Ishida opened his mouth but Isshin caught his eye and made a small gesture to stop pressing her. The Quincy pursed his lips and pushed his glasses up his nose.

The Kurosaki family really was an excellent shield.

Karin picked up the thread of conversation and ran in a less serious direction. “The important question is: Do you have a kitchen sink in there?”

“No.” Homura tilted her head in confusion. “Why would I?”

Fingers drumming together and grinning fiendishly, Karin answered, “You need to put a kitchen sink in your shield. *Need to*. Any time someone asks if you have a kitchen sink, you will *break*
Their brains if you haul one out for them.”

Homura thought of the several times Kyōko had said to her *Holy shit, you keep everything but the kitchen sink in there!* “Ah.” Her brows knit. “Why would I want to?”


“Oh.” Jokes weren't really her strong suit.

Ishida disappeared after the meal. Ichigo and Sado washed dishes as Karin coaxed all the teens into agreeing to play soccer one by one. It didn't take much effort as everyone wanted a distraction anyway. Hitsugaya joined them halfway to the park, walking toward them from Urahara Shop in a gigai and modern clothing and looking like he hadn't slept much. They had been playing for an hour when Karin's friends showed up.

“Heyyy, Kurosaki!” one of the boys shouted. “The teacher said you were really sick!”

“You don't look sick to me,” another called suspiciously.

Karin glared at them. “Snitches get stitches, Ryohei.”

The boys shuddered and shuffled awkwardly. One of them muttered, “It must be great to have a doctor willing to lie for you for a dad.”

“What? I couldn't hear you,” Karin said loudly, twisting a pinkie finger in one ear. Probably a lie, Homura thought, since she had heard it clearly herself. It must be one of the things Karin did for fun. Seeing them squirm was amusing.

The boys joined their game. Though they were usually rather clueless, apparently they picked up on the edgy distraction of everyone else playing because they would give each other uncomfortable glances as the afternoon wore on.

The sky was dimming into early twilight when Ichigo's cell phone shrilled out Isshin's annoying ringtone. Everyone but Karin's friends were suddenly alert. Ichigo answered, spoke with his father and hung up. He looked around at all the faces keenly watching him for some clue as to whether it was bad news. He awkwardly scratched the back of his head and glanced at Karin's friends before calling out, “Hey, Dad said Urahara's invited us over for dinner before we go back to the condo. Homura's staying at the house so she can come, but, uh, you boys... there's no room for you, sorry. It's gonna be a tight fit as it is.”

The boys looked dismayed.

“Dinner at the candy shop?!”

“How?!”

Karin folded her arms behind her head and feigned nonchalance. “Didn't I ever tell you my old man is buddies with the Candy Man?” By the affronted looks on the boys' faces, the answer was a resounding no.

“What?!”

“No way!”
“Awwww!”

“You get to do all the cool things, Karin!”

Karin held herself straighter and preened. “Of course I do. I'm awesome.”

Yuzu laughed halfheartedly and Hitsugaya pinched the bridge of his nose with a deep sigh.

Homura, cheeks still pink with exertion as she breathed deeply, just turned toward the shop and started walking. She wanted this over with as quickly as possible.

She had a Witch hunt to lead.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Uryū approached his father's office in Karakura Hospital with a grim face, running over his arguments in his head. Overcoming Ryūken's obstruction of all things Quincy was not going to be fun, but he wanted a frame of reference before he started digging into the old records. The Director had his secretary make his son wait in the receiving area for forty minutes, of course—a frequent test of how serious his son was about whatever spiritual matter drove him to actually go to the office during business hours. Uryū's obstinacy won the day and he was finally admitted to the impersonal office.

Ryūken didn't bother to look up, instead rifling through a manila folder. “What.”

Accustomed to his father's distant personality, Uryū said, “I need to ask you something about Quincy history.”

“No.”

Uryū scowled. “There is a spiritual predator that has tricked the Kurosaki girls into selling their souls to get power and a wish in exchange for a commitment to fight Hollow-like entities. It claims to have preyed on Quincy girls in the past. I need to corroborate this.”

Ryūken actually glanced up. He stared expressionlessly for a long minute. “Convinced Quincy girls to sell their souls for power and a wish.”

“Yes.” Uryū pursed his lips. “Have you heard about such a thing?”

Ryūken's mouth tightened minutely. “Explain the allegation.”

Irritation made Uryū's eye twitch, but he was used to his father's non-answers. He explained the basics of the Incubator's system without even breathing of time travel or the term magical girl, knowing Ryūken would immediately dismiss him. The fact that the man actually paid direct attention was a sign that he was being taken seriously and he was not going to ruin it. After the explanation, Uryū waited for his father to say something. And waited. And waited. “Well? Have you heard of anything like it?”
Ryūken blinked slowly, then turned back to his folder. “Begin with the genealogies. Cross reference potentially relevant deaths with the histories for context.” It was an obvious dismissal.

Uryū grit his teeth, nodded curtly, and departed for the family archives.

Ryūken stared blankly at the papers in his folder for several minutes after his son left. Eventually, his eyes slid over to the only personal item he kept in his entire office: A simple photograph of his late wife, Kanae. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit one, and took a long drag.

“The selling of power and wishes, eh?” he said quietly to her picture.

And here he had thought his wife had been babbling senselessly, delirious on painkillers after giving birth to their son by Caesarian section. Probably still delirious, he thought, but perhaps not completely out of touch with reality.

“Do you remember when we were young? When we were in middle school?” Kanae had asked him in a breathy lilt from the mountain of pillows that supported her so she could hold her newborn and gaze at him lovingly. “I looked up to you so much. Dedicated myself to you so much. Wished I was Echt like Masaki so much. Wished to be healthy enough, strong enough, powerful enough to be your equal. So. Much.”

“Kanae, you need to rest—”

“I almost made that wish, you know,” she said dreamily as she drew one finger across her baby's knuckles until the little hand opened and clasped it. “For real. But I couldn't do it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A little creature came to me and said if I made a wish, it could grant it with magic and make me stronger at the same time. I'd just have to fight a different kind of Hollow, and I fought Hollows already. I could wish to be Echt, or the most powerful Quincy alive, or even that your betrothal would be nullified. I thought and thought and thought, but I couldn't do it.” Kanae had looked up from their son's tiny face, glassy eyes not quite focusing on her husband. “It wouldn't have been honest. It wouldn't have been fair to you.” Tears slid down her cheeks.

“Kanae,” Ryūken had said haltingly. “Kanae, I think you were dreaming. Give Uryū to me. You need to sleep.”

“A dream? It felt so real....” She trailed off and looked back down at her son as he shifted against her chest. “But I'm so happy I didn't do it. I'm so happy. I didn't need a wish, or to be different. You love me as I am. I was enough by myself. And we have a baby now. I'm so happy. I'm so happy.”

If she remembered the exchange after the drugs wore off, she never spoke of it.

Ryūken exhaled and looked at his wife's portrait through the smoke. “It seems I owe you another apology, Kanae.”
Kisuke sat at the table in the shop's back room, shuffling between papers and a tablet as he reviewed his research. Jinta was absent, minding the shop, and Ururu and Tessai were puttering around in the kitchen preparing dinner. Yoruichi sauntered into the room in human form, plopped a file folder on the table, and sat.

“I fleshed out your dossier on Akemi as much as I could,” she announced as she noted the dark circles under her friend's eyes. “Sad stuff but no red flags. Her parents died not quite two years ago. She was hospitalized for a cardiac incident at the time. The story about the globetrotting uncle also appears to be true. Rich family. Most of the girl's inheritance is held in trust, but disbursements for medical and living expenses are allowed. A generous stipend for food and other necessities is deposited into her active account once a week. None of the withdrawals from the trust look suspicious. All match payments on file with the medical procedures, the move, and so on. Looks like she moved to Mitakihara a few months ago to do an outpatient clinical trial before being admitted for monitoring and surgery. She was just discharged on the sixteenth. She has her own little townhouse in the city.”

Kisuke raised an eyebrow. “No adult supervision?”

“Apparently not,” Yoruichi answered with a shrug.

Kisuke hummed, murmured his thanks, and tucked the file into a box to his side.

Yoruichi leaned back on her hands. “So what's the verdict on this mess?” she asked with a wave at the tabletop.

“...Interesting,” Kisuke muttered.

Yoruichi rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

“Disturbing.”

“A given, I'd assume.” She peered at him askance. “You're not going to say anything until you have more information from whatever the hell we do tonight, are you?”

Kisuke beamed at her. “Nope!”

Yoruichi sighed. “Do you at least think the threat is credible?”

“Oh, yes. Indeed I do,” Kisuke said softly.

She drummed her fingers on the table for a minute. “Right. So we're going hunting tonight. Anything you want me to keep an eye out for?”

Kisuke's eyes sharpened. He signaled for Tessai to approach. When he had both of them, he said, “Tessai, pay particular attention to Miss Akemi's use of her temporal stasis technique. I want to know how similar it is to Jikanteishi*. You're the expert there. I'll give you something to help with that after dinner.” Tessai nodded assent. Kisuke turned to Yoruichi. “I want you to analyze the techniques and powers of the magical girls. See if you can identify the commonalities and differences between what they do and shinigami techniques.”

“Sure.” Yoruichi threw a lazy salute. “And you'll be...?”

“Observing everything to some extent, but largely monitoring sensors about this pocket dimension
and the abilities of whatever opponents we find within.”

Soon, the others arrived for an awkward dinner. They quickly gave up on small talk in favor of grilling Uryū on what he had found in his spontaneous research. He repeatedly demurred, saying he was nowhere near done, but did let slip that he had found several suspiciously young deaths of Quincy girls compared to Quincy boys to investigate. Kisuke was itching to get into the Quincy archives himself. Uryū just gave him an unimpressed stare.

No trust. Honestly.

Once done, they focused on planning their evening. Given the difficulty Akemi described finding the particular Witch they were seeking, they laid out a broad search pattern. Since Urahara Shop was on the far eastern edge of town, they decided to begin their search two train stops into the next city over and work their way west. They began at twilight and divided into three search parties to move along the railway corridor in tandem. Yuzu's team took the street north of the tracks, Karin's team took the street south of the tracks, and Akemi's team walked the tracks themselves. Kisuke walked with Akemi, watching his sensor device. Isshin, Ichigo, and Hitsugaya ghosted along the rooftops and power poles in shinigami form to keep an eye on them all, having abandoned their bodies at the shop. They moved carefully westward, watching the soft glow of the three Soul Gems. It was tense but tedious work. They had reached the train trestle over the Karasu River that bisected town when Yuzu slightly raised her reiatsu to signal everyone that her Soul Gem had sensed something. Her team stopped while the others continued westward until Akemi's Gem began to glow as well. She signaled as Yuzu had. Karin's team continued west for a bit, then veered north and backtracked until her Gem glowed as well. The search parties began wandering toward the center of their triangle, following whichever paths made their Gems glow brighter as Kisuke frowned at his sensor. They met up at a point halfway between the river and the Old Karakura Train Station, by a glass collectibles shop north of the tracks.

Karin huffed and complained aloud, “She's hiding practically in our back yard.”

“How's your dowsing rod, Kisuke?” Yoruichi called from Yuzu's group.

Kisuke hummed. “It only started picking up a slight distortion about forty meters back,” he announced. He looked up and glanced at the three points of light that made up their triangle, Soul Gems glowing brightly. “Far less sensitive than Soul Gems. I'll have to play with calibration later.”

“Something feels weird,” Jinta said suspiciously.

“I feel it,” Uryū said quietly. “Very faintly.”

“I think I see the distortion,” Hitsugaya said as he alighted next to Karin. He squinted and pointed. “Like a heat haze. There. Is that it?”

“Yep!” Karin answered with forced cheer. “Watch this.” She stepped toward it and brandished her Soul Gem. It flared with ruby light, which triggered a flash of orange light. Afterward, the distorted air had a large orange symbol floating in its center. It looked like a pumpkin with a clock face, set against the outline of butterfly wings. Kisuke's sensor beeped.

“Ah, I really feel it now!” Orihime gasped.


“Fascinating,” Kisuke muttered as he inspected the sigil with his sensor. Everyone stood and watched him fiddle around with assorted gadgets for nearly ten minutes. Finally, he straightened
and looked around. “Now what, girls?”

“We go in,” Akemi said coolly. She strided through the portal without waiting for a response.

“Wait—! Oh my God,” Isshin gasped before hurrying after her. Everyone else rushed in with him.

Just as Kisuke thought: His friend had all but adopted the girl and was in protective father mode. What had his other self written?

She is already their kin in spirit, therefore she is ours to protect, now, Benihime declared. The Kurosakis will have nothing less.

Kisuke quirked his lips in amusement as he stepped through the portal himself. He found himself on a platform in a curious subway station. The others were craning their heads around to look at their surroundings.

“Please don’t go wandering away from us without warning again,” Isshin said disapprovingly.

Akemi looked at him over her shoulder and raised a brow. “I said I was going in.”

Isshin opened his mouth to speak, made a gesture, and stopped himself. He sighed deeply. “Wait for us to actually respond next time.”

Kisuke moved to the edge of the platform and peered around. There were haphazard train tracks and tunnels zigzagging about. Industrial wreckage littered every surface that did not host rails. A multitude of clocks adorned every vertical surface, causing an echoing cacophony of asynchronous ticking. Blooming jacaranda branches sprawled along the ceiling, painted lady butterflies darting about the lavender flowers. The air was heavy with presence.

Akemi blinked owlishly at Isshin and shrugged, then turned to face forward. She held her Soul Gem up. “Karin. Yuzu.”

The chamber was awash in colored light as the three girls transformed. Karin and Yuzu stepped up to either side of Akemi in their own magical girl costumes. Even though Kisuke had expected it, he still had to stare and reassure himself that he was awake and not in some bizarre anime dream.

“Oh my God,” Jinta said dully.

The three girls looked back at him. He was obviously staring at Yuzu, cheeks pink. Yuzu tilted her head. “What’s wrong, Jinta?”

The boy went bright red and looked away from the frilly yellow costume. “N-nothing.”

Karin snickered. Yuzu looked confused.

Akemi turned back to face everyone. “Mr. Urahara wants to observe magical girl techniques, so Karin, Yuzu, and I will take point. You follow us and provide support if needed. Observe as much as you can— I do not know of another Witch nearby, so this may be your only chance for now. I will give further instructions when we near the center of the labyrinth.” She lifted her chin imperiously. “Questions?”

Ichigo made a sound of protest and opened his mouth— likely to insist his sisters not fight— but Isshin grabbed his shoulder and squeezed firmly to stop him. His son looked at him to argue, but found his father’s face grim and worried as his probably was.
Isshin met his son's eyes. "They need to do this, Ichigo," he muttered, just near enough for Kisuke to hear. "Keep an eye out for them, intervene if you need to, but this is their cause. They need to do something to contribute to this situation or they'll feel helpless and guilty."

Ichigo's face contorted with frustration, but he settled. He understood the feeling.

“A suggestion,” Tessai said as he stepped forward. “If I understand correctly, your greatest vulnerability is your Soul Gem, correct?”

Everyone's eyes jumped to the citrine at Yuzu's throat. Yuzu froze and swallowed hard, drawing her hand up to it.

“Yes,” Akemi replied.

Tessai nodded curtly. “If you will allow me, I can cast kidō shields around them.”

The Kurosaki girls cheered up and immediately approached the big kidō master. Akemi stared at him in shock and watched as he cast glowing bubbles around the ruby and the citrine. He looked up at her and held his hands out in invitation. Akemi blinked, mouth opening and closing a few times before she could speak. “You— you can do that?”

“Tessai’s awesome,” Karin interrupted.

Tessai smiled faintly. “Yes, I can.”

Akemi looked suspiciously at the bubbles on the other girls' Soul Gems. Yuzu understood and walked up to Akemi and made an inviting gesture. Akemi poked the shield around the Gem at her throat, getting a feel for it and what it did.

Kisuke could tell by the astounded frustration on her face that she was kicking herself for never having thought of something like that before. That worried him a bit; it seemed like a fairly obvious solution. Unless she didn't have a similar technique?

Karin also read Akemi's face correctly and wryly said, “Yeah, right? I'm feeling pretty stupid.”

Yuzu gave a weak, self-deprecating laugh. Akemi huffed and walked up to Tessai. She cautiously held out her left hand, exposing the diamond-shaped amethyst on its back. Tessai carefully hovered his hands over it and generated a bubble. Akemi stepped back and inspected it critically. Kisuke realized she could feel the difference in feel between one side of the barrier and the other. So she was discerning in her understanding of reiatsu. Or magic. Whatever. Was there a difference?

Tessai correctly interpreted Akemi's baffled face. “It's a variant of a barrier called Kyōmon. It is very strong from the outside but easily broken from the inside.”

Akemi peered up at him and tilted her head. Apparently, she appreciated the thoughtful choice and indicated it with a serious nod as she withdrew. Tessai, a man of few words himself, returned the nod.

Kisuke was pleased that they were getting on well. Bless Tessai.

The time traveler held herself regally again, dismissing the presence of their observers. “Karin, Yuzu, have you already been to the center of this labyrinth?”

“Just the once,” Karin answered. “Like a week ago. Too many damn Familiars. She ran away when we were busy.”
Akemi nodded sharply. “We will use the same tactics we did in the previous timeline, as they worked well to get to the center. When we reach chambers full of Familiars, I will use a widespread attack. When I stop, you two rush in to eliminate those that remain.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Yuzu said with a firm nod.

Karin glanced over her shoulder at their friends and family. “You guys ready?”

Kisuke held up his sensor and the others made sounds of agreement. The group set off down a tunnel, following the lead of Akemi’s glowing Soul Gem. Soon, they emerged into what appeared to be a large subway station studded with clocks, the floor covered in scattered wreckage and pumpkins of varying sizes and the ceiling decorated with jacarandas. The Familiars were plainly visible on a far platform. They were scarecrows the size of men with gigantic turnips for heads. All were dressed as train conductors. A whistle was jammed into each turnip where a mouth would be on a human face. They topped off their surrealism with a pair of glistening fairy wings on their backs. Six of them span in circles on the platform. The girls’ backup reacted in several different ways—curiosity, bewilderment, suspicion.

“Ready?” Akemi asked coldly as she reached into her shield. Forewarned by his other self’s letter, Kisuke prepared to be entertained.

The sisters materialized their weapons, to the surprise of their observers, and agreed. Akemi hauled a big gun out of the shield and took aim as the others made sounds of shock.

“Holy shit, is that a machine gun?!” Jinta screeched. He was immediately drowned out by thundering gunfire.

Akemi released the trigger and lowered the muzzle. Karin and Yuzu leapt forward to take out the two stragglers. They made short work of the scarecrows as their observers made a lot of noise.

Karin perched on the edge of the platform, her sword hand fisted against one hip while the other screwed one finger around in her ear. “Dammit, Homura, give a girl some warning before you shoot a fucking machine gun like right next to her ears!” she snarled.

“What,” Hitsugaya said blankly, hands massaging his temples.

Akemi reloaded and snapped the ammo tray closed. “My apologies,” she said, not sounding sorry at all as everyone winced, held their ears, or did jaw exercises to overcome their sudden ringing. Only Kisuke, Tessai, and Yoruichi were unaffected, having heeded their other selves’ warnings about being in close quarters with the magical girl during battle. Kisuke wondered why their other selves had been the only ones to think to include warnings about Akemi’s chosen weapons.

...Probably the trauma, actually. Kinda took the fun out of things.

“What?” Orihime asked dazedly.

“Where the hell did you get a gun?!” Ichigo screamed.

“What?” Jinta said loudly.

Akemi glanced at Ichigo. “My shield.”

“What?!” Ichigo demanded.

The magical girl looked a bit impatient. “I store conventional weaponry in my shield.”
“You have more?” Uryū squawked.

“Of course.”

“You're fourteen,” Isshin said in a disturbed voice.

“So?”

“So how did you get machine guns!?”

“That is not important,” Akemi said breezily as she faced the front again. Beautiful.

The magical girl turned to the next doorway and brushed her hair behind her shoulders. “Come.”

Several of the others sputtered in disbelief, but Kisuke immediately followed her, pretending to completely ignore the mundane weapon in the girl’s hand.

The party continued through the subway tunnels, using the same strategy every time they came to a subway station. As they progressed, each station housed more Familiars and butterflies than the last and the scent of jacaranda flowers became much more cloying. After more than half an hour, they came out of a curve in the tunnel and saw that the next archway was larger and far more ornate, indecipherable runes etched in the bricks. Kisuke had never seen the like.

“This is it,” said Yuzu.

The trio carefully approached the tunnel exit and peeked around its sides. Kisuke and some of the others peered over their shoulders. Before them was an enormous brick chamber. Instead of a subway platform, the cavern housed a sprawling train switch yard with tracks that snaked around and into adjacent tunnels. The timepieces on the walls ranged from pocket watches to cuckoo clocks to ornate grandfather clocks. Jacaranda tree trunks surrounded the cavern, forming a fragrant lavender canopy over the room as they branched out into the tunnels. Lantern-like glass slippers filled with smoldering embers dangled from the branches. A huge bell was suspended from the apex of the ceiling. Beneath the bell, all the various train rails converged into a train turntable. Pumpkins connected by vines made of wire were strewn about the spaces between tracks. Upon the center point of the entire room sat the Witch's decoy.

The decoy's base was a huge jack-o'-lantern that took up most of the space on the turntable. An over-sized vintage plaster mannequin protruded from the top of the jack-o'-lantern from the hips up, lifeless eyes staring vacantly. A gauzy black ballroom skirt flowed down from its waist and encircled the pumpkin base except for the glowing jack-o'-lantern face; jacaranda flowers decorated its waist. It wore a black bodice and its stiff arms were covered with black elbow gloves. Atop its head sat the cut-out lid of the jack-o'-lantern, its thick stem making it resemble a top hat. A mourning veil trailed down from the pumpkin-hat. The entire ensemble was completed with an upside-down pair of painted lady butterfly wings at the mannequin's back. The decoy was not facing the party directly, but was turned about fifteen degrees away from them.

The cavern was crowded with a different sort of Familiar than the turnip-headed fairy conductors. Clockwork creatures made of bare gears and metal whirled around the floor of the chamber in an intricate waltz. Vaguely-female Familiars bore short pseudo-skirts made of jacaranda branches trailing flowers; their partners wore pumpkin-lid top hats on their heads. Their dancing carried them around the rail yard pumpkin patch without tripping.
“Did you give us drugs with dinner, Boss?” Jinta asked suspiciously.

“Not this time!” Kisuke chirped as Tessai cuffed the back of Jinta’s head.

“Okay,” Karin began, matter-of-fact. “We know the dancing thingies can make their hands turn into bayonet-things to slice with. They keep spinning so the room may as well be a gauntlet. We didn’t manage to get to the actual Witch last time so we have no clue what it— she— does.”

Akemi hummed in consideration as she surveyed the cavern, presumably calculating a new plan based on the failures of the previous timeline. “The pumpkin doll is not the Witch,” she said absently. “Not directly. It is a decoy. That was our mistake last time. It is the most complex Witch... Familiar... decoy I have ever encountered. Others are much stronger, but this one is tricky.”

There was a long beat of silence before Karin muttered, “Well, shit.”

Seeing that Kisuke was busy fiddling with his tech toys, Yoruichi drawled, “So what is the target?”

Staring intently, Akemi pointed to the crown of the roof. “The bell.”

Everyone squinted into the dim upper reaches of the ceiling. The bell loomed over them, mostly visible by the reflected orange glow from the glass slipper lanterns.

“How did you take it out last time?” Karin asked. “Cause that thing is way up. I dunno how I’d get to it without bouncing off the... decoy thing.”

“I fired a few RPGs at it,” Akemi answered in a distracted tone.

Kisuke eyed the others. He needed some positive entertainment out of this mess and this was going to be glorious.

After a moment of incredulous silence, Uryū said, “I’m sorry, do you mean rocket-propelled grenades?”

“Yes.”

“You carry rocket-propelled grenades in your shield?!” he screeched.

Akemi glanced at him in irritation. “Yes.”

Ichigo spluttered. “What else do you have in there, bombs?!”

Again, a blandly impatient, “Yes.”

“I was joking!”

“Homura,” Isshin ventured, disturbed. “Machine guns, grenades, bombs...? Where do you get it all?”

“Most of my munitions are appropriated from JSDF or US military bases,” Akemi began.

“Appropriated,” Uryū muttered scandalously.

Glorious. Did she even realize what she was doing?

“But I make the various bombs myself,” the magical girl finished with a dismissive wave.
“You... you know how to make bombs,” Isshin said dully.

“Who taught you?” Kisuke asked quietly. His other self hadn't known that.

Akemi turned to him and weighed him for a moment before answering, “The internet.”

He stared at her for a long minute. That implied strength in self-instruction and a deep well of patience for detailed and delicate work. “I see.”

She frowned, possibly wondering what he understood.

Considering the main chamber again, Kisuke asked Akemi to describe the battle she had survived. Akemi complied with curt, emotionless sentences that made everyone eye the decoy more and more warily. She abruptly stopped.

“And then...?” Hitsugaya asked.

Akemi shifted uneasily, but kept her face impassive. “Then Mr. Tsukabishi's shields would have been useful.”

Silence.

Isshin compulsively reached forward and patted Yuzu's hair as though to be certain she was still with them.

“You have seen us fighting the Familiars up to now,” Akemi continued. “I think it would be best to minimize risk and take out the bell from a distance without engaging the Familiars and decoy.” She glanced at him sideways. “Unless you want to see us fight it?”

Kisuke adjusted his hat on his head, taking the moment to think as everyone turned to him. He deliberately avoided the eyes of the Kurosaki men, knowing they were probably looking rather intense. Time to play it safe. He could be more demanding another day with an enemy that was less of an emotional powder keg. “No, I don't think so. Not if it's as complex as you say. I just want to record the lead-up and aftermath of the defeat to capture what happens to turn all of this into one of those Grief Seeds.”

Akemi gave a businesslike nod, stuffed the machine gun into her shield, and withdrew an RPG launcher. And another. And another.

“Holyshityouweren'tkidding,” Jinta breathed, eyes wide.

Ururu carefully dodged to the front of the group. “I can help,” she murmured, holding her shoulder-cannon up to show the magical girl. Akemi nodded acceptance.

“Um, do you need more help, Homura?” Yuzu asked nervously. “I don't think you can do three at once....”

Akemi tossed her hair over her shoulder, nonchalant as though a cavern full of whirling death wasn't behind her. “That's what my time-stop is for.”

Several of the combatants perked up in interest. Kisuke leaned forward as Akemi turned away. “I want to see.”

The magical girl glanced at him over her shoulder. “Having you hold onto me will ruin my aim.”

Kisuke pouted. Tessai cleared his throat. “Would a kidō that linked us together be sufficient? I can
tie the end to your ankle.”

Akemi raised an eyebrow. “Like a... ribbon?”

The big man nodded. “Yes. But made of reishi.”

“...Magic?”

Karin interrupted with, “Close enough.”

Homura narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “…Show me.”

Tessai nodded once, gestured with his hands, and a bolt of yellow energy lanced out to loop around Yoruichi's wrist. Yoruichi held her hand up to show that she wasn't being harmed by the crackling binding, swinging her arm around to show she retained mobility.

“It's called Hainawa,” Yoruichi drawled.

Akemi inclined her chin. “I suppose.” She watched carefully as Tessai made a cord of energy dart out and coil around her ankle, then lightly twisted her foot around to test and inspect it as Tessai used the same technique to link the entire party together. Kisuke shoved a device into Yoruichi's hand. She glanced at it and idly pointed it at the bell. Another gadget was shoved at Jinta, who grumbled but cooperated and also pointed it at the bell. Tessai adjusted his glasses and faced Homura instead of the bell. Kisuke eagerly messed with another item and pointed it at the bell.

“Ready when you are,” he said, mouth grinning beneath hard eyes.

Akemi activated what appeared to be a previously-hidden sand timer in her shield with a thought. No spoken incantation, even. With a series of clicks and whirs, their surroundings suddenly froze. The lanterns didn’t flicker; the automatons' dance went still. Color itself dulled under the technique and shifted bluish.

Kisuke had more questions than he could ever hope to articulate.

“No fair,” Karin said as Akemi bent to retrieve an RPG launcher. “That makes it so easy to pick off whatever you want.”

Akemi shrugged. She glanced at Ururu. “You fire first.”

Ururu glanced at Homura, then stepped away from the group, intently locked onto her target, and fired her shoulder-mounted spirit cannon. The projectile shot out a good ten meters before freezing in midair. Ururu lowered her weapon and turned to watch Akemi. The magical girl squinted, calculating the blast's trajectory, and side-stepped a few paces to fire the first of her RPGs. She immediately tossed the launcher away with a careless movement; it tumbled for a moment before stopping midair.

A delay between loss of contact and stopping?

Akemi returned, picked up the second RPG launcher, and stepped to the other side. She repeated her actions then returned for the final RPG, tested the cord on her ankle, and walked forward several meters to fire the third RPG below Ururu's projectile. The magical girl strode back to the party, cocked her head, and asked, “Are you ready?”

When she had the all-clear, Akemi allowed time to resume. Two seconds later came a magnificent quadruple explosion and the clanging of the iron bell shearing into multiple pieces. Yuzu cast her
barrier to block the shrapnel, but it had already begun to wobble out of existence as the pocket
dimension collapsed and condensed into a Grief Seed, leaving them back in front of the collectibles
shop in the darkness between street lights.

“Epic,” Jinta said in awe.

Kisuke couldn't help but stare at Akemi. It was amazing, yes. But also frightening. Time bent to
that girl's will so easily it was frightening.

The magical girls immediately released their transformations. Karin approached the Grief Seed
with subdued steps and gently lifted it from the pavement. She stared at it, transfixed, an oddly
conflicted expression on her face. Yuzu hesitantly stepped to her side and leaned into her twin with
a half-hug as Tessai silently dispelled the kidō. Isshin walked up behind the girls and set his hands
on their shoulders. He smiled down at them and hoarsely said, “Come on, girls, let's go back to the
shop.”

On some unanimously superstitious level, no one wanted to overtly celebrate that the twins had
cheated death.

Yuzu reached up and squeezed her father's hand, then stepped forward and pulled her sister along
behind her. Ichigo hovered behind them like a mother hen. The others started to trail along after
them.

Akemi twitched and looked up in surprise as Isshin's hand fell on her shoulder. She blinked up at
him in silent question. The man made a motion as though to wipe his eyes, but diverted to scrub his
hand over his mouth and blow out a hard sigh. He squeezed her shoulder tightly. “Thank you,” he
rasped.

Akemi shuffled and glanced aside, suddenly melancholy. “I do not deserve—”

Isshin squeezed her shoulder again. “What have I said about that?”

She shyly clasped her hands together and looked at her feet, cheeks warm. “Y-you're welcome?”

Isshin barked a tearful laugh and ruffled her hair. “Thatta girl.” He walked forward, then turned
and beckoned her. His face was smiling but his eyes were wet. “C'mon. Let's go.”

Kisuke had to shake himself out of his thoughts to follow them.

Chapter End Notes

* Jikanteishi (時間停止, Temporal Stasis; Viz "Time Suspension") is a forbidden kidō
spell. Only Tessai has been seen using it. One time. And was going to be thrown in
prison for it by Ye Olden Central 46 despite it having been a smart move in an
emergency.

A/N: When I first started this story, I didn't think I'd end up liking to write Isshin as
much as I have come to. He has a mind of his own.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
The party settled in at Urahara Shop once again. Tessai served them all ice cream in a bizarre gesture of normalcy as they sat around the table to discuss everything. A loud smack drew their divided attention to Urahara, who was sitting with a bowl of ice cream in one hand and his fan in the other.

“Okay!” the scientist announced. “I will analyze the data we collected tonight later! Question time for you lovely ladies!”

Homura stiffened. Karin grimaced. Yuzu nervously pushed her ice cream around with her spoon. Urahara proceeded to grill them on how Familiars functioned, how the girls performed their various techniques, summoned their weapons, and so on.

“That's enough to work with for now. In the next few days, I'll ask you three to come—"

“No.”

Everyone turned to Homura, who turned her lips down into a stubborn frown.

“Excuse me?” Urahara asked.

“No. I am not staying a few more days. I shall return to Mitakihara in the morning.”

Everyone stared. Urahara recovered and said, “Miss Akemi, I need to investigate more fully—observe live demonstrations—”

“No,” Homura insisted. “You can ask me by phone, but I must be back in Mitakihara. Without my interference, Madoka will contract tomorrow afternoon. I will not allow it.”

Urahara's frown matched hers. “We have Miss Inoue to—”

Homura narrowed her eyes. “You know as well as I do that the possibility of her reversing the contract is conjecture at best.”

Several people raised their eyebrows and looked to Urahara.

The scientist bit his cheek. “...I concede your point.”

Homura inclined her chin in acknowledgment.

“But how do you expect me to be able to help you if you distance yourself from me and my base of operations?”
“You are intelligent,” Homura said coolly. “I presume you are capable of solving such a problem.”

Urahara's intense gray eyes bored into her for a long minute. “How do you know she'll contract tomorrow? You estimated a few days before.”

“Statistics.” Homura pushed a strand of hair behind one ear. “Over the course of many timelines, I have determined a pattern for her contracting. I confirmed early on that unless I am present to alter events, Madoka will encounter the Incubator on her way home from school tomorrow. It will trick her into wishing to heal a cat that she witnesses being hit by a car. I suspect the Incubator does not move more quickly because it wants Madoka to make a weak wish and is stalking her for an opportunity to convince her to make one.” She tilted her head. “In my experience, if I am present over the weekend, it is easier to delay or eliminate the encounter by indirect means. In waiting this long to approach Madoka, I have eliminated a wide array of potential distractions and will likely have to interfere directly.”

Frowning harder and tapping his fan absentmindedly, Urahara tilted his head and said, “You said you would stay a few days. I didn't take you for a liar.”

“I said no such thing,” Homura sniffed as she turned her attention to her ice cream. “You and Ms. Yoruichi were the ones to bring up a term of 'a few days leeway'. Monday is the second day after that conversation. Two is within the span of 'a few', which is generally accepted to be three or four.”

A self-deprecating grin spread on Yoruichi’s face. “You weren't convinced by my argument at all, were you? You just dropped the subject so we'd shut up.”

Homura inclined her chin in a snobby affirmative. Yoruichi laughed darkly. Honest frustration made Urahara press his lips together like a parent having trouble controlling an unruly child.

“Kisuke,” Isshin said quietly, face somewhere between entertained and disturbed. “Kisuke, this is what it's like to be friends with you. My god.” He couldn't stop himself from chuckling lowly.

Urahara blew a deep breath out his nostrils and reconsidered his options. Recognizing her friend's recalculating expression, Yoruichi stalled for time. “So, let's back up a second. The girl who can one-shot Walpurgisnacht contracted... to save a cat.”

Homura's eyes darted from one former Second Division officer to the other, plainly figuring they were distracting her. She allowed it to continue for now. “Yes. In many timelines in which she contracts before Walpurgisnacht, anyway. A black cat she named Amy. She is a stray that will not let herself be adopted. Madoka calls her independent. She is concerned for Amy's welfare and assists her when she can.”

Yoruichi's face turned sly. “An independent black cat, you say?” Her eyes slid to Kisuke for a moment, then back to Homura. “So she likes cats?”

The magical girl tilted her head a bit, guessing where she was heading. “Very much so. Caring for Amy was one of the things that brought us together in the original timeline.”

“Oho~,” Yoruichi crowed. “What if you had your very own pet black cat with an independent streak? One who takes a liking to your new classmate and coincidentally distracts her from danger sometimes?”

Homura pensively looked down into her empty ice cream bowl. Cooperation would mean that she would be under constant observation herself as well, but a bodyguard for Madoka who the
Incubator wouldn't suspect could be priceless. Actually... “Wouldn't the Incubator be able to sense your magic? ...Reiatsu?”

Urahara distractedly waved his fan while scribbling ideas in a notebook, ice cream forgotten. “There are ways to conceal reiatsu.”

Homura looked up at them, then down again. So Yoruichi could also observe the Incubator's interactions with Madoka. There would also be the opportunity to ask questions about shinigami in private. “I... suppose... that would be a mutually beneficial arrangement,” she said carefully.

“Right, then,” Urahara said decisively. “Yoruichi will go back to Mitakihara with you tomorrow. She'll do what she can as a cat without provoking suspicion. In the mean time, I will work with Karin and Yuzu to study the basics of the magical girl soul-state. Others—” he gestured around the table— “will investigate other angles, such as studying disappearances and history in more depth. I will contact you by phone to ask questions or give updates. Is that satisfactory for now?”

Homura silently nodded her agreement.

“Now, before Ichigo and his friends go back to their condo—” Urahara began.

Ichigo balked. “What?! I need to be with my sisters—!”

“No, you do not, Ichigo,” Urahara said calmly. “We can monitor Karin and Yuzu now. Until we have more information, there's nothing you can do but perhaps assist with research. Which you can do via internet from your condo.” His expression softened at the frustration on Ichigo's face. “Once we know what to attack and how, we'll point you at it and let you go to town. Until then, cooperate so you don't jeopardize the entire investigation.”

Ichigo looked conflicted and furious, but reined himself in. He nodded, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

“Now, as I was saying,” Urahara continued, “before you four leave I want Miss Inoue to repeat the experiment her future self did for me.”

Orihime started in surprise, then her eyes widened in understanding. “Oh! The purification?”

“Yes,” Urahara placed two items on the table: the spent Grief Seed Homura had given him and the new Grief Seed they had just collected. Then he slid something that looked like a smart phone across the table to Karin. “If you would put your Soul Gem on here, please.” Karin dubiously complied and looked up for further instruction. He pushed the new Grief Seed to her. “I want you to purify your Soul Gem using the conventional method. Miss Inoue?”

“Yes!” Orihime chirped. She gestured at her hairpins. “Ayame, Shun’ō, come out and watch!”

Homura watched more closely this time as the two fairies split away from the older girl's hairpins with a flare of gold magic. It was difficult to make out what exactly they looked like even though she went so far as to lean over the table to watch them drift around the clouded ruby. Humanoid was about all she could make out. She decided to not push to see them up close for now.

On Urahara's signal, Karin tapped the new Grief Seed against her Soul Gem with a distinct clink. Everyone watched as darkness gathered and seeped out of the ruby like iron filings drawn to a magnet. Soon, the Soul Gem was a more brilliant red than it had been. Karin withdrew the Grief Seed, going still when the two fairies darted after her hand. She held the Grief Seed rigidly as the fairies flitted around and chattered, then swooped back to the Soul Gem. After a few cycles, they zoomed back to their mistress and fluttered around her head.
Orihime clapped delightedly. “They think they can do it!”

Urahara looked at her intently. “Purify tainted Soul Gems, reverse the transformation from Grief Seed, or both?”

“Both!” the fairy mistress cheered.

Everyone made hopeful sounds as Karin returned the Grief Seed to Urahara, who hummed and looked at it thoughtfully before putting it down. “Do they have any comments about the items?” he asked.

Orihime looked at her fairies expectantly. After some chattering and chiming, Orihime looked back to Urahara and gave the same report her future self had. Urahara steepled his fingers together.

“Miss Inoue, would you mind testing your purification on Yuzu's Soul Gem?”

“Sure!”

Karin recalled her Soul Gem into ring form as her twin manifested her own Gem. Yuzu set the citrine on the smart phone sensor. Orihime held her hands out.

“Sōten Kisshun: I Reject!”

The two fairies floated on opposite sides of the Soul Gem. A translucent gold shield snapped into place over it. Black reishi drifted up and dissipated against the shield like smoke. In the span of two minutes, the Gem was perfectly purified. Many at the table sagged in relief.

The girls didn't have to rely on participation in the magical girl food chain to retain their souls.

Urahara nodded in satisfaction. “Miss Inoue, are you tired?”

“Not at all!” she chirped. “That was simple.”

The scientist picked up the Pumpkin Witch's Grief Seed and rolled it around in his fingers, considering it. “Would you be willing to try to reverse the damage to this soul and return it to a Soul Gem state? Documentation from last time said you were able to do it, but it tired you.”

Face determined, Orihime said, “I can do it. I'll just sleep a lot tonight and tomorrow.”

Urahara nodded seriously. He gestured for Orihime to take the smart phone device, which she did. He balanced the Grief Seed's spindle on its surface and made a gesture of invitation. “Whenever you're ready, Miss Inoue.”

Orihime took a deep, steadying breath, centered herself, and held her hands out. “Sōten Kisshun: I Reject!”

The same shield manifested again. Dark mist drifted upward and evaporated against the golden light. Ten minutes slipped by before the black stone shifted color to have muddy traces of orange. Sweat beaded on Orihime's temples as the Gem progressed from opaque dark mahogany to mildly translucent rust. It gained more clarity, shifting to a cloudy carnelian before amber light blossomed from the crown of the Grief Seed and flowed downward around the silver spindle like flower petals. There was a pulse of energy as the hollow space filled with orange reishi. The silver, pumpkin-shaped decoration atop the Grief Seed shimmered and filled out with orange light, the metal shifting from silver to gold. Gold settings burst out and wrapped down the egg-shaped fire opal, met at the bottom, and filled out along the bottom to form a golden cup. After one last pulse of light, Orihime's fairies disengaged their shield and wobbled back to their tired mistress. Sado and
Ishida held Orihime's shoulders to steady her as she swayed and blinked.

“Orihime, are you—?” Ichigo cried.

Orihime laughed weakly and waved her hands, blushing. “I'll be fine, Ichigo, really! Ahaha, that was a workout!”

Ichigo looked unconvinced, but bit his tongue.

“My, my,” Urahara murmured wondrously. He had lifted the new Soul Gem. He tilted it this way and that, examining the unique filigree and admiring the shifting colors of the fire opal.

“It looks like the embers that were in the lanterns,” Hitsugaya said quietly.

The scientist hummed thoughtfully. “I wonder what would happen if I put this in the hand of a new gigai?”

“Don’t,” barked Karin.

Urahara started in surprise. He looked at her. “Why not?”

Karin grit her teeth. “That's a soul. A person. If the other me remembered... and it drove me... drove me....” She swallowed hard. “Just don’t.” Isshin wrapped his arm around her back to soothe her.

Urahara's face fell into blank seriousness. “I understand.” He quietly put the orange Soul Gem in an isolation jar like the one containing the Grief Seed Homura had brought with her. The silence drew out to awkward lengths. Urahara sighed. “Well. I think that's all I need you all for at the moment. Captain Hitsugaya, please return on... let's say Wednesday. I'll give you a list of things to look up in the Great Spirit Library. In the mean time, advise the Captain-Commander you may need the highest security clearance.” The shinigami nodded curtly. “Ichigo and company, please come home next weekend for further discussion. I will email you assignments for during the week. Except for you, Mr. Ishida. You focus on your Quincy history research.” The older teens all nodded. “Karin, Yuzu, you will go back to school. If you encounter any Familiars or Witches, please call me for backup. I would also like you to be on call for experiments in the afternoons.” At some suspicious looks, he clarified, “Ah, I mean seeing if you can do certain tasks with your 'magic', seeing if you can differentiate how certain things feel, seeing if there is a difference in your perception with and without your transformations active, demonstrating your version of Soul Burial, simple stuff like that.” Everyone settled down again. Urahara turned to Homura. “Miss Akemi, you should leave on the same train as Ichigo and his friends in the morning. I will make arrangements for Yoruichi overnight. You'll carry her with you on the train.”

Homura nodded. That was reasonable.

Urahara looked around the table appraisingly. “I think we're done here—”

“No,” Hitsugaya objected. “There is a question Captain-Commander Yamamoto posed. I think it should be addressed while we're all together.”

Everyone tensed. “Go on,” Urahara said cautiously.

Hitsugaya took a deep breath. “How did the Incubator know about the process to create a King's Key? Even the possibility of forging one at all is highly classified information. The captains and lieutenants were only told when intel indicated it was Aizen's goal. The rank and file were told Aizen saw capturing the jūreichi as the step between conquering Hueco Mundo and Soul Society.”
Everyone looked flummoxed. Homura was completely lost. Urahara scratched his chin in fascination. “That is an excellent question.”

“Uh.”

All eyes turned to Karin, who was giving Yuzu a look of dread. “You have an idea, Karin?” her father asked gruffly.

Karin squirmed and winced. “It's... it's really classified information?”

Hitsugaya frowned. “Yes. Otherwise there could be more attempts to conquer Karakura and breach the King's Realm.”

“...Shit.”

Yuzu didn't object to Karin's language, face pale.

“What did you do.” Hitsugaya's flat words weren't even a question.

“Back before we contracted, when we didn't know Kyub— the Incubator was a soul-sucking bastard, we tried to convince him to contact shinigami because they were nicer since the war. And he— it— asked why a shinigami would want to conquer a human city. And I told him. It.”

Everyone stared in silence until Hitsugaya snapped, “Dammit, Karin!”

“I didn't know it was a secret, okay?!”

“How do you even know about it? I know I was purposely vague about it when we talked.”

Both twins looked at their brother.

Ichigo thought back. “...Shit.”

Hitsugaya gestured angrily, but could produce no words. Instead, he dropped his face in his hands and forced himself to breathe evenly.

Ichigo flailed his arms in front of him in denial. “I didn't know it was a secret, okay?! No one told me it was a secret!”

“Have you heard of common sense?”

Ichigo squawked incoherently, mortified.

“He doesn't have military training, Captain Hitsugaya,” Yoruichi said with a sigh. “None of them do. They're teenagers. They're just such competent fighters and blend in so well with shinigami officers on and off the battlefield that it can slip the mind that they're just teenagers. Really, that's an oversight on our part. We should have sat them all down and discussed operations security afterward.” She huffed, glanced aside, and muttered, “Soifon will be insufferable if she finds out.”

Hitsugaya inhaled deeply and looked heavenward for patience. “Has anyone else been told this top secret information?”

“Ummm.” Everyone looked to Orihime. She made a weak, guilty giggle. “I told Tatsuki and Chizuru.”

“I told Keigo and Mizuiro,” Sado said quietly.
“They were conscious when Aizen attacked, and actually encountered him, so I thought they
deserved to know why... why that happened,” Orihime explained softly. “I'm sorry.”

Hitsugaya sighed and massaged his closed eyes with one hand. Homura felt bad for him. “Just...
just tell them not to tell anyone else. God, Yamamoto will be pissed.”

“Blame me,” Urahara said soberly. “I'm nominally in charge of monitoring and administration of
the locals with powers. The fault lies with me.” After another long silence, Urahara asked, “Are
there any more questions?”

“Yeah,” Jinta said. He leaned on his elbows. “Maybe it's dumb, but have you three even told us
what this Incuthingy looks like? So we can, like, kick its ass or catch it or something? You said it
has a bunch of identical bodies but did you say what they look like?”

Consternation was plastered all over Urahara's face. Yoruichi grimaced.

“Ha, I thought so,” Jinta droned. “You're doing too many things at once and forgetting stupid shit,
old ma—” He stopped with a shudder when Tessai heavily dropped a hand on his shoulder from
behind, his magic menacing.

“That's easy,” Karin said with a casual wave. “The Incubator looks like a drunk artist tried to draw
a white cat with a fluffy tail dressed up as a rabbit with pink mittens and little gold hula hoops on
its ears. Oh, and it has a red... egg-shaped? ...ring on its back that opens up like a trap door to eat
Grief Seeds.”

Brains ground to a halt as they tried to picture it and figure out if she was joking at the same time.
Unanimously, all turned to Homura, who had demonstrated zero humor about anything regarding
the Incubator.

Homura's mouth was opening and closing, face confused. She raised a hand, lowered it, raised her
finger, lowered it to her chest, and frowned uncertainly. “I... actually... can't disagree with that?”

Karin pantomimed a mic drop and said “boom” in the incredulous silence that followed.

After telling the girls to draw what they meant, for heaven's sake, the Urahara Shop crew sat and
watched their guests drift away— Hitsugaya to Soul Society, Uryū to his house to do research and
pack up books, and everyone else to the Kurosaki home. They were silent for a time. Then Tessai
took off his glasses and handed them to Kisuke.

Kisuke accepted them and tucked them into a pocket. “You got clear shots of her when she was
stopping time?”

Tessai nodded and took his real glasses out of a pocket. “Yes,” he said as he donned them.

“Excellent,” Kisuke murmured. “Your thoughts?”

“It felt far more complex than Jikanteishi. Extremely powerful, but equally subtle.” Tessai
frowned. “Jikanteishi is limited in comparison, but one facet of its being forbidden is that only the
most experienced of shinigami can control it or maintain it for any amount of time without draining
all their power and possibly falling into a coma— or worse. It requires extreme focus and mental
discipline. The way she uses this more refined and extensive technique so casually, with such little effort—not even an incantation—it's actually disturbing. Very disturbing.”

“What a terrifying child,” Kisuke mused quietly. He stared down speculatively at three different sketches of the same creature.

Peering over his shoulder, Tessai said, “It looks like an anime magical girl mascot.”

Yoruichi lounged back on her elbows. “Which came first: The chicken or the egg?”

Both men looked up at her in question. She rolled her eyes. “Do you think one of the early creators of magical girl manga and anime was or knew of a magical girl and used them as inspiration? Then others took the idea and ran with it?”

The men stared. Kisuke looked fascinated. “That could be fun to research once this mess is over.”

Yoruichi rolled her eyes again, this time in fond amusement. “Whatever. You need me to do anything overnight?”

“Hmm.” Kisuke tapped the papers into a neat stack and put them in his box of miscellaneous notebooks and sensors. “I'll give you all the intel on the Mitakihara metropolitan area. Study that. Stay up all night if you have to. You should avoid acting like more than a cat once you're in hostile territory and you'll have a four-hour train ride to catnap on in the morning.”

Yoruichi snorted and threw a lazy salute.

“Jinta. Ururu.”

The redheaded boy looked wary. “What?”

“Take some money out of the shop's register and go buy a pet crate and supplies for a cat,” Kisuke ordered. “And get a few of those breakaway collars designed to pop open if a cat gets caught on something. I want to modify them.”

“Don't scrimp,” Yoruichi drawled.

Kisuke's lips twitched. “Only the finest for the Kitty Princess, of course.”

Yoruichi made a snobby pose, nose turned up. “Of course. I'm not your average alley cat.”

“Um,” Ururu said with a little wave. “It's almost midnight. No pet stores are open.”

Kisuke swiveled to look at a clock. “Huh. So it is.” He shrugged. “Break in, I guess.”

Ururu looked worried and Jinta looked doubtful. Tessai cut off their objections with a calm, “I'll do it.”

“Good,” Kisuke said decisively. He slapped his closed fan into his open palm. “Everyone go do whatever. I have a lot to do before morning.”

An hour later, Kisuke finally had some quiet time—he had assembled the information for
Yoruichi, given it to her as Tessai brought him the purloined cat collars, and the task he set for himself was time-consuming but simple. It allowed his mind to wander as he worked. The subject that dominated his thoughts was one Homura Akemi.

The girl seemed to have little to no appreciation for just how godlike her power was. Such power, borne by a girl who made an innocent wish to protect and had the strength of will to shoulder the resultant burden. He was endlessly thankful that such an ability hadn't been gifted to a megalomaniac like Aizen—shuddered to think of what the traitor would have done with it.

Shuddered to think what Akemi could do with it if anything aside from the Incubator drew her ire.

Having spoken briefly with Captain Hitsugaya before the boy left, Kisuke thought the Captain-Commander was wise to be so cautious about the girl and her power. If she ever lost sight of her target or, heaven forbid, her grip on sanity, there was no telling what she could do.

Akemi had a spine of steel as strong as those of the great warriors he knew. But even steel could bend under intense pressure. Even steel could become brittle in harsh conditions. Kisuke's and Isshin's accounts from the previous timeline were strong indicators of such. Her handful of breakdowns was worrying, to say the least. If she had been repeating heartbreaking tragedies for many dozens of timelines, it was honestly a miracle that she hadn't completely snapped already. Consistent Soul Gem purification probably had something to do with that, but didn't account for all of it from what he could tell. No; it was like her sheer, stubborn devotion to Madoka Kaname reinforced her on many levels, poured glue in her cracks. And she was cracking, if the accounts from the previous timeline were accurate. It was very subtle in this timeline. Isshin was probably the one who saw it most keenly. The Kurosaki patriarch had texted him about their conversation in the wee hours; Kisuke had heard their quiet exchange after the Witch hunt. Isshin was doing a good job of gently tethering her to the buoyant Kurosaki family with genuine kindness and he hoped the progress continued, but he worried for the girl's mental state. The repeated denial of self-worth was troubling. Among other things. Like the way her reiatsu was often thick with melancholy. He couldn't fault her for any of it, given the circumstances, but dire consequences had to be avoided.

So. The girl hadn't snapped yet... and he needed to make sure she wouldn't ever.

She was their ace in the hole— their last resort reset button to recover from failure to hold the Incubator in check. So even though there were several huge threats to evaluate, Kisuke's number one concern had to be the continued sanity and survival of Homura Akemi.

...Their reset button. Hmm. One of those would be useful if the girl could persevere.

If they could keep her sane and focused.

If they could give her new hope to bleach out the despair that clung to her like stains that could never be completely washed away.

An idea began to coalesce in his mind.

Karin and Yuzu hustled Homura up to their room when they got home. After changing for bed, Yuzu walked up to Homura and took her hands in her own. She looked at her fellow magical girl with a stubborn cast to her features. “You are taking our phone numbers and are going to call or text us when you need to talk,” she said firmly. Homura tried to object, but Yuzu squeezed her
hands harder and looked fierce. “Yes, you are. You're not alone anymore. We won't let you be alone anymore.”

“You don't understand,” Homura protested unhappily as she wrested her hands out of Yuzu's. Her voice rose in distress as she spoke. “If everything goes wrong, if I go back in time again, you won't know me. You won't remember me. But I will remember you. Do you have any idea what that's like?”

The sisters looked sympathetic, but Karin's face went stubborn, too. “That's why we're going to start writing our own notebooks for you tomorrow. You're our friend now. And Goat Face already dotes on you.” She rolled her eyes as Homura sputtered a denial. “You're stuck with us, Homura. Make it easier on all of us and accept it.”

“We promise to be your friends in any timeline,” Yuzu affirmed, her serious eyes boring into Homura's. “And Kurosakis don't break promises.”

“You won't remember,” Homura objected. She would not cry. Would not.

Karin scoffed. “If Goat Face could pick up where the other him left off because of a diary, so can we.”

“Don't underestimate a Kurosaki,” Yuzu said with a wink. “We've only known one another few days, but we want to know you better. We admire you. You're so dedicated to your friend that you willingly endure all of this. We'd love to be friends with a person who can love a friend that much.”

“And you're capable of messing with Urahara and inflicting mini heart attacks with your badassery,” Karin added with a lopsided smirk. “You're our kinda person.”

Silent tears rolled down Homura's cheeks. She didn't trust herself to speak. Yuzu smiled and took her hands again. “Karin, get the pillows and blankets down on the floor. We're having a sleepover. Just the three of us.” Karin hurried to comply as Yuzu tugged Homura toward the futon on the middle of the room. Yuzu's smile went very gentle. “Would you like to tell us about Madoka? She must be an amazing friend.”

Homura looked surprised, then slowly nodded. “I... I'd like that,” she whispered.

Monday morning was chaotic in the Kurosaki household. Homura jolted awake to the sound of a shout and a window slamming in the next room over. Karin had sleepily grabbed her to keep her down, mumbling about idiotic morning rituals. Way too many teenagers struggled to use the only bathroom to get ready for the day. Sado disappeared after receiving a text—Ishida wanted his help carrying books. Yuzu's rule of the kitchen was ironclad as she aggressively cooked breakfast and fended off assistance and food-thieves alike. Ichigo was bickering with Isshin, who was obviously just messing with his son for Homura's wide-eyed if uncertain entertainment while Karin drowsily ignored them to drink juice. It was loud, unruly, overwhelming... warm. Inviting. Close.

Homura liked it. Didn't want to leave it.

Felt guilty that she didn't want to leave it for the lonely stillness of her townhouse.
She didn't have much opportunity to dwell on it, though, as Urahara and Mr. Tsukabishi soon descended on the clinic. Urahara popped out from behind the door jamb, waving his arm at them all, fan in hand. “Good morning, good morning, good morning~” he sang.

“Good morning, Mr. Urahara!” Orihime chirped sleepily.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Ichigo muttered.

Urahara ignored him. He zeroed in on Homura with a gleeful grin. She froze, wary.

“Miss Akemi! I brought you a going away present! To keep you company back home~!” He waved behind him. Mr. Tsukabishi stepped forward with a pet crate and held it up high. Urahara made a show of emphasizing the crate with wide sweeps of his arms and fan, smiling as though displaying a prize on a game show. “One perfectly normal if very spoiled pet kitty-cat! Don't worry, I crate-trained her myself! You're on your own with the litter box, though, ahahahaha!”

Amber eyes glowed in the crate. A clawed limb darted out and drew blood on his ear as the cat within snagged his hat with a hiss.

“Awww, rude kitty,” Urahara pouted as he struggled to retrieve his hat.


“Science!” Urahara straightened and replaced his hat on his head, smiling madly despite the red scratches on his cheek. “One of my earlier inventions was a reiatsu-concealing cloak. I simply replaced the material from some cat collars with this material. Voilà! Just your average pet. Except not.” He pressed his fingers together deviously.

“We brought supplies for you,” Mr. Tsukabishi added more calmly as he lowered the crate and held up a couple shopping bags. “To make the ruse more believable.”

Homura manifested her shield and tucked the supplies into it as everyone else scrambled to gather their things. Mr. Tsukabishi met her eyes and nodded seriously at her. She returned the nod; he seemed a decent sort. A hand stopped her before she could step toward the foyer. Homura looked back and up.

Isshin had approached from behind. His face was conflicted and concerned. He squeezed her shoulder. “You take good care of yourself. If you need anything— I mean anything— you give me a call, all right?” Homura tilted her head silently and gauged him with quiet surprise before nodding once in hesitant acceptance. Isshin breathed deeply and didn't press for further reply. He smiled and patted her shoulder, stepping back after saying, “It has been an honor to meet you— to get to know you, Homura. You're a very strong young woman.”

His last words perplexed Homura. She was further confused when Isshin clenched his jaw. She hadn't even said anything?

The teenagers tumbled out into the streets of Karakura. Homura's parting with the twins where they split off to go to their school was tearful. Homura and Karin managed to limit themselves to watery eyes, but Yuzu outright bawled and threw her arms around her new friend.

“I'll miss you! Come visit! Keep in touch! I'll send you cookies!”

Homura, Ichigo, and Orihime met Ishida and Sado at the train station. Each had the overnight bags they brought with them and several large canvas bags of books. Ishida looked exhausted and disturbed, but his fingertips and eyes twitched toward the books every few minutes as though eager
to continue his research. They all boarded a northbound train together, irritating office commuters with the expanse of their books, bags, and Yoruichi’s pet crate. Any complaints were rebuffed by apathy and sleepiness.

They had been traveling for about forty minutes when Ichigo shifted uncomfortably, then managed to find words. He looked at the magical girl across the pet crate between them and seriously said, “Homura.” When the girl looked up at him, he bit his lip and looked concerned. “I know you have my number. I want you to call me if you run into something you can’t handle.”

Homura stared at him, nonplussed. “You will be a few hours away,” she hedged.

“I have ways of traveling quickly,” the redhead said with a dismissive wave. “In an emergency, I can even call Tōshirō and he can bust through a senkaimon wherever you are to give you backup. He’ll do it. He’s a good guy.” A loud meow issued from the pet crate. “If Yoruichi doesn’t beat everyone to it, I guess.” He breathed deeply. “You can still call me if you need help, or... or if you want to talk or something.” Ichigo scratched his neck, a bit embarrassed. “I dunno if I’ll really be able to help you, but I can always listen, yeah? Or if you just need someone to talk about something to distract you, I can talk about some of the stuff I’ve done, or tell you about people I know... or give the phone to Orihime. She might be better at that. Oh, and if any of the others gets to be too much for you, call or text me and I’ll handle it.” Ichigo smiled ruefully. “We can be a pretty overwhelming bunch, I guess. But we all mean well.”

Homura followed his affectionate glance at his friends across the aisle. Orihime was slumped on one side of Sado, drooling on him in her sleep. Ishida had his bags of books on and under him like a dragon’s hoard, eyes sharp as he glared people into not touching his dusty treasure. Sado was a peaceful rock between them, immune to drool and glares, calmly nudging them both into preparing for their stop.

After a minute of thought, Homura softly said, “All right.”

Ichigo looked surprised for a moment but beamed like sunshine. He ruffled her hair with a grin as the train slowed. “Great. Remember: You aren't alone anymore. Never again. We’ll win this—together.”

Homura nodded slowly. “...Yes.” Whispered carefully as though afraid to express any kind of optimism too loudly lest it be crushed.

Ichigo's face softened sadly, but he didn't comment. The train slowed more drastically as it entered a station. He swung his bag over his shoulder and stood. He faced her with his arms crossed sternly. “Now, you stay safe as you can. Don't take stupid risks.”

Ishida scoffed loudly as he gathered up his books. “Hypocrite.”


Homura looked uncertain, but her face firmed and she nodded her head.

Ichigo's grin widened proudly. As the doors hissed open, he darted forward and tweaked her nose then scooted for the exit while she was still squawking over the surprise. “See you soon, Stopwatch!” And then he and his friends were lost in the rush of people.

In the loudness of commuters getting on and off, she heard Yoruichi’s voice quietly sing, “Someone~ has~ a nick~ name~”
Homura stared at the closed door in stunned silence until the next stop. For the first time, she wondered if this was what it felt like to have a brother.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *pinches Homura's cheeks*
Mitakihara, here we come! *fistpump*

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Hellowoooooo. Thanks for the great reviews again! They're really motivational.

Running and breathing, running and breathing. Again. Tap-tap-tap-tap shoes on the tile, black and white, black and white. Again, running and breathing. Spinning black and white. How many times had she done this? Running and breathing. Climbing stairs and breathing, black and white, spinning, opening a door and breathing, way too high and breathing, buildings aren't supposed to float in pieces like that and breathing, that girl is being tossed around like a rag doll and breathing, have to help her and breathing, in a concert hall and breathing, confined and breathing, too tight NOT breathing, crunch-crunch not breathing, oh God, she should have listened to—

Madoka Kaname woke suddenly, gasping for breath as though surfacing from a deep dive. She lay still for a minute, panting and disliking the feel of cold sweat on her brow as she blearily held her over-sized stuffed bunny close. When her breathing calmed, she dragged herself upright and squinted at the sunshine peeking in her window, drowsily listened to the birds chirping.

Such weird dreams the last few days. It wasn't like her to dream of....

Of.......

Madoka wilted and flopped on her bunny, then rolled on her side again. “I forget,” she moaned in disappointment.

As usual, Papa was picking delicious things from the garden to use for breakfast. As usual, little Tatsuya was doing his cheerful best to wake Mama from her morning coma with the few words he knew. As usual, Madoka slammed the door open, marched over to the window, threw the curtains wide to let the sun in, and stomped over to the bed to gleefully whip the duvet off her mother. As usual, Mama screeched and flailed like a vampire exposed to sunlight, much to her toddler's delight. As usual, Madoka gossiped with her mother while they both brushed their teeth and did their hair for the day. As usual, her mother's transformation from death warmed over to classy businesswoman with skillful use of brushes and powders and lipstick was a wonder to witness. As usual, Papa smilingly served breakfast to them all in his apron, Tatsuya got about half his food into
his mouth and half of it everywhere else, and Mama rushed out after goodbye kisses for her boys and her customary high-five of encouragement with her daughter.

As usual, as usual. But the usual felt unusual for Madoka these last few days. She couldn't figure out why. It was bothersome.

School was more of the usual. Meeting up with Sayaka and Hitomi, Ms. Saotome ranting about her newly-former-boyfriend in homeroom, classes, lunch, classes. It was all very normal, but the sheer normalcy felt wrong somehow. Like something was missing. The closest feeling she could think of was realizing you have left your homework at home or have forgotten to read the assignment so you don't know what the teacher is talking about, but that somehow seemed too trivial. So Madoka tucked her unease as far from notice as possible and kept smiling.

Near the end of the final class of the day, one of her classmates suddenly rose from her chair and lurched for the door with her hand over her mouth. Everyone stared at her running away for a minute, surprised.

“Ah, the Nurse's Aide for this class is Miss... Kaname, yes?” the math teacher said when he snapped out of it. He found Madoka already standing, her pink pigtails bouncing as she threw her things in her bag. “Good, good. Take care of her, Miss Kaname. Don't worry about coming back to class.”

“Okay!” she called as she scooped up her classmate's things.

“Uh, Madoka—,” Sayaka said lowly as she leaned over from her own desk, face uncertain.

Madoka smiled, winked at her friend, and whispered, “Go ahead and see him without me, okay?” She was halfway out the door before her blue-haired friend could even sputter a reply.

Madoka dutifully helped her crying classmate clean up in the bathroom and leaned against her stall door while they waited for the halls to clear after the final bell. The poor girl was terrified she'd throw up on someone if they tried to break for the nurse's office when the halls were full. Madoka sympathized and rambled on cheerfully to try to distract her through her dry heaving. She let the girl hold her arm to stay steady for the walk and sat with her until someone came to help her home.

The halls were quite empty by the time Madoka left. The uncommon quiet of the building was interesting, so she meandered a bit. She was about to go out a side door when it opened and admitted a girl with long, dark hair. The girl stopped and looked around. Their eyes met.

“Excuse me,” the stranger said. “Do you know where the registrar's office is?”

Madoka's eyes widened for an instant—brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—then her face scrunched up in confused déjà vu. “The... office...?”

“Yes, please.” The girl primly pushed her hair behind her ears. She looked uncomfortable, but still cool. “I am transferring in tomorrow and need to pick up my schedule.”

Madoka blinked and processed that, then perked up. “Oh! Welcome to Mitakihara Middle School!”

“Thank you.”

The pink-haired girl made a beckoning gesture. “The office is this way! I'll take you!”

“Thank you.”
The new girl followed a few steps behind Madoka, who stepped aside and fell back to be at her side instead.

“I'm Madoka Kaname!”

The new girl tilted her head and looked at her sideways. She seemed kind of sad. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Kana—”

“You can call me Madoka!” She waved her fingers cheerfully.

“A-ah,” the new girl said quietly. “Mado... ka. My name is Homura Akemi.”

“Ooh, what an unusual name!” After a pause in which she actually thought about the words that had fallen from her lips, Madoka flailed her arms in denial and hurried to correct herself. “Not in a bad way! Not a bad unusual! It's just uncommon and it sounds so cool! Can I call you Homura instead of Akemi?”

The new student walked without speaking for an entire hallway as Madoka began to sweat nervously and debate apologizing. Finally, Homura murmured, “I do not get called by my first name very much. It is such a weird name....” She sounded... distant. Wistful, maybe?

“Ehhh?!” Madoka halted and whirled to face the new girl, face enthusiastic in the fading sunlight. “No, it's not! It means flame, so it's like you're supposed to flare up passionately!” She made excited hand gestures and gazed into the distance with stars in her eyes, imagining something dramatic.

Brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—

Homura brushed past and stopped a few paces ahead of her but didn't turn back to face her. Instead, she stood still and flexed her hands into and out of fists. She didn't say anything at first, then nearly whispered, “I guess... I do not live up to my name.”

Madoka’s face fell in dismay. “But that's such a waste!” She scowled in determination and marched up to and around Homura, then clasped the girl's hands in her own. Madoka stared directly into her eyes and firmly declared, “Since you were blessed with such a great name, you should become cool to match it!” After a moment’s thought— brave girl jumping— she doubled down. “No, I bet you're already cool! I'll prove it!”

Homura stared at her expressionlessly, hands limp in Madoka's grip.

Madoka flushed and dropped her hands, twirling away with an embarrassed laugh and starting to walk again. “Come on! Let's find out what class you're in!” Once she started babbling, she couldn't stop— she had to fill the awkward silence. “I hope you're in mine. Even if you aren't, I'll introduce you to Sayaka and Hitomi. We'll have lots of fun together! And I'll help you catch up with the class if you need it!” She stopped at the next corner and looked back. Homura was standing where she left her halfway down the hall. Madoka nervously scratched her cheek. “Did I weird you out? I probably shouldn't—”

The new girl stepped forward decisively. “No,” she said calmly. When she was even with Madoka, she looked her right in the eyes. A certain sternness firmed her brow, turned her lips down at the corners. “Please stay just as you are.” Then she brushed past her and kept walking.

“E-eh?” Madoka stood dumbly watching the girl gracefully stride down the hall and make the next turn.
Correctly.

Wait, she was supposed to be guiding her!

“Wait up!” she cried, jogging after the transfer student. Madoka was half surprised to find that Homura actually had stopped, her head tilted slightly to look over her shoulder. Madoka fidgeted timidly, then rejoined her.

The rest of their walk was silent. Madoka wrung her hands all through it, feeling shy. She was going to excuse herself once they reached the office, but Homura had quietly asked her to wait a minute and invited her out to get a snack together to thank her for her help. Madoka perked up and cheerfully agreed—she hadn't driven off a prospective friend by being too forward after all! Still, she had no idea what to talk about as they left through the school's courtyard and walked along the landscaped footpath off campus.

Until she heard a loud meow, that is.

“Ah,” Homura said quietly, looking off to their left. “Yoruichi followed me.”

Madoka followed her line of sight and saw a black cat wearing a purple collar perched in a tree. It meowed again.

“I can not leave you alone for a minute, can I?” Homura murmured. “Always following people and getting into things.” The cat meowed, gracefully dropped from the tree and sauntered up to them. It meowed and rubbed against Homura's legs. Homura sighed and knelt down. She scratched the cat's chin and said, “Yes, I forgive you.”

“Is that your cat?” Madoka blurted out excitedly. She clasped her hands by one cheek and cooed, “He's so pretty!”

“She,” Homura corrected. “And thank you.”

“She?” Madoka knelt across from Homura and tentatively offered a hand for the cat to sniff. “I'm so sorry, Miss Kitty! You're a very pretty kitty-cat!”

The cat meowed and preened, then shrugged away from Homura and pressed her head into Madoka's palm. Madoka pet her with surprised delight.

“She knows what pretty means,” Homura said drily.

“Well, of course! Everyone must tell her she's a pretty kitty!” Madoka didn't care if cats reduced her to the mentality of a five-year-old. They were cats. So cute! “What's her name again?”

“Yoruichi.”

The cat meowed at its name.

“Hello, Yoruichi! I'm Madoka! Let's be friends!”

The cat purred and jumped up onto her, scaling her way up to Madoka's shoulder. She purred and rubbed against the girl's jaw.

Madoka laughed joyfully. She looked at Homura. “What kanji did you use for her name?”

Homura smiled slightly. “Night One.”
Madoka grinned and looked at Yoruichi, whose head was inches away from her cheek. “Your owner has a cool name and she gave you a cool name, too!” Yoruichi’s apparent meowed reply made her giggle.

“She likes you.” Homura stood up, smiling gently. “If we go to an outdoor café, Yoruichi can sit with us.”

“Yes! Let's do it!” Madoka carefully held Yoruichi in place on her shoulder and stood happily. “I know just the place!”

Beady red eyes watched intently from the shadows, then retreated into the shrubbery.

Not today, it seemed.

Yoruichi accompanied Akemi on another munitions heist that night. *That* had been informative on many levels. Two in the morning found Yoruichi perched on a high shelf in the girl's townhouse, tail lazily swishing as she watched the girl engaged in the dangerous business of crafting bombs. Akemi was working intently at her desk. Long familiar with the etiquette of potentially explosive materials and experiments from her years with Kisuke Urahara and Kūkaku Shiba as friends, Yoruichi patiently stayed silent. She only dared speak whenever Akemi sat back after completing a task, not wanting to interrupt her and blow them both into the stratosphere.

During one such pause, Akemi arched her back and stretched her arms over her head. Holding herself tense for such delicate work took its toll. She sighed, manifested her shield, stowed the new bomb away where it wouldn't be a threat, and relaxed.

“You'd fit right in with the Shiba,” Yoruichi said slyly. “You're very skilled.”

Akemi blinked, rubbed her eyes tiredly, and looked at the cat. “Shiba?”

“Isshin's family back in Soul Society,” she explained. “They mostly make fireworks, but they do other explosives, too.”

“Ah. That makes sense.” Akemi started to gather the materials to make a different kind of bomb. The kid wasn't even looking at instructions, crafting munitions from memory. “I do not think Karin mentioned fireworks last time. She just said they are known for 'brash eccentricity and explosions'.”

Yoruichi cackled so hard she nearly fell from her shelf. Akemi eyed her warily. She wheezed, breathed deeply, and broke out in laughter again. “Ah, I've never heard the Shibas described so perfectly in so few words! Karin is priceless!”

Akemi returned to her supplies, organizing them as Yoruichi chuckled and muttered about telling Kūkaku. When she had downgraded into an occasional snicker, Akemi continued, “I do not see why I should fit in with this Shiba family. Millions of people deal with explosives. Are they all
“It’s the attitude,” Yoruichi immediately replied. “You have the bluntly-unapologetic-about-protecting-your-friends-and-throwing-explosions-at-problems attitude.”

“I am not brash,” Akemi argued.

Yoruichi scoffed. “Oh, I dunno. I think you have your moments. It’s a subtle, understated brashness, but it’s there. You do what you want and take no bullshit. You cover it up with good manners, but you’ll be damned if anyone stops you from burgling military bases to collect and make your toys, or from charging off on your own to protect that Madoka girl. You’re obstinate in general.”

Akemi turned and gave her a dirty look.

“See?” Yoruichi gloated. “You’re not hotheaded Ichigo-brash. You’re Karin-and-Yuzu-brash. You decide to do a thing and you will do it come hell or high water. If people resist you, you just ignore them til they forget to resist you because you weren’t loud and angry. You have no problems using military grade weaponry to destroy your obstacles.” Yoruichi approximated a smile, baring her canines. “You’re quiet-brash. Sneaky-brash. Determined-brash. It can be infuriating in some people, but I usually like it. Keeps things interesting. Shows you’re not a pushover.”

Akemi sniffed and refused to look at her.

Yoruichi lazed back against the wall. “You didn't argue the eccentricity.”

“Hmph. I was strange even before all this mess,” the magical girl said frankly. “Now I am a time-traveling magical girl who steals artillery, makes bombs, and is courting shinigami as allies. There is no point arguing the obvious.”

Yoruichi lost herself in laughter again. “You're precious.”

The corner of Akemi’s mouth quirked up into a wry smirk for a moment. So she did have some sense of humor in there somewhere! Then she set about making her final bomb for the night. Yoruichi prudently fell silent to watch her. When the bomb was complete and safely stored, Akemi methodically closed up all her supplies.

Yoruichi took it as a signal that it was safe to talk. “So, what's the plan for handling the girls tomorrow?”

Akemi hummed thoughtfully as she screwed the lid on a shatter-proof jar of ammonium nitrate. “I think my biggest mistake the last several times was distancing myself from and alienating Sayaka Miki. Aside from Madoka, Miki, and Tomoe first seeing me as a magical girl when I was attacking the Incubator, that is. That caused them all to be suspicious of me. So I think I will make more of an effort with Miki. She hated me last time.” A pause for thought. “Not without reason.”

Interesting. Both that she had done it all and that she could recognize it as a mistake. “Why did you distance yourself from Miki?”

Akemi frowned as she carefully lay the jar in a hard, foam-lined case with several others. “I... thought it would be less... frustrating,” she admitted quietly as she snapped the case shut. Yoruichi suspected she had changed her mind about what word to use to describe the feeling she wanted to avoid. “She has a tendency to run off and get herself killed in one way or another no matter what I do. Unlike Madoka, she does not listen to me much.”
Yoruichi was quiet for a minute, thinking about that, then prompted, “Oh? Do you know why not?”

Sighing deeply, the magical girl explained, “She is exceedingly stubborn and has an excessively ideal concept of justice. It leaves her vulnerable to becoming disillusioned by the magical girl dynamic rather quickly and to overexerting herself and her magic. It often causes her to alienate herself from those she considers as not living up to her ideal of a magical girl. Then she feels isolated, compounded by feeling unworthy of the boy she makes a wish to heal.” Akemi scowled. Her voice turned bitter. “That boy is also completely oblivious to her affection for him. And Hitomi Shizuki sometimes pushes Miki to a breaking point by giving her an ultimatum to confess to him before she does. In any other situation, it would be a kindness—Shizuki respects Miki enough to not make a move on Kamijō without telling her because she knows how much Miki likes him. But it is usually... the straw that breaks Miki's back, I suppose.”

That was an unexpectedly thorough and nuanced analysis of relationships, personalities, and behavior. Especially the not demonizing that other girl for interfering. Akemi sounded like an adult looking back on childhood drama with more understanding of how people worked.

“Ah, schoolgirl drama,” Yoruichi mused. “So glad I avoided that by having private tutors.”

Akemi huffed as she stowed the case of explosive material in her shield. “It was a rude awakening for me,” she said. “Because of my heart condition and the way I was treated in my first two years, I had private tutors for most of primary school. Then my uncle shoved me into a Catholic school in Tokyo when my parents died. It was a... culture shock. I have learned to ignore it now.”

Well, wasn't that heartwarming. Flames were warm, right? “I feel like it needs to be said: Your uncle is a selfish asshole.”

The magical girl hummed noncommittally as she stored her measuring cups and scoops.

“Anyway. Back to Miki,” Yoruichi continued. “I take it her Witching out last timeline wasn't a fluke?”

“No. She either dies or falls in every timeline in which she contracts. Which is almost every timeline.”

“Hmm.” Yoruichi stretched and jumped down to the floor. “What have you tried to prevent that?”

Akemi sighed. “Explaining that magical girls become Witches. She did not believe me. Explaining how the Incubator uses us. She did not believe me. Trying to convince her that trading her soul for that boy's stupid hand is not worth it. She became defiant. Giving her Grief Seeds when she exhausts herself fighting Familiars. She refuses them out of stupid pride. Keeping Shizuki from confronting Miki about Kamijō. She still hated herself because she thought of herself as a puppet or zombie because of the Soul Gem mechanics. Sometimes it works out if Shizuki does it a certain way, but then instead of turning into a Witch, Sayaka ends up dead. If by some miracle she makes it to Walpurgisnacht, she is only really good against the Familiars. Her magic is... average. She is mostly a mêlée brawler with her cutlasses and that does not work well against something as big as Walpurgisnacht.” Her frustration was plain, but at least it seemed like she had put a good deal of effort into attempts to mend that flaw.

Maybe she just needed a fresh set of eyes on the problem? Time to poke at the knot.

“I see,” Yoruichi said as she approached and jumped onto the empty desk. She curled up in the middle of it and looked up at Akemi. “The boy's hand?”
“He is a violin prodigy. He was in an accident. His left hand is partially paralyzed, so his career is ruined. He takes his unhappiness out on her when she is so devoted to him that she visits him in the hospital almost every day trying to cheer him up. He says cruel things sometimes. Miki cannot bear to see him so depressed over it so if she contracts it is always to wish for his stupid hand to be healed.”

“It sounds like he has a pretty legitimate reason to feel like his world has ended and lash out at whoever is convenient,” Yoruichi observed neutrally, tiptoeing around the newly-revealed resentment. The kid was capable of objectivity with that other girl, so mayb—

“I don’t care,” Akemi sniffed.

Well, well. “Because he hurts your friend in the process?”

“Hmph.”

Yoruichi measured her sour face with a glance. It seemed Akemi had a hidden blind spot. Poke, poke. “You resent him.”

“Hmph.”

“Ah. Hmm.” Yoruichi licked one paw as she took a minute to think. Akemi hesitantly reached out, the urge to pet her irresistible. Ah, yeah, she had bonded with the original Kaname over a cat. Yoruichi made an inviting gesture with her head and purred as Akemi pet her back. Akemi relaxed minutely. Then Yoruichi casually asked, “Have you ever tried healing his hand yourself?”

Akemi halted mid-pet. A long silence stretched out between them. Yoruichi looked up at her in interest.

“I... no.” Akemi stammered. “No. I....” She stared at the wall, thinking fiercely.

Time to tear off the blindfold. “You resent him so much that helping him never crossed your mind.”

The magical girl glared at her but didn't deny it.

Yoruichi tilted her head. “Healing his hand would remove Miki’s greatest incentive to contract, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes.” Akemi ground her teeth. “In many timelines, she and Madoka hesitate over whether to contract for several days. Tomoe advises them to take their wishes seriously— that making a wish for someone else has the potential to go badly wrong— and Miki at least starts out grounded enough to weigh the pros and cons. She is usually pushed into contracting by Kamijō snapping or something terrible happening to the others.”

“Snapping?”

Akemi’s fingers clenched in Yoruichi’s fur. “Most often, he yells terrible things at her about her torturing him with her visits. There are some timelines in which Miki catches him trying to commit suicide in one way or another. The few timelines in which she does not contract are often ones where he succeeds in an attempt and there is nothing to wish for because the Incubator cannot raise the dead.”

“Ah,” Yoruichi said softly. She looked up at Akemi out of the corners of her eyes. “Healing him would remove that factor altogether.”
A forceful sigh escaped Akemi's lips. “I suppose.”

“It's cute that you're so fierce about protecting your friend from having her feelings hurt by her crush,” Yoruichi said slyly.

Akemi scowled. “Sayaka's ridiculous relationship problems drag Madoka down. That's all I care about.”

“Oh, Sayaka, not Miki, eh?” Yoruichi’s eyes went half-lidded as she gave the magical girl a significant look. “You're lying to yourself, Homura Akemi.”

Akemi's face went red and her eye ticced in fury as she withdrew her hand and crossed her arms over her chest. “I am not!”

“Ah, there's the child in you. She's been quite buried.”

“I am not a child,” Akemi seethed. Which, of course, made her look more childish.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, depending on the situation,” Yoruichi mused. “You're trapped in an in-between place that doesn't allow you to be a child very often.”

“I haven't considered myself a child for a long time.”

“Oh? What do you consider yourself?”

Akemi's mouth worked mulishly before she spat, “A soldier, I suppose.”

Yoruichi just stared at her. That was... not healthy. At least not by Living World standards. Even Ichigo had defined himself as a friend and protector, not a soldier.

“What?” Akemi snapped.

After a long, heavy silence, Yoruichi softly said, “Child soldiers are still children, you know.”

Akemi abruptly stood and stormed off to the bathroom. “I'm getting ready for bed.”

Yoruichi solemnly watched her go. It seemed Kisuke and Isshin were right to worry about her.

Homura had downshifted into just being annoyed the next morning but she still refused to speak with Yoruichi. The cat trotted along behind her as she walked to school, occasionally meowing when they passed other people. Homura presumed the shinigami was trying to get the people who would see her most often to recognize the black cat as belonging to someone familiar— Yoruichi had spent their first afternoon alone telling stories of how some people reacted to strays and how she messed with such people, but she couldn't break cover to do so in Mitakihara. It made sense.

But did it have to be such a pathetically plaintive meow?

It was like a wordless guilt trip. Homura's eye had started to tic by the time they turned onto the footpath leading up to the school. The meowing increased in frequency and volume as Homura approached Madoka, who had apparently roped her friends into waiting to meet Homura near the man-made brook that crossed the grounds. They all glanced over at the insistent meowing. Madoka
cheered and waved, then hesitated at the way Homura was pointedly ignoring her cat. Homura stopped as she reached them. Yoruichi aggressively walked around her in circles, rubbing against her ankles and meowing with even more distress. Homura frowned mulishly.

“U-um, Homura? What's wrong with Yoruichi?” asked Madoka.

Homura blinked slowly, then glowered down at the cat. “She knows she is in trouble.”

*How* was a cat capable of puppy-eyes?

Homura narrowed her eyes. “She was a very bad cat last night.”

Yoruichi stopped, stood with her paws on Homura's shoes, and meowed up at her piteously.

Miki laughed outright, her short, light blue hair falling into her eyes as she shook. “Aha! Kissing up to your girl to beg forgiveness, are we?” Yoruichi paused to look at her as though just noticing her, then meowed at her and padded over to rub against her ankles. The girl held her ribs and laughed harder. “Don't look at me to fix things! Get *yourself* out of your mess! Hahaha!”

“Oh, no,” Madoka cooed. She dropped her school bag, bent, and swept the cat up from under her armpits, stood, and held her up in front of her face. “Were you a naughty kitty last night? After you were *so good* at the café?” Madoka asked like a disappointed parent.

Yoruichi meowed sadly.

“What happened?” Shizuki asked quietly, touching one hand to her cheek in concern. “You look tired.”

Homura looked at the girl with wavy moss-green hair and glanced at the girl with light blue hair. It was tiresome pretending she didn't know these girls. Had to pretend she only knew them by their features not their futures. Green and blue. Green and blue.

“It's complicated,” Homura said after a frustrated pause.

“What'd she do? Wreck your place?” the blue-haired girl drawled with a lazy grin.

Homura pursed her lips. “It was *two in the morning*.” She couldn't think of a story to make up so she left it at that.

The girl laughed loudly again and held her arms up, fingers interlaced behind her neck, school bag dangling from her thumbs. “*Cats*. Right?”

Madoka brought Yoruichi to her chest for cuddles and looked at Homura imploringly. “I'm sure she's very sorry. Right, Yoruichi?”

Yoruichi gave a pitiful little mewl right on cue, *damn her.*

Homura heaved a great sigh and looked away in defeat. She could ignore Yoruichi's puppy-eyes, but not Madoka's.

“Yay!” Madoka cheered.

“Oho, the queen has granted a reprieve!” the blue-haired girl crowed like a melodramatic narrator doing *next time on*— episode previews. “Will the cat mend her dastardly ways?!”

Madoka held Yoruichi up again and smiled joyously at her. “I'm sure she will! Won't you,
prettykitty?!” She brought the cat close to her face and kissed her nose with an exaggerated “*mwah!*”

Her blue-haired friend Laughed again. “Ah, Madoka Kaname: Savior of all things cute and questionably innocent!”

The moss-haired girl smiled affectionately then politely coughed into one hand. “Ahem. I don't think we've been introduced, Miss …?”

“Oh! I'm terrible!” Madoka cried. She cuddled Yoruichi against her chest with one arm and used the other to indicate different people. “Sayaka, Hitomi, this is Homura Akemi! She's transferring in today! Homura, this is Sayaka Miki—”

The blue-haired girl grinned and let go of her bag with one hand to wave. “Yo~!”

“—And Hitomi Shizuki.”

The moss-haired girl smiled and bowed slightly. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Akemi.”

Homura returned the gesture. “Likewise, Shizuki.”

“Ooh, someone with manners as good as Hitomi's!” Miki said in mock awe. She turned to Madoka to make a joke but was interrupted by the warning bell. “Aww.”

Madoka reluctantly put Yoruichi down and picked up her school bag. Yoruichi sat and meowed up at the girls.

“Be good,” Homura said for show.

“Will she be okay by herself?” Madoka fretted.

Homura waved a hand dismissively. “She does what she wants. She will either be here when school is over or be back at the house by dinner. She is an independent explorer and is good at fighting other animals so I am not worried.”

“A fighter?!” Miki bent over with her hands on her knees and looked at Yoruichi with dramatic seriousness. “Go forth and explore Mitakihara, Midnight the Conqueror!”

“Her name is Yoruichi,” Madoka corrected her.

*Midnight the Conqueror* sounds way cooler!"

“Nuh-uh! It just sounds silly! It's too long!”

“Hahahahaha! What, do you think *Night One* sounds like a ninja name or something?”

“Sa— Sayaka!”

“You do! Hahahahahahahaha!” Miki took off running. “Madoka likes ninja cats!”

“That's not it at all!”

Miki twirled around. “Oh, right— only if they're cute!” She took off running again.

“Sayaka!”
“Ninja cats! Cute ninja cats! Madoka loves cute ninja cats!”

Shizuki giggled quietly as Madoka chased Sayaka toward the school. She smiled at Homura and took a step away. “Shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Dear NSA, I promise that browser history about explosives was only for this story.

Bleach-only readers: I swear the cheesy name conversation in this chapter is tweaked PMMM-canon. Watch the first scene of the first episode of PMMM if you want to see Madoka's weird dream.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Homura repeated her first day at Mitakihara Middle School yet again. This iteration, she remained cool and competent but allowed Madoka to pull her into her little circle of friends instead of isolating herself. Aside from Madoka, Homura got along best with Shizuki. Mostly because the girl was so calm and polite. Doing anything with Miki but sitting back and watching her enthusiastic babbling and gesturing could get exhausting so she just let Madoka handle her.

Homura gave her usual answers to her classmates' usual gushing questions: She was so good at the lessons because her previous school was a bit ahead of this one; her English was good because of her uncle's business and her time at the Catholic school in Tokyo; yes, she had been ill, but surgery and therapy had let her become athletic; no, she didn't know much of anyone in town. This time she added an affirmative when asked if she had any pets and talked about Yoruichi. Madoka would jump in to gush over the cat so Homura could fade back and let her take over the conversation.

Actually, Madoka was always good about seeing when their classmates' questions began to wear on her and redirecting their attention. Every timeline. Homura was grateful.

When the girls were wandering away from the school that afternoon, they found Yoruichi waiting for them, meowing from her perch in the treeline. Homura sighed and held her arms out as they passed the tree and caught the cat when it jumped down. Yoruichi purred and nuzzled her cheek. Homura sighed more deeply. “Yes, yes, I forgive you.”

Madoka giggled. “You said that yesterday, too.”

“Aha, a regular troublemaker?” Miki asked with a grin.

“You could say that,” Homura answered. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Would you three like to come to the sidewalk pastry café with me and Yoruichi? My treat.”

“As if I'd ever say no to free cake!” Miki crowed.

“Your standards are low, Sayaka,” Madoka teased.

“All right!” Miki put her hands on her hips and snobbily inclined her face skyward. “Anyone who offers free cake to someone they just met is a generous person worth befriending.”
Homura wasn't sure what prompted it, but before she knew it, words that sounded like a more polite version of something Karin would say came spilling out of her mouth. “Ah. Do you accept candy from strangers, then?”

Miki tilted her head back and looked at Homura sideways from wide eyes, then burst into delighted laughter. She slung an arm around Homura's shoulders. “Pfft. Stranger danger's for strangers, duh.”

“You just met her today,” Shizuki said as she tried to keep a straight face. “She practically is a stranger.”

“Naaahhhhhh,” Miki waved dismissively then leaned into Homura and leered. “Are you saying you have some candy for me, Stranger Danger?”

Madoka and Shizuki giggled while Homura's lips quirked up into a little smile.

She... she kinda missed this version of Sayaka. Miki.

“I'd love to come,” Shizuki answered the original question. “I can only stay maybe twenty minutes, though.”

“Tea ceremony?” Miki drawled.

“Ikebana,” Shizuki corrected.

“I can never keep them straight.”

Homura made a show of looking confused.

“Oh, Hitomi's mom makes her take a lot of extracurricular lessons,” Madoka explained.

“Ahhh, the plight of the wealthy young heiress!” Miki moaned dramatically, holding an arm to her brow as though she would faint.

Shizuki sighed. “I hope she doesn't expect me to continue at this pace when I need to prepare for entrance exams next year.”

“Worry about the future when it comes,” Miki said with a little twiddle of her fingers. Then she struck a determined pose and sharply pointed skyward. “Today there is cake to be eaten!”

The girls and the cat claimed a table at a sidewalk café. The time while Shizuki was with them was spent gushing over desserts, fending off Miki's playful attempts to steal from everyone else's plates, and Homura quietly basking in Madoka's sunny presence. When Hitomi left, Madoka asked Miki if she was going to the hospital that day. After explaining that her friend had physical therapy that afternoon, Homura coaxed Miki and Madoka into doing their homework with her at the table—she wanted to monopolize as much of their time as she could. Both needed help with math and English, they were provided endless refreshments, and a cute cat took turns nuzzling the girls to be petted, so they didn't exactly put up a fight. They sat there for a couple hours, losing track of time until the sun began to set. Madoka squealed and packed up in a rush of apologies then bolted for home. Miki packed up more slowly and laughed at Madoka as she disappeared around a corner, then waved goodbye to Homura and strolled away.

Yoruichi stretched and looked up at Homura. She tilted her head in inquiry. Homura stared at her for a minute then smiled slightly and bent to pick her up.
A fluffy white tail swished in the shadowed branches of a tree as the pink-haired girl rocketed past in a full sprint.

Not today, it seemed.

Beady red eyes observed the human newcomer as she gathered her educational supplies and departed with her domesticated feline.

An unexpected interloper. Bothersome.

Worse, the interloper felt like a magical girl. Yet it could not call up a memory of a contract with her.

It did not like confusion.

“So I did some thinking when I was exploring today,” Yoruichi said over a slab of salmon that night.

Homura hummed inquisitively as she ate her own dinner. They had come to a silent mutual agreement to not talk about the scene in the wee hours.

“Yesterday you said you’ve tried explaining everything to them. Right?” At Homura's nod, she continued, “Was that before or after the little monster shows up?”

“About half and half, for those times I bothered trying.” Homura took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. “If it is after they meet it, they think I am sowing dissent or something to gain an advantage for myself. If it is before they meet it, they think I am insane for talking about magical girls. Sakura will sometimes believe me because she is already contracted and is cynical about the world in general, but she has no bearing on the others this early in the timeline. I outright avoid approaching Tomoe since the time she... snapped.” Homura's eyes went distant, vividly seeing the horror in Mami’s crazed face after Sayaka's fall, her mind replaying the sharp rattle of Mami’s musket as the girl shook like someone had taken a jackhammer to her spine.

“No at all since that time?” Yoruichi asked quietly.

“No.”

The cat tilted her head. “You know, finding out the way she did is probably what broke her. If you do it in a way that isn't as traumatic as seeing her protègée Hollowfy and try to kill everyone, she could take it better.”

Homura sighed. “I tried a few times before then but she just will not see it. I do not know if it is a defense mechanism or denial or what.”

“Hmmm. So you need to focus on Kaname and Miki for now, since they haven't contracted.” Yoruichi thought while she ate some more. “So, if you tell them about everything before they meet the little monster, they think you're nuts. How do they react once they're approached? Do they
“Madoka does more than Miki. But they often end up distrusting me. I think what happens is they bring up my concerns and the Incubator talks around them. It is tricky about trying to get them alone to talk to them without my being there to draw attention to its word games. I am never quite sure what slant it puts on its information. There have been slight variations over the cycles. By the time I counter the recruitment speech, Miki is usually too wrapped up in her own little drama to listen to me and Madoka is hesitant but her concern for Miki—and Tomoe—drives her to accompany them on Witch hunts even though she has not contracted. After the first dozen or so loops, Madoka became most likely to contract when her friends were in dire straits in a labyrinth or when faced with Walpurgisnacht. She knows the consequences, but...” Homura shrugged. “She is too selfless for her own good.”

“The same could be said of you, you know,” Yoruichi commented.

“I am not selfless.”

“Oh?”

Homura stared at her flatly. “I have become too familiar with the ways wishes function and malfunction to claim such. Many ‘selfless’ wishes are anything but when you look beyond the surface.”

“Even yours?”

“Even mine.”

Silence weighed on them as Yoruichi watched the girl thoughtfully. “Anyway,” she eventually resumed. “When you tell them before the Incubator approaches them, how do you do it?”

Homura shrugged. “I tell them.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“Do you transform or anything?”

“Sometimes.”

“Maybe you're too blunt?”

“That is possible.” Homura frowned down at her rice and vegetables. “The problem is that if I am gentle about it, the Incubator usually butts in and derails the conversation. Or it or Tomoe imply they think I have ulterior motives for wanting them not to contract before I can adequately explain. Tomoe is a very competent veteran. She inspires new magical girls. She is likable outside of magical girl duties. She is reassuring. Patient with girls who have never fought, a good teacher, and she has a strong moral code. She urges caution with wishes and sounds reasonable. If she doubts me, the other girls doubt me.”

“Hmm.” Yoruichi hummed and twitched an ear. “What if you emulate her role to Kaname and Miki?”

Homura tilted her head. “What do you mean?”
“I read your testimony about how things go. Tomoe tends to save them from labyrinths, right? So what if you keep cozying up to them as their mysterious new friend, then you manage to be with them and coincidentally stumble into a labyrinth?”

Homura’s eyes widened. She stared for a long minute. “...Go on.”

“I’m not saying to play the hero, but... well, actually, yeah, play the hero. You become the first magical girl they know of. Also, the magical girl who saved them. Bring them back here and explain things to them. Only play up that you were tricked into it and you are concerned for them because they have potential and most other magical girls don’t understand the trick.” Yoruichi cocked her head. “You trust Kaname, right? Have her do the hundred meter test with Miki watching.”

Face white, Homura tried to speak but stopped and stared at the cat, her lips tight.

“You did once say the doll/puppet/zombie dynamic was highly distressing to them. If anything could scare them off contracting, seeing you all but dead should help.”

Homura made a strangled sound.

Yoruichi looked at her levelly. “I’ll be nearby, you know,” she said gently.

Homura covered her face and breathed deeply. Yoruichi let her think. The girl finally tilted her head way back and looked sightlessly at the ceiling. “That sounds... doable. It has potential.”

“I wouldn’t have suggested something that serious if I thought otherwise,” the cat said. “Pair that with nullifying the need for Miki to contract and you could have more control.”

“Miki’s wish. Kamijō’s hand. Right.” Homura centered herself, breathing slowly. “I would like your opinion. If I am capable, should I heal his hand completely or partially? Or partially for now with another healing later?”

“Take me with you. Let me see his chart. I think we should aim for believable improvement but I don’t know if that’s even possible. Things can get screwy sometimes when you combine living bodies and reiatsu. If you’re inexperienced, you may only be able to start out with something very basic anyway.” Yoruichi stood and stretched. “I have a lot of training in healing. I can walk you through something more specific than just dumping reiatsu into the injury and hoping for the best. If that works, I’ll have you devour information on the anatomy of the human hand and go from there.” She padded over to the door. “Shall we?”

On the way to school the next morning, Yoruichi whispered an idea to Homura. Homura was doubtful, but Yoruichi had said to trust her and that it was part of her training to strengthen her sense of humor and friendliness, which Karin had said she needed. Homura had not been aware anyone was taking such comments seriously. It was simple enough, though, so Homura complied and made a small purchase at a convenience store. She then found the three girls waiting on the path for her.

“Heeeeyyyyy, Stranger Danger!” Miki called with a wave.

Perfect.
Homura stopped by them, reached into her bag, and held her hand out to Miki with a solemn face. “Here.”

Miki blinked, then held her hand out eagerly. “A present?!”

Homura pulled her hand back. Miki looked down, was silent with surprise for a moment, then started cackling so hard she couldn't breathe.

“Oh, my. Candy?” Shizuki said with a smile.

“If I am to be a stranger, I must do it properly,” Homura said gravely.

Shizuki and Madoka giggled. Miki wheeeeeezed. Homura felt a moment of warmth.

The school day passed much as the previous one, though Madoka's friends had lost their hesitance about Homura and treated her as one of their own. They went to the sidewalk café again after school, though Shizuki had to leave for yet another of her mother's required lessons and Miki begged off doing homework to go visit her friend at the hospital. That suited Homura fine—she had the entire afternoon with Madoka. Madoka invited Homura to come to her house with Yoruichi instead of sitting at the café, to which Homura agreed.

Red eyes watched the girls walk away from under a car.

Not today, it seemed.

Patience was its nature, though. The right moment would come.

Homura conveniently escorted Madoka home, then both of them skived off homework to play with little Tatsuya and an indulgently gentle Yoruichi. Apparently Madoka wasn't the only Kaname to adore cats. Even Tomohisa had a soft spot for Yoruichi, who played up her cuteness, shamelessly rubbing against his legs and purring until he dropped cooking scraps down to her. She had then cozied up to Madoka's mother when the businesswoman staggered in the door, exhausted.

Homura ate dinner with the Kaname family that night. It was like a far calmer version of eating with the Kurosaki family—not as wild, but just as warm. She was coming to find that she liked to eat with families.

Sayaka was so deliriously happy that she literally skipped home from the hospital. Kyōsuke had been hopeful for the first time in weeks. He had proudly showed her that he could flex his fingers better and said that the numbness had faded a bit in two of his fingers. It wasn't dramatic, but it was progress after a long stretch without any. Sayaka had gushed about the new therapy from the
previous day working. Kyōsuke had joined her and excitedly rambled on about the further therapies he wanted to do, how he thought he could really get better if he could strengthen it, how his doctors were so pleased, how his mother had cried.

Kyōsuke had smiled at her for the first time in over a month. That was a treasure to Sayaka.
The world was a wonderful place.

Homura and Yoruichi had another stop-and-go strategy session late that night as Homura methodically pulled stolen weaponry and ammunition out of her shield to prepare them for immediate use in battle. Again, Yoruichi went quiet whenever the girl was handling the more dangerous items.

“So, I thought I'd let you know my plans for tomorrow,” Yoruichi eventually said. “Just in case.”
The magical girl raised a brow. “Oh?”

“You remember the disappearances from last time around, right?”

“Yes. Not the specifics, but in general.”

Yoruichi watched her own tail lashing. “Tomorrow is Thursday the twenty-fourth of March. Last time, Sumire Akane went missing overnight, gone by Friday morning. I'm going to go to Asunaro early and follow her around all afternoon and into the night. See if she's a magical girl or whatever. See what happens to her.”

“Ah,” Homura said in understanding. “Once we part tomorrow, I shouldn't expect to see you until Friday, then?”

“Yep.”

Homura paused and stared at the cat expressionlessly. Yoruichi waited. Finally, the magical girl said, “Be careful.”
Pleased with the sign of concern, Yoruichi chimed, “I will~!” She cocked her head. “Your plans?”

Homura pursed her lips as she unpacked more bullets. “Tomorrow, the Rose Garden Witch's Familiars may generate a labyrinth on the floor of the mall that is closed for renovations. I like your idea and I think it would be safest to try with a Familiar labyrinth. I may have to hold off on the hundred meter test if you will be away, but I can lay a foundation, at least.” She sighed. “I just have to figure out an excuse to get them to come to the abandoned floor with me. Last time, I was chasing the Incubator and it called Madoka for help. Assuming it shows up there. My different tactics this time around may have changed things just enough for it to be somewhere else.”

“Is it being the Familiar or the Incubator?”

“Both,” Homura said with an unhappy shrug.

“Hmmm. Well, if all else fails, you could just look disturbed and hurry away like you're looking for something. If you don't say anything, they may follow you.”
Homura sniffed disdainfully. “Miki would definitely do that.”

Yoruichi made a satisfied sound. “Well, now that's settled... Your friends are adorable.”

Homura's lips quirked up.

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Homura's... friends were surprised when Yoruichi wasn't there to greet them after school. Homura shrugged and said the cat was probably exploring and that they could go somewhere different since they didn't have a cat with them. Shizuki suggested taking Homura to the trio's usual café in the mall. Homura neutrally mentioned she had never been to the mall. Miki's face firmed into determined mission-mode as she declared they had to fix that. Homura acquiesced.

No one could claim Homura orchestrated the situation if Sayaka Miki was the one who practically dragged her there, after all.

After Shizuki left for another lesson, Miki dragged Homura and Madoka to a music shop. After she bought something for Kamijō, she led the girls around the mall. Madoka smiled indulgently and played along with the tour guide act. They were near the hall that led to the restrooms and staff stairs when Homura paused and looked down the corridor.

The Familiar. She felt it. Yes!

Madoka noticed she had stopped and turned to her after tugging Miki's sleeve to make her stop. “Homura?”

Homura didn't reply. She pasted a disturbed look on her face and stepped down the empty hall.

“If you gotta go, you can just tell us,” Miki said with amusement. “We won't make fun of you.”

Homura walked past the bathrooms. Miki and Madoka looked at each other in confusion and silently agreed to follow her. Homura walked just slowly enough to let them trail her up a floor, through a door with DO NOT ENTER plastered on it— Madoka whined—, and across a dimly lit room with a black and white checker tiled floor until they reached a short set of stairs. Both girls should know it was the entrance to a community art gallery, but its hours of operation sign was covered with a different sign that read THIS FLOOR CLOSED DUE TO RENOVATIONS. The fancy staircase was roped off, but Homura dodged around the obstacle and climbed the stairs.

“Hey, Stranger Danger! Where do you think you're going?” Miki hissed loudly.

Homura stopped mid-step and looked over her shoulder at them. Miki was a contrary sort, so instead of inviting them along Homura mildly said, “It would probably be best if you stayed here.”

“Like hell!” Miki objected. She took a challenging step forward.

Perfect.

Madoka gasped. “Homura, your ring is glowing!”

Homura lifted her left hand and splayed out her fingers. Her Soul Gem ring was indeed glowing purple. Good. She glanced back at the other girls. “You can see it?”
“Of course we can see it!” Miki snapped.

“That's a really strange question, Homura,” Madoka said worriedly.

Homura stared at them more, then finally said, “Maybe you should come with me after all. I can protect you that way.”

“P-protect us?” Madoka squeaked.

“From what?” Miki demanded.

“I suppose you will see soon enough,” Homura said as she crested the stairs and opened the door. “There is no time to explain right now.”

Miki took a deep breath and stomped up the stairs. Madoka whimpered and followed on her heels.

The empty art gallery was dark, lit only by the faint green light of exit signs, occasional red emergency lights to mark paths, and fading daylight from the distant windows on the other end of the building. Construction materials were strewn about between concrete pillars. Homura brazenly walked through the forbidden room. Miki, apparently set on edge, shoved her bag at Madoka and grabbed the first potential weapon she could find: a fire extinguisher.

Homura stifled a sigh. Miki always choose that fire extinguisher as a weapon. Not the loose chain with a hook on the end, not the easier-to-hold pipes. Always the fire extinguisher. It was like some kind of cosmic joke now.

The girls followed Homura to a section that was barred by a chain link fence. Homura looked down at her ring, which was glowing more brightly, and turned left. She followed a series of chains hanging from the ceiling, then halted.

“Here it comes.”

“Here what comes?” Miki demanded.

The air suddenly became misty. Lights flared and dimmed at random. Before Homura, a large vertical circle made out of dead butterflies pinned to vine wreaths manifested and spun towards them, followed by another and another. It felt like moving through a tunnel. Their surroundings flashed through a series of images like rapidly changing art slides. The pillars and construction supplies all reappeared flat and papery as though pieces of a collage. Multicolored doily-like mandalas spun in random places in the air. Signs featuring runes, German words, and black mustaches scribbled in marker were dotted about. The distant walls were studded with paper cutouts of fancy windows. Barbed wire-like brambles and papier maché butterflies were everywhere. Chains draped at random from above. Something—many somethings—giggled and clattered in the shadows.

Perfect.

Madoka was so frightened she forgot to let go of the book bags when she threw her arms around Miki. “What's happening?!"

Homura glanced over her shoulder and opened her mouth, but the rattling was joined by chanting in children's voices as big, jittering cotton balls jerked out of the shadows.

“Das! Sind! Mir! Unbekannte! Blumen! Ja! Sie! Sind! Mir! Auch! Unbekannt!”*
“W-what the hell?!” Miki rasped.


“W-what's happening?!?” Madoka wailed again.

The cotton balls had mustaches pasted on them and were mounted on black stems that ended in butterfly wings, which functioned as their legs. Thorny vines darted through the air, trailing behind many pairs of snapping scissors that sounded like machetes cleaving brush.

“Und! Die! Schlechten! Blumen! Steigen! Auf! Die! Guillotine!”

“Guillotine?! Did I just hear guillotine?!” Miki shrieked.

As the monsters drew closer, the girls could see grotesque mouths made from paper cutouts of sketches of lips and teeth shifting about with the chanting. Dark holes served as eyes. The scissor-briars had apparently sprouted from the eye sockets, as every eye had multiple vines coming out of it.

“JA! SCHNEIDE! SIE! AB! JA! SCHNEIDE! SIE! HERAUS!”

“Stay together!” Homura ordered. “I'll take care of this!”

With that, Homura triggered her transformation, violet light rushing around her and replacing her school uniform with her battle costume, finishing with the manifestation of her shield. She stood firm and glared at the Familiars as she conjured her rarely-used barrier. A purple sigil that mirrored the swirling designs on her shield appeared on the ground beneath them. The magic burst upwards like vines and coiled into a swirling domed cage of light. Madoka and Miki gaped as the force of the magic whipped at all their clothes and hair. Homura thrust her shield arm skyward and took a deep breath.

She'd never actually tried this before. It was an idea she'd toyed with while thinking about the strange “kidō” spells she had seen the shinigami use in the big battle.

Instead of stopping time and using her weapons, Homura focused on her magic as it flowed through the whorls of the barrier and mentally made it behave like when she would shoot bolts of pure magic at the Incubator. Violet rays lanced straight out from the dome in all directions, skewering and destroying the Familiars. Homura let the dome fade out of existence as cotton balls disappeared and their butterfly feet flew away. The nightmare world wobbled and faded, leaving the three girls back in the dark renovation area. Homura felt a bit disoriented but was satisfied with her first experimental technique— it wasn't particularly strong, but it got the job done with minor Familiars. She blinked rapidly and turned to the others.

Miki was frozen with the fire extinguisher brandished in front of her. Madoka was clinging to her waist like a vise to stay upright, knees too weak to stand and school bags dangling from each hand. Both stared at Homura with wide eyes.

Homura pushed her hair over her shoulders and stepped closer to them as the magical dome shimmered and burst away like a popping bubble. “Are you injured?” she asked calmly. The girls shook their heads, still gaping silently.

Then Miki snapped back to herself. “W-what the hell was that?!” she demanded. “What the hell is that cosplay?! What the hell is going on?!”
Homura sighed. “This is not cosplay. I am a magical girl.”

“Say what?!”

“I am a magical girl.”

Miki sputtered. “I heard you the first time!”

“Then why ask?”

Miki squawked and tried to come up with a response as Madoka finally dropped the school bags and lunged for Homura. Madoka wrapped her arms around Homura's waist and cried. “Thank you! Thank you so much! I was so scared!”

Homura sadly patted her hair. “You are safe now. I will protect you from those things to the best of my ability from now on.”

Madoka jumped back and looked up at Homura with damp eyes. “There are more of them?!” she asked fearfully.

“Yes.”

“What are they?” Miki demanded again, trying to hide her fear with shaky bravado.

Homura took a deep breath and released her transformation. Things were actually going as planned for once in her life. It made her uneasy. “I think you should come to my house so I can explain in private.”

Yoruichi paced restlessly at Homura's door as she waited for the three reiatsu signatures to reappear from the pocket dimension. She was incredibly tense.

To say her reconnaissance had not gone as planned would be putting it lightly.

She had reached the northern edge of Mitakihara around noon, thinking she'd go to Akane's school and camp out until classes let out for the day to stalk her. It had seemed a perfectly logical plan until she actually crossed into Asunaro city limits.

She felt subtly odd at first. Two blocks in, she stopped in her tracks and wondered why she was even there. Yoruichi racked her brain.

Magical girls. She was going to follow a girl to see what caused her disappearance. It was part of the investigation of a threat against girls and Soul Society. That threat could also be wandering the streets of Asunaro, as it did Mitakihara, so she had to be watchful. It looked like—

Like—?

The threat was called—

Blank. She knew this!

The threat was—
Looked like—

...A black cat wearing a white scarf? No, that didn't sound right.

It was a threat because— because—

The enemy was—

Nothing.

Something was not right. Something was deeply wrong. This wasn't like her. Yoruichi ran through her options and experience from her time in charge of the Thirteen Divisions' Covert Operations. Checked herself, checked herself—

A chill ran down her spine. Something like a complex, passive kidō had ensnared her so smoothly she hadn't noticed. Was affecting her memory. Had made her forget who her enemy was.

The cat haltingly turned around and retraced her steps to Mitakihara. As soon as she left Asunaro city limits, her mind supplied Incubator – white cat-rabbit thing that eats Soul Gems and so on. Obviously, the enemy was the Incubator.

Yoruichi had stared back at Asunaro for a long time, profoundly disturbed.

Now she paced and paced around a package a delivery person had left. It smelled of Yuzu and baked goods, which was soothing. She relaxed minutely when the girls' reiatsu reappeared. She hoped Homura's experiment had gone better than her own mission.

Yoruichi needed to talk to Kisuke. Immediately.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
?????
?????
Minion: Anthony. His duty is landscaping. His mustache is set by the Witch.

A/N: Somehow, my characters keep making up new nicknames for Homura.

* The German chanting is taken directly from the PMMM anime.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: A few people asked why I'm complicating things by adding Kazumi Magica to the already complex plot.
1. I need/want the abilities and knowledge of at least two of the characters.
2. My own entertainment. :)
Yeah, some of the Pleiades Saints' powers are broken af in canon, but I'm going to try to handle them carefully.

...I just realized that the Kazumi Magica big bad's powers may have been able to mess with Aizen. Or Aizen could have manipulated tf out of her. Someone write that fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madoka anxiously fidgeted with the strap of her book bag at Homura's coffee table as Homura made tea in the kitchen. She kept meeting Sayaka's equally uneasy eyes. Neither dared speak. They couldn't help but notice that Yoruichi had seemed irritable and clingy as she followed her owner through the townhouse and into the kitchen. Even now, they could faintly hear Homura's voice saying soothing words just quiet enough to be unintelligible. Obviously, there was no way the cat's mood could be a reaction to the strangeness they found themselves in, but it was just one more thing to add to the pile of wrongness that made their scalps prickle.

Madoka knew the moment when Sayaka couldn't take the tension anymore. Her friend's face shifted through multiple emotions before the girl leaned over the table and stage-whispered, “Do you think we've gone crazy? Do you think she's crazy?”

“I suppose it must seem so.”

Sayaka squealed and recoiled as Homura politely set the tea tray on the table as though her sanity hadn't been called into question in her own home.

“Wah, uh, sorry— I shouldn't've—”

“It is all right,” Homura said quietly, face neutral. “You have had quite a shock.”

Sayaka flushed and looked down at her lap as Homura served them.

“I do not have any snacks right now,” Homura said as she sat. “I apologize.”

“O-oh, no! No! That's fine!” Madoka gushed nervously. “W-we ate earlier, and tea is lovely...
right, Sayaka?” Sayaka stared blankly. Madoka's face went a bit desperate. “Right, Sayaka?”

Sayaka jumped and turned forward again. “O-oh! Yeah! Tea's great!”

Homura sipped from her cup, delicately put it down, and folded her hands in her lap as her cat stalked into the room and lay under the table. Homura looked up at them, face so coldly serious it made Madoka hold her breath for a moment.

“Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that I can be very blunt. You may not like it. There are other people who could explain this to you. They may do it more gently. They also might skim over the more unpleasant information through either ignorance or malice. I prefer brutal honesty.”

“Brutal, huh,” Sayaka muttered warily.

“So. Let us begin.” Homura squared her shoulders. “First simple fact: Magical girls are real.” She raised a brow in question. Madoka and Sayaka nodded; they'd seen the entire light show. “Second: Becoming a magical girl is not the innocent fluff you see in anime. There may be good times, but it is mostly very difficult.”

“How?” Madoka asked softly.

Homura inclined her chin in acknowledgment, her manner academically aloof. “The superficial difficulties are social isolation due to keeping your secret, strained relationships, lack of time for extracurricular activities— or dating—, late nights, serious injuries, and the very real risk of death.”

“D-death?” Madoka squeaked.

Homura looked at her evenly, seeming to debate something. She carefully asked, “What did you think those giant scissors were going to do?”

Madoka and Sayaka gulped. Point made.

“What— what was that place, anyway?” Sayaka asked with forced challenge.

“The proper term is a labyrinth. It is a pocket dimension controlled by the... entities that magical girls fight,” Homura answered. “I will explain that in due time. I want to begin with what a magical girl is.” Homura steepled her fingers together on the table. “When a girl develops enough spiritual power, a third party sometimes notices and attempts to recruit them— contract them— to become magical girls. This third party introduces itself as Kyubey. It looks like a cute stuffed animal. It offers girls the chance to have a single wish granted.”

Sayaka perked up. “A wish?”

Homura's eyes slid to her and stared for a minute. After Sayaka had withdrawn slightly, Homura continued. “Yes. Kyubey considers the granted wish as a down payment. In exchange, the girl pledges her soul to become a magical girl and fight designated enemies.”

“Her soul?” Madoka asked hesitantly, nibbling her lip.

“Yes. A magical girl's object of power is called a Soul Gem.” Homura held out her left hand. Violet light flashed from her ring and reformed as an egg-shaped amethyst set in gold. “The Soul Gem allows a magical girl to be extremely durable. However, Kyubey's sales pitch glosses over the fact that it is called a Soul Gem because the contract is sealed by Kyubey tearing the girl's soul out of her body and condensing it into a crystal. The girl's body is essentially a puppet afterward. The
actual girl— her mind, her soul— are contained in the Gem.”

Madoka and Sayaka looked at each other, then down at the amethyst in Homura's hand. “Th-that's your soul?” Madoka whispered.

“Yes,” Homura said, subdued. She looked at her own Gem for a moment, then met their eyes. “I am aware of how unbelievable this must sound. So if you are willing to do an experiment, I would like to prove my claim before I move on. As a show of good faith.”

Sayaka balked. “Experiment? What kind of experiment?”

Homura took a deep breath. “One disadvantage of possessing a Soul Gem is that its... grip, I suppose... on the magical girl's body is severed if the Gem passes out of a range of one hundred meters from the body. At that point, the soulless body collapses like a doll. Death is not immediate if attended quickly, but it is highly probable.” Homura carefully reached out and offered her Soul Gem to Madoka, who took it in shaking hands, too surprised to refuse. “Madoka, please walk down the street with this. Go at least one hundred meters and come right back.”

Panic flooded Madoka. “But— b-but—” she looked down at the precious treasure in her hands. “You— you just gave me your soul?!”

Homura drew her hand back to her lap, but couldn't hide its tremble before Madoka and Sayaka saw it. “Yes.” She looked Madoka in the eye, Earnest. “I trust you,” she whispered. “Just put it in my hand when you come back.”

“Wait, wait, wait, what's this gonna do?” Sayaka demanded.

Homura pushed her hair back. “I will collapse and stop breathing.”

“What?!”

“I will be fine once the Gem is put back in my hand. My soul will reclaim my body.”

“What?!”

Homura sighed. “Please go, Madoka. I want this to be over.”

“You— you don't have to do this,” Madoka said with distress. “We believe—”

“No. You must witness it to understand. I have explained to... other girls, and they did not truly believe me. Please, go.”

Madoka shakily rose to her feet and staggered toward the door. Sayaka flailed. “Wait, wait, what's Madoka supposed to do when people on the street see her with a giant piece of fancy jewelry?! Someone could try to steal it!”

“No one will see it,” Homura said calmly as Madoka glanced back at her in new fear. “There was a reason I asked if you could see it earlier. I will explain. Please go, Madoka.”

Madoka whimpered and went out the door. She hesitated and looked around. Everything seemed so normal. She looked down at the— the literal soul in her palm and gulped. Cold sweat beaded on her temples.

Homura trusted her to do this. They had just met and she trusted Madoka with her soul. It was humbling.
The hundred meters felt like an epic journey that would never end. Her steps slowed in dread as she neared the estimated cutoff point. She forced herself to go past it just in case her estimate was wrong, then froze for a minute and took several gasping breaths, turned, and sprinted back to Homura's townhouse. She barreled in the door and rushed into the living room.

Sayaka was kneeling over Homura's lifeless form where the girl had collapsed backwards. Madoka ran over and slid the last bit on her knees, searching for Homura's face beyond Sayaka's frantic attempts to shake Homura awake. It was useless; Homura's violet eyes remained unfocused and glassy. She wasn't breathing. Dead? Madoka's chest constricted. Brave girl jumping—flying back—hitting a building—

“The egg thing! Madoka! The egg!”

Madoka snapped back to reality and fumbled the Soul Gem into one of Homura's open hands. Her new friend immediately arched, blinked, and drew a gasping breath. Madoka threw herself down into a hug on top of Homura and wailed her relief. Sayaka sat back and held the sides of her head in both hands, face contorted in distress. After a minute or so, Madoka felt fingers in her hair. She sat up and tearfully looked at Homura.

Homura looked up at the girls solemnly. “Do you see how serious this is?” Both girls nodded fervently. Homura sighed. “I am glad.” She levered herself up. “Let us continue.”

Sayaka scrubbed tears from her cheeks and sputtered, “You just died!”

“Technically. But I am fine now.” Madoka thought the sharp look she gave Sayaka was strange. “Aside from using my body as a puppet, that is.” She tilted her head and looked at Sayaka through half-lidded eyes. “A couple girls I have known have called us zombies and said we are no longer truly human.”

Sayaka gave a full-body shudder.

“That's wrong!” Madoka cried. When Homura looked at her in surprise, Madoka balled her hands into fists and looked pained. “That's wrong! You're just as human as me! Whe-whether your soul is in— in your body or not, it's still a human soul, right?” She firm her face stubbornly. “That’s what matters! Never let anyone tell you you're not human ever again!”

Homura just stared at her for a long time, nonplussed, eyes wide. Then she tilted her head and stared more. Just when Madoka faltered and started to go red in the face, Homura wistfully said, “You are truly kindhearted.”

Madoka pouted at Sayaka and forced all her attention on her teacup as she tried to control her blush. She'd just gotten in Homura's face and preached at her. The magical girl hadn't even said she agreed with the inhuman thing. How embarrassing.

“Anyway,” Homura said as though she hadn't just resurrected herself, “That is not the worst of it.”

“Oh, God,” Sayaka said dully.

Homura delicately set her Soul Gem on the table again. “When a magical girl contracts, she becomes obligated to fight enemies called Witches. They are cursed spirits who lure innocent humans into their labyrinths—”
“That thing today?” Sayaka interrupted.

“Yes. They either lure humans into their labyrinths whole or overwhelm them with so much despair that they commit suicide, at which point the Witch eats their soul.”

Madoka recoiled in horror. “That's— that's awful!”

“Why hasn't anyone noticed them?!” Sayaka demanded.

Homura tossed her hair over her shoulder. Madoka fleetingly wondered if it was some kind of nervous tic. “They are invisible to most. Victims are generally reported as suicides, mysterious deaths, or missing persons who are never found.”

“So— so magical girls protect the innocent? You put your life on the line to protect the innocent?” Sayaka recovered some color and looked at Homura with admiration. “You're so awesome!”

Unexpectedly, Homura's face twisted into a thunderous scowl as she leaned forward to glare. “There is nothing noble about this,” she hissed. “This is not a child's fairy tale with simple good and evil. I am no hero. I am like any other magical girl— enslaved by my own wish. Doomed by my own wish.”

Sayaka went pale again and pulled back from the table uncertainly. Madoka bit her lip hard. “W-what do you mean, doomed?”

Homura reined herself in, sat ramrod straight, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. She relaxed and opened her eyes, face back in a neutral mask. “The part that... Kyubey... never mentions to potential contractees is that Soul Gems... are not invincible. They become corrupted as a magical girl uses her magic to fight. They become even more sullied if a magical girl begins to slip into negativity and depression. All magical girls know that their Soul Gems get darker after fights and brighter after....” She trailed off, pursed her lips, and backtracked. “When a Witch is defeated, it usually drops an item called a Grief Seed. They are smaller than Soul Gems and are completely black. A magical girl can use a Grief Seed to clean the darkness out of her own Soul Gem. Then Kyubey collects and eats the Grief Seed, which it says is its goal. However, the part it leaves out is that if a magical girl does not clean her Soul Gem or if she gets so depressed she falls into despair, her Soul Gem will turn black, become a Grief Seed, and transform the magical girl into a Witch. Thus, the enemies of magical girls were once magical girls themselves. Magical girls have always been intended to become Witches in the system devised by... Kyubey.”

Madoka had never felt so sick and horrified in her entire life. She covered her mouth, then slid her hands up to cover her eyes as she began to cry again.

“No way. Are— are you sure?” Sayaka rasped. “That's— that's—”

“I am certain,” Homura said with her eyes lowered in melancholy. “I have seen magical girls fall myself. My... friends.” She looked up at them, pained. “Girls who have already contracted don't believe me when I tell them. They don't want to believe me because it's too late for them. That's why I've taken the time to explain this to you.” Her face went hard but her eyes were desperate. “Please, don't contract and become magical girls!”

Madoka jolted and looked up at her in shock, as did Sayaka. “W-what did you say?”

“Us?”

Homura nodded firmly and breathed deeply. “You saw my ring glowing. You stayed sane in the labyrinth. You can see my Soul Gem now. You both have enough spiritual power in your souls to
become magical girls.” She leaned forward on the table and entreated them, “Please don’t.” Her voice was breathy as she continued, “You will probably be approached by a little white creature that looks like a cross between a cat with a fluffy tail and a bunny with floppy ears. It will speak using telepathy. It will tell you it is called Kyubey. Its true name is Incubator.” She held up her Soul Gem— her egg-shaped Soul Gem. “It contracts girls specifically to turn them into Witches and harvest the energy their souls create when in despair. It lures girls in with promises of wishes that can go very, very wrong. Disastrously wrong. I know of a girl whose entire family ended up dead because of her wish intended to help them. It doesn't matter how well you think you know what you want—or what you think someone else wants. It almost always goes bad somehow. I—” Homura paused and looked between the girls, then focused on Madoka with a wretched face. “I— don't want to watch you fall. Either of you. So please: Don't contract.”

Madoka and Sayaka were silent for a long time, staring at the table with drawn faces while Homura poured more tea.

“If— if you knew this,” Sayaka said slowly. “Why did you contract?”

Homura hummed sadly. “I did not know any of this before I contracted. I was tricked. I found out bit by bit afterward.”

“Oh.” Sayaka fidgeted with her skirt like a scolded child and looked up again. “If you had known, would you have done it?”

The magical girl stared at her. It was a thousand-yard stare, a detached stare, a hollow stare of having seen too much with little to show for it. It made Madoka want to bury the girl in candy and plushies and hugs and warmth— anything, anything to erase it. Homura didn't notice the look on Madoka’s face, too focused on Sayaka. She carefully answered, “There were... extraordinary circumstances for me. My hand would have been forced. So given that specific set of circumstances... possibly.”

“What did you wish for?” Sayaka asked stubbornly.

“Sayaka!” Madoka hissed. Somehow, she just knew that was an extremely rude question. It was the worst timing possible for one of her friend's moments of utter lack of tact.

Homura's stare went cold. Her mouth shifted distastefully as though she was chewing on potential words. “My wish... was intended to protect a girl who had already contracted.”

“And how did that work out?” Sayaka asked morbidly. “Did it get someone killed like that other girl's?”

Madoka saw her new friend's face go disturbingly dark. “Sayaka, stop!” When Sayaka just kept staring at Homura expecting an answer, Madoka made a sound of distress and dove across to slap a hand over Sayaka's mouth as the room seemed to spin in her vision. She could swear the air was quivering. Instinct told her Homura is furious. She could feel it on her shoulders, taste it in the air. Madoka staggered to her feet and babbled apologies, hauled Sayaka upright, and dragged her stumbling to the door while delivering an appalled if stammered lecture.

“Madoka. Mi— Sayaka.”

Both girls whirled to look back at Homura, who was still sitting at the table, absolutely still. Her face was blank as though she had removed her angry mask and had yet to decide which mask to use next. She looked much older than them all of a sudden.
“This is not how I wanted this conversation to end.” Her eyes strayed to Sayaka and back to Madoka. “Whether or not you believe me is your choice. However, I urge you to be careful with the Incubator. It talks smoothly. It may get other magical girls who do not know all of the facts to tell you about the advantages of being a magical girl. So be it. But ask questions. Ask many questions. Your first one should be what is a Soul Gem made out of? Your second should be where do Witches come from?” Homura tilted her head slowly, eyes flinty, and managed to look like a bird of prey on the hunt. “I am unsure whether the Incubator is capable of telling direct lies. Just do not automatically believe everything it tells you.”

“But we should believe everything you’ve told us?” Sayaka challenged.

Madoka’s face tightened with silent what do you think you’re doing?! Homura leveled an arctic glare at Sayaka. “I would prefer that you do, but that is your prerogative. Do not make hasty decisions. This is not something you can change your mind about once you have committed.” She pursed her lips and looked at Madoka. More hesitantly, she said, “I... like... you. I do not want to see you sell your soul and trap yourself in that contract. Either of you.”

The three girls were tensely silent for a long time. Finally, Homura stood, smoothed her skirt, and nodded politely. “Will I see you before school tomorrow?” Do you want nothing to do with me now?

“Of course!” Madoka answered immediately. Don't be silly!

“S-sorry. No— no hard feelings, Stranger Danger,” Sayaka said weakly. She scuffed her toe on the floor uncomfortably. “I’m sorry. It's just... that was hardcore harsh.”

Homura blinked placidly and approached them at the door. “I did say—”

“Brutally honest. Right,” Sayaka finished with a strained laugh. “You... you made your point, I guess.”

“I suppose that is all I can do for now,” Homura said quietly. “Do not tell Shizuki. Let me know if anyone starts harassing you. Either the little monster or another magical girl. I am not the only one in Mitakihara.”

“Thank you, Homura,” Madoka said quietly with a shallow bow of her head. “We'll keep this in mind.”

The two friends walked away together. Half a block away, Madoka turned and looked back at Homura's house. Homura was standing in front of her open door, watching them walk away with a deeply sad and exhausted expression.

Madoka believed her.

Red eyes looked down on the girls from atop a nearby building.

They had been in a labyrinth. The interloper really was a magical girl. It seemed she had explained some of the system to the candidates. The candidates were upset.
Homura sat down at her table with her head in her hands and took a shaky breath. An anxiety crash plus lingering anger at Miki made her feel unsteady.

Yoruichi slunk out from under the table and climbed into her lap. “I see what you meant about Miki being stubborn and defiant,” she commented wryly. “My guess would be that it’s a defense mechanism when she gets overwhelmed. Otherwise, that... challenge came out of nowhere.”

Homura sighed and ran her fingers through Yoruichi’s fur. “She is so frustrating.”

“She’s a teenager,” Yoruichi droned. “You’re all frustrating.” She ignored Homura’s dirty look. “Open the package you brought in. It smells like a gift from Yuzu.”

Homura raised a brow and pulled the neat package toward her. It had no return address. She opened it and found an unsigned letter hoping at least one of the kinds of cookies within tasted good. Homura peered in the box.

“That is... a lot of cookies.”

Yoruichi snorted. “That’s Yuzu. Ah, and she was smart enough to not sign it and link you to her by accident. Good.” She stretched a bit and settled herself more comfortably. “Dig in. You need to calm down. Cookies are a girl’s best friend.”

Homura tentatively tasted cookies. The cat lay calmly in Homura’s lap and allowed herself to be petted until the tremor was gone from Homura’s hands. Fifteen minutes later, Yoruichi gravely said, “I need you to get out your phone and call Kisuke. I need to tell him about Asunaro.”

The magical girl nodded and reached for her bag as Yoruichi jumped up onto the table. Homura dialed Urahara’s Soul Phone number, set the phone to speaker, and put it on the table between herself and the cat.

“Hello, hello, hello, direct line to Kisuke Urahara! Kisuke Urahara speaking! How may I help my favorite magical girl~?”

Homura raised her brows at the phone while the cat snorted. “Kisuke, we need to talk,” Yoruichi droned.

“Oh, my favorite kitty-cat! Are you enjoying yourself in Mitakihara?”

“If by enjoying myself you mean wandering into a mind-altering kidō to the north, sure.”

Silence. “Mind-altering how?”

“Forgetting-my-enemy mind-altering.”

Homura stiffened and looked at the cat in bafflement. What?

A long pause. “Well, that's not good.”

Yoruichi snorted again and drily agreed, “No, not exactly.”
“Please describe the incident.”

Yoruichi gave a detailed report. The clacking of computer keys faintly emanated from the phone as Urahara transcribed her testimony.

“Did it feel Hollow?”

“No.”

“Interesting. Miss Akemi?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever encountered anything that has that effect?”

“No,” Homura answered. “But I have never ventured that far north.”

“How curious.”

Both Homura and Yoruichi sat silently while they listened to the sound of Urahara drumming his fingers against his desk.

“Well. I'll certainly look into this. Don't try to go up there again until I do some research,” Urahara said decisively. “Miss Akemi, you should probably come to Karakura this weekend. Other than that, how are things going?”

Yoruichi spoke before Homura could even open her mouth to politely end the call. “Akemi's friends are adorable.”

“Oho~? Do tell.”

Homura sighed and resigned herself to listening to gossip. At least she had cookies to nibble on.

Homura strode up the school path, trying to act more confident and normal than she felt. Shizuki and Miki stood together and looked up as Yoruichi trotted up between them and wove through their legs. Shizuki cooed and knelt to pet the cat as Homura and Miki made eye contact. Homura stared evenly. Miki looked uncomfortable.

Miki awkwardly raised a hand to scratch the back of her head. “Uh, yo. Sorry about yest—”

Face stubborn, Homura held out a fist. Shizuki glanced up at them from the corners of her eyes, then tactfully focused on the cat. Wary, Miki reached out. Homura dropped a candy into her palm. Miki looked up in surprise.

A peace offering.

Homura’s face went even more stubborn, with a questioning tilt. Are we good?

Miki closed her hand and pulled the candy close. She smiled wanly and laughed. “Thanks, Stranger Danger.” We’re good.
Homura nodded. “You are welcome.” *Good.*

Madoka ran up panting just as the warning bell rang. She stopped and leaned with her hands on her knees. “I made it. I made it!”

Homura’s lips quirked up and Shizuki and Miki laughed.

“Did you oversleep, Kaname?” Shizuki asked.

Madoka glanced from Miki to Homura and laughed awkwardly. “Y-yeah, actually. I had a hard time falling asleep.”

Miki looked away, downcast. “Me, too,” she sighed, rubbing one eye tiredly.

Homura sighed softly. “Let’s go to class. If you stay awake until lunch time, you can have some of the cookies my friend in Tokyo sent me.”

The blue-haired girl snapped upright with stars in her eyes. “Cookies?”

“Homemade cookies,” Homura murmured with a slight curve of her lips as she stepped toward the school, Shizuki at her side.

Miki pumped a fist. “Aw yeah, homemade cookies!”

Madoka and Shizuki laughed.

“Oh, my, Akemi,” Shizuki said teasingly, eyes mirthful. “You are quite the persuasive stranger.”

“Akemi’s the *best* Stranger Danger!”

“A-ah, I don't think that's something you're supposed to be happy about, Sayaka... ahaaha,” Madoka said weakly.

---

Madoka felt a bit guilty for her relief that Hitomi bowed out of their afternoon hangout because of extracurricular duties that day. When Madoka and Sayaka were alone with Homura and Yoruichi on the path away from school, Homura turned away from their usual route to the outdoor café.

“Eh? Where are you going, Homura?” Madoka asked.

Homura stared at them for a minute, seeming to debate her answer. She slowly admitted, “I need to hunt the Witch whose Familiars we encountered yesterday. Otherwise, it could kill someone.”

Madoka froze in trepidation. “You... you said there’s another magical girl who can do that, didn’t you?” She didn’t want her friend to risk herself. It felt selfish, wanting someone else to walk into danger, but the thought of Homura being injured was awful.

“I do not know if she is aware of this Witch,” Homura said after a long pause. “Take Yoruichi to the café with you.”

“You expect us to sit around eating cake while you run off to fight monsters?!” Sayaka demanded.
“Yes.”

Sayaka's face scrunched up in frustration. Madoka bit her lip. She did not like this one bit. “What—if you get hurt? What if you need help?”

Homura looked her in the eye. “I will be fine. I have a lot of experience and it is not a particularly powerful Witch.”

“But still—”

“It would give me greater peace of mind to know you are safely sitting at the café,” Homura argued. “If you were to be injured because I made a single mistake... I could not bear it.”

“O-oh.” That made sense. Madoka looked down guiltily for a minute, then looked up at her new friend. Her brave friend. Recognizing that her absence would be more useful than her presence was painful, but.... Her face firmed. “I'll wait for you at the café.”

“Why?”

Sayaka scoffed. “So we don't spend all night wondering if you got yourself killed, duh.”

Homura stared at them both for a long time. Madoka and Sayaka both made their faces more stubborn. Homura sighed. “Fine.” She looked stern. “Do not follow me.”

Both girls nodded a bit like they had been scolded. Homura looked like she was assessing them, then nodded once and set out with purposeful strides. They watched her grow smaller in the distance.

“C'mon, Madoka,” Sayaka said unhappily.

Madoka glanced at her sideways and saw the tense, jerky way her friend adjusted her school bag's strap. “You want to follow her,” Madoka observed softly.

“Well, duh.” Sayaka griped. “I don't like sitting back. But... she kinda has a point, I guess. I don't like it, but I don't wanna distract her, you know?” She kicked a pebble and mumbled, “Sometimes Kyōsuke will ask me to leave if he's learning a new song because me being there is just enough distraction to mess him up. So I get it. But I hate it.”

“Ah.” Madoka took a deep breath and looked determined. “Let's get to the café like we promised.”

The afternoon at the café was increasingly stressful. They couldn't focus much on homework and their appetites were nonexistent. Hours passed with excruciating slowness. Yoruichi was their only substantive distraction. The setting sun was turning everything warm orange when Homura appeared and approached their table with an uncertain scowl.

“You're okay!” Madoka gushed happily.

“You had us worried, there, Stranger Danger,” Sayaka said with relief. “How'd it go?”

Homura sat and looked frustrated. “I couldn't find it.”

“Oh?” Sayaka finally snatched the strawberry off Madoka's untouched cake. “World's worst game of hide-and-go-seek?”

“Yes,” Homura sighed disappointedly.
“Maybe the other magical girl got it?” Sayaka ventured, rolling the strawberry around in her cheek.

“Maybe.” She didn't look convinced.

“But you're safe. That's all that matters,” Madoka said decisively. “Do you both want to come to my house for dinner?”

Sayaka perked up. “Aw, yeah! Your dad is the best cook!”

Homura's face relaxed. “I would like that.”

Madoka beamed. Maybe she couldn't be directly useful, but she would try her best to support her new friend any way she could.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sayaka is surprisingly difficult to write.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: I've been pretty down lately, but your reviews cheer me up a lot. Thanks, guys. :)  
Regarding IchiRuki v IchiHime, since this seems to be a huge concern???: At this point, my plan is to do the equal-opportunity ship teasing Kubo did up until the last manga chapter, if I do anything at all. I don't consider any of the three among my “main” characters and don't really intend to go in-depth with them. Caveat: I didn't think I'd delve into Isshin as much as I have so who knows where the characters will take me?  
I don't often glom onto one set-in-stone OTP when I read or watch things. Characters and relationships are like Legos to me: You can combine them in so many interesting ways. Following the directions on the box is fun but experimenting has its merits. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before school Saturday morning, Homura was the first to arrive at their usual meeting spot. She tensely waited as first Shizuki and then Miki walked up, but didn't relax until Madoka bounced up the path. Glad her friend had come early, she greeted Madoka and quietly said, “May I ask a favor of you, Madoka?”  
Madoka looked up from scritching Yoruichi's ears with a happy expression that said she was pleased her new friend had asked. “Sure!”  
“I have personal business to attend to back in Tokyo tomorrow,” Homura fibbed. “Do you think your parents would mind if you kept Yoruichi at your house until Monday? I can give you her things at my house after school. I could take her with me, but it is a long ride to spend in a small crate.”  
Madoka's eyes practically sparkled. “Oh! I'm sure they wouldn't mind! I mean, I'll text Papa to be sure, but I'd love it!” She picked up the cat and cuddled her. “Do you wanna visit me and play with Tatsuya instead of being caged up on a train forever?” she cooed. She giggled when Yoruichi purred and nuzzled her neck.  
Homura relaxed. Bodyguard successfully assigned.  
Morning classes breezed by. Passing off Yoruichi with her pet supplies in her crate went smoothly, though Madoka whispered a quiet worry about the Witch at large. Homura urged her to stay home if possible and stick to populated areas if not. Leaving her was difficult, but at least she had a
Homura was surprised when her phone rang halfway through the train ride south. She rarely received calls these days.

“Hey, Homura,” Karin said pleasantly. “Ichi-nii’s home. You know when you'll get here?”

“A-ah, um.” Homura peered out the window at the current station. “Maybe two hours?”

“Cool. See you soon!” Beep.

Homura stared at the phone for awhile and pondered how such a normal thing had come to be strange.

When Homura rounded the corner into the main lobby of Old Karakura Train Station as the sun was just beginning to set, it was to the sight of all three Kurosaki siblings sitting on a bench sharing an open box of Pocky. Or Ichigo holding it out of his sisters’ reach, to be more accurate. Both girls were playfully trying to get to it without standing. Ichigo noticed Homura first.

“Hey, Stopwatch!” he called casually, grinning as he kept the Pocky box high above his head. “Anything interesting happen on the trip down?”

“No,” Homura murmured as she approached the siblings and stood in front of them, awkward.

“You sure travel light,” Karin quipped. Yuzu oohed her agreement, noting Homura wasn't carrying anything.

“That shield thing's a really cool trick,” Ichigo said as Karin launched herself up to get the Pocky. He dodged, drew his arm straight down, then offered the box to Homura as his sister squealed and toppled over the back of the bench. “Pocky?” he asked innocently, the remains of an earlier cookie stick dangling from the corner of his mouth.

A reluctant smile turned her lips upwards. Homura hesitantly withdrew a stick. She raised a brow.

“Ah. Crushed almond?”

Yuzu beamed. “Mr. Urahara said he thought you might like them!”

Homura stared at the snack and paused to think. To know that, Urahara— the other Urahara—must have written down even her choice of marzipan from the last timeline. Just how detailed were the man's notes? Was he trying to send her a message? Was she overthinking this? Was he just trying to be nice? Was it a complete coincidence?

“Um, do you not want it?” Yuzu asked meekly.

Homura snapped back to reality. “Ah, no— I mean, that's not it. Just thinking. Thank you.”

Ichigo watched her with his head tilted. Karin threw herself over his shoulder from behind and snagged a stick of Pocky from the box, discovered she had no leverage to go back, and just stayed draped over her brother to munch her snack with her legs hanging a few centimeters off the ground.

“Do you mind?” Ichigo drawled.

“Don't mind if I do,” Karin said sweetly.

Yuzu giggled and took a stick for herself.
Isshin spoiled them all with an early dinner at a teppanyaki restaurant that evening. It was the loudest dinner party Homura had ever been part of. Halfway through, she started eyeing the waitstaff and hoping they wouldn't be tossed out. The servers seemed resigned, though, so they'd probably had a Kurosaki Experience before. She hadn't known it was possible to duel with chopsticks, but every Kurosaki except Yuzu had. While bickering. At high volume. Despite Homura's upbringing screaming it was a massive faux pas. Yuzu and Orihime laughed through it while sniping food among the tangle and Sado was mellow as always, but Homura thought she'd do best huddling off to one side of the chaos like Ishida was. Unfortunately, she was caught between Ichigo and Karin making a victory gesture at each other over a choice piece of meat and Isshin bawling to the heavens that it had been grilled to perfection but our cruel children stole it from Daddy, Masakiiiii! Yuzu caught Homura's eye and mirthfully made hand gestures as though demonstrating. Soon, Homura was tentatively sneaking in to grab good pieces while the others played— and their bickering was perhaps ninety percent dramatic play. Homura was beginning to be able to tell the difference.

She wasn't sure if that was good or bad. At the very least, it was weird. She thought. Was it really? Maybe her quiet, serious family had been the weird ones, back before. Who knew? She rarely visited other households to have much frame of reference.

Their rowdy mob gradually quieted as they approached Urahara Shop. No one truly wanted to talk business, but they slipped into business mode anyway as though proximity to the store enveloped them in gravity. Mr. Tsukabishi greeted them quietly and escorted them all to the back room, where Jinta and Ururu sat on either side of Urahara, who was poring over files from an SD card on a tablet. Several more SD cards were lined up on the table. At its other end, Hitsugaya expressionlessly contemplated the steaming surface of a mug of green tea. All but Urahara looked up as they entered.

Karin plopped down next to Hitsugaya. “Hey, Tōsh. Who gave Sandal-Hat the nerd-candy and what's in it?”

The shinigami captain dipped his head at her. “That would be me. And those would be classified research materials from the Great Spirit Library in Seireitei.”

“Wait, dead-people libraries use computers?” she asked.

Hitsugaya scoffed. “Yes. But a good deal of the records I sought were so old they only existed in hard copies so I had to get Yamamoto's permission to take Urahara's secure phone in there and take pictures of every... single... page and compile them. I'm still not done.”

Karin gasped dramatically. “Tōsh! You've been holding out on me! I didn't know a geezer like you knew how to use newfangled technology for anything but talk and text!” She leaned in close and slyly stage-whispered, “When you say you're texting reports, are you really playing shinigami game apps on your shinigami phone? What kind of games do dead people play? Hangman?”

Hitsugaya rolled his eyes powerfully.

“Most of the other shinigami seem confused by computers and stuff,” Ichigo said curiously.

“The rank and file would be. They're not common in Soul Society,” Hitsugaya explained. He
glanced around, very obviously realizing he was being used to stall. He looked at Urahara, who met his eyes and gestured with his chin to go on before turning back to the tablet. Hitsugaya sighed. “My division does a lot of reconnaissance, investigation, and Living World infiltration. Matsumoto and I are far more familiar with the information processing functions of Soul Phones than many of the high-ranking officers. Less than Twelfth, but better than Second. Soi Fon's old-fashioned when it comes to information management. The overall bureaucracy is all done by hand, so seated officers of the Tenth use the Soul Phones as aides for reference for reports. Other divisions haven't caught on to the convenience.” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Eighth maintains the Library and Ninth publishes the newsletter, so they know about textual stuff, at least.”

Karin pressed her hands to her cheeks as her face turned mockingly gleeful. “There's a dead-people newsletter? Where do I sign up?!"

The young shinigami looked heavenward for patience.

“Find anything interesting?” Ichigo asked.

“I dunno. Can you keep your mouth shut about it?” Hitsugaya droned.

Karin winced as her brother looked like a kicked puppy. “Harsh, Tōsh.”

“True, Karin.”

“I think my children have learned their lesson about intel,” Isshin drawled with a glance at each of his children, who flushed and avoided his eyes. “Share?”

Hitsugaya sighed. “I still have a large swath to go through, but I found sporadic records of strange girls with shinigami-like powers of purification and Soul Burial. Old reports of skirmishes between them and patrolling shinigami. Back in the old days before Twelfth adopted its scientific, communications, and world-monitoring functions, the Thirteen Divisions had a fair number of shinigami go missing in action. At the time, there was suspicion that these girls had somehow stolen shinigami powers from a segment of the missing shinigami. That they were the reason why the shinigami went missing in the first place. It turns out it's actually one of the reasons a shinigami sharing their powers with a human is— was— such a dire crime.” Many glanced at Ichigo. Homura recalled he had been involved in some power-sharing debacle.

“So, what, the shinigami went for summary execution after jumping to conclusions?” Ishida snorted derisively. “Typical.”

An irritated scowl furrowed the captain's brow. “I hate the history as much as you do. Soul Society changes slowly by its very nature, but we are progressing. If you study human history, you find that such tendencies pervade many human civilizations even to the modern day. Every society has skeletons in its closet. Even Quincy.”

“The Quincy—” Ishida interrupted.

“Speaking of Quincy,” Urahara said mildly as he set the tablet down and looked at Ishida with interest. “What did you find in your research, Mr. Ishida?”

Ishida's jaw worked silently for a minute. Then he sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I looked in the genealogies for Quincy who died before age twenty. Proportionally speaking, more girls died in that age bracket than boys. I cross-referenced the dates with the histories. About two thirds of the female deaths were definitively listed as due to illness and encounters with Hollows, hostile humans, or shinigami— roughly the same number of female deaths as male deaths, which
makes sense. The extra third of the deaths of Quincy girls is further split into rough thirds. Overall, about one ninth documented deaths in childbirth in the late teens, one ninth disappearances presumed dead, and one ninth undetermined causes—just being found dead, usually without injuries or illness, often when away from home by themselves.”

“My, my,” Urahara murmured. “About twenty-two percent of female Quincy deaths in childhood and adolescence that could support the Quincy magical girl model. That’s over one fifth. Fairly significant.” He tapped his fan against his chin. “Did you calculate a margin of error?”

“Plus or minus about seven percent.”

Urahara hummed in thought. “Were there any location or population distribution patterns?”

“I haven’t compared locations, but population distribution? Yes, actually,” Ishida said with a frown down at his notes. “Eighty-nine percent of the mysterious deaths and disappearances I’ve found were among Gemischt girls. Only eleven percent were from among the Echt. For all other confirmed deaths, the numbers are around sixty-forty due to there being more Gemischt than Echt. A twenty-nine point deviation is suspect, in my opinion.”


The Quincy glared. “German.”

“Whatever.”

Ishida twitched and looked like he wanted to throw something at Ichigo.

Yuzu raised her hand like she was in class. Ever the peacemaker, she said, “Umm, I've never heard those words before, Uryū. Can you explain, please?”

Ishida sighed. “Echt is the term for those with an unbroken line of Quincy among all direct ancestors. Gemischt is the term for those whose bloodlines are broken up with non-Quincy direct ancestors.”

Karin raised her brows and drawled, “Like purebred and mixed breed dogs?”

“Or nobility?” Yuzu quickly added before her sister could be subjected to more than a murderous glare.

Ishida gave Yuzu a flat look that said I see what you did there, but he didn't verbally acknowledge her ploy. Instead, he continued, “Echt generally had much more social and financial power than Gemischt. Gemischt often took subordinate roles to Echt. On the battlefield, Echt were their commanders. Off the battlefield, Gemischt were often house servants, laborers, et cetera.” He sighed unhappily. “Something of a feudal system. The basic structure followed Quincy culture as it expanded globally.”

“Meaning Gemischt girls might have stronger wants,” Isshin said thoughtfully.

“And be more vulnerable to something offering to grant a wish,” Sado murmured.

Urahara looked fascinated. “Did you notice anything about the relevant Echt girls that would set them apart from the others?”

“Not that I saw,” Ishida answered. “I can look into that more.”
“Please do. And plot locations, if you could.” Urahara scratched the stubble on his chin. “Was there anything else in the histories that would support the assertion that Quincy girls contracted?”

Ishida frowned and looked down at his neat notes. “About half of the girls in that mystery segment were noted to have been vaguely rebellious, or to have suddenly changed behavior, or to have been punished for sneaking out unescorted not long before their deaths or disappearances. Nothing more specific than that, I'm afraid. Many didn't have notes like that at all.”

“Proportions?” Isshin asked.

The Quincy glanced at him. “More notes about erratic tendencies and misbehavior among the strange deaths than among the rest of the deaths. More notes about Gemischt girls than Echt girls. Then again, the histories were written by Echt Quincy who may have... obscured some details about anything embarrassing by fabricating illness or injury, or omitting any notes at all if a girl did something... scandalous.”

“What, like a fancypants purebred Quincy pulling a Romeo and Juliet and prancing off into the sunset with a normal human?” Karin asked with a smirk as she leaned her chin on her elbow.

“...Exactly.” Ishida looked like agreeing with her pained him.

“Well,” Urahara said decisively. “For now we can at least say that the Quincy evidence doesn't definitively rule out the possibility of Quincy magical girls.” He clapped once to close the subject and turned to Homura. “Did you bring me anything, Miss Akemi?”

“Yes,” she answered quietly. She manifested her shield, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and passed it across the table. “Yoruichi had me buy a map and draw a rough boundary where she thinks the spell is set. At least a section of it.”

“Spell?” asked Orihime.

“There's some kind of kidō over Asunaro. We have to figure it out before we can poke around up there,” Urahara said absently. Looking at the map, he observed, “Huh. Right on the city limits, eh?”

“That mean something to you, Sandal-Hat?” Ichigo asked.

Urahara looked up and beamed sunnily. “Nope! Just interesting!” He carefully folded the map and set it down. “How are things proceeding this time, Miss Akemi? Is Yoruichi having any effect?”

“Yes,” Homura replied coolly. “She is an excellent distraction and talking point with the other girls.” The magical girl looked down for a moment, debating internally, then looked up and hesitantly offered, “She gives... sound advice.”

“T've glad to hear that!” Urahara said with a grin. “Now, when we talked on the phone, she mentioned that she was able to guide you through rudimentary healing kidō on that boy who is the usual cause of Miss Miki making a healing wish, correct?”

Homura nodded seriously. “She said you would probably teach me something more this weekend.”

“Quite!” Urahara's grin widened with vaguely sadistic eagerness. “I'm going to give you and the girls a crash course on healing kidō tomorrow morning!”

“Oh, God,” Ichigo and Isshin said in the exact same dreadful tone.
Homura glanced at them with trepidation. Isshin noticed and ran a hand through his hair. “Kisuke is a genius—”

“Thank you!” said genius chirped.

“—And his methods of teaching can be extremely effective but... ah....”

“More stick than carrot,” Ichigo said drily. “More *whip* than carrot.”

“You *wound* me,” Urahara mourned with a pout.

“Whatever. You haven't told us what *you've* found out, Sandal-Hat,” Ichigo said suspiciously.

The shopkeeper hummed and gestured vaguely with his fan. “A lot of scientific jargon, but it boils down to something being very wrong with the distribution of spiritual density around Mitakihara. I don't want to get too deep into the details there because I'm still working with hypotheticals. The information Captain Hitsugaya brought should help me fill some of that in.” He nodded his gratitude at the shinigami, who nodded back. “I may have to craft a ruse for Yamamoto to get some more data from Twelfth for me to add to the files from the last timeline, though. Now, as far as magical girls themselves are concerned: My experiments with Karin and Yuzu this week have been quite edifying. The magical girl soul seems to function with very fine differences to the shinigami soul. Weapon summoning or generation appears to be an interesting mix of shinigami shikai and Quincy generation of spirit weapons. Magical girl flash step seems to be a hybrid of shinigami shunpo with Quincy Hirenkyaku— very much like the Bringer Light of Fullbringers, but without the Hollow reiatsu and usually not the visible flash. I want to study this in more depth before coming to any conclusions. My working hypothesis is something to do with the involvement of the living body as the focus of magical girl powers instead of fighting as a pure spirit. It's all nebulous but very fascinating.”

“Nerrrrrrrrrrrd,” Karin droned. Her face was pleasantly amused, though.

“I hope I'm your *favorite* nerd,” Urahara cooed with one hand pressed to his cheek in mock-shyness, the other hand fluttering his fan in front of his face.

“No comment~”

“Awwwww~”

The meeting wound down after that. Karin and Yuzu cheerfully dragged Homura out the door and down the street ahead of the rest of the group heading back to Kurosaki Clinic. They trooped into the kitchen, shoved a pan of brownies at their friend and plopped three plates and silverware on top of them, loaded their own arms with drinks and ice cream, and swept a confused Homura upstairs for a sleepover during which they had no plans to sleep anytime soon. Homura was initially reluctant to talk, so Karin and Yuzu slid into easy gossip that didn't require much response from her if she didn't feel like it. The sisters related Urahara's weird tests through the past week, chatted about their school friends, and eventually used that transition to coax Homura into telling them the mundane but pleasant things that she had done with her once-and-again friends.

Karin's eyes *gleamed* at the words *Midnight the Conqueror*. Yoruichi would probably be hearing a lot of that title.
The girls demolished the sweets and finally drifted off to sleep around two. Homura was the last to succumb, too comfortable to bother moving to turn out the light. She drowsily watched Karin's brow and fingers twitch as she dreamed while Yuzu clung to the cake server and muttered to it grumpily. It was... peaceful. Elsewhere in the house, Ichigo's three friends were steady beacons on the floor below; the burning moonlight of the Kurosaki men—one fire bright, one fire dark— was banked and warm in the sleep to either side of the sisters' bedroom. Homura had forgotten what it felt like to be surrounded by friendly magic and not feel caged, stifled, or threatened—to not have to obsess over which “Homura” the people around her knew this time. She could just... relax. Though she was very sleepy, her bone-deep, constant tiredness felt lessened somewhat.

*What an odd juxtaposition*, she thought distantly. She immediately forgot the thought. Just as she floated away, Homura wondered how long it had been since she last felt so safe.

Homura jolted awake at the slam of the window next door and a shout from outside. Karin opened her eyes just enough to target and grab her shoulder while Yuzu sat up and yawned. Isshin's voice bawled outside; Ichigo's window slammed open, his voice yelled something angry, and the window slammed shut again.

Typical Kurosaki morning madness. Right. She needed to get used to that.

Following another lively breakfast, the three magical girls walked to Urahara Shop together. Mr. Tsukabishi escorted them to the back room and served tea at the table. The girls waited for Urahara in silent boredom. None of them bothered turning around when he wandered up behind them, whistling, so they all nearly jumped out of their skins when he sashayed past them and dumped what looked like a bare-muscled human body on the table with a thud and a rattle of teacups. Yuzu squealed and flailed backwards. Karin and Homura leaned back and looked down in horror.

“Welcome to Healing 101!”

“Holy shit, did you skin someone?!” Karin shrieked.

“Who, me?” Urahara asked with an excessively innocent expression. “Of course not! This is my good friend, Mr. Monk!” He bent down, grabbed the body's wrist, and made it wave a greeting.

Homura was no stranger to gruesome bodies but this was the last place she had expected to encounter one. Her mouth opened and closed without sound as she tried to find words. “Wh—What? What?”

Urahara grinned sunnily and dropped the body's arm. “It's short for *Homunculus!* He'll be your friend, too!”

“It is a skinless human body,” Karin ground out, looking at Urahara sideways as though he had gone insane.

“No, no— Mr. Monk is a gigai with transparent skin and subcutaneous fat to best display internal anatomy.” Urahara waved his fan at the body, face and gestures goofy. “Don't worry— he's just a medical dummy. A really detailed one. That can bleed. And has a functioning autonomic nervous system. And a rudimentary reiryoku system akin to a normal human's. But no consciousness.”

The girls' faces cycled through many different emotions. After a delay to process and really look at
the gigai, Yuzu held her hand in front of her mouth and said, “Oh, my God, it's breathing.”

“I did just say he has a functioning autonomic nervous system,” Urahara said gleefully. “That and the reiryoku are what make Mr. Monk so useful!”

Karin calmed down and got grumpy. “You're such a goddamn troll, Sandal-Hat.”

Urahara giggled behind his fan. He then strolled to the opposite side of the table, slung a long art tube off his back, pulled out some odd contraption, and unfolded it into an easel from which a stack of posters unfurled. The girls looked at the top image for a moment, but Urahara stepped to the side and slapped his folded fan into his hand. “All right! Before we begin, I'd like to summarize my observations of you girls regarding healing.”

“Joy,” Karin droned.

“You magical girls appear to be excellent at healing yourselves—a curiosity in itself, as shinigami can have difficulty with that. You can heal other magical girls and injured shinigami with diminished effectiveness or efficiency, but it's still within your abilities.” He paused and tilted his head toward Homura. “My sample size is admittedly small. Do you have any observations to add, Miss Akemi?”

Homura frowned. “Some magical girls have greater healing abilities than others. For example, Sayaka Miki’s wish to heal someone enhanced her capacity for healing of herself and others.”

Urahara looked fascinated. “There is a correlation between wish and abilities?”

“Yes.” She paused thoughtfully. “Allegedly. I do not know how far to trust the Incubator's explanations of powers now.”

Tapping his fan against his chin, Urahara asked, “Can you give me some examples? If you know any, that is.”

Homura nodded. “Mami Tomoe contracted when the Incubator approached her in the wreckage of the car accident that killed her parents.”

“Asshole,” Karin sneered.

“I found an article about it once. She was trapped in the back seat with serious internal injuries. Anyway, she didn't want to die. She never told me her exact wish, but the Incubator once said her abilities with magic ribbons stem from her desire to be 'tied to life’.”

Karin crossed her arms and skeptically said, “That sounds kinda....”

“Abstract,” Urahara finished when she couldn't find a word.

Homura shrugged. “Sakura's wish for people to believe her father's preaching gave her a power the Incubator calls 'enchantment'. It's mostly like... a boost in persuasiveness. Tomoe once told me Sakura tries to avoid using it since her father....” Homura sighed. “I think she must use it unconsciously when she manages to rent hotels without an adult, though. She sometimes has the ability to create illusions of herself in battle, but I have only seen it very rarely and very briefly, usually when things are particularly dire. She has a fire aspect but mostly relies on her segmented spear.” She noted Urahara's interest and paused. He gestured for her to continue. “Then Miki. The Incubator said outright that her extremely advanced healing powers stem from making a wish to heal. Her main attributes appear to be water and music, but she relies almost exclusively on her cutlasses. I do not know if the musical aspect is... innate or artificial, I suppose.”
“What about Madoka?” Yuzu asked.

Homura frowned. “I... don’t know. Her wishes are always made out of... concern or sympathy. Her Soul Gem looks like a teardrop when she is transformed. She uses a bow and arrows and her magic is associated with roses. I do not know how those could relate.”


“Excuse me?”

“What color roses?”

Confused, Homura replied, “Pink.”

“Light or dark?”

“Light?”

“Ahh,” he said with understanding. “In Western flower languages, light pink roses can signify several things. Among them: grace, sweetness, gentleness, admiration, and sympathy. Medium pink is associated with cheering people up— especially those who are grieving or healing.” Urahara tilted his head. “There's also the Western association of the bow and arrows with love— Cupid's bow.”

Homura stared with blank surprise. “Oh.”

Karin smirked at Homura and leaned on one elbow. “Sure sounds like Madoka.”

“Yes,” Homura murmured as she looked down at her hands, face soft.

“Does degree of power correlate to effectiveness of healing, in your experience?” Urahara asked Homura.

Homura looked at the ceiling in thought for a long moment. “I am unsure. Tomoe can heal, but does not do it often. Most of the times she has, it was to repair damage I did to the Incubator. Sakura... I have not seen her actively heal someone, but she can... repair or preserve Miki's and Tomoe's bodies if they are recovered when they become Witches. I am not sure if that is healing or something else. Both of them are on the high end of the power scale. Miki's magic is average, but she is the best healer.”

“Interesting,” Urahara declared. “Anyway, back on track! Your greatest challenge appears to be the healing of normal humans. I personally think it's more due to a lack of education than a lack of ability.” He glanced at Homura. “Did Yoruichi tell you about how physical bodies get weird with spiritual healing?”

“Yes, though not in great detail,” Homura replied. “She had me focus on sensing Kamijō’s soul as it overlaps with his body and sensing where the... reiatsu... felt weak and dim in his hand, then applying my magic carefully while imagining the places that felt weak as paper I had to glue to cardboard. Then she had me pour in some extra magic while willing healing and leave it to 'take' for a few days. Miki mentioned that he improved some, so something about it worked.” She tilted her head. “Yoruichi said she would leave the explanation for why it worked only a little and how to do more to you. She has had me studying the anatomy of the arm and hand in the mean time.”

“Excellent.” A pleased smile curled Urahara's lips. He snapped his fan closed and slapped it into his empty palm. “Okay, students! The issue at hand boils down to most spiritual healing working
“Then why could Kyōko heal the empty bodies?” Yuzu asked with confusion.

“I have no idea!” Urahara declared with a smile. “I don't even know if what she did was healing. I'll investigate that anomaly later. Moving on. While the human body has a great potential for repairing itself, it has its limits. Healing is also tied to the subject's soul and its bond with their physical body. The stronger the connection, the more the resiliency of the soul can boost the physical body's ability to repair itself.”

Yuzu and Karin oohed in understanding while Homura focused on Urahara with intense concentration.

“Oddly enough, some of the living actually identified these connections in depth before shinigami did,” Urahara continued. “The simplest to explain with a visual aid is the concept of chakra. It is a system that describes the flow of spiritual energy through the human body, strengthening it and occasionally allowing abilities considered near-miraculous from a human standpo—”

“Have you been watching too much Naruto again, Sandal-Hat?” Karin asked drily.

“Nooo,” he replied with a pout. “Besides, there is no such thing as too much.”

Karin rolled her eyes. “Nerd.”

“The battle techniques are quite creative. Crafting similar kidō is quite enterta—”

Homura cleared her throat. Her face was bland as though she had done nothing when everyone glanced at her.

Urahara coughed into his fist. “Right. Yes. Moving on.” He sharply slapped his folded fan against the poster on the easel like an instructor's pointer. The image was a diagram of a human body with a vertical column of large colored circles stacked from head to groin. “Each major focus of spiritual energy is directly correlated with the main nerve ganglia— ah, clusters, I suppose— that emanate from the human spinal column.” He flipped to the next page for a minute to show them an anatomical cross-section of where bundles of nerves exited the spine, then flipped back to the first page. “These are also the main anchors of the soul to the physical body. By far the most important of these is Anahata, the heart chakra.” He slapped the fan against the circle on the diagram's chest. “Students, what else is located here?”

Karin and Yuzu chorused, “The Chain of Fate.”

“Correct!” Urahara drew back from the easel and tapped his fan in his empty hand as he lectured. “This is partly why a Hollow is said to have lost its heart. As we know, this is the place where the human soul is most directly tied to the body. Ancient Hindus with high spiritual power were able to determine this chakra point had that duty and figured out that mastery of meditation focusing on it enables one to leave and enter the body at will. Astral projection, in modern terms. To a degree, anyway. The concept has been embellished in fiction and oral tradition.” He looked at Homura. “Relevant for your project, Miss Akemi, they also determined this chakra is associated with, among other things, the actions of the hands.”

“Oooh,” Yuzu cooed as Homura's eyes went sharp.

“Now, various sects and scriptures identify hundreds to thousands of minor chakra points elsewhere throughout the body. Most of them are correct to at least some degree, excepting some clerical errors by scribes—the discoverers had varying power levels and techniques that made
them notice different things and group themselves together into separate sects, is all.” Urahara flipped to a third poster that resembled a human outline completely filled with circles of varying sizes, many quite tiny. “What Yoruichi was walking you through, Miss Akemi, was a simplified version of thinking of the foci as stitches holding two identically-shaped pieces of cloth together. In alignment, I mean. When stitched properly, each piece of cloth reinforces the other. The soul is stronger than the body to some degree and is thus the reinforcing agent.” With his free hand, he fished around in his haori and whipped out an object that was two differently colored handkerchiefs sewn together, one thicker than the other. He tucked his fan in a pocket and made a show of tugging and twisting the cloth, demonstrating that it was strong. “Now, sometimes physical damage comes along—be it illness or injury—that is serious enough to damage those connections.” Urahara laid the cloth on the table, pulled a scalpel from a pocket, and sliced open the stitches near one corner of the cloth, then picked it up and jerked the corners apart, popping more stitches. He held it up and wrenched it around more, showing that the separated portion of the cloth was more flimsy, somewhat ragged, and not exactly aligned. “As you can see, when lacking the extra reinforcement from the soul, the body is less resilient. It can be repaired by itself to an extent, but it's more delicate.”

“Dude. Are you saying people who are sick or paralyzed or something are that way because their souls aren't powerful enough to fix them?” Karin asked skeptically. “Because that would be shitty.” Beside her, Homura frowned and unconsciously lay a hand over her once-flawed heart.

“No, no, you misunderstand,” Urahara answered. “No matter the power or strength of the soul, it's the integrity of the anchors that matters most because the soul is always more powerful and inclined to healing than the body. It remains poorly understood, but some diseases and injuries compromise the anchors as well as the physical body, so even a powerful person with good anchors could succumb if the damage outweighs other factors. Someone with great spiritual power but compromised anchors may not recover from injury and illness as well as a much less powerful person whose anchors are perfect. Consider serious bone injuries as a metaphor. If a bone suffers a complex fracture and receives no treatment—no support—it can heal mangled, if it heals at all. If it is placed in a cast, it will likely heal better. But if pins or bolts are placed surgically to hold the bone pieces in very fine alignment, the bone may heal to nearly-normal status. The degree of reinforcement can make a significant difference in outcome.” He pursed his lips and rolled his head, thinking. “Let's go with another metaphor. Consider an average house that is properly secured to its small, simple foundation and a mansion poorly secured to its large, fancy foundation. Assuming otherwise equal workmanship on both houses, which one is most likely to sustain less damage in an earthquake and be repaired more quickly afterward? Or more likely to stay where it is instead of being washed away in a flood?”

“The little one that's actually attached to its foundation,” Karin answered with a frown. “But... so, people who are sick or permanently disabled by something would be better if they, like... connected to their souls better?” She leaned on an elbow and gave him the side-eye. “That sounds like blamey New Age bullshit to me.”

“If what you mean to ask is if the sick or disabled can be blamed for their outcomes for lack of spiritual effort, then no,” Urahara answered. “Barring outside interference, the degree of spiritual connection and support between a body and soul is mostly innate—think of a physically strong person with a weak immune system and a physically weak person with a strong immune system. Third-party interference can have some effect in a way similar to a vaccine or surgery's supportive role. Base degree of connection is a roll of the dice when soul first joins body. All you can do is work with what you were granted by the cosmic lottery, as it were. Human ability to repair one's own anchors is extremely limited, no matter the level of power, and is especially limited when a chronic condition continually erodes the tethers. Spiritual activities such as healing-focused meditation or prayer might have some effect, but results are usually negligible if the person in
question has inefficient connections to begin with. And that is no fault of theirs—it's as much of a
gamble as one's genetic predispositions to illnesses are.” He looked at each of the girls and
evaluated their faces. “Miss Akemi?”

Homura was frowning deeply. “If that is true—if what you said about healing one's own physical
body being so difficult is true,” she said slowly, “why am I able to rapidly heal my heart and repair
my eyes on command? My physical body?” She drew her finger along her jawline and curled her
hand under her chin. “Why can any magical girl heal her own physical body? Especially as
automatically and intuitively as it seems to be for us?”

Urahara pointed at her with his fan, gray eyes sharp. “That is an excellent question, Miss Akemi. I
have yet to study it.”

“I see.” Homura frowned down at her lap.

“Ahhh, don't sound so disappointed,” Urahara cooed, opening his fan and waving it at her as she
looked up again. “A mystery is an opportunity to learn! Now that you know of it, you'll be paying
more attention when you encounter healing, will you not?”

“...Yes?”

“Good, good!” Urahara grinned. “Who knows what you might find if you apply critical thinking to
the aspects of magical girlhood you've taken for granted!”

Homura tilted her head doubtfully. “I suppose.”

“You'll see, you'll see,” Urahara chirped with more waves of his fan. “Ah. One concluding thought
to wrap up the lecture thus far: Unfortunately, some physical diseases and injuries have a chronic
destabilizing effect on the anchors between body and soul even if the anchors have been healed by
an outside source. It is quite frustrating. We are still unsure why this happens in some souls and not
others, but it seems to be the rule, for now.”

“What? You haven't figured something out?” Karin asked. She held her hands to her cheeks and
widened her eyes in feigned shock. “How can this be!!”

Faint amusement crossed the scientist's face. “Every Napoleon has his Waterloo,” he murmured.
“But it is on my list of things to do more research on. I've had a busy century.” He took a deep
breath. “Anyway. Back to healing. Spiritual healing is mostly centered on strengthening the
tethering of soul to body so the soul can support the body better. Pouring reiatsu into a spirit body
with repairing or healing intent can be very effective though imperfect because it is a spirit-to-spirit
correction, and the soul is nothing if not malleable. Pouring reiatsu into a physical body can help,
but it is the support structure that is most effective to bolster. Consciously repairing connections
and encouraging the spiritual side to enhance the physical side is the best option. It also
concentrates and conserves your energy to use it most effectively. Think of applying your power
like spraying water from a hose to put out a fire with and without a pressure nozzle. Focusing the
water— your power— is more effective and not as lossy.”

The girls nodded and murmured their understanding.

Urahara grinned. “Now for the hands-on portion of our class!” He bent and smacked his fan against
the chest of the medical gigai— over the heart chakra. “Mr. Monk and I will now teach you how to
detect the connections and what playing with them does to physical anatomy.”

It was a long afternoon.
A/N: The trickiness of those technicalities and checking and re-checking them slowed me down. Had to be careful~ ;) If I obsessed over checking it any more I would lose my mind and never post ahaha. Let me know if something seems off. It could screw up something down the road if there's a contradiction.

Thanks for your continued encouragement and support!

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
I've been on worse infiltrative bodyguard assignments, Yoruichi thought idly on Saturday night. Sure, she had to endure an excitable toddler's grabby hands reaching for her ears and tail all afternoon, but his sister and father corrected him when he made contact and gave her pieces of chicken to reward her for her patience, so it worked out. Besides, baby giggles were highly entertaining. Thankfully, Tatsuya was equally amused by missing when she dodged creatively or pounced around. Madoka watched her play with him after dinner until she wore the toddler out enough to go to bed early.

Tomohisa had given her slivers of yet more chicken—score!—and murmured his sincere thanks while musing that maybe they should look into getting a cat of their own.

Yoruichi lazed among the small army of stuffed animals on the shelves in Madoka's room and watched her do homework for the rest of the evening, wondering when the girl's mother would get home from her business dinner. Her feline ears heard the rattle of the front door and muffled voices a few minutes before footsteps approached. She and Madoka looked up when the door to Madoka's room opened. Tomohisa leaned in and sheepishly asked Madoka to help him. Madoka sighed fondly and got up. Yoruichi dropped to the floor and followed, curious.

Junko Kaname was sprawled in the entryway. She was barefoot, her briefcase and discarded high heels half in and half out of the front door. To Yoruichi's feline nose, she reeked of sake. Drunk as she was, her clothes and makeup were still immaculate. She just writhed a bit and grimaced as she looked up at her husband and daughter. Madoka left to get water while Tomohisa stooped to help his wife get into a sitting position. Junko's head flopped to one side as she whined a protest. Then she stilled, her eyes widened, and childlike excitement warmed her features.

“Kitty!”

“Yes, dear, Madoka is cat-sitting tonight,” Tomohisa explained patiently.

“Aahahaha, kitty!” Junko clumsily reached out for Yoruichi, who cautiously padded over and allowed herself to be petted. The drunk businesswoman cooed.

“You sound like Tatsuya,” Madoka teased as she returned from the kitchen and knelt to offer a cup. “Here. Water. I'll hold it for you.”

Junko blinked up at her daughter. She tried to take the glass herself but Madoka batted her hands away easily and put the cup to her lips. Junko drank as best she could, water dribbling down her chin. She sighed in contentment when Madoka pulled back.
“She drinks like Tatsuya, too,” Madoka giggled to her father as she pulled her mother's shoes and briefcase all the way in the front door.

Junko scowled. “My s-son is too young to drinks!”

“Ah-ahhhh, that's not what I—”

“Let's get you to bed, dear,” Tomohisa said gently. He took one elbow while Madoka hurried around to take the other and Yoruichi darted out of the way. Madoka and Tomohisa heaved Junko to her feet.

“I d'wanna move,” Junko moaned.

“I know, dear,” Tomohisa said. He shuffled them all around to aim for a hallway. “The dinners are running later these last few weeks,” he said neutrally. “Is something wrong?”

“Pigs,” Junko slurred.

Tomohisa held himself more rigidly as his face went cool, but Madoka looked confused and said, “Eh?”

“Pigs,” Junko repeated, then slid into a rant that distracted her from the fact that she was being compelled to walk toward her bedroom. Yoruichi trailed them and listened. “Greedy pigs. My ideas, my proposals, those two goddamn trustees treat me like a goddamn—a goddamn—seca—secta—ughhhhh.” Her voice and face slid into a slurred, mocking leer. “Ohhh, Kaaaname, maybe you'sh'd g'home an' change diapers while we finish talkn businz ha ha haaaa, 'don't worry 'bout keep'n up li'l ladies can't hold 'eir liquorrr,' pigs. Our whoh-ohhh-ooooole innernass'nal promo things is my ideas, idiots. So I drunk 'em unner the table. Show them. Pigs.”

Madoka and Tomohisa eased Junko into bed. She flopped on the mattress haphazardly and pouted up at them. “Sorry.”

Tomohisa sat on the bed and reached over to caress her cheek. “Don't be.” He smiled gently. “I'm very proud of you.” She flushed and shyly tried to pull covers up over her, but wasn't coordinated enough to figure out she was on top of the covers. Tomohisa's smile gained a sharp edge. “Under the table, huh?”

Junko gave up on the sheets and flung her arms onto the pillow on either side of her head, lips curled smugly. “I stayed 'wake and din't e'en throw up,” she slurred proudly. “Unlike some pigs 'oo neeeed~ newww~ shoooo-hooooze~~~.” She snickered evilly.

Tomohisa smirked and pushed her hair from her face. “Pigs do tend to make messes of themselves,” he murmured philosophically.

Junko's giggles spawned hiccups as her eyelids drooped. Just as Tomohisa moved to stand, she grabbed for his wrist.


“Love you, too,” Tomohisa said as he squeezed her fingers.

Junko's smile was blissful as she immediately drifted off.

Tomohisa glanced at Madoka and gestured toward the door with his chin. She picked up Yoruichi and left the room, followed by her father. When Tomohisa had carefully closed the door, he turned
to his daughter and quietly asked, “Want some hot chocolate?”

“Sure,” Madoka answered, scritching Yoruichi’s chin. She tilted her head and looked at the bedroom door. “Mama has it rough, huh?”

Tomohisa loosely wrapped an arm around her shoulders and ushered her down the hall. “That she does, sometimes. But she eats snobby old men who think women should only be secretaries for breakfast. Defying their expectations is one of her life’s missions. Making them squirm entertains her. It wears on her sometimes, but your mother is a very strong woman.”

Yoruichi decided Junko Kaname was her kind of woman. Drinking with her and Kūkaku would probably be highly entertaining.

Madoka looked down at Yoruichi and smiled warmly. “Mmhmm. She really is.” She looked up at her father and hopefully asked, “Do you think I can be like Mama when I grow up?”

“Of course!” Tomohisa ruffled her hair with a grin. “Don’t take that to mean you have to be a hotshot businesswoman if you don’t want to, though. Mama and I will be very proud if you grow up to be a young woman who can be herself while doing whatever it is she loves and doesn’t let the world discourage her from doing it.” He squeezed his daughter’s shoulder. “Mama had lot of uphill climbing to do to get where she is today. She fought hard to accomplish her dream. Still has to fight to keep it. If you want to be like Mama, find what you love and fight to keep it. And know we’ll do everything in our power to support you.”

Cheeks pink, Madoka leaned into her father’s side. “Thanks, Papa,” she murmured.

Late Sunday morning, Yoruichi was sprawled out on Madoka’s bed watching the girl dream with drowsy amusement. It turned to vague concern when the girl’s face became troubled and her breathing labored. Then Madoka’s eyes snapped open as she fearfully mumbled, “Homura?” with a breathy little gasp. Yoruichi watched the girl sleepily clinging to her stuffed bunny toy and looking around in confusion. Madoka’s eyes settled on her and stared for a minute before clearing as she apparently remembered why there was a cat in her room.

Madoka dragged herself upright and stared blearily at the floral window shades. After a minute of waking up, she scrubbed her eyes with her knuckles and moaned, “Ahhh, dreams are so weird.”

She cooed good morning to Yoruichi, stretched, and staggered out of bed with a yawn. Yoruichi trotted after her as she wandered to the back door in her pajamas and found her father picking produce from the garden. He didn’t need any help, so he told Madoka to go wake her mother.

The uncharacteristic devious smirk on Madoka’s face surprised Yoruichi. She was instantly curious.

They went to the door from the night before. It was already ajar. Madoka slammed it open ferociously. Yoruichi peeked in. Junko had managed to get under the covers at some point in the night. Little Tatsuya was perched on top of her duvet-cocoon, lightly pounding his fists on it.

“Mama! Mama! Up! Mo’nin’! Up! Maaamaaaaaa!”

Madoka marched over to the curtains and threw them wide as Yoruichi slunk along the baseboards
of the room. The girl picked up her baby brother and put him on the floor. He smiled and stuck his chubby fingers in his mouth, gleefully expectant. Madoka whipped the covers off Junko and cheerfully yelled, “GOOOOOD MORNING!”

Yoruichi was hard pressed not to laugh with the siblings as Junko shrieked and flailed.

Breakfast with a hungover Junko was amusing. She was zombie-like and bleary. Madoka and Tomohisa played a game of making bizarre suggestions in reasonable voices to hear her replies. Tatsuya helpfully threw his own food at her from his high chair when she looked at her plate in confusion. Even when she began regaining her senses thanks to glorious coffee, she played along and ate the strawberries and cherry tomatoes that reached her general vicinity because Tatsuya squealed proudly whenever she did.

The Kaname family seemed to be one of the healthier, happier families Yoruichi had ever encountered in her work. Observing them was a treat.

The next couple hours were occupied by the family claiming the living room, parents perched on the sofa, quietly talking to one another and occasionally participating with the ball rolling-chasing-bouncing game their children played with the borrowed cat. Then the doorbell rang. Yoruichi sensed who it was before Tomohisa returned and announced that Miki was looking for Madoka. Junko took Tatsuya and Yoruichi trailed after Madoka as she padded through the house.

Miki turned to face Madoka when the door opened. “Oh, uh, hey, Madoka. Um. Sorry to bother you.”

Madoka noted the way her friend was shifting uneasily. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Or, um, kinda?” Miki took a deep breath and straightened. “Mom said I had to go shopping for some stuff. She wouldn't let me say no. I can't tell her about the Witch thingy.” She looked down at her feet, balled her hands into fists, and looked back up. “I— I don't want to go alone. So I thought— I thought, they always say that if you have to do something kinda risky, have someone with to help... so... yeah.”

“I— I don't know, Sayaka...”

Miki reached to one side, where Madoka and Yoruichi saw she must have leaned a baseball bat when she came. “I— I have a weapon!” Miki gave an experimental swing and looked at Madoka hopefully. “But... safety in numbers, you know?”

Madoka bit her lip as Yoruichi wove between her ankles. “I don't have anything I can use.”

Miki stood straighter, bolder. “I'll protect you!”

After nibbling one thumbnail for a minute, Madoka hesitantly said, “Let me get dressed.”

Yoruichi trailed her through the house, meowing unhappily. While she was pleased that Miki had the presence of mind to think of the buddy system, the entire situation had Bad Idea written all over it in flashing neon letters— especially considering neither of them had any idea how to use the reiatsu they possessed. When Madoka and Miki left, Yoruichi darted out the door to follow them. They tried to make her go back inside, but gave up and resigned themselves to the black cat trotting along with them as they headed for the shopping district.

They were cutting through a quiet lane behind an antique shop and a florist when Miki stopped in her tracks and cocked her head to one side. She looked around in confusion. “Do you hear that?”
Madoka frowned. “Hear what?”

“That girl.”

“What girl?”

“She’s calling....”

Yoruichi looked up at Miki’s face. She looked lost. Then Madoka stiffened and looked in the same direction as her.

“I... I hear it, too. But— but where is it coming from?” Madoka wondered, looking dazed.

The disguised shinigami cast her senses around them more carefully. Nothing. Miki turned toward the dumpster behind the florist and took hesitant steps toward it. Yoruichi still sensed nothing until the air warped and a large circle of dead butterflies spun into existence, the space within like a blurry kaleidoscope image with a large red butterfly sigil in the middle. The distinct Garganta-like feeling she had noted in Karakura popped up from nowhere. The heat haze effect must have been hidden by the dumpster, dammit.

*Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,* Yoruichi thought. *I knew this was a bad idea.*

Eyes glazed, Miki stepped inside and disappeared. Madoka startled into full awareness with a small flare of reiatsu and gasped, “Sayaka!”

Yoruichi yowled as Madoka jumped in the portal after her friend. She had no choice but to follow the girls. Akemi was going to be *pissed.*

The world within was bathed in dim twilight. It was composed of assorted architecture, art, and gardens. Arbitrary girders and bridges zigzagged from tower to tower. Atop the girders were rows of silhouetted Familiars conveying large rose blossoms across the air in an unending chain like a bucket brigade, stick-like arms swaying back and forth above them as they were partially silhouetted by a permanently setting sun. Old-fashioned elevators and wrought iron staircases were placed at random, some straight, some spiral, linking each checkered floor to the next. The girls and cat were currently on a platform of red and black tiles bordered by strips of dry grass and scraggly trees with twitching teabags dangling from their limbs.

Yoruichi had just resolved to claw Miki’s calves to snap her out of her trance when the girl blinked and jerked into awareness on her own. As with Madoka, it seemed to happen because of a small flare in her reiatsu. Kisuke would have a field day with this information.

Miki glanced around, saw Madoka completely frozen in terror, and gulped. “I didn't— I didn’t mean to do that.”

Madoka whined far back in her throat and looked around like a caged animal. There was no sign of the portal. “H-how do we get out?”

Miki turned in a circle. “The only doors I see look pretty crazy. And they're almost all the same.” She chewed her lip and weighed their options. “Stranger Danger called them labyrinths, right? That's a kind of maze, right? Mazes have exits. So— so maybe we just need to find the exit? If we wander around, we'll find it eventually, right?”

Yoruichi wondered if Japanese schoolchildren were taught the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The one where wandering the labyrinth got most people lost and killed, which she only knew because Kisuke was both a polymath and an unrepentant over-sharer who had inventor's-remorse
feelings about Daedalus and Alfred Nobel when exceedingly drunk.

...Probably not.

Hadn't their parents taught them to stay in one place when lost to be easier to find?

“What about the Witch? And the— the little thingies?” Madoka squeaked.

Whatever Miki was going to say was interrupted by the tinkling of small bells and chirping of baby birds as a flock of mustachioed blobs with butterfly wings and many eyes swarmed them. Both girls screamed and held their arms up to protect their faces as Yoruichi sized up the Familiars. They were all multicolored and didn't seem to have any appendages, simply flying around the girls in an irritable flock as their ringing and chirping grew louder. Then both girls broke and ran— thankfully in the same direction. Yoruichi tailed them as the Familiars chased them like a flock of oversize bats. Madoka followed Miki through twists and turns, up stairs and down stairs, until they got cornered in a courtyard surrounded by teabag trees decorated with multicolored caterpillars and chrysalids. Then came a clattering and giggling as giant cotton balls with mustaches lurched out of the rose bushes on butterfly legs.

They matched the description Akemi had given her, but Yoruichi still felt like she had accidentally ingested one of Kisuke's experimental products.

As the Familiars began closing in on the girls and chanting in childish German, Miki straightened her spine, hardened her face, and hefted her baseball bat into a few practice swings. “I—I'll handle it,” she said with shaky bravado.

“S-sayaka—!”

“I'll handle it!” the blue-haired girl shouted with an edge of panic in her anger. She swung at one of the flying creatures, missing the one she intended to hit but connecting with a second one behind it. Miki gave up on trying to aim in the mayhem and just started swinging wildly at the swarm while Madoka huddled at her feet with Yoruichi.

Yoruichi, for her part, seriously considered blowing her cover to assume her human form and save the girls before they could be badly hurt. Two things stayed her hand: the possibility that this experience could scare them out of contracting better than any words that could be said to them and the thought of if this Incubator is anywhere near as conniving as Kisuke or Aizen, this is a setup.

She held herself back and repeated this mantra as Madoka broke down and sobbed into her fur. Just when Yoruichi decided to throw caution to the wind, a bolt of reiatsu slammed down from above, hit the ground in front of them with gold and red light, and rapidly expanded in a storm of ribbons in every direction to blow away the Familiars as if by an explosion. Miki and Madoka's hair and clothes rustled as though caught in wind as light forming a floral kaleidoscope shimmered beneath their feet and exuded an outward-pressing force.

“Ah, that was a close one,” a girl's voice called out pleasantly. Yoruichi and the girls looked up. A blonde with her hair in curly pigtails was descending a nearby set of spiral stairs, spring green cardigan and pale yellow dress fluttering in the streams of golden reiatsu pouring off the yellow Soul Gem she held in her left hand. Her right hand hovered near the Soul Gem as little flowers made of light popped into and out of existence around it like bubbles. The girl smiled kindly, eyes warm. “But don't worry— you're safe now.”

Annd there's the bait for the trap, Yoruichi thought drily. Mami Tomoe, paragon of magical girls. Sometimes she hated being right.
Miki sputtered as the newcomer reached their floor and strolled closer, seemingly unmindful of the masses of Familiars angrily surging around her barrier. Madoka stared with wide eyes, surprised out of her tears.

“Are you injured?” the new girl asked.

Madoka stammered, “N-not really” as Miki squawked and gestured at the blonde with her bat and demanded, “Who're you??!”

“That's right, I haven't introduced myself yet,” the new girl said contritely. She opened her mouth to say more, but the strange blob Familiars were clustering together into large masses and beating on her barrier as the cotton ball minions generated thorny vines wielding scissors longer than the girls were tall. The girl let out a little huff, sounding more amused than anything. “Before I get to that——” she held up her Soul Gem and smiled— “Do you mind if I wrap up a bit of work?”

Miki opened her mouth to retort but it turned into a gasp as the yellow Soul Gem flared brilliantly. Yoruichi narrowed her eyes and committed as much as she could to memory to report to Kisuke later. Whereas Akemi's transformations seemed to be her violet reiatsu consuming her as though in some combination of flame and fluid, this girl's transformation seemed to consist of shining ribbons of yellow reiatsu twirling around her, pulling tightly around her form, and bursting away with a sparkle of flowers until her normal clothing was replaced by a magical girl costume featuring a white blouse, white arm warmers, brown fingerless gloves, brown cincher, short but puffy yellow skirt, striped saloon girl stockings, and brown and yellow boots. A flower-shaped topaz— her Soul Gem— was attached to a brown pillbox cap with a puff of white feathers. Yoruichi noted that the girl's reiatsu was very strong. Stronger than Akemi had been when facing the Pumpkin Witch; but Yoruichi was certain Akemi had been holding back then. And her use of conventional weaponry masked her true strength.

Yoruichi really wanted to know how strong Homura Akemi was when she went all-out. She admired the girl's ability to conceal her true prowess, though. It bespoke caution, self-preservation, and strategic planning— playing her cards close to the vest. As former commander of the division specializing in covert ops and subterfuge, she had true respect for that.

The magical girl winked at Madoka and Miki, pointed the toe of one boot out, and span in a circle, throwing her arms wide as tiny flowers burst up in a trail behind her dragging boot. Bolts of yellow reiatsu lanced out from her hands like party streamers and turned into ivory muskets. Dozens of identical copies of the weapon were suspended in midair, all pointing outward. The blonde gracefully raised one arm and let it fall in a sharp movement. The guns each shot a molten gold projectile. It looked like countless hot coals exploding out from around them. Secondary explosions happened whenever a musketball made contact with an enemy.

Yoruichi shook her head slightly and flicked her ears. She had long known how to use her own reiatsu to protect her ears from explosions— anyone who had ever lived in the same building as Kisuke Urahara or been friends with a Shiba learned this to preserve their sanity— but she had been just a bit slow on the uptake. Unacceptable. She'd have to practice. An irreverent thought crossed her mind: Well, it was obvious where Akemi had picked up her habit of suddenly firing the ordnance of a small army without warning anyone around her that she was going to do it.

With another gesture, the girl caused a yellow ribbon to spiral out of her hand and around the clearing, then retracted the ribbonlike reiatsu quickly to generate a small whirlwind to clear the smoke of her attack. The butterflies from the minions fluttered away. The magical girl settled her hands on her hips with a satisfied sigh and turned to the girls. She smiled contritely once again. “My apologies. Are you all right?”
Madoka stood shakily, clutching Yoruichi to her chest. The cat could feel the girl's heart thundering. Madoka's mouth opened and closed, but all she could do was gape. Miki behaved similarly. The magical girl looked concerned and stepped toward them.

Miki took half a step back. "Wh-who are you?"

The blonde blinked and stopped short in surprise, then smoothed her skirt and laced her hands together demurely. "Ah, I apologize. We were interrupted. My name is Mami Tomoe." She bowed slightly. "As you can see, I am a magical girl." Tomoe smiled and winked conspiratorially. "Don't tell anyone, okay?"


"Normally, I would try to get you safely out of here and chase down this Witch later, but this one has been so slippery I can't afford to lose it again— it may take more people like you before I can track it." Tomoe tilted her head and looked at them searchingly. "But you are conscious and sane in here. That's rare. I can feel your magic. You should be able to withstand this labyrinth as long as I do the fighting and you hang back and do exactly as I say."

"Won't— won't we get in your way?" Madoka asked meekly.

A sunny smile warmed Tomoe's face. "Of course not! Not if you cooperate! Stay behind me, stay together, and I'll be able to protect you."

"W-well," Madoka said hesitantly, "I— I don't want someone else to get hurt just to get out of here, so— so I'll come!" Determination didn't quite hide her fear, but Yoruichi was pleased that she could push through it.

Miki straightened with the trickle of her confidence returning and tentatively held up her bat. "We — we won't be completely helpless."

Bemused, Tomoe hesitantly asked, "Why do you have a baseball bat with you in the shopping district?"

Miki flushed and looked at Madoka. "Well, uh... long story?"

Tomoe's lips quirked with restrained humor. "You'll have to tell me later. Hold it up toward me, if you don't mind?"

Miki brandished the bat as Tomoe stepped closer. The magical girl grabbed the bat. Reiatsu, ribbons, and flowers flashed and transformed the bat into... well, a more ornate bat. Instead of scratched wood, it was pale blue and embossed with golden rose filigree. Tiny flowers bubbled around it, apparently a calling card of sorts for the girl's techniques.

Tomoe let go and stepped back. "There you go. It's not much, but it should work much better on anything you can hit. It's the closest thing to a magical weapon I can get you."

Kisuke is going to love this, Yoruichi thought. Imbuing a mundane object with one's reiatsu to enhance attack power was common enough, but to be able to do so remotely for more than a few seconds— as with Karin and her soccer balls— was advanced. Especially if the object itself was changed or encased.

Miki marveled at the changed bat and swung it experimentally. She must have liked what she felt because her eyes lit up even more. "Wow, thanks, Tomoe!"
Tomoe giggled into her hand, then turned serious. “Follow me. I'll finish this enemy and explain everything over some cake, okay?”

“I never say no to free cake!” Miki crowed.

Madoka looked uncertain, but firmed her face and straightened her shoulders with a nod.

They set off at a jog. Tomoe in the lead, Madoka in the middle carrying Yoruichi, and Miki as rear guard. Of sorts. Tomoe's floral kaleidoscope barriers did most of the guarding, but Miki got a few hits. Yoruichi took mental notes on Tomoe's abilities. Her supply of guns seemed to be endless, but Tomoe only ever got one shot from each gun before she threw it aside and conjured another one. The ammunition seemed to vary; most of the time, it was a glowing yellow musketball. Sometimes, Yoruichi could swear it was buckshot. Tomoe was a pragmatic fighter. She seemed to thrive mostly in ranged combat, but would allow specific weak enemies to get close to her if she could take them out with a blow from a used gun in one continuous motion between shots—excellent conservation of motion and effort. The girl often summoned multiple guns at once and went through them with the fluid grace of long practice, her style a mesmerizing hybrid of rhythmic gymnastics, flag twirling, stave fighting, and skeet shooting. She was methodical enough to get predictable if you watched her very long, but she was also dealing with floods of the same kind of enemy very efficiently, so that may or may not mean anything. And she was young, still. So much potential. Graceful and conscious of manipulating range as she was, Yoruichi bet the girl would be a holy terror if properly trained in hand-to-hand combat.

The party progressed through the labyrinth at a steady clip, plowing through twilit hallways, bridges, gardens, and galleries, past strange art, doors, and windows that looked like they had been slapped onto the walls with découpage and little respect for perspective or logic. Patrolling flocks of the chiming blobs kept finding them and clamoring to summon more cotton balls to stop them as they navigated rose-filled tea gardens and black hedgerows. They finally reached a pit that contained a fancy door. Tomoe jumped down into the pit, conjured a row of guns, and fired at the mob of cotton ball Familiars juggling roses. Madoka and Miki awkwardly dropped down after her and approached the door. It was covered in strange runes.

“There will be a much stronger monster called a Witch behind this door,” Tomoe explained with a businesslike tone. “You need to stay behind me and do as I say. I'm not sure what the inside will look like. Be ready for anything.”

Miki’s face firmed with determination while Madoka squeezed Yoruichi tighter and swallowed hard.

Behind the door was... another door, surrounded by a ring of giant dead butterflies. And another, and another. The butterfly doors had begun to seem infinite when suddenly a door opened into a massive chamber. Tomoe cautiously stepped to the floor's edge and assessed the battleground. Madoka and Miki peered around her. They were on a ledge high above a tea garden full of brambles and roses. There were also stone pillars with cotton ball heads and random artwork strewn about. The cotton ball Familiars bustled about the ground, apparently tending the roses. The chamber's walls were constantly shifting overlapping rings of different materials—lace, wrought iron, picket fences, burlap, plaster molding, accordion fencing, patterned wallpaper—a wildly rotating jumble, often featuring silhouettes of butterflies. Above them, the ceiling was completely blanketed in red rose blossoms. In the middle of the garden was a massive red fainting couch that served as throne to an ungainly monster.

“Look. That is a Witch,” Tomoe said to the other girls.

“Eugh,” Miki said with a lip curled in disgust. “Gross.”
“Y-you're going to fight that?!” Madoka asked, voice small.

Tomoe glanced at them over her shoulder with mild surprise, then turned and smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I won't lose to the likes of that. Here.” She took the magically-augmented bat from Miki’s limp fingers, twirled it around, and slammed the end of the bat straight down into the ground. Yellow and red ribbons exploded upwards like party crackers, arched outward, and formed Tomoe's floral barrier. She smirked playfully. “I’ll just be a minute. Then we can talk over cake!” Without further ado, the magical girl hopped over the edge and disappeared.

Madoka and Miki rushed to the edge. They and Yoruichi watched Tomoe stroll through the garden to approach the monster. The majority of it was an amorphous blob whose surface was swirled with colors that balanced out to peach mottled with red. Six black insect legs jutted out from the blob. The blob narrowed up to a vague neck holding a rough head of hanging moss and red roses. The whole thing was slumped over like a weeping willow, but shifted and twitched in a mockery of life. Gigantic swallowtail butterfly wings beat slowly on what was supposed to be its back.

Tomoe stopped within plain sight of the Witch, but it didn't react. The magical girl glanced down at what, from a distance, looked like little candle flames floating along the grass. She straightened, stared at the Witch, and deliberately stamped a candle flame under her heel. The Witch jerked up in alarm. Tomoe crushed another under her boot, grinding the thing into the sod for good measure. The Witch whirled to face her and roared. Tomoe curtsied and caused guns to fall from beneath her skirt. The Witch roared again, presumably at the impudence, and outright hurled its throne at the magical girl. Tomoe calmly grasped the guns as she rose from her curtsy, aimed, and shot at the furniture flying her direction. The two shots were sufficient to make the thing explode into a mess of splintered wood and upholstery as Tomoe back-flipped away.

Damn, this girl has style, Yoruichi thought appreciatively. She could condone a certain flair for the dramatic as long as it wasn't detrimental to actual battle performance. It certainly worked in the current situation. The Witch was agitated and jittering around the huge room like an angry bee with no apparent direction— too upset to coherently attack, it seemed. Perfect for taking pot-shots.

Tomoe took off her feathered cap, held it to the side and above her head with the brim down, and drew it across the air in front of and around her. Ribbon-like bolts of gold dropped out of it and turned into over two dozen muskets that stuck stock-up in the grass— her own garden of weaponry. She calmly replaced her hat, braced herself in a good stance, and began methodically firing gun after gun after gun at the flying Witch, her motions smooth as she swept up a gun with one hand and discarded a gun with the other in an easy, alternating rhythm. Those shots that didn't connect with the Witch pockmarked the walls and sparked yellow.

Yoruichi noticed the problem before the other girls did. Madoka and Miki gasped as the grass-born candle flames that had converged on Tomoe turned black and rose up in a line, melding into a black vine that wrapped around the magical girl's lower body and yanked her skyward. Madoka and Miki yelled her name as Tomoe cried out in surprise and immediately shot both guns she was holding, pelting the ground with buckshot and yellow sparks. The vine slung her around in the air and whipped her at a wall. The girls screamed, but Yoruichi watched intensely as she felt Tomoe's reiatsu spike right before the unexpectedly loud impact. When the dust cleared, Tomoe was sitting upright in the cracked wall, which looked more like a wrecking ball had hit it than a human body. The grimacing magical girl was still entwined in the vine but also surrounded by her floral kaleidoscope as little sparkles Yoruichi presumed were the eldritch flowers she'd seen earlier bubbled around her head and joints.

The little part of Yoruichi's mind that would forever speak in Kisuke's voice when evaluating oddities crowed, **Fascinating! Practiced or instinctive? How many techniques did she just combine**
into one? Would that be more akin to shikai or kidō? Or is it a completely new toy? She also noted that the girl would do well to drill in situational awareness. Getting snagged so easily had been sloppy.

The vine swung the girl airborne again and jerked her up to hang upside-down over the center of the garden—directly over the Witch. Tomoe's arms dangled loosely as the monster beneath her strained upward like a dog seeking a treat. Madoka and Miki screamed the girl's name again, terrified panic in their voices.

Tomoe shook herself a bit, shifted, and called out, “I'm fine!” She swayed a bit and glanced their way with a confident smile. “As though I could ever let myself look so uncool in front of my future magical girl juniors!”

Yoruichi's ears flicked back to rest against her head. Was it an innocent presumption based on the power Tomoe had sensed from the girls? Or had she been told to actively recruit them?

A hissing sound echoed in the chamber as all the bullet holes pockmarking the ground and walls sparked and sprayed ribbons of yellow light in every direction, accompanied by the tiny flowers characteristic of Tomoe's techniques. The cotton ball Familiars who had been tending the garden scattered around uncertainly as though trying to prevent damage to the roses. Many of the ribbons ensnared the cotton ball minions and thrashed them about in the brambles. The Witch turned this way and that in panic, decided the magical girl was to blame, and shrieked as a cacophony of machete slices rang out in the chamber. Gigantic pairs of black scissors burst from the Witch's mossy head, snapping toward Tomoe as they were propelled by thorny black vines. Tomoe's yellow streamers swirled through the air after them, lassoed them to restrain them, and wrapped around the Witch with a shower of tiny flowers. The Witch turned this way and that in panic, decided the magical girl was to blame, and shrieked as a cacophony of machete slices rang out in the chamber. Gigantic pairs of black scissors burst from the Witch's mossy head, snapping toward Tomoe as they were propelled by thorny black vines. Tomoe's yellow streamers swirled through the air after them, lassoed them to restrain them, and wrapped around the Witch with a shower of tiny flowers. Once the Witch was bound and struggling, Tomoe looked satisfied and murmured something as she put one hand to her neck and untied her costume's neck bow with a quick tug. The yellow ribbon flew a short distance of its own accord, snapped straight, and shot up at the vine Tomoe was suspended from. It cut the vine and freed the magical girl, then rebounded to return to her hand as she righted herself mid-fall. The ribbon enlarged and spiraled into a cylinder which filled and flashed with Tomoe's sunny reiatsu as it turned into a massive flintlock musketoon without a stock. Yoruichi didn't know how the hell the girl was holding it to her shoulder without looking comical—the barrel was nearly as tall as its wielder and should have looked ridiculous.

The magical girl cheerfully yelled, “Tiro Finale!” The ensuing discharge sounded like cannon fire and looked like a flamethrower of golden light. It seemed to ignite the ribbons of light around the Witch. Then everything exploded in blindingly bright yellow light.

Yoruichi stared in dumbfounded surprise. That was several orders of magnitude more devastating than she had expected. That Lieutenant-class attack could have done serious damage to a Menos Grande. And the one who used the technique was a cute fifteen-year-old girl in a cute dress and cute pigtails daintily landing with a pirouette and smiling up at them as though she had swatted a bug and was eager to return to her tea party.

Just.

Wow.

God, she hoped whatever Kisuke put together included teaching this girl something. She knew her friend had something in mind for her to do with Akemi, though he had been vague on details. That was going to be fun on its own. The prospect of adding Tomoe filled her with glee.

The garden world wobbled and collapsed, leaving all four beings standing in the alley once again.
Tomoe released her transformation, replacing her battle costume with her civilian clothing. The technique she had applied to Miki's bat faded as it fell over and clunked on the asphalt. Madoka and Miki stared at Tomoe as she delicately smoothed her dress and adjusted her hair. Yoruichi saw the light of newborn hero worship in their eyes. Which was probably the Incubator's pla—

*Good job, Mami!* a cheerful voice rang in their heads. Yoruichi stiffened as Madoka turned around in search of the “voice's” source.

“Ah, Kyubey!” Tomoe said pleasantly as she retrieved the Witch's Grief Seed from the pavement. “I was wondering where you were.”

Perched on the edge of the florist's dumpster among wilted bouquets of baby's breath, pink roses, and rotten white carnations was a creature that matched the sketches Karin, Yuzu, and Akemi had drawn for Kisuke. Its fluffy tail undulated lazily as its beady red eyes stared at the girls. What unnerved Yoruichi was that she hadn't sensed it at all. Still could not sense it. No noticeable reiatsu. She could smell it, though. Very faintly. Oddly, it didn't have any residual scents aside from Tomoe's. Usually, Yoruichi's feline sense of smell could assist her in making educated guesses about where any given item or being had been— traces of grass, smoke, sea breeze, food, and so on. Madoka tended to have the residual scents of laundry detergent and baby shampoo common in her home. Akemi had a constant undertone of gunpowder. Currently, Tomoe smelled strongly of baked sweets— probably the cake she had mentioned. Yet the Incubator only had its faint unique scent and Tomoe's faint unique scent. It hadn't picked up the scent of baked goods from the magical girl. It was something Yoruichi decided she should pay attention to in the long term.

*I apologize for my tardiness. But I knew you could do it, Mami!* the creature cheered. *And I see you made new friends!* It turned to the two girls it had yet to contract and tilted its head cutely, eyes crinkled in an approximation of a smile. *It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Madoka Kaname! And also you, Sayaka Miki!*

“How do you know our names?” Madoka asked timidly.

*I have a request for you two,* the Incubator said, completely ignoring the question. *I want you to make contracts with me and become magical girls like Mami!*

*Straight for the kill,* the cat observed grimly. *Think fast, Yoruichi.*

Chapter End Notes

**WITCH DATA**

**GERTRUD**, the Rose Garden Witch with a distrustful nature. She holds roses dearer than anything else. She expends all of her power for the sake of beautiful roses. Despite stealing the life-force of humans who wander into her barrier to give to her roses, she loathes the thought of them trampling the inside of her barrier.

Minion: Anthony. His duty is landscaping. His mustache is set by the Witch.

Minion: Adelbert. His duty is to act as lookout. Upon seeing a human, he will sound a warning bell and headbutt him mercilessly. They have 2.5 (20/8) vision. The smaller type can change into rose vines to hinder intruders.
This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Yoruichi had mere seconds to decide how to react—or whether she should at all. Figuring the girls could use some interference to keep them on edge around the Incubator and that she and Akemi could cook up an explanation later depending on its reaction, Yoruichi looked straight at the Incubator, set her ears back, and bristled her fur with a low growl. Everyone turned to look at her. She snarled a hateful threat, hissed, and bared her teeth. Madoka and Miki were instantly wary.

Tomoe looked stunned. She turned to the Incubator with wide eyes. “I thought you were invisible to anyone who couldn't be a magical girl, Kyubey.”

For the most part, the Incubator replied in a mildly curious tone as it scrutinized the spitting cat. With humans, that is. Some animals have always been more perceptive of the supernatural than humans, though. They have a certain intelligence but lack sentience to interfere with their instincts. It tilted its head in apparent thought. Felids and canids are the most adept, it said. I have been chased by the more territorial of each family. I tend to avoid them.

Yoruichi yowled, but was pleased. Hurray for the little monster providing her with a role to work with. It was lying about visibility, tho—wait. “For the most part.” With context that implied the answer was “true of all humans, but not for all animals.” Misdirection. Yoruichi growled resentfully. This was going to be like a business or matchmaking meeting between noble houses back in Seireitei. Or getting a straight answer out of Kisuke when he was in a mood.

“Animals?” Tomoe frowned in confusion. “But I've seen you near pigeons. They don't notice you.”

The Incubator took its eyes off Yoruichi to look at Tomoe and waved one paw dismissively. With the exception of corvids and psittacines—

“Sitta-what?” mumbled Miki.

—Most avifauna lack sufficient perception. I could walk through a flock of columbids without disturbing them.


“What do Colombians have to do with any of this?” Miki asked, scratching her head and looking
bewildered.

Avifauna are commonly called birds. Columbids are commonly called pigeons or doves. Also, corvids are generally called crows or ravens and psittacines are commonly called parrots, the Incubator explained happily.

From its posture and tone, Yoruichi would bet money it was making a play to look intelligent and instructive. Like a benevolent sharer of higher knowledge. It was like one of Kisuke's little “ha ha I'm so smart look at me say big words you don't know” needling techniques without the blatant obnoxiousness.

Miki's mouth twisted for a second. “Just say so, jeez,” she scoffed quietly.

Those terms are so specific that I find it more efficient to refer to the groups by their scientific classifications to include every species within the families, the Incubator chirped.

“A-ah. All right,” Tomoe said with a thoughtful look as the creature hopped into her arms. She turned back to the girls. “As I said before, I'm Mami Tomoe. I'm a third-year student at Mitakihara Middle School.”

“Um, I'm Sayaka Miki. I'm a second year there. And this is Madoka Kaname,” Miki said with a wave of her arm. She cautiously bent to retrieve her bat. After a long, uncomfortable silence, she blurted, “I think you said something about cake?”

Tomoe's eyes widened and she laughed brightly. “Of course, of course! Follow me!”

The cake was lovely, as was Tomoe's posh apartment, but Yoruichi refused to let the girls relax and enjoy either. She maintained a steady, low growl rumbling through the welcoming, oohing and ahhing, and serving. When the Incubator hopped onto the table in front of Tomoe, Yoruichi made a show of lunging for it, claws out, but allowed herself to be caught by Madoka and drawn into her lap. She settled back against Madoka's abdomen and hissed. Her behavior obviously disturbed all three girls. Then the Incubator gave her a gift.

Perhaps we should dispose of the feline, it said.

Madoka and Miki whipped their heads toward it and looked appalled. Both physically pulled back from the table.

The Incubator blinked exaggeratedly. Ah. Temporarily, of course. To prevent interruptions. Perhaps we can confine it? It waved its tail toward the apartment's hall to indicate the other rooms available.

A reasonable explanation that calmed the girls, but Yoruichi felt smug. The damage was already done. She became even more smug when Madoka hugged her protectively and said, “N-no. This is my friend's cat. She trusted me to take care of her. I'm keeping her with me.”

Your friend Homura Akemi, the Incubator added, far more directly than Yoruichi had expected. A ploy to catch them off-guard?

“So you know her,” Miki said.
No. I know of her but have not met her directly.

Tomoe frowned as she lifted her teacup to her lips. “How is that possible? If she's a magical girl, surely she must have made a contract with you?”

The Incubator looked at her placidly. *You could say yes. You could also say no. She is a curious anomaly. I do not know when she contracted. I am suspicious of her.*

Madoka and Miki shifted uneasily and exchanged a glance. The magical girl lowered her teacup after taking a sip and reproachfully said, “You didn't mention this when you told me to be careful of her, Kyubey.”

*I did not want to worry you unnecessarily, it soothed. Still, she is a dangerous unknown element.*

“She's our friend!” Madoka objected.

The Incubator turned to her and looked innocently curious. *Is she really?*

“Yes!” Madoka said emphatically.

“Akemi saved us! Like Tomoe did!” Miki added.

Red eyes shifted to Miki. *Are you sure that was not calculated on her part? Can you be sure she was honest with you? What if she aims to manipulate two potential contractees for her own ends?* *Ohhh, this sneaky little bastard,* thought Yoruichi.

Miki crossed her arms and scowled suspiciously. “I dunno. Can we be sure Tomoe saving us wasn't calculated? Can we be sure you're honest with us? What if you're trying to manipulate us?”

Tomoe looked startled and hurt. The Incubator blinked and tilted its head. After a long silence, it said, *Touché.*

Stalemate.

Yoruichi wondered exactly which of Miki's buttons had been pressed correctly to achieve this inversion of the suspicion Akemi had described of the times before.

“So,” Tomoe ventured after a long silence. She unhappily looked between her two wary guests. “You two are friends with the... other magical girl?”

The two friends glanced at each other again. Madoka looked forward. “Yes. She's very nice. I'm glad to have met her,” Madoka said with a touch of defiance. “It feels like I've known her much longer than I have.”

“Really serious and not good at chitchat, but she's cool,” Miki added with a shrug.

“And you say she saved you?” Tomoe prompted.

“Yup. The other day at the mall we ran into those cotton ball thingies.” Miki looked at Madoka. “She called them Familiars, right?”

“Mm-hmm,” Madoka agreed, still frowning.

Tomoe's brows rose. “She explained Familiars to you?” When they answered with nods, she asked, “What about Witches and such?”
“She told us,” Miki answered with a sulky caution.

What did she say to you? asked the Incubator.

“She explained things about everything and stuff,” Miki non-answered, eyes narrowed at the Incubator. “How about you tell us your version?”

Yoruichi glanced her way and took note of her tense body language—shoulders slightly hunched, chin tilted down while she looked up through her bangs, hands balled into fists in her lap, ignoring her cake and tea. It mirrored the slide into her particular brand of offensive defensiveness she had displayed during Akemi’s explanations. That could actually be a good thing, given the circumstances.

It would help to know what information she gave to you so that I may be sure to correct any inconsistencies, the Incubator argued, voice reasonable.

Madoka opened her mouth to answer, but Miki’s hand snapped up and gripped her shoulder to stop her. She was staring at the Incubator, eyes hard despite her apparent nervousness. “N-no. Then you could change what you say. I—I wanna know if what you say matches without—without you knowing what Akemi said.”

Yoruichi mentally threw her arms skyward in gratitude to any deity who might be paying attention. God bless the stubborn contrariness of Sayaka Miki! It could be useful! Aiming it seemed to be the tricky part.

“So, how about you tell us your version?” Miki repeated aggressively.

Tomoe looked between the girls and the Incubator, her dismay that everything was going so terribly wrong written all over her face. The Incubator stared at them for a long time, face blank, tail a sinuous metronome. At length, it sadly said, It appears Homura Akemi has already turned you against us.

The perfect words to make a lonely teenage orphan like Tomoe immediately increase her mental threat assessment of Akemi, Yoruichi noted. The perfect nudge to make the girl take on the effort of recruiting the potential contractees, drawing them away from the mystery Akemi presented, and digging for information without giving any kind of command. A neat little package.

Tomoe shakily set her teacup in its saucer and clenched her hands into fists in her lap, face distressed with an undertone of anger. “What did she tell you? Why are you so—so—” Words failed her. Anger faded into plaintiveness. “Why don't you trust us?”

“It's not you, Tomoe,” Miki said slowly. “Not really. But this guy is being weird. Not wanting to tell us stuff because we won't say what Akemi said.”

“Um,” Madoka said hesitantly, “My mama would say that... that not wanting to explain a contract is bad. I think.”

It is not that I do not wish to explain the contract, Madoka Kaname, the Incubator said carefully. It is that I do not know what verbal traps Homura Akemi may have laid when she spoke with you. She may have conditioned you to react poorly to a certain word, phrase, or concept.

“Nuh-uh,” Miki said defiantly. “She told us some things and warned us not to do it but said it's up to us and if we listened to your offer we should ask a lot of questions and decide for ourselves. How is that a bad thing?”
It sows doubt, the Incubator replied.

Madoka shifted uncomfortably. “Isn't that how contract... bidding... works?” She wet her lips. “Um. Kinda? Like, Homura made an offer— well, not an offer, I guess, but you know— and now I want to hear your offer, and then I ask questions and stuff to find out if you have a good deal or a bad deal. See if— if you get more from it than me. Or maybe you have a good deal, but it's not the right deal for me.” She squeezed Yoruichi and dipped her chin shyly. “O-or something. Kinda. Um.”

The Incubator stared at her for a long moment. You have more general knowledge of contracts than most humans your age, it observed.

The girl blushed, gave an awkward little laugh, and ruffled her own hair bashfully. “A-ah, I just know what Mama has said at dinner and stuff.”

Yoruichi needed to think long and hard about the implications of the Madoka of previous timelines choosing to contract despite that knowledge. Or was this the first time she had thought in business terms? It seemed unlikely, but Miki had already jumped the rails of Akemi’s expectations, so who knew? Then again, Akemi had said Madoka was always the one most likely to be cautious about contracting if she had forewarning. Time to think about it. Maybe there had been more behind it than Akemi had realized.

“S-so, what's your offer?” Miki asked sulkily.

The Incubator glanced at Tomoe, who pursed her lips and looked at the Incubator out of the corners of her eyes. “I'll explain the contract and the magical girl structure,” she volunteered in attempt to make peace.

Yoruichi and the girls listened as Tomoe gave the abridged version of the system and contract. The undercover shinigami was pleased that the girl presented the risk of death as seriously as she did, but her phrasing made that risk sound noble. At least she stressed that wish-making was not something to be taken lightly at all— that the girls should only do it if there was something they wanted badly enough to risk their lives for.

“That's... pretty much the basics of what Akemi said,” Miki said skeptically.

“But... but Homura told us more,” Madoka added.

“Yeah,” Miki agreed. “She— what's the word—? Em— Ell— Eel—?”

Embellished? the Incubator offered in an innocent tone that made Yoruichi want to strangle it.

“Elaborated?” Tomoe guessed.

“Elaborated, yeah! Elaborated on things she said a lot of magical girls don't know. Thanks, Tomoe.” Miki gave the Incubator a dirty look. “I'm not super smart but even I know those are different things.”

How do you know it is one but not the other? it asked smoothly.

Madoka very nearly scowled. Apparently, repeatedly accusing a friend of deception crossed a line with the sweet girl. “She proved it.”

“Proved what?” asked Tomoe.
Madoka and Miki exchanged a long, solemn glance. The pink-haired girl breathed deeply, sat straighter, and turned to look Tomoe in the eye, uncharacteristically serious. After a hesitation to ponder words, she said, “Homura said every potential magical girl should start by asking what a Soul Gem is.”

Tomoe looked confused. She manifested her Soul Gem in egg form and held it up in question.

“But what is it, Mami?” asked Madoka.

The blonde blinked and furrowed her brow in greater confusion. “I just told you: When a girl accepts a contract with Kyubey, a Soul Gem is born. It is the proof of a magical girl's magic—”

“But what is it?” Miki interrupted grimly. “What is it made out of?”

Tomoe's mouth clicked shut. She stared at her Gem, then the aloof Incubator, then her defensive guests. “Magic.”

Madoka nibbled her lip. “Why are they called Soul Gems?”

“Yeah,” Miki said, perking up with challenge. “Why not Magic Gems?”

*Every girl's magic is defined by the wish her soul expressed at the time of contracting, the Incubator said as Tomoe turned to it in question. This is evident in the different colors and shapes Soul Gems take, as well as in the wide variety of magical abilities contractees develop.*

Tomoe looked mollified, but Madoka and Miki exchanged an uneasy glance. Yoruichi hoped it was because they noticed the evasion.

“Did Akemi tell you something about Soul—” Tomoe started, but was interrupted by a phone ringing.

Miki shuffled around in her pockets with a mumbled apology and answered her phone. “Hi, Mom. ...Uh, yeah. Madoka and I ran into someone from school, so we're still... by the shops. Yeah. I'll get that, too. Okay.” She rolled her eyes and stared at the ceiling as her mother apparently nagged her. “Yes, okay, I'll hurry. See you later.” She hung up and looked from face to face around the table. “I have to go. We'll have to talk more later.”

“I'll come, too,” Madoka added quickly and stood as her friend did. She looked at her hostess and bowed slightly. “Thank you for having us, Mami.”

Tomoe rose and escorted them to the door, still uncertain. “If you have any more questions, feel free to see me at school or come here, all right?”

As they exited the door, Miki paused and turned back. “Thanks for saving us, Tomoe. Really. You're awesome.” She tilted her head and searched the older girl's face for a moment. “Can I ask you one more question Akemi told me to before I go?”

Tomoe raised a brow. “All... all right...?”

Miki pursed her lips for a moment, then grimly asked, “Where do Witches come from?”

The blonde blinked in surprise. “I... curses, of course.”

“Curses on what?” asked Madoka.

Tomoe knit her brow. “Spirits.”
Madoka tilted her head in confusion. “What kind of spirits? Where do they come from?”

Miki perked up with a sudden thought. “Oh, hey, have you seen any spirits without a curse?”

Tomoe looked stunned and confused. Behind her on the table, the Incubator was unfathomable as seemed to be usual. The magical girl opened her mouth to speak a few times but could not give an answer.

Miki pressed her lips into a disappointed line. “Think about it and tell us later, yeah?” She bowed slightly. “Thanks for having us over. And thanks again for saving us.” She turned away and walked past Madoka.

Madoka worried her lip and hopefully said, “M-maybe you should talk to Homura?” After another awkward moment, she turned and followed her friend to the stairwell.

Yoruichi wriggled up to peer over Madoka's shoulder. Tomoe stood motionless at the door, face completely bewildered.

And so began the wait to see whether Mami Tomoe would snap.

Mami stood at the door for a long time after the two prospective contractees had disappeared. She didn't know what to think. Their questions were ones she had never really considered before. Turning them over and over in her head just confused her more. At long last, she slowly shut the door, stared at it for a minute, then turned to look at the table. “Kyubey—”

The table was empty of everything save the three untouched slices of cake and the tea set. Kyubey was gone. The empty apartment felt cavernous in the silence.

Mami leaned back against her door and slid to the floor. The situation seemed to be more complex than she had first thought. She wished she had someone to talk it over with.

An hour later, Sayaka dumped her purchases in her kitchen and scurried off to hole up in her room with Madoka. They sat cross-legged on Sayaka's bed with a plate of cookies between them. Both were silent, each caught up in her own thoughts. Homura's cat was curled up in Madoka's lap, docile once more.

Sayaka thoughtfully sucked chocolate off her fingers as she watched the cat. “Midnight really hates that Kyubey-thing,” she began at long last.

Madoka hummed her agreement and pet the black cat, which immediately began purring. “I wonder if she's seen him around Homura. Homura sounded like she hates him.”

“Kyubey said he doesn't know her, but Tomoe said magical girls are made by contracting with him,” Sayaka said slowly. “So... is it lying, or is Akemi?”

Her friend frowned hard. “I believe Homura,” she said. “She was— she was so sad. I don't think
“She could fake that.” She bit her lip. “And... the other stuff.”

“Y-yeah.” Sayaka stared sightlessly down at her bed, a vision of Homura's temporarily dead body in her mind's eye. It was seared into her memory. Dull, unblinking eyes and the unnatural stillness of the absence of breath, made all the more unnerving by how the girl had been staring at her intensely before her face went slack and her body crumpled to the floor. It had been the first time she had seen a human corpse. Sayaka swallowed nervously and said, “Kyubey... didn't really answer the questions Akemi told us to ask.”

“Yeah.” The friends fell silent and nibbled cookies for a few minutes. After awhile, Madoka said, “I think... I think we shouldn't trust Kyubey.”

Sayaka twisted her lips to one side in an expression of skepticism. “I think you’re right. I mean, I’m still not super certain about Akemi’s info, either, but....” She smiled bitterly. “Like she said: 'Brutal.' She didn't sugar-coat at all, you know?”

“Mm.”

“But she still said she might wish again if things were really bad.” Sayaka looked at the ceiling and turned the memory of that meeting over in her head. “So... so, Kyubey and Tomoe say the wish risks your life, and Akemi says the wish risks your soul... I think.”

Madoka nodded. “But Kyubey didn't say it doesn't risk your soul.”

“Man, I wish Mom hadn't called when we got to the good part,” Sayaka sighed in dismay. “I wanna know more. A wish and protecting people sounds really cool, but I dunno if it's worth my soul, you know? It'd have to be for something really big to be worth that. I wish we got more straight answers from them.”

Madoka chewed a cookie then worriedly said, “Mami... didn't seem to know the things we asked. Like how Homura said.”

“I dunno if that's good or bad,” Sayaka sulked. “I mean, I don't wanna be paranoid or anything. It could be Akemi has information Tomoe doesn't. But that could be an excuse so Akemi could lie.”

Her friend scowled stubbornly. “I believe Homura.”

Sayaka grinned ruefully, not a bit surprised. That was just what she'd expect from her friend. “I think I do, too, but... well, she's the one who said not to rush into anything. So I d'wanna rush into automatically believing her, you know?”

Madoka tilted her head, eyes unfocused as she thought, then slowly nodded. “That's fair.”

Sayaka heaved a sigh of relief. If Madoka thought it was reasonable, then she wasn't being paranoid.

Yoruichi was jostled awake on Monday morning when Madoka abruptly sat up and blearily stared at her open window, looking confused.

*Must have dozed off,* Yoruichi thought. She stretched, yawned, and accepted Madoka's morning
head-pat with a purr. Her ears twitched as she noticed something odd—

“Good morning,” Madoka said sleepily.

A smell that didn't belong— Tomoe, and the Inc—?! 

*Good morning, Madoka Kaname!* a cheerful voice responded.

Madoka jumped and gasped. Yoruichi whipped her head around and locked onto the Incubator. It was sitting among the plushies on the topmost shelf over the bed. A “cute, harmless thing” among cute, harmless things.

It tilted its head curiously. *Did you sleep well?*

“Kyu—?!” was all Madoka managed to sputter out before Yoruichi launched herself at the shelves with an enraged yowl.

Awake enough to not give herself away by enhancing her jump, Yoruichi latched onto the bottom shelf and scabbred her way up, scattering plushies as she went. The Incubator stood and tried to back away or jump but she set upon it before it could complete the movement. Yoruichi clawed its chest and locked her jaws on its throat. The Incubator thrashed wildly and caused them both to fall, tumbling down with yet more plushies as Madoka yelped and scrambled off the bed.

The Incubator kept trying to defend with its long, ear-like appendages, but Yoruichi just clawed them to ribbons. If it had claws or any other defenses, it wasn't making use of them. The fight was extremely one-sided. The two creatures were a whirlwind of fur and blood as Yoruichi relentlessly attacked while yowling, hissing, and snarling. Madoka ended up on the floor with her back pushed up against the door as she gaped at the fight with wide eyes.

They were all distracted by a knock on the door. Tomohisa’s voice called, “Madoka? Are you all right?”

“Ah— ah— P-papa—”

“What's going on?”

The Incubator capitalized on Yoruichi’s momentary glance away and made a break for the window. Yoruichi leapt after it and raked a long series of parallel gouges down its back as it jumped from bed to window sill. She stood on the sill and yowled a challenge at the bloodied little monster as it fled. Madoka rushed over and slammed the window shut, breathing heavily with the rush of adrenaline.


Madoka remained kneeling on the bed, looking panicked. Yoruichi turned back to the closed window and continued her territorial cat act, hissing, spitting, and pawing at the glass as though wanting to give chase. Madoka turned this way and that, taking in the splashes of blood and the occasional tuft of white fur scattered around her bedroom. “Um— Um— There was— There—”

Tomohisa cautiously stepped in, assessed the scene, and focused on the black cat. Yoruichi made a point of continuing to act belligerent toward something outside. Tomohisa frowned. “What is Yoruichi so angry at?” He plucked a tuft of bloodied white fur off the bed. “Was there an *animal* in here?”
“Oh! Um! Yes! That's— yes!” Madoka cried. “Ah, there was a cat— um, a white cat! It was on the shelves. I-it must have been sneaky. I woke up... when... when Yoruichi jumped up at it and started making those noises! Yoruichi fought it—the cat—until it ran away. And I closed the window. Um.”

Yoruichi glanced back at her, then sulkily dropped to the bed and rubbed against Madoka's back in a gesture of comfort. The cat could see that the girl's eyes were wide and desperate—probably terrified her father wouldn't believe her. Yoruichi meowed to get their attention and crawled up on Madoka's lap and pawed at her until the girl picked her up. She curled up and began licking blood from her claws.

Hm. Tasted like normal blood. Somewhere between cat and rabbit, oddly enough. Made her tongue tingle, though.

Tomohisa sighed. “Did you forget to close your window before bed again?”

“Um... yes!”

The man rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I warned you something like this might happen, sweetheart.”

Madoka looked down, cheeks burning. “I-I know. I'm sorry, Papa.”

“It could have bitten you or clawed you. It could have had rabies.”

“M'sorry,” Madoka mumbled.

“Ah, well. I think this has taught you more than any lecture could,” he said with resignation.

Madoka nodded fervently. “I'll take care of the mess while you're at school. Go wake up Mama and get ready, okay?”

The girl perked up. “Okay! Thank you, Papa! I really am sorry.”

Tomohisa smiled slightly. “I know you are. Go on. No worries.” He leaned in and ruffled her hair, then reached down to Yoruichi and tugged at the tag on her collar. “Well, her license is new. Her shots must be up-to-date. Tell your friend about this just in case, though.” He dropped the tag and rubbed Yoruichi's ears. “I'm glad you were here to protect my little princess from that mean old dragon, Milady Yoruichi. I'm making you a treat before you go.”

Yoruichi meowed cutely. Madoka giggled. “Homura told me she knows what 'treat' means.”

“Oh?” Tomohisa's eyes lit up. He grinned at the cat. “Treat treat treat treat treat.”

Yoruichi meowed and rolled out of Madoka's arms, hopped down, and rubbed against his ankles as he laughed. Attention sufficiently diverted.

She pranced after Tomohisa as he headed for the kitchen. The man cut up and shredded a bit of leftover chicken for her to start with. Yoruichi ate it as she listened for the distant shriek of Junko waking up for the day. When Tomohisa went out to gather from the garden, Yoruichi wandered back down the hall. She found Madoka and Junko in the spacious bathroom, brushing their teeth side by side and talking lowly. They were just moving on from the “white cat” incident as Yoruichi slunk in to eavesdrop.

Madoka rinsed her mouth, then washed her face. Junko pushed a towel within her reach as she blindly groped around for one. The girl thoughtfully watched her mother applying makeup for a minute. She took a deep breath. “Hey, Mama.”
Junko put away her foundation and picked up a soft brush. “Hmm?”

“Say that— just hypothetically— say that someone offered to magically grant you any wish in the world. What would you d—?”

Junko scowled as she loaded her brush with blush and straightened to look in the mirror. Her reply was immediate and fierce. “I’d have those two trustees driven straight out of the company.”

Madoka blinked in surprise and let out an intimidated little, “Ah... hahaha....”

Yoruichi approached Madoka and circled her as Junko continued to think out loud. “And also... the CEO really is getting too old to keep pushing himself, so maybe I’d have him retire?” She applied her blush with irritated strokes, face drawn into fierce thoughtfulness. “Oh, but he hasn’t named a successor yet... hrm.”

Madoka smiled conspiratorially. “Hehe, then what if you became the new CEO?”

“Hmm?” Junko stilled, brush poised over a cheek, and stared at her daughter's reflection in surprise. Her mouth opened slightly, but she was speechless. Yoruichi watched her curiously as she ended her long pause by straightening, putting away her brush, and snapping the makeup kit shut. She turned away from the counter, eyes unfocused in quiet epiphany. “I hadn't considered that,” she murmured with speculative fascination. She distractedly picked up the makeup case by the handle and stood with it slung over her shoulder, face lighting up with determined challenge as she stared into space. “If I could gather enough support in the Sales Department...,” she said slowly. “I've already got the Planning Committee and General Affairs in my corner... Then my only hurdle would be old Baldy from Accounting....” She stalked away, intensely muttering, “Maybe... interesting....”

Madoka laughed weakly and began to brush her hair. “Ah, Mama... you've got a scary look in your eyes.”

Yoruichi stared after Junko. She couldn't help but notice that the woman seemed to have completely forgotten or dismissed the hypothetical wish and instead planned to get what she wanted through her own hard work. Hadn't said she'd wish to be CEO, but immediately figured out the basics of a plan to accomplish the new goal. Had rejected the notion of wishing in favor of hard reality in which no real advancement came without effort even though the conversation had begun fancifully. Interesting.

The question was whether or not the woman's daughter had noticed.

Mami sat at her coffee table and rubbed her eyes. She had slept poorly, woken early, and prepared everything for the school day well before dawn. Her tea had long since gone cold as she sat and listened to the clock tick away the time. She glanced at the dish rack in the kitchen— at the plates and cups she had washed though the two potential magical girls had barely touched them. The entire afternoon had been a mess. It left her with so many questions— which was jarring, considering she was used to having the answers. Or, she had thought she'd known the answers. She had wandered the city a bit, casting about for Kyubey in an attempt to seek answers, but couldn't find him. What options were left to her? It was all very distressing. If only she still had Kyōko around to help her poke at it all, maybe... but that wouldn't happen. The rift was too deep. Mami
The early morning stillness made the sudden thump on her balcony surprisingly loud. Mami startled as Kyubey's androgynous voice touched her mind for the first time since the debacle the previous afternoon.

*M-Mami. Help... Help me...!

Mami bolted upright and rushed to the balcony. She slid the glass door open and threw herself to her knees with a cry of shock. Kyubey was mangled and bloody, small chest heaving as he labored to breathe. He looked like he had been slashed repeatedly. Mami couldn't be sure, though— his fur was matted with blood badly enough to make the wounds difficult to discern.

*P-please... h-help... help me....

“Kyubey! I'm here!” Mami manifested her Soul Gem and held it over him with a sob. “Don't leave me!”

*Akemi..., Kyubey said faintly.

“What? What about her?!”

*Akemi’s... ca-attacked....

Angry tears streamed down Mami’s cheeks as she willed her magic to heal her companion. “Why?!”

*Hates me.... Kyubey's eyes drooped. What...? Why...? He shifted and relaxed some as Mami directed a red ribbon to wrap around one of his paws with a special purpose. Ah... the pain... Thank you, M-Mami....

“It's all right. We'll be all right. We'll figure this out,” Mami blurted. “I'll stay with you.”

*Ah, but h-humans... school? he asked drowsily.

Mami scrubbed her eyes with a shirtsleeve and forced her face into determination. “Healing you is more important for now. I don't want to leave you alone like this. You could be attacked again. Go to sleep. I'll keep you safe.”

*You are... truly kind... M-Mami Tomoe....

Mami stayed hunched over him for a long time after he fell asleep, wishing she was able to heal more quickly.

Furious. Utterly furious.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It's odd how much I want to kick the Incubator in the jaw for what it does when I'm the one writing it.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Once again, Homura jolted straight from sleep to battle readiness at the shout from Ichigo’s room well before dawn. Karin stirred and squinted at her in the dimness, saw her ring spark violet, and rolled off her bed and on top of Homura. Homura squawked and flailed through the slam of Ichigo's window as Karin clumsily grabbed her ring-hand and Yuzu sat upright and yawned.

“Karin, what are you doing?” Yuzu asked drowsily.

Karin remained draped over Homura like a sloth. “M calmin’ ‘er down. Stupid Goat... loud....” she trailed off into a snore.

Homura, trapped beneath her, looked wildly at Yuzu, who just blinked back as though nothing unusual was happening.

After another boisterous Kurosaki household morning with a round of Soul Gem purification by Orihime, Homura boarded the early train with Ichigo and his friends once more. The boys sat in comfortable silence while Orihime babbled cheerfully at Homura. At the four friends' stop, Orihime bobbed toward Homura for a quick hug before darting off the train. Ichigo gave her some more quiet words of encouragement, ruffling her hair at the last minute before he left. Homura spent the rest of the ride drowsily running over the previous day's lessons in her head.

Homura checked the time when she got off the train in Mitakihara and decided it was late enough that she would just go directly to school. She pulled her book bag out of her shield in a quiet alley and approached the usual morning meeting place to find Miki and Shizuki waiting. They both waved cheerfully, but Miki's face had an awkward edginess to it. Homura tensed.

“Good morning, Akemi,” Shizuki said with a smile.

“How was the trip, Stranger Danger?” Miki asked with a crooked grin.

“It went well enough,” Homura murmured. She rifled in her bag and retrieved two tins of Glitterati to offer the girls. Miki squealed and Shizuki cooed her thanks.
“When did your train get in, Akemi?” Shizuki asked.

“Half an hour, perhaps.” Homura zipped her bag closed and settled with the third tin of candy. “Where is Madoka?”

“Not here yet,” Miki drawled. “Midnight could be keeping her busy.”

“Mid—? Oh. Yoruichi.”

“No, Midnight the Conqueror. Get it right, Stranger Danger!” Miki teased as she unwrapped a tiny candy.

“Have you even slept?” Shizuki asked as she tuckered her own candy into her bag. “Tokyo is hours away from here, isn’t it?”

“A bit, and yes,” Homura answered. She pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “I took the first train and came straight from the station.”

Shizuki frowned and touched a hand to her cheek. “Oh, my. You’ve been up for hours, then. How are you still awake?”

Homura stared directly at her, paused for thought, and blandly said, “Magic.”

Miki choked on her candy as Shizuki giggled.

“Ah! You’re here!” Madoka’s voice called from down the lane. Homura turned to look for her and found her jogging up the path with Yoruichi tucked against her chest with one arm. Madoka looked worried. She stopped when she reached them and panted for a moment. Yoruichi wiggled out of her arms and dropped to the ground, then wove around Homura’s legs in greeting. Madoka took a deep breath and looked Homura in the eye, troubled. “Um... Yoruichi... got into a fight.”

Homura frowned as the other girls looked curious. “With... what?”

Madoka bit her lip. “I... left my window open last night. When I woke up, there was a... white cat on the shelf over my bed.” She looked disturbed and stressed words in a way that told Homura what had really happened.

The Incubator had approached Madoka.

Instantly angry, Homura looked down at Yoruichi. Yoruichi looked up at her expressionlessly, but Homura saw her bare her claws a few times. Confirmation?

Madoka continued. “Yoruichi jumped up and fought it. They... they fought all over my room. Yoruichi... really, really attacked... it. She chased it out the window.” Madoka looked down and nervously fidgeted with the strap of her book bag. “Papa is going to clean up the blood and fur while I’m at school.”

Homura glanced down at the cat again as the other girls made alarmed sounds. Unable to speak, Yoruichi sat and licked a paw regally— the cat who ate the canary.

“W-wowww,” Miki said with a strained smile. “So— so Midnight really is a ninja!” Her laugh was awkward and brittle. She shifted restlessly and glanced from face to face, settling on Homura with a significant look but speaking to Madoka. “It must have... followed you home yesterday.”

Homura felt her skin crawl. “You... saw the white... cat... yesterday?” she asked through gritted...
teeth. “How? Did it... approach you?”

“Ah, it's my fault,” Miki said ruefully. “Mom wouldn't let me skip out on shopping and I didn't want to go alone, so I got Madoka to come with me.” After a pause, she added, “Midnight followed us. She... already didn't like the... *white cat* when it showed up.”

Homura glanced down coldly. Yoruichi looked her in the face, bared her teeth with a yawn, and stretched, front legs extended before her with her claws out. She raked them backwards as she settled on her haunches. Homura desperately wished she could communicate with Yoruichi telepathically the way magical girls could with the Incubator.

“Well, I'm glad Yoruichi was there to get that stray out of your room. Did she get hurt?” Shizuki asked with concern, bending to look at the cat.

“We, too. And I don't think so,” Madoka answered.

School bells chimed in the distance, ending the conversation. Homura shook herself a bit, suppressed her rage, then held the last candy tin out to Madoka. “Here. From Tokyo.”

The worry melted off Madoka's face and was replaced by a sunny smile as she took the tin and hugged it close. “Thanks for thinking of me, Homura!”

Homura couldn't help but quirk her own lips into a slight smile.

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Tomohisa finally got Tatsuya down for his nap after a busy morning. Instead of taking the time to breathe as usual, he gathered cleaning supplies and went to his daughter's room, resigned to scrubbing up dried blood. He stepped through the doorway and assessed the scene with a sigh. It seemed to not be as bad as he had remembered. He *swore* there had been much more fur lying around, but whatever. Less work.

He moved around the room carefully, taking note of clumps of fur as he methodically pre-treated the blood spots. That done, he picked up a grocery bag to collect fur in while the stains soaked. He went to the places he had noted, but he must have been mistaken— there was nothing in some of the places he thought there had been fur. Nothing pinged him as wrong until he got to the desk, where he had piled a couple clumps to get them out of the way on his first pass.

Nothing.

Tomohisa frowned. It had been very fine and light— maybe a draft had blown it? He bent to look on the floor. The chair. Beside the desk. Nothing. Like it had disappeared.

He carefully completed his circuit of the room, noting more missing fur. It was unsettling— was his memory going? was he overtired? Tomohisa thought hard as he knelt and started scrubbing the first of the stains, which seemed to have faded somewhat. After awhile, he zoned back in, sopped up the cleaner and water, and frowned harder. The stain was unaffected. Nothing on the cleaning cloth. He tried a different cleaner. Nothing. He sat back and looked around in confusion. His eyes wandered to the grocery bag full of fur.

Or not. It was empty.
Tomohisa stared hard, thoroughly disturbed. He leaned forward and brushed his fingers over the
blood stain, withdrew to think, then dropped his hand and cloth into the pail of water. After a
moment of contemplation, he hesitantly scrubbed at the stain again. It took some effort, but it came
out.

Weird.

The school day was uncomfortably tense. Sayaka kept sliding her eyes from Madoka to Akemi,
noting how Madoka couldn't stop fidgeting and Akemi's movements— when she wasn't sitting
rigid with her hands clenched into fists, that is— were jerky and abrupt with restrained anger.
Hitomi caught Sayaka's eye and nodded at the two in question. Sayaka shrugged and cut her eyes
away, forcing her hands to stop tapping her pencil. She was okay for awhile until Akemi was called
to the board to solve an equation and somehow wrote as if she was stabbing something with the
marker. Sayaka's pencil went back to tapping, her knees bouncing anxiously again.

The day dragged on at an agonizing pace. It was a relief when Hitomi parted from them for her
after-school lessons. They stood on the path and returned Hitomi's wave. Madoka bent down to
pick up Yoruichi, who was hanging around waiting for them as always.

Akemi glanced at them coldly. “My house.”

Sayaka and Madoka nodded meekly.

They trooped off to Akemi's house in silence. Sayaka and Madoka sat at the table and fidgeted as
Akemi prepared and served tea and cookies, face stony rather than welcoming. Yoruichi slunk
around the girl when she sat, purring insistently until Akemi relented and pet her. Sayaka was glad
to see Akemi relax minutely. That cat was really something.

Akemi closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at them evenly and said, “Explain
everything that happened.”

So they did. Akemi was silent through the whole thing, eyes boring into whichever of them was
speaking at any given time. Sayaka felt like a child explaining how she had been naughty to an
adult. When they were done, Akemi frowned, looked down at her tea, and picked it up to sip with
her brows furrowed in thought. The silence dragged. Sayaka was getting desperate to end the
silence even if it meant babbling something stupid when Akemi looked up once more.

“You were lucky,” Akemi said bluntly.

“Y-yeah,” Sayaka agreed bashfully. She wiggled her teacup around by its handle, cheeks hot with
shame.

Akemi pressed her lips into an unhappy line and reluctantly said, “I suppose it is good you took the
warning of danger seriously enough to not go out alone. But this could have gone very badly.”

“Y-yeah,” Sayaka said again, looking down. She glanced at Madoka. Her friend was wringing her
hands and looking down.

“Mami— Mami was really nice, though,” Madoka said hopefully as she lifted her chin. “Maybe—
maybe you could work together?”
"I doubt it," Akemi said immediately.

"Why not?" Sayaka asked.

Akemi twisted her lips sourly before replying. "She trusts the Incubator too much. Besides, she is too soft."

Sayaka was insulted on Tomoe's behalf. The magical girl with the guns had seemed pretty damn badass. "What does that mean?"

"Do you know her?" Madoka asked softly.

Akemi stared for a moment, then huffed slightly. "I know her by reputation. She has mentored other magical girls." She focused on methodically preparing another cup of tea for herself as she continued. "Mami Tomoe is excellent in a fight. She is a... nice person. Noble. She has a tender heart. But she does not know any of the darker implications of the contract— as far as I know, that is. Magical girls as well-intentioned as her... they do not tend to handle the truth about the contract very well. Be very careful when you interact with her." Akemi finished stirring sugar into the tea, tapped the spoon on the cup, and laid it on a napkin. She looked them both in the eye. "Whether you tell Tomoe about the birth of Witches or she figures it out herself, she could become... dangerous."

Sayaka exchanged an uneasy glance with Madoka and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

The magical girl pursed her lips as she considered her words. "Girls who are caught up in the noble cause of protecting the innocent like some hero generally do not react well when they find out they will become the monsters they fight."

"W... what kind of reaction?" asked Madoka.

Sayaka was unnerved by the long, ominous stare Akemi gave them. Her violet eyes were fathomless. It was like peering into twin black holes as the magical girl debated what to say. Finally, Akemi explained, "Sometimes they immediately turn into Witches themselves. Sometimes... I have seen the kindest of girls snap, hunt down and kill other magical girls, and kill herself— destroy the Soul Gems, that is— to prevent the creation of Witches. To 'protect the innocent'."

Nausea washed over Sayaka. "No— No way—"

"No one— no one would do that. Would they?" Madoka said shakily. "A kind girl like Mami— never— she wouldn't—"

"That was what I thought until a friend of mine killed our friend and tried to kill me," Akemi said with a bitter nonchalance. She picked up her cup and delicately sipped as Madoka and Sayaka stared at her in speechless horror. Akemi glanced up at them, expressionless, set her teacup in its saucer, and carefully folded her hands together on the table. "I was once part of a team of magical girls. We had just finished defeating a Witch. We had seen another magical girl's Soul Gem turn black and were drawn into her labyrinth. My... friend— our leader— put all the pieces together during the fight and killed another of the girls we were with as soon as the labyrinth was gone. Then she tried to kill me."

"What... what happened?" Sayaka forced herself to ask.

Akemi looked down at her hands, melancholy. "Another friend reacted quickly and killed her to save me. But she turned into a Witch a couple weeks later."
Sayaka and Madoka could only stare.

“That girl was... a good leader. A good teacher. She was a veteran when I contracted and she taught me a great deal. But the truth broke her.”

Madoka made a sound of distress and leaned forward. “Surely... surely not all of them react like—like that?”

“Like you,” Sayaka blurted. “You—you haven't gone nuts or gone on a killing spree or anything!”

Something doubtful and sardonic passed through the magical girl's features for a fleeting moment before her face smoothed again. “You assume a great deal,” she murmured faintly. Was that regret in her voice? Akemi tilted her head back and stared into the distance, contemplative. “There are a few. The ones who have... support, or a purpose outside of their duty to hunt Witches. I suppose you could count me among the latter, now.”

Sayaka swallowed hard. “How many... how many of your friends... or just, just magical girls... how many d-died?” ...Actually, that had probably been very rude to ask. Dammit.

“Too many.” Akemi bowed her head and closed her eyes. “I am the only survivor of my original team of five.” She looked up at them with sudden ferocity. “To accept a magical girl contract is to sell your soul and sign your death warrant. Do not do it.”

Sayaka nodded with Madoka as she thought. It was hard to be suspicious of Akemi. Sayaka knew she should try to remain objective and give equal consideration to all sides of this wish business. Should probably poke more at that... well, at least a lack of agreement that she hadn't gone nuts—even if all of Sayaka's instincts said there lie dragons on that topic. Technically, Sayaka supposed Akemi could just be a masterful actress. Discouraging them from contracting for her own ends, though Sayaka had no idea how their not contracting would work to her advantage. But even if Sayaka had suspicions about the girl's motives, she didn't know what else could explain that temporary death thing. That was a huge chunk of solid evidence. Well, as solid as magical spiritual superhero soul stuff could get. She thought. Probably.

Metaphysical junk was hard.

Sayaka was fooling herself if she thought she could maintain her doubt. She took a shaky breath and looked up at Homura. “Th-thanks, Stranger Danger.”

Homura blinked in surprise, her gravity dispelled by confusion. “What for?”

“W-well,” Sayaka stammered. “You—you saved us, and then you've warned us so much. I mean... I dunno what I would've done if I just met Kyubey by myself. I could've— me and Madoka could've— um. I know—I know you've said stuff about magical girls not being heroes... or something, but, um...” Her cheeks burned. “You're... you're kinda a hero to me.” She shyly glanced up at Homura.

Stunned. Violet eyes wide, lips parted slightly as she stared—a picture of disbelief.

“Yes! Me, too!” Madoka added enthusiastically. “I—I'm not very smart, and I— w-well—”


Madoka's cheeks flushed. Sayaka grinned and poked Madoka's waist to make her squeak again. “I keep trying to tell her that.” She looked at Homura again, feeling bolder. “You really are a good
friend. And I don't care what you think. You're a hero.”

Homura stubbornly mumbled a denial, cleared her throat, and shifted around awkwardly. Her face was strangely conflicted.

“What? You saved us,” Sayaka teased. This was more her element. “I don't know if we could be called innocents— well, except for Madoka—” she poked her friend again and got a little swat for her effort— “but you saved us from the Familiars and you're teaching us a lot to protect us even more.” She wagged a finger at Homura as though scolding her, but winked and smiled. “So don't you argue, young lady.”

Homura scowled at her, but Sayaka swore she saw a kind of frustrated fondness in it. Reminded her of the faces her older cousin would make at her younger cousin whenever he threw his arms skyward in the face of sibling brattiness. A kinda you are infuriating but I can't really bring myself to hate you attitude. Knowing what Sayaka did now, it made a lot of sense, though. Homura seemed to get frustrated whenever they got optimistic about anything relating to magical girls. Like she wanted them to think a certain way and their circling back to positives over and over was— Oh.

With a sobering flash of insight, Sayaka's teasing smile evaporated and she asked, “Have you... tried to talk girls like us out of this before?”

The magical girl's face went utterly blank as she stared at Sayaka. At length, she said, “Yes.”

Sayaka squirmed. There was something eerie in the way Homura was staring at her. “Did... they listen to you?”

“Rarely, if ever,” Homura immediately replied, her face creepily intense.

Madoka fluttered her hands from her lap to her teacup and back again. “What... happened to them?”

Homura's grave face turned to her. With a thousand-yard stare, she answered, “Dead or Witches. All of them.”

There wasn't really much that could be said to that. A long silence stretched between them.

Hands curled into fists and drawn to her chest, Madoka looked determined and said, “We'll listen to you. Right, Sayaka?”

Sayaka nodded. Being a hero seemed to be much more emotionally difficult than she had thought. Which made Homura's heroism even more admirable in her eyes, but that sounded like something that would just piss off the magical girl— and Sayaka didn't want to make more problems for her. More tension seemed to bleed out of Homura at Madoka's pronouncement. It made Sayaka relax again, too. She cleared her throat. “Um. What should we do if we find one of those floaty Witch-door things?”

Homura settled back and picked up her teacup. “Call me. Madoka has my number.” She hesitated before her sip. “Ah. Both of you text me so I can add you to my contacts.” After her sip, she looked at them seriously. “Do not go into the labyrinths. You will not be able to contact me inside and you may die.”

“What should we do about Kyu— the... Incubator?” Madoka asked timidly.

“Refuse it. Tell it to leave you alone. Say it is wasting its time trying to convince you to contract,” Homura said with cold rage in her eyes. “It will probably still loiter about, waiting for an opportunity to recruit you in some kind of emergency. Refuse it.”
Sayaka nodded firmly. “And what about... Tomoe?”

Homura sighed deeply and contemplated the surface of her tea for a long moment. “Be polite. Ask more leading questions if you wish. If you do that, be cautious.”

“Um. Can— can we tell her to talk to you?” Madoka asked.

Tilting her head in thought, Homura slowly said, “I suppose.” Her face firmed again. “Keep in mind, though, that she has already sold her soul. There is no turning back for her. The best you can hope for is that she will... join me in discouraging other girls from contracting.”

“We— we could be her friends, though,” Madoka said hopefully. “And maybe— maybe you could work together!”

Sayaka sat straighter and enthusiastically said, “Yeah! Be a magical girl duo!”

Annnd Homura's scowl was back. Damn. “This is not some happy little manga,” she said disapprovingly. 

Sayaka deflated. “I know. I just... two heads are better than one, right? You could have each other’s backs.” She looked down at her lap, then up at Homura. Quietly, she said, “I just... want you both to be okay.”

Homura stared at her flatly, then closed her eyes and sighed. “I will remain... open to the possibility. But unless Tomoe learns the truth and does not snap, I absolutely do not want her at my back.”

Sayaka and Madoka flinched. Sayaka swallowed hard. “That's... that's reasonable.”

Homura nodded curtly and settled with her tea again.

“Can... I ask you a question?” Madoka asked cautiously.

“Of course.”

“The Incubator said he doesn't know you. But Mami said you can only be a magical girl if you contract with him. So. Um.” Madoka wrung her hands and hesitantly asked, “So how... are you a magical girl?”

The magical girl sighed tiredly. “My situation is... extremely complicated. I have taken measures to... obscure my origins. Deliberately. If it is telling the truth about not knowing me, then that means that my methods are working well.” She looked at them askance. “The less it knows about me, the better. I know my secrecy must be a point of contention for you. I apologize, but you must understand that I need to be extremely careful in controlling dissemination of information about me. I do not mean to say that I think you will deliberately pass information on to the Incubator, but it is safest to prevent accidental disclosures which could be used against me.”

Like in a spy movie or something, Sayaka thought but was smart enough not to say.

Madoka nodded, then shifted around nervously. “Is there— is there anything we can do to help you?” she asked with concern.

Homura pursed her lips and sighed. “For now, tell me whenever you are approached by Tomoe, the Incubator, or any other magical girls. Refer to the Incubator as Kyubey to minimize its suspicion about what I know. Call me if you notice any labyrinths or other signs of Witches and Familiars.”
Sayaka perked up. “What kind of signs?”

Sayaka seared the following conversation about odd behaviors and Witches' Kisses into her memory. If watching for such things and distracting victims in thrall was all she could do to protect people, she was going to make sure she was a damn expert.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sayaka's hero worship transferred lol. First come, first served.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: I have just realized this story is two years old and over 200k words. What have I done. I never thought this would go this farrrrrr. Thanks for the support, everyone! Without your encouragement, I may have just fizzled out. Thank you for your patience every time adulting sinks its claws into me and gobbles up my time.

By dates, technically last time's chapter could have been the “Happy Second Birthday, Infinity!” chapter. But because I didn't realize it, here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEUNUNDFVIERZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

After Madoka and Sayaka left, Yoruichi jumped up on the table. “Call Kisuke. I may as well brief you both at once.”

Homura nodded and did so, setting the phone to speaker as she lay it on the table.

“Hello, hello, hello! Kisuke Urahara, magical girl support team resident mad scientist, at your service!” he crowed. “How may I help you?”

“I need to make a report, Kisuke,” Yoruichi drawled.

“As you wish, magical girl support team resident mascot! Fire away!”

Homura felt her face twitch in disapproval. Yoruichi glanced at Homura, rolled her eyes, and flexed her shoulders in a feline shrug as if to say, He’s always like this. Get used to it. Homura wondered if she'd ever learn to take the man's irreverence in stride the way the cat had.

Yoruichi related the weekend's events in a professionally clipped tone. A lot of it was disturbing, but Homura's eyes widened in disbelief when the change in Sayaka came up.

“Well, at least it seems your role reversal gambit was successful,” Urahara said thoughtfully.

It can't be this simple, Homura thought. No way.

“Yoruichi, your thoughts on Tomoe?”

The cat curled up near the phone and spoke pensively. “Excellent in battle. Her skills are definitely seated officer level— perhaps even third seat. Edging into lieutenant level, but with some key flaws and need for improvement. The most glaring is that once she becomes focused on a single target, her situational awareness for secondary threats gets dangerously sloppy.” Yoruichi tipped
her head inquisitively and glanced at Homura, who nodded her agreement. Kyōko had said as much in multiple timelines and she had seen it herself. Yoruichi returned her nod and continued, “If she's only been fighting for two years, it's very promising. With some formal training and more experience... well. Now, her power level is definitely on par with a lieutenant. And she can do some fascinatingly complex things with her reiatsu. The technique she called Tiro Finale was impressive. I think that attack could take out a Menos Grande.”

She still wasn't entirely sure what a Menos Grande was, and Mami did have flaws, but...“The Rose Garden Witch and her Familiars are not particularly strong or clever,” Homura interrupted. “You likely did not see Tomoe at full strength— nor at her tactical best. She was not our leader simply because she had the longest... tenure among the five of us.”

The cat gave Homura the distinct impression of raising her eyebrows in interest despite the limitations of her feline face. “Oh?”

Homura nodded. “I learned how to plot strategy and tactics from her. She is excellent at devising ways to combine our powers for maximum force multiplication. Her improvisation is similarly strong.” Homura pressed a finger to her chin thoughtfully. “The fault in her situational awareness is a major handicap, though.”

“My, my,” Urahara said with a hum. “Yoruichi. Her mental state?”

“Confused, for now,” Yoruichi answered. “The girls gave her some food for thought. It's too soon to say how she's processing it.”

“Hmm, hmm, hmm. Miss Akemi?”

“Yes?”

“In previous timelines, have you broached the subject with Tomoe by outright stating facts or asking leading questions?”

Homura thought back. “Factual statements,” she said slowly. “Which she then doubts.”

“Maybe figuring it out herself based on leading questions will let her process it better.”

“Who knows?” Homura said doubtfully. It seemed extremely unlikely to her.

“Ahhh, chin up, Miss Akemi!” Kisuke cheered. “We'll figure something out for her.” He ignored Homura's sour hum to ask Yoruichi, “According to the calendar from last time, Noriko Chiasa will go missing in Kazamino tomorrow. What are your plans?”

“Following her. Provided there isn't a barrier around that city, too.” Yoruichi tilted her head curiously. “Do you have any ideas about what to do with the Asunaro barrier?”

“Yep,” Urahara said cheerfully.

“Care to share?” she asked drily.

“Nope!”

Homura scowled and opened her mouth to object, but Yoruichi loudly said, “Whatever,” to cover her words. Homura glared at the cat. Completely unrepentant, Yoruichi continued, “Anyway, I'll follow Chiasa. See if she's a magical girl, see if she turns. Tip off Akemi if she needs to hunt a Witch.”
“Excellent,” Urahara said. “Ah, Miss Akemi. I just had a thought. Would you mind writing out descriptions of each of the Witches you can remember having encountered? It could be useful to be able to match Witches to their human identities. We may be able to establish some patterns.”

Homura raised a brow, thought, then agreed with him. She needed to update her extensive file on Walpurgisnacht, anyway. After they wrapped up the call, she sat at her desk and started writing and sketching in fits and starts as Yoruichi lazed about and groomed herself.

The next day, Yoruichi accompanied Homura to school. She watched with interest as Homura's mood lightened when Madoka jogged up and greeted her cheerfully. Useful. She greeted the girl with a purr and an ankle-rub, then slunk off into the trees when the girls left.

She didn't want to look un-catlike in case the Incubator saw her, so she took a meandering, vaguely-eastern route, pretending to chase birds and mice, getting into a hissing running battle with a stray, and sucker-punching a man with a Kazamino police badge into giving her scraps from his lunch at an outdoor cafe. She then followed behind him as he walked back to Kazamino, meowing as though begging for more food the whole way. She didn't notice a barrier like at Asunaro. When the man shoved her away with his foot and went into a building, Yoruichi had the perfect opportunity to wander around Kazamino. She took a circuitous route toward her target's school while mentally reviewing the relevant portion of the news article passed on from the previous timeline.

Noriko Chiasa (16)... is the class representative for her first year high school class. Meticulous and responsible, Chiasa was known to be dedicated to her office to the point of obsession. Investigation found that many of the “late club meetings” she told her parents about seemed to not exist.... Some prodding... revealed... an admission of a confrontation in a classroom the afternoon she went missing. No one has seen her since she stormed out of the school, upset.

By intently focusing her attention forward, Yoruichi was able to feel a person with elevated reiatsu from four blocks away from the school. It wasn't especially strong, but definitely present— and definitely tainted by the Hollow-like reiatsu that needed to be removed from Soul Gems. That probably confirmed Chiasa as a magical girl.

Yoruichi decided to avoid approaching the school too closely, changing course to pick a fight with another alley cat and sift through dumpsters until she felt the reiatsu source flare in distress and shift darker. Her quarry darted around erratically— perhaps running around in the building's halls? — before taking off in one direction. The angle wasn't too far off, so Yoruichi moved to intercept. She managed to fake chasing a rat out onto a sidewalk just as Chiasa barreled around a corner. The girl tripped on her and sprawled to the pavement as Yoruichi yowled in fake pain. Yoruichi regained her feet and turned around. The girl was the same as in the once-and-future article's accompanying photo: Dark hair long and straight with a precise part, black sailor uniform with red kerchief, brown eyes. Chiasa was struggling to her feet, audibly sobbing. Yoruichi hissed at Chiasa, but the girl ignored her and ran again, uncaring of having lost one shoe in the collision and having skinned her knees and palms on the pavement. Yoruichi raised her hackles and charged after the girl, snarling as though enraged and seeking to attack her. She pounced and scratched Chiasa's ankle as she stumbled around another corner, deliberately snagging her claws on the girl's sock so she could be dragged for several steps and yowl in pain— an excuse to look even more
enraged. Chiasa was hysterical beyond ability to notice the claws and it was best to look like she had more reason to follow the girl.

After zigzagging through the neighborhood with the Hollow reiatsu intensifying with every step, Chiasa fell to her knees in a narrow street between the backs of a strip mall and a skating rink. She sobbed harder, building into a roar of rage. The girl jerkily crawled toward a pile of junk behind a dry cleaner and started throwing objects like a toddler having a tantrum, hangers and clothespins breaking against the ground and walls as her reiatsu rose and made her throws more forceful. Yoruichi made a point of yowling and backing to the other side of the alley with her hackles raised as though she was angry but frightened by the power surge. With a final sound of despairing fury, the silver ring on the girl's left hand sparked with red light. An egg-shaped garnet crackling with black energy manifested over her hand. Yoruichi's feline instincts shrieked danger! run! so she complied out of convenience— it would make her look more legitimately catlike and she had no desire to get sucked into a labyrinth, anyway. She took off like a shot and leapt from the ground to a block wall around a dumpster to an awning over a delivery bay. Chiasa's Soul Gem exploded as Yoruichi scrambled to the far end and jumped toward a ledge. The force behind her slammed her into the wall ahead of her. She acted dazed and looked back.

Chiasa's body was sprawled on the ground, limbs askew and school uniform disheveled, thrown into a wall by the force of the explosion. Something akin to a hollowed-out silver pendulum floated over her and exuded Hollow-like reiatsu, growing until it was twice as tall as the girl had been and sprouting spikes from its cardinal points. Yoruichi had hardly registered the scene when the power imploded, retracting to the rapidly shrinking pendulum— Grief Seed?— and visibly warping reality around it while dragging refuse and Chiasa's empty body into it like a vacuum. Everything disappeared into a single point as suddenly as the reiatsu had burst outward. The alley settled back to normal. The only sign anything had happened was an area with no litter with a slight heat haze in the center. The entire transformation had taken perhaps twenty seconds.

Yoruichi stared for a moment, then let her cat instincts guide her into hissing once and slinking away. Hackles still raised as though edgy, she jumped from surface to surface until she crested the nearest roof while glancing back over her shoulder. She hissed again, then noticed a scent and turned around.

The Incubator was perched on a rooftop air conditioner condenser not three meters away from her, watching her impassively.

Little bastard. Observing Chiasa? Or following “Akemi's cat”?

Well, nothing for it. She had to stay in character, after all.

Snarling fiercely, Yoruichi lunged forward to attack. The creature didn't panic as it had the previous day, coolly evading about half of her attacks and showing no reaction when Yoruichi injured it. It also fought back to an extent, using its ear-like appendages as flails far more effectively than in their last encounter.

Yoruichi allowed herself to be hit several times to be convincing and gauge its strength. She got the distinct impression it was holding back, testing her in the same way she was testing it. Yoruichi became convinced that its helplessness in Kaname's room had been a ploy. She grimly loosened her control of her feline side and let it fight more instinctively, hoping to muddy the waters and allay suspicion. She backed off for a moment, made a hissing display of dominance, and attacked again. The Incubator fended her off expressionlessly, finally retreating when she succeeded in gouging out one of its eyes. It flickered from paw's reach ahead of her to a much higher rooftop across the street in the blink of an eye. It showed no sign of pain, settling back into impassiveness as it sat and
looked down at her from safety with one beady red eye while its ruined partner dangled out of its socket.

There was no way Yoruichi could follow without giving away that she could use shunpo, so she settled for pacing and watching it with her hackles raised, yowling resentfully. It watched her for ten minutes with no sign of moving. Yoruichi decided to feign losing interest and leaving.

Not wanting to appear to intelligently run back to Akemi to fetch her and lead her to the Witch, Yoruichi wandered vaguely southeast—away from Mitakihara and most recorded magical girl and Witch activity. She acted like she was still keyed up from the fight, clawing the hell out of an insistent tomcat here, perching on a fence to hiss taunts at a dog there. She stalled for hours with her wandering before meandering back to Akemi’s neighborhood in the silence of the wee hours. One window still displayed a dim light through the curtains—Akemi’s desk lamp, she thought. Akemi’s reiatsu felt alert, so Yoruichi went to the front door to scratch and meow plaintively until the girl opened it and looked down at her.

“Ah. There you are. Where have you been?”

Yoruichi made a show of hurrying to snake around her ankles and meow obnoxiously. Akemi was quick on the uptake.

“I suppose you finally decided to come home because you are hungry,” she said with tired annoyance.

Yoruichi flopped on her side, rolled on her back, and did her best to look cute and apologetic.

Akemi huffed. “Yes, yes. Come in. I will feed you.”

Yoruichi entered and didn’t relax until the door was firmly closed. Minding the angles to the windows, she muttered, “Close the drapes over the curtains and get ready for bed. We’ll talk tomorrow. I may have been followed—”

“The Incubator?” Akemi asked coldly.

“Yes. I think it was trying to figure me out. I don’t want it to see me speaking, and we need to act like you forced yourself to stay up and went to bed when your annoying cat got home. If it’s surveilling the house, it should sense your reiatsu settle into sleep.”

Akemi pursed her lips unhappily, but nodded.

Though impatient to learn what had happened elsewhere the previous day, Homura appreciated the second normal school day in a row with her friends. When Shizuki inquired after Yoruichi’s absence the previous afternoon, she mentioned that her cat had been out annoyingly late. She found herself amused by Miki’s cheerful cackling and jokes about Yoruichi being a two-AM troublemaker. Madoka and Shizuki were assigned cleaning duty for the day, so Miki and Homura stayed and helped. The normalcy was surreal for Homura.

When Shizuki ran off to whichever boring lesson her mother had scheduled for the day, the other three girls left more slowly. They greeted Yoruichi in the usual spot and meandered down the deserted path. Homura’s magical senses tripped to alertness just before they turned a corner. Mami
Tomoe stood waiting in the center of the path, frowning as she held her school bag in one hand. The Incubator was in a tree behind her, tail a sinuous metronome.

There went her normal-ish day. It had been nice while it lasted.

The girls stopped in their tracks. Madoka darted down and snagged Yoruichi under the armpits as the cat snarled and tried to lunge toward the Incubator, then backed up and held her firmly against her chest. Homura and Tomoe silently sized each other up for several painfully long seconds.

“What is your problem with Kyubey?” Tomoe finally asked in a clipped tone.

Homura lifted one brow. Tomoe hadn’t bothered with politeness or greetings even as a formality. That indicated a dangerous mood for her. Great. “I have many problems with it,” Homura answered blandly. “You will have to be more specific.”

*It may be best for this discussion to be a private matter between contracted magical girls,* the Incubator interrupted.

Homura’s eyes narrowed. Did it not want the potential contractees to overhear something? It was also farther away from Tomoe than she would expect. In some timelines, she had seen it behave similarly when it disapproved of a magical girl’s decision but seemed to want to observe anyway. Or when it thought something catastrophic would happen— especially if there were uncontracted girls also present who might make a wish to fix it. Which was it?

“We’re staying,” Miki declared stubbornly, stepping up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Homura in a show of support. Madoka nodded firmly.

Well. That was interesting.

Tomoe's frown deepened as she looked from face to face, then settled on Homura once more. “You're trying to convince girls not to contract and you even attacked him. Why?”

Honest surprise flitted across Homura’s face. “While I admit to an adversarial attitude toward it, I assure you I have not attacked it.” This time. Yet.

“Oh?” Tomoe said archly. “If you didn't attack him, why did he come to my apartment Monday morning with extensive injuries? He was torn up and bleeding so badly I couldn't even see the wounds well. He was only partially coherent and mentioned your name and an attack.” She dropped her bag and crossed her arms, eyes narrowed. “How can you deny it?”

Homura ground her teeth. The Incubator had sent its damaged terminal to Tomoe after the incident at Madoka’s house. Of course the little monster had found a new lever. Of course. “—”

“Ah— ah, um, I can explain!” Madoka interrupted. She looked determined, then drew back timidly when everyone looked at her, then pulled herself together again. “When I woke up on Monday, the — Kyubey had come in my window and was sitting on my shelves. The ones on the wall over my bed. Yoruichi woke up and attacked i-him.” She held Yoruichi up a bit. Everyone could hear the cat’s steady growling and see her looking at the Incubator with murder in her eyes. “It got... really nasty. There was blood everywhere.”

“Akemi wasn't even in Mitakihara early that morning,” Miki added defiantly. “She was on a train coming back from Tokyo. She came straight to school from the station.”

*How do you know that for certain? Did you just take her at her word?* the Incubator asked calmly.
“I wasn't talking to you,” Miki sniffed.

“If you really wanted, you could probably find security footage of me at the station,” Homura dared it. She tilted her head and looked at it with heavy eyelids. “Did you really lie to Tomoe? I have never known you to lie directly.”

Tomoe looked at the Incubator from the corner of her eye, face shifting toward uncertainty.

But I have never known you at all, the Incubator parried.

Miki dropped her own bag and stepped forward aggressively, fists clenched at her sides. “No! You don't get to do that!”

“Do what?” Tomoe asked, surprised.

“Change the subject!”

Homura stared at the back of the blue-haired girl's head and couldn't hide her shock. Having Miki's loyal hair-trigger suspicion wielded for her benefit was bizarre.

Miki jabbed a finger toward the Incubator. “Maybe if you don't want to get clawed all to hell and back, you shouldn't sneak into girls' rooms to watch them sleep!” She took another challenging step forward and shook her finger for outraged emphasis. “Are you some kind of pervert!?”

Homura felt her face contort horribly as her throat made a garbled sound, choking back a hysterical laugh. Madoka gasped and took another step back as if she hadn't even looked at it that way before. Tomoe's jaw dropped and she looked appalled.

The Incubator's tail paused in its constant movement. It blinked in what appeared to be real surprise, but you could never tell with the thing. I am physically incapable of what humans would refer to as sexual perversion, it said. Madoka Kaname allowed a nonhuman being to accompany her in her bed. I do not understand why you are upset by my presence in her room.

“So you admit it!” Sayaka crowed, pumping a fist in front of her in triumph.

I am as incapable of perversion toward humans as your domesticated household p—

“The difference is your sentence,” Homura interrupted dispassionately. “Regardless of your... proclivities—” she saw Tomoe's face twitch with dismay— “trespassing is generally frowned upon. As is stalking.”

“St— stalking?” Madoka squeaked.

You deliberately misconstrue my intentions, the Incubator accused.

“Do I really?” Homura asked coolly.

You will characterize my words negatively to Madoka Kaname and Sayaka Miki no matter what I say, the Incubator said, its tail resuming its hypnotic movement. Further discussion on this topic appears pointless.

Everyone stared at each other silently. Stalemate.

Tomoe shifted uncomfortably, searched their faces, then glanced at the Incubator. “Was it really the cat, Kyubey?”
Akemi's, it answered. I tried to say as much. I apologize if I was unclear while incoherent. But I suspect Homura Akemi has trained it to attack me, as it was extremely vicious.

“First, that is speculation,” Homura argued. “Second, I have done no such thing.” She tilted her head to one side, considering. She decided to take a cautious gamble based on Yoruichi’s intel. “A being such as yourself should be aware that cats are excellent at detecting the supernatural.”

“Oh! That's what he said on Sunday!” Sayaka said brightly as she stepped to the side of the path and angled herself so she could see both Homura and Tomoe.

“Fight and flight are any animal's main options,” Homura continued, “and my cat is particularly aggressive. I allow her to wander when I am at school instead of shutting her in my house because hunting during the day keeps her from getting... ah, combative with me and shredding my furniture out of frustration. It was a problem when she was a kitten.” Homura hoped that sounded reasonable. Something like that had come up in the reading on cat ownership she had done when she assumed her new cover. She decided to take another small gamble. “Her closeness to me appears to have made her more sensitive to the supernatural, though I do not understand the magical mechanism. If there is one. It may just be frequent exposure making her more observant.”

The doubt on Tomoe's face took on a worried cast. She looked over her shoulders and into the trees where the Incubator sat silently. “Kyubey....”

The Incubator faced her, expressionless. It is a plausible explanation. However, I find it suspiciously convenient.

“And I find it suspiciously convenient that your alleged incoherence gave Tomoe the impression that I attacked you directly,” Homura parried.

“Yeah!” Sayaka practically cheered from the sidelines.

Again: Bizarre.

The Incubator didn't bother to argue back. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them all.

Tomoe finally pulled herself together and firmly said, “None of this explains why you are trying to discourage these girls from contracting.”

Homura raised a brow. “You must at least be aware of the physical dangers involved. Among other considerations, I believe this aspect is extremely understated when Kyubey proposes its contract.”

Frowning and putting her hands on her hips, Tomoe accepted part of the argument but pulled at the thread of vagueness. “Among what other considerations?”

Homura stared at her expressionlessly and debated her response. She could feel Madoka's worried gaze at her back. Sayaka was looking to her face for some kind of cue. Homura settled on, “I doubt you would believe me. Kaname and Miki asked you certain questions the other day, did they not?”

Tomoe's face twitched in a way Homura couldn't quite put a name to. Nothing positive, but not quite sour. “They did.”

“Then I suggest you give those questions serious thought before you ask me more.”

“You put them up to asking those questions.”

“You could say that,” Homura agreed with a small shrug.
The blonde frowned deeply and stared for several seconds. She switched tacks. “How does their not contracting work to your advantage?” Gold eyes darted over Homura's shoulder to Madoka and back again. “Kaname in particular has a great deal of potential. She would be a powerful magical girl. Anyone with magic can feel it,” she said, prompting Madoka to squeak in surprise. Tomoe arched a brow. “Oh? Haven't you told her?”

“No, I have not,” Homura agreed easily. “Her magical potential is irrelevant in the face of the risks involved.”

“I disagree,” Tomoe said tartly. “The decision is hers, of course, but her power makes her risk of defeat far smaller than for many magical girls.” She paused and considered Homura with narrowed eyes. “She could rival your power. Possibly both of us. She could become your rival, period. Does that bother you? That's the attitude of a child.”

“The prospect of her being more powerful than me does not bother me at all,” Homura replied, casually running a hand through her hair and flipping it over her shoulder. “If she should contract, I have utmost faith that she would never seek to contend with other magical girls. Her heart is too kind and friendly.”

She heard a small *meep* behind her, but ignored it to glance at Sayaka. The blue-haired girl looked like she was hanging on her every word. “Similar with Miki, by the way,” Homura tossed out as she looked back at Mami. She saw Sayaka perk up in her peripheral vision. “She is too honest and forthright. Contending with peers of her own volition would conflict with her morality. If either contracted, I would expect them to form alliances instead of rivalries. I am confident they would only combat other magical girls in self-defense. Therefore, I have no need to view either of them as a threat.”

Sayaka had no awareness of her own nebulous magic, but Homura and Tomoe could feel it quivering with pride. Tomoe's mouth twisted into disapproval for a moment. She had noticed the ploy. Interestingly, she chose not to call it out.

“There are other ways they could rival you even unintentionally,” Tomoe objected. “They would compete for limited resources.”

“Wait, what?” Sayaka asked.

Tomoe's face eased as she turned to Sayaka. “There is a limited supply of Grief Seeds in any given area,” she explained. “Magical girls need them to replenish their magic. The more magical girls in an area, the higher the chance of the supply of Grief Seeds being too thin. That limits the recovery and fighting power of the magical girls competing for Grief Seeds.” Her face hardened again as she turned back to Homura, but continued to speak to Sayaka. “Stopping you from contracting means there's more for her.”

“What's wrong with that?” asked Madoka. Everyone turned to her in surprise. Uncertain pink eyes darted from face to face during a long silence. “Why— why is it bad?” she asked as she hugged Yoruichi closer.

Yoruichi, for her part, was still relentlessly glaring at the Incubator with the eyes of a predator. Deliberately not reacting to the conversation or all the eyes turned her way as a non-sentient animal would in the presence of prey.

“It's like hoarding,” Tomoe finally said, looking baffled. “It's selfish.”

Madoka fidgeted in place. “But... she— magical girls— you all really really need Grief Seeds, right? So you can—” she swiftly glanced at Homura and away again, seeming to remind herself of what she was supposed to avoid saying— “you can keep your magic strong enough to keep
fighting and stay... safe. Like you said. Right?”

Tomoe uncertainly said, “Yes....”

“Then— then, keeping Homura safe is more important to me. Um, and you too, Mami,” Madoka said more strongly as she straightened. “I can't think of anything to wish for that would be more important than that. Contracting when I know I would put Homura and other magical girls in danger by using up the things you need... that would be selfish of me. I think. Um.”

Homura and Tomoe stared at her, dumbfounded, as Sayaka snapped back to certainty with a loud, “Yeah! What Madoka said!” Madoka blushed brightly and looked shy. Turning to Tomoe, Sayaka continued, “It's totally reasonable! It protects her and us!” She firmly planted her hands on her hips in a challenging pose and demanded, “What's your problem with that?”

Tomoe just stared, mouth working speechlessly.

Homura felt like she had been shunted to a parallel universe. Or that Sayaka had been replaced by someone from a parallel universe.

After a long silence, Homura cleared her throat and diplomatically said, “I believe you have a great deal to think about, Miss Tomoe. Perhaps we should pause this conversation for now and resume it in a few days' time. If you are willing, of course.”

Surprised, Tomoe asked, “You... want to talk to me more?”

“Of course,” Homura replied easily. “Provided we can keep it peaceful, that is.” She tilted her head and allowed her face to soften a bit. “As I told Kaname and Miki, I know you by reputation. I have heard that you mentor new magical girls and avoid contending with them. That you have a code of ethics you hold yourself to despite great personal risk. I think you would be less likely to attack someone who... I do not wish to say opposes, as I do not wish to be in opposition with you. Perhaps... someone who challenges your world view.” She dipped her head forward and looked up at Tomoe through her bangs. “I am under the impression that you would never attack a fellow magical girl unless attacked first. Or would you attack me over words and ideas alone?”

Her words very obviously caught Tomoe off-balance. The gamble worked. Maybe Yoruichi was right about her usual directness being off-putting.

“Of course I wouldn't!” Tomoe answered after a moment of scrambling for a response.

Homura straightened and raised her eyebrows. More pleasantly, she said, “Then perhaps we may yet be able to work together.”

“W-what?”

After a thoughtful pause, Homura carefully said, “Being a magical girl can be... a lonely business. I am the only survivor of my original team. I... miss it. It would be... nice... to be able to trust someone to have my back again. But I have also had other girls take advantage of that trust. I... apologize if I am distant and suspicious. I hope you can understand how the... politics, I suppose, of magical girls would make me exceedingly cautious.”

Tomoe floundered, mouth opening and closing as her face cycled through many expressions. She was obviously torn between her original perception of Homura and the diplomatic offer of alliance, if not friendship. Homura thought she had managed to angle her words at Tomoe's emotional weak points. She deemed it a tentative success, if only for the moment.
Her mind screeched to a halt when she noticed how deeply manipulative the ploy was. The realization made her sick for a moment. Was she becoming as manipulative as the thing she hated for being manipulative?

Homura glanced toward the Incubator and found it staring at her expressionlessly, tail unusually still. It had probably understood her ploy. She hoped it was as frustrated with her games as she was by its games.

Games, she thought darkly.

“I know—,” Sayaka blurted out. She stopped and took a deep breath when everyone looked at her.

“I know being a magical girl isn't, like, sunshine and rainbows. I guess. But if you two could work together... wouldn't that be awesome?!”

“And we— we can help!” Madoka chirped.

Homura whipped her head around to give her an outraged look.

She promised she wouldn't contract!

Immediately interpreting the look correctly, Madoka waved one hand in panicked denial. “I don't mean by contracting— ah!” She juggled her grip as Yoruichi tried to scrabble out of the girl's newly one-handed hold, intent on the Incubator. The cat snarled as Madoka secured her. “I mean— like, with Homura— we can call you if we find a labyrinth, or we can wait for you when you go... um, hunting? And maybe you can come to our houses for dinner sometimes.” She lowered her head shyly. “It... it seems to make Homura happier, anyway. So... Oh! Or you can... you can talk to us when fighting makes you sad, or... you know... um.

“Yeah! We can be your normal sidekicks!” Sayaka cheered, causing Homura to whip back around to her. Sayaka ignored her face and stubbornly plowed on. “Since we're already in on the secret, you don't have to keep secrets from us! We can be like... like... ummmmm.” She gestured wildly as she grasped for an example. “Like that arcade guy in Sailor Moon! You know— the guy who finds out the magical girls have a secret base under his arcade and he's totally cool with it? That guy! We can be like him! Only better!”

As Tomoe's expression shifted more toward optimism, Homura couldn't decide if she wanted to thank Sayaka or strangle her. She was doing so much better this time around, but that underlying fantasy was proving to be hell to get rid of.

“I'll— I'll— think... about that,” Tomoe stammered.

Homura nodded politely. “I look forward to our next meeting.” She glared past Tomoe at the Incubator. “You, however, would do well to avoid us. Kaname and Miki are under my protection. I have no love for you. And my cat will likely attack you on sight. Consider this your warning.”

The Incubator made no reply.

Looking back to Tomoe, Homura said, “You know how to find me. I just ask that you do not surprise me from behind. I may attack on reflex. I have learned the hard way to beware ambushes. You understand.”

Tomoe looked troubled. “I... understand.”

“Good afternoon, then, Miss Tomoe. I will see you soon,” Homura said with a slight bow. She glanced at the other girls. “Madoka, Sayaka, would you like to come to my house? My friend in Tokyo sent me even more cookies. I cannot eat them all myself and it would be a waste for them to
“Score!” Sayaka shouted, pumping a fist and hurrying to retrieve her book bag.

Homura picked up Madoka's bag so the girl could keep Yoruichi restrained. As they walked past Tomoe, Madoka paused and said, “It was nice seeing you again, Mami. Please... please stay safe, okay?”

Homura made a point of leaving her back open to Tomoe as they left even though she felt a paranoid itch between her shoulders. She glanced back as they turned a corner. The blonde looked beyond confused.

And the Incubator had disappeared from its bough, leaving Tomoe alone again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am finding that writing Mami breaks my damn heart.

Sayaka is still hard to write, but I think I finally have a feel for her. I was worried that I had botched her and made her too much like her Rebellion self. She seemed to be fairly reasonable and introspective BEFORE she contracted. Kinda impressively so at moments, considering the rooftop conversation about wishes in episode two.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Bleach-only folks: I swear to God the way this Witch attacks and the method of
defeat are canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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After an otherwise pleasant afternoon of cookies and homework followed by another round of
Yoruichi reporting to Homura and Urahara, Homura readied to leave.

“Where you going?” Yoruichi asked lowly.

“Hunting,” Homura answered. “You need to stay here so it does not look like you are leading me.”

Yoruichi sat primly and asked, “Are you sure that's wise?” with a frown in her voice.

Homura waved one hand dismissively as she tapped papers together and shoved them in her shield
for later. “I am quite familiar with all of the Witches that appear in this area. I have fought them
countless times.”

“Isn't that what you said about that Walpurgisnacht thing?”

Homura stilled. She slowly turned and looked at the cat. After a long shared stare, Homura warily
said, “I will... keep that in mind.”

The cat nodded firmly. “Now. Will you be crossing into Kyōko Sakura's territory?”

Shrugging, Homura said, “Possibly. But I can handle her.”

Yoruichi lowered her chin and looked up with heavy-lidded eyes. “Don't you go and get cocky on
me, Akemi.”

Homura glanced back over her shoulder as she headed for the door. “I won't.”

She transformed and took to the rooftops, first wandering west before detouring south and east,
skirting then entering Shinchi. She had never ventured that far south before. Her scalp prickled and
she felt watched; following her senses, she spotted a magical girl perched on the crossbeam of a
radio tower. Though distant, Homura could still make out that she wore a puffy powder blue dress,
matching boots, and a tall marching band hat. They were too far apart to make out her face, but
what caught Homura's eye was the large pink drum major's mace the girl was twirling in lazily
threatening arcs. Whenever the pompom on its end moved just so, Homura could see it was
wickedly sharp. The girl briefly glowed pink as she flared her considerable power.
Message to *get the hell out of my territory or die* successfully conveyed.

Homura made a point of facing the girl directly, giving the briefest of stiff bows in apology, and veering north. She could not afford to make any new enemies. It was a good excuse to head more toward where Yoruichi had said the other girl had turned, anyway.

She finally detected a labyrinth when she was patrolling the Mitakihara-Kazamino border. It was a bit west of where Yoruichi had reported seeing the girl turn. Glad to not have to suspiciously find her way to the exact place her cat had been, Homura descended from the tall buildings to the roof of a squat strip mall. Her Soul Gem led her to the cap over a laundromat ventilation shaft that smelled of dryer sheets. She brandished her Soul Gem and instantly recognized the sigil that appeared—a gold medallion with spider legs added to the knot of a stylized sailor uniform collar. It was the labyrinth of the Witch another Sayaka had sometimes jokingly called the Class Representative Witch. Fairly weak, as Witches went. Moving around inside was a pain without Tomoe's ribbons, though. She sighed and strode into the labyrinth.

Blinking in the instant shift from night to bright daylight, Homura assessed the environment. As expected, she had appeared at the confluence of a number of thick tightropes that stretched around the blue sky at crazy angles, each serving as a clothesline for a variety of sailor uniform tops at pennant-like intervals. Homura balanced better and mapped the paths. She had never trusted the fluffy white clouds some of the lines disappeared into and the telephone poles below struck her as so easily navigated as to probably be a trap, so she would be avoiding them again. Finally, she spotted the dark shape of the Witch far up and to her left.

Before she set out, Homura decided to experiment. Though it took a good deal of concentration, she managed to conjure up a miniature version of her barrier to hold around her Soul Gem. Her self-assigned test would be to maintain it through the entire fight as practice for more dangerous fights. She breathed deeply and started running along the tightrope.

With her first step from her starting point, school desks and chairs started tumbling out of the sky. Instead of letting them slow her progress, Homura deftly evaded them by leaping from clothesline to clothesline. The first Familiars appeared when she was halfway to the Witch, as usual, but Homura had to force herself not to hesitate.

The Familiars were different.

Usually, the first salvo would be the bottom halves of girls in matching school uniform skirts with ice skates attached to their loafers, all gliding along the clotheslines and attacking with bladed kicks and spins. Mostly an annoyance, but the skates were still sharp. This time, each Familiar had one skate and one bare foot and their knees were bloodied. They skated with one leg while the other leg was extended behind them for balance.

Not particularly interested in giving them a chance to attack, Homura frowned and pulled a pump-action shotgun out of her shield. She kept running, dodging and jumping from tightrope to tightrope as often as possible, freezing time momentarily as needed, blowing a Familiar off the line in front of her when it was more convenient, mechanically dropping spent guns and pulling pre-loaded ones out of her shield as she ran— a tactic out of Tomoe's playbook, without Tomoe's magic guns. She climbed higher as her dodging allowed her and scowled when she was able to make the Witch out clearly.

As per usual, it was the headless body of a girl wearing a school uniform— black skirt, long-sleeved black shirt, a sailor collar, and red kerchief. It had four sleeved arms where there should only have been two. From its skirt, two bare arms protruded where there should have been legs.
The jumble of limbs was perched among the clotheslines like a spider. In a new development, all six palms were bloody.

Homura was going to have to pick this apart with Yoruichi later.

As Homura dodged around a desk and a Familiar, the Witch spread open its leg-arms. Myriad skate-Familiars and desks pelted out from under the billowing skirt. Homura tossed the shotgun, brandished her shield, and flared her magic protectively as she charged into the onslaught. The closer she got to the Witch, the harder it became to dodge along the haphazardly-strewn clotheslines. This labyrinth was one that always made Homura miss having Tomoe on her team. The blonde's ability to weave a direct-route ribbon-bridge tied to the existing clotheslines made this Witch so much easier to defeat.

It took some maneuvering, but Homura finally found a clear shot and froze time to maintain it. She couldn't get close enough to use a bomb as she did whenever Mami could get her closer, so she pulled five RPG launchers out of her shield in quick succession, firing them all up the Witch's skirt. When time resumed, the RPGs exploded and killed the Witch. A concussive shiver ran through all the clotheslines just before they disappeared. Homura calmly let herself fall, lightly landing on her feet in the real world as the Witch's Grief Seed drifted down in front of her.

Homura snatched up her prize with an annoyed huff and took off for home.

“That's her?”

Yes, the Incubator confirmed.

“Hm-hmmmm-hmmmmm, she wasn't in there very long. And hardly a scratch on her. She must be strong.” The girl sat up straight. She was perched on the catwalk of a high billboard, swinging her legs happily as her long brown ponytail wafted in the breeze. The opera glasses in her hand dissolved into sparkles that retreated into her red Soul Gem. Her blue eyes slid to consider the Incubator suspiciously. “It's not like you to tip me off like this, Kyubey. You don't like to share. She a pain in your ass?”

Homura Akemi is an anomaly among magical girls. She appeared suddenly. She has not contracted with me.

“Huh? Then how is she a magical girl?”

I do not know.

A hungry grin stretched across the girl's face. “So she's ultra-rare—or maybe even unique?”

You could say that.

“I want her,” the girl said huskily, then licked her lips. “If she showed up out of the blue, I'd better nab her before she pulls a runner. That girl in black will have to wait—the Pleiades will still be in Asunaro in a few days. I can't risk losing this one.”

The Incubator remained impassive, neither approving nor disapproving.
Thursday was rather melancholy for Sayaka. Her friends noticed, but Homura weighed her with a
look and stayed silent and Madoka's attention seemed torn between her, Homura, and the glimpse
of Mami Tomoe they had caught in the hall during a break. Hitomi watched her closely and was
the one to finally say something at lunch.

“Miki, are you feeling unwell?” Hitomi asked quietly as she opened her bento.

Sayaka laughed awkwardly. “Ah, well, no. I'm fine. I'm just worried about Kyōsuke, I guess.”

Hitomi tensed and looked worried. “I thought he was improving?!”

“Yes. Last week, after a new therapy,” Sayaka explained. “After a few days, the numbness started
to creep back. It's not as bad as it was, but Kyōsuke is... upset.”

“Of course he would be,” Hitomi cried. “Do they know what's wrong?”

Sayaka sighed deeply and ran her hand through her hair. “They think maybe they all got too
excited and over-used the hand exploring the progress, but it's a guess. They did scans, then they
splinted it to force him to rest it for a couple days, and they're doing more tests today.” She pouted.
“I haven't been able to visit him since Saturday because of the circus.”

“Then how do you know all of this, Miki?” Homura asked. She didn't sound particularly interested,
though. Ah, wait— she'd never met the guy.

Scowling at her poorly-snapped chopsticks, Sayaka said, “His mom actually texted me an update
for once.” She stabbed around her bento distractedly. “She said I could visit today if I want, but
says he's been angry at everybody who goes in his room. I dunno if I believe her. I've never seen
him like that when I visit him. It doesn't sound like him. He'd never yell at me.”

Hitomi and Madoka made sympathetic sounds and agreed. Homura stared at her for a long
moment, watching her chew. Sayaka took another bite and made a weird face at the girl's
unblinking intensity.

“You may be surprised by what medical setbacks can do to a person's mental state,” Homura
finally snapped sourly, her voice stilted and face pulled into a bitter half-frown. Sayaka flinched,
but the magical girl continued, “It is like winning a prize and having it taken away. As though the
universe has played a cruel trick. Do not visit him unless you are mentally prepared to see him
furious and in despair. Prepared for him to lash out at you simply because you are a convenient
target— and to not allow yourself to be wounded by his words. It would do neither of you any
good. Once he says something hurtful because he is in pain, he cannot take it back and you cannot
unhear it. It will constantly be in the background of your friendship. That is the foolish risk you
would take by visiting him when he is in this mood. Wait for him to get a hold of himself or you
will regret it.” Disgust crossed her face— and something like disbelief?— before she looked away,
broke her chopsticks perfectly, and ate as primly as Hitomi always did.

Sayaka exchanged uneasy glances with the other girls as they all chewed. The diatribe had been
extremely rude, but something about the transfer student's bristling body language was enough to
give all of them pause. It felt like the atmosphere had gotten heavier. Sayaka was glad to have her
mouth full of food to keep an automatic comeback from slipping past her lips. A sassy “What
would you know?” would probably not be helpful.
Besides, Stranger Danger kinda had a lot on her mind. Grumpiness would be understandable—maybe even expected. And she... yeah, she had a really good point. Sayaka wished she could slow down and be as insightful as the magical girl. *Homura might be the most mature person my age that I know,* she thought.

“You're right, Homura,” Sayaka said frankly after a long pause. It seemed to startle the other girl. Whether it was because she wasn't arguing or had used her actual name for once, Sayaka couldn't say. “I... hadn't thought about it that way. I'll just send him a text or something. Say I'm sorry to hear about whatever and to call me if he wants me. Thanks.”

Homura opened her mouth to speak, paused, then warily said, “You are... welcome?”

The look on her face was just *too funny.* Sayaka laughed brightly, mood lightening. “Really! You might've saved me from making a total *dummy* of myself with him!”

Solemnity returning, Homura stared for a moment then quietly said, “I am glad you can see it that way.”

“Well, you *were* pretty harsh, young lady,” Sayaka babbled happily. She wagged a chastising finger, enjoying the sudden uncomfortable sideways glance it triggered. Thinking of the magical girl's no-nonsense warnings about other things, she winked and added, “But that's just how you get sometimes when you worry about people, isn't it?”

Madoka and Hitomi cooed as Homura huffed and refused to look at any of them, cheeks pink.

Sayaka's pleased smirk lingered through the rest of the lunch period.

Late that night, Homura transformed in her house, froze time, and set out for the hospital with Yoruichi in her arms. She navigated the silent halls to Kyōsuke Kamijō's room with ease and stood at the foot of his bed, frowning down at him. His injured arm was in a bulky splint and there were dried tear tracks on his sleeping face.

“Idiot,” she finally snapped.

“Now, now,” Yoruichi chided. “I told you last time that what you did wasn't particularly thorough and probably wouldn't last a long time. And you have no idea if he actually did overwork it to ruin your work.”

Homura scowled. After a moment of silence, she stubbornly repeated, “Idiot.”

Yoruichi sighed, then shimmied up from Homura's arms to her shoulders. “Grab his chart. Let's look at it before we do anything. And get out Kisuke's diagram.” After ten suspended minutes of reading, Yoruichi said, “I think we should stick with the gradual plan. See the path Kisuke highlighted in green?”

“Yes. The median nerve.”

“Did he teach you how to find its major connectors with Mr. Monk?”

Homura slowly turned her head to look at the cat, disturbed. “You... know about the dummy?”
“Of course.”

“You did not warn me.”

“Of course not. That wouldn't be any fun. So did he?”

“Yes.” Homura pointed to a half dozen points on Kamijō's arm. “Roughly here, though it takes time to pin each down for certain. He said every body has variations and to consider that Kamijō might have more connections than average if he usually has such fine dexterity.”

“Good.” Yoruichi settled more comfortably on Homura's shoulders. “Start at the wrist and work up to the shoulder. Finding each will be the hardest part. Use only a bit of carefully-controlled reiatsu at each point. Encouraging the median to repair itself will help with fine motor control and sensation in some of the fingers. He has other, more complex issues, but this will be a gentle start to help the stuff down the line where the median branches. Nothing deep or thorough yet, but enough for him to notice a difference. We'll reinforce it sometime next week.”

Homura took a deep breath and concentrated.

After what felt like hours of trial and error seeking tiny needles in a hayloft and threading them with spidersilk, Homura returned to her home, allowed time to resume, and staggered to her bed. She flopped on it and lay breathing deeply for a few minutes as Yoruichi fussed around her.

“Get out one of your Grief Seeds and use it before you pass out,” Yoruichi said firmly.

Homura blinked the blurriness from her eyes, then wearily reached into her shield. She rolled on her side and tapped the Grief Seed against her Soul Gem, which was dirtier than she ever felt comfortable leaving it. The amethyst's impurities used up the entire Grief Seed in one hit. Homura shoved the Grief Seed back in her shield, released her transformation, and sighed.

“You shouldn't have pushed yourself so hard,” Yoruichi chided.

“Need him... don't tempt Sayaka,” Homura slurred, eyes already closed. “Harder... than I thought.”

“It will get easier with practice,” Yoruichi said quietly. “You're still very lossy on transfer and working at a disadvantage by simultaneously maintaining the time stop so long. If you use manufactured weaponry all the time, it makes sense you run into endurance problems when multitasking your magic. We'll have to get closer to the hospital first next time. Minimize wasted travel time while you build endurance and finesse.”

“Rather not've the Incubator see... me near there,” muttered Homura. “Don' want it... pokin' 'round why... I go there.”

The cat sighed. “We'll talk about it more when you've recovered.”

Homura was snoring lightly before Yoruichi finished the sentence.
By the time Homura woke up, it was nearly lunch time. Thoroughly disgusted with herself despite Yoruichi’s insistence that it was a common reaction, Homura decided to forgo showing up to school late and spent the afternoon obsessively studying the charts and reading material Urahara had given her at his healing lesson. Yoruichi gave up trying to talk to her and spent her time lazing in the sunshine filtering in the window. Both were startled when the doorbell rang, but they recognized the magic on the other side. Homura rose and opened the door for Madoka and Sayaka. Both looked concerned.

“Yes?” Homura prompted when they just stood and stared.

“We— we were so worried!” Madoka fretted.

“Did something happen?” Sayaka asked.

“Are you hurt?!”

Homura blinked at them owlishly as Yoruichi wove between her ankles to greet the girls with ankle-rubs. “Ah. I had a... very long night. I slept until lunch and decided to stay home.”

Both friends sighed deeply. Sayaka scowled and put her hands on her hips. “Why didn't you text us or something?”

The thought had never occurred to her. She tilted her head curiously. “Why should I?”

Sayaka huffed and jabbed a finger into Homura’s cheek repeatedly. “We're your friends! Get it through your head that we give a damn about you and would like to know you're not lying in a ditch somewhere!”

Homura made no move to stop the poking, just staring at Sayaka with a baffled look on her face. Sayaka apparently decided to keep poking until she reacted, her face set in a stubborn pout. Typical of Sayaka, really, but Homura couldn't remember being on the receiving end before. She usually did stuff like this to Madoka. Sometimes Kyōko.

“If I promise to notify you next time, will you stop that?” Homura finally asked grumpily.

“Y-e-e-e-s-s-s-s-s-s-s,” Sayaka drawled, poking Homura again but wiggling her finger in a circle on the cheek, pulling one side of Homura’s frown into a smile. Madoka giggled at the motion as she bent and picked up Yoruichi.

“Fine,” Homura huffed as she brushed Sayaka's hand away. “Would you like to come in?”

Homura escorted them to the living room and gestured at the table. “Please have a seat while I get some snacks.”

“Ah! We brought your classwork!” Madoka said.

Homura vaguely gestured over her shoulder. “Just put it on my desk, thank you.”

When she returned with a tray of tea and Yuzu's endless cookies, Madoka was seated and Sayaka was standing by the desk with school papers, frowning at the diagrams Homura had been studying. The ones about the human hand. Mentally, Homura did a full-body cringe. Sloppy. Sloppy. Sloppy. Maybe she still needed more sleep.

“What's this?” Sayaka asked.
“A project,” Homura said curtly as she set the tea tray on the table.

“For what?”

“None of your business.”

Sayaka's face transitioned into contrary mode. “Why not?”

“It is personal,” Homura snapped. “You should not go looking through other people's papers.”

“They're just laying here in the open,” Sayaka argued with a pout.

“Sayaka, stop it,” Madoka scolded. “We're guests.”

“But it looks so interesting!”

“Homura will tell us about it only if she wants to,” Madoka argued. “I told you not to look and you did anyway. Don't be even more rude.”

Sayaka sulkily dropped the school papers and moved to the table to sit. Madoka elbowed her and made an expectant face. Sayaka looked down at the table and mumbled, “Sorry, Stranger Danger.”

Homura sighed and tamped down her anger— which was honestly mostly at herself. “Do not do it again.”

“I won't.”

After a long, awkward silence while the girls poured tea and munched cookies, Sayaka asked, “So, was your late night... magical girl business?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Sayaka fiddled with the handle of her teacup and looked up through her bangs. “Do you need help with a cover story or something?”

Homura sighed. “Not particularly. I have notes in my school file about a medical condition that makes my absences less likely to raise eyebrows.”

“Medical condition?” Madoka asked worriedly.

“I used to have a heart condition,” Homura carefully explained after a pause. “I spent much of my childhood in and out of hospitals. Between an experimental surgery and my healing abilities as a magical girl, it is not a problem anymore. The adults just do not know that.”

Sayaka perked up as though she had a realization, but clamped her mouth shut and kept it to herself. Odd.

“Should we tell people you had heart trouble, then?” Madoka asked.

“No. That would make my gym participation suspicious,” Homura replied. She looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. “Say... that I pulled something near my surgical scar while... hmmm.”

“Moving heavy furniture to get something your cat dropped behind it?” Sayaka suggested after they all thought.

“That works,” Homura agreed. “Let's say this something was a piece of fish I did not want to rot. I
“pulled my muscle and scar here—” Homura slid a finger along her rib cage beneath her left armpit — and I chose to rest it for a day.”

“Works for me!” Sayaka cheered.

“Got it,” Madoka agreed with a wan smile.

Sayaka pressed her hands to her cheeks and stared into the distance excitedly. “We get to help with cover stories! Guarding magical girl secrets! Cool!”

Homura didn't have the energy to discourage Sayaka's fantasies verbally so she just frowned her disapproval. Sayaka didn't notice but Madoka did. The pink-haired girl smiled ruefully and shrugged in Sayaka's general direction. Sayaka's being Sayaka. You get used to it.

Actually, she did have the energy. “You are incorrigible,” Homura sighed.

“What's that?” Sayaka chirped, snapping out of her fantasy.

“Nothing,” Homura and Madoka said at the same time. They met each other's eyes. Madoka giggled and Homura reluctantly smiled.

“What? What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Madoka repeated innocently.

“What's incorrig— corragg— corrugatedible?”

Homura snorted into her tea while Madoka laughed joyfully.

Homura allowed herself to be dragged to Madoka's house for dinner. Yoruichi played with Tatsuya while Madoka cemented Homura's cover story by expressing concern while Homura tried to limit her left arm's movement as though it was tender. Tomohisa and Junko Kaname fussed over her even more than Isshin Kurosaki had. After dinner, Tomohisa went back into the kitchen and cooked up a storm in a way that strongly reminded Homura of Yuzu, packing two days' worth of meals for her to take home so she could rest her “pulled muscle.” He announced that Madoka would bring an extra bento to school for her for a few days so she didn't have to prepare or carry her own. Madoka was sent home with her to carry everything for her and both adults offered to help her with anything heavy in the future. It was touching and made her feel guilty that it was all based on a lie.

After Madoka left, Homura sighed and rolled her shoulders. She looked at Yoruichi and grudgingly said, “I need to restock tonight. I used up a lot of shotguns on Wednesday.”

Yoruichi hopped up from chair to desk to the book shelf Homura had eventually just cleared for her dedicated use and watched Homura grabbing casual clothes from drawers. “Do you actually keep track of inventory or do you just throw stuff in there just in case?”

“I know exactly how much of what is in my shield,” Homura replied distractedly.

“Oh? You take notes?”
“No.”

“You just know?”

“Yes.” Homura went into the bathroom to change. She didn't particularly like dressing in front of the cat-woman.

“That's interesting.” Yoruichi called.

“I suppose.”

Clothes changed into uninteresting neutral tones and carrying a small purse, Homura murmured a goodbye and stepped out into the night. She casually made her way to the mall, bought a large boba tea to drink while wandering around, browsed at a book store, bought a book, and headed to the restroom. Once in a stall, she hung her belongings on the peg, transformed, and stopped time. She walked through the mall briskly and took to the rooftops once outside, heading directly to her nearby target.

The Yakuza locker room was full of men smoking cigarettes, as usual. She pilfered each locker, storing any weapon she found into her shield and carefully replacing the doors to whatever position they had started at. The storeroom was dim, but she knew it by heart now— robbing the Yakuza blind was routine these days. Once done, she turned north and pilfered a JSDF base. Very routine.

Before long, she had retraced her steps to the mall bathroom. She released her transformation, waited a moment, flushed the toilet, and left. She was still a bit tired from the previous night and was just done dealing with humanity for the day, so she detoured through alleys to avoid the press of bodies on public transit on a Friday night.

She hadn't gotten far when her instincts screamed in alarm and a girl dropped from the rooftops half a block in front of her. The stranger wore a loose sweater over short-shorts and her long brown hair trailed behind her in a sleek ponytail. The girl smiled and clasped her hands behind her back, leaning forward playfully. Homura could sense that she was definitely a magical girl. A strong one she had never seen before. This was probably bad.

“Hi! I'm Ayase Sōju!” the girl called loudly. “I heard your name is Homura Akemi. Is that true?” she asked with a wink.

Homura frowned. That was ominous.

“Ooh, the stoic type? Nice.” Ayase kicked a foot back and forth in another playful gesture. “I need you to answer so I can label you correctly, though.”

Homura scowled. “I am not in the mood to play games. Leave.”

“But playing games is so fun!” Ayase cheered, throwing her hands wide with a grin. Her Soul Gem sparkled red on her left hand. “I'll show you a good time! I have a lot to show you!”

Irritated and wanting to avoid a fight until she knew more, Homura triggered her transformation. She froze time just as a frilly white dress coalesced around the other girl, shoved her book and purse into her shield, then walked up to Ayase and scrutinized her face. After some thought, she pulled her spare phone out of her shield and snapped some pictures. Not wanting to kill the girl until she knew what her motives were but too grumpy to deal with it that night, Homura sniffed disdainfully and took to the rooftops. Instead of going home, she veered hard south toward Shinchi to see if the girl would follow her, staying just within sensory range for someone of that girl's strength.
Time resumed. Homura waited for an hour, but the magical girl didn't follow. The distant magic churned in frustration for a bit, then retreated west. However, she soon felt that marching band magical girl homing in on her position, so she froze time again and went home.

Yoruichi startled when time resumed and Homura seemed to pop into existence from nowhere.


“A complication.” Homura yanked her purse and book out of her shield and sourly threw them on the floor. “A new magical girl I have never seen before confronted me and seemed to want to fight me.”

Yoruichi's ears perked back up and she bristled. “Not in all your timelines?”

“Never.” Homura released her transformation, kicked her shoes off, and stalked toward her bedroom. “I am in no mood. I left and she went west. She will have to wait.”

She went to bed but was too angry to sleep at first. Even though she had been trying to accomplish change for ages, she hated when change popped up in the form of complete unknowns.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
PATRICIA
The Class Representative Witch. Her nature is to remain an onlooker. Using the spiderlike threads which she vomits forth, she created a school for herself alone within the sky of her barrier and endlessly acts out an ordinary daily student life there. If you ring the going-home bell, this witch will likely return to her house somewhere.

Minion: Mathieu, whose role is to be her classmates. Although the skates on their feet allow them to glide gracefully along the threads, all of them are actually controlled by the witch using her threads, and they have no will of their own.

A/N: A new challenger appears!
If you've read Kazumi Magica, you probably have an idea where this is going.
If you haven't read Kazumi Magica, it just means you won't be spoiled for a twist.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Homura felt better when she woke in the morning. Though she was awake in time to go to school, she decided to stay home and work on her arsenal. The presence of the new magical girl who seemed to want to fight her made it imperative that she be prepared for anything. Besides, it was just a half-day and she could do the classwork in her sleep at this point. Remembering the previous day's conversation, she texted Madoka and Sayaka to say she was going to give her “injury” an extra day to heal and called the school to report her absence and repeat the cover story. Sayaka replied with an emoji-ridden expression of concern and encouragement. Madoka replied that she would bring her lunch when the half day was over so they could all eat together. Homura paused thoughtfully, then accepted.

Yoruichi was lazily reading her phone over her shoulder as Homura ate breakfast. “When are you leaving for Karakura?”

“I am not going to Karakura,” Homura said distractedly.

The cat straightened into alertness. “You're supposed to do another briefing and get instruction.”

“I have a phone.”

The cat's tail lashed irritably. “It's not the same and you know it.”

Homura looked at her darkly. “I am not leaving Madoka and Sayaka alone to be preyed upon by the Incubator like last weekend and I do not know the new magical girl's intentions. I am staying here.”

After a minute of consideration, Yoruichi conceded the point with an inclination of her chin. “Call Kisuke to tell him.”

“Fine,” Homura sighed.

Kisuke Urahara skilfully attempted to wheedle her into doing the trip anyway, which Homura had expected. She stonewalled him sullenly.

“I asked you before and I'll ask you again: How do you expect me to be able to help you if you
distance yourself from my base of operations?"

“As I said before and will say again, you are an intelligent man,” Homura replied. “I presume you are capable of finding a solution.”

In the pause that ensued, Homura could practically feel that he was pursing his lips in consternation. Yoruichi chuckled lowly.

Urahara tersely said, “I've been working on an idea, but it will still take some time.”

“That is not my problem,” Homura said.

“It kinda is,” Yoruichi drawled. “You have a limited window in which to sort all of this out before you you could be forced to turn back and teach us everything all over again. Four weeks left, now. Tick-tock.”

Homura pursed her own lips in consternation. Point taken.

“I admit your concerns are legitimate,” Urahara sighed. “I'll rearrange some of the lessons into reading material with prompts for Yoruichi to verbally explain certain points in more detail. And send me the pictures you took of the new girl. I'll see if I can find anything about her. Ah, speaking of research! I traced Noriko Chiasa's progress from her school, into a section of old buildings around a park with no cameras, picked her up getting chased by Yoruichi, into the alley, and then nothing. There was a security camera on the one loading dock but it shorted out as Chiasa turned the corner.”

“That's another convenient coincidence that seems to keep popping up,” Yoruichi said lowly. “Reiatsu feedback powerful enough to mess with human electronics?”

“That would be my guess,” Urahara agreed. “Like a spiritual EMP. Do you care about the science behind that?”

“Nope,” Yoruichi answered as Homura shrugged.

“I poked around the businesses and found a couple work orders for faulty lighting at the ice rink and completely dead everything at the dry cleaners. By the blueprints in the city's files and Yoruichi's description, Chiasa was pretty close to their breaker box. So....”

“That is good to know,” Homura murmured.

“Oho, you sound like you have an idea,” Urahara crooned.

“Perhaps,” Homura said blandly.

After tidying up, Homura manifested her shield and pulled out her haul from the previous night. She sorted the items methodically, lining them up in neat rows on the floor as she paired weapons with related ammunition. Once it was all set out, Homura sat on the floor and worked her way down each line, loading and readying each weapon and storing them in her shield for quick access in battle without the bother of loading on the fly. Homura was pleased that Yoruichi knew to keep her mouth shut and stay out of the way when she was handling weapons. In some early timelines when she had done this in front of Sayaka or Kyōko, they would babble or distract her by moving around or poking things.

Well, Kyōko did most of the poking. Once Sayaka contracted, she learned to be wary of munitions because her largely mêlée style got her up close and personal with them in battle. Kyōko was more
reckless in that respect.

When Homura stored the last set of weaponry, Yoruichi asked, “Were you low on the grenades and RPGs too, or...?”

“No. But if they are there, I may as well take them,” Homura answered.

“I'm getting the impression that you could supply an army,” Yoruichi said drily.

“Fighting Walpurgisnacht requires an army's worth of weaponry,” Homura said with a shrug.

“...Right.”

Yoruichi was silent for a few minutes as Homura bustled around preparing a tray of tea and cookies for her friends, who would arrive within the hour. Homura was mildly frustrated— she did not have Mami's flair for artful food arrangement. And she swore she could feel the cat watching her struggle. Would having a normal cat be the same way?

“Hey, Akemi,” Yoruichi said. “There's supposed to be another disappearance today, right?”

“Ah.” Homura manifested her shield and retrieved the calendar of disappearances and strange incidents Urahara had put together for her based on the infodump from his alter in the previous timeline. “Yes. Saki Yamaha. Kazamino. Her body should be found in an amusement park tomorrow.” She looked at the cat with narrowed eyes. “I think it would be suspicious for you to be present at another potential turning.”

Yoruichi purred. “I was going to say the same thing.” She sounded quite pleased. Practically smug. Homura raised an eyebrow, but the cat ignored the implied question. “Not sure if you going could also be suspicious. If Mami Tomoe was on your side, it would be less suspicious for her to venture into Kazamino. And less dangerous, maybe— you said she had a preexisting friendship with Kyōko Sakura, right?”

Homura hummed doubtfully. “There is a rift between them at this point, so I do not know.”

“Ah, well,” Yoruichi sighed. “I guess just go hunting tomorrow and hope you run into the Witch. You can never have enough spare Grief Seeds.”

Looking at the calendar, Homura said, “I will search the area after the announcement of her body's discovery airs on the morning news. The Incubator probably knows I know the truth. If it confronts me, I can say I search whenever I hear about a girl dying mysteriously.”

“Works for me. Then the other girl— Momoe? She's Monday by the hospital, right?”

“Yes.” Homura looked up and pursed her lips. “I may have to find a way to accompany Miki to the hospital as Madoka usually does. If I can get a Grief Seed and time it right, I may be able to keep Momoe from turning.”

“Mind the cameras,” Yoruichi drawled.

“We just spoke about that,” Homura said with a dismissive wave of her hand. Yoruichi cooed her gleeful understanding.

Any further conversation was interrupted by the doorbell. Madoka and Sayaka were cheerfully waiting on her doorstep.
“Look, Stranger Danger!” Sayaka crowed, brandishing a grocery bag. “I’m the one giving the candy this time!”

Madoka giggled and held up a bakery box. “I got us a little cake from the usual place.”

Homura sighed fondly and shook her head. “Come in.”

Lunch was pleasant. Homura was content to quietly let Sayaka and Madoka’s bubbly chatter wash over her. Somehow, they both understood what she was doing. Not unusual for Madoka, but somewhat surprising for Sayaka. At least at this point in the timeline. Homura didn't miss the blue-haired girl's occasional serious glances her way, but chose not to acknowledge them. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what was rattling around in Sayaka's head today.

“So, are you staying here this weekend?” Sayaka finally prodded her when they broke out the cake.

“Yes.” Homura carefully set slices onto small plates, face serious as she concentrated. “I do not want to leave you two alone in Mitakihara. That is to say, I do not want to be far away should you find yourselves in trouble. Whether it is a labyrinth or the Incubator or— ah.”

“What-ah?” Sayaka asked, leaning her chin on her hands and watching Homura's face.

Homura frowned and lay the knife down, then put the slices of cake in front of her friends. “Something disturbing happened last night. I want to warn you.”

Sayaka snapped upright again, ignoring the cake. “What?! Is that why you didn't come to school in the morning?”

“Yes.”

Madoka nibbled on the tines of her fork. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“I was not injured, no.” Homura sighed, considered her words, and continued, “You recall that magical girls can challenge one another over territory or limited resources, yes? As I discussed with Mami Tomoe.”

“Yeeeeeaaaaahhhhhhhhhh,” Sayaka said suspiciously.

“I know the two most active magical girls in this area by reputation. One is Mami Tomoe. The other is... I have heard that her name is Kyōko. I saw her from a distance once. Dark red hair, dark red costume, almost always seen snacking on something or other— from what I have heard. I have heard that she can be extremely aggressive, but... not necessarily terrible. From rumors, it depends on if you manage to offend her somehow. If you do, then she can be vicious.”

“Uh, what offends her?” Sayaka asked warily.

Homura pursed her lips. How much would it be safe to say? She hadn't really planned for the conversation to go this way— she thought she'd mention Kyōko in passing and move on. Maybe she could do something to keep Sayaka from butting heads with Kyōko as badly as the girl often seemed to manage. Sayaka tended to blow up in rage first then accept Kyōko later after she got more information. Maybe if Homura got the blow-up portion done before the two even met...? Tricky.

“It is... hard to say, having never met her myself,” Homura answered slowly. Distantly, she didn't like that lying came so easily these days. “I have heard that she is very cynical about our... duties. That something terrible happened to her. That she fights off idealistic magical girls who are more
concerned with fantasy than reality to teach them a lesson. That she sometimes allows Familiars to roam until they consume enough souls to spawn a new Witch, then defeats the Witch for its Grief Seed.”

Madoka gasped softly. Sayaka scowled and snarled, “Then she is terrible!”

Homura frowned and tented her fingers together on the table. “It may not be as black and white as it appears at first glance, Miki.”

“You're defending her letting— letting those things— letting them eat people?! That's pure evil! There's no excuse—!”

“Grow up,” Homura snapped before she could stop herself. Sayaka reared back as though slapped. Homura huffed and massaged her closed eyes. “Miki. You must remember how badly our situation can force a magical girl's hand. Whether or not a girl knows her Soul Gem will turn into a Grief Seed if it is not cleansed, we all know that as it darkens, we struggle more. That its darkness is a deeply disturbing and dangerous thing. Our magic is more difficult to access. Battle requires more and more effort, which increases the amount of magic we need to accomplish the same things—a death spiral. We take more damage and heal more slowly. In short, we know that our chances of dying in battle rise apace of the darkening of our Gems. Many girls just do not know that there is a worse state beyond death for us. It is like slowly starving.” She dipped her chin and looked up at Sayaka through her bangs. “It is one thing to talk of ideal standards for food when you are comfortable. When you are truly starving, it is madness to dismiss any food out of hand. Ideal standards mean little when you are trying to avoid death and have no safe options. In such circumstances, you may come to be grateful for even molding trash, no matter how disgusting. You may become desperate enough to steal food. Desperate enough to fight or kill for food. No matter what ideals you had before you could no longer afford to maintain them. There have even historically been incidents in which desperate humans resorted to cannibalism to survive. Even in the more recent past.” And here she was using creepy moral relativist food metaphors like Kyōko. What had her life come to? She tilted her head and tried to be less cynical. Aim for sad? “Some people stick to principles even if it kills them. That can be noble. Many others compromise for the sake of staying alive. It is human nature. They may not even realize they are doing it. Have you never heard that one of the dangers of saving a drowning person is that they may drag you under them and drown you in their panicked effort to avoid death?”

And now she was using a metaphor about drowning to explain something to a girl whose Witch form was a mermaid. Sometimes Homura felt like her life had become a cosmic joke.

Sayaka's face was cycling through emotions. Hither and thither with a center at appalled and confused. She sputtered but could not summon words. Anger appeared frequently, as did hurt and doubt. Hopefully, that was a sign of thought beyond knee-jerk reaction level. Hopefully, Homura hadn't just broken the strange tie that had developed between them in this timeline. She was finding herself actually enjoying that tie. Cautiously, even uncertainly, but it was... nice.

Homura sighed heavily. “I am not saying that such survival tactics are admirable. Nor moral, or even desirable. I wish to stress that they are potentially understandable. Yes, there are some magical girls who are rotten to the core. But figuring out which magical girls enjoy it and which have had their hands forced by the system is not necessarily simple. I only ask that you pay very close attention to magical girls and accept that they likely fall into a shade of gray on a black to white scale.”

“Even you?” Sayaka mumbled.

“Especially me,” Homura replied tiredly. She took a deep breath and decided to up the ante. “Who
knows? Maybe this Kyōko just needs the right sort of... support. Rumor says she was once Tomoe's partner. Do you think Tomoe is the type to associate with someone with no redeeming qualities?"

“N-no...,” Sayaka said quietly.

Madoka gathered Yoruichi into her lap and solemnly said, “We'll have to keep an open mind. But be very careful.”

Sayaka poked her cake with her fork, face troubled. “Ye-yeah.”

“That is all I can ask of you,” Homura said with a nod. “This is all a tangent, though. I need to warn you about a different magical girl who has appeared in this territory. One I have never seen or heard of before.”

Madoka bit her lip. “Maybe Mami knows her?”

Tilting her head thoughtfully, Homura murmured, “Perhaps. I should approach Tomoe about this as a courtesy, anyway. This is technically her territory. She just does not particularly mind sharing if other girls are polite about it.”

“So what's the big deal with this other magical girl?” Sayaka asked.

“I do not know her motives, but I believe she is dangerous,” Homura answered.

“I thought we were supposed to keep an open mind,” Sayaka grumbled.

“This one ambushed me without provocation,” Homura said bluntly. She stared hard at Sayaka, hoping to get the seriousness across. “That is the most dangerous sort of magical girl. I was lucky that she is arrogant enough to grandstand before attacking. Had she wanted, she could have attacked me from above before I even knew I needed to defend myself. She had the high ground in a narrow space. I was distracted. I could be dead now.” Seeing Sayaka and Madoka both had gone pale, Homura settled back and carefully used her fork to slice a bite from her cake. She had made her point.

“Okay, yeah, that sounds... really bad,” Sayaka said shakily.

“What should we do?” Madoka asked.

“Be extremely cautious. I do not know why she approached me. I do not know if she will seek out potentials like you two or if she is just targeting those with existing contracts—or even if she is specifically targeting me. The two clues I have are that she knows my name and that she wanted to verify it. She said she wanted to label me correctly.”

Face twisted in disgust, Sayaka said, “Wow, can she sound any more like a serial killer?”

Homura's lips quirked in a brief, grim smile. “Anyway. She had very long brown hair in a ponytail. She introduced herself as Ayase Sōju. Her magical girl costume was a long, frilly white dress with purple ribbons.” She paused to chew her cake, running over potential problems in her head. If one unknown magical girl could show up, what ruled out others? After a sip of tea, she continued, “Actually, be careful with any girl with a silver ring on her hand. Like mine.” She held out her left hand, fingers splayed to show her Soul Gem ring. “If you go near Shinchi, there is a magical girl there who seems extremely defensive of her territory. I do not know much about her aside from that. I was too far away to make out her hair color, but her costume is a short frilly blue dress and a marching band hat. If she confronts you, apologize and say you are not contracted and do not intend to challenge her. I think she may accept that. When she showed herself to me when I
trespassed by accident, I bowed my apologies and left. She did not chase me.”

“Well... that's good. I guess,” Sayaka said uncertainly.

Homura nodded. “There are also magical girls to the north in Asunaro, but I know very little about them.” She tapped her fingers on the table and slowly said, “Do not mention this to anyone, but there is some sort of spell over Asunaro. I am trying to figure out what it is.”

“A spell?” Madoka said in surprise.

“Yes. The one time I crossed the city limits, it took a moment to notice the spell. It made me forget the Incubator.” She forked another piece of cake and sourly said, “That is extremely dangerous for me. I will not go into Asunaro proper again until I figure out that spell.”

“Did the Incubator do it?” Sayaka asked, voice gradually rising. “Did it do that to keep you from telling other girls about it?!”

“I do not know,” Homura said quietly. “It does not fit with the pattern of behavior I have observed in it. It does not seem to particularly care if magical girls find out the truth, provided it happens after contracting. If a potential who is powerful enough finds out, it simply outright says to call on it if she thinks of a wish she would stake her soul on. If such a girl contracts, she is likely already in a distressed state. Distress and the truth often cause magical girls to decline faster, which works to its advantage.”

“Then why is it being so damn cagey about it with Tomoe?” asked Sayaka.

“All I can do is guess,” Homura said carefully. “The way it misled her about its injuries at Madoka’s house... It may be trying to leverage Tomoe against me as a proxy. I would also not be surprised if it sees Tomoe as a useful recruitment tool to ensnare the two of you.” She eyed them speculatively. “You were quite impressed by her in combat, were you not?”

Madoka and Sayaka glanced at each other, then their respective laps, blushing guiltily.

Homura made herself smile wryly. It bordered on a grimace. “Do not be ashamed. I have heard she is legitimately impressive. She would have to be, to survive as long as she has. And I doubt she has any idea she is being used. Her concern for you in the labyrinth was most likely genuine.” After a long stretch of unhappily silent eating, Homura sighed. “I think we have spoken about enough serious business,” Homura said as she pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “How is that boy doing, Miki?”

Sayaka's face lit up. “Guess what?!”

After a long brainstorming session, Homura ate one of the dinners Madoka's father had packed for her and set out for Mami's apartment. Yoruichi followed at her heels, an insurance policy to drive away the Incubator if it was present. Mami's face was stunned when she opened the door.

“Good evening.” Homura bowed slightly. “I apologize for bothering you. I need to pass a warning to you.”

“About what?” Mami asked slowly. She glanced down when Yoruichi darted forward and curled
around her ankles, purring.

“Business.” Homura glanced down the hall and nodded to indicate Mami should look at the family several doors down. A harried mother was squabbling with her children. Potential witnesses to talk about magic. “May I come in?”

Mami frowned uncertainly, then nodded. “Of course.”

Homura slipped off her shoes as Mami closed the door behind her. “I apologize for my cat. She follows me everywhere sometimes. Would you like me to put her back out?”

“No, no, she's fine,” Mami said more warmly. Yoruichi purred more loudly and rubbed her face into Mami's leg. A smile ghosted across Homura's face at Mami's resulting giggle.

“I brought a gift,” Homura said, holding up a cloth-wrapped bundle tied together with one of her old purple hair ribbons. “Cookies.”

Mami smiled and accepted the package. “Thank you. Please, follow me.”

Homura sat at the usual table while Mami, ever the perfect hostess, bustled in the kitchen and brought out two artfully-plated slices of some kind of fancy cake.

“I need to pay attention to how she does it sometime,” Homura thought idly as she thanked the blonde. She deliberately took a bite as Yoruichi slunk under the table. The mutual acceptance of cookies and cake was akin to a truce ritual.

Mami watched her for a minute before setting fork to her own slice. “What kind of warning do you want to give me?” She was obviously weighing every aspect of Homura’s appearance—probably watching her body language for signs of attack or dishonesty.

“Perhaps I should start with a question,” Homura replied. “Do you know a magical girl who wears a frilly white dress with purple ribbons? She has long brown hair in a ponytail.”

Mami frowned. “I don't think so.”

“She said her name was Ayase Sōju.”

Tapping a finger on her chin in thought, Mami said, “I don't recall hearing that name, even in rumors. Why?”

Homura lay her fork on her plate and clasped her hands together on the table. “She tried to attack me last night.

Mami's brows rose. “Go on.”

“I was in an alley. I was not transformed. She descended in front of me, also not transformed. She knew my name, but said she wanted me to verify it so she could label me correctly. She then transformed.”

Mami took a sip of tea, troubled. “Did you fight?”

“No, I escaped. I try to avoid unnecessary battles. I wanted more information on her motives and did not wish to draw attention from normal people,” Homura answered. “I was lucky that she was so arrogant as to reveal herself before attacking. I fled south and waited to see if she would follow. She did not. She moved west.” After a pause, she ventured, “I then encountered a magical girl in Shinchi. She made a display of challenge when I trespassed, but she did not chase me when I
bowed at her and left.”

“That would be Nonon,” Mami murmured with a wave of her hand. “She's been a magical girl at least as long as I have. Probably longer. Her magical aspect is sound and music. She's highly experienced and viciously territorial but we worked out a border between our territories after several fights. She shouldn't follow you back here unless you provoke her.”

Homura had known Mami had worked out deals like that before she had contracted, but had never cared about the other parties involved.

Mami looked down with her brow knit in thought and drummed her fingers on the table. “There are a pair of sisters a bit west of here, but I haven't seen them for a few weeks and neither fits the description,” she murmured. “I know of other magical girls in the surrounding areas, but none of them match.” She looked up at Homura and frowned. “She knew your name?”

“Yes. That concerns me. I... try to avoid becoming well-known.”

“Could she have followed you from wherever you were before you came here?”

Homura couldn't come out and say that was impossible. “That would be extremely improbable. I went to great pains to obscure myself.”

“Even from Kyubey?” Mami said in the same pensive tone. Fishing for information by surprise. Smart.


“Hmmmmm.” Mami took another bite of cake and watched her guest carefully as she chewed. Homura patiently bore the scrutiny. “Why did you come to tell me about this, Miss Akemi?”

Homura mirrored her and resumed eating the cake. “I felt you needed to know about a potentially dangerous interloper of unknown origin.”

A wry smile curled Mami's lips. “You realize you're also a mysterious interloper, do you not?”

Acknowledging the dig with a snobby inclination of her chin, Homura replied, “Perhaps. But I have no intention of challenging you for this territory or fighting you in anything but self-defense. I cannot say the same for this new girl.”

Mami cocked her head curiously. “You sound... concerned?” She didn't quite succeed at concealing her hope.

“Yes. I do not want you to die,” Homura said bluntly, focusing on her cake instead of her hostess' face. She never liked to see Mami vulnerable. It always struck her as wrong even though she knew the perfect confidence and nobility the girl projected was largely a mask. But the first dozen or so timelines in which she had effectively been Mami's apprentice had solidified that mask as the ideal Mami in her mind. Whenever Mami's vulnerability slipped out, it reminded her that her past self hadn't noticed anything amiss until the timeline in which Mami's mind had snapped.

She really wasn't a very good friend, was she?

“Why?”

Homura blinked out of her melancholy and looked up. “What?”
“Why?” Mami repeated, mystified. “Why do you care if I live or die?”

Homura stared at her in silence for several long minutes. She felt Yoruichi slink up into her lap but couldn't look away from Mami. Finally, she tiredly said, “I have seen too many magical girls die.”

Mami's face went similarly solemn, but her eyes looked like she was trying to solve a puzzle.

Finishing her cake, Homura lay down her fork and gathered Yoruichi into her arms. As she rose, she said, “Be alert. Please keep your Soul Gem clean and stay safe. There is a paper with my number in the package I gave you. Call me if you encounter Sōju or hear more about her.” She walked to the door and slipped her feet into her shoes, then looked back. Mami had half-risen from the table and looked confused. Homura bowed. “Thank you for your hospitality. I look forward to speaking to you about other matters soon.”

Mami stammered a reply, but Homura let herself out before she could be drawn back into conversation.

Shortly after she returned to her house, Homura's phone started chiming with a flurry of incoming text messages—the group of everyone in the know had been told she wouldn't be visiting Karakura at their Saturday evening meeting. Homura wondered how Urahara had told them because not one of them challenged her decision. Orihime's messages were warmly encouraging and included an offer to come up and purify her Gem if need be. Isshin's messages read like a helicopter parent checking on their child at summer camp, starting serious and gradually slipping into silliness. Ichigo's were supportive with that same awkward offer to talk if she ever needed to, later followed by an offer to smash Isshin's phone. Karin and Yuzu peppered her with questions and chatter that became difficult to follow. When Karin finally asked if they could just call, Homura stared doubtfully from the phone to her windows. She could angle the screen away from view so the Incubator couldn't see who she was talking to if it was spying and had a way to see past the curtains, but if it was hanging around outside and she had the phone on, it might recognize their voices. She wasn't sure how good its hearing was.

“No worries,” Yoruichi said lowly. Homura looked up to the shelf from which the cat had been reading over her shoulder. After stretching, the cat dropped from the shelf and said, “I'll go out and guard the house. Gimme a pillow to claw up so we can get covered in fluff and you can toss me out like you're angry. Just ignore all the pathetic meowing and scratching I do after.”

“Why?”

Yoruichi hummed pleasantly. “You've earned a bit of downtime with the girls, even if it's remote.” She winked and added, “Besides, clawing the little monster to shreds is fun. Let it come. Give me a great excuse to go at it. See if I can get both eyes this time.”

After setting up the incident and some surprise clawing of her arms to make her genuinely angry when she tossed the black cat out the door by the scruff, Homura allowed the Kurosaki sisters to call her.

“Oh, wow, you totally sound like you need to bitch about something,” Karin said gleefully. “Tell us, tell us!”

“Tell us, tell us!” Yuzu's voice echoed.
“Is it the violin twit?” Karin urged, voice thick with the craving for juicy gossip. “Or the Incubastard?”

A surprised, ugly laugh burst from Homura's mouth before she could quash it.

“Aww, yeah! I win! Told you I could make her laugh by calling it names! Right out the gate, too! Pay up, Yuz!”

Yuzu's voice carried a pout. “Aww, I thought it would have to be a happier topic.”

“Never underestimate the uplifting power of pettiness, Yuzu!” Karin gloated. “Now, Homura! Let's get down to bitching about life!”

“Language, Karin!” Yuzu chided.

“Pffffffttttt.”

They spoke about all manner of things from serious magical girl business to mundane gossip into the wee hours of the morning. It was surprisingly easy to talk to them. Yuzu's cheer and Karin's sass made for a disarming back-and-forth balance. Plus she didn't have to pretend with them. She could compare this Sayaka to other Sayakas outside her own mind, express her frustration with changes she tried to make going oddly, and really just speak about time travel in general. It was a relief. Even talking to them by phone felt like they were right there with her instead of hours away. Was this what it was like to have a confidant? It had been so long since she felt like this with a Madoka who knew everything that she wasn't sure. Whether or not that was it, it was soothing to vent and be vented at.

Homura's sleep was actually deep and restful that night.

Sayaka chewed on her pencil as she struggled with her English translation assignment. She was laying on her bed belly-down, head propped up on one hand as she shifted her scowl back and forth between the laptop with its translation prompts and her admittedly poor notes from class. Homura makes it look so easy when she helps me, she thought.

May I come in?

Sayaka stilled and slowly looked up and around her room at the “sound” of the androgynous voice of the Incubator in her head. Nothing. “Where are you?” she asked suspiciously.

Outside your window, the voice replied.

“Like that's not creepy,” Sayaka muttered. Eyes narrowed, she stood and stalked to the nearest floor-to-ceiling window to tug aside the drapes. Nothing on the sill. She found it when she looked out the nearest window on the adjacent wall and pushed the drapes and curtains all the way open. The creature was perched in the very center of the sill as though it was perfectly normal for a catlike being to have reached an apartment building's fourth floor ledge with nothing to climb.

Good evening, Sayaka Miki! May I come in?

“No. Buzz off,” she snapped.
I would like to speak with you without the interference of others.

Sayaka crossed her arms and glared at it. “So, what, it’s my turn to get perved on? Not interested.”

The creature approximated a frown. As I explained previously, I am incapable of—

“Whatever. Homura's right. You're totally a stalker.”

That is precisely why I wish to speak with you alone, outside her influence, the Incubator said. Homura Akemi is affecting your perception of me. Her presence has not allowed you to form your own opinion of me.


It blinked its beady red eyes up at her. Choosing to change the topic altogether, the Incubator said, I am curious what Homura Akemi told you about Soul Gems and Witches. You asked some interesting questions of Mami Tomoe when you visited her.

Sayaka shifted her stance, fists on her hips, and retorted, “What's it to you?”

I do not understand your question, it said in a way that reminded her of emotionless robots on television.

Rolling her eyes, she asked, “Why do you care?”

Her narrative may be inaccurate and dissuade you from considering a contract which could benefit you greatly.

“And you, too, right?” she parried. “I heard what Madoka said about contracts. You get something out of this whole thing and you aren't saying what it is.”

It stared at her for a long minute, tail undulating behind it, then its body shifted to a different position to mirror an adjustment in the angle of its argument. Considering how pointed the questions were, I infer that you are aware of the tie between magical girls and Witches.

“Good for you, smartypants,” Sayaka sneered. “Yeah, Soul Gems turn into Grief Seeds and magical girls turn into Witches. Why would I ever want to sign up for something like that?”

It didn't deny her statement and ignored her question. Obviously, you knew the answer to the questions when you asked them of Mami Tomoe.

“Obviously,” Sayaka said with a more sarcastic roll of her eyes.

Then obviously you know that she is not aware of the truth. This truth upsets you. Do you think it would upset Mami Tomoe?

“Duh.”

Well, then. I must thank you for urging her down the path to despair.

Sayaka blinked in surprise and knit her brow. “What do you mean?”

Mami Tomoe was blissfully ignorant. You have introduced her to doubt. She is not unintelligent. It is only a matter of time before she comes to the correct conclusion. As with many magical girls, the truth will accelerate her descent into despair. The Incubator tilted its head and crinkled its eyes in a mockery of a smile as dread rose in Sayaka's heart. I have been observing her for two years
now. She has been so adept that I became convinced that she would be one of the rare girls to endure to adulthood. I believe you have successfully sabotaged that possibility. She will become a Witch much sooner than I had anticipated. It is much more efficient. Thank you!

She was going to be sick.

“Get out,” Sayaka rasped.

I am already outside, the Incubator said quizzically.

“Go away!” Sayaka yelled.

My, my. You humans have the strangest reactions to efficiency. It stood and lazily stepped to the edge of the window sill, past the reach of the window's dim light. When it glanced back over its shoulder from the shadows, its red eyes glowed. If you ever change your mind about the contract, call me and I will help.

“Help?! That's not help! Why would I ever want your help when I know what you would do to my soul?!” Sayaka raged as tears blurred her vision.

Many humans eventually find a wish they want so desperately that any price is acceptable, the Incubator replied casually.

“No me! Never!” she snarled. Sayaka slammed her fists on the window. “Leave! Now!”

As you wish, the Incubator sighed. If you ever find something you want so badly you would sacrifice your soul to obtain it, I will be waiting. And I am sure Mami Tomoe would welcome a partner. A burden shared is a burden lightened, after all. Perhaps you could delay her fall.

The white figure disappeared into the night with a graceful leap.

Sayaka roughly drew the drapes closed. She left her hands fisted in the cloth and slid to the floor, grimacing as she let loose an angry sob.

It had done exactly what Homura said it might. Homura knew so much! She had to get Homura to help Mami. Had to. She had to do something. Mami was too nice, too heroic to be rewarded with a transformation into a Witch. Or with insanity, as Homura had said was possible. There had to be a way to help her. Sayaka was sure of it. She just had to find it.

For the first time in her life, Sayaka understood what it was like to loathe something with her entire being. It was like being consumed in a tempest at sea, her rage at the storm bearing her up to defy the sky from among the waves.

The Incubator would pay for what it had done. Somehow.

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Homura drowsily let Yoruichi in on Sunday morning, yawning as she threw the curtains wide and turned on her rarely used television to blare the news on her way to the kitchen to reheat one of the breakfasts Madoka’s father had packed her. Discussion about the mysterious theft of JSDF weaponry that had leaked to the public became background noise. She let her mind drift as she kept half an ear open for mention of Saki Yamaha's corpse. When the discovery of the body was
finally relayed by the disturbed news anchor, Homura turned the TV off and washed the dishes before heading out.

After taking a bus to the northeastern border of Mitakihara and Kazamino, Homura set up a search pattern like she had used for the Pumpkin Witch by the Karakura train corridor. Up one street, down the next, Soul Gem held low to disguise her holding something invisible. She crossed into Kazamino and worked her way toward the amusement park from the news. About half a kilometer away from it, she detected a labyrinth behind an electronics store. Brandishing her Soul Gem revealed a squarish sigil with thick margins and the outlines of two angels holding hands in the center.

The Box Witch. Great. She hated that thing. It was a weak combatant, but its mind games put her on edge. Homura tried to avoid entering that labyrinth when she could—especially with other magical girls. The television screens that displayed memories were loathsome. She preferred to throw Sayaka at this Witch. It was one enemy for which the swordswoman's tendency to charge against something without much forethought was an asset.

With a deep sigh, Homura transformed, set her practice barrier on her Soul Gem, and entered the labyrinth. She could immediately feel that it was a Familiar's labyrinth—no Witch present. Less annoying, but it meant the Witch was still out there and she might be the one to face the same hated labyrinth twice. Bothersome.

Hair drifting in the snow globe's sparkling pseudo-water as she tried to ignore the images of her worst memories on the television screens embedded in spinning carousel horses, Homura pulled a machine gun out of her shield and methodically destroyed each art mannequin Familiar in a hail of bullets.

Ayase licked her lips and intently watched the labyrinth's door flickering as her prey fought within. Already transformed and holding her sword, she shifted with tension like a cat with muscles coiled to pounce. As soon as the sigil collapsed and the purple magical girl reappeared, she launched herself down from the girl's left. The stoic magical girl sensed her and instantly moved to shield with her buckler. Ayase's grin sharpened—the Soul Gem was exposed on her hand. She could disable her opponent before she could even retaliate!

Then Ayase crashed into the ground where the girl had been. Ayase whipped around, wild-eyed.

“Whatever your motives are, this is your last chance,” a cold voice echoed in the alley. Ayase looked upward and found the girl perched on the edge of a building. Her face was set in grim disapproval. “Whatever grievance you may have with me, have the decency to talk to me first.” She narrowed violet eyes. “Did Kyubey send you?”

“So what if he did?” Ayase said tartly.

“It hates me and has misconstrued events to at least one other magical girl in an attempt to make her hate me,” Akemi said, glare intense. “It may be manipulating you.” She lifted her chin and looked at her askance. “Either to eliminate me...or to draw me into killing you. I would guess it considers you expendable.”
Ayase paused. Kyubey did have reason to want her dead. No matter, though; she'd just have to be on her A-game.

Akemi must have noticed the tic in her face. She sighed harshly, tossed her hair over her shoulder, and brusquely said, “Really, all magical girls are expendable to it. Think about it. Should you decide to oppose Kyubey, approach me when not transformed and I will speak with you. If you attack me again, I will kill you.”

Ayase opened her mouth to retort but the girl was gone. No movement. Just gone. She looked at the rooftops with bafflement, then hopped up to the roof and looked around, primed for attack. Nothing. She twitched as she felt Akemi's power flare brightly on the far side of Mitakihara. Probably by the western city limits. Perhaps three seconds had passed and her target was already kilometers away. It was a taunt. *Come get me. I dare you to try.*

Ayase was confident in her abilities but not stupid enough to go after an alert, powerful opponent on a battleground of that opponent's choosing.

She released her transformation and viciously kicked a loose roof tile, sending it skittering off the edge to crash in the street. “How does she do that?!"

Three seconds to cross the city. If her prey was that fast, Ayase needed to trap her in a closed environment so she couldn't get away if she had any chance of getting one over on her. Looked like it was time to find a labyrinth to camp in.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Somehow, writing this story makes me hate Incuchulhu even more than I did when I started.

Mentally picturing Homura glowing purple and looking fierce with a caption of *COME AT ME, BRO*

Kinda like Inucurry's drawing of Rebellion!Sayaka captioned I HAVE THE HIGH GROUND

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: You don't know how happy I am to be writing more frequently again. And to be hearing from you all more often. Despite how long it took me to carefully line up plot dominoes and the difficulties of my real life, you've been cheering me on patiently for a long time. Thank you.

Homura planted herself on a high girder in a construction site, arms crossed, scowling eastward, and flared her magic. The strange magical girl had fled west last time; perhaps she would come this way again. But Homura sensed Sōju drop her transformation and her magic fade in the act. Too far away to detect direction without the amplification of the active transformation. Not sure whether she was pleased or disappointed, Homura scoffed and dropped her flare.

She wanted to know if this girl could be swayed to her side. It was looking very unlikely, but Homura had thought that about Kyōko in many timelines. Even in the most recent timeline, Kyōko had made her entrance by confronting Sayaka and immediately getting into a life-or-death duel; once that was broken up, she tried to start another duel. Initial aggression wasn't always indicative of eventual alignment. Sōju was a complete unknown, though, and allies were something she was not in short supply of these days, so Homura wouldn't be as patient as she was with Kyōko. If Sōju rejected the offer of parley, Homura's response would be a timestop and a bullet to the girl's Soul Gem. Simple as that.

Mami Tomoe appeared on a girder opposite Homura, transformed and frowning. She held one of her rifles in a downward-facing ready stance and scanned for enemies before looking back to Homura. Homura huffed and nodded a greeting to her, making sure to leave her arms crossed to not seem about to attack. Tomoe hesitantly let her rifle dissolve into yellow sparkles and hopped girders to get close enough to speak.

“I felt your magic. What happened?” Tomoe asked. “I thought maybe that girl you mentioned attacked you and you might need help.”

“She did,” Homura said sourly. She noted that Tomoe had warmed to her enough to come to her defense. Good? “On the other side of town. She ambushed me as I was exiting a Familiar labyrinth.”

Tomoe looked surprised. “You fight Familiars?”

“Oh course,” Homura said with a casual wave. “Aside from their predations, it takes less magic to nip them in the bud than to face them once they have matured. Provided one is conservative with their magic use.”
That was definitely approval on Tomoe's face. Targeting Familiars despite the "waste" of magic was the greatest moral standard Tomoe held herself to—the one that often got her abandoned by other magical girls she tried to work with.

"Did she say what she wants?" Tomoe asked.

“No,” Homura replied, glancing east again. At this point, it would do no good to mention the potential involvement of the Incubator. She looked back at Tomoe. “I told her to approach me without transforming and talk it out with me because if she attacks me again, I will fight back and... possibly kill her.”

Tomoe's face went troubled, but she nodded after a moment. “Self-defense is self-defense,” she said slowly. “And it's not like you haven't tried to be diplomatic.” Tomoe tilted her head and searched Homura's face. “I respect that you've been... moderate despite being attacked. A lot of girls wouldn't bother.”

Homura stared at her flatly. “I try to avoid making enemies unnecessarily. Rivalries benefit no one.”

A tentative smile softened Tomoe's face. “I think I was wrong about you. I apologize.”

Looking at her sideways and nodding, Homura slowly said, “Thank you. I know I am... standoffish. And my hatred of the— Kyubey is off-putting to many magical girls.”

“Yes, it is,” Tomoe agreed. “But... I think it's starting to make some sense. I just wish you would tell me more. The secrecy is what makes you most suspicious.”

Homura tried to project frankness. “I feel you would react better to my information if you figure out a few things yourself first. I would rather outright tell you I am not ready to explain things than lie to you.”

The blonde looked thoughtful. “I... suppose I can respect that.” She sighed and relaxed. “I need to get home. I have a cake in the oven. I don't want it to burn.” Tomoe shifted nervously and said, “Would you... like to come over?”

Homura eyed her uncertainly.

Tomoe clasped her hands behind her back and looked a touch shy. “I think... we could get along. If we try. And... um, if Kyubey's there, I'll ask him to leave out of... consideration for you.” She glanced at Homura, cut her eyes away, and gave a little self-deprecatory laugh. “But he hasn't exactly been around much, anyway.” She looked up again and smiled wanly. “I guess I've been... kind of lonely.”

God, Homura hated seeing her this vulnerable. But if she was outright admitting it to a virtual stranger when her habit was to bury it, she must be desperate. The Incubator's apparent distance was interesting. Homura decided to try to reach out to her. If she could keep Tomoe stable, maybe she would react better to the secrets. And who was she to waste a chance to edge out the Incubator?

“I understand,” Homura said. “I would be glad to visit with you. I do not know how long I can stay, though. I have reading to do... for class.” Actually, whatever jargon Urahara had sent her. But Tomoe had always emphasized being a good student in addition to being a good magical girl when Homura and the others became her apprentices. She would happily accept that excuse.

Tomoe's entire face broke into a sunny smile. “That's great! That's fine! I do, too, ahaha! Hopefully, you'll be able to stay long enough to try my cheesecake! I-it's only a small one, but it's more than
Not for the first time, Homura wondered how much of Tomoe's baking and sharing was an attempt to attract friends. Nodding, she said, “Yes. Please, lead the way.”

Homura was a bit disgruntled by how quick Tomoe was to leave her back open to her, but followed her without mentioning it.

When they arrived at the apartment and released their transformations, Homura's phone blew up with notifications. She sat and grimly read Sayaka's edgy texts about the Incubator's visit the night before while Tomoe bustled in the kitchen. After some brief exchanges—yes, it was gone, no, it hadn't come back— Homura praised Sayaka's resistance and responded to the girl's worry about Tomoe by saying she was actually at her apartment trying to bridge the gap. She smiled ruefully at the hurricane of happy emojis that Sayaka spammed her with in return.

“Is everything all right?” Tomoe asked as she set a tray with tea and cake on the table. “You looked angry.”

“Ah. Yes. It is fine now,” Homura said after a moment of surprise. Then she stopped. She didn't know whether to say the Incubator had visited Sayaka or make something up.

“I see,” Tomoe said as she set the table. “May I ask what happened? Or is it too private?”

Homura pursed her lips. Tomoe let the silence drag. Finally, Homura cautiously said, “It was Miki. She was upset.” She waited for Tomoe to put the teapot down so she wouldn't drop it. “Kyubey went to her window last night. It disturbed her.”

Tomoe's eyes widened in surprise. Then she frowned in disappointment. “I've told him that pressuring girls into doing things is rude. He doesn't seem to understand it.”

Homura tilted her head and eyed Mami speculatively. “Is it that it does not understand, or that it does not want to understand?” When the only response she got was a stare, she continued, “We outright told it that it was behaving like a stalker. Miki made her disinterest clear. She said it at least bothered to ask permission to come into her room and cooperated when she denied it entry, but it sat on her windowsill and made its sales pitch again.”

“Maybe... Kyubey doesn't...,” Tomoe trailed off in confusion.

“What would you think if it had not been that creature, but a boy Miki had turned down who scaled her apartment building and sat on her fourth floor balcony trying to woo her?”

Tomoe's mouth turned down doubtfully. “Well, obviously—obviously, it would be quite disturbing,” she said quietly.

Homura sipped her tea and let Tomoe think for a minute, then softly asked, “Do you see why I hate its tactics?”

After a long silence, Tomoe said, “Yes,” just as softly. “I don't think he intends it that way, though....”
“Does intent matter if the action is disturbing and continues after being strongly discouraged?”

Tomoe picked at her cake unhappily. “I think... I need to talk to him. And think about this.” She looked up and searched Homura's face. Mami Tomoe was many things, but stupid was not one of them. “Is this the thing you want me to work through before you talk to me?”

“One of them, yes.” Homura said coolly.

Tomoe stared at her pensively as they continued to eat their cake. When the tension got deeply uncomfortable, Homura murmured, “Your cake is delicious. How did you learn to bake so well?”

Tomoe's face lit up. “Well—”

—

Madoka had trouble sleeping Sunday night. Her day had soured after the hushed phone call she had received from Sayaka. She kept glancing at windows whenever she noticed movement. In the dark of her room that night, she tossed uneasily and kept sitting up to peer past her curtains and make sure the Incubator wasn't there. She didn't know what on earth she would do if its beady red eyes were there to greet hers one of these times, but couldn't stop checking. If only Yoruichi was there to guard her! What little sleep she got was restless and cluttered with disjointed dreams she mostly forgot every time she woke with a little gasp to check the window.

Finally accepting that sleep was beyond her as the sky began to lighten, Madoka got up and puttered in the kitchen. She was blearily sitting at the table and staring out the window at the garden as it became visible in the predawn light when her father came in. It took him a couple tries to get her attention.

“Madoka?”

Madoka turned to him with a drowsy “Hmmm?”

Papa scrubbed his face with his hands and cracked a yawn. “What are you doing up this early, sweetheart?”

It took a moment for Madoka to process the question. “I couldn't sleep.”

Her father frowned in concern. “Are you feeling okay?” He shuffled over and pressed a hand to her brow. “Hmm, no fever. Do you feel sick?”

“No, Papa,” Madoka said softly. “Just... a lot of... not bad dreams, I don't think, but, like... short dreams that keep surprising me awake. And I can't remember them, but I keep thinking—” She caught herself before she could be too honest about fearing the Incubator. “I keep checking the window like someone is watching me when I wake up. But there's never anything there.”

Papa carded his fingers through her hair and deftly undid the tangles her night of tossing had caused. “Maybe you're thinking of the cat that got in last week?”

If only he knew. “Yeah... maybe...,” Madoka murmured and sipped from the mug of hot chocolate she had made.

“Speaking of the cat. Have you seen it around anymore?”
Madoka blinked slowly and tilted her head back to squint up at him. He looked worried. She was too tired to decide what to say so she just kept squinting at him blearily, as though she couldn't understand the question.

“It's just... I think it wasn't hurt as badly as we thought that morning,” Papa said. “Maybe it was the adrenaline? There wasn't as much fur and blood as I thought there would be when I went back later. If it's not hurt as bad as we thought, I was wondering if you've seen it hanging around.” He tilted his head and looked at her carefully. “Madoka?”

She was never good at keeping guilt off her face. “Yeah... I think?” She shifted uncomfortably and cut her eyes back to the garden. “Well, um, a white cat. But... I dunno if it's the same.”

“Where?”

“Uh... you know... around,” Madoka said with a vague wave of her hand, keeping her eyes on her mug. She faked a yawn for good measure.

After a minute of quiet, her father squeezed her shoulder and said, “Just be sure to keep your window closed.”

Madoka nodded. “Okay, Papa.”

Madoka left for school extremely early and took her time picking her way to the campus as she thought. She was surprised to find Sayaka already at their usual place, sitting on a large rock and looking distracted. Madoka greeted her tiredly.

Sayaka lifted her head and blinked slowly. “Mornin', Raccoon Eyes.”

A fleeting smile graced Madoka's face. “You couldn't sleep, either?”

“Nooope.” Sayaka glumly kicked a rock into the stream. “Kept checking the windows for Incucreeper like I'm in a slasher flick or something.”

“Me, too.”

Madoka joined her friend on the rock. They leaned against each other and tiredly watched the first trickle of students arriving. Homura was both early and surprised to see them. Sayaka smiled wanly and waved. “Hey, Stranger Danger.”

Homura stared at them solemnly for a long moment, then walked up to them and offered them each candy. She said nothing, but sat on Madoka's other side and waited for Hitomi with them. Her silent presence made Madoka feel safe.

The school day went well. They caught a glimpse of Mami during a break and the girl tentatively smiled and waved. Madoka and Sayaka waved back cheerfully and Homura offered her own cautious nod. Madoka felt fiercely happy at the progress.

Hitomi joined them at the outdoor café for treats before running off for her lessons. Sayaka clapped once and announced, “I heard Kyōsuke is doing better again! I wanna go visit him. Wanna come and wait for me and we can go to my place after?”
“Sure!” Madoka cheered. When she glanced at Homura, she thought the girl's face was relieved. Maybe they were going to her place too often? Hmm.

Sayaka babbled the entire way to the hospital. Madoka and Homura trailed behind her and traded amused glances now and then. When Madoka and Homura sat in the lobby and watched Sayaka practically dance into an elevator, Homura actually snorted something like a laugh. Madoka added to her tally of improvement in her new friend's demeanor. It was like she was slowly defrosting. But the longer they sat there, the more Homura started to fidget and frown. She looked restless, her wary eyes scanning the lobby.

“What's wrong?” Madoka asked.

Homura pressed her lips together grimly. “I feel magic,” she murmured under her breath. “Twisted magic. I think there may be a magical girl with a badly corrupted Soul Gem nearby.”

“You feel it?” Madoka asked. She looked around at all the oblivious people.

“Hey, guys! I'm done!” Sayaka announced as she strolled up to them. “Kyōsuke had to go for—what? What is it?”

Madoka was about to answer but a shiver ran down her spine. Homura jumped to her feet and intensely looked at something behind Madoka. Turning in her seat, Madoka saw a girl with long white hair running through the busy adults. The girl had tears on her cheeks and looked heartbroken.

On her left hand, something sparked with blackness.

Homura grabbed her bag and charged off after the girl without another word. Madoka and Sayaka scrambled to follow. They trailed the girl out the door and along the sidewalk, turning the corner to the bike racks as the girl fell to all fours and wailed. The breath was knocked out of Madoka and Sayaka when Homura dropped her bag, transformed, and did something that made the air suddenly heavy and tingly, then leapt forward faster than Madoka could track. Homura skidded to her knees and roughly grabbed the girl's left hand. Black energy spiked as a blackened egg manifested above the girl's hand, but suddenly stopped when Homura forced a Grief Seed against the corrupted Gem. Madoka and Sayaka hovered nearby, afraid to move though the creepy spine-chilling feeling had subsided. They watched as the blackness from the Soul Gem was drawn into the Grief Seed like sand through an hourglass until it shone white. With a flash of milky light, the Gem turned back into a ring on the girl's hand. When Homura sighed relief and the tension left her body, Madoka and Sayaka exchanged a glance and cautiously approached.

The white-haired girl seemed to still be oblivious to Homura, too preoccupied with hysterical crying. Madoka caught Homura's worried glance to the ring on the girl's hand.

“Despair,” Sayaka muttered beside her. More loudly, but uncertainly, Sayaka said, “Hey, Homura. You said the... thing... happens when the Soul Gem isn't cleaned or if a magical girl... despairs, right?”

Homura looked up at them with a solemn face, glanced to the ring and back at them, then nodded. Sayaka chewed her lip and made several abortive movements, unsure what to do. Homura let go of the hyperventilating girl's hand and cautiously lay her hands on the shaking shoulders. Face hesitant then resolved, she firmly said, “Breathe.”

The girl startled and looked up with a gasp. Homura's face firmed into something more
authoritative and she repeated her command. “Breathe.”

Madoka cringed internally. It... wasn't exactly a sympathetic face. But it at least seemed to catch the smaller girl off guard enough for her to automatically obey.

“In and out. Breathe,” Homura said.

The girl stared up at her, hiccuping through her tears. She looked Homura up and down. “You're—you're a ma-magical girl?”

“Yes.” Homura stared more intensely. “You need to calm down or your Soul Gem may turn dark again.”

Fresh tears welled up in the girl's eyes as her face crumpled back into despair. “B-but my mom-mmy died an-nd it's all my fault!”

Madoka and Sayaka inhaled sharply.

“What happened?” Homura asked.

“I— my— my wish,” the girl sniffled. “I made a st-stupid, stupid wish! I could've sa-saved her but I did something so dumb!”

Madoka and Sayaka looked at each other with pale faces. Neither needed to say anything: It was exactly like Homura had warned them. Wishes were dangerous things.

Homura's face softened a bit with pity, but she also looked like she didn't know what to do.

Madoka took a deep breath, shoved her school bag at Sayaka, and marched up to the kneeling magical girls. She dropped to her knees next to Homura and held out open arms. “I'm sure you didn't mean for it to go like this. I'm so sorry that happened.”

The girl threw herself into Madoka's arms with a wail and nearly hugged the breath out of her.

Madoka held her, rocked her gently, and murmured soothing words into her hair. Her own eyes teared up with empathy. This close, Madoka thought she sensed something; like she could actually feel the girl's grief. Something made the hair on her arms prickle like static electricity. Was this magic?

She felt more than she saw Homura release her transformation as she stood up and said, “Shall we go into the park and sit somewhere quiet?”

The crying girl cuddled into Madoka's arms with a wail and nearly hugged the breath out of her.

Madoka held her, rocked her gently, and murmured soothing words into her hair. Her own eyes teared up with empathy. This close, Madoka thought she sensed something; like she could actually feel the girl's grief. Something made the hair on her arms prickle like static electricity. Was this magic?

She felt more than she saw Homura release her transformation as she stood up and said, “Shall we go into the park and sit somewhere quiet?”

The crying girl cuddled into Madoka and nodded. Madoka stood and helped the girl up, but her knees buckled. Sayaka jumped forward and caught her from behind with a loud “whoops!”

“M'sorr-sorr-rry,” the girl mumbled.

“No prob! I gotcha!” Sayaka said warmly. “Hey, Madoka, hold her up a sec?”

Madoka held a steadying hand to the wobbly girl's arm as Sayaka turned her back to them and knelt. Homura stepped aside and gathered all their school bags as Sayaka glanced over her shoulder with a sympathetic smile.

“Hop on!” Sayaka said. “The Miki Express is now boarding!” Madoka smiled gratefully and helped the girl climb on Sayaka's back, then helped Sayaka stand. When Sayaka gained her feet and adjusted her grip, she looked at Homura with a determined smirk. “All aboard! Miki Express
now departing! Lead on, Stranger Danger!"

The little girl squeaked alarm. “Stranger danger?!”

“Whooooooops!” Sayaka said with an embarrassed laugh. She swiveled to make the little girl face Homura. “That's just my nickname for Homura over there. She's always giving us candy and cookies and stuff. It started as a joke and it just stuck.”

Homura nodded a silent greeting to the girl. Madoka wished she was more open, but she also noticed that Homura kept watching the girl's Soul Gem ring like a hawk. When she looked closer, Madoka saw that the milky gem—tinged the faintest pink-violet now that she saw it up close—was already dimmer than it had been. Homura's aloofness was understandable if she was wary of the girl turning into a Witch.

Madoka decided to officially take charge of comforting the girl so that Homura's attention would be less divided. *This* was how she and Sayaka could help without contracting!

“This way,” Homura said quietly.

“Yes, ma'am!” Sayaka trilled. “Miki Express now leaving the station! Choo-chooooooool!”

From behind, Madoka couldn't help but notice the way Homura went rigid and paused mid-step. It was brief, but strange enough to notice. Was she mad that Sayaka was acting so lighthearted about the situation? It seemed to be calming the little girl—whose name they *really* needed to get—so Madoka didn't know why Homura would be bothered.

They trooped through the wooded margin of the park and found a gazebo with a little round table and a circular bench. Sayaka dropped the little girl at a bench with a loud imitation of a train whistle and hissing steam brakes. Homura's face twitched, but returned to pleasant-yet-serious. They all sat at the table, Homura across from the new girl and Sayaka and Madoka in between on either side. Madoka reached for her school bag and rifled through it until she found a little packet of tissues.

Handing a tissue to the new girl, Madoka smiled gently and said, “Let's start over. My name is Madoka. It's a pleasure to meet you. Though, um... I'm sorry about the circumstances.”

“I'm Sayaka!” She leaned forward with her elbows on the table and braced her chin in her hands as she smiled. She glanced sideways at Homura and lifted her brows expectantly.

“I am Homura Akemi,” she introduced herself. She gravely dipped her head. “I am sorry for your loss.”

The little girl sniffed hard and tried not to whimper. “M-my name is Nagisa.” She looked around at all their faces. “Are you all magical girls?”

“Just Homura over there,” Sayaka answered with a tilt of her head. “We're her plucky normal sidekicks.”

One side of Homura's face pulled into a brief frown of disapproval before smoothing out once more. She sighed and pushed her hair over a shoulder. “Madoka and Sayaka have the potential to become magical girls. However, I have advised them not to. Because of the danger... and the possibility of wishes going wrong.”

Nagisa's face crumpled again. “I wish you were there when I was gonna make my wish.”
Homura tilted her head. “When did you make your wish?”

Nagisa shrugged and held the tissue to her face.

“What date?” Homura pressed.

Madoka and Sayaka looked at her oddly but she kept staring at Nagisa.

“Wh-why does it matter?” Nagisa muttered.

“You never know,” Homura said calmly.

Nagisa sniffled and looked up at the gazebo ceiling. “Um, I didn't have school, so it was a Sunday. A week ago, I guess? Two?”

“March twenty-seventh? Or twentieth?” Homura asked.

Nagisa shrugged and held the tissue to her face again. “Why does it matter when it happened? It still got M-Mommy killed.”

Madoka rubbed the girl's back. “Can you tell us what happened?”

The girl looked around at them, then began. “W-well, um. I moved here with Daddy in February because Mommy got moved to this hospital. We're from Kinuma, and it's a little place so the fancy stuff Mommy needed for her cancer wasn't there so we came here. Our apartment is that way,” she said, pointing southwest. “Mommy got a little better, but then she got sicker again. Mommy and Daddy told me Mommy was d-dying.” Nagisa covered her face and cried.

Madoka stroked her hair and made hushing sounds, looking at her friends worriedly. They both looked grim.

“M-Mommy was on funny medicine and talked a lot about things we used to do and she wanted something one more time b-b'fore she d-died but Daddy said we didn't have enough money because rent and Mommy wanted it so ba-ad so when Kyubey came— when Kyubey came, I wished for— that.”

“Wished for what?” Homura asked quietly.

Nagisa's face flushed dark red as it twisted into a wretched expression and she muttered something unintelligible.

“What was that?” Sayaka asked.

After a long pause, Nagisa whispered, “A cheesecake.”

Everyone stared, silent with shock.

“What,” Homura said flatly after a long pause.

Nagisa hunched down and squeaked, “A cheesecake.”

Madoka looked up at her friend and saw mounting anger in Homura's usually placid face.

“You. Wished. For. What?”

“I to-told you it was really dumb,” Nagisa whimpered. “I should've— I should've wished for
Mommy to get better. Then we could have all the cheesecake she wanted w-when we got more money.”

“A cheesecake,” Homura echoed, expression appalled.

Nagisa covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Madoka saw Homura’s glance and followed it. The Soul Gem in the silver ring had dimmed more. Madoka looked up at Homura and held out a cautionary hand. “Stop, Homura. I think she’s angry enough at herself without you being angry, too.”

Homura sat back and heaved a gusty sigh. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “I am not angry at her,” she grit out. Violet eyes opened as windows to endless fury as she spat, “I want to kill that white rat!”

Madoka said nothing, but gently wrapped her arms around Nagisa as she cried. Sayaka was looking at Homura, grim agreement in the tightness of her lips and narrowness of her eyes.


“Thing?” Nagisa asked, surprised out of her tears.

“The Incubator,” Homura said coldly.

“The what?”

“The lab rat that calls itself Kyubey,” Sayaka sneered. She sat upright and pounded a fist into her opposite hand. “I want to punt that thing off a cliff. No, into a volcano.”

“Kyubey is... bad?” Nagisa asked in confusion.

“Damn right it is!” Sayaka snarled.

Homura sighed and relaxed some. “I can explain it to you, but I fear it may upset you further.”

Nagisa shrugged Madoka off and sat up straighter. “Will it— will it make me angry?”

“Probably,” Homura answered. “And probably depressed.”

Face firming, Nagisa said, “I want to be angry.”

Homura tilted her head and scrutinized her. Nagisa stared right back with a trembling scowl, hazel eyes glassy with unshed tears. Homura closed her eyes and sighed. “I can explain, but I do not think we have time to do so today. The people in the hospital are probably looking for you.”

Nagisa wilted again. “O-oh.” She looked up from behind her bangs. “But... you'll tell me?”

“Yes. You will probably be quite busy for the next few days,” Homura said. Madoka thought there was something mournful in her eyes. “I will give you my phone number.” She rifled in her school bag as she spoke, fetching a notebook and pen. “Call me when... your family's preparations are done. And I want you to call me if anything happens in the meantime. If you find a Familiar or a Witch, or if another magical girl bothers you... but especially if your Soul Gem gets dark.” She wrote her name and number on the notepad, paused, and passed it to Sayaka. Sayaka took it and fiercely wrote her own contact information on it.

Nagisa looked at her ring. “Why?”
Madoka wove her fingers into Nagisa's splayed hand. “Something very bad happens if a magical girl's Soul Gem gets too dirty,” she explained gently. “It's... like... ummm.” Wait, Homura wanted to wait to explain. Stupid, stupid—

“It may as well be death,” Homura said.

That worked. Madoka took a deep breath and continued, “It very nearly happened to you when we followed you. But Homura saved you with a Grief Seed.”

Nagisa whipped her head up and looked at Homura in surprise. “You saved me?”

Tilting her head and looking melancholy, Homura shrugged. “I suppose. As much as a magical girl can be said to be saved, anyway.”

Madoka decided Homura needed a hug.

“Anyway,” Homura said in her neutral-bordering-pleasant tone, “I will clean your Gem again with what is left of the Grief Seed. Then we can relax until you are found. Or go back to the hospital right away, if you wi-want.”

Madoka smiled sadly at her friend’s avoidance of the word wish.

“I wanna stay with you guys,” Nagisa said as Homura sifted through her bag again and Sayaka pushed the notepad to Madoka, who scribbled her name and number on it and tore it off to give to Nagisa.

Homura nodded. “Your Soul Gem, please.”

Nagisa manifested the pale gem and held it out to Homura, who clinked the nearly-spent Grief Seed against it. Once it had brightened, they both sat back.

“Good,” Homura murmured. She tucked the Grief Seed in a pocket and pulled a tin out of her bag. “Would anyone like some candy while we wait?”

Sayaka's face brightened. She pumped a fist and cried, “Stranger Danger strikes again!”

It was enough to surprise a wet little giggle out of Nagisa. Madoka thought they could work with that.

Red eyes watched them from the treeline until hospital security found them.

How unexpected. Nagisa Momoe had seemed an easy mark, yet she had stabilized. Homura Akemi was quite the complicating variable. Especially in combination with Madoka Kaname and Sayaka Miki.

It did not like variables.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: For Nagisa, the way I'm writing her is probably more childish than in the Rebellion movie. That version of her has ascended to a higher plane of existence and has acquired vast knowledge of the universe as part of the Law of Cycles. I see it as a maturing force, like it was for Rebellion!Sayaka. (Insecurities gone, more rational, etc.) So I'm going with Nagisa being more childish like Bebe as normal mode.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A cheesecake, Homura fumed on her way home for the evening. *The little idiot sold her soul for a cheesecake.*

Despite what she had said, *yes,* Homura was furious at the little girl for making such a stupid wish. She understood it— knew the blame really lay with the Incubator for finding someone gullible enough to make such a weak wish— but the thought that the Sweets Witch that often killed Mami had been born of a wish as trivial as *a stupid cheesecake* made her blood boil.

Madoka and Sayaka seemed to be very aware that she was angry, but unwilling to leave her alone. After parting from Momoe and hospital security, Homura hadn't felt like going to Sayaka's apartment. The others ended up tagging along after her as she seethed her way toward her own townhouse— knowing them, they probably wanted to keep an eye on her at least as far as her place before they continued past. Fine. Whatever.

She was surprised by how much she wanted to snarl at Yoruichi over the new low she had found in the Incubator's operations. It was weird having someone who it was acceptable to vent and be angry around, but she kind of liked it. Even if it was a cat. A whim struck her: She wanted to call the Kurosaki girls and vent with them, too. So strange.

Homura sensed something odd when they were a block from her house. Madoka and Sayaka were finally making awkward attempts to start some kind of conversation when they rounded a corner and saw someone sitting on Homura's doorstep, boredly messing around with a smart phone as Yoruichi lazed next to him. Homura jerked to a halt mid-step and stared in confusion. Madoka and Sayaka bumped into her back. The person on the step glanced up at their double squeak of surprise.

“Ah. There you are, Akemi,” Tōshirō Hitsugaya droned.

“What,” Homura said flatly. She felt like her mind had ground to a stop and couldn't possibly be correct in telling her the shinigami was sitting in the middle of Incubator Central. Wouldn't this tip off the Incubator somehow?

Hitsugaya arched one eyebrow and straightened. “You act like you weren't expecting me.”
Homura turned her face hard to the side and glared at him askance as she tried to restrain her outrage. “That would be because I was not.”

“Oh?” The boy shinigami levered himself up and dusted off his jeans. “I take it my uncle was lying about actually notifying you of the move date, then?”

*What uncle?! What move?!* she wanted to hiss. She would not let her eyes bug out. Would not. Instead, she grit out, “It would seem so.”

Hitsugaya clicked his tongue and scoffed. “I don't know why I ever expect anything better from him. What a pain.” He looked over Homura's shoulders and inclined his chin. “You must be Akemi's new friends. Kaname and... Miki, right?”

Homura felt a tic starting in one eye as her two oblivious friends made small sounds of surprise.

“Y-yeah,” Madoka said.

“Who're you?” Sayaka asked cautiously.

The boy pressed a button to mute his phone just as it started ringing and shoved it in his pocket. “Tōshirō Hitsugaya. I went to school with Akemi in Tokyo.”

What. Since when?!

Sayaka nosed forward with a coo, then elbowed Homura and crowed, “You didn't tell us you have a boyfriend!”

Madoka gasped delightedly as Homura rounded on Sayaka, appalled, and shrilled, “*He's not my boyfriend!*”

“Ah, she's one of those,” Hitsugaya muttered with a long-suffering glance at the sky.

Sayaka's laughter was downright obnoxious. Madoka stifled giggles and patted Homura's shoulder as Homura tried to shrug Sayaka off of her.

Hitsugaya watched blandly as Homura struggled with Sayaka. “I was actually her math tutor when she was ill.”

Surprised out of her teasing, Sayaka exclaimed, “Math tutor?! But she's so good at math!”

“Thank you,” he replied.

Her eye was definitely twitching. “I am not good at math because of you,” Homura hissed.

“I am aware,” he said with a smirk. “You did all the work. But I was there.” Hitsugaya's serious gaze bored into her own. *Play along,* he seemed to be saying. *Reinforce the cover.*

Homura worked her jaw as she clenched her fists at her sides, then abruptly crossed her arms and looked away with a snobby *hmph.*

Sayaka started snickering all over again. “You guys go way back, huh?” When Hitsugaya shrugged and didn't say anything, she leaned forward and said in a stage whisper, “Are you sure you're not her boyfriend?”

Hitsugaya pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Will I ever go somewhere where people don't think I'm dating my friends who are girls?” he muttered under his breath.
“Oh, you have a lot of girlfriends?” Sayaka squealed.

Hitsugaya gave her a deadpan stare, then looked heavenward and said, “Why.”

Laughing, Sayaka trilled, “Just teasing!”

“You shouldn't, Sayaka,” Madoka said. Lips curving slyly, she said, “We could say things about how far back you and Kamijō go, you know,” with a playful wink.

Sayaka flushed bright red and squawked.

“Sounds like I should talk to this Kamijō guy,” Hitsugaya said airily.

“No! Don't!”

And suddenly, Homura regained her footing. She glanced at Sayaka from the corner of her eyes and pleasantly said, “Ah, I understand. You are projecting.”

Sayaka's sputtered denials were unexpectedly satisfying.

“Anyway,” Hitsugaya said to regain their attention. “I thought I'd drop by with Yumi's gift right away so she doesn't annoy me by text all night.” He bent and lifted a box from the doorstep, then held it out to Homura by its elaborate yellow ribbon. “Brownies this time.”

“Yumi...?” Homura said slowly as she accepted the box.

Hitsugaya looked at her askance. “She gave it to me before I left Tokyo. You know how she is: Burying us in food, getting pissed if we don't eat it.” He tucked his hands in his pockets and stared at her evenly, willing her to understand.

A light went off in Homura's head: He meant Yuzu. She nodded and slowly said, “Yumi has sent me four boxes of cookies in two weeks.”

“Of course she has,” Hitsugaya said with a lazy roll of his eyes. “Do me a favor and message her that you got the box so she doesn't get on a train and hunt me down.”

“Of course,” Homura sighed.

“Thanks.” He glanced at each of the girls. “I'm starting at your school tomorrow, by the way.”

Sayaka and Madoka made sounds of interest. Homura stared flatly again. What was going on?

“Maybe you'll be in our class!” Madoka said brightly.

“I won't,” Hitsugaya said. “I'm a year ahead of you all.”

Homura’s friends awwwed in disappointment. For her part, Homura thought fast. A year ahead... Tomoe's class, maybe?

“Oh, well. Maybe you can eat lunch with us, though?” Madoka said.

“Maybe another day. I'll be figuring out where everything is and whatever tomorrow. But maybe I can take you all to my uncle's shop after school so you can watch Akemi tear into him.” He looked back to Homura. “Can we go in and talk for a minute? I'll explain whatever my idiot uncle didn't.”

Moving. Shop. Idiot uncle who doesn't tell her things.
The ‘uncle’ was Kisuke Urahara and this was the idea he had mentioned but not explained.

There went the tic in her eye again.

‘Ah, we’ll leave you, then,’ Madoka said politely. She grabbed Sayaka’s hand and tugged her along as she started to leave. ‘We’ll see you tomorrow!’ she said with a wave. ‘Welcome to Mitakihara!’

Hitsugaya murmured a reply and waved at them. When they were a block away, he turned to Homura and looked at her expectantly. Homura glanced around them at rooftops and shadows, looking for an Incubator. Yoruichi rubbed at her ankles then walked away, jumped up onto a window sill and looked around. They had a sentry. Homura nodded sharply and brought Hitsugaya into her home.

As soon as the door was closed, Homura hissed, ‘What is going on? Why wasn’t I told any of this? Why wasn’t I asked?!’

Sighing as he kicked off his shoes, Hitsugaya answered, ‘Don’t look at me. Urahara told me you had been apprised of the plan.’ He looked up at her. ‘I’ll brief you on the cover story. Details are in a notebook in the box of brownies.’

Homura huffed, tossed her school bag aside, and looked at the box in her hand. ‘Ridiculous.’

‘Most things with Urahara are, really. You get used to it. It never gets less annoying, but you get used to it.’

With a sharp wave of her hand, Homura beckoned him over to the living room table and plopped down to open the box. ‘If Yuzu is Yumi, what is Karin?’

‘Kikyo,’ Hitsugaya said boredly as he sat across from her. ‘She rattled off something about why but I stopped listening after badass undead miko soul possessing a fake body.’

Homura looked at him weirdly. He just shrugged, so she dropped the subject. ‘By the way, why doesn’t your magic feel... the same? As strong?’

‘Reiatsu. And it’s a new gigai with a more complex power limiter,’ he answered. ‘As a captain, I am capable of controlling my reiatsu tightly, but it’s easier to have a gigai do most of the work for me to prevent slip-ups or inconsistencies. We decided to go with me having enough power to see and fight spirits on a high level but be believably human. Basically, like Karin was before she contracted. I have ways to break the seals or leave the gigai altogether in an emergency.’

Homura stared silently for a moment, then looked down and lifted the plastic box of brownies out of the cardboard box to access the notebook beneath it. She flipped through its pages for a moment, then set it down and said, ‘A summary, please.’

Hitsugaya took a deep breath and began.

Mami smiled and greeted her classmates as she sat at her desk and arranged her materials for first period. School was strange these days— somewhere between empty formality, a taunt of watching normal relationships she hadn’t had in years, a hope of connecting with the potential magical girls a
year behind her, and an escape from her duties. These last couple weeks, she had been floating through the school day on a superficially smiling autopilot. She was uncertain about everything she had thought she had known. Kyubey was still keeping his distance. The stability she had carefully crafted for herself was shaky.

She wished she still had Kyōko to talk to.

Her musing was interrupted by the teacher announcing a transfer student. Mami perked up in interest and watched a boy with messy white hair walk into the room and stand in front of the class. His body language bespoke thinly disguised boredom, but his eyes were sharp and attentive as they darted from face to face. He made eye contact with Mami, glanced at the next face, then doubled back to look at her again. He tilted his head ever so slightly; then Mami felt something that made her inhale sharply in surprise. A strong presence; cold, but not threateningly so...

A boy with magic?

Since when could boys have magic?!

The magic flare faded as he stared at her, curious. She darted her eyes around to see if anyone had noticed him looking at her while the teacher introduced him, then slightly flared her own magic. It was the weirdest greeting ever. Was Mami imagining that Tōshirō Hitsugaya looked impressed?

He was assigned a seat behind and to Mami’s left. Mami spent the morning distracted by trying to figure out the boy and his magic. It was like a fragment of quiet winter was hovering in the back of the room. She was probably entirely too obvious about her glances over her shoulder and her scrutiny when he went to the board to solve an equation, but she couldn't care. A boy having magic was yet another crack in her concept of reality and she was desperate to solve the puzzle.

Their last class before lunch was gym. The girls went first for their soccer rotation. Afterward, they sat in the shade and watched the boys play. It quickly became apparent that Hitsugaya was an ace soccer player, much to the appreciation of the girls and the alarm of the opposing team.

Two of the girls Mami had been close with before she contracted scooted over to sit on either side of her. The uncommonly scheming looks on their faces startled her. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

The girls’ smiles got smug. “Don't think we haven't seen you looking at Hitsugaya all day,” Hanako said slyly.

“W-what?!”

Kisa grinned. “Can't say I blame you. He sure is cute.”

Cheeks pink, Mami waved her arms and sputtered, “That's not it at all!”

“Suuure it's not,” both girls chorused together.

They all glanced at a ruckus from the field. Hitsugaya was coming down from a jump, having stolen the ball from midair with a chest bump. The boys around him were too surprised to move for the ball, so he kicked it at the goal with such force that the goalie screeched and dodged it. Hitsugaya's team cheered. Kisa and Hanako cooed.

“You should try to sit with him at lunch,” Kisa said.

“Yeah— move quick before the other girls snag him,” added Hanako.
“What—! No!” Mami hissed.

“We'll run interference,” Kisa said with an unholy glint in her eye. “And when you start dating, you can give us cake to thank us.”

Hanako clucked and shook her head disparagingly. “Always with the cake,” she huffed. Then she looked at Mami and smiled gently. “We know you've been... distant... since the accident. And you have a hard time by yourself. We can't really understand, I guess, but it makes sense you'd be depressed. It's been hard seeing you lose interest in so much we used to do together.”

Kisa leaned in and held a finger to Mami's lips to stop her usual polite denials. “You're actually showing interest in someone. It's nice to see. We want to help.”

Mami was suddenly struck by how much she missed her old friends. They hadn't gone anywhere, but the distance imposed by being a magical girl... well. Mami was the one who effectively went away. She was always declining invitations, always pushing them away; she hardly remembered their likes and dislikes anymore. She really didn't deserve them.

“That's really... nice of you, but I'm not... um... I'm just... um....”

“Crushing on him?” Kisa suggested with a leer.

“No! It's not— it's just— he seems—!” How was Mami supposed to disguise that her interest was the magical mystery he presented? Well, technically, a crush would work, but... that would get really awkward really quickly. Already was awkward. She buried her face in her hands and gave up on talking.

Why was her life so tumultuous lately? It had been so routine for so long that she was having trouble keeping up with the new zigzags.

Mami was still fretting over what to do as lunch started. She was usually decisive, but she was slipping into default hesitancy about everything since Homura Akemi arrived. Uncertainty had her biting her lip and looking down at her bento when a shadow fell over her and she felt that cold magic.

“Excuse me,” said a low, quiet voice.

When she looked up, the new boy was standing over her, face curious. A quick glance past him showed her Kisa and Hanako leaning toward each other and gleefully watching with stars in their eyes. Mami looked back up at Hitsugaya. “Yes?”

He tilted his head and looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “I was wondering if you would let me eat with you, and maybe be willing to show me around a bit after we eat.” He glanced at her left hand. At her Soul Gem ring.

He could see it. And seemed to attach significance to it. Her heart raced. What was going on?

“Oh! Of— of course!” Mami said with a smile. They couldn't talk about magic in public, but they had to start somewhere. She gestured at her desk. “Please feel free to pull up a chair.”

Hitsugaya murmured his thanks and did so. Mami introduced herself as they unwrapped their lunches. He blinked and looked up at her again. “Ah. So you're Tomoe. My friend who moved here from Tokyo before me mentioned you.”

“Your friend?” Mami asked, surprised that someone would talk about her.
“Yes. Homura Akemi. She's a year behind us.” Hitsugaya looked into her eyes with an even stare as Mami froze. “I was her math tutor at our school in Tokyo before she moved here and... recovered.”

Mami furrowed her brow. “Recovered?”

Hitsugaya glanced down and snapped his chopsticks apart. “She had a heart condition. Before...” His eyes darted back up with a significant look, one brow raised slightly. He glanced at her ring and back again.

“Before...? Oh,” Mami said. Before her contract. Hitsugaya knew about the contract?

“Anyway,” he said calmly as as he poked around in his bento, “she said that she had met you a few times. Said you remind her of our friend Yumi.”

“How so?” Mami asked. She hesitantly started eating her own lunch.

“Akemi says you bake a lot. Is that true?”

“Ah— yes.”

The boy nodded. “Yumi is constantly cooking and baking for friends. She's been mailing cookies to Akemi for awhile. Sent me with brownies when I moved. Any occasion to sit down and talk is an occasion to sit down and eat cake or something. When Akemi visited last week, Yumi buried her in homemade food.”

Mami's face reddened. “That... does sound like me,” she said with a sheepish smile.

One corner of Hitsugaya's mouth turned up. “Then we should get along,” he said casually. “You'll probably get along well with Akemi if you run into each other more, if you're patient. She just doesn't trust easily. She plays her cards close to the vest until she's more certain about a person.” Again, he looked her in the eyes, to her ring, and back again.

Mami used chewing as an excuse to mull that over in the context of his knowing about magical girls. “Miss Akemi has been... a bit confusing. Warm and cold, I suppose.”

Hitsugaya shrugged. “Sounds right. That's just how she is with pretty much everyone. Even the people she likes.”

She thought hard. So the attitude isn't specifically triggered by me? Slowly, Mami said, “The few times we've met, she's said there are things that she's... not comfortable with speaking of with me yet. And implied that it could be a barrier if I don't take it well.” This time Mami caught his eye and glanced to her ring. “Do you know what she's talking about?”

“I do,” Hitsugaya said without hesitation, face frank. “But if she hasn't told you, I won't go against her choice.”

“I see,” Mami said, disappointed.

“She's had a hard time of things and has lost a lot of people,” he added quietly. “Once burned, twice shy. I don't want to burn her. If you know what I mean.”

Thinking of how jaded Kyōko had become after her family died, Mami sighed. “I understand.” They lapsed into quiet eating for a few minutes. “I think... I would like to be her friend,” she said after awhile. “I'm just not sure how.”
Hitsugaya stared at her speculatively as he chewed. “Patience and ability to continue functioning through bad news are the trick, really,” he finally said. “Roll with it when she gets bitter. Yumi and her sister say that sometimes she gets cold and snappy to try to push people away if she gets spooked by how close she's allowed someone to get to her.” He smirked wryly. “Kikyo says that about me, too. That we're both quiet and grumpy. Might be part of why we get along.”

“You don't seem grumpy to me,” Mami said warmly.

With a snort of dry humor, Hitsugaya said, “I'm in a good mood because I know I will probably witness Akemi tear into my uncle for being an idiot later. Otherwise, I admit to getting annoyed easily. I'm a serious person but a lot of people... our age are not.” He paused for a moment, hedged, then continued, “I... don't usually talk this much, but Akemi seems to think well enough of you that our mutual friends in Tokyo have given me the mission of not letting Akemi run into her own wall.” His face firmed back into seriousness. “When Akemi gets irritable, it's probably not personal. She just has so much to be bitter about that there are many things that remind her of what she has to be bitter about. Or so Yumi says. She's far more of a people person than I am, so I'll just go with her verdict.” He shrugged. “Aside from that, the biggest thing Akemi probably looks for is being able to accept disturbing information without freaking out.”

“Disturbing stuff?” Mami asked carefully.

“Yes.” Hitsugaya looked her in the eye and heavily said, “There have been too many times when she has met other girls—” another significant glance at her ring; so other magical girls— “who learned some information and turned on her. Attacked her.”

Mami's eyes widened. “Attacked?”


An echo of what Akemi had said at their first confrontation played in her head. “I just ask that you do not surprise me from behind. I may attack on reflex. I have learned the hard way to beware ambushes.”

Disturbed, Mami asked, “Was it regarding... whatever she's avoiding telling me?”

“Yes.”

Mami thought back to what Akemi had said and what questions the two potential contractees had asked her. Something with Kyubey's methods and Soul Gems and spirits and Witches. Something that made other magical girls flip out. Her unease intensified. “I see.”

After a minute of contemplation, Hitsugaya carefully said, “Akemi and her new friends are coming to my uncle's shop this afternoon. You can come with if you like.”

Startled, Mami gasped, “Oh, I wouldn't want to impose—!”

He lazily waved her off. “It's no trouble. And I'd actually like to throw you two together more often. She doesn't like to admit it, but I think she needs as many friends—” a glance at her ring; magical girl allies— “as she can get. If you want to try, that is.”

Face warming, Mami said, “Yes!”

Hitsugaya smiled faintly. “I'll wait for you on the path.”

Mami nodded. The boy's face and posture shifted back into what seemed to be his default aloofness
— similar to Akemi, now she thought about it. Then she looked over his shoulder and saw that Kisa and Hanako were still excitedly watching from the other side of the room. They looked enraptured, actually clasping each other's hands. A couple other girls were watching suspiciously. Most of her conversation with Hitsugaya had been quiet, but they had gotten louder at the end.

Their classmates probably thought they were going on a date. Hitsugaya seemed oblivious. _Really awkward really fast_ had probably been an understatement.

“I wonder where Midnight the Conqueror is,” Sayaka thought aloud as they waited for Hitsugaya on the path away from school.

“With her, who knows?” Homura muttered.

Sayaka popped her sucker back in her mouth and eyed the magical girl warily. Homura had been irritable and snappy as hell all day. It apparently had something to do with Hitsugaya's uncle, but she had been tight-lipped. Before they all parted that morning, Hitsugaya had blandly told her he wouldn't interfere with whatever revenge plot she came up with. Sayaka was morbidly curious about what their afternoon would be like. It sounded like a tossup between _prepare the popcorn_ and _run for the hills._

“Oh! Tōshirō! And Mami, too!” Madoka gushed.

“Hitsugaya,” the boy corrected neutrally. Sure enough, Mami Tomoe was following him shyly as he strode toward them. That was interesting.

“Oh, I'm sorry, Hitsugaya,” Madoka said with a hand in front of her mouth.

“It's fine. At least you actually listen. Unlike some people I know.” He glanced aside and muttered something resentful. Then he looked at Homura, face somewhere between stubborn and bored. “I invited Tomoe. Deal with it.”

Homura shrugged disdainfully and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “It is your home. Who you invite is none of my business.”

Sayaka glanced at the other girls to see them also looking uncertain. The two old friends were blunt to the point of rudeness with each other but neither seemed angry. They actually seemed borderline pleasant in spite of the deadpan. Weird. Maybe that was why they got along.

“So... I thought we were going to a shop, not Hitsugaya's house,” Sayaka said slowly. Her parents might be... unhappy if they heard she went to a strange boy's house.

“We live behind the shop,” Hitsugaya said with a dismissive wave. “Come on. It's up near Asunaro.”

Sayaka quickly glanced at Madoka. Both remembered what Homura had said about a spell over Asunaro. They looked at Homura, who seemed to understand; she shook her head. _Don't say anything._

Hitsugaya led them to the train station, took them several stops north, and led them through the streets. They wound their way to an older area of town with more traditional buildings. He was
quiet until they must have been approaching their destination.

“I must warn you,” he said drily. “My uncle is... eccentric.” He glanced aside as Homura clicked her teeth in annoyance, then continued. “He likes to tease people and can swing between silly and serious and back again at the drop of a hat. He's especially fond of making serious people crack. He doesn't mind if you tease or insult him back, but still: He's probably one of the more obnoxious people you will meet in your lifetime,” he said with a completely straight face.

“I concur,” Homura added immediately, voice clipped.

Both looked resigned. That was... honestly kinda worrying.

“There it is,” Hitsugaya said as they turned a corner.

Across the street was a fenced-in lot. The signpost over the neat open gate read High Spirits Magic & Tea. A stone path through minimal landscaping lead to what had once been a traditional Japanese house but had been converted to a shop. It had a lovely front veranda with rich woodwork. The corners of the tiled roof featured dangling wind chimes and a long shimenawa was artfully placed across the entire façade, the sacred rope dipping between each support beam.

“A magic shop?” Mami asked in surprise.

Homura tilted her head to one side and looked unimpressed. “At least he found one that looks less run-down this time,” she muttered.

Hitsugaya snorted in amusement. “Come on. I apologize in advance for any insanity.”

Sayaka felt a tingle when they crossed the threshold onto the property. She glanced at the other girls; they must have felt it too, as they looked unsettled. None of them said anything, though. They were halfway up the path when a man burst out the front door. He was wearing an olive green jinbei, the oversized top of which was so loosely tied as to bare half his chest. Over it he wore a black haori with a white diamond pattern along the hem. His face was shadowed by a green and white striped bucket hat; messy blond hair hung in his face and he was unshaven. Sayaka thought he looked scruffy. Kind of like he had rolled out of bed and jammed a hat on his head. What she could see of his face was wide awake and gleeful, though.

The man spread his arms wide and called out, “Welcome home! My darling nephew! So handsome in your new uniform! You left before I could see it and get pictures!”

“I'm not letting you take pictures,” Hitsugaya said dully. “And you slept in.”

“Shopkeeping is hard work! I need my beauty sleep!”

“Useless. No amount of beauty sleep can help you.”

“How cruel!” Urahara swooned, produced a fan from his sleeve, and held it to his forehead. He maintained the pose for a moment then looked past his nephew, jolted upright with wide eyes, and fluttered his fan over his mouth. “Oh, my! Dating four girls on your first day? Your father will be so proud!”

The girls all squawked— though Homura sounded more appalled than embarrassed.

Hitsugaya quietly growled, “I'm not allowed to kill him.”

“And Kikyo makes five! Oh, my!”
“For the last time, I'm not dating K-ikyo!” Hitsugaya snarled, red-faced.

“Hello, girls! I'm Kisuke Urahara! Welcome to the family!” He looked at his nephew again. “Harems are fun but you can only marry one of them legally, Tōshi—WAH!” He dodged Hitsugaya's flying school bag, which the boy had hurled at him. “My nephew is so vicious!” Urahara wailed.

“My uncle is insane!”

“How rude! I didn't raise you to—”

“You didn't raise me at all!”

Sayaka was glad that Madoka and Mami, like her, could only stare in speechless confusion at the scene. Homura was seething, though.

Hitsugaya's uncle seemed to notice Homura for the first time. Face immediately brightening, he trilled, “My darling Homura!”

“Akemi,” Homura corrected.

“Don't you dare say a word about her uniform,” Hitsugaya grumbled.

Whether or not he actually heard his nephew, Urahara didn't miss a beat. “It's been so long since I heard from you!”

Homura frowned sourly. “It has been three days since our last conversation.”

“Three days too long,” Urahara mourned. “I thought you would come help us move in!”

“About that,” Hitsugaya said with a smirk.

Sayaka watched Homura's eye twitch dangerously. She saw Madoka actually take a nervous step back.

“Perhaps you should have told me your exact moving date. Or that you were moving at all,” Homura said acidly. “Your new address would also have been helpful.”

Urahara's arms fell. He slouched and pouted. “Then it wouldn't have been a surprise!”

Homura looked skeptical. “How could you expect me to help when you also wanted to surprise me?”

Urahara just pouted at her.

“You are a giant child,” Hitsugaya sneered. He stepped forward and said, “Get out of the doorway so we can get inside.”

Urahara pivoted on one geta-clad foot and clattered his way into the shop. Hitsugaya and Homura stepped forward. Sayaka shared wary glances with the other girls before following them.

When Sayaka had seen that it was a magic shop, she had assumed she would find playing cards and top hats and other tricks inside. Instead the shop was a neatly sorted array of crystals, incense, candles, books, and lucky charms. Half of the area was dedicated to shelves holding bins of dried herbs and teas. It was basically a psychic-supernatural-whatever shop, Sayaka guessed. Different kind of magic.
“Welcome to my humble shop!” Urahara crowed, throwing his arms wide. The girls were still looking around them when he said, “Ah, Tessai!”

Sayaka turned and saw a giant of a man emerging from the back room and taking a place at the shop's counter. Face serene, he adjusted his glasses, nodded genially at Homura, and said, “Miss Akemi. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise, Mr. Tsukabishi,” Homura said politely. And with some degree of relief, Sayaka thought.

Note to self: Big guy is probably less... nuts. Probably.

Sayaka waved awkwardly when it was her turn in Homura's round of introductions and Urahara's effusive greetings. She shuffled uncertainly with the other girls when the shopkeeper's demeanor suddenly shifted to seriousness.

“Now, Miss Akemi. Have you warded your home appropriately? I have yet to see a spirit here, but it's always best to be safe,” Urahara said in a far more reasonable tone.

“What?” Sayaka blurted. She saw Homura tense and cut her eyes between them and the shopkeeper. The air felt heavier. Stranger Danger was pissed.

“Spi-spirits?” Madoka squeaked.

Urahara gasped and fluttered his fan in front of his mouth. “Oh, my.” He looked at Homura with wide-eyed innocence. “I felt their power, so I assumed they know about spirits. I suppose I was wrong?”

Homura's eye twitched. She opened her mouth to speak, seemed to be too angry for words, and nodded jerkily.

“Oh, dear. How terribly rude of me. Well, you know what they say about when you assume something, ahaahaha~”

“You— you know we have magic?” Sayaka asked hesitantly.

The scruffy shopkeeper looked her in the eye for the first time, gaze piercing from the shadow of the brim of his hat. “Oh, yes indeed,” he said softly. “I can feel it from here. Raw; immature; untrained; but definitely there.” He cocked his head to one side. “Have you ever seen ghosts?” He glanced between her and Madoka and Mami. “Any of you?”

Sayaka rocked back on her heels at the unexpected question. “I... don't know?”

“Hmm, hmm, hmm. Have any of you ever seen a person walking around with a chain dangling off their chest?” Urahara tapped his folded fan in the center of his chest. “There would also be a metal plate about here.”

Sayaka and Madoka frowned, but turned when Mami sharply sucked in a breath. Mami startled when everyone looked at her expectantly.

“Ah... a few times. Years ago,” Mami said haltingly. “When... when I visited Sendai with my parents. I was... maybe nine? Ten? It was— it was funny, so I asked my mother about it. She always said no one was there and I had a good imagination.” Distressed, she asked, “That was a ghost?”
“Quite probably, especially if it was in Sendai. A city that big and old has a lot of spirits,” Urahara said soberly. He scrutinized her with his head canted to one side. His eyes strayed to Mami’s left hand and back again. “Your magic is extremely focused and well-controlled. I see your ring. You are a magical girl, correct?”

Mami jolted, surprise escalating. “You can tell—? You know about—?” She looked from Urahara to Hitsugaya and back. “Wait, you have magic, too! And you—!” she cried with a glance at the huge man in the back of the shop. Her face screwed up in confusion. “How?!”

Urahara blinked and looked curious. “We were born with it, of course. Just like you.”

“But how do boys have magic?!” Mami sputtered. “I’ve never— today is the first time I’ve ever— what is going on?!”

The shopkeeper looked deadly serious. “You don’t need to be a magical girl to have magic, Miss Tomoe,” he said, pointing his fan at Madoka and Sayaka. Mami opened her mouth, but Urahara cut her off before she could speak. “Nor is magic limited to potential magical girls. There is a wide variety of what you call magic in this world. Magical girls are just one specific type of user.”

Grinning faintly, he raised his free hand and pointed upward. Glimmering red light blinked into existence over his finger and whistled like a small firework, then disappeared like a spent sparkler.

Sayaka's eyes widened. Madoka's jaw dropped. Mami’s eyes bugged out.

Stranger Danger and Hitsugaya looked completely unsurprised.

Urahara glanced at his nephew expectantly. Not moving from his spot leaning on a display case, the boy sighed and held his hand out in a similar way. Palm up, he made a flicker of blue-white light that rapidly blossomed into a spiky flower made of ice crystals. He cupped the ice sculpture in his hand and idly spun it with his thumb.

Sayaka realized something. Excited, she blurted, “You can use magic without becoming a magical girl?!”

“Yeah,” Hitsugaya said, causing the ice flower to disintegrate into sparkles with a flex of his fingers.

Awesome. Awesome, awesome, awesome!

“Could we— me ’n Madoka— could we use ours?!”

“It's possible,” Urahara answered. “It requires study, training, and practice, though.”

Awww.

“As does becoming an effective magical girl,” Homura said quietly.

Double awww.

When they looked at Homura, she added, “Access to your powers means little if you do not use them effectively. I read books about battle tactics. I studied weapons. I watched martial arts tournaments obsessively in the beginning. Even choreographed fight scenes in fiction can give me ideas. I take notes. I have begun files on Witches, looking for patterns.”

“You do?” Mami asked with happy surprise.
“Of course,” Homura said, face expressionless.

“So do I,” Mami said with a wan smile.

“Aaanywaaay,” Urahara drawled loudly to get their attention, “What you need to worry about most, Miss Miki, is that your inborn power can attract spirits.”

Completely derailed, Sayaka blankly said, “Spirits?”

“Ghosts?” Madoka asked.

“Yes,” Urahara said with a decisive nod. “Spirits are often attracted to those with enough spiritual perception to see them or hear them. Many are simple annoyances, but there are dangerous ones. Predatory ones that eat souls to absorb their power.”

“You mean— Witches?” Madoka asked timidly.

“No. I mean Hollows. It can be a bit complex, so I will have to explain in more detail another time, but they are assorted monsters that have bone masks on their faces and holes in their chests.” The shopkeeper stared at each girl in turn, weighing them. “Miss Akemi would not have allowed you to come here if she didn't trust you to some extent,” he said slowly.

They all looked to Homura, who lightly closed her eyes and pushed her hair back over her shoulder in a smooth motion probably intended to take up time. She did not object to the shopkeeper's words. Sayaka glanced at Mami, who was visibly surprised, and wondered what had happened between them. Sayaka hoped they were moving toward alliance; that would imply Mami was starting to take things well. That would be a relief.

Urahara eyed Mami. “Miss Tomoe. Are you capable of keeping our confidence even if the Incubator asks you about us?”

Sayaka and the other girls froze. They looked to Mami, who didn't know.

“Mister Urahara,” Homura hissed in outrage. The what the hell do you think you're doing?! was implied.

Mami frowned in confusion. “What? Incubator?”

Urahara leveled an unrepentant stare at Homura, then turned to Mami. “You would know it as Kyubey.”

“...What?”

Homura sighed and rubbed her eyes with one hand. “In-kyu-bey-ter.”

There was a long silence as Mami knit her brows and looked at each of them in turn, then settled on Homura. “Is this one of the things...?”

“Yes,” Homura murmured. “There is much more, and much worse, but this is its most minor deception.”

“Wouldn't that just make 'Kyubey' a nickname, though?” Mami asked.

“Nicknames are often used to disguise one's true name,” Urahara said. “The motive for doing so can be innocent or deceptive. We have evidence of the latter.”
“What kind of evidence?”

Urahara turned to Homura and raised one brow. Homura sighed deeply. “It is complicated and distressing. I would still rather wait to explain.”

Mami shifted uncomfortably, but searched Homura's face with narrowed eyes. “Do you really believe I would react that poorly?”

“Yes,” Homura answered without hesitation. “In my experience, kind and honorable girls like you take this news the hardest. I want you to figure out some small things yourself to reduce the shock and denial.”

For some reason, Mami turned her head to look at Hitsugaya. He met her gaze with an emotionless, heavy-lidded stare and shrugged slightly.

“Anyway,” Urahara said mildly. “I would prefer that you do not tell the Incubator how much spiritual knowledge I have. Ah, my nephew and business partner, too. Speak in generalities; ghosts, negative energy, cursed spirits. Do not mention the word Hollow.” He paused and his gray eyes drilled into each of them in turn. “Since you have power and Miss Akemi trusts you, I’m going to make you some protective charms. Something more complex than I generally sell in the store—subtly tailored to each of you now that I’ve gotten an idea of what your power feels like. It could take a couple days to make the charms, so in the meantime—” he switched from serious to ridiculous in an instant, grinning wildly as he threw his arms wide—“each of you can choose one item from the shop to have for free! A grand opening present for friends of a friend!”

Sayaka couldn’t help but go with his cheer. Besides: free stuff, helloooo? She pumped a fist and crowed, “Score!”

Madoka and Mami started making polite refusals, so Sayaka dropped her bag and grabbed each of them by their free hands and yanked. “Come on! You heard Magic Man! It’s a present!”

Mami ended up wandering over to the bins of tea and carefully reading the descriptions on each. Madoka stuck with Sayaka as they curiously poked around at everything. They wound their way to a section of more commercial, mass-produced trinkets.

Sayaka's face lit up. “Cazh Soul stuff! Look, Madoka! Those limited edition cell phone straps!”

Madoka shuffled over to her and oohed. Homura approached them warily and asked, “Cazh Soul?”

“Whaaaat?!?” Sayaka cried. Had she been living under a rock?! “You don’t know about the Casual Soul Realm Assault Trip show with Don Kanonji?!”

“It’s so fun!” Madoka cheered. The two friends looked at each other, raised their arms and crossed them as though in coffins, and playfully cackled, “BOHAHAHAHA!”

Stranger Danger looked disturbed.

“I dunno if it’s real, but Don Kanonji is cool,” Sayaka said. “He’s really funny and totally heroic.”

Urahara sauntered up behind them. “Cazh Soul is real. Don Kanonji started out as an ill-informed novice with excellent showmanship, but has improved greatly in the last several years. Television cameras just can’t pick up the spirits. I talk to him from time to time to see if he’s having any trouble and give him supplies for difficult cases.”

Sayaka whirled to Urahara, stars in her eyes. “You know Don Kanonji?!”
“Indeed, I do,” Urahara chirped. “He is a good man. Very conscious that some children see him as a kind of superhero. He tries to be worthy of that.”

Hands pressed to her cheeks, Sayaka squealed, “Awesome!”

Homura still looked wary. Madoka noticed and perked up. “One of these nights, you should come to my house so we can have a sleepover with a mar—”

“Marathon! Yes!” Sayaka cheered.

Face dubious, Homura said, “I... suppose.”

Madoka and Sayaka high-fived and crowed, “Spirits are always with you!”

Urahara laughed lightly and Homura looked weirded-out.

Knowing Homura had personal business of some kind with Urahara and Hitsugaya, they didn't stay much longer. Sayaka and Madoka put their matching Don Kanonji cell phone straps on their phones and took places on either side of Mami as she left with a bundle of some kind of tea. They walked to the train station with the older girl, who seemed to become more sure of herself and cheery the longer they chattered.

Sayaka met Madoka's eyes when Mami was leaning forward to stifle giggles. Their eyes shone with purpose. By silent mutual agreement, Mami was officially their second project.

The Incubator watched the girls leave the shop from a nook on the roof of a building a block away, then turned back to the shop.

It was wary. The shop contained at least three bright, strong souls apparently allied with Homura Akemi, though it only knew such from the residents’ forays off the lot. If there were other souls within, it could not say. The property was warded to the teeth with possibly the most efficient human use of magic it had ever encountered. Innumerable barriers were intertwined in a fine lattice, anchored by stone lanterns that looked like normal garden decor in a wide circle that touched the edges of the lot, with additional lantern anchors in the corners. All lanterns probably disguised something crucial—likely a power source and ward programming. Their positions indicated the already-formidable cubic wards formed at the corners of the lot likely disguised a dome or sphere of wards within.

The layers of woven wards shifted at what appeared to be random intervals and at such a rate that it was difficult to latch onto and scrutinize any single one for more than a moment. There were many shields and diffusers to disguise any magic or soul within the boundaries, multiple trip-wires for unknown purposes, alarms, deterrents that would make various types of spirits and Hollows deeply uncomfortable or even repel them altogether, a handful of different potential bindings or traps, and several duplicates of everything cast with different underlying magic with whispers of the different souls the Incubator had sensed when they were outside. Plus spells that were disturbingly unfamiliar. There were also threads of something Hollow-like, which should have clashed with the Hollow-repellent wards and caused cascading failure but defied logic to dovetail with them. Everything shifted in disorienting but artful chaos. It felt like there was greater magic beneath it. Perhaps an active attack system? No way to know. The Incubator was unsure if it should even try to breach the wards. It could usually pick its way through or outright overpower human-wrought
wards without being detected, but the sheer scale of the protections gave it pause.

Taking out the stone lantern anchors could probably destroy a good number of wards, but the anchors were protected by their own shields and failure of the wards would be an alarm of its own. The cubic wards would have to come down first. Wards with corners were much easier to break than spherical ones. However, they were tied to the spherical wards at the cardinal points of the inner wards’ circle in such a way that there would probably be dire consequences for breach—there were blatant trigger mechanisms between the two schema. It could target the cardinal point overlaps to attack both sets at once, but that wouldn't destroy either set of wards— the cubic ones would still be anchored at corners and the circular edge of the spherical ones had extra anchors at forty-five degree angles from the cardinal points, well within the boundaries of the cubic wards. Even if the cardinal points the Incubator could access were destroyed, the sheltered midpoints would simply shift the axis of the wards forty-five degrees instead of crashing them altogether—while also screaming of breach. And there was a whisper of a trigger mechanism for something that felt like a lock waiting for a key to turn it— to rotate the spherical ward. What that would trigger was a mystery. Every potentially exploitable weakness was re-purposed into something useful, turning disadvantages into advantages.

Masterful. Beautiful, even.

This was no novice. Whoever had designed the wards was brilliant, powerful, and in possession of extensive spiritual knowledge. The Incubator felt a rare grudging respect for whichever human—or humans— had designed and implemented the magical masterpiece. It was disturbing that whoever crafted it was allied with Akemi. It now seemed more likely that the girl knew far more about magic and spirits than most magical girls in the last two centuries. She might even know more than the weak, marginalized Quincy girls the Incubator had contracted in years gone by.

This merited closer scrutiny rather than overt or covert action. It was always best to conserve energy and remain unnoticed by the spiritually aware, after all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Reminder that I interpret the Incubators as lacking empathy, not all emotion.

I need to draw Madoka and Sayaka doing the Cazh Soul pose all }:.D and Homura side-eyeing them, leaning away and looking disturbed. I need that image in my life.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
The occupants of the shop waited until their sense of the other three girls' souls moved rapidly south, indicating they had boarded the train. Then Homura abruptly turned to Urahara and exploded. “What do you think you are doing?!”

Urahara cheerfully made a V-for-victory sign with one hand while the other indicated the shop with a wide arc of his fan. “I thought it was a good time to franchise!”

Homura snarled in rage at his flippancy. “You will give us all away!”

“No, I won't,” Urahara said with an infuriatingly relaxed wave of his fan. “The three of us and some friends warded the hell out of this place and we're wearing special gigai that disguise our reiatsu so we don't feel like shinigami.”

Homura ground her teeth and glared at him. Hitsugaya sighed. After glancing at him and deciding this was what he meant by not interfering, Homura turned back to Urahara and snapped, “What makes you think you can just appear here and tell Mami about the Incubator?! And all of them about Hollows?!"

“It's a test,” Urahara said mildly, unfazed by her outrage. “By giving Miss Tomoe some tempting bits of truly superficial information, we may be able to gauge her willingness to keep her mouth shut. Same with the other girls. Will they wait for us to tell them, or will they seek the Incubator? It could tell us a lot.”

Homura did not let her glare subside. “Did you fail to inform me of this plan so you could avoid any objections?” The prospect appalled her. In a way, Mitakihara was her territory more than any other's— even Mami. More than the physical space and the Grief Seeds that could be gained within it; everything that happened there in her time was hers to change. Control of variables was vital. Yet another massive change— especially one she should have had some say in— set her teeth on edge, made her scalp tingle with magic that hummed and spun through her with ever-condensing fury.

Urahara fluttered his fan in front of his mouth. “Oh, so suspicious!”

“That is not an answer.”
The shopkeeper lowered his fan and grinned. “So observant.”

Homura glared harder. She almost never got truly physical, but she felt a burning desire to punch that toothy smile off his face.

“Partly, I suppose,” said Urahara. “But also because I did want you to be surprised and angry out where the Incubator could see you. That’s why I sent Tōshirō—”

“Hitsugaya,” the shinigami said dully.

“—to surprise you on your doorstep. It muddies the waters whether we colluded on our arrival.”

“Thanks for warning me,” Hitsugaya muttered sarcastically.

Homura crossed her arms and looked skeptical. “And you came here why?”

“Well, you wouldn't come to me,” Urahara said innocently, “and there is research I can't do remotely. Especially that barrier over Asunaro.” He tapped his folded fan in his empty hand and smirked. “Besides, you have more access to me— us— this way. You can learn things.”

She shifted and grudgingly downgraded to a scowl. “What kind of things?”

He dipped his head until his eyes were gleaming from the shadow of the brim of his hat, smirk widening with mischief. “Oh-hohhhhh, many things.”

Homura reengaged her death glare. “You are infuriating.”

“Thank you!” he chirped.

Hitsugaya rolled his eyes at the man and looked at Homura. “You can practice healing and fighting, learn some kidō, and so on. We have a concealed training area and a way to get Inoue here without anyone outside noticing. Urahara—”

“Uncle Kisuke!” the shopkeeper sang obnoxiously.

The captain favored him with a disdainful sneer then looked back to Homura. “He has some weird idea about citywide spiritual surveillance on the Incubator.”

Homura doubtfully looked at Urahara, who giggled and coyly said, “It's a surprise!”

Hitsugaya joined Homura in glaring at the shopkeeper. Homura was becoming more convinced that she would get along with the shinigami who was as no-nonsense as she was.

“Anyway,” Urahara said in one of his probably habitual pivots, “I looked up that Sōju girl you told me about, Miss Akemi.”

After a sigh, Homura arched a brow and said, “And?”

He rummaged in his pocket, tapped on a phone, and showed her the screen. “Is this her?”

Sure enough, a school portrait of the girl she had met stared out from the screen. “Yes.”

Urahara withdrew the phone. “Ayase Sōju is from Rumoi, up in Hokkaido. She has been missing for five months, ever since her twin sister Luca's body was found burned so badly it could only be identified by dental records. There doesn't seem to be anything remarkable about either of them aside from no one being able to figure out how Luca ended up as she did.” Urahara frowned.
“There have been a few reported sightings of Ayase, first in Hokkaido and then moving south. We haven't had much time to dig deeper, but now that we've moved I'm having Tessai research the places where she was allegedly sighted. See what kind of news happened around the same time in the areas she was allegedly in.”

Homura chewed her lip thoughtfully and tapped her foot for a few moments. “I wonder if her sister was also a magical girl.”

Urahara shrugged. “The only way we'll know is to ask her. Has she shown up again?”

“No,” Homura answered. She scowled at her feet. “I am... suspicious.”

“Well, I've given Tōshirō—”

“Hitsugaya,” the shinigami corrected. Again.

“—and Tessai pictures of her so they can also be on the lookout for her. Be careful.”

Homura sighed. She didn't know what she had expected from the research, but it was disappointing nonetheless.

After a moment of pensive silence, Tessai spoke up. “Please stay for dinner. We can speak about the basics of wards while we eat, then you can tour the facilities.”

Homura was still angry enough that she didn't particularly want to stay in Urahara's presence, but the prospect of knowledge was an acceptable trade-off.

Homura was down in the truly impressive underground training room for a couple hours that evening, taking it all in. It was huge. Tessai called it a pocket dimension, which she could believe — the sensation was similar enough to labyrinths to register as déjà vu. Afterward, she transformed and went on patrol. She haunted the area around the television station where the Box Witch usually showed up on this date, but it never appeared. No thralls attempting suicide, no labyrinth, no Familiars, nothing.

Disturbing.

When she got home and released her transformation, her phone trilled with message notifications. She ignored the ones from an unknown number in favor of Madoka and Sayaka's messages. Reading those prompted her to look at the other messages.

*hi this is Nagisa from the other day*

*sorry if im bothering you*

*i dont know lots of people here and im lonely*

*sorry if this is weird but can you come to mommy's funeral? its on thursday*

*you dont have to it would just feel nice.*
its a dumb way to make friends but I dont know who else to ask

sorry

Madoka and Sayaka had messaged her that they planned to go. Homura chewed her lip. She didn't particularly like funerals. Did anyone? She hadn't even known the woman. Had only met the girl once. And yet...

There hadn't been anyone with her at her parents' funeral when she was around the same age as Nagisa. Her uncle didn't count. He acted like she wasn't there and attending was a chore. So it had been Homura alone in her black dress with white collar and lace trim— that dress was seared into her memory, every uncomfortable fold and button of it, even though she had only worn it once and thrown it away the day after— and two caskets concealing the charred remains of her mother and father. She was still angry at the little girl— cheesecake, of all things!— but still....

Homura sighed and tapped out a response.

*I will try to be there.*

She hoped she didn't regret it.

After she had done her homework on autopilot, her phone trilled again. She thought it would be Momoe, but was surprised to see a message from Karin.

*Tōsh texted me and said Ura-asshat pissed you off being his sneakyass self. Wanna bitch about it?*

The mental pressure to speak welled up in Homura's throat until she nearly choked on it. She tilted the phone toward Yoruichi, who glanced at the screen and dropped from her shelf. Homura was confused by how satisfied Yoruichi was with the situation, but “angrily” tossed the cat and some ruined leftover fish out the door so she'd have a sentry without asking about the attitude.

Snarling all her frustration and anger at the sisters was a relief. Pressure she hadn't realized was building in her mind found a release as Karin agreed with everything she said and creatively insulted Urahara between stories about how he had annoyed her or her brother, while Yuzu gently soothed. Then Homura moved on to the goddamn cheesecake wish and reveled in the twins' outrage at it and the Incubator, then heard out their speculation about why Momoe would see cheesecake as *so damn important*. Homura was still grumpy but much calmer by the end of the conversation.

She could get used to this.

She was *afraid* to get used to this.

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Wednesday dawned bright and sunny, a lovely day with fluffy white clouds decorating the blue sky. Madoka hummed her entire walk to school, feeling much better about the disturbing things happening now that it was looking like a team effort was pulling together. Tōshirō— no, Hitsugaya! be polite!— and Mami were waiting for her on the path with Homura, Sayaka, and Hitomi. Mami looked shy and Hitsugaya looked irritated. Hitomi was stifling giggles and trying not to choke on a sucker and Sayaka was smug, white sticks for two different suckers poking out the corners of her mouth. Madoka greeted them and Homura solemnly gave her a sucker of her
“Did you finish yours already, Hitsugaya?” she asked as she unwrapped hers.

Before he could say anything, Sayaka made a little heh and spoke around her candy, cheeks puffed out around the suckers. “Sugaya's a’tickinna mud. Don'tlk candy. N'yu b'l'v'it? Ahhhhwl, mo'l' me!”

Hitsugaya looked like the way Sayaka spoke physically pained him.

School was... school. Unremarkable. The two upperclassmen joined them all on the roof for lunch. They couldn't talk about magic because Hitomi was there, but it was a pleasant enough affair. Hitsugaya didn't talk much, but neither did Homura. Mami and Hitomi seemed to click a bit. Madoka thought they were all getting along well enough despite it still being a bit awkward. She hoped it continued.

They all went to their usual café after school. Yoruichi wound through everyone's legs and seemed drawn to Hitsugaya, who became increasingly annoyed by her repeated ankle-rubs. Sayaka teased him for being boring when he said he got tea and a croissant because the rest of the pastries were too sugary. Hitomi ran off for one of her lessons after her usual twenty minutes. They all sat awkwardly for a couple minutes until they silently agreed to not talk about magic and instead did homework. Homura and Hitsugaya helped everyone else, both toeing the line between seriously focused and bored. A couple hours later, Homura and Hitsugaya excused themselves for personal business at the shop.

Sayaka stood and stretched as they walked away, then eagerly turned to Madoka and Mami. “I wanna get a new CD for Kyōsuke. Wanna come with to the mall?”

“Sure!” Madoka chirped, grabbing her bag and standing up.

Mami smiled. “Have fun.”

Madoka and Sayaka drew up short. Sayaka disappointedly said, “You're not coming?”

The blonde started in surprise and pointed at herself. “I'm... invited?”

“Of course!” Madoka cried cheerfully. She dropped her bag and stepped forward to take both of Mami's hands in her own and smiled. “We're friends, aren't we?”

Mami's hopeful disbelief broke Madoka's heart a little.

Their mall adventure was the most carefree Madoka had felt in weeks. They stayed out far later than intended, texted their parents to say they would eat dinner at a friend's house, and meandered toward Mami's apartment after dark. Sayaka impulsively detoured them into a park, dropped her things, and ran ahead of them to a merry-go-round. She waved her friends over, but instead of waiting for them, she grabbed a handle, ran to get it spinning, then jumped on by herself.

Madoka and Mami stopped in their tracks, though. Madoka's skin was crawling and she felt unsafe. Mami held up her left hand and frowned at it. A chill went down Madoka's spine when she saw the Soul Gem's amber glow. She screamed, “Sayaka! There's a—!”

A round blob like a glowing window into an aquarium full of faintly rising bubbles appeared in the air behind the merry-go-round. It contorted and expanded, shaped as though spawning large bubbles at its edges until it resembled a child's outline of a cloud. A line of skeletal horse marionettes within galloped down across it at an angle as it emitted garbled speech. Creepy
wooden marionettes with cardboard wings bubbled out of it and scurried over the merry-go-round faster than Sayaka could scramble away. They swarmed her, pulled her limbs, and she seemed to break apart and bubble out of existence as she screamed. The entire scene shimmered once and was replaced by a warping of the air like a heat haze.

Mami transformed and landed where Sayaka had been a split second later and touched the gem on her hat. A shimmering teal sigil snapped into existence on the far side of the merry-go-round, boxlike and containing the outlines of two angels. Mami glanced over her shoulder and ordered Madoka to call Homura for help, then jumped into the labyrinth herself.

Shaking in terror, Madoka dropped her things and fumbled for her phone. She got it steady, dialed....

No answer.

She tried again and again, sobbing. No answer. Madoka left a couple semi-coherent voicemails and dropped her phone from numb hands. She stared at the sigil. Fear flooded her body. She didn't know what to do. What if Sayaka was hurt? Could Mami help her and fight at the same time?

Could she help?

It was probably really stupid, but Madoka wiped her tears on her sleeve and charged into the labyrinth.

Red eyes watched from the underbrush at the edge of the park.

Mami suddenly found herself floating underwater among rising bubbles and falling snow. The first thing she noticed was the heavy presence of a Witch; this was no Familiar's labyrinth. Craning her head back, she saw a CRT computer monitor with some kind of flipper being spun by two angel marionettes far above her. If that was “up;” up and down were difficult to distinguish.

A Witch that wasn't hiding could be a dangerous one. Potentially one with traps or tricks. Analyzing everything could make a difference between life and death even more than usual.

She was buoyant as though underwater, but could breathe. Her guns manifested around her, pointing in all directions as a precaution while she took in her surroundings. She was in the vertical and horizontal center of a column of many levels of rotating carousels with film reel trim, crude woodcut and pixellated, faded CMYK horses bobbing along on their poles. Many of them had television screens displaying test patterns embedded in their sides. Woodcuts of angel marionettes clung to and crawled over them. A faint melody echoed through the labyrinth, a dainty and cheerful orchestral piece that was like subdued carousel music slightly out of tune. There didn't appear to be anywhere to go; it was all a single chamber. Mami did not like that. It looked simple, but probably wasn't.

A scream made her look down. Below her, four jaunty marionettes had Sayaka by each of her
limbs—pulling each of her limbs. The girl looked blurred at the edges and cartoonish, the Familiars stretching her like taffy. One of the ones that held an arm had also grabbed one of her cheeks and was stretching her face.

Mami scowled and made her rifles rotate to point downward with a thought. She blasted each marionette to pieces as she dove. Sayaka's limbs rebounded like a released rubber band and she snapped back into focus, losing the cartoonish appearance as Mami reached her and held her in her arms. Sayaka clung to her in terror. Upside-down—perhaps?—Mami allowed them to sink while she scanned the labyrinth and debated retreating or fighting.

Then Madoka popped into existence where Mami herself had originally entered, floating in a pose that suggested she had entered at a run. The Familiars at the top of the cylinder dropped the Witch, which spun as it drifted down toward Madoka.

Anger at the girl's risky move flashed through Mami briefly before she buried it in pragmatism. She shoved Sayaka away, conjured a ribbon to tie to Sayaka's ankle so she could keep hold of her, made a platform of her floral kaleidoscope barrier beneath her feet, and launched herself upward. Ivory muskets manifested around her in a spiral, constantly shooting at the angel Familiars that had bubbled up from behind the carousel horses and moved to intercept her. When she neared Madoka, she conjured a large musketoon and fired it straight up at the Witch. The blast connected with it with a crunch of crackling glass and sent it rocketing upward, trailing test-pattern colored blood in its wake.

The feel of the labyrinth changed. The atmosphere was heavy with rage. More, larger angel marionettes clambered out of the carousels and attacked her. She wrapped a ribbon around Madoka's middle and used it to propel her all the way down to where Sayaka was, ignoring the girl's shriek. Mami's floral ribbon shield cocooned the two girls just as all the screens embedded in the carousel horses flashed and changed channels from test patterns to images. Mami fought the first wave of Familiars efficiently, but froze when she caught a glimpse of the screens.

She knew those scenes.

Having fun with her parents. Lying in the wreck of their car, gravely injured. Her parents' bloodied corpses. The funeral. Good times with Kyōko. Feuding with Kyōko. And that Witch. The one she had lost to so badly when she first contracted, before she knew how to craft guns with her magic. Ribbons alone had just not been enough against the massive construct of grainy black smog and tarnished motorcycle parts. And everywhere, in so many screens, the screaming face of the grieving mother whose child Mami had been unable to save from that Witch.

Her greatest failure. The event that had shaken her to her core and inspired endless effort to learn more, get better, save everyone—to be the perfect magical girl.

Mami was slow to react to the next wave of Familiars that swarmed her. Her fight turned into a close-quarters frenzy as she lashed out with ribbons, shot the disturbingly smiling heads off the marionettes with ivory pistols, and used rifles as staves. She was regaining her rhythm when the next wave of Familiars descended on her. This time, they all had television screens for heads, each playing her worst memories on an endless loop. She couldn't look anywhere without seeing her parents' corpses, that Witch, or that shrieking mother clutching her hands to her head as though to hold her skull together. Mami fought desperately as she uttered a guttural scream and tears streamed down her cheeks. She threw an arm up, fashioned a huge ribbon, and made it spiral down around herself before making it burst outward and send the Familiars crashing into the carousels. Screaming mindlessly, she conjured innumerable rifles around her and fired an endless onslaught in all directions. Madoka and Sayaka's screams from below as her shots impacted their shield only
dimly registered to her. She barely noticed Homura Akemi pop into existence nearby until the girl's body was immediately riddled in her bullets and slammed into the carousel along with the Familiars with a loud crack.

Floating in the middle of the newly-cleared column, Mami held her hands to her head and tried to gather her wits. She heard Homura roar, “Tomoe!”

Mami turned to look at Homura and noticed just how angry and bloodied she was. How many bullet holes in her body were shimmering violet as they healed. How many of them were near vital organs. How Homura's back was engulfed in fluid violet flame as she jerkily forced herself upright on uncoordinated, faltering legs by dragging herself upright on a horse. Realized the crack she had heard must have been Homura's spine instead of a carousel pole and that the amount of magic consumed by healing so quickly would be extreme. Realized that it was her fault. She was always hurting people. She was a terrible magical girl.

“I'm so sorry!” Mami wailed at Homura.

Homura's angry expression twisted into pity as chiming laughter rang out above them. Mami looked up and saw the computer monitor Witch descending again.

“Get down by Madoka and Sayaka!” Homura ordered fiercely as she steadied herself and pulled some kind of rocket launcher out of her shield. “I'll get the Witch!”

Mami looked at her and hesitated. Homura's face looked irritated, but suddenly her eyes went wide and her face paled as she looked past Mami.

“Behind you!” she shrieked.

Conjuring a gun automatically, Mami glanced over her shoulder and prepared to defend.

White and purple frills— so close!— a reaching hand, silver light trailing from fingers like smo—

Face contorted in horror, Homura leveled the RPG launcher at the magical girl who had leapt out from a hiding spot in the carousel and grabbed Mami's Soul Gem with glowing fingers. Whatever magic Ayase Sōju was using must have severed Mami's link to her body regardless of distance, as the blonde's eyes immediately went dull, her flower-shaped gem turned back into an egg, and her battle costume evaporated. Homura fired the RPG as Mami's slack body drifted downward, Madoka and Sayaka's distant screams ringing in her ears.

The white-clad magical girl smirked and thrust a sword forward as she held Mami's Soul Gem up like a trophy. She pointed the weapon at Homura and shouted, “Avviso dell'Ustione!” A gout of flames gushed out and met the projectile in midair. Both looked away from the mutual detonation to save their vision. Before the smoke could even clear, Sōju yelled, “Prodotto Secondario!” Huge balls of flame shot out of the smoke in a spiral and crashed into the nearest level of carousels.

Homura grit her teeth and scanned for the girl as she forced her spine to heal faster, quickly finding Sōju's form among raging flames. Her skirts billowed in the heat, untouched by the fire quickly spreading to other levels of the carousel. She was still holding Mami's Soul Gem up in a taunt.

“Ohhh, did I make you angry?” Sōju cooed. “Was she your friend?”
Snarling, Homura froze time, leapt to the girl's side, and seized Mami's Soul Gem. Touching the Gem created an indirect link with Sōju and her opponent was exempted from the timestop. Sōju tightened her grip and reacted violently, swinging her sword around to stab Homura in the throat. Homura jerked her head to one side and managed to avoid having her spinal cord severed again, but blood fountained out from her slashed right jugular and carotid. Her vision whitened out before she dropped the taxing timestop and forced her magic to seal the wounds. Homura could hear Madoka screaming in the distance as she let go of Mami's Soul Gem and reeled back. She flooded her body with magic and willed it to keep working; her vision wobbled back into focus just as Sōju's sword stabbed her dead center in the face. Sight gone again, Homura flared her magic more strongly and brought her shield up in a blind attempt to dislodge Sōju's grip on the sword in her face. She realized her mistake as Sōju triumphantly crowed, “Tocco del Male!”

Wreathed in magic that Homura could not see but the sense of which made her skin crawl, Sōju's hand grasped for the amethyst on the back of Homura's hand with a movement like a striking snake. Her cackling turned into a frustrated shriek as her fingers broke against the shield Homura had been training herself to hold around her Soul Gem.

Homura desperately sensed for where Mami's Soul Gem was and pinpointed the feel of her magic. Relative to Sōju's, the enemy probably still held it in her hand, though Homura couldn't figure out how she managed it. Up her sleeve? Homura probably couldn't use a bomb without also shattering Mami's Gem. Firing the RPG in the first place had been a stupid instinctual risk. She would have to stall to recover and kill her opponent more precisely. Homura knee'd the girl in the gut, drew a sawed-off shotgun from her shield, jammed it into Sōju's ribcage one-handed, infused it with her magic, then pulled the trigger to send Sōju flying.

“Secondo Stagione!” Sōju shrieked in rage as her voice trailed farther away.

Still blinded, Homura stopped time and pried the sword out of her head with a wet squelch. Panting and gasping, Homura struggled to ration her magic between timestop, Gem shield, head wound, and neck wound. It would have been much easier had she only sustained one such grievous wound, but two so soon after recovering from Mami making Swiss cheese out of her and snapping her spine took longer. She closed her eyes— well, used the mental focus of doing so; the actual organs were probably wrecked somewhere in the gaping hole in her head— and forced her breathing to calm. The major muscles that supported her head and everything related to her vision were her main priorities. Once her head was repaired enough to be functional, she wiped the blood and bits from her face with a sleeve and looked around while her magic shifted to secondary healing targets. The attack Sōju had called out had fired spiraling gouts of flame not just at her, but in every direction. That was in addition to the top two thirds of the carousel already engulfed in flames. Homura found that she was above everyone. Sōju was two levels down, frozen horizontally in the midst of swinging around a carousel horse pole she had caught herself on with one hand, Mami's Gem clutched to her mangled chest with the other hand so it was nestled beside her own Gem. Three levels below her, Mami's soulless body floated like a corpse in the ocean. A level below her —

Homura's blood chilled. The theft of Mami's Soul Gem had caused the shield protecting Madoka and Sayaka to collapse. Sayaka, the idiot, had started swimming upward to intercept Mami's body, face determined and protective despite the Familiars and fire closing in on her. Three levels below her, the Familiars were trying to shove Madoka into the forgotten Witch's cracked, test-pattern-bleeding computer screen as her face contorted in terrified pain; it looked like one of her elbows had dislocated and one of her legs was broken. A faint nimbus of pink magic hovered over her skin — a defensive reaction Homura had rarely seen Madoka engage without being contracted.

A vivid memory of the early timeline in which the Familiars managed to actually tear off some of
Madoka's limbs and offer them to the Witch while Madoka watched, shrieking and bleeding everywhere, alive because the Soul Gem at her throat was intact, overtook Homura's mind for a minute. After a struggle, she forced her mind to consider her options.

The flaming projectiles and burning carousel-walls would make navigating the labyrinth with time stopped difficult, but not impossible if she was willing to be burned. Which she absolutely was. But even with her time freeze, she couldn't be in four places at once. Order was vital. She decided to plan from top to bottom.

Reclaiming Mami’s Soul Gem would probably require more fighting because the monster's Soul Gem was so close to Mami's that the amber egg could sustain collateral damage from attacks on the spinel beside it. Well, that just meant she would have to stall Sōju while she dealt with the others. Homura backed off as she pulled a handgun from her shield. She automatically fired from the distance she knew the bullets would travel before freezing just short of Sōju's crazed face, emptying all fifteen rounds from the gun before tossing it away. A shotgun was the next item out of her stockpile; she fired it at Sōju's midsection, carefully aiming to create a difficult-to-heal spinal injury to add to the gaping wound she had already caused. Then she flickered to Sōju's side and emptied another fifteen 9mm rounds into her from neck to knees, making sure to aim for the cervical vertebrae and joints.

Sōju was a powerful enough magical girl to be able to recover from the catastrophic injuries that would result, but it wouldn't be fast. She couldn't pause reality while her magic repaired her body like Homura could. It should buy Homura precious time. If she was lucky, Sōju would also drop Mami's Soul Gem. A bullet to the cervical vertebrae should paralyze her and make her hand relax before she could counter the injury with her magic, but Homura didn't want to count on anything when she didn't know how the mess below would turn out.

Homura assessed her remaining tasks. Mami's empty body was her lowest priority. Now that she had allies with healing capabilities and it was detached from Mami's soul, most damage it would sustain could be repaired after the fact while also not causing her pain. Besides, if worse came to worst, Urahara had mentioned that a Soul Gem could occupy one of his fake bodies.

So, Sayaka. Whom Homura dearly wanted to grab by the shoulders and shake. Violently. Even though some part of her realized that one less person in the mob below was probably a good thing; it was the principle of the matter. She could freeze time and move the girl, but with the fire rapidly descending the column of carousels there wasn't anywhere safe to leave her— and she apparently couldn't be trusted to stay in one place even if Homura did shove her off to the side. Encasing her in a barrier was chancy with her magic in its current straining state. Homura decided to leave Sayaka where she was but clear as many of the threats to her as she could. If Sayaka was focused on recovering Mami's body, that could keep her occupied. Homura swam from fireball to fireball, touching each with her shield, flaring her magic and gritting her teeth through the heat. Then she took aim at Familiars with a machine gun. When she resumed time, they would be blown away.

Now, most importantly: Madoka.

Even if she could grab her friend, the dense tangle of limbs and Familiars meant touching Madoka would indirectly unfreeze time for all the enemies, too. Homura was hesitant to do much to the Witch with Madoka so close. More than close— one foot was inside the CRT monitor's screen. After careful analysis, Homura angled headshots at as many Familiars as she safely could without hitting Madoka, then found an opening for a shotgun round to hit the Witch in one of its corners. It wouldn't be enough to kill, but hopefully it would cause the Witch to recoil and let go of Madoka. Then the fighting could begin in earnest.
Homura took a deep breath and let time resume.

The labyrinth echoed with the sound of bullets hitting their targets and ricocheting off carousels. Many of the Familiars attacking Madoka were blown back like bowling pins as bullets knocked their heads from their bodies. Her carefully-angled shot at the Witch startled it into releasing Madoka and launched it spinning across the labyrinth and into a horse. Marionettes bubbled around it and carried it up toward the nebulous ceiling once more. Madoka was screaming in pain and fear; her cries became more urgent as the angry Familiars that remained pulled on her more insistently and one of her shoulders dislocated with a pop. Pink magic flared around her and knocked back marionettes as Homura rammed a Desert Eagle handgun into that particular Familiar's chest and fired. It rapidly turned into a brawl of grasping hands and close-range weapons, made awkward when a panicked Madoka lunged and latched onto Homura's leg with her good arm. Endless waves of Familiars mobbed the two of them as Homura fought. But with Madoka safely plastered to her leg, Homura was able to pull a machine gun and start spraying bullets into the horde without worrying about hitting her.

A sharp, abbreviated scream made her glance up. Homura realized she had been careless— some of her bullets must have reached Sayaka, as thin streams of blood trailed away in the not-water of the labyrinth. She had reached and caught Mami's body, though. Mami's body was trailing blood as well. Damn.

And then Sōju was looming over Sayaka.

Impossible, Homura thought. She shouldn't have been able to heal that fast. Even Sayaka would have trouble healing that fast with her contract. Did I really lose that much time in the mêlée?

Homura saw that much of the enemy magical girl's white dress had been dyed pink and red with blood. Her face was spattered with gore and deranged. She was missing much of her midsection and neck, but her spine had repaired in both places; bare bone showed where her scalp hadn't regenerated to cover the reassembly of brain and skull; her joints had recovered enough to function, but she was swaying drunkenly so the job must not be done. It seemed she was forcing her magic to perform some manner of puppetry to make up for missing and damaged muscles, as bands of white magic glowed in those empty spaces. That was a costly technique, as Homura well knew.

Sōju glared at Homura and roared, “WE’LL FIND YOU AGAIN, BITCH! THIS ISN'T OVER!” With that, she slammed a palm against Sayaka's forehead and retreated.

Homura was baffled by the action at first, but then Sayaka dropped Mami's body and grabbed her head. Black magic snapped and sizzled around her head, then spread as she writhed and howled tortured screams. After a blast of power, Sayaka began to change. It was Witch magic. How? How?

The crackling blackness raced along Sayaka's limbs as they warped. Her hands enlarged into webbed claws. Scales grew from her skin and gave her an inky blue and rainbow sheen like an oil slick on an ocean. Her legs fused into a tail and her hair suddenly grew out and turned into tattered ribbons of navy and fuchsia. The distinctive knight's helm that usually formed the Mermaid Witch's head manifested on Sayaka's brow, but stopped just short of her screaming mouth. A similar knight's visor manifested over her pelvis and sprouted more tattered ribbons like a skirt. When her transformation was complete, she was a creature halfway between Sayaka Miki and the Mermaid Witch Homura knew from countless timelines.

Homura stared dumbly, having never seen anything of the like. How could Sayaka turn into a
Witch without contracting first?! What did Sōju DO to her?!

What am I supposed to do?!

Her default reaction kicked in and she froze time to think.

Madoka was badly injured and vulnerable. Mami's body would be an acceptable loss. The Box Witch was still lurking somewhere in the burning labyrinth. And then Sayaka. Homura could leave Madoka if she conjured her barrier and maintained the timestop to fight the two Witches. She looked down at her Soul Gem and debated her endurance. She wasn't fully healed herself, her magic still knitting parts of skull, meninges, facial nerves, and the intricate lattice of muscles and blood vessels in her head and neck; part of her magic was repurposed to act as blood due to the extreme exsanguination from the neck injury to keep her brain working, while yet more magic shuffled resources to create new blood and thus made every bone ache down to its marrow. Sōju had departed, so the risk to her Soul Gem was lessened; however, Homura didn't feel it wise to drop her barrier from around the amethyst on her hand. That was another magic sink— she needed more practice crafting and holding it efficiently. Her Gem was rapidly dimming and she had exhausted her spare Grief Seed on Nagisa Momoe. Homura's vision swam again. Magically speaking, she was doing too many things at once. She debated a tactical retreat, but didn't know what might happen to Sayaka if she was stuck in the labyrinth. It would be painful to abandon Sayaka— especially this Sayaka, who she got along with so well for once— but Madoka was always her first priority.

Taking a deep breath, she dropped the timestop, grabbed Madoka around the waist, and moved up toward the hidden exit. The mermaid creature rushed to attack her but was stopped by the sudden appearance of Tōshirō Hitsugaya. He startled, then kicked the twisted mermaid in the face with a glowing, ice-clad foot to send her reeling. He glanced around and locked on Homura. Throwing one hand out in invitation, he yelled, “Akemi!”

Homura let go of Madoka and froze time again. She moved up to him and grabbed his hand, exempting him from the timestop. They looked at one another for a moment. Homura realized he wasn't in his shinigami uniform, but his school uniform. Instead of his metal blade, he held a sword crafted of solid ice in one hand. He was maintaining his cover as a human with powers.

His face twisted. “What the hell happened to you?”

Right. She was covered in blood and gore. Right. “It's complicated.”

He huffed and set that aside. “Sitrep?”

Homura blinked and took longer than she liked to translate that into situation report. “The Witch is over there,” she said, pointing upward. “Tomoe's Soul Gem was stolen. Her body is over there.” She pointed down, then rubbed her eyes— the crackling sound her facial bones made at the contact was not good— and pointed at the mermaid-creature. “That is Miki. Sōju did something to her. It is like she is halfway between her normal form and the form she takes as a Witch.”

Hitsugaya scrutinized the mermaid suspiciously. “Where is her body?”

“Her body transformed. I think.”

The shinigami's eyes cut to her. “You've never mentioned anything like that.”

“That would be because it has never happened— that I know of,” Homura answered tiredly.

Frowning uncertainly at the creature that had been Sayaka, he muttered, “Well, that's disturbing.”
“Quite.”

He searched her face for a moment. Homura hated herself for wobbling with the strain of healing, Gem shield, and timestep. Hitsugaya scowled. “You're at your limit.”

“Yes,” she bit out resentfully.

“I can go after the Witches—”

“No. I need to do it.” Homura defiantly met his skeptical gaze. “Does that ice-sword work like your zanpakutō?”

“To an extent.”

Homura made a sour face. “Would it purify the Witch and send it on?”

Hitsugaya pursed his lips and looked down at his blade. “I can't be certain. It would work on a Hollow, though.” His tone was grudgingly resigned; he was quick-witted enough to understand the thrust of her question. “You want the Grief Seed.”

“Need it,” Homura corrected as she held up her left hand to show him how dark her Soul Gem was getting. Damn her swimming vision. And it felt like her body's movements were through thickening molasses, control becoming more difficult. This was Bad. She hadn't been this badly off since— best not to think of it.

Grim-faced, Hitsugaya could only say, “That's worse than I expected.”

Homura sighed. She swayed again, even less steady; she hated admitting it, but she announced, “I cannot maintain the timestep much longer.”

Tilting his head in consideration, Hitsugaya said, “Let me hit them with some ice real quick. To make it easier on you when you drop it.”

With a firm nod, Homura agreed and curtly said, “Then your mission is to protect Madoka and retrieve Tomoe’s body. If you are capable of using that yellow rope spell Mr. Tsukabishi demonstrated, apply it to my ankle so you can be exempted from my timesteps.”

He raised a brow at her barking orders, but didn't argue. As his fingers sparked yellow light that snaked down to both their ankles, he lowly said, “Careful with the timesteps. Don't push yourself beyond—”

“I am aware,” Homura snapped.

He stared into her eyes, weighing her, then turned away and leapt up to sling waves of ice at the Box Witch and incomplete Mermaid Witch. On his way down, he unleashed a dragon construct that spiraled down the sides of the labyrinth to hit Familiars and douse flames. He met her eyes and nodded as he descended past her, snatching Madoka around the waist as he went. Madoka was immediately exempted from the timestep and resumed her screaming. Homura propelled herself up to the Box Witch and pulled an RPG launcher from her shield. As time resumed, Hitsugaya's ice restrained it and she fired an RPG into the Witch's screen at point blank range. The ensuing explosion of shrapnel and test pattern-colored blood knocked Homura back and inflicted more lacerations on her front. As the labyrinth wobbled, Homura froze time briefly to approach the Mermaid Witch. The technique that was as natural as breathing these days made her gasp with effort. While fetching a weapon from her shield, she glanced down toward Hitsugaya. Satisfied that he had Madoka under one arm and Mami’s body under his other with a shimmering barrier around
them, Homura dropped the timestop with a double barreled shotgun leveled straight at the incomplete Mermaid Witch's visor as the creature shrieked and struggled against the ice holding it in place.

Homura hated it, but she had to put Sayaka out of her misery. Again. She pulled the trigger.

It was as though her shells only hit the Witch portion of the composite creature; the shape of the corrupt mermaid seemed to blow off behind Sayaka's body like a costume ghost sheet in a strong wind, leaving the human girl behind unharmed as it rapidly disintegrated. Homura forced herself to clumsily grab her friend's shoulders just before the labyrinth could collapse completely. She blacked out for a moment; when she snapped back, they were standing in the dark playground again. Her vision tunneled as she cast about and saw that Madoka was still alive at Hitsugaya's side. Screaming near her caught her attention, so she drunkenly turned back and noted Sayaka's face was wild and panicked, screaming; she thought she heard her name but was so very tired. Her hearing faded into a dull whine. The last thing she noticed before drifting off was the sight of Kisuke Urahara landing atop a nearby jungle gym as her gaze wandered beyond Sayaka's shoulder and toward the moon.

An Incubator terminal passively observed the fallout. Sōju's battered and bloody exit carrying Mami Tomoe's Soul Gem was an interesting indicator of the resistance she had encountered. It was impossible to be certain how much of the damage had been inflicted by which magical girl, though. It was unfortunate that Sōju had confiscated the wrong Soul Gem; however, its theft could incite Homura Akemi into a rash reaction. They would reserve judgment of success or failure for now. Besides, Sōju would fall and cede possession to them eventually; their loss was only temporary.

The empowered youth from the shop appeared and awkwardly squinted and grasped around and stabbed in the air for the entrance to the labyrinth until it drew him within. He was capable of flash step and had ice-based powers. Interesting.

The humans remaining in the labyrinth reappeared as it collapsed. The youth was the only one without injuries. Madoka Kaname was badly but not fatally injured and Mami Tomoe's empty body and Sayaka Miki had only minor injuries, but Homura Akemi's state was dire— half-healed catastrophic injuries and a heavily tainted Soul Gem. Perhaps the operation would be a success after all? Akemi's turning would be a profit far beyond the loss of Tomoe.

The two adult males from the so-called “magic shop” appeared, also capable of flash step. Sayaka Miki screamed and caught Homura Akemi as the magical girl lost consciousness on her feet, her costume dissolving in dim violet sparkles. The larger of the two men descended, pressed his fingers over Madoka Kaname's eyes, and rendered her unconscious with some manner of magic as the blond man solemnly retrieved the Grief Seed and Evil Nut from their resting places on the children's centrifugal force amusement device.

So Sōju had been desperate enough to use one of Hijiri's Evil Nuts. Interesting.

After terse discussion, the entire party retreated. Sayaka Miki clambered onto the youth's back, still sobbing hysterically. The blond man gravely lifted Homura Akemi and the large man carried the senseless bodies of the other two girls, one over each shoulder.

The Incubator monitored their rooftop journey back to the shop from multiple terminals. It had
learned much. Not as much as it had wanted, and the primary goal of eliminating Homura Akemi had not quite been accomplished, but useful information nonetheless.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

H.N. ELLY (KIRSTEN): The Box Witch with a covetous nature. She is a staunchly reclusive witch. Anything she covets she locks away within glass. The thoughts of her prisoners are laid bare, but one can strike her without thought without problems.

MINIONS: DANNIYEL & JENNIFER: The Box Witch's minions with the duty of transportation. Anything they touch becomes easy to carry.

A/N: ( °  ámb °)

Ayase's attacks are Puella Magi Kazumi Magica canon. Like... I think all of PMKM attacks, they are Italian puns on Western TV shows or showbiz terms. The author is my kind of dork.

Avviso dell'Ustione: Burn Notice
Prodotto Secondario: Spin-Off
Secondo Stagione: Second Season

Tocco del Male: Kinda weird. Il tocco del male means The Touch of Evil and is the Italian name for the American movie Fallen. If you read a plot summary for it, it's very relevant to the Kazumi plot and the spell's purpose.
...or if you translate it as Bad Touch, you get a slang term for groping that lends a certain infamous song about mammals and cable TV its name. And since the spell involves grabbing a Soul Gem off a magical girl's body and dispelling their costumes, both potential meanings are equally, terribly possible. ( °  ámb °)

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: We now return to your regularly scheduled broadcast of sunshine, rainbows, and Nice Boats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rooftop journey was a blur to Sayaka. The tingle as they crossed the wards brought her back enough to register their swift navigation of the shop. Was she messed up in the head or were there way more hallways and rooms than the building should be able to hold?

A shudder ran through her at the memory of the shotgun muzzle flash in her face. She was definitely messed up in the head. Her head should probably be a mess on the ground. So. Yeah.

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

They stopped in a windowless room. Hitsugaya knelt and eased her in a corner, rose and told her to stay where she was, then hurried off to pull out futons. Sayaka nodded numbly in a delayed reaction, certain she couldn't move if she tried. She watched Hitsugaya help lower each of her friends onto a different futon. Mr. Tsukabishi swept a hand above Mami's body. She glowed faintly green as he turned away. The two men had a muttered conversation before the big man repeated the action on Madoka. Both men knelt over Homura's body.

Homura's breath was labored and raspy, what little Sayaka could see of her waxy face so pale and blue-lipped beneath drying gore that Sayaka wondered how there could be any blood left in her body; she looked like a breathing corpse. Her long hair was matted with congealing blood and fragments of bone and... other stuff Sayaka didn't want to think about. A deep gash in her neck had reopened in transit and was the first thing the men addressed. Mr. Tsukabishi did something that made the blood stop then Hitsugaya leaned down and iced it over with a light touch as they all muttered while pointing at different points of her body. Urahara gently lifted Homura's left hand and pressed the new Grief Seed against her ring. Homura moaned and fluttered her eyelids. Her eyes rolled around sightlessly and she writhed in agony but she flexed her hand and made her Soul Gem appear in egg form.

Sayaka wanted to throw up. The Soul Gem was so dark she could barely make out any purple. If she believed everything Homura had told her, her friend was on the cusp of turning into a Witch. On top of Mami being... dead? All because Sayaka had run ahead of her other friends and needed to be saved because she was too damn oblivious to notice she was running right into a labyrinth.

She remembered being pulled in all directions by the creepily smiling marionettes, remembered her
own body making creaking sounds like cloth stretched too tightly.

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

She remembered Mami's empty-dead body falling toward her in the not-water, unfocused eyes wide in vacant surprise

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

She remembered the Familiars' screens changing channels from scenes of a car accident and a screaming woman to scenes of magical girls in various colored costumes dying violently; pink and red and yellow and blue Soul Gems exploding with blackness— or just exploding; the nightmare visions of Witches with clown faces and pumpkins and mermaid tails and dinosaur skeletons and candle-heads and spinning gears flickering ominously; was fervently glad she had been far enough from the screens to avoid seeing faces as magical girls were maimed.

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

She remembered the sight of Homura from between the slits in her visor. Remembered the shotgun, yes, but also the wretched face Homura had been making beyond it before she pulled the trigger. The tears in her violet eyes, so stark against the mask of gore on her skin.

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

She remembered becoming herself once more in the park, Homura's bloodied and exhausted face as she fell forward onto her.

Sayaka wanted to throw up.

She jolted back to reality at the sound of Homura sighing in relief. Sayaka saw that the Grief Seed in Urahara's hand was crackling and sparking blackly; he barked an order at Hitsugaya, who immediately ran from the room. What was more important to Sayaka was that Homura's Soul Gem had much improved. It was still worryingly dark, but Sayaka saw that it was fully purple in the moment before it flashed and reverted to ring form on Homura's hand. The magical girl's entire body went limp as she lost consciousness again.

Hitsugaya hurried back into the room as he popped the lid off some kind of glass tube. Urahara immediately shoved the Grief Seed into it. He grabbed the tube and closed it as Hitsugaya produced a second one. Sayaka shuddered at the object Urahara took out of his haori and shoved in the tube. That had been the last thing she saw before she had—

before she had—

Sayaka shuddered again and hugged herself, trying to ignore the way her skin crawled. Remembered twisting inside her. Remembered her leg bones cracking and popping and doing things they should never have done. Remembered the shotgun. Homura's despairing face. Her own face being blown off. She wanted to throw up.

“I gotta throw up,” she blurted.

The men glanced at each other, then to Hitsugaya. Hitsugaya appeared at her side and lifted her. She didn't remember getting to a restroom but found herself retching into a toilet somehow. When she was done, she fell back into quiet sobbing. Having forgotten anyone was with her, Hitsugaya's hand on her shoulder startled her into shrieking. He pulled his hand back, but carefully replaced it when she looked at him. His face looked so awkward that hysterical laughter burst from her against
her will. Hitsugaya looked disturbed, but stayed where he was and cautiously held out a glass of water.

They spent a long time and no time at all sitting across from one another in the hall. Hitsugaya stayed silent the entire time, mostly staring placidly at the wall to one side of her head with occasional glances to read her face and gauge her rocking. When she had calmed, he murmured, “We need to clean and dress your wounds until they can be healed.”

Sayaka blinked tears from her eyes and stared at him. “Wounds?”

He eyed her oddly for a moment then lifted his chin to gesture at her body. “You have gunshot wounds. They don't seem to have hit anything vital, but they need tending.”

Sayaka looked down and stared at the two bloody holes in her uniform top and a graze at the hip of her skirt. She poked a finger in one hole, registered that the warm wetness was bloody flesh, and numbly said, “Oh.” Tilting her head, she mumbled, “I don't really feel it.” She pouted and added, “Cleaning this uniform will suck.”

Hitsugaya sighed something about shock and then they were in the room with everyone else again. Magic Man was kneeling beside Homura. One of his hands was hovering over her face and radiating warm green light; the other cradled the magical girl's left hand, a thumb glowing the bright red of the little magic trick he had shown them the other day pressed against the Soul Gem ring. He looked frustrated. Sayaka was made to sit on the last futon just as Mr. Tsukabishi relocated Madoka's shoulder with a cringe-worthy pop and lay her limbs out straight. Bile rose in Sayaka's throat again. At least it seemed she had missed the setting and splinting of Madoka's leg.

“Progress?” Hitsugaya asked as he stepped closer to Homura.

“She's accepting all the reiatsu I pour into her ring,” Mr. Urahara muttered distractedly. “Drinking it right up. Gem's not getting brighter—”

“Darker?” asked Hitsugaya.

“No,” Mr. Urahara answered, slightly mollified. “Perhaps I'm keeping pace with her need? My attempts to directly heal damage are... unsatisfactory.” He huffed and gave up on the head wound, settling back and focusing on the Soul Gem.

Mr. Tsukabishi leaned over and looked at Homura with narrowed eyes, lifting his glasses and peering at something Sayaka couldn't see. “She's using your transfusion to heal herself?”

“Yes. Mostly, but not entirely.” Mr. Urahara raised Homura's hand and looked at the ring more closely. “She's doing something else, too, but I'll be damned if I can tell what it is. The healing is too slow for my liking.” He cast his gaze down at Homura's face, which they must have cleaned in Sayaka's absence so they could see the wound. Homura's face spasmed in pain as she struggled to draw each reedy breath through her mouth. The center of her face looked wrong. There, but... not right. Not exactly crumpled, but delicate and not filled out properly.

“What's with her face?” Sayaka asked dully. “Why won't she breathe through her nose?”

“She hasn't repaired enough of the underlying nasal cavity structure for it to be functional yet,” Mr. Urahara said clinically. “What she has is essentially incomplete scaffolding. My best guess would be she didn't want to waste magic on it because her airway from her mouth was intact. The nasal passage would be redundant and she had more pressing things to address.”

“Oh.” That should probably worry Sayaka more than it did. Instead, it had the immediacy of a TV
medical drama. Words words boring words; shut up and get to the part where you cleverly fix the patient.

Well, she was the one who had asked the question, Sayaka conceded. To herself. Was she arguing with herself now?

Mr. Urahara looked up at Sayaka and met her eyes. “This was a stab wound straight through her head with a large-ish blade, slight downward angle, front-to-back with a twist, was it not?”

“Yeah.” Sayaka’s voice sounded weird even to her. Detached.

With a sharp nod, Mr. Urahara looked down at Homura again. “Looks like she focused on the brain— parts of it, anyway— the eyes, the cranial structure to support them, and the muscles and nerves that control them; the occipital lobe; some surface structure to hold it all in... leaving the rest for later.” Under his breath, he murmured, “Such fine control and priority assessment, in battle besides... but how was she able to think with this much frontal lobe damage...?” Louder, he asked, “Hitsugaya, she was able to speak and plan coherently? Problem-solve?”

“Yes.”

“No apparent memory problems or personality changes? Irrationality?”

“No. Sharp as ever. All there. Just disoriented and sluggish in an exhausted way.” Hitsugaya's mouth quirked wryly. “And aware of it. And pissed off by it. Able to accurately assess her flagging endurance and need for the Grief Seed then account for those in tactics. I never would've guessed she had brain damage.”

“Fascinating.”

Mr. Tsukabishi moved back over to Homura and lowered his own glowing hands to touch Homura's brow where his boss' had been. He gravely met Mr. Urahara's eyes. “Her skull is still eggshell thin there, but the damaged brain tissue beneath is... well, improved from its state half an hour ago. The bleeding's stopped. Still catastrophic.”

Sayaka dry heaved. Catastrophic brain damage?! But she had been fighting just fine! Unwillingly, Sayaka's eyes drifted to the unidentified substance scattered in the blood clots in Homura's hair. She made an educated guess at its makeup and dry heaved again.

Mr. Tsukabishi then gently turned Homura's head and slipped his fingers to the point where Sōju's sword had exited. “Occipital lobe has improved even more. Cranium's closer to normal there, but still fragile. Better than it was, though.”

“It's too slow,” Mr. Urahara repeated.

Mr. Tsukabishi held his hands above Homura as though warming his fingers at a fire. He guided them around as though dowsing and wandered up to her left arm, then followed it down to Mr. Urahara's grip on her hand. “You were right. Connections all funnel through that arm. No wonder direct healing is difficult.” He dropped his hands, sat back on his heels, and stared pensively. “It's as if... her heart chakra moved to her hand— her ring finger,” Mr. Tsukabishi said slowly. “Her entire system is... restructured.”

Mr. Urahara grunted unhappily. “I thought so. It's more apparent with the system stressed near to breaking. Wasn't as obvious in the twins. I need to study...” He tsked disappointedly. “Not now, though.”
“We do have that spare Grief Seed,” Mr. Tsukabishi suggested. “Perhaps purifying her will let her heal more efficiently.”

“Perhaps. But I’d rather not use it up until I’ve studied it more.” After another minute of frowning, Mr. Urahara sighed deeply. “Hitsugaya, retrieve Miss Inoue, please,” he said curtly. “I’d rather not take unnecessary risks and this will go much more quickly with her aid.”

Sayaka was about to ask who Miss Inoue was when Mr. Tsukabishi’s hand covered her eyes and she relaxed into sleep.

Sayaka shifted under her covers and rolled onto her front. She stretched and yawned blearily, then peeked out to find a clock. Her surroundings jarred her fully awake. This was that room in the magic shop, and her friends—

Stressed near to breaking—

Catastrophic—

Near to breaking—

She levered herself up on her elbows, desperately searching for her friends. The other three girls were all there. They were all clean and whole—healed. Mami was eerily still and glowing green, but Madoka and Homura appeared to just be in deep, peaceful sleep. Relieved, Sayaka’s arms and legs gave out and she flopped onto the futon once more. After a moment of thought, she flipped herself and searched her own body. No wounds. No blood stains or bullet holes in her uniform, either. Had she been dreaming?

“—Miki? Are you with me, Miss Miki?”

Sayaka turned her head on her pillow to find the source of Mr. Urahara’s voice. He was sitting cross-legged near a wall, cradling a steaming teacup in his hands beside a low table bearing a tea set. His face was solemn but kind as he rubbed one finger around the rim of his cup. Somehow, his lack of weird bucket hat struck her as a sign that he was deathly serious.

“Y-yeah,” Sayaka stammered. She shyly pressed her head into her pillow. “Um, did that— did that all really happen?”

“The carousel labyrinth and the battle within it?” he asked quietly. “Yes, unfortunately.”

Sayaka squirmed uncomfortably, then sat up on her knees and hugged her blanket around her. She glanced at her friends and back again. “Will they be okay?”

“Physically, yes. Psychologically, I cannot say,” Mr. Urahara answered easily. “Miss Tomoe is in stasis because her Soul Gem is missing. Do you know where it is?”

Sayaka held a hand over her eyes and took a steadying breath as she thought back to the moments before Mami’s barrier around them had collapsed. “That white and purple magical girl Stranger Danger told us about grabbed it off her head. Homura fought her for it but things got really crazy and—” Her eyes teared up of their own accord. She had seen the jet of blood from Homura’s neck; had seen that sword skewering Homura’s head and the way the magical girl kept fighting despite it,
movements drunken but effective as she glowed violet.

Catastrophic—

Near to breaking—

The whole “immortal puppet if the Soul Gem is intact” thing Homura had sketched out for them was hard reality.

After a long silence, Mr. Urahara delicately said, “My nephew told me about the end. I apologize for asking, but you are the only one who has regained consciousness. Can you tell me how you came to be as you were?”

Sayaka shuddered and stared at him in haunted silence. Magic Man tilted his head in consideration and waved a hand in invitation, urging her over to the table. She crawled over with her blanket and plopped herself down across from him as he poured her a cup of tea. Sayaka took the cup gratefully and focused on it as she haltingly recounted what she could remember. He never interrupted her or judged her, simply humming his understanding at points when she struggled to put things into words. When she was done, he didn't pry for more; he thanked her and went quiet. Sayaka looked up at him and found the man contemplating the surface of his tea with a troubled frown.

“Um. Thank you for helping us,” Sayaka mumbled. “Healing us?”

Mr. Urahara glanced up at her, eyebrows raised in surprise. “Oh? You are quite welcome, Miss Miki. But Tessai and I merely stabilized you. The bulk of the work fell to Miss Inoue.”

Sayaka followed his faintly amused glance across the room to a futon and occupant she hadn't noticed. A young woman—college-age?—was sprawled across it, long auburn hair disheveled. Her lips were parted and she was drooling. The two silvery hairpins tucked near her ear caught Sayaka's attention, but she couldn't say why. They were just stylized flowers or snowflakes. Nothing really remarkable.

“She is a superb healer,” Mr. Urahara explained. “I sent my nephew to fetch her. We took measures to ensure that the Incubators don't notice her. Please never speak of her outside of this building. None of us want her to be targeted.”

Sayaka turned her gaze back to the shopkeeper. “Is she a magical girl?”

“No. She's like my business partner and nephew. She learned how to use her magic herself.”

With sudden intense interest, Sayaka demanded, “Can I?” She was nursing a mounting hatred of the Incubator and the magical girl who had messed them all up. Power to fight and be an asset instead of a liability was something she now burned for. She didn't want to be the weakest link anymore. It was worth working for, studying for, dedicating herself to.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But I think that is a topic for another day.”

Sayaka wilted. “Right.” She stared at her empty teacup; she could feel Mr. Urahara's eyes on her but it somehow felt reassuring instead of uncomfortable.

After a pleasant silence, Mr. Urahara said, “By the way, I apologize for accessing your phone. I used it to message your parents as if I was you to tell them you were staying the night with Miss Akemi so they wouldn't worry. I read some of your previous messages to your parents so I could imitate you convincingly. I said that you all ate something that disagreed with you and you decided to just stay where you were and go to school together in the morning. Just so you know.”
Sayaka stared at him blankly. “What?”

The shopkeeper’s smile was more than a touch rueful. “It’s now almost three in the morning between Wednesday and Thursday, Miss Miki. I didn’t want you reported missing.”

“Oh. Thanks, I guess.” She stopped, shook herself as she realized the rudeness, and sat straighter. “I mean, thanks a lot.”

“I am happy to help,” the shopkeeper said with a warmer smile.

Sayaka decided that, as nuts as he had been on first meeting, she kinda liked the guy.

The giant Mr. Tsukabishi brought them more tea and fussied over her for a bit, then brought her food. Sayaka had no appetite—*bones twisting, stabbing and itching from head to toe as scales burst from her skin and*— but she also didn't want to be rude to the people who had saved them, so she forced herself to eat. She was halfway through picking at her noodles when Madoka stirred. Sayaka was at her side in an instant, watching her blearily rise into awareness and remember what had happened. When the tears came, Sayaka opened her arms wide to invite Madoka into a hug. Madoka launched herself at Sayaka and clung to her as she cried. Sayaka held her gently and felt perversely better about everything. At least she could be useful this way.

Mr. Urahara stayed where he was, silent and melancholy as he watched them. Sayaka got the distinct impression that he was treating them like glass he didn't want to break, like a house of cards that would collapse if he moved just wrong or too quickly. If she was right... well, she supposed he wasn't wrong.

Hiccuping, Madoka looked around, choked on a sob at Mami's deathlike stillness, then gasped at the sight of Homura. She untangled herself from Sayaka's arms and clumsily crawled to their friend with a stammered, “Homu— Homura— is she— she's ali-ive? Is she-e a-live? I-is she—?”

“Definitely,” Sayaka said with conviction. Their friend didn't look like death anymore, skin no longer waxen and lips no longer blue. Homura's rosy lips and flushed cheeks were a testament to the restoration of her blood and the center of her face was back to normal, breath through her nose silent and easy. Sayaka had seen her essentially dead— had Homura not been a magical girl, she would have died thrice over— so she knew just how wonderfully *alive* Homura was.

“Her head was— h-er hea-ead was— her *head*— sword— th-the blood— *blood*—”

Sayaka rubbed Madoka's back as her friend's hands flitted over Homura's face and neck in frightened search for signs of the mortal wounds that were no longer there.

“Homura? Ho-mura? Ho-oh-mu-ra?”

Homura shifted in her sleep and turned her head into Madoka's hand with a sigh. Her eyelids fluttered and she breathed, “Ma... do... ka...?”

“Homura!”

But Homura had already faded back into deeper sleep again. Madoka's body sagged with relief all the same.

After another minute, Sayaka coaxed Madoka over to Mr. Urahara's table. Mr. Tsukabishi appeared as though summoned and brought Madoka her own cup of the herbal tea they had been drinking. Mr. Urahara spoke equally gently with Madoka to get her own version of events. Sayaka was shamefully relieved that Madoka showed signs of also having lingering sensations from their
ordeal— she kept rubbing her shoulder and elbow, brushing her fingers along the leg that had snapped so badly.

“I must apologize to you both,” Magic Man said gravely. “It is largely my fault Miss Akemi was unable to get to you more quickly.”

Both girls frowned in confusion. “How?”

“When Miss Kaname called Miss Akemi, I had taken her into a chamber beneath the shop for training.”

“Beneath?” Sayaka said quizzically, looking down at the floorboards.

“Beneath,” Mr. Urahara repeated. “There was no cell reception. She got your messages when we emerged. Tessai sensed Miss Tomoe transform and fetched us in case we wanted to react somehow. Miss Akemi was gone without a word as soon as one of your voicemails gave her a location. We were slower to follow.” He looked down into his tea, then met their eyes seriously. “It is a mistake we will not repeat.”

There wasn't really anything that could be said to that, so they were silent for awhile.

“What happens now?” Madoka asked as she picked at her own bowl of food, which Mr. Tsukabishi had placed before her as he gave both looks that commanded them to eat everything without speaking a word.

“I hunt down Ayase Sōju, retrieve Mami's soul, and 

**crush Sōju's Soul Gem into dust,**” Homura's voice snarled from behind them.

Magic Man didn't look surprised, but Sayaka and Madoka whirled around to look back at the futons. Homura was pulling herself up to her knees slowly, her movements taut with threat like a panther on the hunt, face drawn with hate. Rage made her eyes seem brighter than usual— was that a shimmer of violet magic?— and the air in the room felt heavy.

“I'll have your back,” Hitsugaya's grim voice said from the other direction. The girls turned and saw him take a place leaning on the door jamb with his arms crossed.

Homura stared at him with that wide-eyed, near-feral expression for a long minute. It honestly frightened Sayaka.

“Her fire versus my ice and water, Akemi,” Hitsugaya replied to an unspoken argument. “Besides, she'll have a harder time getting the drop on us if we're looking out for each other. Sneak attacks on your back don't work when someone's watching your back for you.”

Homura's face shifted to grudging acceptance.

Tessai brought another bowl of food for Homura, but Homura stayed where she was, looking ominous as she ran her fingers over her Soul Gem ring. Somehow, Sayaka was strongly reminded of Midnight the Conqueror whenever the cat was near the Incubator.

“Come eat, Miss Akemi,” Mr. Urahara finally said.

“No.”

“Your magic has been restored and your body repaired, but you still need to **fuel** your body, you know.”
“It is fine.” Homura shifted restlessly and cast about the room for exits like a caged animal. “I need to go hunting.”

Mr. Urahara was frowning now. “Your body will use less magic if you fuel it conventionally. You should probably rest it more, too.”

“It will perform well without any additional care,” Homura said dismissively as she climbed to her feet.

Sayaka was creeped out by the way they spoke of Homura's body as an object. Like she was having car trouble.

Madoka pursed her lips with concern and said, “Please come eat, Homura.”

Incredibly, the magical girl who seemed ready to charge out on the hunt paused and turned to Madoka with a doubtful frown.

“Please?” Madoka repeated, eyes tearing up.

Tension bled from Homura. “All right.”

Sayaka met Magic Man's eyes and was glad he seemed to be as surprised as she was, though he limited his expression to one lifted eyebrow. She thought back to their interactions since they had met; how Homura behaved with Madoka. Little invitations, small requests, tiny smiles. A slow realization blossomed: It seemed like Madoka could say *jump* and Homura would be in the air before *how high?* could leave her lips. Mr. Urahara was darting his eyes from Madoka to Homura and back again, thoughtful, and Sayaka figured he was coming to the same conclusion as Madoka fusses over Homura and coaxed her into eating and drinking.

Around four, Mr. Urahara said, “Why don't you girls go to bed?” There was a command beneath the suggestion.

Homura bristled but Madoka declared it a good idea and dragged Homura to the futons. Madoka crossed her arms and pouted at Homura until she sighed and bedded down. They generally reminded Sayaka of a girl and her sulky cat.

Sayaka climbed into her own futon and wondered how she would ever sleep again. Just before Magic Man cut the lights, she noticed that Miss Inoue was in the same position as earlier but no longer asleep. Instead, gentle gray eyes watched them with something like pity.

Orihime Inoue was gone when Homura woke, which made her feel surprisingly disappointed. She thought Inoue would probably get along well with Madoka and Sayaka. Would probably be much better at soothing them than Homura herself was. Homura knew she was terrible at it. Madoka had fussed over everyone all morning and Homura's attempts to reassure her only made her more tearful. In retrospect, things like “do not worry, I have recovered from far worse head wounds in the past” and “at least Mami will have an intact body to come back to” had been really, really awful things to say to innocents like Madoka. Probably would have horrified her own pre-contract self. These days, her concept of reassurance was skewed. Must be even worse than she thought, judging by the sideways glances Hitsugaya and Urahara kept giving her. Even Mr. Tsukabishi was better at soothing her friends' occasional crying jags than Homura was. It was safer to keep her
mouth shut.

Madoka and Sayaka texted their parents to say they had overslept but were feeling better than they had. They said they were helping Homura clean the mess they had made, might take a nap, and would come home by dinner. They then spent the morning bustling around after Mr. Tsukabishi like ducklings as he did shop things to distract them.

Homura was convinced to convene a debriefing and strategy session with Urahara and Hitsugaya. They raked over every detail Homura remembered of the fight the night before. Then Urahara brought out the item that Hitsugaya said he had seen fall from the incomplete Mermaid Witch upon defeat—the item which Sayaka had apparently told them Sōju had slammed into her forehead with the confusing palm strike.

It strongly resembled a Grief Seed in both look and feel. The silver filigree cage that usually framed the blackened Soul Gem in the center of a Grief Seed was empty and warped as though the silver had been heated and twisted. In the empty center, there was a much smaller gem that had a taijitu-like swirl, a meeting and balancing of black and gray held suspended by black brambles. The ornament on top was a silver Möbius strip and the silver spindle at its base was warped into a squiggle. It felt like concentrated Witch magic... yet not.

“Have you ever seen the like, Miss Akemi?” Urahara asked.

Shaking her head slowly, Homura answered, “No. Never.”

“It seems like a lot of new things are happening to you this time,” Hitsugaya said uneasily.

“Yes. I hate it.” She halfheartedly directed a resentful glance at Urahara, but the man blithely ignored it.

Urahara set the item on the table, balanced on its spindle. “It would seem this item is what caused Miss Miki’s transformation. I’ll have to do more study on it. For now, it would appear to be an imitation or derivative of a Grief Seed.”

Homura and Hitsugaya stared at him. Hitsugaya spoke for them both. “I don't like it.” He looked at Homura. “You know who could pull off something like this?”

“No.”

He shifted, frowned harder, and asked, “If it does this to someone who isn’t contracted... what happens when applied to an actual magical girl?” Hitsugaya paused, then looked up and added, “Or even a shinigami?”

The question settled over the table with a near-physical weight. Instead of answering, Urahara dipped his chin so his hat shadowed his face and said, “Take care to never be hit with one of these.”

Afterward, Homura took to the rooftops with Hitsugaya. First they stopped at her townhouse to make a show of attending to Yoruichi so they could quietly brief her indoors before she went roaming again. Then they leapt up and patrolled. They took care to be far enough apart for it to be difficult to hit both with a single attack and constantly shuffled their positions relative to one another to make their movements less predictable. Homura found Hitsugaya an excellent patrol partner. Always focused, never chattering, mission-oriented; beneath that, his magic made her think of feeling hunted in a whiteout blizzard. He was as coldly enraged as she was. Excellent.

They crossed into Kazamino on and off. In early afternoon, they encountered the childish green
Familiar labyrinth containing the Scribbling Witch's minions. The duo tore through the enemies like a hot knife through butter with brutal efficiency. Homura, further pleased by the ease of their teamwork, described the Witch whose Familiars they had destroyed in case they stumbled upon the main labyrinth. While she spoke, her phone rang. Madoka. She picked up.

“Homura! We forgot! Nagisa's mom's funeral is today!”

It had completely slipped her mind. Homura frowned at the phone. “I have other priorities right now, Madoka.”

“But what if Sōju goes after her?”

Homura paused. If Sōju managed to turn Nagisa into the Sweets Witch, Homura would almost have to let Hitsugaya send her on; but that would give them away to the Incubator if it was watching labyrinths. If she retrieved the Grief Seed, she didn't want the Incubator to know they were capable of reversing the process by letting Nagisa go. They hadn't experimented on if a soul could be sent on by zanpakutō contact with the pure Grief Seed or if they'd need to spawn the Witch first. They could experiment on her Grief Seed while hidden in the shop, but it was harder when Homura could put a face to the soul. If they wanted to maintain secrecy without just shelving her Grief Seed, the only other solid options should she turn and be recovered would be to ship her out to Karakura or for the girl to hide in the interminable halls of the magic shop, never seeing light of day. She didn't know the girl's demeanor, but would bet big money on her chafing and going out by herself and ruining everything. If she got turned into a Witch, it would be one more battle to waste time on, one more distraction. It would be easier for everyone if they convinced Nagisa to lay low until they could neutralize Sōju. They needed to drill caution into her even if it meant frightening her—and Homura couldn't count on Sayaka and Madoka to be intimidating.

“I will accompany you,” she said grimly. “Put Urahara on the phone.”

After a terse discussion, Homura and Hitsugaya returned to the shop. When the three girls set out, Hitsugaya and Urahara shadowed them from just within sight along the rooftops and served as sentries around the funeral parlor.

Nagisa looked so painfully grateful at their arrival and her magic quivered with such heartbroken relief when Madoka hugged her for a solid five minutes that Homura was reminded of herself once more. Standing in a room full of strange adults she didn't know and a single relative who didn't care about her enough to even put a hand on her shoulder, watching the flower-covered caskets containing her parents, trying not to scratch at the lace collar of her black dress, wishing someone would just hold her. If only she had known Madoka back then....

At least Nagisa's father hovered over her like she was the most precious thing in the world to him. That was something. And he actually greeted Homura, Madoka, and Sayaka and thanked them for taking care of his daughter the day security had found her with them. He was the kind of father who paid attention to who did right by his little girl. If Nagisa's Soul Gem could be kept clean, she should have enough emotional support to have a decent chance of coming through this without turning into a Witch.

Homura's mind wandered as they primly sat through the service. It was a chance to really think about the day before— when she had been unable to receive Madoka's calls. Urahara had led her down into the twisting halls of the shop and into a lab. There he had described the research he had been doing in greater detail. She had drunk in his every word until he showed her a Grief Seed he had been running tests on.

“Wait— isn't that the Grief Seed from the Witch in Karakura?”
“Indeed it is.”

“But... Inoue reversed the transformation, did she not?”

“Indeed she did.”

“Then how...?”

Urahara's face was neutrally clinical as he met her eyes and said, “I placed the Soul Gem into the hand of a gigai to study the mechanism of attachment. Tests were inconclusive— I need to refine my instruments. The magical girl reacted poorly. She did try to cooperate, but she soon went mad and turned back into a Witch. I made a point of defeating her with kidō to avoid sending her on. I got valuable information from the entire process.”

Homura scowled and looked at him askance. “You told Karin you would not do that.”

“I said no such thing,” Urahara said in a deliberate echo of her words from weeks before. The shopkeeper's faint smile was chilling. “I said I understood her objection. Not that I wouldn't do it.”

They stared at one another for a long while. At length, Homura firmed her face and gave him one sharp nod. If the knowledge gained helped save Madoka in the end, it was acceptable.

The Kurosaki girls had once told her that Urahara was capable of morally questionable things. Homura understood now. The secret was a morally gray tie between them. They both knew they couldn't approach Inoue to reverse the transformation again— she would probably balk at what had been done and possibly blab it to others who would be furious. Tsukabishi knew, but he was loyal to Urahara. Hitsugaya knew, but he was a professional soldier— a commanding officer— who agreed that there were times and places for distasteful methods. He obviously didn't like what Urahara had done one bit, but he limited himself to sideways glances of judgment and kept his mouth shut.

After the memorial service, they all saw Nagisa fidgeting uncomfortably and trying not to cry as a parade of adults spoke with her father. Though Mr. Momoe kept a comforting hand on his daughter's shoulder, there were no other guests anywhere near Nagisa's age. The vast majority seemed to be business acquaintances of the deceased going through formalities— something Homura was intimately and resentfully familiar with. Madoka looked progressively more indignant at how the adults were barely glancing at the bereaved girl leaning against her father; she finally looked at Nagisa stubbornly and opened her arms in invitation. Nagisa's face crumpled and she dodged through adults to throw herself into Madoka's arms. Madoka hugged and rocked her, hushing and soothing.

It felt a bit odd that it was Madoka taking the position of team mom this time around. That fell to Mami ninety-nine percent of the time.

Sayaka frowned protectively and waved to catch the attention of Nagisa's father beyond the crowd. When he was looking, she pointed to Nagisa, gestured to the other girls, and used two fingers to mime walking toward the door; then she pulled her phone out of a pocket and wiggled it in the air while gesturing at Nagisa— call her, or we'll have her call you. Afterward, she cocked her head and raised her brows as though she had asked a question. The man paused, looked down at his daughter plastered to Madoka, then looked up and nodded tiredly. Sayaka offered him a thin smile and nodded back at him.

Homura led them as they shepherded Nagisa to a park with a picnic table in a wide open area where it would be difficult to pull off a sneak attack. She felt Urahara and Hitsugaya darting around a
perimeter, their positions shifting and shuffling at random intervals. Sayaka and Homura sat quietly while Madoka continued to comfort Nagisa until her sobs downgraded into tearful hiccups.

“I apologize,” Homura began delicately, “But I have a warning to impart to you.”

Nagisa sniffled and rubbed her eyes. “Wha-what is it?”

“There is a new magical girl in the city. Her name is Ayase Sōju. She is attacking other magical girls.” Homura paused and considered an idea. Mami was well-known in the area.... “Have you ever met a blonde magical girl who wears yellow and fights with guns and ribbons?”

The little girl startled. “Oh! Miss Mami? One time! She was nice! She explained some things and said I could ask Kyubey to find her if I need help!”

“Yes, she is nice,” Homura said agreeably. Had Nagisa always met Mami? Mami had never mentioned it, if she had. That would be morbidly interesting. “The new magical girl stole Tomoe's Soul Gem in a fight last night.” She paused. Needed to be scarier. “And nearly killed me while trying to steal mine. My Soul Gem nearly turned black from the magic consumed to heal and fight. Without my... allies, I probably would have died.” God, she hated admitting it.

“Seriously,” Sayaka muttered lowly. “Sōju set a labyrinth on fire and attacked Mami from behind. When Stranger Danger tried to get the Soul Gem back, the other girl almost took her head off then stabbed her in the face. Like, straight through her head.” She made a sharp thrusting motion toward the little girl's face with her hand, rigidly imitating a sword's movement. “Then she stuffed a fake Grief Seed in my face and turned me into a monster so she could get away. Homura had to shoot me in the face to turn me back to normal.”

Homura eyed her neutrally. She actually hadn't expected Sayaka to get in on the intimidation game — especially even more graphically than Homura herself. Maybe she was angling for scaring the girl in an expression of protectiveness?

Nagisa's face contorted in horrified fear. “What— what do I do?!”

“Do not transform or enter a labyrinth unless you absolutely have to,” Homura replied. She tugged a business card out of her pocket and offered it to Nagisa. “This is the address and phone number of a shop owned by some friends of mine. They know about magical girls and have protections on the premises. If you feel threatened, go there and you will be protected.”

Nagisa timidly took the card and stared at it. After a bit, she looked up worriedly and asked, “What if I can't get there?”

“Then transform and shield your Soul Gem. Run away while flaring your magic as much as you can to get my attention.” Homura tilted her head and thought. “Where is your Soul Gem located when you transform?”

“My tummy,” Nagisa said shyly.

Tummy. Stomach. Eating. Eating cheesecake. Like the Sweets Witch's tendency to eat Mami. Knowing Nagisa Momoe was going to be deeply awkward.

“And what kind of magic do you have?”

Nagisa blushed and fidgeted. “Bubbles.”

...What?
“How is bubbles a kind of magic?” Sayaka asked.

“Um, I blow them with my horn and....” Nagisa made vague hand gestures.

“How?” Madoka asked.

Homura could feel that she was staring. Bubbles?

“I can transform and show you?” She sounded cautiously hopeful. At Homura's nod—she was too damn curious—Nagisa clambered off the picnic bench and triggered her transformation.

White bubbles burst from her Soul Gem and swirled around her, shimmering into shades of orange and brown. The bubbles popped into a series of white sigils and left her magical girl outfit behind in a confetti-fall of sparkles. Her coral poncho trimmed with white fluff was the most eye-catching part of her costume. Everything else was muted, earthy shades of chocolate-brown. Short, puffy milk chocolate bloomers were held up by suspenders, each fastened with a dark coral bow. Dark chocolate stockings with light polka dots covered the entirety of her legs and ended in dark coral slippers. Atop her head was a fluffy dark chocolate hat with catlike ears and dangling pompons. Long fingerless gloves covered her arms. Nagisa held one hand up. A white, circular design glowed in the air, popped like a bubble and a child's toy trumpet fell into her hand.

Homura had to stop herself from attacking the weapon on reflex. With its red polka dots on a black background, medical cross, and red and blue feather decorations, it was obviously the source of the Sweets Witch's aesthetic. That combination of shapes and colors triggered a violent reaction Homura forced herself to suppress just as violently. She gripped the edge of the table so hard the rough wood bit into her fingers. The pain grounded her.

Nagisa put the trumpet to her lips and blew it while pointed straight up. A stream of bubbles gushed forth above them and popped into white sigils with explosive force. It was absolutely, one hundred percent not something Homura had expected. The Mermaid Witch wielded cutlasses like Sayaka; the Wūdàn Witch wielded a spear like Kyōko; and the Dress-Up Witch had ribbons like Mami. Bubbles and a trumpet that sounded like a high-pitched kazoo? She couldn't connect them to the Sweets Witch aside from sheer childishness. Maybe that was it? Her outfit's colors were reminiscent of her Witch's initial plushie form, though. But less pink. Wait, Momoe had been wearing pink when they found her. Hmm. Maybe the tie was Nagisa's trumpet being associated with the mouth, meaning she technically attacked with her mouth? Or the way the clownish hellworm always emerged from the plushie's mouth?

“Exploding bubbles?” Sayaka said as though surprised by being impressed. “Huh.”

Homura idly wondered if the technique would be useful in particular situations, but set that aside for later consideration. “Do you know how to make a barrier?”

“Yes! Mami helped me figure it out!” Nagisa chirped. She lowered her trumpet and blew straight in front of her. A giant bubble wiggled out from it and snapped into a perfect globe around her, its surface shimmering with the same white filigree as the sigils her attack bubbles used. The girl looked at Homura hopefully, like a puppy seeking praise for doing a trick.

“Excellent,” Homura said with a grim smile. “Do you have enough control to always hold a small one around your Soul Gem?” She triggered her own transformation with a thought and held up her hand. When her swirling violet barrier encircled her Soul Gem, she said, “Like this?”

Nagisa looked down at the space beneath her navel where her tiny Soul Gem was positioned like a belt buckle. “Ummmmmmm. Let me try?”
The older girls sat and watched her make faces and stick her tongue out in thought while she experimented. Homura murmured advice now and then. The younger girl eventually settled on blowing a small bubble with her trumpet, catching it on the tip of one finger, then pressing it over her Soul Gem. Again, she looked up with those puppy eyes and a tentative smile.

With some difficulty, Homura offered her a warmer smile. It felt brittle even to her. “Good. How long can you maintain it?”

“Ummmm. I dunno. I have to really think about it to keep it from popping.”

Homura nodded in a show of thought. “If Ayase Sōju attacks you, your first priority is to shield your Soul Gem. Your second priority is to flare your magic to attract attention to your location. Your third priority is to run for the address I gave you and cross the property line. Do you understand?”

Nagisa clutched her fists to her chest and nodded earnestly. Then she fidgeted and asked, “Is Miss Mami okay?”

Homura and her friends went utterly still. Nagisa's face fell with dread. Homura finally said, “If I don't recover her Soul Gem, she will die. All magical girls die if separated from their Soul Gems too long—or if they are broken.”

Nagisa's face contorted in terror and she held a hand over her Gem. Homura was surprised Madoka and Sayaka didn't object to how frighteningly blunt she was being with the girl. The previous night must have shaken them to their cores.

After some fretting, Nagisa looked up at Homura and declared, “I want to help her!” Her eyes were still terrified, but she added, “Mami saved me from my first Witch! I want to save her!”

So Mami had probably saved her in other timelines. Then gotten eaten by her. Again: Knowing Nagisa Momoe was going to be deeply awkward.

Homura considered her words carefully. “You are a very new, very young, inexperienced magical girl. Sōju has far more practice in battle.” She stopped herself from saying you’ll just get in my way. “I do not want to put you in unnecessary danger. I am concerned that you would be overwhelmed. Tomoe would not want you to risk yourself for her sake. She would blame herself if you were injured—or worse.”

Nagisa deflated and looked at her feet. “I just wanna help,” she mumbled.

“How can you maintain it?” Homura asked. She could feel her patience slipping. She shifted irritably, then thought of something and pulled her spare phone out of her shield. She tapped around and held the screen up to Nagisa. “This is Ayase Sōju. If you see her, get away and call me even if she is not transformed. Memorize this face. If you see her lurking around somewhere pretending to be normal, you could help us find her more quickly and save Tomoe.”

Nagisa moved closer and intensely stared at the screen. She stared so long that Homura started shifting restlessly. Madoka noticed.

“If you think you have it memorized, I think we should let Homura go. I know she's very anxious to get Mami's Soul Gem back.”

Nagisa drew in a sharp breath and hopped backward. She dropped her transformation and mumbled, “S-sorry to waste your time.”
“It wasn’t a waste at all,” Madoka said gently, smile sunny. Homura wasn’t so sure about that, but whatever. Madoka stood and hugged Nagisa. “Homura will be very busy, but if you need to talk to anyone you can call me, okay?”

Homura also dropped her transformation. After escorting Nagisa back to her father, they turned back to the magic shop. Hitsugaya and Urahara joined them at a dining table in yet another room as Tessai served them all tea. Homura was impatient to leave, but Madoka gave her a look and she sat down.

“Did you finish them, Tessai?” Urahara asked.

“Yes. I'll fetch them.”

“Finished what?” Sayaka asked when the man was gone.

“The magic charms I promised you,” Urahara answered. “Once you were all healed and asleep, we threw ourselves into making them more quickly. Your need became more dire overnight.”

Tessai returned and gravely gave Madoka and Sayaka each a small box that felt steeped in magic. Homura watched intently as her friends opened them. Each box contained a bracelet made of colorful beads. Madoka held hers up to sparkle in the light. Sayaka brought hers close to her face and scrutinized the stones.

“Is there... writing carved on this?”

“Yes.” Urahara snapped open his fan and held it to his face as he turned aside with blatantly fake modesty. “I fancy myself a bit of a lapidary.”

“A say what now?”

“Gem-cutter,” Tessai said with a smile. “He cheats with... magic, though.”

Urahara pouted and looked wounded. “It's not cheating if I invented the tools myself, Tessaaaaiiii. Then it's just ingenuity.”

“If you say so, Boss.” The big man's eyes gleamed behind his glasses.

Homura got the distinct impression she had stumbled into an inside joke between friends.

“So, what is this, anyway?” Sayaka asked.

“A collection of semiprecious stones imbued with various magic spells to work together as a system,” Urahara explained. “Largely the more useful varieties of calcite and topaz.”

“Useful?” Madoka asked doubtfully as Sayaka stared at Urahara with the blankness of not understanding a word he had said.

“All forms of calcite amplify magic and purify negative energies; various colors have more specific properties. I intend them to help your own magic resist Witch lures and the effects of labyrinths—to enhance your natural resistance,” Urahara lectured. “Then I anchored a strong shield in a few varieties of topaz, which is excellent for rejection of negative magic and protection from danger. Additionally, I set the trigger mechanism in malachite. The opaque green one.”

Madoka and Sayaka shuffled their bracelets around to find it. “When you are faced with magical danger, that bead will shatter and trigger the shield. The shield will be independent of your magic. Do you see how every other bead in the strand is clear with some white streaks, like ice?” Both
girls nodded. “Those are quartz. I had Tessai charge them as reservoirs of magic. Think magical batteries.” Urahara's mouth turned up into a razor sharp grin. “The power released will be intense enough for any of us—” he gestured at himself, Tessai, Hitsugaya, and Homura—“to sense it as a distress beacon.”

Homura's inner Karin grumbled sounds like New Agey bullshit, but she kept her mouth shut.

Rolling the beads around in her fingers, Madoka softly said, “It feels... really tingly. And nice.”

Sayaka went still and squeezed her own beads. She closed her eyes and looked like she was straining to hear something. “Yeah... a little bit. I think?”

“So you both are aware enough to sense external magic,” Urahara said as though pleasantly surprised. “Excellent.”

After Homura helped her friends put on their charms— which did buzz with potent magic that gave her goosebumps— she and Hitsugaya escorted them home to their worried parents. Madoka and Sayaka didn't have to fake feeling out of sorts. Homura made herself look exhausted as a show for the parents and kept her eyes averted to apologize for getting them all sick with bad food. Madoka's father had patted her shoulder and soothed her with it's all right, it happens to everyone who cooks at some point, then cheerfully changed the subject to remark upon his daughter's new bracelet to spare her feelings.

Faking out Madoka's parents didn't used to bother Homura as much as it did since meeting everyone in Karakura. She didn't like the weakness.

Homura and Hitsugaya patrolled their way back to the magic shop to check in before another round of extended searching. They found Urahara waiting on the doorstep for them.

“Did the parents go for it?”

“Yeah,” Hitsugaya said. “Let's hurry this up.”

Urahara bared his teeth in a grim smile and waved for them to follow him inside.

Homura refused to sit at the table again, impatient to leave. “What were those bracelets really?”

One brow arched, Urahara said, “Exactly what I said they were. Just in a different way than I described and fancier than necessary.”

“I've seen protective charms like that before,” Hitsugaya said quietly as he sat down to tea. “Captain Shiba once made me something similar but far simpler back when I was inexperienced at fighting and suppressing my reiatsu at the same time— I had so much that I kept inadvertently attracting more Hollows than I could handle when on assignment. Captain Shiba embedded a charm in a bronze medallion and designed it to use my own reiatsu as a power source.”

Urahara grinned and pointed his folded fan at the boy. “Isshin is indeed talented at making protective trinkets. It's one of the lesser-known specialties of the Shiba clan, along with wards. Comes in handy with all the spiritual explosives they store and handle. Isshin even made a charm for Kon back during the war. He uses metal tags on small pouches of a power source since he moved to the World of the Living.”

“Why didn't you do that, then?” Hitsugaya asked with narrowed eyes.

“What I made was more complex and required more surface area. The structure would have
worked if I layered tags of etched metallic foil but I thought they'd be more comfortable wearing something cute. Easier for them to explain away, too.” Urahara dipped his chin so his hat shadowed his face. “Besides, I was able to build in some extra bells and whistles with the added support of crystalline structure. Crystal is a wonderful amplifier.” He lifted his chin and turned cheerful again. Waving his fan with one hand and making a V-for-victory sign in the other, he crowed, “I also tacked on a Hollow repellent and embedded the spiritual equivalent of a GPS tracker in each of them ahaahahahahaha~~~”

Homura met Hitsugaya's deadpan look with one of her own.

The pair took to the rooftops again and roved the city through the night. No sign of Sōju, but Homura wasn't particularly surprised. The magical girl was probably laying low to heal. She'd definitely need Grief Seeds to replenish herself afterward, though, and that would eventually force her out. Hours passed as they searched. When they had come up with nothing by the time the sky began to lighten, Hitsugaya insisted upon returning to the shop to rest and check in for updates. Homura initially refused.

“You need to rest your body so your reiatsu— magic— doesn't have to work as hard to support it, Akemi,” he eventually snapped. “Even Kaname understood that despite complete lack of experience. Even captains who have the endurance to fight for days without stopping avoid it if possible specifically to conserve resources. Wasting energy on something so easily handled otherwise is beneath your intelligence.”

Homura hated that he had a point, but reluctantly retreated for food and sleep all the same.

When Homura woke, it was late afternoon and she had a sneaking suspicion Urahara or Tsukabishi had hit her with something to make her sleep longer. Hitsugaya was gone, having slept then decided to attend school late with a story about some minor moving-related crisis at home to avoid a suspicious number of absences among their group and keep an eye on Madoka and Sayaka.

Hitsugaya returned to the shop shortly after Homura woke, having escorted Madoka and Sayaka home. He tossed his school bag aside, nodded once at Homura, and they both took off to patrol without a word. Several hours later, their search pattern took them into Kazamino and they encountered the Scribbling Witch's true labyrinth. The two of them made short work of the childish crayon-drawing creatures and defeated the porcelain-clown-doll-like Witch with businesslike efficiency while warily watching for Sōju to pop out from behind building blocks or notebooks. Homura was relieved to have a fresh Grief Seed on hand.

They patrolled into the wee hours of Saturday morning without encountering anything or anyone else. Homura allowed herself to be convinced to return to the shop to rest and attend school for the half day to keep adults from nosing around. Personally, she thought that if the school administration had gone weeks without investigating Mami's absences in other timelines, she could get away with not going; but the way events kept happening so differently this time made her wary enough to give in. They didn't need any more complications.

Homura moved through the school day in stony silence and allowed her bad mood to show enough to make other students stay the hell away from her. She avoided being called to the board by death-glaring at various teachers and had no patience, so much cold rage and frustration flowing through her veins that even Madoka and Sayaka were intimidated.
When the school bell rang to end the day, Homura took off like a shot, met Hitsugaya at the front door, and hurried into the trees to shove their school things into her shield and immediately take to the rooftops again. They monitored their friends' routes home then resumed their search pattern.

Every minute Sōju delayed their confrontation only made Homura obsess over their impending battle in greater and deeper detail. Made her cycle through anger at Sōju and herself. Made her fantasize about the spinel at Sōju's shoulder shattering into a million billion trillion pieces.

She should have shot Sōju's Soul Gem in the alley when she had the chance. Acquiring new allies had made her soft. Homura vowed to correct that mistake with extreme prejudice.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: one step forward, two steps back

My chapters always get so much longer when the plot picks up. *side-eyeing myself*

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Nagisa spent Friday huddled with Daddy, grieving in their tiny apartment in the sketchier far southwest of Mitakihara. When Mommy had stopped working, money had gotten tighter. They had sold their house and moved into a nice apartment back in Kinuma. When Mommy got so sick she had to be transferred to Mitakihara, Daddy had regretfully explained that while the government was now paying all of Mommy's medical bills, he couldn't find a good enough job in the new city to get a really nice apartment and they would have to eat cheap food that wouldn't be as good as she was used to. But that was okay with Nagisa as long as she could be near Mommy while she got better. Mommy said that when she was better enough to go back to work, they would be able to live somewhere nice again. And they would celebrate with Mommy's favorite cheesecake. The really fancy kind. The expensive kind. The kind they couldn't afford anymore. The kind Nagisa had wasted her wish on.

Now Mommy was gone forever because Nagisa was a stupid stupid stupid idiot and Nagisa and Daddy only had the ruins of their old lives falling through the hole the wrecking ball of Mommy's death had left in their family. The way Daddy kept breaking down crying was Nagisa's fault. Her Soul Gem was dimming again, but she didn't call Miss Homura. Nagisa probably deserved whatever would happen to her if it turned black so she didn't want to waste the older magical girl's time and Grief Seeds.

On Saturday, Daddy and Nagisa took a train east to the coast by Shinchi. They wandered the shore with Mommy's small metal urn until they found an abandoned pier. They spent a long time sitting on its edge, holding hands and looking out at the ocean even though the place made Nagisa's skin crawl as though something creepy had happened there. Mommy had loved the ocean. She had organized so many summer beach trips over the years. Daddy said they would take Mommy's ashes to the family grave back in Kinuma someday, but he wanted to take Mommy to the sea one more time. Nagisa hadn't known her heart could break even more than it already had.

So they sat and listened to the surf without speaking, the urn full of Mommy's ashes a loud presence cradled in Daddy's hands.

When they tried to go home at sunset, the direct route train was shut down because of an accident down the line. So they took the long way that looped up through Kazamino. When they got off to transfer to a westward subway, Daddy paused and cocked his head as though he had heard something. After a few halting steps, he turned away from the entrance and walked right past it.

“Daddy? Where are you going?”
“There's... something I need to do,” he said distantly.

“Oh. Okay.” Nagisa dutifully tagged along after him.

They zigzagged through streets and alleyways. Daddy stopped answering questions after a few blocks—or what felt like a few blocks; Nagisa thought they might be going in circles. She stayed quiet though—a lady at the hospital had told her Daddy might do weird sad things for awhile and that was normal so she shouldn't be scared. But she worried when Daddy stopped and stared at a bar. Then he stepped into the street to cross to it. Without looking both ways. Which he always, always yelled at her for doing. A car screeched to a halt and honked. Daddy just kept walking forward with the same uncertain steps. No reaction.

“Daddy?!”

No answer.

Nagisa bit her lip, looked both ways, and darted after him. Instead of going into the bar, Daddy wandered around its corner into an alley. If she hadn't been watching him so closely, she would have missed the mark on his neck as he turned.

A Witch's Kiss.

Nagisa whipped her head down to look at her ring. Her Soul Gem was glowing. There was a Witch nearby. She panicked and shouted, “Daddy! Stop! Come back!”

Not only did he not stop or answer, but he dropped Mommy's urn from limp fingers. It hit the pavement with a metallic clang and rolled away into some trash.

Nagisa's stomach lurched. “Daddy, no!!”

A dark sigil wavered into existence in front of several crates of empty booze bottles. It looked like a blocky sketch of a bird whose head and tail were sticking out of a wire birdcage. And Daddy walked right into it. The sigil swallowed him and blinked out of existence.

Panic froze Nagisa. For a minute, all she could do was gape in horrified disbelief at the wavering air where the sigil had been. She then took a jerky step forward and brandished her Soul Gem to make the sigil appear again. Just to make sure it was still there.

What was she supposed to do?!

Hyperventilating, Nagisa hugged herself and tried to remember Miss Homura's instructions.

*Do not transform or enter a labyrinth unless you absolutely have to.*

Well, Nagisa thought this qualified as absolutely have to.

*Transform. Your first priority is to shield your Soul Gem. Your second priority is to flare your magic to attract attention to your location.*

She could do that. She could do that. Yes, she *could* do that.

*Your third priority is to run for the address I gave you and cross the property line. They know about magical girls and have protections.*

She *couldn't* do that. Not when Daddy was inside the labyrinth.
The new magical girl stole Tomoe's Soul Gem in a fight last night. She set a labyrinth on fire and attacked Mami from behind.

She... she would have to be very careful. It was very dangerous, but she couldn't leave Daddy. Nagisa failed at saving Mommy because she was tricked, but she could never forgive herself if she didn't do better at saving Daddy. If Mommy was watching from Heaven, maybe she would be happy if Nagisa could save Daddy.

Maybe Mommy would forgive her.

Taking a deep breath, Nagisa transformed, flared her magic as much as she could—reached, reached, felt Miss Homura's magic flare in alarmed response from afar—blew a bubble for her Soul Gem, and entered the labyrinth on shaky legs.

Hitsugaya slammed a hand on Homura's shoulder just as she was about to stop time and home in on where Momoe's magic had flared and disappeared. Homura snarled and tried to shake him off but his grip was like cold iron. She opened her mouth to yell at him but he shook her hard as his phone rang.

“Dammit, Akemi, you have allies to coordinate with now!” Hitsugaya snapped as he yanked his phone out of a pocket with his free hand. “Don't run off on your own without cursory communication so we don't trip each other up!”

He had a point, but this kind of delay was part of why Homura had once vowed not to rely on anyone anymore. It was faster to plan everything considering only herself. Besides, she actually had control of herself. She couldn't control allies, and that was a weakness that lowered the effectiveness of having allies.

Hitsugaya tapped his phone's screen to put the caller on speaker. Without any greeting, Urahara's voice barked, “Thirty-eight degrees northeast of your position. Fourteen-point-one kilometers.”

Homura blinked and dully said, “What?”

“You didn't think I'd move up here and not deploy at least some sensors from the moment the wards were active, did you? I got even more online since the carousel,” Urahara said mildly. “Look for a McDonald's—”

“A what?” asked Hitsugaya.

“Western food. Sign's a giant yellow letter M,” Urahara explained. “Look for that, a bar with a blue neon sign shaped like a martini glass, and a red, white, and green convenience store sign. The signal was somewhere in between. I still have some tweaking to do to make triangulation more exact.”

Homura stared at Hitsugaya's phone. That was... unexpectedly useful information.

“Anything else detected in the area?” Hitsugaya asked curtly.

“Aside from Momoe's transformation signature? Nope~!” Urahara sang. “Not that my current sensor array can pick up, anyway.”
“Keep us updated,” Hitsugaya said curtly, then ended the call. He turned to Homura and raised a brow expectantly, yellow magic flickering around his fingers.

Homura nodded firmly and froze time. They rushed through the washed-out city linked by the magic lasso spell, tersely calling out plans for working around each other once they figured out what they’d be fighting. When they found Urahara's landmarks, they stopped in the middle of their triangle and Homura dropped the timestop.

“I do not sense Sōju,” Homura said as she cast about. She held up her Soul Gem and observed its glow. “There is a labyrinth nearby.” They hopped around rooftops dowsing for the entrance. When they found it, Homura frowned at the sigil. Before Hitsugaya could ask, she said, “The Birdcage Witch. It is a giant pair of a woman's legs trapped in a birdcage. To defeat it, you must first break the birdcage. I can usually take it out with one grenade once the cage is out of the way. It can sling chains down from above. It is a very dim labyrinth. Familiars are birdmen who are vulnerable to fire. Generally not a difficult labyrinth, but if Sōju is inside....”

“A simple labyrinth is probably the best place to fight her,” Hitsugaya muttered. “Would it have a lot of hiding places?” He rolled his shoulders and manifested an ice sword and a loose collar made of ice that confused Homura until she realized it would protect his neck if Sōju tried to slip behind him. He wouldn't be able to immediately heal a critical neck injury like Homura could.

Homura pulled a flamethrower from her shield and prepared it. “It is a very large... room or hall, and things tend to be obscured by darkness beyond a certain distance, but there aren't a lot of solid objects to hide behind. I would keep an eye on the bar counters, though.”

“Bar counters, huh?” Hitsugaya said with a glance at the bins full of empty alcohol bottles by the back door of the bar. Taking a deep breath, he looked back to the sigil and said, “Shall we?”

As usual, the floor was lined in black lace and ambient light was provided by multicolored gemstones raining from the fathomless darkness above. The scents of spiced rum and cigarette smoke wafted through the labyrinth accompanied by the sound of chirping birds and rustling wings. Homura led Hitsugaya forward by the least-obscured path of lace as it meandered through the darkness. There were points where the distant walls narrowed enough for them to make out the glimmer of sheer, beaded curtains, shelves full of books, booze bottles, and neat displays of glassware— cordials, flutes, goblets, shot glasses, all manner of things to drink alcohol out of in style. A couple minutes in, they started to find islands of twitching feathers and masculine limbs in the darkness.

“Momoe must have managed to get through the first wave herself,” Homura commented. “Unless it was Sōju. But I do not see burn damage or slices.”

Hitsugaya hummed unhappily and peered into the darkness on either side. “That bar counter. Explosive damage without scorching.”

Homura glanced to one side and saw a shattered bar counter in the distance, bar stools and shards of glass lying in disarray with dead birdmen slumped on the bar.

“Probably Momoe, then,” Homura said.

They hadn't gone far when the abyss above them became dense with the sound of angry birdcalls. Homura aimed her flamethrower straight up just as the first Familiars descended. As usual, they were the bodies of muscular men with wings for arms and colorful bird heads with ridiculously oversized eyes. Once they were in range, Homura methodically swept a jet of flame over their heads. Burned birdmen dropped around them. She sprayed fire until the Familiars stopped coming.
Hitsugaya dispatched any that survived their fall to the ground with quick stabs.

Hitsugaya glanced at her curiously as she lowered the flamethrower. “I’ve heard of those but never actually seen one,” he said. “Where did you steal that from?”

Homura noted the lack of judgment in the question. As though the theft itself was unimportant. Good. “I took a train to a forest half an hour inland and got it from a rural firefighting regional headquarters,” she said as she checked the weapon's integrity. “They stock them to set controlled back-burn fires to stop the spread of forest fires.”

The shinigami tilted his head thoughtfully and said, “Back-burn...? Huh,” before returning to scanning for enemies. The look on his face reminded her of when Urahara was fascinated by something she mentioned that made him want to do research. She began to understand an offhand comment Karin had made about her friend frequently prodding her with questions about things modern living humans did.

They proceeded warily, fighting off waves of Familiars until they heard popping, explosions, and a girl's voice making distressed sounds between high-pitched horn blasts. They increased their pace but didn't allow themselves to be distracted from watching for an ambush. When they reached a bend in the lace floor, they found Nagisa Momoe desperately fighting off a swarm of Familiars with her bubble trumpet, her fear plain on her face as she stood over a body. It took a moment, but Homura recognized the unconscious man as Momoe's father.

Well, at least Momoe actually had an understandable excuse for ignoring her order to not enter a labyrinth by herself. It was obvious that she was in over her head, though.

Exchanging a glance with Hitsugaya, Homura said, “I will use the flamethrower. You shield them and watch for ground attack.” The shinigami raised a brow at her barking orders again, but must have found the plan reasonable as he gave her a businesslike nod and leapt forward at her side. Hitsugaya defended with horizontal slashes of his sword and arcs of ice while Homura concentrated on the birdmen from above. Homura noted the louder sound of clanging chains; they must be near the Witch.

A shriek of metal on ice behind her made her instinctively dodge to one side. As she turned, she saw that Hitsugaya had blocked a blow from Sōju, who appeared to have struck from a downward angle through the air thick with roasting birdmen. The shinigami redirected the strike, released one hand's grip on the hilt, and punched at Sōju's face with a fist encased in spiky ice. She dodged backward and crowed, "Punto d'Infiammabilità!"

Hundreds of needles of flame lanced out at them. Homura conjured her swirling violet barrier as Hitsugaya countered with a horizontal sweep of ice. The projectiles exploded with blinding flashes upon impact with the ice, kicking up a huge cloud of steam. Sōju grinned and melted backward into the smoke and steam like a phantom. Momoe gave a delayed shrill of fright as the sound of Sōju's laughter echoed around them.

“You had to bring a boy into a fight between girls?” Sōju taunted airily. “Are you scared of little old me? I thought you were tougher than that.”

Homura didn't bother responding. She stored the flamethrower and pulled a machine gun as Hitsugaya made ice race up from his hands to form bracers on his forearms and extended a ledge of ice down and back from his collar like miniature wings to guard his shoulders. They took stances on either side of Momoe, facing outward and scanning for Sōju in the darkness between falling gemstones.
“Not gonna talk? How rude. Maybe another sword through your skull will teach you some manners.”

Momoe sobbed in fear and huddled over her father's body. “What do you want?! Why are you attacking us?!”

“Want?” Sōju echoed. “Your Soul Gems, of course!”

Her voice bounced around with a different quality. Homura figured she must be moving around. It was difficult to sense her clearly so close to the Witch, whose distant thrashing was making chains rattle above them.

“Why?!” Momoe squealed.

“Why?” Light laughter mocked her. “I collect them! They're unmatched in beauty because they shine with the light of life!” Her voice suddenly sounded closer. “Ooh, a white Soul Gem? That's uncommon. Here, let me show you!”

Small flashes of brilliant color and a few splashes of white light blinked into existence among the falling gemstones of the labyrinth. Dozens of Soul Gems sparkled all around them in the thinning steam. Dozens. Bile rose in Homura's throat. The theft of Mami's Soul Gem hadn't been a one-off strategy. This girl stole souls just like the Incubator did.

“What's your name, little one?” Sōju's voice cooed from yet another angle. “Gems need names, you know? I need to label my collection properly.”

“You're sick,” Hitsugaya said in a low sneer.

Sōju just laughed.

Momoe sobbed. “I don't want to be— I don't— Don't take my—”

“Then run away, little girl,” Sōju said sweetly as poisoned honey. “Akemi's the one I want most. I'll be nice and give you a head start. I'll find you later. Take the boy with you.”

“Run,” Homura ordered.

Momoe whipped her head up to stare at Homura. “But Daddy!”

“Take him!” Hitsugaya snapped.

“B-but he's big and I'm little!”

Homura forced herself not to turn and glare at the girl, staying alert for attack. “You're a magical girl! *Use your magic!*” she snarled.

Momoe squeaked like a mouse, rustled around fretfully, then blew a big bubble with a shrill toot on her horn. Soon, Homura caught a glimpse of her in the corner of her eye as she ran away, pushing a bubble containing her father's senseless body ahead of her.

There was only the eerie rattle of chains for a long minute. At length, Sōju's voice huffed, “When are you going to kick out your boyfriend and fight me woman-to-woman?!”

Homura's eye twitched in irritation. Hitsugaya muttered something under his breath.

Sōju sighed in false disappointment. “I guess we *are* more evenly matched this way,” she declared.
“Makes it more fun.” Her voice shifted again. “Are you really going to shoot a machine gun around indiscriminately? With all these beautiful souls floating around? A good girl like you wouldn’t want to hit any, would you?” Sōju finally stepped from the darkness further up the lace path, barely within sight. “Especially this one.” She held an amber Soul Gem up between forefinger and thumb, licked it smugly, and cradled it right up in front of her own Soul Gem, a red spinel attached to the shoulder just above the white and purple ruffles at her left breast.

Mami. Mami's Soul Gem.

Sōju smirked and dipped her head down to touch the tip of her tongue against the floral ornament atop Mami's Soul Gem. Homura's blood sang in her ears with her rage, but she forcibly reined herself in. She couldn't allow herself to be prodded into the same kind of instinctively angry reactions that had cost her in their last encounter.

Homura scowled and stopped time. She turned to face Sōju and scrutinized the space between them. No clear shot. Not with Sōju using Mami's Soul Gem as the magical girl equivalent of a human shield.

“Akemi.”

She glanced sideways at Hitsugaya, who had turned with her. His face was sharp and utterly without emotion beyond a cold glint in his eye. “We’ll flank her. Push Soul Gems aside and loop around. Get out one of your small guns. I’ll grab Tomoe’s Gem. You be ready to shoot Sōju’s as soon as I get Tomoe’s clear, before Sōju has time to react.”

Homura hated being ordered around but the plan was sound so she nodded, shoved the unused machine gun back in her shield, and retrieved a Beretta. They walked to Sōju with measured steps, the yellow rope spell glowing between their ankles expanding as necessary while they gently pushed aside Soul Gems as though parting curtains. When they reached the enemy magical girl, Homura stared at her face for a moment. She wanted to stab it as payback, but Sōju had proven to have quick reactions once exempted by contact. It would be too much of a risk for something so petty.

Beretta raised, Homura shifted around until she found a good angle and positioned the muzzle a bare centimeter from Sōju's spinel. She met Hitsugaya's eyes and raised a brow. He shifted around her and hovered a hand near Mami's Soul Gem.


Hitsugaya clamped his hand over the amber egg and Sōju's fist and yanked to the side, away from Sōju's Soul Gem. The contact exempted Sōju from the timestop. She gasped but didn't have time to react beyond that as Homura's handgun immediately shattered her Soul Gem. Homura dropped the timestop and coldly watched the light leave Sōju's eyes as her battle costume evaporated around her. The empty body crumpled to the floor. Homura stared at it as the multitude of floating Soul Gems fell to the floor with a chiming series of pings.

Homura still wanted to stab Sōju’s face.

“Let's collect all these Soul Gems,” Hitsugaya said solemnly as he held Mami's out to Homura. “We can't just leave them here.”

Homura took it and stored it in her shield with a sigh. “Yes.”

They had turned, walked a few steps back, and were bent to pluck Soul Gems when unfamiliar
magic exploded behind them. They whipped around to look just as Sōju's enraged voice roared, "Caso Freddo!"

Homura barely registered the words before a cold force slammed into her back like a wall of knives and sent her tumbling. She rolled to her feet and looked back again. Hitsugaya had large spikes of ice lodged in the ice armor over his shoulders and had bleeding gashes on the side of his head and various parts of his body, but he swung his ice sword with a roar and sent his own flock of dagger-like icicles flying back at Sōju. Homura caught a glimpse of Sōju in a different, red magical girl costume just before the girl swung her sword to block the icicles and shrieked, "L'Inverno sta Arrivando!" Hail and snow pelted them as the labyrinth filled with a dense, freezing mist.

Homura froze time and stared out into the fog as she and her ally broke chunks of ice off their limbs. Sōju had disappeared; the mist surrounded them with her magic and made it impossible to sense her position.

Hitsugaya lowered his blade. "The hell is going on?! I saw you break her Gem! Felt her reiatsu disappear! She should be dead!"

"She had a different costume," Homura muttered as she pulled a machine gun. "That implies a different Soul Gem." She paused in thought. "She is using a completely different sort of magic, too."

"Ice against ice. Great," Hitsugaya grumbled, also scanning the mist.

"Worried?" Homura asked lowly.

"Not particularly," he replied. "It'll just be annoying to calculate how much resistance she has to ice attacks and use just enough power to overwhelm her." He eyed Homura over his shoulder. "Does the Incubator come into labyrinths to possibly see me use more power than I show outside?"

"Sometimes," Homura answered. "Usually with a magical girl so it can observe her, but who knows what else it does."

"What a pain," Hitsugaya griped. "So much for releasing seals and snatching all the mist from her before she realizes what I'm doing."

"You can do that?"

"Of course. Hyōrinmaru gives me control of the moisture in the air. This mist feels like mostly natural moisture held by her reiatsu, not her reiatsu solidified. If her grip on it isn't strong enough, I can turn it against her. Without my limiters, that would be easy as breathing." He scowled unhappily. "That ability is limited in this gigai. There would be a delay before I could control all of it and with the limiter on me she may be able to... start a tug of war on it, I guess."

"Concentrating on that could delay her reactions to me, though."

Hitsugaya perked up and looked calculating. "Point."

After a brief discussion, Homura dropped the timestop.

"We weren't going to kill the boy, you know," Sōju's bitter voice echoed around them. "But now you've destroyed my precious Ayase. She was my greatest treasure. I'm going to make you suffer!"

"Talking about yourself in plural and third person now? You really are insane," Hitsugaya taunted
as he held his sword out in front of him; tendrils of the mist crept along the ground, faintly swirled around his feet, and shimmered up his body. “Guess that's to be expected from a homicidal soul collector. Monster.”

Harsh laughter rang around them. “You killed Ayase, not me.”

“And who are you?” Homura asked.

“My name is Luca Sōju,” Sōju's voice said airily. “You killed my sister. Prepare to die!”

Before she could attack, Hitsugaya made a yanking motion with his blade. The mist in a five meter radius was rapidly drawn to and around him. It condensed into icicles the size of bullets and he launched them in every direction with a shout.

A series of pings like breaking glass rang out around them. Much of the mist rapidly retreated, leaving a wide open area studded with floating colored sparkles but leaving enough to continue to conceal Sōju's location. Hitsugaya's grip on the mist had slipped in his horror at the realization that the enemy had sent the scattered Soul Gems airborne again and he had irrevocably shattered several souls.

“Who's the monster now?” Sōju drawled condescendingly. “At least I don't destroy Soul Gems. I treasure them for the precious life they are. You're such a cold-blooded murderer! And ruining my collection besides!” Her voice rose in a snarl. “Those were priceless, you bastard!”

“Then you should not have risked them like that in the first place, you idiot,” Homura sniffed. Her eyes slid to Hitsugaya, who made a choking sound that edged into a hateful growl. “Do not let her get under your skin,” she said emotionlessly. The glance he gave her started angry and moved into incredulous— accusatory— then bitter before he looked away again.

“Ooh, my precious Ayase was right! You are the stoic type!” Sōju's voice cooed. It immediately dropped into guttural rage. “I'll collect your Soul Gem if it's the last thing I do, bitch.”

“Go ahead and try,” Homura said lightly, face a cold mask as she continued to sweep her machine gun around warily. A large part of her didn't care about the other Soul Gems. Those girls were functionally dead anyway. Or would have been, without her new allies. The possibility of the souls being given those fake bodies made her pause, but eliminating Sōju was her first priority. The more the enemy's voice shifted back and forth between mocking cheer and dark fury, the more convinced she was that the girl was truly insane. It meant she was dangerously unpredictable, yes, but it also meant she was more likely to make a stupid mistake if they could taunt her enough to attack without thinking— the tactic she was trying to use on Hitsugaya. And so... “Your sister tried repeatedly and look where it got her. She is less than dust now. Would you like to join her? I am more than willing to oblige.”

Sōju's voice gave a wordless shriek of rage and the floating Soul Gems flew toward one position in the mist. The mist dropped from around Luca Sōju, who stood firm with a sword brandished and had a thoroughly unhinged look on her face. The Soul Gems whirled around her billowing red dress in a tight orbit. It would be impossible to attack her without hitting a Soul Gem. Sōju threw her arms wide and screamed, “And how do you think you'll be able to do that without destroying these other beautiful souls? You wouldn't want to destroy them just to get me, would you?” She looked hard at Hitsugaya and bared her teeth in a mocking grin. “You wouldn't want to be a mass murderer, would you?”

With Sōju's position revealed, Homura raised her shield with a sneer to freeze time and pluck the Soul Gems from the air. Which they should have done in the first place, damn it all. Sometimes
she hated hindsight.

**FEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET!**

A stream of bubbles flooded at Sōju from behind. Some hit her and exploded, but most flowed around her and encased each Soul Gem then spiraled upward and behind Sōju as she whirled to look. There stood Nagisa Momoe, shielded in cleared air by a bubble at the edge of the mist, looking utterly terrified as she continued to blow her trumpet. The Soul Gems shielded by her bubbles flocked around her. Sōju roared in rage and charged at the girl, sword raised for a strike.

Homura stopped time.

“The little idiot,” Homura hissed.

“I dunno, seems to have worked,” Hitsugaya said grudgingly. At least he was also unhappy.

Homura drew a steadying breath and suppressed her anger. Later. She could deal with the little twit later. “Let's finish this.”

They stepped up to Sōju and stood on either side of her. They found Luca's white Soul Gem on the opposite shoulder Ayase's red one had been on—encased in thick ice that glowed with her magic. Homura clicked her teeth in annoyance and Hitsugaya huffed in frustration.

“Looks like she picked up your trick,” Hitsugaya said with a glance to the barrier Homura held around her own Soul Gem.

“Use your magic to remove the ice.”

Hitsugaya frowned and held a hand near the lump, gauging it. “It's her ice, made of her reiatsu—magic. Damn near fused to her actual soul. I can't control that. It's not truly moisture.”

Homura's lip curled into a snarl. “Stab her in the face while I drop the stop and shoot her ice at close range. She—or her sister—had unusually fast reactions to exemptions from the stop, so your job is to sabotage that. Pull back and I will freeze again. I will aim again. Stab her somewhere else. Dismember her if you must. We will do it as many times as it takes for me to chip through her ice.” She was pleased that he nodded and got in position to do as she said.

The first four repetitions went well; the ice shield was stubbornly resisting much of the impact and ricocheting bullets glowing with Homura's violet magic off into the misty darkness, but Homura managed to chip away half of its thickness. On the fifth repetition—probably about two seconds' time from Sōju's perspective—the lump of ice exploded outward in spikes with Hitsugaya's next stab at her abdomen. Aim ruined, Homura fell back with an icicle through her left eye socket and right clavicle as the barrier over her Soul Gem took a direct hit but stayed intact. She heard Hitsugaya curse and cough wetly, then the clang of steel on ice somewhere to her left as she reeled and took stock of her head injury. What kind of contact did Sōju have with Hitsugaya to be able to move? Unimportant. One eye was hit but both eyes were blind. The icicle was angled through her optical—

“Drop the stop and heal faster, Akemi!” Hitsugaya roared, voice rough and almost gurgling. Punctured lung? “I've got this!”

Homura ground her teeth but obliged. The sound of sword battle and the sting of cold moved further away, joined by the sound of birds. They had moved far enough along the path to trigger another wave of Familiars. Fabulous.
“Momoe! Shield her!” Hitsugaya ordered with undeniable authority.

The little girl gave a startled squeak. Momoe's trumpet trilled. Homura felt herself surrounded in magic— one of Momoe's bubble barriers. The whole thing was infuriating. It would allow her to focus her magic and heal with greater efficiency, but she hated it.

She should have just bombed Luca Sōju when she was standing out in the open, Soul Gems be damned. Should've killed Ayase in the alleyway at their first meeting instead of trying to figure her out.

Should've, should've, should've. Always should've.

Enraged, Homura gripped the icicle through her eye socket and yanked it out. She flooded her brain and eyes with magic— again, damn Sōju and her— their?— head shots— as she tugged the other icicle out of her chest. It took but a moment to stem the blood loss there and snap her clavicle together like a jigsaw puzzle. Several moments more and Homura's sight was restored, her magic then shifting to repair the rest of the wound.

The mist was gone but there was ice everywhere. Their entire group had wandered far enough for the chains above them to be low enough to be visible. Icicles dangled from every chain, some glowing faintly blue and others glowing faintly white. Birdmen were encased in boulders of ice in a winding trail along the lace floor. Hitsugaya and Sōju were engaged in vicious sword combat, each using their ice in dirty tricks to surprise the other. Both were bloodied, but every wound they had was iced over. Sōju was worse off and on the defensive, backing deeper into the labyrinth with many of Hitsugaya's strikes.

“Remove your barrier,” Homura ordered Momoe without looking at her. She watched the two combatants intensely, waiting for an opportune moment to stop time— looking for a good opening on that goddamn Soul Gem.

“B-but—” Momoe stammered.

“Do it!”

Momoe squeaked; the bubble popped harmlessly as Homura stalked forward, waiting for the perfect moment. She didn't have to wait long. The next time Hitsugaya and Sōju locked blades, the shinigami conjured a spike of ice on his knee and rammed it up into Sōju's stomach. The girl shrieked and jerked just enough for Hitsugaya to force her blade aside and slide his sword down toward her left wrist. Sōju let go of her blade with one hand, flung the hand behind her, then thrust it forward in a palm strike at Hitsugaya's brow. Hitsugaya's eyes widened as he saw the imitation Grief Seed flying toward his face, snapped the ice spike off his knee, let go of his blade, and dodged back awkwardly while making the ice bracer on his forearm expand into a crude shield to block the—

Homura stopped time with a click as soon as Hitsugaya had no direct or indirect physical contact with Sōju.

Even as he stumbled back, Hitsugaya opened his hand and made another sword of ice. He fell into a ready stance with it and an armored forearm blocking his face, hyper-focused on Sōju as he panted heavily. It took several breaths for him to process the timestop and relax. He turned to see Homura prowling toward them with one hand deep in her shield.

“Akemi—”
“Shut up.” She hauled out an RPG launcher and shouldered it. “Chop that hand off, grab that thing, and get back.”

Hitsugaya's brows arched toward his hairline, but he turned back to Sōju with his face settled into arctic lack of emotion. His blade quickly severed Sōju's hand—the one holding the fake Grief Seed. Sōju was exempted from the timestop for only the span of a breath before freezing again. Lowering his sword, Hitsugaya plucked the object from the severed hand's palm, encased it in ice, shoved it in his pocket, fell back, and took a defensive pose between Sōju and Momoe.

Homura stopped ten meters from Sōju. She shot the RPG at the girl's face. Pulled another and shot it at her abdomen. Pulled another and shot it at the Soul Gem on her shoulder.

Time started up again with three simultaneous explosions. Homura stood firm in the backwash, glowing violet, and raised her shield arm to conjure her swirling barrier and whirl it outward to clear the smoke. She froze time again as soon as she could see Sōju, then walked closer. The enemy had been blasted back and was frozen in a tumble, thoroughly maimed but Soul Gem intact.

The ice around the Soul Gem was gone, though.

Homura stared at it hatefully for a moment before pulling a pipe bomb from her shield and dropping it from a height that would cause it to freeze in the air in the path Sōju's body was taking, in the perfect place to be hit by the shoulder the Soul Gem was attached to. She half expected Hitsugaya to discourage her, but he remained silent. She stepped back as she palmed the remote detonator, then released the timestop and clicked the button. Homura used her magic as a buffer against the explosion and savored the faint shattering sound that accompanied the final destruction of Sōju's second Soul Gem.

This time, Homura let the smoke clear naturally as she stood and stared at Sōju's mangled corpse. Hitsugaya stepped up next to her and stabbed his sword straight down into it, encasing it in a miniature iceberg. They stared in silence, waiting for some unlikely counterattack. The only sounds were chains, distant birds, and Momoe's still-frantic gasping.

“It's done,” Hitsugaya murmured a good five minutes later.

Homura let her eyes close and sighed. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Punto d'Infiammabilità and L'Inverno sta Arrivando are attacks I made up based on TV show shout-outs like the manga does. They mean Flashpoint and Winter Is Coming, respectively. Or so Google Translate says.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Before advancing into the labyrinth, Tōshirō gathered Soul Gems from Momoe's bubbles with Akemi and stored them in the magical girl's shield. When done, Akemi turned to him and held out her hand.

“Give me that thing.” Meaning the imitation Grief Seed.

“No.” Tōshirō didn't wait for her to snap at him, which she was obviously about to do. “What if inserting it into your shield works on you the same way as inserting it into Miki's forehead?”

Akemi blanched and withdrew her hand. “Point taken.” After a moment, she huffed and tossed her hair over her shoulder, pulling a flamethrower again and stalking deeper into the labyrinth. “Let us finish this and get out of here.”

He wholeheartedly agreed.

The Witch was anticlimactic after their battle with Sōju. As Akemi had told him, it was a woman's torso from the base of the sternum down, feminine curves and legs clad in lacy black lingerie and stockings. Birdcage bars arced out from the center of the top of the torso—probably from the spine. So the cage was part of its body? It stayed in one place despite the furiously kicking legs causing the birdcage to thrash around noisily. They didn't particularly have to worry about Familiars as the Witch seemed to have crushed a fair number of them, and the chains lashing from above were simple enough to avoid and block even while keeping one eye on Momoe. Akemi dodged closer, froze time, and fired several RPGs at the cage. Time resumed; the birdcage broke apart in a series of explosions. Time froze again when the smoke cleared enough to see the legs falling from their perch. Akemi fired more RPGs, unfroze time, and stood impassively as the second round of explosions destroyed the Witch and collapsed the labyrinth.

Even as their surroundings wobbled out of existence and put them back in the alley, Tōshirō frowned at Akemi's back as she extended a hand before her to catch the new Grief Seed drifting toward the ground. The timestep was an invaluable tool, but he wondered if she relied on it too much.

“I'm glad to see you didn't need me,” Urahara's voice said behind them. “Did you encounter and eliminate the target?”
Momoe squeaked in surprise and actually clung to Tōshirō's waist as he and Akemi turned to look toward the mouth of the alley. The shopkeeper stood there, face serious as he took in their appearances, evaluating wounds, bloodstains, and body language with sharp eyes. He held the cane that concealed his zanpakutō in both hands, positioned near a hip as though contemplating drawing the blade within.

“Yes,” Akemi answered coldly in a way that reminded Tōshirō of Soifon reporting on a covert op.

Urahara relaxed. “Did you recover Tomoe's Soul Gem?”

“Yes. And forty-three besides.”

Tōshirō glanced at her over his shoulder with his eyebrows raised as Urahara crooned, “Is that so?” in calculating interest. For better or worse, those Soul Gems would probably be finding their way to Urahara's lab. Better than Kurosutchi’s lab, Tōshirō supposed.

“Daddy!”

Momoe released Tōshirō's waist and ran to a body slumped on the ground among the crates of empty liquor bottles. She threw herself down on the man and shook him, breath hitching with new tears. “Don't die!”

Urahara stepped forward, leaned down, and gently lay a hand on her shoulder. “He is simply stunned, Miss Momoe. We will take him to my shop and help him recover. He will be fine. Come along.”

Momoe sobbed her relief and backed off as Urahara lifted her father over his shoulder. Tōshirō and Akemi jumped to the rooftops ahead of them when Momoe gasped, “Oh! I need to get Mommy! The Witch made Daddy drop her!”

They were all confused until the little magical girl jogged to one side of the alley and pulled a funeral urn from among some trash. Tōshirō felt Akemi's reiatsu flicker with anger and glanced at her in question as Momoe tenderly brushed refuse off the item, polishing it with her poncho. Akemi noticed, glanced at him, and looked away. He had to strain to hear her grit out, “I hate what Witches do to people. Such disrespect to—” She cut herself off and looked murderous.

Tōshirō was suddenly reminded that Akemi was an orphan and probably had feelings about funeral urns containing the remains of parents.

Their rooftop journey to the shop was leisurely so Momoe could keep pace with them. The little girl was tired and her Soul Gem was dim, so they didn't see a reason for her to push herself. They all followed Urahara to the normal part of the living quarters of the shop, where he lay Mr. Momoe on a futon in a dimly lit room. Momoe fussed over him but yawned.

“Miss Akemi, please use a Grief Seed on Miss Momoe's Soul Gem and your own,” Urahara said quietly. “We will let Miss Momoe rest with her father for a little while.”

Akemi blankly complied and didn't react when Momoe hugged her around the waist afterward. Momoe stepped back uncertainly as Tsukabishi came in the room with a tray of food and drink. Urahara gently ordered Momoe to eat and sleep. The girl fretted, but complied after a moment's hesitation.

Urahara led Tōshirō and Akemi into the deeper halls of the shop and sat them around a table that already had tea and damp towels waiting for them. As soon as they sat, Akemi wiped the blood from her face and hands on the warm towel, took a dainty sip from her teacup, set it down next to
the discarded towel, and started pulling Soul Gems out of her shield. She lined them up on the tabletop in neat rows as Tōshirō tidied up himself and Urahara watched. The last one she pulled out was Tomoe's. She hadn't seemed to care about the others, but closely inspected Tomoe's for damage before setting it directly in front of her with thinly-disguised reverence; she cautiously set one arm on the table near it in a protective curl. Just like Tōshirō had seen his soldiers who had come from Rukon districts where food was scarce treat their plates in the mess hall. An unconscious measure to prevent theft. Combined with her earlier rage....

Akemi cared about Mami Tomoe more than she let on. Considering also the way she had spoken of Miki in early debriefings, Tōshirō wondered how much of her seeming annoyance with the other girls was self-preserving bravado.

“Please describe everything that happened after our phone contact,” Urahara ordered in a clipped voice.

Tōshirō and Akemi took turns describing the events. When he was reminded of how he had shattered several Soul Gems, Tōshirō choked on his words. As a shinigami, he was supposed to protect souls. His current mission was, in part, to save magical girls' souls. And he had destroyed them. He stared at the table blankly, mind turbulent as Akemi finished the debriefing.

After a minute of quiet, Akemi flatly said, “Do not torture yourself over those Soul Gems. Those magical girls were functionally dead already.”

Tōshirō slowly looked up at her and scrutinized her blank face. “You're jaded.”

“Yes. I am,” she admitted easily.

“You know they are capable of being sent on even if they no longer have bodies.”

“We know *Witches* are capable of being sent on,” Akemi said. “We know nothing of the pure Soul Gem state as yet.”

He looked at her askance and argued, “You know we think it's *possible.*”

“Perhaps. But your actions were reasonable, their destruction was accidental, and our mission succeeded in the end. You are military, are you not? You should be familiar with the concept of collateral damage.”

Tōshirō stared at her. Again, he was reminded of Soifon in a bad way. In his peripheral vision, he noticed that Urahara was studying Akemi closely as she sipped her tea and pretty much ignored them. What he was thinking was a mystery, though.

After a few minutes, Urahara said, “So. I'm thinking we should have Miss Kaname and Miss Miki on hand when we reunite Miss Tomoe's Soul Gem with her body. After they comfort her, we can explain at least the soul crystallization to her and Momoe at the same time. We can save the tie to *Witches* for another time, once they have accepted this first piece of information.”

Akemi pursed her lips and stubbornly refused to look at him, but eventually lifted her chin in assent.

Urahara tilted his head and scrutinized her. “You are withdrawing from us, Miss Akemi,” he said bluntly. When she made no move but to coldly look at him out of the corners of her eyes, he went in for the kill. “You are afraid of how Miss Tomoe will react and are numbing yourself in preparation.”
Akemi’s mouth turned down in a harsh frown and she glared at the shopkeeper. “You think we will be destroying Mami Tomoe's Soul Gem tonight, don't you?”

The magical girl still said nothing, but the arm around Tomoe's Soul Gem twitched. After a long mutual silence wherein Urahara waited for her to react, Akemi forced her face into blankness and looked at Urahara directly. “Do you or do you not wish to proceed with your plan?”

Urahara continued to stare at her. It seemed a silent battle of wills—or calculations. Finally, Urahara inclined his chin and coolly said, “Contact Miss Kaname and Miss Miki. Say Miss Tomoe's out-of-town emergency has been resolved, she has returned from her trip, and has invited all of you over for a Saturday night sleepover to relax and catch her up on schoolwork. That should clue them in that the crisis is over. Once Captain Hitsugaya's wounds have been dressed, he will wait near Miss Tomoe's apartment and intercept them to come here. I will heal him more fully later—I want the girls to see he is injured. You go to your home and retrieve Yoruichi and some cat food to keep up that charade. We will wake Momoe to witness the reunion of Miss Tomoe's soul and body. After they calm, we will discuss things further.”

“Fine,” Akemi said sullenly. It was very obviously not fine, but she cooperated.

An hour's time found Tōshirō leaning against a light pole near Tomoe's apartment complex in casual clothes, idly watching moths flutter in the glow of the lamp as he waited and tried to ignore the ache of his gigai’s bandaged wounds. Soon, Kaname and Miki hurried around a corner, sighted him, and jogged over, school and overnight bags bouncing at their sides.

“You got Mami back?!”

“What about Sōju?!”

Tōshirō pushed off from the pole and gestured for them to follow him. “We recovered Tomoe's Soul Gem intact. Sōju is dead.”

Kaname gasped and Miki looked grimly satisfied. As Tōshirō turned away, Kaname said, “Were you hurt? Your voice sounds...” She trailed off as she couldn't find a word.

“Rough?” Tōshirō ventured.

“Yeah,” said Miki.

Tōshirō sighed. Time to remind them of the violence involved as a deterrent to contracting. “I took several hits in the fight. Most of my wounds are healing fine.” He casually held an arm up and flexed it so the sleeve fell away and revealed clean gauze on his bicep, then stuffed both hands in his pockets. “A chest stab slipped between ribs and nicked a lung. It needs more healing, but it's functional and we thought you should be present when Tomoe wakes up.”

“A lung?” Kaname gasped, holding a hand over her mouth.

“Yeah.” Thank God Urahara had made the gigai more durable than the average human. The lung hadn't actually collapsed. Fighting with a collapsed lung was hell as a spirit; in a fragile human body, he could have lost consciousness for lack of oxygen and been slaughtered.

They walked in silence for another block before Kaname worriedly asked, “And Homura? Is Homura hurt?”
“She's fine now. Healed with her Soul Gem and used a Grief Seed to restore it,” Tōshirō answered. “Pretty sure she's pissed that Sōju stabbed her in the eye again, though. Among other things.” He looked at them over his shoulder as they made choking noises. “Just so you know, Akemi is in a dangerous mood. Tread lightly with her tonight.”

“I— I thought she'd be happy,” Kaname said doubtfully.

Tōshirō sighed heavily and looked forward. “She's pissed Sōju nailed her in the face again. Pissed at Momoe for going into a labyrinth alone then defying an order. Furious at some things we learned about Sōju. Enraged that Sōju had a trump card and got one over on us before we could end her. Probably second-guessing a lot of our moves in the fight for ways we could have saved ourselves trouble—I know I am.” He tilted his head thoughtfully and considered the tentative psychological profile Urahara had composed about Akemi. Maybe the girls would be able to help reel her back in if they could head off the bad reactions. Up the potential sympathy factor. “Pretty sure she's also angry at herself for not killing Sōju earlier, maybe even the first time she saw her—you know, blaming herself for... everything—and afraid Tomoe is going to snap when she wakes up and we explain things to her. So Akemi's withdrawing. Doing that thing I told you— wait, no, I told Tomoe.” Tōshirō sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. Bothersome. “Akemi gets cold and bitter as a defense mechanism. If she says things that anger or offend or disturb you, don't let it get to you. She probably doesn't mean it.” He turned and gave Miki a hard look, knowing from Akemi's reports on previous timelines that she often had knee-jerk reactions. “Don't let her push you away by getting you angry. Out-stubborn her.”

Miki's face went mulish as though she would argue, but she cut her eyes away and looked troubled instead. Tōshirō hoped that was a good sign.

The rest of their journey was completed in uneasy silence. Tōshirō led them through the dark shop and down the long hallway to the living quarters, navigating twists into the hidden corridors with ease until they found the room that had been their impromptu infirmary the other night. Tomoe's body lay in stasis on the only remaining futon. Akemi, Momoe, Urahara, and Tsukabishi were seated at the low table. Momoe was fretfully looking from person to person. Urahara was watching Akemi, who had an arm loosely curved around Tomoe's Soul Gem again as though she hadn't left. At least she had thought to wash off the rest of the blood at home. She was rigid and expressionless as a statue of cold marble.

“Homura!”

Akemi's eyes slid toward them as Kaname took an eager step forward but drew up short. The magical girl's eyes were twin voids. She was there and light years away at the same time. After a hesitation, Kaname firmed her shoulders with determination and marched forward to kneel next to Akemi and hug her. Akemi allowed the contact, but her only other reaction was a slight tilt of her head.

Miki gulped audibly and passed Tōshirō to take a place at Akemi's side. Tōshirō glanced at Urahara and raised a brow in question. Urahara's sharp eyes looked from him to the doorway to Tomoe and back. Tōshirō took a position casually leaning against the door jamb and prepared himself to stop Tomoe if she tried to bolt upon awakening.

Urahara lightly clapped his hands once to get everyone's attention. “Now. What I would like to do is wait to explain everything until Miss Tomoe has repossessed her body.” A flick of his eyes indicated that he did not miss Miki's shudder at the term. “She will likely be quite upset. We will rely on you girls to help comfort her as we explain things.” Kaname nodded firmly. “My plan is to explain things gradually. At least for tonight, please do not explain anything more than myself or
Miss Akemi if you know more on a topic. This will be quite shocking— and I daresay this will be new to Miss Momoe, as well. Will everyone cooperate?"

After various nods and nervous murmuring, Urahara turned to Akemi and held his hand out. Akemi stared at him for a moment, frowned at his hand, picked up Tomoe's Soul Gem, stood, and turned to Kaname instead. She gently took Kaname's hand, pried it open, and tucked Tomoe's Soul Gem into the palm, then folded the fingers closed again.

Akemi looked the startled girl in the eyes. "In the hand. Just like with me. The last thing she will remember is being attacked from behind while surrounded by her worst memories. Expect her to panic at the sudden change. She may fight. Afterward, she will probably cry." She released Kaname's hands and stepped away.

“B-but—Homura! What—?!" Kaname scrambled to her feet, cradling the amber egg to her breast. She looked baffled and distraught. “Why?! I can't— Homura, wait!"

Akemi glanced back over her shoulder. “You can. You are the kindest and most trustworthy person in this building,” she said frankly, as though rendering judgment or stating a universal truth. “Her soul is safest with you. You know what to do.”

“I don't—!"

“You do. Just be yourself.” Then she brushed past Tōshirō as if he wasn't there.

Tōshirō noticed the implied barb at Urahara. A glance at Urahara's carefully neutral face told him the scientist did, as well. Miki's face twitched but she pursed her lips and stayed quiet, eyes sharper than Tōshirō expected of her evaluating every face in quick glances.

“Umm, why— why is Miss Homura leaving?” Momoe asked.

Tōshirō sighed. “She doesn't want to be here if Tomoe reacts badly. She's seen it too many times before.” He sensed that Akemi wasn't far off, though— down the hall, perhaps, though distance was strange in the bowels of the shop. The girl couldn't bear to be near but also couldn't bear to be far. Tōshirō could sympathize with that feeling, but it worried him. He couldn't decide if it was better or worse than her taking off altogether.

Urahara took a deep breath and blew it out in a gust. “Well, Miss Kaname. Whenever you're ready.”

Tōshirō found himself impressed by how quickly the human girl went from gobsmacked, overwhelmed confusion to kind determination. She strode to Tomoe's bedside and looked down at her with lips pursed in thought. Glancing up, she beckoned, "Sayaka."

Miki stood promptly and moved to Tomoe's right side as directed without a peep of objection. At Kaname's murmured, hesitant prompting, each girl knelt and took one of Tomoe's hands in her own. Kaname met Miki's eyes seriously and took a deep breath. “Try to keep hold of her, but don't... be hard. And don't yell.” She wet her lips as Miki nodded, then looked up at Tōshirō and Urahara. “If she— if she fights, you'll— stop her but don't— not— won't hurt her, right?”

Tōshirō nodded with Urahara. Tsukabishi shifted positions and dispelled the green stasis spell with a gesture, then held his hands in a neutral starting pose for kidō, ready to choose a spell on the fly. The big man said, “I can bind her with a spell if necessary. As a last resort. I don't want to make her panic more by waking up already bound.”

Tension eased off Kaname's face and she nodded at Tsukabishi. Another deep, centering breath
later, she was lowering Tomoe's Soul Gem toward her left hand, eyes intent on Tomoe's face. Bit by bit, Tōshirō was beginning to see what had inspired Akemi's devotion to her.

—like smoke, danger!

“Mami?”

Madoka

Mami eyes snapped open light in front someone attacking back— more guns more guns aim behind —

“Wah!”

Sayaka

—fire!

Booms shouts cracks squeals thrust away hands restraining her own clatter of guns falling... beside her?

—turn to see... a pillow? not enough air sight dimming starbursts vision—

“Mami. Slow down. Breathe! Mami, look at me. Mami, you're safe, you're safe, breathe!”

Madoka voice firm not screaming no music no not-water whatwherewhat—

“Breathe, Mami!” Madoka's voice commanded her. Hands grasped her shoulders, thumbs rubbed circles.

Mami inhaled more deeply, screamed, and threw the arms off her, eyes searching everywhere looking for white and purple frills fingers light silver smoke—

No carousels, snow, water, or TV screens, no deadMom deadDad that Witch, no angels, nothing, no threats, just pure adrenaline, walls, ceiling, people, people, Madoka Sayaka that-girl-that-one-time boy-with-magic shop-men... no Homura?! Her ally— friend?— hurt, bleeding, warn behind you!, where—

Hands grasped her own, which she hadn't realized she was holding to her head. They caressed gently, slid under her fingers, pulled her hands away, squeezed again.

“Look at me, Mami.” Madoka. Calm smooth kind voice. “Breathe and look at me.”

Mami gulped air as though surfacing from a dive, eyes finally focusing on Madoka, who smiled at her then opened her mouth wide to mime a slower breath. Mami unconsciously matched her. Copying her rhythm for a few breaths made Mami realize she had been hyperventilating. Nothing made sense, but as her mind downshifted from red alert, Mami was able to tell herself that she would figure it out when she could think properly. She startled at a hand on her shoulder, but calmed when she saw Sayaka smiling at her with tears rolling down her cheeks.
Mami took an extra big breath and gasped, “Akemi—I hurt her—ambush—where—”

“Homura is fine now,” Madoka soothed. “We all got out alive. We're safe. It's over.”

And the tears came.

Mami tugged her hands back and covered her face, crying her relief and shame. She heard rustling cloth-on-cloth and then a hand was stroking her hair, a slight breath of warm-ramblingrose-comforting-Madoka-magic soothing as fresh rose tea radiating from her fingers. Did the girl even know she was using it?

It felt like a long time before she calmed enough to accept Sayaka's hand to sit upright. Mami rubbed her sleeves over her face repeatedly to mop up the tears, noticing for the first time that she was in her school uniform instead of her battle costume. Had she been unconscious? She sniffled as she looked around the room. At the faces of all the people who had seen her at her crying messy worst. Her face burned in embarrassment. Her eyes caught on Hitsugaya, who was leaning on a door jamb and watching her with obvious sympathy. Mami looked down at her lap and wrung her hands. No one said anything for a long time. The silence stretched as though waiting for Mami to make the first move. Mami could not. Could not.

“Ah, my poor floor.”

Mami lifted her chin and blinked owlishly at Mr. Urahara. He was seated at a table at the far end of the room with Mr. Tsukabishi and—litle Nagisa?

“You certainly know how to regain consciousness with a bang,” Mr. Urahara said with lighthearted relief.

Sayaka choked on a laugh that came out as a screech and Hitsugaya made a disapproving click with his tongue. Mami looked down and found several of her ivory rifles scattered on the floorboards. The floorboards which looked like they had been bombed around the pillow her head had been resting on. Charred and splintered beyond repair.

Mami covered her mouth as she gaped, dismissed the rifles, then gasped, “I'm so sorry!”

Mr. Urahara laughed merrily.

“Really! I'm so so sorry! I'll—I'll pay—!”

Mr. Urahara produced a fan from his sleeve and waved it dismissively a few times. “It's nothing, it's nothing! An excuse to redecorate! Like the time I brought someone home for Tessai to heal and they literally blew the roof off my old shop when they woke up, ahahahahaha~”

Mami was going to object again but was surprised by something soft and warm brushing her side. She looked down and found Homura's black cat rubbing at her hip. “Eh? Where did you come from?”

The cat meowed and threw herself on her side, raising her front arm in a blatant demand for a chest scratch. Mami complied automatically.

“Stranger Danger brought her from home when it looked like she'd be camping out here for a few days,” Sayaka said.

“A few days?” Mami looked up. “Was I unconscious?”
“In a way,” Mr. Urahara said, wiggling his fan in a gesture she interpreted as kinda-sorta.

Madoka took her free hand and squeezed it. “Let’s sit at the table and talk about it, okay?”

Mami eased into a seat between Madoka and Sayaka as Mr. Tsukabishi poured her a cup of steaming tea. She gratefully lifted the cup to her lips in shaking hands; strong German chamomile with a touch of honey and cinnamon—the flavor she had told Mr. Tsukabishi was her favorite when he helped her choose a new tea to try yesterday. Or... probably not yesterday, now. Yesterday to her? Whichever. She thanked him weakly and allowed herself to be distracted by Yoruichi climbing into her lap and purring.

“Um... um, are you okay, Miss Mami?” Nagisa asked timidly.

Surprised, Mami stared at her, then recovered. “Oh, I'm feeling much better,” she said with the best reassuring smile she could manage. “What are you doing here?”

“Miss Madoka and Miss Sayaka and Miss Homura helped me on Monday when I was sad after m-mommy died,” Nagisa answered, eyes tearing up.

Mami set down her teacup as her face fell. “Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. Come here.” She opened her arms.

Nagisa crawled around the table and hugged her fiercely, then sat back and rubbed her eyes. “A-and they even came to M-mommy's funeral on Thursday. Then today Miss Ho—”

“Wait. Thursday?” Mami looked around worriedly. Past tense? It was Wednesday last time she checked. “What is today?”

Nagisa looked away.

“Saturday evening,” Hitsugaya's steady voice said behind her.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, startled. “Saturday?” Turning back to everyone at the table, she stammered, “I was out... I was out for three days?!”

“Yes, Miss Tomoe,” Mr. Urahara said gravely.

“What happened to me?” Mami was baffled. “With my magic... Was I badly hurt? How...? My magic should have....” She trailed off and looked at everyone.

Mami did not like the looks traded around the table.

“You were ambushed by Ayase Sōju,” Mr. Urahara said. “She stole your Soul Gem. You instantly lost consciousness. We brought your body here. Miss Akemi has been leading the hunt for your captor from then to this evening, when she and my nephew were able to retrieve you.”

Appalled, Mami clutched her Soul Gem ring to her chest protectively. Her mouth worked silently as words failed her. But— “Retrieved... me? But you said she took my Gem. Not me.”

A smile ghosted across Mr. Urahara's face. “Ah, you're a clever one.” He met her eyes and looked curious. “You're already working it out for yourself, aren't you? You finally have enough information.”

“I don't— I don't understand—” No. No. “Taking my Soul Gem... took my magic, right? A magical girl without magic would... I don't... I'm not my...” No.
“Mami.”

Mami turned to Madoka, who was looking at her with sympathetic regret. “What?”

Madoka took one of her hands. “This is one of the things Homura has wanted to tell you. She wanted to tell you gently, not like this.”

Mami shook her head in denial. No. No.

“You too, Nagisa,” Madoka said gently, reaching out with her other hand. Nagisa latched onto it and watched her in silent dread. Madoka took a steadying breath and said, “You are your Soul Gem. Your Soul Gem is your soul. When the Incubator— Kyubey— when it makes your Soul Gem, it's actually taking your soul out of your body and... um....” She looked around at the other people for help.

“Making it solid,” Mr. Urahara finished. “When crystallized, your soul can still control your body within a one hundred meter radius. It is a focus as the Incubator explains, but the circumstances that make it so are far different from what it implies through lies of omission.”

Mami and Nagisa stared at the shopkeeper in numb horror.

**Lies lies lies lies lies**, Mami's mind echoed. She started shaking her head again.

Which was the lie?

Madoka's warm hands squeezed theirs again, prompting them to look at her. She smiled at them lovingly. “You're still you, no matter where your soul is. Never forget that.”

Fresh tears spilled down Mami's cheeks. “Kyubey— Kyubey did— what?!”

“It tricks girls into a deal with the devil,” Sayaka said lowly.

“Why?!” Mami demanded.

“We know some of its reasons for doing it that way and know what it claims its end goal is, but we have doubts about that,” Urahara said plainly. Vaguely. As if that could ever be a satisfying answer! Seeing her face, he added, “One of its stated purposes is for the body to become far more durable as a measure to have more contractees survive battle. Among other reasons.”

“What reasons?!” Mami demanded as she angrily scrubbed tears from her face. “Tell me!”

“Not until you have had time to process and accept this,” Akemi's voice said quietly behind her.

Mami turned and looked at the door. Akemi stood in the dim hallway just outside it, face impassive. Hitsugaya was eyeing her over his shoulder warily.

“Why not?!”

Akemi pushed her hair over her shoulder. “Too much information at once will overwhelm you. You are already overwhelmed. Hearing something worse so soon—”

“Worse?!” Mami demanded.

Akemi sighed. “Worse. You need to... regain your balance before the next step so you do not crack. Like the other girls. I do not want to fight you.”
Mami felt her chest tighten with contrary anger. “What makes you think I’ll react like those other girls? I’m not them!”

Akemi stared at her, face disturbingly devoid of emotion and eyes far away for a minute before she pursed her lips, then frowned. She did not answer.

“You don’t know me!” Mami added hotly.

The other magical girl’s frown did not change, but her magic snapped taut with bitterness. “Exactly.”

Mr. Urahara drew breath to speak, but Sayaka beat him to it. “She’s trying to protect you, Mami. She doesn’t know you’ll flip out, but she wants to be careful because she doesn’t want the same bad things to happen to you like what happened to the other girls she told flat-out.” Sayaka shifted her gaze to Homura. “Right?”

Akemi reverted to a blank slate and looked away.

Sayaka tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, then looked to Mami. “She’s had to kill other magical girls in self-defense. She once told us—”

Mami’s heart leapt into her throat.

Dizzying magic flickered with outrage. “Miki. Stop.”

Sayaka favored Akemi’s hiss with a nervous but unrepentant glance, then looked to Mami again. “Her first team leader went nuts and broke a teammate’s Soul Gem and tried to break Homura’s—”

“Miki!”

“But another teammate stopped the leader. By breaking her Soul Gem first.”

Nagisa whimpered. Mami gaped in horror. “You— you’re not— that didn’t—” She whirled and looked at Akemi with heartbroken desperation. “That’s not— have— Did you? Did that happen? When you said— when you said you’d been ambushed, did you— k-kill them?! Did— did that leader— your friend ambushed you?!”

Akemi stared blankly, neither confirming or denying, until Hitsugaya sighed and said, “Yes. Her friend was the first one. She’s had to kill others in self-defense after trying to help them. Always after a despairing magical girl either tried to destroy her Soul Gem— or succeeded at destroying others. But sometimes...” He paused, mulled over his phrasing, looked at Akemi out of the corner of his eye, then looked at Mami with direct eye contact. Hitsugaya quietly finished, “Sometimes, the magical girls kill themselves instead. Shatter their own Soul Gems. Often right in front of her. Or even me, once.”

Wide-eyed, Mami looked at Akemi, who met her eyes coldly then looked away yet again. “One must put down rabid dogs, no matter how gentle they were before the illness made them vicious and dangerous,” she said to the wall.

“No matter how loved,” Madoka said slowly.

Akemi did not look at her. “It is the safe and merciful thing to do,” she finished without inflection.

Mami shook. “S-so magical girls are dogs now?! Even your friends?!”
Akemi slanted her eyes at Mami, face hard. “You deliberately misunderstand. This is why I release information slowly: To prevent irrational reactions like yours from cascading into disaster. It does no one any good. Perhaps blissful ignorance would suit your soft sort best.”

Mami clenched her fists and opened her mouth to retort, but Sayaka beat her. The girl loudly blabbed, “Stranger Danger's doing that thing where she's way too damn blunt and rude and mean because she's worried.” She turned to Homura. “Because you care about Mami getting hurt. Like when you snapped at me about Kyōsuke to keep me from being dumb and getting hurt because you knew what it's like to be on the other side of the thing I was gonna do and how bad it could go. And how brutally honest you were when you talked to me 'n Madoka about contracting. You can be a stone-cold bitch when you're worried about someone.”

“Sa—Sayaka, um—” Madoka tried to interrupt, looking like someone trying to figure out how to stop two trains from colliding at full speed.

“You use words to smack sense into people when you think they're gonna do something that gets them hurt.” Sayaka continued. “You don't care about hurting feelings as long as the person you're worrying about stays safe. Mami just doesn't know that's how you roll.” Akemi scowled at her fiercely. Sayaka leaned forward on her elbows, chin cupped in her hands as she looked at Akemi like she was examining a puzzle and unhappy with some of the pieces. “I really like you, Stranger Danger, and I'm blunt, too—”

“And absolutely tactless,” Akemi spat.

“Yup. Got me there. But you can be, too. Anyway, I think I get how you roll. But I really don't think it's healthy.”

Mami noticed that Mr. Urahara was watching Sayaka with intense fascination. She glanced back at Akemi and found the girl fuming, glaring at a wall with her arms crossed. Just in front of her, Hitsugaya was watching her over his shoulders with his eyebrows raised, seemingly waiting for Akemi to reply. She did not.

Way too damn blunt and rude and mean because she's worried, Mami echoed in her head as the room remained tensely silent. A stone-cold bitch when she's worried about someone. She uses words to smack sense into people when she thinks they're gonna do something that gets them hurt. She doesn't care about hurting feelings as long as the person she's worrying about stays safe.

Mami thought of the things Hitsugaya had said to her. She plays her cards close to the vest until she's more certain about a person. She's had a hard time of things and has lost a lot of people. Once burned, twice shy. Roll with it when she gets bitter. Sometimes she gets cold and snappy to try to push people away if she gets spooked by how close she's allowed someone to get to her. There have been too many times when she has met other girls who learned some information and turned on her. Attacked her.

Some people reject painful truths. Violently.

And Akemi herself. I have seen too many magical girls die.

Sayaka's eyes turned to Mami again. “She almost died trying to save you that first night, you know.”

Mami's brain stuttered to a halt. What.

“It was terrible,” Madoka said softly as she rubbed a thumb in soothing circles on Mami's hand.
“She completely ignored the Witch and tried to get your Soul Gem back. But that girl—that girl was—” Words failed her as her shoulders hitched with suppressed sobs.

“Homura was hard on Sōju’s tail from the minute your Gem was stolen,” Sayaka said sharply. “Sōju lit the whole labyrinth on fire. It looked like Homura got close enough to grab your Soul Gem, but then Sōju slashed her throat open. There was blood everywhere. Then Sōju stabbed Stranger Danger straight through her face. All the way through her head. But she did her glowy purple magic thing and kept fighting and trying to get your Soul Gem back and wrecked Sōju as bad as Sōju hurt her. But things got... really messy and dangerous because Madoka and me lost your shield and got attacked by the Witch and Familiars. Sōju did... something really... really....” Her voice faltered and faded, face broken.

“Atrocious,” Mr. Urahara said softly.

Sayaka glanced at him gratefully. “To me and ran away. A weird... kinda spell, I guess? Homura had to— had to attack me to help me. I— I was like a rabid dog. I was gonna kill—” A gulp stalled her speech, but she forced herself to continue. “She had to— she had to— put me out of my—” Her lip quivered. “She didn't want to h-hurt me. I know 'cause I remember her fa-ace. Sh-she was crying.” Tears spilled from her own eyes.

Akemi startled, but the mask of indifference slammed back onto her face and she looked away again as everyone looked at her.

“But she did what she had to and I'm not mad at her,” Sayaka continued, trying to ignore her own shaking, fists clenched on the table. “Oh, and Hitsugaya came at the end and helped. Then Magic Man and Tessai took care of us.” She looked down. “They brought us all here and Homura—Homura looked— d-dead. And her Soul Gem was so dirty it was almost black and she almost tur—” She stopped herself. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she ignored them and looked up at Mami fiercely. “When— when she finally recovered, though, she was so angry and all she could think of was getting your Gem back. Getting you back. She and Hitsugaya skipped school and wandered around hunting Sōju for days. They found her tonight and— and—”

“We fought her,” Hitsugaya said, picking up the thread of the conversation, much to Sayaka's relief. “It got pretty brutal. Sōju used dirty tricks.”

Nagisa made small sounds as though trying to speak. When everyone looked at her, she was looking at Mami. “M-miss Homura and Mr. Hitsugaya saved me and Daddy and got hurt but they got your Gem back a-and fought really hard to save the other Soul Gems, too.”

“Other Soul Gems?” Mami said blankly.

“Miss Akemi and my nephew recovered forty-three Soul Gems in addition to your own,” Mr. Urahara said gravely. “Sōju was a magical girl hunter. Essentially a magical girl serial killer-kidnapper. She collected Soul Gems as trophies.”

Mami felt sick. Not only had Kyubey lied to her... in a way? ...but she had been hunted by one of her own.

...Like Akemi had been ambushed or maybe hunted?

“We're getting a bit off topic, or ahead of ourselves,” Hitsugaya said in a businesslike manner. “The main thrust of it is Akemi is trying to help you, Tomoe. Graceless as she is at it.” He ignored his friend's glare. “And we're cooperating with her because she has the most experience with this kind of situation. Please be patient with her methods.”
“You... all know what she's keeping from me?” Mami asked.

“Except for Miss Momoe, yes.” Mr. Urahara said frankly. “We want to be gentle with her, too.”

“I— I want to know,” Nagisa said hesitantly. “I want— I want to be angry. Angry is better than....”
She made vague hand gestures and looked down, tears in her eyes.

Madoka let go of Mami's hand and hugged Nagisa. “We'll tell you soon. Let this part settle first.”
Nagisa nodded and cuddled into Madoka.

“Kyubey should have told us,” Mami said quietly.

“Cueball should tell girls a lot of things,” Sayaka sneered. “But then a lot wouldn't contract. Little creep's like a magical used car salesman.”

Mami's bitter laugh surprised her. She covered her mouth with a hand and stared at her teacup.

After a minute of thought, she took a breath and asked, “What was his— its— real name, again?”

“Incubator,” Mr. Urahara said solemnly.

“Incubator,” Mami echoed. She would have to use that name now. It was like her friendly mascot Kyubey had died and been replaced by a swindler. Except the swindler had been there all along. New tears sprung to her eyes. Her most steadfast companion since her parents died was using her somehow. All the good times were lies. How naive was she, really? A memory rose unbidden: Her mother closing a storybook, raising a finger, winking, and announcing the moral of the story to her when she was six-ish: Be careful what you wish for.

I was stupid, Mami thought. So stupid.

Everyone stayed respectfully silent as she calmed herself and thought. Eventually, she took a deep breath and asked, “So what happened after I... was knocked out?”

“Let's get more comfortable,” Madoka declared. She shifted closer to the table, tugging Mami and Nagisa with her, and glanced over her shoulder. “Homura, Hitsugaya, come sit.”

Akemi looked sulky as Mami dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose with a tissue given to her by Mr. Tsukabishi. “I am fine here.”

Madoka frowned. “Please don't do this, Homura,” she said in a disappointed tone. Raising an arm and scooting closer to Mami to make a space between herself and Nagisa, she beckoned and said, “I want you to sit by me, Homura. Please?”

Akemi huffed and grudgingly stepped forward. Mami wanted to know why Hitsugaya looked so amused as he stepped up behind his friend. She wondered if he had been back there to keep an eye on Akemi. No. Akemi hadn't been in the room. Mami scanned the room again now that she was more coherent, plotted everyone's positions when she woke... Hitsugaya had been blocking the exit and watching her. She was going to have to think about what that implied later.

The story Madoka and Sayaka laid out about what had happened in the carousel labyrinth made Mami sick. If she had been in top form, Sōju could never have cast whatever horrible monster spell she had on Sayaka. She felt like she had failed them. “I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have let those TV screens... I shouldn't have let them affect me so.”

Akemi sighed and spoke for the first time in the story. “That is not your fault. You were taken by
“surprise by your worst memories.” She crossed her arms and bitterly said, “I should have warned you when I spoke to you after I destroyed her Familiar's labyrinth.”

“She?” Mami asked, rubbing a tear away with a knuckle.


“Oh.” That was... odd. She called Kyubey— the Incubator— it and Witches she and her. It was backwards from what Mami was used to. Something else to ponder. Mami set it aside and looked around. “What happened after the labyrinth?”

The way they had searched for days touched her. Hitsugaya took over the narrative when they got to the other labyrinth and everyone paid closer attention— if Mami understood correctly, no one but Hitsugaya and Homura knew everything that had happened within. Nagisa's explanation of how she got there broke Mami's heart. Then Hitsugaya's description of the encounter with Sōju chilled Mami's blood.

Into the silence that followed the revelation of sister Gems, Mr. Urahara pondered, “Miss Akemi. When Sōju cobbled herself together in the carousel, you said you saw white magic instead of red, correct? That her costume was both red and white? And that she healed far more rapidly than you expected?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Urahara tilted his head in thought and scratched his chin. “I wonder if that was a function of having two Soul Gems healing their shared body at the same time.”

Mami found herself blinking and considering that— the concept of Soul Gems being separate and attaching to bodies was still new and nauseating to her, but it made sense. She looked to Akemi’s speculative face. “It... sounds plausible,” Mami slowly said to her.

“Yes,” Akemi murmured.

They looked back to Mr. Urahara, who was staring intensely at the air just above his fingers as they drummed the table. They let him think until he gestured for Hitsugaya to continue. Mami breathlessly listened to his description of Luca's madness and hostage-taking. Her heart cracked with his voice when he told of how he had accidentally broken other Soul Gems. Then he got to Nagisa's reappearance.

“Never do anything like that ever again,” Akemi suddenly interrupted the story to hiss at Nagisa next to her. “When you are told to get out of a battle, you get out of that battle.”

Nagisa looked frightened. “B-but—”

“We could have killed you by accident, thinking you were safe when you were behind the enemy,” Akemi snarled. “The enemy could have taken you hostage. You could have destroyed a plan of attack. You—”

“Akemi!” Hitsugaya snapped.

“Y-you needed my help!” Nagisa cried. “I he-helped!”

Everyone gaped at Akemi's flash-bang anger. “We had it under control! We had a plan! We are lucky your reappearance did not defeat it. This time. Next time may be different. Never do that again!”
“I’m s-sor-ry,” Nagisa sobbed.

“You—!”

**Boom!**

“Hey! Knock it off, Homura!” Sayaka finally snarled, slamming her hands on the table. “She gets it! You don't have to bite her head off!”

All of Akemi's magic seemed to abruptly retract into her and leave a cold void in the room as her face went pale and haunted then horribly, utterly blank. Her eyes were wide and empty, unfocused though she was looking at Sayaka. Flat violet turned to Mami. And stared. And turned to Nagisa. And stared. And Mami. And stared. Like she was seeing ghosts in a nightmare.

Disturbed, Mami reached for her. “Miss Ake—”

Akemi scrambled to her feet disjointedly and charged out of the room without a word.

Everyone stared. Sayaka blurted, “What the hell was that?”

Mr. Urahara sighed, took off his hat, and tiredly scrubbed a hand through his sandy hair. “That was Miss Akemi substituting anger for fear and concern, then having a flashback.” He looked at Nagisa and gently said, “I apologize. She is concerned for your safety and **terrible** at expressing it. She had a good point but she attacked you unnecessarily. I will talk with her about that later.” Once Nagisa tearfully nodded at him, he looked around at everyone. “Please **never** use that figure of speech around Miss Akemi.”

“What?” Madoka asked blankly, arms wrapped around Nagisa.

*Bite her head off,*” Mr. Urahara explained. “**Do. Not.** Say that around her.”

“Why not?” Sayaka snapped, face defiant. “That's what she was doing!”

Hitsugaya sighed and carefully said, “Akemi saw a Witch literally bite the head off one of her original team members then eat the body.” He gave Mami a contemplative glance, then softly added, “That girl was blonde. Like you, Tomoe.”

Nagisa cried harder as the older girls all reacted with silent horror.

“When I was in the labyrinth, I saw... Well, it was all really jumbled, but I saw the TV screens,” Sayaka babbled, eyes wide and face pale. “After Homura came. There were lots of screens with magical girls dying. And getting ripped up and burned and— I think. I wasn't super close. And Gems exploding. And blood and Witches. And— and—” She dragged her hands down her face. “Stranger Danger said they showed Mami's worst memories... before. Were those— were those hers?”

“Most likely,” Mr. Urahara sighed. “She has extensive emotional scars. She has seen—”

“—Too many magical girls die,” Mami said with him, voice distant as she considered her reflection in the surface of her cold tea. She was thinking of every encounter she had ever had with Akemi. “I think... she's starting to make sense to me,” she murmured. Mami looked up at Mr. Urahara from under her bangs. “She blames Kyu— the Incubator for it all, doesn't she?”

Mr. Urahara's mouth curled in a grim smile; he seemed to be pleased that she understood. “Can you fault her for it?”
Mami looked down again. “No.”

After another awkward silence, Madoka said, “Should— should someone go after Homura?”

“I'll see if she's still in the building,” Mr. Tsukabishi said as he stood. “If she left, we may not find her unless she allows herself to be found, though.”

“If she's here, I think the only person who could get near her anytime soon would be Miss Kaname,” Mr. Urahara began.

“Eh? Me?!” Madoka blurted, pointing at herself in surprise.

Sayaka gave her a brittle smile. “Dunno if you've noticed, but she actually listens to you when she's messed up.”

Madoka looked around at the others who had agreement written all over their faces. “W-what? But — Me?”

Mr. Urahara chuckled, then continued. “If she left the shop... well, if she's not back in an hour, we'll have to track her down and haul her back.”

“She's tricky,” Hitsugaya warned.

Mr. Urahara smiled tightly. “You say that as though I am not tricky myself.”

Hitsugaya snorted halfheartedly.

After a deep breath, Mr. Urahara smacked his fan on the table. “And then you beat Sōju with teamwork, defeated the Witch, and woke Sleeping Beauty. The End. Now that we're all up to speed and it's late, I think you girls need to rest. I'll have Tessai bring you some food. Then I want you all to sleep. Come morning, we'll deal with Mr. Momoe. Tōshirō, I'll hit you with some more healing before I send you out after Miss Akemi.”

“Joy,” Hitsugaya deadpanned.

Mami thought he didn't actually seem annoyed. He had the wrong kind of frown.

“Then I have some things to do.” Mr. Urahara did that vague wave of his fan again. It felt like so long ago that he had done it before the big debriefing. “I want Miss Kaname and Miss Miki to go home early tomorrow. They've been away from home with weak excuses too often this week. We don't need their parents worried.”

Mami watched with interest as Mr. Urahara healed Hitsugaya's arm while they waited for Mr. Tsukabishi to bring food. Nagisa crawled into her lap, so Mami held her loosely as the girl sniffled. Madoka and Sayaka bracketed them in on either side. Hitsugaya gave them weird looks.

“Wow,” Sayaka said blankly when Hitsugaya's uncle unbuttoned his shirt to poke at a bandaged chest wound with a glowing hand, not bothering to unwrap the bandage.

“What?” the boy finally snapped. He coughed roughly.

“Ahhh, your lung,” Mr. Urahara moaned. “Don't ruin my work!”

“Heal faster, then,” Hitsugaya groused.

“You have muscles,” Sayaka observed. Loudly. Everyone looked at her. “I know guys who'd kill
for abs like that.”

Hitsugaya flushed and looked away. Mami and Madoka gave her death glares for lack of tact, blushing themselves. Sayaka squawked and slapped a hand over her mouth as her brain registered what she had said. Mami turned back to Hitsugaya, who seemed more concerned—irritated—that his uncle was giggling at him.

“If you tell Matsumoto or K-ikyo, I will gut you,” Hitsugaya snarled at his uncle.

“Worth it,” Mr. Urahara immediately declared.

They were deep in familial bickering when Mr. Tsukabishi brought the girls their food. Even when they left, the mood was a bit lighter in their wake.

Meanwhile in Asunaro, a real girl who believed she was a puppet thought she got revenge on a selfish Gepetto, but she was actually gloating over the death of her Blue Fairy.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA
ROBERTA: The Birdcage Witch. Her nature is rage. She continuously stamps her feet inside her cage, directing her rage at those who do not respond to her. This Witch is extremely fond of alcohol, and her minions are also easy to burn.

Minion: GOTZ
The Birdcage Witch's minion. His duty is to act with frivolous indiscretion. These birds that swarm together are idiotic men. Even though they are total good-for-nothings, they try to attract her attention by swarming around her feet and attempting to woo her. They are nothing more than objects of disgust to the Witch.

A/N: So I have just realized that Witch Kirsten is basically a digital Dementor.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Tōshirō ate slowly while seated on a veranda facing the property's inner courtyard, koi pond, and pigeon coop. Akemi hadn't been in the shop. Whether or not it was consciously done, they had felt Akemi pull her reiatsu into herself and conceal her existence with the skill of an experienced lieutenant before she stormed off. Finding her manually would be a pain. Urahara had said to leave her to cool down for an hour while he tried to track her between phone calls. He didn't say what kind of calls, just whisked away into his labs. Great.

So Tōshirō bided his time and watched the moon. He reflected that things had gone better than expected—well, mostly—until Akemi got surprised—spooked—by protectiveness for a magical girl she'd never met before and Miki opened her damn fool mouth and said the absolute worst thing she could possibly say in the company of Tomoe. He had thought the upset magical girl they might have to hunt down would be Tomoe, not Akemi.

Not that he could blame Akemi. His breath still hitched sometimes if he approached his sister from behind at a certain angle, briefly reminding him of how he had been tricked into stabbing her in the back during the Winter War. There had been a lot of running off to his training cave to gather his wits after a flashback in the first several months after Aizen's defeat, especially if he encountered the word backstabber. So Tōshirō didn't begrudge Akemi her retreat. But Hyōrinmaru had been with him to help him work out the mental knots when he had been in the same place. Akemi didn't have that. It worried him.

Urahara clattered out onto the veranda in his geta an hour or so later. He stood solemnly as Tōshirō tilted his head and eyed him.

“I've tracked her down.”

“How far?”

“Surprisingly, just downtown. At an altitude that matches the tallest building for kilometers.”

Tōshirō turned to look south, but the wall of the compound blocked any view. “Tch. So she likes
“high spaces, huh?” he mused.

“So it seems,” Urahara agreed. “Go talk her into coming back here. I have a plan.”

Raising a brow, Tōshirō said, “Me?”

With a self-deprecating smile, Urahara drily said, “I don't know if you noticed, but to put it plainly: She doesn't trust me right now.”

Tōshirō rolled his eyes, looked away, and said, “I can't imagine why.”

“I am quite aware it's because I unexpectedly invaded her space and am vague with her about my plans and actions.” Urahara looked up at the moon pensively. “I wonder if she has worked out that I'm being as cautious with information with her as she has been with Miss Tomoe.”

“Maybe,” Tōshirō said. “Even so, she'll probably still hate it.”

“Indeed.” Urahara laughed lightly; fondly, he added, “She's quite the fierce little spitfire under the surface, isn't she? Fights to the death to keep control.”

“Reminds me of you,” Yoruichi Shihoin's human female voice said smugly.

“Pardon?” Urahara said as he and Tōshirō both turned to see her pad out of the dark of a hall, barefoot.

And naked.

Tōshirō screeched and whirled away, face aflame.

“Why the hell are you naked when you transform?!”

“Because it's funny,” Shihoin said with a smirk in her voice.

He twitched in outrage. “Do you mean to say you don't have to be naked when you transform?!”

Shihoin laughed. “Nope. It's just fun this way.” She tried to step within his line of sight. Tōshirō reeled away and covered his eyes, making her laugh more. “Ahahaha, such a modest boy!”

“He was quite modest when the girls were admiring his figure earlier, too,” Urahara trilled like an old gossip.

Tōshirō squawked his outrage. “They weren't admiring—!”

“I saw, I saw! Adorable! Is it on the surveillance tape?”

Urahara giggled behind his fan. That meant yes.

“You're worse than Matsumoto!” Tōshirō hissed.

Shihoin and Urahara merrily laughed like the trickster devils they were.

“Gimme your haori, Kisuke. Before we have to haul Captain Hitsugaya to Tessai to be revived.”

Tōshirō shuddered. He had heard stories.

“The girls?” Urahara asked over the rustling of cloth.
“Asleep. Passed right out, poor kids.” Her voice mockingly high, she sang, “I'm decent now, Caaaptain!”

Tōshirō swore to God Matsumoto must have taught her that shameless crow of triumph-masquerading-as-innocence. It was pitch perfect. He shuddered again. And here he thought this mission would be a break from Matsumoto's antics.

“Now, don't play ignorant and try to divert me, Kisuke,” Shihoin drawled. She crossed her arms but lifted one hand to lazily point at Urahara. “You and Akemi are locking horns because neither of you likes being out of control of a situation. You both hate being out of the loop. You both want to know everydamnthing, but you both hoard knowledge like magpies with shiny objects. Neither of you likes sharing your toys.”

“Guilty as charged, I suppose,” Urahara said wryly.

Tōshirō kneaded the space above his eyes, trying to stave off a headache. “She's young and hurt and not as cooperative as we really need her to be, but she is a vital ally. You need to include her more if you don't want her to completely ignore us if she turns time back again.”

“When.”

“What?”

“No if,” Urahara said. “When.”

Tōshirō eyed him suspiciously. “All told, so far this time around has been... wild, but generally better than previous times she's described. Kaname is horrified by the prospect of contracting and with all of us around, seems likely to survive past the turnback point. Miki isn't... self-destructive this time. Seems very sharp, actually. Tomoe hasn't lost her mind. Yet.”

“Yes.”

“And you still think she'll go back?”

“Yes.”

“Based on what?”

“Oh, a variety of things,” Urahara said vaguely, waving his fan. He yelped as Shihoin kicked his shin.

“You're doing it again, jackass,” the woman snapped.

“Does it matter, though?” When they glared at him, Urahara sighed and said, “Various character assessments and observations. Interactions. Reactions. Since last time's apocalypse, I think Akemi understands that the only way Kaname will be safe is if we completely eliminate the Incubator. There's no way we can learn enough to accomplish that in the next three weeks. If she stays beyond the turnback point, we have no idea whether we'll lose the strategic advantage of her time travel. Akemi just hasn't acknowledged it yet.”

“Knowing her, she'll fight it to the end,” Shihoin muttered. “Especially with how she's let herself get attached to Miki again. Ugh, and I pushed her toward that.” She rubbed her face and heavily said, “I'm concerned for her mental health. Now, let alone if she erases all of this and goes back. She already has, what, at least four extra years of the same set of things happening behind her? And this loop has been so different that it's rocking her world. Strange as it seems, the sheer
sameness could have become a kind of safety—stability. We've helped her shatter that without really thinking of the effect it would have on her. It worries me.”

Urahara plopped down on the edge of the veranda with a gusty sigh of his own and swung his legs. “I wouldn't say I hadn't thought of how it would affect her. Our original plans were moving nicely before the Sōju factor. But we got lulled into trusting the sameness that Miss Akemi had grown accustomed to and it bit us.” He rubbed his face and sounded frustrated. “As useful as the items recovered from Sōju will be for my research, I'm quite furious with her for appearing. Given the little psychopath's newness, I'm making an educated guess that the Incubator aimed Sōju at Akemi somehow. As a bonus, this all stalled my research for days.” His mouth turned down sourly. “Akemi was progressing so well until that spanner got tossed in the works. That brat took a hammer to so many of Akemi's vulnerabilities that I lost count. And we probably don't know the full extent. So much progress—” he gestured with his hand as though scattering smoke—“and back almost to where we started in the last timeline.”

“No taser this time,” Shihoin said with dark humor.

Urahara barked out a laugh. They were quiet for a time, absorbing moonlight and considering their own thoughts.

“So what's your idea for evening her keel again, Mr. Know-it-all?” Shihoin finally drawled.

Urahara flopped on his back on the wooden slats, folded his hands behind his head, and smiled up at them. “The same thing that broke the ice last time, of course: The Kurosaki Effect.”

Tōshirō did find Akemi perched atop the tallest tower in the city, which was a pain to access in gigai. The tower was ridiculously and pointlessly tall, really, but humans were the sort to build something ridiculous just to prove they could. When Akemi was in sight, Tōshirō loosed his control on his reiatsu as a warning he was coming. She didn't react. At least she didn't stop time and disappear.

He dropped to the metal catwalks beneath radio dishes and antennas, tucked his hands in his pockets, and carefully approached the girl. She was sitting with her back to a thick column, legs held tightly against her chest with her arms curled around her shins, chin neatly tucked into the space between her knees. The wind whipped her hair around, but she didn't seem to care. He had expected tears or tear tracks, but Akemi's face was dry and her face stony. She didn't react to his presence.

Tōshirō looked out at the twinkling fairy lights of the city. “Nice view.”

Nothing. Long silence.

He looked up at the spire that continued far above them. “The living build the strangest tall things.”

Nothing. Long silence.

“From this high up, the city lights kind of look like stars.”

“Stars are better.” Dull and barely audible. Well, it was something.
“You like stars?”

“Yes.”

“So do I. Though I prefer the moon.”

“Mm.”

More silence. Tōshirō shifted uncomfortably. “Mind if I sit with you?”

Akemi just shrugged, so Tōshirō sat beside her and inspected stars and city lights. He waited her out.

“They hate me now,” Akemi said dully to the open air in front of her.

Not a question. Stated as fact. She expected nothing else.

“They do not,” Tōshirō said without looking at her. If she could speak better without making eye contact, he wasn't going to spoil it.

“I am strange, angry, and do not act their age.”

He didn't bother arguing that, because it was obviously true. Denying it would insult her intelligence. “They're understanding why, though. We're helping them understand why, as much as we can without giving everything away. So they're far more worried for you than angry.”

“Hmm.” Doubtful.

“I won't lie and say you didn't hurt Momoe, because you did. But she understands the intent behind it. More than I would expect of someone so young, actually. Forgives it.”

“That does not erase what I said.”

Tōshirō was glad that she understood that. Too many people did not understand that good intentions and forgiveness were not a free pass from consequences. He hadn't particularly expected petulance from her in the first place, though. “No, it doesn't. But it tempers the blow. They're better prepared to call you out more productively. You recognize that you were in the wrong. And you'll rein yourself in better next time.”

“Will I?” Akemi asked darkly.

He tilted his head back and looked for the North Star. “I have faith that you will.”

Akemi snorted derisively. “Faith.”

“You could use some.”

“Faith in what?” Her voice dripped with scorn. “Some kind of god?”

“You yourself, for starters. Your allies, for another.”

Silence.

Tōshirō wondered if Venus was visible at that hour and let his gaze idly wander the sky looking for it while Akemi mulled that over.
“How am I to have faith in myself or my allies if those allies treat me like a child?”

Tōshirō laughed, low and bitter. He couldn't help it even though he could sense the cooled embers of her anger warming again. It seemed they had more in common than he had realized. “Have you seen what I look like lately? I still get treated like a child at times. By my fellow captains, even. My equals. I finally had a bit of a growth spurt in the last two years so I don't look like an elementary-schooler anymore, but I still don't look like a forty-seven-year veteran shinigami twenty-six years into his captaincy over a division of soldiers. I look like a fourteen-year-old captain of a soccer team. And a lot of people look at me and treat me that way when they know better.”

Movement. He had actually surprised her into turning to look at him. He kept his eyes on the sky. Hyōrinmaru helped him order his thoughts. Getting deeply personal was something he usually had to be dragged into kicking and screaming, but if there was anything he could contribute to Homura Akemi's strategically crucial stability, he'd gladly give it. No matter how uncomfortable it made him.

“My lieutenant had faith in me long before I had faith in myself,” Tōshirō said slowly, turning the words in his mouth as he turned them in his thoughts. “The circumstances under which I took the haori were... distressing and unconventional. I was very young, especially for a shinigami. The responsibility may have crushed me without my lieutenant. Matsumoto is terrible at paperwork and an unrepentant slacker but she is frighteningly motivational, protective, and loyal. Having someone that cheerful and enthusiastic pour endless faith in you... it goes a long way. Then when they finally kick some sense into you and demand you have faith in yourself... well.” A nostalgic smile curled his lips as he remembered a day some twenty-four years back that involved an after-action debriefing gone miserable and Matsumoto with her hands on her hips, yelling at him in the same tone she had the day she found him in the market near his childhood home and scolded him for not standing up for himself.

Tōshirō turned to look at Akemi directly. She was looking at him like he was a puzzle. He gave her a wry smirk. “I'm not cheerful or enthusiastic like my lieutenant. But I have faith in you. That you will do everything in your power to improve, to study yourself, to be more stable. To protect Kaname. And I demand that you have faith in yourself.”

She stared at him, lips parted in surprise. Completely still.

“For what it's worth, Shihoin and I are getting on Urahara's case about making you a more equal partner,” Tōshirō went on. “But you also have to realize that people like you and I— people who have more life experience than we appear to have— also do have some tie to the age of our bodies. Our physical brains and their structure match our physical bodies, even though the demands we make of them are far more... mature. People like you and I constantly perform a mental balancing act. It helps to understand what you're balancing instead of denying it. That way, you can work with it enough for it to turn into an advantage. Even if it's just an avenue to release your stress. Getting over myself enough to stop denying that part of me was hard. Still can be. The more you learn how to do so, the more productive you'll be.”

Akemi tilted her head and looked at him speculatively for a long while, frowning in distaste. She turned her face back to the sky, so he did as well.

“A powerful shinigami captain whose life is composed of responsibilities deliberately acts like a child?”

“Indulges the childlike side, I guess,” Tōshirō said thoughtfully. He was uncomfortable talking like this with anyone but Karin, but... well, Akemi seemed to be in a similar place as he used to be. “I walk around the office in just my tabi sometimes. Sit on rooftops to watch the sky and sunset like I
did with my sister when we were little. Get into watermelon seed spitting contests with her. I make time to visit Karin and play soccer or video games. That... outlet has actually proven to be vital in the last couple years.” He scrubbed at his hair and considered his point. “I have to behave more seriously than many of my colleagues to counter my young appearance and cultivate a professional reputation. It works. But I was also more uptight about it before I befriended Karin. I would, frankly, overreact to perceived slights to my capability to lead, fight, strategize. I still struggle with it. Karin says Yuzu is the people person but she zeroed right in on that and addressed it with as little tact as Miki used tonight.” He did not elaborate that Karin had broached the subject by declaring out of the blue that we really need to talk about this stick up your ass, Tōsh.

“I do not understand Miki this time,” Akemi said.

Tōshirō decided not to call her out for diverting the conversation. Let her think on it. “How so?”

“I always knew she was perceptive before she contracted and she usually is suspicious of me from an early point. I was used to that attention. Yet she seems to pay more attention to me when she is not suspicious.”

“Less initial bias,” Tōshirō said. “I think she admires you this time. It's making her reason you out and actively try to see your actions positively. So maybe a kind of confirmation bias, as before, but for good instead of ill this time.”

“Hmm.”

After an easy silence between them, Tōshirō said, “Come back to the shop with me? Urahara has a surprise for you.”

“Tōshirō rose and watched her, curious about her method of movement from so high. Interestingly, she was moving down at an angle in broad jumps off nothing, violet reiatsu flashing at her feet with each leap. It was similar to several flash stepping techniques he had seen, but especially Bringer Light. Urahara would probably like to know.

Taking a deep breath, Tōshirō forced his gigai into shunpo to catch up with her and bound across the rooftops toward Asunaro.

Ichigo leaned against Urahara's giant reishi henkan-ki, which he still insisted looked like a stone window frame covered in haphazardly placed newspapers. He had his arms crossed and was drumming the fingers of one hand against his bicep, forcibly restraining his instinct to charge outside Urahara's freaky duplicate of the training room under his original shop and find Homura himself. Urahara, Yoruichi, and Tessai would probably bind him with ten kinds of kidō if he tried, though, citing not wanting to let the goddamn Incubator sense his reiatsu.

Fucking monster. Ichigo would gladly turn his Hollow loose on the thing. Things. Whatever.
Yesssss, please, the Hollow hissed eagerly as a child wanting to play with a toy. It was probably the first time Ichigo had ever heard him use the word please. Without sarcasm, anyway.

Eventually, Ichigo thought at him. Hold your horses.

The Hollow projected frustrated, bloodthirsty impatience, but Zangetsu touched his presence and he settled back, purring and fantasizing about extreme violence. Ichigo left him to it and wondered what was taking Tōshirō so damn long to bring Homura back.

“You're really worried about this girl, aren't you?”

Ichigo glanced over at Rangiku Matsumoto, who was leaning on the other column of the reishi henkan-ki in a far more relaxed pose. One hand idly twirled a strand of strawberry blond hair around and between fingers, pale blue-gray eyes solemn despite her teasing tone. She hadn't been fully briefed, but had apparently been told enough to take the whole thing seriously.

“She's been through hell this week. Nearly died. I need to take her home,” Ichigo said in a clipped tone.

“Oooh, home?” Matsumoto looked curious as a cat, her lips curled in the satisfied smile of a busybody encountering juicy gossip. Those eyes were calculating, though. “Not your house, just home?”

He looked away from her, reminding himself that she was sharper and more observant than she presented herself. Like his father. Birds of a feather, these Tenth Division officers. “Well, my old man has declared her an honorary Kurosaki. She's like Karin and Yuzu. I need to protect her.” He scowled. “Urahara's not letting me though. Pisses me off.”

“Big~ brother~ com~ plex~,” Rangiku sang.

Ichigo rolled his eyes.

Any retort was cut off by the arrival of Tōshirō and Homura's reiatsu. They descended into the training room behind Urahara. Homura moved warily, but Tōshirō briskly strode up and nodded greetings at them. “Matsumoto. Kurosaki.”

“I missed you, Caaaptaaain!” Rangiku said loudly, clutching her hands in a dramatic pose next to one cheek. Ichigo had expected her to make one of her sudden rushes to hug her captain, but she kept to her place with an eye on Homura's suspicion.

“It hasn't even been a week, Matsumoto.”

“But do you know how much paperwork builds up in a week?”

“Yes. I do,” Tōshirō said flatly. “You've been doing it, have you not?”

Rangiku laughed nervously. Tōshirō's brow twitched in anger.

“I missed you, Caaaptaaain!” Rangiku said loudly, clutching her hands in a dramatic pose next to one cheek. Ichigo had expected her to make one of her sudden rushes to hug her captain, but she kept to her place with an eye on Homura's suspicion.

“It hasn't even been a week, Matsumoto.”

“Lieutenant Rangiku Matsumoto, I'd like to introduce you to Miss Homura Akemi,” Urahara interrupted loudly before the officers of the Tenth Division could get into one of their signature screaming matches.

Rangiku leapt on the change of subject and happily waved at Homura, who was hanging back by a boulder, watching them intensely. The lieutenant waved cheerfully. “Hello, Homura! Nice t—”
“Akemi,” Homura said coldly.

Rangiku, not missing a beat, laughed and looked at Tōshirō. “Is she your long-lost sister, Captain?” She giggled at the pained look on Tōshirō's face and turned back to the magical girl. “Okay A~ke~mi~! You can just call me Rangiku, though! Don't bother with the rank— I'm not stuffy like Captain!”

Ichigo gave a short laugh at Tōshirō's expense, remembering the months of It's Captain Hitsugaya to you! before the guy had mostly given up on him, but he kept his eyes on Homura. She was distant, somehow not present even though she was standing in the same room. Her expression was shuttered and unreadable. Considering the sobbing description Inoue had given of her Soul Gem and injuries when she had returned from her healing trip and Urahara's extensive reports about the events since, the term that kept crossing Ichigo's mind was shell shock.

Note to self: Tōshirō owed him for marching out of the senkaimon in their apartment on Wednesday night and nailing him with that trippy sedation kidō to knock him out before he could even ask what had happened.

“Hey, Stopwatch,” Ichigo said gently.

Homura blinked owlishly at him.

“Come on, Homura.” He held out a hand. “Let's go home.”

She tilted her head and continued to stare at him, but did not correct his use of her name. That was a good sign. He hoped. Her eyes wandered to the gate behind him without returning the greeting.

Ichigo gestured at the weird thing with a casual wave. “This is a gate between worlds. Gramps gave special permission for you to use it to come to Karakura instead of taking the train.”

“Gramps?!” Tōshirō looked scandalized. “You refer to Captain-Commander Yamamoto as Gramps?!”

“Yeah. So?”

Tōshirō was going to have an aneurysm one of these days.

Homura moved closer, watching the gate as though something might pop out from the bright cloudiness within and grab her. “How does it work?”

Urahara looked at Ichigo, not moving any closer than he had been at his introduction. Ichigo wondered why he was staying the hell out of things. The scientist was usually in his element explaining things like this. He'd have to text Tōshirō later; for now, Urahara seemed to want Ichigo to do the talking.

Ichigo scratched his temple. “I dunno the technical sciencey stuff, but it's a door to a path through an in-between dimension from the World of the Living to Soul Society. Usually, it's just called a senkaimon and only spirits go through it, but this big ugly thing called a reishi henkan-ki lets living bodies like ours make the trip. Somehow. With magic spirit science.”

Urahara had specifically told him to come in his human body in casual clothes instead of spirit form in his shihakusho. Ichigo had an inkling of why when he caught Homura repeatedly eyeing Rangiku's uniform and the Tenth Division insignia on the lieutenant badge at its waist: They were cutting through the land of the shinigami full of people in shinigami uniforms and Ichigo would bet his badge that Urahara wanted to symbolically ram home that Ichigo Kurosaki is not part of the
military structure in Seireitei, just an ally with comparable powers and irreverence for their formalities.

It pissed Ichigo off that he had to figure it out himself on the fly, but he could play that role.

“Anyway, we're going to Soul Society from here, then we'll turn right around and make a path to Karakura. It's faster than the train,” Ichigo finished as though the idea of dimension-hopping was boring.

“It also implies the Captain-Commander acknowledges your high value as an ally,” Tōshirō added gravely. When Homura turned to him with one brow raised, he added, “The Captain-Commander did not give permission for this convenience lightly. Travel to and from Soul Society by the living through an officially sanctioned gate into the heart of Seireitei is extremely rare. Kurosaki and his friends were the first people in ninety-seven years to be allowed such travel.”

Ichigo blinked in surprise. “What? Who came ninety-seven years ago?”

Tōshirō stonewalled him. “Classified.”

“You're no fun.”

“I'm professional.”

“Like I said: No fun,” Ichigo teased.

Tōshirō rolled his eyes, but looked like he understood Ichigo wasn't serious.

Homura watched their interactions solemnly, then turned back to Urahara. “Why are you sending me to Karakura?”

Urahara smiled slightly. “After the traumatic week you've had, you need rest. Calm. Where you don't have to worry about the Incubator stalking you. With people you don't have to hide your time travel or extensive knowledge from. A small vacation. I suggest you stay not just through Sunday, but Monday as well. You need to reset, so to speak. Start fresh.”

The magical girl scowled. “We do not have time for vacations.”

“We do, actually. Or, to be more precise, you do.” Urahara held up his folded fan and counted off points on the fingers of his other hand with small taps. “The other girls will be hunkered down at home tomorrow. We will escort them safely. Hitsugaya will be their guard and escort at school. Tessai is making a protective charm for Miss Momoe, since her grasp of defense is far weaker than Miss Tomoe's. I plan to propose Miss Tomoe stay at the shop until you return so the Incubator can't get her alone. Or perhaps I will assign Yoruichi to stay with her. I'll wait to see what her mental state is before deciding on a course of action for her. I need to finish up my surveillance system for penetrating the barrier around Asunaro to collect data from within, then I have the Soul Gems and imitation Grief Seeds to study. Your presence is not strictly necessary for the next two days. Possibly three.” Urahara smiled more kindly. “Allow your allies to share your burden, Miss Akemi.”

“My allies need to share more with me,” Homura retorted immediately.

And damn if Ichigo didn't empathize with that from the depths of his soul. He glared at Urahara in a gesture of support for the complaint. It was fucking valid. Playing the game was hard when someone hogged all the cards. Ichigo was spitefully pleased to note that even Tōshirō was giving Urahara the side-eye of judgment.
Rangiku remained pleasant-faced and silent, eyes darting from person to person as she drank in every detail of the encounter. Ichigo would also bet his badge Tōshirō would be receiving a report of some kind with her outsider observations of the scene and the relationships implied therein. Despite their frequent bickering, they were a frightfully effective team.

Urahara's face sobered. He removed his hat and held it to his chest, then bowed slightly in implied apology. “So I have had it made clear to me by Yoruichi and Captain Hitsugaya. I will endeavor to be more open with you if you try to reciprocate with more cooperation yourself—or at least actually share your objections to methods so we may negotiate in good faith.”

Homura’s mouth twisted unhappily, but she glanced at Tōshirō and turned back to the reishi henkan-ki.

Returning his hat to his head, Urahara lowly said, “You could probably use a break from me, as well. Let us start over on Tuesday.”

In reply, he received a haughty glare over the magical girl's shoulder. Ichigo interpreted it as Damn right I need a break from you, you shady bastard. Well, Homura was far too prim to have those exact thoughts. But Ichigo got the gist of it. He understood why Sandal-Hat was keeping his distance now.

“Are we ready to go?” Rangiku asked with a bubbly smile, as though oblivious to everything that had just happened.

Homura looked at Ichigo. “You trust this thing?”

His real answer would be complicated so he just waved and said, “I've been through them lots of times.”

Her eyes narrowed. She noticed but didn't call him out on the dodge.

“All right! Here we go!” Rangiku cheered. Just before she stepped into the portal, she waved at Tōshirō and sang, “Bye, Captain! I’ll forward you all the paperwork!” She slipped through the portal, laughing innocently as Tōshirō roared her name like he always did when she did something outrageous.

Laughing at Tōshirō, Ichigo turned to Homura with a smile. “Ready to go, Stopwatch?”

Homura straightened proudly, tossed her hair over her shoulder, and marched into the portal as though she'd done it a million times. Ichigo gave Urahara and Tōshirō a wry grin and followed her.

As usual, the Precipice World was creepy as hell. It was a dark, dank square hallway whose walls oozed with thick purple fluid. The defensive flow was frozen, however—courtesy of special permission and preparations by Yamamoto's orders.

“Miss Akemi? Are you all right?” Rangiku asked.

Ichigo looked at Homura. She was standing rigidly with the strangest look on her face as she eyed her surroundings. Ignoring Rangiku's question, she lifted an arm in front of her and stared intensely at her hand. She flexed it several times, then turned it over and flexed it more. Like she was testing it.

“Miss Akemi?” Rangiku asked again.

No response. Homura looked down and flexed an ankle. Ichigo wondered if she was wiggling her
toes inside her shoes.

Worried, Ichigo said, “Hey, Stopwatch. Talk to us.”

Homura looked up at him with a frown. “What did that do to my body?”

“Oh. Damn. I should have explained that better,” Ichigo said, abashed. “That big square frame converts our living bodies into reishi— uh, spiritual energy or particles or something— so we can pass into Soul Society— a spirit place— without separating from our bodies.” At her deepened frown, he said, “I’ve never really noticed anything. You feel different?”

“Yes.” Homura rolled her shoulders uncomfortably. “It is... not unpleasant. But it is very strange. Like... wearing new clothes.” She looked around. “This place feels very strange.”

“Let’s walk and talk,” Rangiku said. “Captain Ukitake is stabilizing the passageway at the other end and we shouldn't keep him waiting.”

Ichigo waved for Homura to walk with him as Rangiku led them. Homura hesitantly matched his steps and kept looking from him to Rangiku, who was swinging her arms and humming cheerfully — faking airheaded obliviousness again. Ichigo casually strolled with his hands in his pockets. “So yeah, this place is really damn strange. A couple years back, my old man explained it's a bunch of spacetime mashed together and time passes like two thousand times faster in here than in any of the worlds outside.” An idea struck him. “I wonder if you actually notice the time difference because of your time magic?”

Homura looked surprised, then thoughtful. “I wonder.”

“I'd say to ask Urahara, but you seem to be on the outs with him.”

Her little huff of annoyance amused him. “He keeps things from me and has too many methods that involve surprising me.”

Ichigo laughed wryly. “Yeah, he's an ass like that. You know, back when he first became my mentor, he sent me a message summoning me to his shop by having some invention of his write the message on my wall in... well, it looked like blood. Thought I'd jump out of my body without any assistance that time. Did it to the others, too.”

Homura gave him a look that somehow conveyed incredulous and complete lack of surprise at the same time. “Did Karin and Yuzu tell you about Mr. Monk?”

“Did they ever,” Ichigo said with a snort.

Frustrated, Homura growled, “Why is he like this?”

Ichigo scratched his temple. “I don't really know. Some kind of mild sadism? Whatever it is, at least he focuses it on pranks instead of conquering all the worlds and mentally wrecking people like Aizen did.” He saw her curiosity and decided to elaborate, remembering what others had said and what he had sensed during single combat with the narcissistic sociopath. “Aizen was a brilliant man, but so smart and so powerful and so alone— by his own fault, I think, but no one noticed and derailed it— that he killed his ability to relate to others. It... what's the phrase... withered on the vine. It twisted him until he thought his way was the only way and if the world didn't cooperate, he'd just have to rewrite the world from the top. He didn't have cooperation with valued allies, he had subordinates who were disposable trash. He may have started out with a noble goal— who knows, at this point?— but he got so arrogantly twisted up in himself that he thought himself a god and the world his to play with as he willed.” Ichigo scrubbed his hand through his hair and
struggled with words. “People with a lot of power, like me and the shinigami captains... we need allies to relate to so we don't lose touch with reality and humanity, you know? Going it alone because you think you know everything and your way is best... it can mess with your head. I kinda think Urahara still wrestles with that. Yoruichi and Tessai notice and derail those moods, though. And at least Urahara is able to admit he has faults once they're thrown in his face.”

Homura frowned and turned away, her face looking like her thoughts were flashing through her mind at the speed of light. Ichigo decided to be quiet and let her think. He faced forward again and caught Rangiku peeking back over her shoulder at them just before she turned away.

A few minutes later, they saw a dull light in the distance. When they neared it, they saw Captain Ukitake standing in the middle of the passageway just inside a portal. He was tethered to the walls with four cords connecting his wrists to four forked blades in the walls. The white-haired shinigami smiled broadly. “I'm glad to see you made it back safely.” He nodded amiably at Homura. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Akemi. I am Jūshirō Ukitake, Thirteenth Division Captain. Mitakihara is my division's jurisdiction. I have been fully briefed.”

Homura eyed him warily, but gave him a polite nod.

The fatherly shinigami smiled even more warmly. “Come, go through the door. I'll drop this after you get out and exit behind you.”

Rangiku cheerfully bounced through the gateway. Homura eyed Ichigo with trepidation. “Is there anything I need to know about what is on the other side?”

Ichigo grinned, noticing in his peripheral vision that Ukitake also displayed amused interest before turning his head so his long hair disguised the curve of his mouth. “Nah, Stopwatch,” Ichigo said with a casual wave of his hand. “It's just a big white old-fashioned city.”

“There are four hooded guards, as usual,” Ukitake volunteered kindly. “They have orders to not approach you unless you try to go beyond the senkaimon platform.”

Homura eyed Ichigo in disapproval, obviously wondering if he had lied. He laughed nervously and said, “Sorry, I forgot. Those guys are like background scenery to me. Never heard them speak a word and they all look alike with their uniforms.”

The girl still looked wary, glancing between the captain and the gate as though gauging which was the larger risk.

Ichigo lay a hand on her shoulder. “C'mon, we'll go through together.”

He made a point of watching her face when they passed through the gate. Once through, she took a few steps and stopped. After looking at each of the four hooded guards with narrowed eyes, she visibly dismissed their presence like a queen ignoring servants. She swept her eyes around the courtyard they found themselves in, taking in the path of pale jade through the wide circle of gray marble that made the central senkaimon platform. Pairs of tall white obelisks with pyramidal tops were evenly spaced along the path's length. The round courtyard was encircled by a ring of shadowed sandstone arches. Every vertical surface hosted some kind of will-o'-th'-wisp kidō lanterns Ichigo never saw fixtures for in daylight. Everything was bathed in moonlight. Homura looked up at the night sky above with interest.

“There are stars in... Soul Society?” she asked quietly.

“Yep,” Ichigo said, enjoying her curiosity. “Dunno how that works, but it's pretty.”
“Hmm.”

“Welcome to Seireitei, Miss Akemi!” Rangiku chirped.

“Ah.”

The atmosphere shifted as the senkaimon closed behind them. Homura turned to look as Ukitake readjusted the four blades tethered to his wrists, preparing to redeploy them. He smiled up at Homura, who was now staring up at the gate they had come from. It was ridiculously tall, a roofed lintel atop two more white pillars. Deactivated, they could see through to the arches on the far side of the courtyard.

Ukitake smiled at Homura. “What do you think, Miss Akemi?”

The girl tilted her head and blinked at him, then looked around again. “It is very... geometrical.”

The captain laughed brightly. “And overly ceremonial and grandiose, my friend Shunsui would say.”

“As you say,” Homura murmured. Ichigo snickered at the girl's implied damn right it is and watched her try to peer past the arches. She looked at Ukitake over her shoulder and politely asked, “May I look?”

“Of course. Just don't leave the platform,” Ukitake answered. He waved some kind of command to the guards, who stood down. Probably because an alert captain and lieutenant were present to subdue the girl if she made a break for it, Ichigo thought.

Their eyes followed her closely as she took measured steps across the tiles. Ichigo and Rangiku went with her. When they reached the edge, Homura was visibly stunned by how high they were. The tiny tile roofs of Seireitei were whitewashed by moonlight far below them.

“So, yeeeaaaah, the old shinigami liked to build big-n-tall,” Ichigo drawled. “I don't even know why they decided this thing had to be up so high.”

“Hmph. And Hitsugaya said it is the living who are strange for building such tall things.”

Surprised laughter burst from Rangiku's mouth. Ichigo grinned and fondly said, “As if that brat isn't always perching on the highest thing in sight.”

Homura frowned at him in disapproval. “Hitsugaya is not a brat. Considering him such is an insult to his character.”

Rangiku and Ichigo both blinked at her, nonplussed. They traded thoughtful glances. Ran looked like she sensed gossip. Ichigo suddenly wanted to ask Tōshirō a lot of questions. He was guessing Ran would be bombarding the guy with texts after her escort duty was complete. But what the hell was he supposed to say now? Did Homura not understand affectionate teasing?

...Actually, that might be it. Maybe?

“Everyone's a brat sometimes,” Ichigo ventured. “Even adults. I didn't mean it as an insult. Kind of a... term of endearment.” When she raised a judgey eyebrow at him, he held his hands up defensively and said, “Karin sometimes calls me Jerkface in a very loving way. Dad knows something’s wrong if she doesn't call him Goat Face. And aren't you nicknamed Stranger Danger?”
“She's what?!” Rangiku gasped delightedly as Homura's cheeks colored.

“Where did you hear that?” she growled.

Ichigo grinned. “Karin.”

Homura's breath hissed through her teeth. Ichigo did not envy Karin.

“Excuse me!” Ukitake called. When they turned back, he waved at them. “Terribly sorry, but we need to get going!”

Homura took one more long look at the city below, spun on her heel, and marched back to the senkaimon. When they met back up with Ukitake, Homura gave him a very formal if shallow bow and thanked him for allowing her to look.

“You are quite welcome, Miss Akemi,” the captain said with a smile. He looked to Rangiku and nodded at the empty gate. “Will you do the honors, Lieutenant Matsumoto?”

Rangiku cooed and hopped up to the gate, drew her zanpakutō, and stabbed it into the empty air. A swirl of light manifested, then flashed out to fill the entire doorway. She withdrew her sword and winked. “All ready!”

“I'll stabilize the path,” Ukitake said, approaching the gate. “Just a moment.”

Rangiku stepped forward immediately. Homura said, “Wait—”

Ichigo ruffled her hair. “Time's like two thousand times faster in there, remember? One second out here is two thousand seconds in there. So now he's been in there for like half an hour from his perspective.”

“Probably a couple hours now,” Ran chirped. “Come on!”

When they entered, Ukitake was humming cheerfully, utterly serene while tethered to the solid gloom. He smiled at them and nodded. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Akemi. I hope to see you again soon.”

Homura paused, eyed him carefully, then offered him another shallow bow. Respectful, but not fawning or submissive. “Likewise.”

The rest of their journey was quiet save for Rangiku singing under her breath as though bored. This time, Ichigo watched Homura inspecting the walls, ceiling, and floor as they walked. She was obviously deep in thought and fascinated. He'd have to text Urahara and get the dick to find a reason to give her information about the Precipice World as a peace offering or something.

And then they were at the end doorway, walking through another portal into the identical Karakura original of the Mitakihara training room. This one hosted Ichigo's family, Isshin standing behind the girls with his hands on their shoulders as they anxiously waited for Homura's arrival. Rangiku closed the reishi henkan-ki behind them as Yuzu cried out and ran forward.

“Homura! You're all right!” Yuzu cried as she hugged Homura fiercely. “We were so worried!”

Homura initially showed no reaction to the hug, but one hand came up to rest on Yuzu's back as Ichigo's sister continued to sob her relief into Homura's shoulder. She opened her mouth to speak but closed it again, looking at a loss for what to say.
Isshin and Karin approached more slowly. Karin looked at Homura up and down as though checking for injuries, then stepped closer and croaked, “Hey, Yuz, my turn.”

Yuzu pulled back and wiped her face on her sleeves repeatedly as Karin leaned in for a brief but tight hug and weakly joked, “Tales of your badassery are going to give me a heart attack one of these days.”

Ichigo thought back to the morning a pale-faced and shaken Inoue had shuffled out of the miniature reishi henkan-ki Urahara had installed in their apartment, taken one look at Ichigo, and started bawling. He remembered his mounting horror as Inoue recounted what she had seen; remembered the additional horror of Urahara's update later in the day, which included something akin to a coroner's report diagramming Homura's wounds with far too many of the injuries on the attached list followed by \textit{(fatal)}; thought of the new report they had received just before Rangiku showed up to ferry him to Mitakihara....

Yeeaaaaahh, he agreed with Karin. He glanced at his father and found silent agreement.

Isshin was watching Homura, face lined with regret and worry. When Karin stepped back, he held out a hand in invitation. “Come on, Homura. Let's go home.”

Homura hesitated, face conflicted, then gave a tentative nod. Isshin smiled broadly. After watching him for a moment, she did an about-face and looked at Rangiku, who was leaning on the reishi henkan-ki and twirling her hair through her fingers again while smiling at Homura. The magical girl gave her the same shallow bow she had given Ukitake and politely said, “Thank you for escorting us, Lieutenant Matsumoto.”

Rangiku's smile widened. “You're welcome!” Pushing off from the column, she said, “I'll get going and let you all go home.” She briefly glanced at Ichigo with a twinkle in her eye, then looked away, stepped to one side of the giant frame, and stabbed her zanpakutō into the empty air. When she turned it like a key, the air swirled and a pair of shoji panels appeared inside a circular hole in reality. The doors slid open. Across an undefinable space like a waiting room, a second set of shoji panels slid open to bright light. A black butterfly darted out and danced around Rangiku's head.

Homura blinked surprise. “A butterfly?”

Rangiku lifted a hand and offered a finger as a perch for the delicate creature. “This is a \textit{Hell Butterfly}!”

Homura stared flatly. “...Hell.”

Rangiku laughed. “They got that name thousands of years ago when not even shinigami knew much about anything and it just kinda stuck. They just carry messages and guide spirits from one world to the other without getting lost in the Precipice World. Shinigami traveling without non-shinigami guests don't have to worry about the Precipice World. Our little buddies and our fancy gate let us skip all that.”

“But... how do \textit{butterflies} do that?”

Ichigo grinned. Her confusion was adorable. “I dunno, Stopwatch. The spirit world is really damn weird sometimes.”

Homura's frown and knit brows spoke volumes about the hurricane of questions she had. Something else for Ichigo to text to Urahara. He got the impression she was as endlessly curious and detail-obsessed as the scientist. Maybe she just didn't get many opportunities to show it or...
indulge it. Or maybe it was some kind of coping thing.

“It's been lovely, cuties!” Rangiku trilled as she wiggled her fingers at them all in a little wave. She looked at Homura and winked. “You need to give me gossip about my captain sometime!” She was through the door and gone before Homura could react.

Yuzu hooked an arm around Homura's elbow and smiled through her tears as the girl glanced at her. “Come on. Let's go.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Dorky note: Mitakihara's architecture is cobbled together from the most impressive buildings in the world. Including the damn Burj Khalifa. Because SHAFT was like, “why not?”

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Why was this chapter so difficult to write. Why.

To those who frequently worry about the logistics of notebooks/journals/letters being inadequate for conveying non-Homura memories with each loop: I do have Plans, but you're also making an assumption that may not be correct.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kisuke needs to come up with a plan before I lose it and just go rabbit-hunting, Isshin thought to Engetsu as he watched his children with Homura. Engetsu smoldered in silent agreement, an ominous harvest moon low on the horizon.

When Isshin had last seen Homura two weeks ago, she had been subdued but cautiously opening up like a flower bud peeking through snow in early spring. In the time since then, winter had proven that spring false and frosted the bud shut. That thousand-yard stare was back, facial expressions were all but gone, and she reacted to Karin and Yuzu's affections with a dull monotony, mechanically going through the motions of what she knew she was supposed to do in response. Isshin agreed with Kisuke: Homura had regressed. It broke his heart.

Isshin fleetingly came back to wanting to introduce Ayase Sōju to Engetsu, as he had ever since he read Kisuke's may-as-well-be-an-autopsy report. He added Luca as an afterthought. Teenagers or not, they were monsters who had wrought all kinds of havoc on one of his girls.

At least Homura seemed to be able to express curiosity. Maybe that could be an inroad. Kisuke had said she was pissed at him for withholding information. Maybe Isshin could offer to talk to her about spirit stuff. Isshin saw that his son was looking at Homura speculatively behind her back; they would have to sit down to a strategy session after the girls were asleep.

Yuzu started leading Homura toward him, but the girl stopped when she noticed the other person in the room for the first time. Hachi was an imposing man at first glance, tall and broad and rotund, but the mellow kindness on his face was reassuring. The olive green suit and yellow bow tie he wore were also disarming. His eyes twinkled and his pink mustache twitched as he smiled at Homura and bowed. “Welcome back to Karakura.”

“Who are you?” Homura asked bluntly, her undertone of challenge unmistakable.

“Hachigen Ushōda,” he answered politely. “I am a colleague of Tessai's. I am assisting with minding the shop while Tessai and Kisuke are away and stabilized the reishi henkan-ki from this
Homura eyed him suspiciously, but turned away and allowed Yuzu to lead her toward the exit. Behind them, Ichigo heaved a dismayed sigh and met Isshin's eyes.

The four of them ascended to the trap door in the ceiling. Isshin still was not used to his daughters being able to flash step even though he had been training them. They emerged in a back room of Urahara Shop and wended their way through the halls until they reached the storefront. Though it was very late, Ururu was tidying up and restocking shelves with the questionable assistance of Jinta and Hiyori, who were doing more aggressive bickering than anything else. Isshin wondered who thought it was smart to put the two of them together.

...Probably Kisuke.

Ururu greeted them politely, traded a long look with Homura, and turned back to her task with a nod. Jinta didn't seem to notice them, but Hiyori immediately latched onto how Homura was eyeing her suspiciously. “What're you squinting at, Baldy?!”

“Shut it, bitchface,” Karin snapped. “This is not the time.”

The blonde shook with rage. “I'll bitchface you!”

Karin sneered. “Bring it, shorty!”

“Let's go!” Hiyori reached back over her shoulder for her sword, which was slung over her red tracksuit.

Ichigo's hand slammed down on her shoulder. “Don't even, Hiyori,” he growled.

“Someone needs to teach your sister when to shut her smart mouth,” the blonde snarled.

Karin took a threatening posture and widened her arms in invitation. “Fight me!”

Homura, who had watched impassively, swept in front of Karin and grabbed one of her hands. She tugged Karin's arm as she walked past and coldly said, “Come. That child is not worth your effort.”

“What did you call me, Baldy?!” Hiyori screeched.

Homura paused to glance over her shoulder disdainfully. “A child. Your insults are kindergarten level at best and you are throwing a tantrum. Go to bed.” She turned forward and tossed her hair over her shoulder dismissively, then said, “Come, Karin. We have better things to do than waste time with her,” and pulled Karin toward the front door. Karin stumbled after her willingly, looking back over her shoulder and cackling the whole way out into the yard. Jinta also pointed at Hiyori and laughed. Yuzu made a judgey little hmph and flounced out after her sister.

Hiyori tried to lunge after them but Ichigo threw her over his shoulder and stalked back down the hall. “I'll catch up to you guys in bit,” he called out. “I need to have a talk.”

Isshin and Ururu looked at each other blankly in the wake of the tempest. Engetsu muttered, Well. That escalated quickly.

At least Homura still has Karin's back... I guess, Isshin thought to his zanpakutō spirit.

Orrr she decided she hates Sarugaki just. that. much.

Isshin sighed, scrubbed his face in his hands, and left to rejoin the girls.
He caught up with them two blocks away. Homura had slowed, but still loosely held Karin's hand as she led the way. Karin was plainly allowing her to do so, deliberately submissive to maintain the hand-holding. As Isshin watched, Yuzu sped up and hooked her arm in Homura's free elbow, then matched her pace. Homura stiffened, but relaxed and otherwise showed no reaction. Yuzu didn’t lean in close or say anything— touching, but allowing space. Homura did not reject her move.

Karin and Yuzu still had an inroad with her— had access to some chink in her armor. Thank God.

Isshin decided to be passive that night. Let Homura get comfortable with the twins. He'd be present and available but not intrusive. His daughters seemed to get Homura on some deep, priceless level that gained them access to the girl's emotional fortress, so he'd be their willing assistant as they helped her untangle her knots.

When they got home, Yuzu led their human chain into the kitchen and ushered Homura into a seat. Isshin hung back by the doorway and waited for direction, trusting Yuzu's lead. Her fleeting glance and approving smile at him made his lips quirk. Ah, Masaki. If you could see your daughters now....

“Karin,” Yuzu said in an assertive tone that made her sister all but snap to attention, “get Homura a glass of... what would you like, Homura?”

“Water is fine,” Homura said quietly.

Yuzu nodded at Karin, who turned to comply. Yuzu bent and took Homura's hand. “When's the last time you ate?”

Homura stared at her blankly. “I do not remember.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I... suppose.”

Yuzu nodded again as Karin set the water in front of Homura and stepped back. “I'm going to cook you something small,” Yuzu announced. “Then we can do whatever you want.”

Homura stared at the glass of water dully. After a long minute of silence, she said, “I would just like to sleep. I am... tired.”

Isshin remembered what his other self had written about the first night Homura had been in their home. He saw the resemblance to Ichigo after his mother's death even though all of her friends were still alive. So the events may have made her feel like she had pushed her friends so far away they may as well be dead and lost. Damn. Well, at least she could admit to being tired and hungry this time.

Cold comfort.

He quietly cleared his throat to get their attention. “Homura, is there anything you'd like me to do or get?”

She stared at him a bit, then said, “No.”

“All right,” Isshin said. He took a step back. “If you need me for anything— and I mean anything— just call for me, okay? You too, girls. Same goes for Ichigo when he gets home.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”
“Got it, Goat Face.”

Homura just tilted her head and stared some more.

Isshin sighed heavily and offered her a gentle smile. “Good night.”

His daughters chirped it back at him, but Homura still stared in silence.

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Homura woke slowly on Sunday morning, surrounded by warmth. She rubbed her sore eyes and sleepily looked around the room in the weak light of predawn. Karin and Yuzu bracketed her on either side of the futon on the floor between their beds. Yuzu was still on her side facing Homura with one hand loosely holding the end of the braid made of smaller braids she had made while listening to Homura talk—well, babble-cry—the night before. Calmer now, Homura figured out that Yuzu had been soothing her with a repetitive set of motions that kept her close but involved minimal touch. It was something Madoka would have thought to do. There had been a few timelines when Madoka had spoken to her gently after a breakdown and woven her hair together while she cried. Madoka had held her, playing with her hair from the other end of a hug, tho—

She forcibly stopped the memory. Focus on the now.

Karin had started out facing Homura from her other side, close without touching except to occasionally prod Homura’s ankle with her toes if she lost herself for too long mid-sentence. Karin had rested her chin on her hands and watched Homura’s face keenly, noting every tear and grimace with calculating gray eyes that betrayed violent thoughts as she muttered a low string of profanity-laden commentary on the people who had hurt Homura. Somehow, the outside offense and anger and salty language soothed Homura. She felt...validated. Now, Karin seemed to have turned in her sleep and was spread-eagled on her front, the arm closest to Homura resting against the top of Homura’s head. Strangely, Homura felt no need to get away from the contact. Strange, how something so minor actually made Homura feel welcome. Like it was natural for her to be there between the sisters.

Homura closed her eyes and loosened her magic a bit, reaching with her senses. The twins were two complimentary sets of welcome—one slightly possessive in her protectiveness, the other a curious sort of all-are-welcome, ingathering sparkle of desire to cheer. Just beyond their huddle, they were once again flanked by the warm, contained-wildness moonlight-and-embers magic of the Kurosaki men. They were unseen banked fires of...protective concern, Homura thought. Whatever it was, she basked in it. The four of them. She didn’t understand how she was so comfortable with them. She wanted to, but was also afraid to. It reminded her of when she had been small and endlessly fascinated by laying on her back and sinking into the ridiculously fluffy down comforter on her parents’ bed; it gave her mixed feelings she had trouble identifying. So she settled into it, accepted it, without thinking too deeply on it.

She lay drowsily for a long time as the room gradually brightened, eyes heavy-lidded as she felt around with her magic in lazy curiosity about the residents of Karakura. The vast majority really did have at least the slightest touch of magic, with points of brighter magic scattered here and there. Several nearby were very bright, but she could only identify that girl who had joined her and Inoue on the rooftops in the last timeline. Whatever her name was. Homura’s wandering magic noticed when Isshin woke up, his magic shifting from nebulous in sleep to more focused; he seemed to notice her magic, as his own flickered with amusement.
Awhile later, Isshin's magic moved past their room and paused near Ichigo's. It stopped and gently poked at Homura in question. Homura snorted aloud and prodded back. Isshin's cheered like an eager puppy and Ichigo's door opened with a slam. This time Homura understood his shouted *GOOOOOD MOOORNING ICHIKOOO!* before Ichigo's window slammed open and Isshin howled on his way out it before it slammed closed behind him. This time she perceived Ichigo's magic cycle through startled-notsurprised-irritated-playful-satisfied-affectionate-grumpy-alert. Weird.

How was this her life. How was she okay with this. So strange.

Karin pried herself off the floor with her elbows with a growled *goddamn idiots* and sat up on her knees to rub her eyes. Yuzu yawned and stretched. Down the hall, Ichigo was shouting down the stairs at Isshin, who was bawling loudly. Their magic was tinged with a mutual playfulness that made for a strange contrast with their morning routine. And it *was* a routine, almost a show; one that Homura was building an *ah, I've seen this episode already* acceptance to. Homura blinked drowsily and let her eyes wander to the window and take in the soft blues of the sky.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, Madoka was alive and uncontracted, and Homura felt... safe.

Homura joined the entire Kurosaki family in a cooperative effort to make a big breakfast. Except their bantering, playful bickering, and a flour war consisting of Ichigo and Karin vs. Isshin dragged out the prep until they had to call it brunch to save face. Yuzu smiled and hummed as the rest of the family shrieked with laughter behind her back while she taught Homura how to cook another dish. Homura kept glancing over her shoulder at them with conflicting emotions— confusion, consternation, amusement, disapproval— but Yuzu acted like it was normal so she didn't say anything.

Then there was the sound of something breaking. Everything fell silent as Yuzu continued humming but wiped her hands on a towel and turned to face her family. Homura turned and eyed them with her. The rowdy ones were all frozen mid-action, Karin's arm rearing back to throw a fistful of flour, Isshin brandishing a plate like a shield, and Ichigo staring in shock at some kind of ceramic shards on the floor. All slowly looked at Yuzu with horror.

Yuzu smiled. “I think that's enough play for now.”

Even Homura shivered.

Brunch started with the flour-covered miscreants subdued as guilty children, but it wasn't long before they had cheered back up. Isshin started telling stories about strange patients that week, which prompted a sprawling reminiscence of all strange patients through the years complete with contributions by the Kurosaki children, who had apparently been assisting in the clinic for years. Homura tentatively told a story about someone she once had to share a hospital room with. Her account of the nurses' subtle revenge on the snobby woman had them rolling. A smile played across Homura's face at causing it.

Yuzu ordered her family to clean up and dragged Homura back upstairs. “You can't just wear your uniform all the time,”’ she declared. “Pick something out.”

Homura opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Karin's distant voice hollering, “You'd better be putting on something you can play soccer in, you dweebs!”

An hour later, Homura stood beside Yuzu on a soccer field, fidgeting in her borrowed shorts, shirt, and sneakers while the brunette hummed cheerfully. They watched Karin commandeer random
Kids from the park between furiously texting her soccer minions. Soon, summoned minions began to appear from every direction.

The one with glasses whined, “Heyyy, you said Hitsugaya would be here!”

Karin looked him in the eye, face an uncaring deadpan, and bluntly said, “I lied.”

“No fair,” complained the one with curly hair.

“Life’s not fair, Donny,” Karin said with a dismissive wave. “Let’s make teams.”

Homura allowed herself to get lost in the game, let the world beyond the soccer field fade until all that mattered were an exertion that didn’t involve the keyed-up edginess of life-or-death battle, a far more soothing application of adrenaline rushing through her, and the scents of freshly-mown grass and clean sweat. The only sounds were the shouting of players, the scuffling and pounding of feet on sod, and Isshin’s distant cheering from atop a park bench as Ichigo lazed on it beside him. The lightness started to feel like a natural high of sorts. She was firmly tied to the here and now for once.

Then one of Karin’s minions failed at stealing the ball from Homura, slipped, and grabbed a fistful of her hair to steady himself with a hard yank that twisted her head. Reacting without thinking or making any sound, Homura jerked her elbow back into his solar plexus and floored him. Everyone on the field froze in silence for a moment before Karin cackled and shouted, “The ball! Homura, the ball!”

“That was a foul!” shouted one of the other minions.

“Ryohei fouled her first!”

“So what?!”

“I don’t see a ref, Heita, do you?!”

Said minion looked to the bench holding the Kurosaki men and found no sympathy. He looked to Yuzu and found a frighteningly bland smile.

“The baaaalllll, Ho-mu-raaaa!” Karin shouted impatiently. “Keep your eyes on the prize!”

Still off-balance by the situation, Homura mechanically positioned herself and kicked the ball toward Karin over Ryohei’s groaning body. She stood and watched in confusion as Karin crowed triumphantly and the game picked back up. The minion at Homura’s feet rolled onto his front and pried himself up to his knees with a deep gasp. He glanced up at her sideways with a combination of fear and respect.

“You... really are like Karin,” he wheezed.

Homura found herself pleased, oddly enough. Even though she couldn't tell if that was intended as an insult or a compliment. “Most people would apologize for hair-pulling,” she said coolly.

“Jeez, sorry, I was falling and your hair was there,” the boy huffed as he gained his feet. “If you have that much hair you should be used to people pulling it by now.”

That had actually been a Major Problem at her old school, so very long ago. Homura scowled at him fiercely. He quailed and scrambled away from her. If Homura played more roughly after that, Karin certainly didn’t complain. No one else made a grab for her hair, either.
A couple hours of intense play later, the three magical girls were the only ones with any stamina left. The randomly drafted playground kids Karin had hustled into playing drifted away one by one; Karin’s minions remained out of wariness of their commander but looked dead on their feet by late afternoon and took off quickly once Karin gave them leave. Isshin fawned over them and declared a victory dinner. The Kurosaki family caught Homura up in their current as they jostled and flowed to the little pho place they had taken her to in... was it this timeline or last timeline? Whatever. Homura kept her protests about their appearances to herself even though her proper upbringing was screaming to her that they didn’t belong in a restaurant while breathing heavily and covered in dirt and stale sweat and grass stains. She sat back and forced herself to drink her third glass of water more slowly, watching over the rim of her cup as Isshin and Karin dramatically analyzed and reenacted several scenes from the game. At high volume. With expansive arm gestures. Yuzu encouraged them from Homura’s left as she downed her own water and Ichigo leaned back in his chair and snorted or chuckled fondly at them from Homura’s right.

Ichigo’s eyes met Homura’s and crinkled in amusement. He leaned toward her and said under his breath, “Karin will scream from the rooftops that she’s not like the old man, but she really kinda is. Sometimes, at least.”

Homura eyed the father and daughter, who were shaking their fists in the air as Karin perched on a chair and stomped a foot on the table, striking a victorious pose with a furious face. Both were yelling and acting like the game had been a glorious battle.

“I see it,” Homura agreed without hesitation, dully wondering if this restaurant would kick them out for rowdiness.

It did not. People in Karakura seemed to be immune to Kurosaki strangeness. It was the only thing Homura could come up with when pondering why they didn’t get pitched out into the street by police. She suddenly understood what the train conductors had bickered about in the last timeline: Karakura was a basket of absurdity and the residents had grown disturbingly used to it.

They got home as the sun set. Karin barreled up the stairs and Yuzu pulled Homura up with them. They took turns showering off the grime of the game, the sisters pushing their guest to go first. Afterward, Homura wore the nightdress Yuzu laid out for her without really thinking about it and sat down to prepare for the task of untangling her hair. Which she really, really should have braided before the game.

The sisters came back into the bedroom together, Yuzu with her hair up in a towel and Karin with her hair fanned out over the towel around her shoulders, just as Homura finished pulling supplies out of her shield.

“What,” Karin said blankly.

“What’s all that for, Homura?” Yuzu asked.

In answer, Homura tugged the towel off her hair, let the entire mess fall down around her, and stared at them drily. She felt like she was peering out at them from a mass of black seaweed. The surprised faces they made amused her, though.

“Holy crap,” Karin said, voice detached with shock.

Isshin’s voice drifted up from downstairs before Yuzu could say anything, “Girrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrlllllss, iiiiice creeeeeeem!”

“You look like that ghost girl that crawls out of TVs,” Karin continued. From her tone, this wasn't
a bad thing. She was approaching gleeful and looked like she had *ideas*.

Homura blinked at the doorway dispassionately. Yuzu drew up in determination and declared, “Karin, grab her stuff. We'll help her downstairs.”

“That will not be necessary,” Homura demurred.

“Shut it, Rapunzel,” Karin said as she bent and gathered combs, brushes, and bottles into a jumble in her arms. “Ice cream's calling. Let's go.”

Ichigo's double-take when he glanced up from the couch and saw Homura looking like a drowned rat was admittedly hilarious, Homura thought as the sisters herded her into the family room. Karin dumped all the supplies on the coffee table and set them upright. Yuzu pointed where she wanted Homura to sit and Homura just did not have the energy to object, so she sat. The brunette started organizing the supplies. She picked up one of the bottles of leave-in conditioner and examined it like a connoisseur of fine wines.

“You have good taste in product,” Yuzu said in a businesslike tone. She glanced at Karin and ordered her to get their ice cream, exchanged the conditioner for a de-tangler, then popped the cap and settled in behind Homura.

“Trial and error,” Homura said quietly.

“The best teacher,” Yuzu quipped as she started spraying the liquid into Homura's damp hair.

Karin and Isshin ended up bringing the entire bucket of ice cream into the living room and plunking it and the bowls and spoons on the coffee table. Isshin cheerfully lined up the bowls and started fighting the ice cream with a serving spoon. Karin sat with her chin in her hands and looked at Homura.

“Are you *sure* your name isn't Sadako?” she drawled. “Or Rapunzel?”

“Homurapunzel?” Ichigo said with a smirk.

Karin whipped around and looked at him with delight. “*Homurapunzel*. You're a genius!”

Ichigo smirked and preened, then turned to Homura. He watched Yuzu start carding the slicked hair with her fingers to get the biggest snarls sorted out. “It sounds dumb, but I really hadn't noticed just how long your hair is.”

“It goes down to her *butt,*” Karin observed incredulously.

“It looks longer because it is wet,” Homura said dismissively.

Yuzu cooed, “It's beautiful, but the upkeep must be exhausting.”

“Oh my God, seriously, how do you live with that much hair?” Karin said. “I grew mine out long enough for a decent ponytail and even *that* annoys the hell out of me sometimes.”

Homura shrugged. “My hair has always been long. I am used to it. It only bothers me when it gets like this.”

“Doesn't it get like this every time you fight?” Ichigo asked with a curious tilt of his head.

“Not particularly,” Homura replied, carefully holding her head exactly as Yuzu placed it. “Unless my magic is extremely strained.”
“Wait wait wait. *You make your magic take care of your hair?*” Karin blurted.

What? Homura had never even considered it. “No.”

“So, what... maybe unconsciously? Subconsciously, whichever.” Karin leaned forward with a grin. “Do you *hate* untangling your hair *so much* that your magic just avoids tangling your hair? Makes every strand just flow perfectly? *Magical automatic tangle prevention?*”

Homura stared blankly at her, thought for a moment about how Mami would sometimes use—waste—her magic to put her hair in perfect pigtails with a snap when in a hurry, then fervently hoped that wasn't really the case. It would be so petty.

“Do you want chocolate on top, Homura?” Isshin asked brightly.

“...Yes, please,” Homura said slowly. “Just... a bit.”

Isshin whistled a cheerful tune and set out the bowls of ice cream in front of everyone. Yuzu took one large spoonful and went back to work on Homura's hair, this time with a large comb. Homura shifted awkwardly as they all watched her like some kind of museum exhibit.

“No, seriously, you could strangle someone with it,” Karin declared.

“What?” Homura asked with a confused frown.

“Your hair,” Karin clarified. “You could seriously strangle someone with that hair. Or smother them.” She noticed the weird look Homura gave her and turned to Ichigo and Isshin. “Back me up here, guys!”

“Captain Unohana's is probably longer,” Isshin said immediately. “Her braid is that long, so her hair must be longer when down. I've never seen it, though. She always keeps it in a braid under her chin.”

“Say what?” Karin said. “How does that work?”

“I dunno,” Ichigo said with a shrug, “but it looks like she's wearing a black noose with the rope going down her front.”

“A noose?” Karin blurted in surprise.

“She's a terrifying woman, so it suits her,” Isshin said darkly as he shuddered over a spoonful of ice cream. Ichigo shuddered with him.

“That sounds highly impractical,” Homura observed. “It would be a handicap on anything she wants to do with her arms. If she bends, it will get in her way.”

“That may be the entire point,” Isshin wondered aloud. “The challenge of working with a limitation, I mean. Keep life interesting after a couple millennia.”

...*Millennia?* Were shinigami really that long-lived?

“Whatever. *She can make it into a noose,*” Karin declared.

“On *herself,*” Ichigo said drily.

Karin ignored him. “Homurapunzel could *totally* strangle someone with that hair.”
“Well, yes, technically, but it would be extremely difficult and expose her to close-quarters attack,” Isshin said thoughtfully.

Yuzu picked up a smaller wide-toothed comb and another bottle. “Not worth it.”

Homura relaxed into quiet comfort as Yuzu worked on her hair and the others engaged in a gossiping session about the hairstyles of various shinigami. It had been a long time since Homura had allowed anyone but a Madoka dozens of timelines ago so close to her hair—a long time since she trusted anyone but Madoka with her vulnerable neck and back. It was soothing; it brought back memories of sleepovers with the Mitakihara girls in early, innocent timelines and shades of her mother caring for her hair when she felt too ill and weak to do so herself. Her hair had been her pride, then. Everything else about her body had been frustratingly wrong and limiting but her hair was attention-getting and envied even by healthy people. It was the only thing she regularly got complimented on. She had cherished it as one thing that didn't make her feel less-than. Any suggestion of cutting it short would bring her younger self to tears.

How silly it seemed, now, in the scale of things.

Everyone was long done with their second bowl of ice cream by the time Yuzu had Homura's hair combed perfectly straight. The brunette hummed in scrutiny and clinically said, “You have a lot of breakage down the center.”

“I used to wear it parted down the center in two braids,” Homura explained.

She could practically feel Yuzu squinting as she tugged hair this way and that. “How long ago? This looks recent.”

“Technically, just a few weeks for this body,” Homura said carelessly. “ Probably at least three dozen timelines, though.”

There was a long silence before Karin said, “That will never stop being weird.”

Yuzu avoided the subject, switched to a brush to get more airflow between strands and dry the hair more, then said, “Hmm. How about a single French braid? I can hit it with a hairdryer if it's still too damp when we go to bed.”

“Please do not trouble yourself,” Homura demurred. “Combing it out took enough effort.”

“Awww, but I've never gotten to play with hair this long before,” Yuzu argued with a pout.

Homura sighed. “Fine.”

Every other Kurosaki grinned at her with blatant entertainment. Homura realized she was submitting to Yuzu's unspoken authority in the household just like they did. Surprisingly, it didn't particularly bother her. She still scowled at them, though, then scowled harder when it was plain that they saw right through her.

They ended up rearranging themselves, Yuzu on the couch with Homura on the floor in front of her, Isshin sitting next to Yuzu on the couch, and Ichigo and Karin serving as bookends on the floor on either side of Homura as they watched a movie. It was a jump-scare thriller, but none of them found it frightening. Yuzu cheerfully hummed through it as she brushed and braided Homura's hair. Homura only vaguely watched the screen, more intent on the other Kurosakis bantering about every stupid thing the characters in the movie did. It was pleasant and... domestic. Isolated from time in a good way, for once. Homura closed her eyes and let it soak in, memorizing every detail she could. Odd and objectively unremarkable as it was, this definitely belonged in her
mental treasure trove of Good Memories.

The movie was abandoned near the end when Yuzu brightly announced that she was done. Homura tilted her head around to get a feel for the new style and couldn't decide whether or not she liked all the weight in one place. She reserved judgment.

“It's beautiful,” Isshin said warmly. “We should take a picture.”

“You could beat someone to death with that braid,” Karin declared.

Everyone eyed Karin sideways, but no one could really argue. The braid could pass for a heavy rope thicker than a child's wrist.

The rest of the night passed in a comfortable blur. Homura went to sleep that night without obsessing over the mess in Mitakihara. It was more a series of passing thoughts. Hitsugaya's reassurances about her friends' reception of her behavior rang more plausibly when she was with the Kurosaki family. For the moment, Mitakihara was far and later. Karakura was here and now.

Homura wished Karakura and Mitakihara were one and the same. That everyone she cared about was together. Maybe it would make everything easier. It made for a pleasant dream, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hmm. This chapter feels short but this is where the natural break is and the next chunk is too big. *shrug*

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Tōshirō crashed in the room next to the one all the girls were sleeping in. It was his assignment while Urahara and Tsukabishi worked on projects through the night. He observed and memorized each reiatsu signature that was less guarded in sleep, paying particular attention to Tomoe and Momoe for any worrying fluctuation toward darkness that might call for interference. Both felt dimmer than they had, but not dangerously so and they seemed to have stabilized while deeply asleep. He spent several hours texting back and forth with Ichigo and his former captain about Akemi and was glad for Yamamoto's ban on communication with anyone in Seireitei via phone. Matsumoto was probably squirming over not being able to bombard him with requests for gossip and agonizing over having to do her mission report on paper. In duplicate, one for him and one for Yamamoto. The thought made him smirk.

He allowed himself to doze off in the wee hours of the morning and trusted Hyōrinmaru to alert him to any sudden danger, as the dragon spirit did when they had to camp out on long patrols in the Rukon districts. It wasn't a particularly restful night's sleep, but it was enough to not be muddled in the morning. Hyōrinmaru nudged him awake a bit after dawn to alert him that the girls seemed to be awake. He lay and sleepily paid attention to their reiatsu, careful to not intrude with his own— more like eavesdropping on someone behind you in a restaurant than peeking in a window. Tomoe's reiatsu was turbulent and dimming, but stabilized as Kaname's gently rose.

He really needed to talk to Urahara about that girl's reiatsu. Miki's, too. Both were using their reiatsu in ways they seemed to be completely unaware of. Kaname seemed to project hers as a strong empathic tool for comforting people and Akemi mentioned her instinctively using it to repel attackers in the carousel labyrinth. Tōshirō had sensed Miki's weak use of reiatsu when he had carried her on his back after the carousel debacle. He had told her nothing vital seemed to have been hit, but Urahara later corrected him— a bullet had grazed and compromised an artery, but the life-giving fluid within seemed to have remained in its correct path regardless with very little spillage— hemorrhage. She should have bled internally far more than she had. All they had had time to talk about was that seemingly unconscious mitigation of bleeding having added to the girl's exhausted shock. Now that the Sōju crisis was over, they really needed to talk about this.

Tsukabishi's reiatsu approached; Tōshirō heard him knock on the girls' door and them have a conversation. Tsukabishi then fetched Tōshirō. They all trooped into the normal living quarters
portion of the shop compound and helped Tsukabishi make breakfast while Yoruichi—back in cat form—darted around their feet making a nuisance of herself. The big man disappeared as they were sitting down to eat and reappeared five minutes later with Urahara, who looked more rumpled and scruffy than usual. His eyes had the restrained manic look of someone who had been downing unholy amounts of caffeine or God-only-knows-what to pull an all-nighter. Or third or fourth all-nighter, as it were.

When they started to eat, Kaname looked around and timidly asked, “Where's Homura? Did you find her?”

“I talked her into coming back last night,” Tōshirō said, then looked to Urahara to explain her absence and give him a cue for what story to play along with.

“She needs a break to pull herself together a bit. We smuggled her out of town in a way the Incubator shouldn't notice to a place we hid from it with magic,” Urahara half-fibbed.

Miki perked up. “Oh! The same way you brought in Miss In—oh—uuu-oops.” She nervously looked at Tomoe and Momoe, obviously realizing she had just blurted out something she was supposed to keep her mouth shut about. Tōshirō brought a hand up to his face and massaged the space above his eyes.

Teenagers.

“Miss who?” Tomoe asked.

Urahara waved his fan in a motion that implied unimportant. “Oh, I smuggled in the best healer we know on the night you were taken,” he explained. “Miss Akemi’s magic was so depleted from keeping her body alive that she was at her limit and unable to do anything else for herself by the time we got her here. We stabilized her and probably could have healed her ourselves, but it is difficult for most uncontracted people to heal magical girls so it may have taken weeks for it to have a meaningful effect on her. We used up the Grief Seed from that battle on her in one hit and she was still near death and unable to heal herself. And we have no way of finding labyrinths to get Grief Seeds without her.” He paused, then continued, “Well, that was true at the time. We have Miss Momoe now. And you.”

Tsukabishi bent to top off everyone's cups with tea and added, “We had hoped to never need to bring that healer here and risk exposing her to the Incubator in the unlikely event the wards should fail. The Incubator doesn't know she is allied with us and we want it to remain that way. However....”

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” Tōshirō commented quietly. “Making sure Akemi didn't die took priority.”

Tomoe's grip on her teacup tightened and she looked miserable, lips pursed as she looked down. After a long silence, she said, “I was unreasonable with Miss Akemi last night. She was only trying to help.”

“No. Your being upset was both understandable and expected. Akemi was out of line,” Tōshirō said. Tomoe looked at him with surprise; he met her eyes seriously, then glanced at Momoe, too. “Especially when your actions were discussed, Momoe,” he said in an aside. Looking back to Tomoe, he sighed, “Hopefully, the way Miki handled giving information and calling her out will be a good influence on her.”

Miki’s mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. She pointed at herself. “Me? A good
influence?"

If only she knew how bizarre that idea truly was when considering tales of other timelines. From Akemi's perspective, anyway.

"Your bluntness was both honest and sympathetic," Urahara praised her with a small smile. "Miss Akemi shies away from sympathy as a hazard. It's understandable to a degree as a defense mechanism to not add others' pain to her own, but in your words: unhealthy."

"It's not fair." Kaname's lip quivered and her eyes shone with unshed tears. "She tries to help us so much and tries to keep from— keep us from getting hurt, and it keeps hurting her. W-what— how can we help her?" she asked plaintively.

Urahara tilted his head and gave a fond smile. "Be her friend. Stay safe— keeping you two uncontracted and as safe as possible is extremely important to her. She's out of touch with interacting with people her own age because she has been forced to take on responsibilities that would crush many adults, so try to coax her into doing normal teenage things while not treating her oddly when she reacts to them with confusion or awkwardness." He turned to Tomoe and Momoe and softly said, "That goes for you, too. Especially you, Miss Tomoe. Do not let yourself become too solitary or let your duties consume your very being. You see where that path has led Miss Akemi."

Tomoe looked away from them all, guilty.

Miki eventually couldn't take the reflective silence anymore, fidgeted, and asked, "So how do we help Homura now? When she's not here? I know you— you probably don't want to tell us where she is, but... will she be okay there?"

Urahara smiled encouragingly. "She is with friends who form another cell of resistance against the Incubator. Including the only two magical girls she's ever found who managed to both cope with the truth and not get killed afterward. Yet. That pair's family knows everything and includes military veterans, so Miss Akemi doesn't have to be careful about concealing anything while they help her sort herself out."

That was more information than Tōshirō would have given them, so Urahara was probably making some kind of strategic move. Ugh. "That family has been highly effective at calming and helping her get her head straight in the past," he added for the hell of it. "I trust them with her."

"Just please don't tell the Incubator that Miss Akemi isn't here in the shop," Urahara ordered the girls, looking each of them in the eye with particular attention to Momoe and Tomoe. "I've warded the hell out of this place so they shouldn't be able to identify any personal magic from outside the property, so if they don't see someone leave they have no way of knowing that person isn't here. And I am under no illusion that the Incubators have this property under constant surveillance. Our wards are an anomaly in this area."

"Wait, Incubators... plural?" Tomoe asked with a frown.

Tōshirō narrowed his eyes at Urahara, certain he'd "slipped" on purpose. The man ignored him. "Yes, plural," Urahara answered. "We are unsure of to what degree they have individual or collective consciousness, but they have multiple identical bodies for contracting and monitoring magical girls."

Seeing Tomoe's skeptical confusion, Tōshirō said, "You know there are magical girls all over the
“Yes,” Tomoe said slowly.

Tōshirō looked down and gathered more food in his chopsticks, considering his words, then quietly said, “Would it make sense for a single body to interact with that many girls at the same time over such a great distance?”

He didn't look, but he could feel Tomoe's stare as he chewed. After a long pause, she softly said, “No. It would not.”

And so her perception of the “magical” world took another blow. Tōshirō hoped Urahara knew what he was doing.

“All right. So. Setting that aside—” Urahara made a hand motion of pushing something to his left — “we have things to handle on our end.” He pointed at Miki and Kaname with his fan. “You and you, you're going home and staying there. You're going to school tomorrow and straight home after. You've been away from home for too many nights recently and we don't need your parents suspecting you're up to mischief. Don't hole yourselves up in your rooms, either. Actually interact with your families. It should be safer to walk the streets now that Sōju is dead, but Tōshirō will escort you.” He raised his brows in question and both girls nodded firmly.

“You,” Urahara said with a jab toward Tomoe, “You have a choice. I would prefer for you to stay at the shop for a few days so you are not alone while you sort through your feelings on everything, but if you wish to be in your own home I can send Miss Akemi's cat to stay with you to alert you to the Incubator if it should try to observe you.” And strip its flesh from its bones without mercy went unstated but understood. “Or my nephew could stay with you,” he said casually as Tōshirō choked, “but having a boy move in with you without adult supervision so close to your school may cause some rumors.”

Tomoe squeaked and held her hands to her burning cheeks. Miki crooned and leered in a way that made Tōshirō think of an unholy combination of Karin and Rangiku. He knew exactly what she was going to say before she even finished drawing breath to speak.

“Mayyybe you can pretend to be dating,” Miki drawled gleefully.

“NO,” Tōshirō blurted at the same time as Tomoe.

Miki giggled at them with a wide grin, still looking like a combination of the two women who most enjoyed teasing him until he snapped. “Maybe you could actually date!”

Time to shut this down. Tōshirō glared at her straight in the eye and ominously said, “Maybe I really do need to have a talk with that Kamijō guy.”

“No!” Miki squealed as glee fled her face.

“Who’s Kamijō?” Momoe asked innocently as she slipped scraps to Yoruichi. Tōshirō allowed himself a wide smirk as Miki squirmed. “Miki’s boyfriend.”

“Oooooooooloooolooh,” Momoe cooed as she looked at Miki with interest.

“Is not!” Miki squawked.
Kaname glanced at her friend sideways with a sly smile. “This is why you don't tease people, Sayaka. They can tease you right back.”

*Clap, clap!* “Children!”

Tōshirō glared hard at Urahara. It didn't help that Hyōrinmaru was chuckling lowly in the back of his mind.

“Miss Tomoe, I apologize for asking you to make a fairly large decision with very little time to consider your options, but I really need to know your choice so I can shift my plans accordingly.”

The blonde bit her lip and fidgeted uncertainly, then looked up at Urahara. “I think... I would like to stay here. Think things through. And learn things. But I need to go home and pick up some stuff. If that's all right with you.”

Urahara beamed. “It is. I'll have Tessai put a guest room together for you. Would you mind going with Tōshirō to escort Miss Miki and Miss Kaname home before you both head to your home? I'd like their parents to see that the 'other friend' we used in last night's excuse for them to stay the night actually exists.”

Tomoe smiled weakly. “That's fine.”

The shopkeeper nodded decisively and turned to Momoe. “I think I'll send Yoruichi home with you. She will protect you if the Incubator comes and tries to talk to you. It can say some tricky things.”

Momoe's eyes widened as she pulled Yoruichi up into her lap. “But isn't Yo-yo Miss Homura's kitty?”

Urahara’s eyes gleamed wickedly as he glanced at the cat and Tōshirō knew Yoruichi had acquired a new nickname to be teased with. “She is. But Miss Akemi regularly lets her stay with other girls because Yo-yo hates the Incubator and will fight it off tooth and claw.”

Yoruichi let herself go boneless and stretch out in that way particular to cats as Momoe lifted her under the armpits to cuddle against her. The little girl shyly said, “Okay. But what if Daddy says no?”

Urahara waved his fan at her and said, “Let me worry about your daddy. You just act like Yoruichi makes you very happy and less lonely and I'll convince him having Yoruichi around will be good for you. If he argues, you just start crying, okay?” Meaning Urahara had meticulously planned out how to tug every single one of Mr. Momoe's heartstrings dedicated to making his grieving daughter happy.

“Okay!” Momoe chirped. She sat up straighter. “What do we tell Daddy about yesterday?”

That was how Tōshirō ended up quietly leaning against a wall in the room they had stashed Mr. Momoe in as Urahara nudged the man awake and gave him water.

“Where am I?” Mr. Momoe asked.


Mr. Momoe snapped into alertness and searched the room. “Where's Nagisa?!”
Urahara made a soothing gesture. “A couple rooms away, in the dining room with her friends.”

“Friends?”

“The girls who came to your wife's funeral. And another friend of theirs.”

“Oh.” Mr. Momoe scrutinized them cautiously, eyes distant as he thought. “How... did I get here?” he asked. “The last thing I remember is getting on the train to come home from Shinchi with Sacchan.”

“I believe you experienced a mild fugue state,” Urahara answered.

“A what?”

“A brief episode of dissociative fugue,” Urahara said. “As I understand it, you just experienced the traumatic shock of your wife's death and becoming a single parent, yes?”

“Yes,” Mr. Momoe said warily.

“Sometimes, when faced with such stress, the mind just... checks out,” Urahara explained. “Detaches from the stressful things by forgetting about them for a bit. I'm glad it seems to have passed. You were very disoriented last night. Confused and detached and just... wandering.”


“You just wandered aimlessly. Nagisa couldn't get you to remember how to get home and became alarmed when you crossed a street without paying attention to cars,” Urahara said as Momoe's father looked like he had been punched in the gut. “She didn't know what to do, so she called her new friends. The girls were visiting my nephew here—” he gestured toward Tōshirō, who nodded silently— “so we all went and brought you here together.” He tilted his head and looked sympathetic. “A friend of mine had a similar reaction in the weeks after his wife died and left him with three young children, so I thought I'd bring you here to see if it would pass. Had you still been disoriented upon waking, I would have called authorities. But I thought you might prefer for it to remain a private matter if it was a brief episode.”

Mr. Momoe looked down, pale and ill, and croaked, “Thank you. Yes. I can't... I can't afford to be hospitalized or— or committed, or whatever. Sacchan needs me.”

“There is no shame in grief, or how your grief manifested. The mind protects itself the best way it knows how,” Urahara said quietly. “But I would recommend you seek professional grief counseling. You need to take care of yourself if you want to take care of her.”

Mr. Momoe scrubbed his face with his hands. “Yeah. Yeah. I'll do that. God, she must have been terrified.”

“She was frightened, yes,” Urahara said with a gentle smile. “But the older girls turned the whole thing into a slumber party and got her cheered up. She's also become attached to our cat.”

“Of course she has,” Mr. Momoe said with a wry grin. He straightened and firmed his face, then bowed. Upon rising again, he looked Urahara in the eye and said, “Thank you for all you've done for my family. I am indebted to you. How can I repay you?”

Urahara laughed lightly and waved his hands. “You are quite welcome, but I require no payment. I would hope someone else would do the same for me, is all.” He cocked his head to one side and
looked thoughtful. “Maybe you should take a few weeks off from work. Stay home with your daughter and heal together.”

Tōshirō had to admire the deft way Urahara was angling to have the youngest magical girl be less able to get away from her father and get herself killed in a labyrinth. Manipulative as hell, but necessary to limit the number of balls they had to juggle.

“Ah, I can’t,” Mr. Momoe said with regret. “I used up my five days’ paid bereavement leave. I could get unpaid leave, but what money I have saved would go to the rent and utilities so I need to work to have money for food.”

“Oh. I see. That’s too bad,” Urahara said softly. But there was a calculating gleam in his eye. Tōshirō would bet his haori Mr. Momoe would soon discover that all his outstanding balances had been mysteriously paid off.

Urahara slapped his hands on his knees and stood. “So! How about we get you some breakfast? Then my assistant can drive you and your daughter home in the shop’s van.”

Mr. Momoe rubbed his eyes and said, “I would appreciate that, actually.”

Urahara glanced at Tōshirō. “Please let Tessai know to set another place at the table, Tōshirō.”

Tōshirō nodded and left. Back in the dining room, he found Miki telling some kind of melodramatic story that involved a lot of exaggerated faces and expansive arm gestures. Tomoe was holding a hand to her face to stifle giggles while Momoe leaned forward in her seat with wide eyes. He ignored them and found Urahara’s assistant. “Tsukabishi. Another place at the table, please.”

Tsukabishi nodded genially and moved to the kitchen as Urahara led Mr. Momoe into the room. His daughter noticed immediately. Her face lit up and she squealed, “Daddy! You’re awake!”

Mr. Momoe smiled wanly. “Yep. I feel much better now, too.”

“Yay!” Momoe ran to her father and threw her arms around his middle. He hugged her back until she pulled away and tugged on his hand. “Daddy, look! I helped cook!”

“You did? Wow! What did you make?”

Tōshirō couldn’t resist the slight smile that stole across his lips as the little girl bodily dragged her father to the table, chattering a mile a minute.

“And I helped Miss Mami with the strawberries and— Oh! Daddy, this is Miss Mami! She’s very nice!”

Said girls held their wrists up to show off their bracelets, obviously amused by the little girl. Tōshirō glanced at Tsukabishi as he set a place at the table. The man nodded at him. He must have given her the one they made overnight while Urahara and Tōshirō were in the other room.

“Wow, it’s so pretty!” Mr. Momoe said. “Did you say thank you?”
“Yeah!” Momoe smiled brightly and tugged him down. “Sit, sit! Have breakfast!”

Mr. Momoe sat, looking deeply relieved. Probably glad his daughter didn't seem frightened or traumatized by whatever had happened the night before. And possibly that she was capable of cheer a mere week after her mother's death.

Miki resumed telling her stories. Whenever she paused for breath, Mr. Momoe would make a point of exclaiming how good the food was, which would make his daughter puff up with pride. Then Yoruichi sidled up from under the table and started meowing at the man's heels.

Momoe hopped off her chair and picked up the cat. “Yo-yo, no begging!”

Her father's lips quirked. “Is that the shop cat?”

“Yo-yo is Miss Homura's kitty,” Momoe explained. “Mr. Urahara is babysitting her because Miss Homura had to leave for a few days.”

“Yoruichi may as well be half ours,” Urahara chuckled. “She tends to follow Miss Akemi a lot and since she spent a lot of time at our old shop in Tokyo... well, Miss Kitty thinks she can boss us all around. Once she decides she likes you, you're pretty much her property ahahahahaha.”

“I love Yo-yo,” Momoe announced brightly as she hugged the cat. Yoruichi purred loudly and nuzzled the girl's face, causing her to giggle. “I want to take her home!”

“You know,” Urahara said speculatively, “I spoke with Miss Akemi about how much you like her cat. She said that if Yoruichi makes you happy and you promise to take good care of her, you can watch her until she comes back. I actually gave Yoruichi to her as a kitten after... well, after her own parents died,” he added softly. Ignoring the surprised sadness on the faces of Akemi's friends, he concluded, “So she's fine with lending her to you.”

Momoe was either genuinely excited or a damn good actress because she immediately turned wide, sparkly eyes on her father. “Daddy, can I babysit Yo-yo until Miss Homura comes home?!”

Mr. Momoe's face faltered. “Ah... well... uh....”

“I promise I'll take really good care of her!”

“We don't have a litter box or anything.”

Momoe turned to Urahara with a pout. The shopkeeper said, “Ah, she actually goes outside. Miss Akemi lets her roam around outdoors while she's at school. As long as you give her food and pet her on demand, she's pretty low-maintenance. I can give you her food.”

The girl whirled back to her father with a hopeful face. The man dithered. “I dunno, Sacchan....”

Momoe's lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears, much to her father's alarm. It reminded Tōshirō of Matsumoto's last resort tactic when trying to squirm out of paperwork or slip out to go shopping. It was more potent on the face of an actual child.

“O— okay,” her father stammered. “Just... just a few days, right?”

Momoe's face immediately cleared. “Yay! Thank you, Daddy!”
Tōshirō and Tomoe walked Miki and Kaname home at a lazy, meandering pace. Miki's parents did seem fairly annoyed with her, but Tomoe proved to be a master of politely smoothing ruffled feathers. She doled out relieved smiles and thanks for sympathy and help with her “emergency” to the parents as much as their daughter, praising all for saving a lonely orphan's schooling until it would be rude for them to get irritated. Miki was obviously in awe as she disappeared behind her apartment's door.

Kaname's house was far less tense. Her father was away for the day—“sanity-preserving baby break,” Mrs. Kaname had declared as her toddler trotted in circles screaming at nothing—but her mother more than made up for his absence with her own concerned hovering. Tomoe skilfully avoided getting roped into staying awhile, slipping out with promises to seek the help of the Kaname adults if she ever needed anything.

The walk to Tomoe's apartment was mostly quiet, though Tōshirō did notice she kept looking at him searchingly. She finally spoke when they were halfway to their destination.

“You... skipped school to look for m-Sōju?”

Tōshirō looked at her out of the corner of his eyes and kept himself casual. “Yeah.”

“You're... not even a magical girl, tho—ah! I mean, well, obviously, since you're a boy, but—aaahhhhh—” she wrung her hands and looked mortified—“I mean, I didn't expect anyone but a magical girl to care about magical girl business.”

Lips twitching with amusement, Tōshirō said, “Even if I didn't have friends who had been wronged by the system, I wouldn't stand idly by if someone's life and soul were in danger. Not if there was something I could do to help.” He cast his eyes down at the ground and considered whether or not to continue, weighing the pros and cons. Opening up to Akemi seemed to have a positive affect, so perhaps.... He hesitated until he got the impression of a mental shove from Hyōrinmaru. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Slowly, he added, “That's why shattering those Gems—even by accident—I'm... horrified, I suppose. I wanted to save them.”

Tomoe's face softened in sympathy. “I... would feel the same way. I would probably be a crying mess,” she said ruefully. “Have been, when I fai—I f-failed to save—.” She cut herself off and went silent for awhile, watching her feet and obviously wrestling with old pain. Then she looked back up at him. “But you did manage to save almost four dozen of them. Including me. Miss Akemi isn't here to thank, but I want to thank you. You barely met me, and yet....” Tomoe trailed off and looked away.

“You're welcome,” Tōshirō said after a long pause.

The rest of their stroll was completed in silence. At Tomoe's door, the girl invited and then cajoled him into waiting comfortably in her apartment while she gathered her things, turning that weaponized politeness on him until he reluctantly agreed. As soon as they had taken their shoes off and passed from the foyer into the apartment proper, Tōshirō was fiercely glad he had accepted the invitation.

There on the coffee table sat the Incubator, tail snaking behind it as it stared at them. It looked almost exactly like the sketches he'd seen. Except the sketches hadn't conveyed how creepy the beady pink-red eyes truly were.

*Welcome home, Mami Tomoe,* it chirped.
Tomoe's arms locked at her sides, her fists clenching so hard they shook as her face darkened and her reiatsu vibrated with hurt-rage-betrayal in a way Tōshirō had become very familiar with during the Winter War. “Get out,” Tomoe snapped.

The creature tilted its head. *But I wish to speak with you.*

“I don't want to hear a word,” Tomoe said.

*Why not?* it asked as it blinked innocently.

“Because I don't trust a single word you say to me anymore,” Tomoe declared with the beginnings of tears in her eyes. “They told me all about what you did to my soul, you *liar*—!”

*I do not speak lies,* it interrupted her.

“ Lies of omission are still lies,” Tōshirō drawled.

The Incubator stared directly at him for the first time. Though its face was expressionless, Tōshirō felt it was performing some manner of threat assessment of him. Good. Now was probably a good time to initiate the plan Karin had gleefully termed *Operation: Incu-Baiting.*

“Don't even bother philosophically arguing that point,” Tōshirō interrupted its attempt to reply. “We've gone round in circles about it every time we met and, frankly, it's gotten boring.”

*The creature's tail stilled. We have never met before.*

Tōshirō allowed himself a grim smile. “If that's truly what you think, then our methods are more effective than we thought.”

“What... methods?” Tomoe asked as she glanced between the two of them.

“Ever since the debacle with Akemi's original team, we've been helping her try to save other girls,” Tōshirō explained without breaking eye contact with the Incubator's rabbit-like eyes scrutinizing him. “Every time we come close, the Incubator either sweet-talks the girls we're protecting or aims other magical girls at Akemi. Moving on to another group when we failed with one became a non-starter because it would poison the minds of other girls before we could reach them.” He smirked at the Incubator. “So we cast an exhausting spell to interfere with memories of us whenever we move on.”

*The Incubator seemed speechless for a moment, then said, Impossible.*

“Is it really?” Tōshirō said airily.

*You are bluffing.*

“Am I?” Tōshirō crossed his arms and looked at it flatly in the way he reserved for new recruits skeptical of his apparent youth. “I notice you didn't argue that you don't sweet-talk or pit magical girls against each other when it suits your needs.”

*White fur bristled, but it seemed to be considering its reply. Best to interrupt that. Don't let it regain its balance.*

“Sōju first showed up specifically looking for Akemi. By name and on sight. She wasn't local. I wonder why she came to Mitakihara and specifically sought Akemi. Considering our past encounters... I suspect you were directly involved.”
Ayase and Luca Sōju were magical girl hunters, the Incubator argued. They traveled widely in search of prey. It is not unreasonable that they would visit Mitakihara.

“Oh? So you knew about them? Well, you know most magical girls, so that isn't surprising.” Tōshirō was sorely pressed not to laugh as he faked piqued interest. “You know, you didn't deny influencing Sōju's choice to come here. And also...” He craned his head around to look at Tomoe with heavy eyelids. “Tomoe, did this thing warn you about the Sōju coming to town?”

Tomoe was quivering with emotion, glaring at the creature with furious accusation. “No. It did not. Not even when Miss Akemi warned me. It avoided me after I confronted—” her eyes widened and her reiatsu flared in outrage. “You really did try to play me against Homura, didn't you?!” she gasped. Angry tears finally spilled down her cheeks. “And when I made peace instead of fighting — I became— I became useless to you, didn't I?"

Will you really allow these strangers to come between us, Mami Tomoe? the Incubator wondered sadly.

Tōshirō's brows rose at the obvious avoidance of an actual reply. He had expected the thing to split hairs with the definition of “useless” or something. At least Tomoe noticed the dodge and got even angrier.

“You tried to make sure I'd never listen to Homura,” Tomoe snapped. “You wanted me against her from the start.”

I attempted to protect you from her, it said as though hurt.

“Protect a strategic asset from outside influence to question your methods and goals, you mean,” Tōshirō interrupted.

It turned beady eyes on him as its mark's rage was stoked ever hotter, the slight shifting of its fur indicating tense twitching of muscles. It was frustrated. Excellent.

I think it is unused to someone who looks so young being an equal match in a verbal spar, Hyōrinmaru commented with grim smugness.

Bless the tactical advantage of a youthful face, Tōshirō wryly thought to his dragon. Though it of all beings should know to never trust appearances. The answering rumble of distant thunder from within his Inner World was like a dark laugh. Tomoe's starting to hold her own now that the blindfold's been torn off, though.

True, Hyōrinmaru admitted.

Tomoe marched to the sliding glass door to her balcony and slammed it open. “Get out.”

But Mami—

“Shut up.”

If you do not hear my side, you will have an unbalanced view of events.

“I had an unbalanced view by listening only to you. Leave.”

The Incubator sighed and daintily dropped to the floor. As it took its time approaching the door, it mournfully said, This is not like you. What did they tell you to affect you so?”
“They told me the truth about Soul Gems,” Tomoe hissed as Tōshirō moved to follow the Incubator. “I never want to speak to you again, Incubator!”

The Incubator stopped just shy of the door and looked up at Tomoe. *I see. Well, the last two years together have been fun—*

“The last two years have been a lie,” Tomoe snarled. “Don't act like you were my friend when you were using me. Leave!”

*I never spoke an untruthful word to y—urk!*

And that was when Tōshirō had enough of word games, flooded his right leg with his reiatsu to coat his sock-clad foot in ice, and literally kicked the Incubator out. His foot connected with the little monster as though it was a soccer ball. It rocketed out the open door and over the edge of the balcony at high speed, trailing ice crystals like a comet. Tōshirō hoped its landing was painful.

So satisfying.

Tomoe was frozen in shock, wide-eyed and incredulous. Tōshirō met her eyes as he dissolved his ice, lowered his leg, and tucked his hands back in his pockets. “What a pain,” he said boredly. “Demon never knows when to shut up.”

The girl's mouth opened and closed speechlessly. She kept looking from him to the open air outside her balcony. Finally, she sputtered, “De—demon?”

Tōshirō blinked in surprise. That wasn't what he thought she'd latch onto. “Ah. I meant it in the pejorative sense, but that option isn't off the table. We're still not sure exactly *what* it is.”

Tomoe just squawked and looked around like she didn't recognize anything or had been stunned into forgetting where she was. Her world had been shaken again. “Demon?” she repeated quietly.

Tōshirō let her fret for a minute then gently prodded, “We came here to get your things.”

“Right. Right,” Tomoe said. She looked unfocused for another moment then snapped back to reality and declared, “I'll make you some tea to drink while I pack. If—if you want, I mean.”

Tōshirō didn't particularly care, but he was strongly reminded of how Karin's sister used routine domestic tasks to calm herself. “All right.”

As he savored his tea and waited for Tomoe, Tōshirō mentally combed through the interaction with the Incubator to firm it all in his memory. Hopefully, their plan to prod the Incubator into looking at itself for nonexistent outside interference with its memories would distract it. Tomoe seemed to be solidly on their side. And he had gotten to kick the Incubator out a high-rise window. Karin would be jealous.

So satisfying.

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**A/N:**

Kyubey: ❣️ ⼈ glColorConverter(stdout).color(192, 255, 255) ² ⼈ 

I technically never said anything untruthf--
Tōshirō: #(■ 〰■) *boot*

Mami:  unmanned

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: I didn't really want to release this until I had more than the next chapter written for Reasons, but I feel badly about how long it's been since I posted. I've been having difficulty writing for a number of real-world and health reasons that have been dragging me down and it frustrates me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that afternoon, Mami sat on the edge of the veranda in the shop's inner courtyard and tried to settle her confused thoughts. So far, all she had accomplished was downshifting from laser-focused anger into nebulous distress. Watching the koi lazily swimming in the pond was soothing, so she tried to focus on that. If she could just settle on one topic, maybe her world would stop wobbling on its axis. That topic may as well be fish swimming in circles without a care in the world.

A hysterical laugh tried to rise in her throat, but she clamped down on it. She was jealous of fish. Fish.

“Here.”

Mami looked up. Hitsugaya stood nearby, holding out a small paper bag. Curious, Mami took it and peered inside. Some kind of pellets.

“Fish food,” he explained without being asked. “I recommend throwing some on one side, then the other. Make them chase it. May as well make them work for your attention.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “Thank you.”

He solemnly nodded at her. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you. I'm fine.”

“All right. Call me if you think of anything.” Hitsugaya turned and stepped away.

Mami's breath caught in sudden panic and she reached after him. “Wait! Stay!”

Hitsugaya stopped and glanced at her over his shoulder, surprised.

Cheeks burning, Mami mumbled, “I mean—! I— I don't want to be alone.”

The boy's face relaxed into sympathy and he returned to her, paused, and sat an arm's length away
from her. Mami fretted for a moment, then placed the paper bag on the wooden slats between them. Hitsugaya looked at her curiously, then grabbed a handful of fish food and settled facing the pond. They wordlessly eased into a pattern in which one of them threw food on one side of the pond, they both waited for the fish to eat it, and the other one threw food on the other side of the pond. Mami half expected him to try to... actually, she didn't know what. Get her to talk? But he didn't. He was just... present.

She didn't know how much time had passed; just that the sunlight was more orange than yellow and the paper bag was more than half empty when she hesitantly asked, “Can I... think out loud with you?”

A brief flash of teal as he glanced at her. “Of course,” he said agreeably.

Mami took a deep breath and tried to decide where to start. “So. Kyu— the Incubator. He— it... took my soul out of my body?”

“Yeah,” Hitsugaya answered.

Mami looked down at her ring and made her Soul Gem flash and turn into its egg form with a thought. She looked at the yellow stone and slowly said, “This... is my... my soul?”

“Yes.”

Mami forced herself to take several deep breaths. “When my soul is too far away from my body, they... separate? I mean... And I lose consciousness?”

“Yeah.”

“The Incubator did this to me in exchange for a wish... so I would fight Witches.” After a pause, she added, “For it. But why?”

After a moment of quiet, Hitsugaya prompted, “What does it get when you defeat a Witch?”

“A Grief Seed,” Mami answered immediately. “It... eats them. It gave me a wish to... pay for? ...me collecting Grief Seeds for it to eat.”

Hitsugaya sighed heavily. “Yeah.”

Mami turned toward him and considered his troubled face as he cast more fish food into the pond. “There's more, isn't there? Another reason it does this?”

He didn't look at her. “Yeah.”

She could tell that she wouldn't get more out of him on that front, so she went quiet for a bit. Her Soul Gem was warm in her palm. Mami rolled it around morosely and finally said, “Am I even human anymore? Am I— am I just a... haunted rock?”

Hitsugaya choked and coughed, probably trying not to laugh. He did an admirable job of it, but it was obvious.

“That... came out really strangely, didn't it?” Mami asked with an embarrassed laugh.

“Yeah,” he said as he fought a smirk. “I get what you mean, though.” Hitsugaya looked directly at her and firmly said, “You are human. Your soul is human. It has an unusual form now, but it's still a recognizably human soul.” He paused and looked thoughtful, then slowly said, “It is not unheard
of for a human's soul to... leave the body, you know. Without dying, I mean. Rare, but not unheard of.”

Mami looked at him in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Astral projection is real?”

He blinked slowly, nonplussed. “I... guess you could call it that?”

“Can you do it?”

“...Uh.”

All right, now she was really interested. Hitsugaya noticed; he grimaced and looked away. She couldn't help but smile at him. “You didn't mean to reveal that, did you?”

His cheeks went pink and he muttered something unintelligible.

“Why don't you want that known?”

Hitsugaya blew out a deep breath and scrubbed his hands through his hair. “It's... I guess you could call it a high-level technique. Spiritual power— magic— is stronger without having to go through a body. Like a... filter, I guess. If the Incubator knew I was capable of leaving my body to fight.... Well, we don't know what it might do. Considering how it reacts to Akemi, it might find a way to convince other magical girls I'm a threat and try to take me out with a mob or something.”

“O— oh.” Mami could feel the blood drain from her face as she had a vivid mental image of him cornered by other magical girls she knew of working together as a team for once to fight a common 'enemy'. Before this week, she could have been one of them. Could have trapped him in ribbons while Kyōko and Nonon and others—

“So I keep it as a last resort for if I get pushed into a corner by something that could destroy my soul. After all—” he gave her a wry look— “my empty body would be just laying there, vulnerable. A lot of spiritual predators don't give a damn about empty bodies, but the Incubator is smart enough that it could direct a magical girl to destroy it.” After a thoughtful pause, he continued, “If it comes down to staying in my body and having my soul destroyed or leaving my body and having my body destroyed while my soul survives, I'll take the latter. But I'd rather not have to make that call.” The boy searched her face for a moment then solemnly added, “Please don't tell anyone I can do that. Akemi knows, but the other girls do not.”

“I won't. I promise,” Mami said quickly.

Hitsugaya nodded and turned back to the pond. “Anyway, back to your situation. I think... the Incubator not telling you what it would do before it did it was a deep violation. For all its victims. It'll say it got agreement for the exchange but... by not giving all the details, I think that contract should be invalid. There's no....” He gestured vaguely after throwing some fish food, frowning hard and grasping for words. “I think the legal term is informed consent. If you agree to a deal, you can't make a real choice if you don't have all the information about it, yeah?”

“Mm.” Mami let her Soul Gem turn back into a ring and refilled her hand from the bag of pellets. She threw more out when it was her turn, thinking aloud. “Even knowing that... doesn't change that my soul is... I don't know. Deformed?”
“Is not,” Hitsugaya scoffed as though offended at the very notion.

Mami looked down and mumbled, “Maybe 'mutilated' is a better word.”

“Nothing is... 'deformed' or 'mutilated' about your soul.”

“My soul is a rock,” Mami argued dully.

“A gemstone,” Hitsugaya corrected.

“What's the difference?” Mami asked, her voice cracking as she tried not to cry.

“Gemstones are beautiful, obviously,” he said as casually as declaring water wet. “Yours looks like, what, amber? Topaz? Something precious.”

Mami stared. Hitsugaya threw his fish food and waited for her to take her turn, not looking at her. Eventually, he noticed that she wasn't taking her turn and looked at her sideways. She was still staring at him in surprise. He furrowed his brow in confusion.

“What? What is it?”

“Did— did you just—?” Mami hesitated, then continued with a wobbly voice, “Did you just say my soul is... beautiful?”

Hitsugaya's entire body froze. His mouth dropped open and he stared at her with widening eyes as his face flushed. He made a strangled sound and looked torn between embarrassment, worry, and panic.

“Oh, my.”

Ears going red and face contorting into horror, Hitsugaya joined Mami in turning to their left and saw his uncle standing in a doorway, eyes twinkling merrily as he hid the rest of his face behind his fan.

“I was going to call you to dinner but perhaps I should leave you for a bit,” Mr. Urahara cooed. “It's not—! It isn't—!” Even Hitsugaya's neck was going red now.

“I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your romantic moment.”

“It wasn't romantic!” Hitsugaya screeched.

Mami couldn't help it. Bright laughter burst from her lips. Hitsugaya whirled to look at her incredulously. It was too funny. She laughed so hard she cried and gasped for breath. Every time she thought she had herself under control, she took one glance at Hitsugaya's baffled and mortified expression, his uncle's glee, and just lost it all over again.

“Ahhh, you make her so happy, my darling nephew! You two are truly blessed!”

“What?!”

“Look at that smile! You put it there! That laughter like music! How charming!”

“I didn't—! What?!”

Mr. Urahara waved his fan at them in a shooing motion. “You two have fun. Make sure she comes
up for air now and then, Tōshirō!"

“What is that supposed to— what?!”

“I mean the laughter, of course, you naughty boy~! You're too young for that kind of kissing~!”

“What?!”

And Mr. Urahara disappeared into the house with a clatter of geta and an “Ohohohoho~!”

Mami held a hand over her mouth, centered herself, took a deep breath through her nose, and looked at Hitsugaya. He was the very picture of overwhelmed dismay as Mami's giggles triumphed and he slowly lowered his face into his hands.

Ichigo woke early on Monday and had a quiet chat with his father as they cooked breakfast before the girls woke. They went quiet when the girls' reiatsu approached and looked at the doorway, where the three stopped and blearily looked in at them. Adorable.

Snap!

Everyone turned to Isshin, who was shoving his phone back in his pocket with glee.

“The hell you take our picture for, Goat Face?” Karin snarled. She self-consciously reached up to pat her hair, then grimaced at the mess she felt.

“To add to the family album!” Isshin gushed. “It needs more pictures of you three together! And you're all so cute when you're sleepy!”

Karin rolled her eyes, but Homura stared at Isshin, eyes wide in her otherwise blank face.

Yuzu pouted and rubbed her eyes. “I could've made breakfast.”

“You get a day off,” Ichigo said with a little grin.

“We get a day off school, too, right?” Karin asked as she flopped into a chair at the table.

“Nope,” Ichigo and his father said at the same time. Ichigo continued, “Better eat fast and get dressed.”

“What?!” Karin cried, finally provoked into full alertness. She looked offended. “Why not?!”

“We've missed too much lately,” Yuzu sighed as she took her own place.

Karin's face twisted into childish objection. “Homura gets to miss school!”

Isshin pointed a serving spoon at Homura, who was still staring at him from the doorway. “Homura has a heart condition on file. They expect her to miss school.”

“You're a doctor,” Karin very nearly whined. “Lie about us!”

“Nope!” Isshin sang.
“Why not?! You've done it before!”

“Not in the mood,” Isshin said lightly.

“But I want to hang out with Homura!”

“You can hang out with her after school,” Isshin said firmly. “Let your brother have a chance to spend time with her.”

“Wait, Ichimaru gets to skip school?!” Karin shrilled. “Why?!”

“Because I'm older,” Ichigo said with a teasing smirk designed to piss off his sister. “I get to play lazy college student. They don't care if I don't show up as long as they get paid and I turn in my classwork.”

“No fair!”

Ichigo laughed at her obnoxiously. His sister scowled and looked for something to throw at him, but the table was empty. She glared at him and stewed in her frustration.

“Come sit down, Homura,” Yuzu beckoned with a little wave of her hand.

Homura was still standing in the doorway, wide eyes staring at all of them now. Girl really needed to get it through her head that she was an honorary Kurosaki. A dubious honor, maybe, but pretty much unavoidable now.

“Is there something on my face, Stopwatch?” Ichigo asked loudly, then made a show of feeling around his face. His father mimicked him with the addition of a ridiculously worried facial expression.

“Ah— I— ah— no,” the girl stammered. Homura looked lost for a moment, leaned forward as though to take a step, pulled back in hesitation, canted her head to one side to look at them all like they were utterly baffling, then haltingly approached the table.

Ichigo cajoled Homura into coming with as they accompanied the sisters to their school. Karin grumbled and bitched the whole way, but Ichigo thought it was mostly for show. He couldn't tell whether or not Homura realized that. He stood with Homura and waved the twins off, then turned to her when they disappeared. “Coffee?”

Homura stared up at him with that now-familiar expression of caution, head tilted so her long hair cascaded over her shoulder, still wavy from its night in a braid. “All right,” she said eventually.

Ichigo ruffled her hair with a grin and waved her to follow. “Come on. I know just the place.”

His past self's notebook had mentioned something like this. Specific café hadn't been mentioned—that “him” had passed on a largely rambling scrawl of jumbled thoughts which told him volumes about how badly things had gone—but Ichigo would bet it was his usual favorite. Overnight, he had debated whether or not to go to the same place—he didn't want to look like he was following a blueprint or something—but decided to go there again anyway. Make sure to mention it was his favorite in case another “him” had to do this. Ichigo hoped that wouldn't be necessary, but his father had said Urahara's bet was on more repetitions. It was infuriating, really. Ichigo didn't want Homura to have to reset at all, but if she did, he wished he could go with her. That they could all go with her. It wasn't fucking fair to send her back alone to strangers with familiar faces. And so he had decided that if he couldn't follow her, he'd make damn sure every other “him” would be able to pick up where he left off. Establish some kind of routine or tradition for all of “him” to give...
Homura some measure of constancy.

And here he was, thinking of himself in the third person plural and making perfect sense. His life was many things but it would never be dull.

Ichigo had already filled an entire notebook with both a more coherent proof of authorship and painstaking details about everything that happened when he interacted with Homura, what he thought about her behavior, and what others said about her. It felt super stalkery, but he needed to learn more about her to pass down if Homura got reticent again. He thought he had laid a decent foundation for the next “him,” but he needed more. So he asked Zangetsu to help him remember little things to write down later. Little preferences and tastes like he knew about his sisters—material for another “him” to make small gestures of inclusion to her.

So. Homura liked two pumps of almond syrup in her iced coffee— easy on the ice. She liked Almond Crush Pocky. She liked chocolate syrup on her vanilla ice cream, but not very much of it. She preferred water to soda and bun cha over pho. If she borrowed clothes from the twins, she leaned more toward Yuzu's closet than Karin's. She didn't seem very enthusiastic about playing video games, but she was content to watch others play. She enjoyed soccer— wasn't as obsessed as Karin, but was capable of being just as intense in the moment. She observed Yuzu's cooking intently, as though trying to learn. She listened more than she spoke. She eyed the rest of them oddly when the family got wild while they ate— something between what the hell is happening, I don't know you people, and I am judging you— and had impeccable manners. She willingly subjected herself to hell for her best friend's sake. She had an easy friendship with Karin and Yuzu, wavered between welcome and wariness of Isshin, demonstrated a decent degree of respect for Tōshirō, and was pissed at Urahara's games. She had deep curiosity and a subtle sense of humor, even though a lot of humor seemed to fly right over her head. She hated being denied information or being interfered with without warning.

It wasn't enough, but it was something.

Ichigo led Homura to his usual thinking-bench by the river and noted that she hesitated before sitting, choosing a spot not quite all the way to the opposite end of the bench. He waited her out, thinking of a group text he had received from Tōshirō noting that he had managed to have a decently long conversation with her by minimizing eye contact and not pressuring her to speak. So he relaxed, sipping his coffee and watching the soothing eddies of water and light playing in the river until the girl stopped shifting uncomfortably and settled in her seat.

“So. I'm not stupid enough to start with how are you doing, since you're obviously not doing well,” Ichigo began.

“Obviously,” Homura muttered darkly.

Ichigo ignored it. “So I'm just gonna jump straight to I know how shitty it is when an enemy swoops in from nowhere and fucks with your friends while you're trying to figure out what the hell is going on at the same time you're trying to get stronger to protect them. It's a really, really shitty feeling I wouldn't wish on anyone. Screws with your head.” He calmly sipped his coffee, not looking at the girl though he was very aware of her stare.

“What makes you think you know?” she asked slowly.

So he told her about the entire Xcution debacle a year past. How the monotony of his powerless existence was broken by the arrival of the Xcution Fullbringers and their offer of training in a new power. How Ishida had been mysteriously attacked, the looming threat of Tsukishima, Ichigo's desperate struggle to master his Fullbring and be useful again, the horror of realizing Tsukishima
had interfered with everyone's memories to make them think he was a faithful ally who had been by their sides through all their struggles in spiritual matters. The sheer confusion and paranoia of it all, of people Ichigo cared about having radically different memories from his, making him question his own sanity. His friendship with Ginjō, which ended with a stab from Tsukishima's Book of the End memory-altering blade and the revelation that the entire Xcution crew had gone so far as to have their memories of plotting against Ichigo altered to make their act perfect, cultivating his powers to steal them. How he had literally cried in despair in the rain at the second loss of his ability to fight until Urahara showed up with that brilliant sword of light containing whispers of the reiatsu of so many of his shinigami comrades, all sweeping through him to rekindle his power. The dramatic reappearance of Thirteen Divisions leadership to fight at his side again. Riruka throwing herself between Ichigo and Tsukishima's last desperate attack. The bittersweet victory.

It was a long story and took a long time to deliver, but Homura sat through the entire thing in rapt attention. Her only interruptions were requests to define spiritual terms new to her. He was pretty sure she'd be asking others for clarification later because that was the sort of explanation he had trouble with. They sat in companionable silence for a long while after. When Homura finally spoke, it was not to question the basis of his empathy.

“It all sounds very... Shakespearean,” she commented. “Themes of identity, illusion, conspiracy, betrayal....”

Ichigo burst out laughing. “I'd never thought of it that way before!” He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. “Oh, God, it applies to the start of the Winter War, too. I need to tell Ishida. He thinks Shakespeare has little relevance to modern times. It's all lit nerd hype, or something.” He laughed again at the look on Homura's face and poked her forehead. “You're pretty Shakespearean too, you know.”

Homura frowned in a way that came damn near pouting and batted his hand away. “Am not,” she groused.

“Are you kidding? You burst onto the scene all—” he threw his arms into a dramatic pose to gesture with his coffee cup and raised his chin to speak skyward in a lofty voice, switching to English— “My lord, I have remembrances of yours That I have longèd long to redeliver! I pray you now receive them!”

Her eyes and mouth went wide in surprise. She blinked rapidly, then looked at him askance. “Ophelia?”

Ichigo couldn't help it. He perked up like an eager puppy. “You know Hamlet?! In English?!”

Homura ignored him and looked appalled. “You are comparing me to Ophelia?!”

“That line fits! You came in and gave us our mementos—”

“Ophelia literally lost her mind and drowned in despair,” Homura said in disgust.

“...Oh.” Well, fuck. That wasn't where he had wanted this conversation to go. “You... don't do that, okay?”

She rolled her eyes powerfully and looked away. Bitterly, she said, “A Shakespearean tragedy suits me, I suppose.”

“No. Comedy,” Ichigo immediately argued.
She gave him another incredulous look. “My life may be a cosmic joke but it certainly isn’t a funny one.”

“No, no, comedy in the old-timey meaning,” Ichigo said with a placating wave of his arms. “You know—a stage play with a happy ending. Or just... anything serious with a happy ending, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Though... that usage kinda predates Shakespeare. People in his day may have said tragicomedy.”

“What?”

Somehow, he ended up passionately babbling to her about the history of tragedy and comedy. The weird looks she gave him made him awkwardly delve deeper and move into Shakespeare until her face was equal parts bewildered and interested and he couldn't stop rambling why couldn't he stop rambling.

“How do you know all this?” Homura finally asked.

“I'm aiming for a degree in Western literature,” Ichigo explained. “I've been fascinated by Shakespeare since I was a kid. Found an old dual-language edition in my mom's things when I was ten and started working it out myself. I figure I'm gonna have a ton of responsibility and spend a lot of time in offices and on battlefields once I become a shinigami full time, so I should do something fun for the rest of my... physical life, or whatever.” He grinned. “I'm planning to throw in some pol sci, military history, business administration, and sports science or coaching to use after death. My resumé is going to be ridiculous.”

“Oh.”

“How do you know Shakespeare?” Ichigo asked curiously.

Homura looked down at her empty cup. “My mother was... fond... of theater. Ballet, opera, plays.” He waited for her to continue, staying quiet as she fidgeted. “She... wanted me to be able to get out of the house. Have fun, see people. Since I couldn't go to school to make friends, or play sports, or... do much of anything physical, really. She took me to opera houses and theaters a couple times a week, if I was well enough. Then I could recover from the walk to our seats while being entertained for a few hours by whatever was on stage. If I was unwell, she would watch videos with me or help me read the plays.” She morosely watched her hands picking at the rim of the paper cup until it ripped, then slowly tore the rim off in one long strip with nimble fingers.

“Besides Japanese, my mother... was fluent in English, French, and Russian. She was trying to learn Italian to better understand opera when she... died. She wanted to expose me to many languages.”

It struck Ichigo that sharing this was probably a huge step for her. He couldn't fuck this up. Absolutely could not afford to. “Did you pick up all those languages from her?”

She glanced at him, then to the river. Ichigo turned back to the river as well.

“To a degree,” Homura said quietly. “Mostly English and French.”

Ichigo grinned. “At least they both use the same alphabet.”

Homura didn't speak, but made a quiet sound of amusement.

Awesome. Ichigo grinned wider and said, “So you like Shakespeare's plays?”

“I suppose. Mostly as context,” Homura answered. “The dialogue can be tiresome. I prefer the
“ballets.”

Ichigo blinked in surprise and looked at her again. “There are ballets of Shakespeare's plays?”

“Of course. Some of the musical accompaniment is quite well-known out of context.” Homura turned to him and arched an eyebrow. “After all you said, I thought you would be familiar with everything Shakespeare.”

Ichigo's cheeks burned and he laughed awkwardly. “Apparently not.” He scrubbed at his scalp self-consciously and said, “Ballets don't have talking, right? So how do they tell the story?”

Homura shifted to angle her entire body more in his direction and looked at him directly, face intense in the way of someone seriously knowledgeable of a subject feeling compelled to share—as he had probably been. “There is a great deal of pantomime involved in the classics. There is also significance in the chosen choreography. For example, the sequence of thirty-two fouettés performed by Odile in Swan Lake are a feat of endurance and ostentatious effort to impress and seduce Prince Siegfried. Also, particular instruments in a score may be used to represent different characters, such as Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy using the English horn to represent Romeo and the flute to represent Juliet. When all of these factors are combined, it is possible to tell a detailed story through silent dance. The plays with dialogue are useful for context and further depth to the ballets.”

Ichigo stared at her the same way she had stared at him. “So like... musical charades?”

Homura looked hilariously offended.

“Just kidding.” Another wide grin slowly overtook his face. “Oh, man, I need you to teach me how to interpret Shakespeare ballets. You're amazing.”

She stiffened in surprise. Cheeks flushed, she turned away from him again and stammered, “It is a simple matter of mem— memorizing hand gestures, dance steps, and noticing the coincidence of musical motifs with particular dancers.”

“Nah, I think it's more than that. But even just that would be awesome,” Ichigo argued. “You're a step above me. We both know that screwy old Shakespearean English, but you learned an entire other language to appreciate another version of the same things. I have some studying to do.”

Homura squirmed, tried to wring her hands, and settled for tearing her paper cup more. Apparently, she was awkward about receiving compliments.

Ichigo leaned back in a sprawl on the back of the bench, twirling his own empty cup by the tips of his fingers. “You like ballet a lot, huh?”

“Yes,” she bit out, still looking away from him.

“So, you dance?”

Homura’s body and reiatsu went rigid and Ichigo cursed himself for however he had just misstepped.

“No,” she said with complete lack of emotion. “Dance is an extremely strenuous physical activity. My health would not permit it.”

“...Oh.” Fuck fuck fuck. He'd depressed her. Fix it fix it fix it! “But you're healthy now, right? I mean, you can play soccer without having a heart attack now, right?”
“Yes.”

“So you can dance now!”

“No,” Homura snapped. “I do not have the time or energy to waste to dedicate to such a frivolous activity.”

Brr. But he could understand the attitude— she was as focused on saving her Madoka as he had once been on saving Rukia, Orihime, his family. So he wouldn't argue against that priority. But how could he work with that...? “Right. Then... I know! That can be the last scene of your comedy.”

She was startled into turning back to him to give him a look that declared you have lost your mind. “What?”

“The happy ending for your play,” Ichigo explained. “When all the magical spirit bullshit is over and you finally have a lot of downtime, you can dance. Be a ballerina in your epilogue.”

Homura's mouth dropped open into an O of surprise.

“Be forewarned— Dad will take tons of pictures and cry at your recitals,” Ichigo said with a triumphant grin. Homura just stared, mouth working without sound. He was quite pleased with himself for making her speechless for a good reason for once.

Finally, she cut her eyes away from him and went for a graceless change of subject. “Why are you doing this? You dragged me out here to talk about Sōju and Tomoe and Urahara, didn't you?” she said gruffly.

Ah, he'd spooked her by getting too close to an old wound. He'd count it as a win, though— she had gotten far more personal with him than he had expected before their conversation detoured. Ichigo wondered if Rukia had felt something like this in the aftermath of learning the details of his mother's death.

Satisfied by progress, Ichigo didn't rise to the bait of Homura's confrontational tone. He just shrugged and said, “I don't recall dragging you anywhere.”

Homura dropped what was left of her cup and clenched her fists.

“And I thought we were having a pretty pleasant conversation. As friends do.”

“But why?” she demanded.

“Why is it surprising that I would want to get to know you better?”

“No one really wants to know me.”

“Liar,” he drawled. Then he looked at her askance, thoughtful. “Or do you really not know?”

She turned back to him with a scowl. “I would know better than anyone,” she argued.

“I really don't think you do,” Ichigo said. “You try not to let people get close to you. And you keep getting pissed off lately because you've been slipping and letting people get close to you again. Or closer, at least.”

And now he'd gone and pissed her off with his bluntness. Furious, Homura snapped, “What would you have me do?! I lose either way. If I avoid making ties until I know a timeline is a success, I
ruin potential relationships. If I make ties hoping a timeline will be the last, it explodes in my face when I reset to a time before those ties were forged. I can't win!” Voice raising in anger, she lifted and shook her hands in a motion pantomiming both grabbing her head to shake it and begging in frustration. “What would you have me do?!”

He met her pained eyes seriously. “Admit it hurts you instead of pretending it's... just an inconvenience to whatever plans you make. Let yourself be pissed off that it isn't fair.”

“What purpose would that serve?!”

“You can be pissed off at circumstances instead of snapping at your friends, for one. And you can turn around and use that pain to push you forward— toward defying and defeating the cause instead of the... bystanders. If you just ignore it and bottle it up, it'll eventually sneak up on you and bite you. Probably at the worst possible time. The surprise will make it hurt more. It'll pop up and drag you backward. You'll lose hard-won ground.” Ichigo tilted his head and went quiet for a moment, listening to Zangetsu's unexpected commentary. He slowly continued, “My zanpakutō spirit says this... thing... to me when I'm feeling defeated or hopeless. 'Abandon your fear. Look forward. Move forward and never stop. You'll age if you pull back. You'll die if you hesitate.’”

Homura glared at him with incredulous confusion, then looked defiant. “Stopping and going backward are the basis of my powers.”

“Nah,” Ichigo said with a wave. “You're looking at it wrong. You stop everyone else, not yourself. And you don't go backward, you loop.”

Her face twisted in bafflement. “What difference does that make?”

“You can go forward by going backward.”

“What.”

Ichigo gestured vaguely as he cast about for some way to explain what made sense as he envisioned it in his head. “Think like... you're running on a racetrack. You know, one of those oval ones with the two straight sides? When you loop around the far side, you're technically going the opposite direction of how you started, right? But you're still moving forward. It's, like... a matter of perspective. Or something.” He shrugged lightly. “Unless you allow it to be the other way. Stopping yourself and pushing yourself back, I mean. Reversing to the starting line instead of lapping that line and going farther.”

Homura wavered uncertainly. In his head, Zangetsu was silent but pleased.

“As for not being able to win,” Ichigo continued, “my zanpakutō always tells me that can only happen when you despair and cease to walk forward. So keep moving forward. Try to look at each loop as... instead of... no. Uh.” He scratched his head. “You have all of us now. Instead of thinking we're going away every time you loop, look at it as passing the starting line again with all our mementos and stuff— like we're giving you the baton for a relay race with other 'us'es!’” Satisfied with the metaphor, he let his grin sharpen and added, “We're on your team and beyond competitive. We wanna win the relay race with you.”

The girl stared at him for a long time, silent and conflicted. Ichigo relaxed outwardly and fervently hoped he hadn't said something stupid. He started to tense and fought not to squirm as the silence dragged, tried to focus on the river and birdsong until Homura had turned it all over in her head enough to respond. If she'd respond.
“Even if that is true of you,” Homura eventually said slowly, “it is not true of my friends in Mitakihara and never has been.”

That was the warmest descriptor Ichigo had heard her use for the Mitakihara girls. He decided not to call attention to it. “Only if you let it be. Pass them the baton.”

“I tried to involve them,” she growled in frustration. “They don't listen!”

“Welllllllllll.” Ichigo rolled his neck and worked his jaw in thought. “Pass their batons to us, and we'll relay them to them. To the girls, I mean. Teamwork.” He smiled at her again. “Clue them in to the time travel and let us help recruit them for the team next time around. You've done a pretty good job yourself this time, though.”

Homura pursed her lips and searched him with narrowed eyes. “You are far too optimistic.”

Ichigo playfully pointed at her. “And you are far too pessimistic. We'll just have to balance out.”

The girl scowled down at her lap, where she was clenching her hands in her skirt. After another long pause, she quietly said, “After the way I behaved, they will want nothing to do with me now. I know how this ends.”

“Nah,” Ichigo said. “I texted Tōshirō to ask about them. They're all worried sick about you.”

Homura glanced up at him from the corners of her eyes. “Why would they be worried? I was cruel.”

“Because they've gotten to know you enough this time around to know that it's out of character for you,” Ichigo said. He ignored her scoff. “They got close enough to you this time to see that you lashing out is a thing you do when you're in pain or afraid. A lot of people do that.” At her skeptical frown, he continued, “I'm not saying letting them get close to you and looping isn't painful, but, like... letting them get close means you don't have to resist them on top of the Incubator. Less stress and wasted time that way. Also... I think you blowing up like the other night could be the... everything you try to ignore catching up to you and surprising you into reacting in one of the worst ways you could. That right there is why you need to really work on that bottling up thing. You're like a soda bottle. The longer you stay closed up and let the world shake you, the bigger the messy explosion when you finally can't keep the cap on anymore. At least if you shake an open bottle, there's some splashing but no explosion.”

She gave him a weird look for a long time, then said, “You make excessive use of metaphors.”

Ichigo laughed. “Lit major, remember?” He grinned at her playfully, but his eyes were serious as he quoted Shakespeare again. “If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which will not, Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear Your favors nor your hate.”

Homura frowned. “But I do know.”

“But you've been surprised this time.”

The girl's face darkened back into a stormy scowl. “Due to new variables.”

“Right. So how can you say you know how things will turn out? You haven't been to the end of the line with the variables we've added, and we still have a lot of variables we can add if we want.”

Homura stared at him and quietly said, “I do not like unknown variables.”
Probably one of the truest things she'd said. “How has using only your known variables worked out for you?” he said, not unkindly.

She looked away, hurt. “I just need to combine them correctly,” she said softly, failing to suppress a quiet desperation.

“And what if it turns out they'd slot together easier if you had a few extra pieces to fill in the gaps?”

Homura frowned mulishly and wouldn't look at him.

“You're only making it harder on yourself. Resisting help.”

“Urahara's 'help' is disruptive.”

“Yeah, he can be a dick. We're working on that. But I think your biggest problem with him sticking his nose in your business is that it's different. And you don't like different.”

“So?” she said defiantly.

“So with all the same things you're used to working with, it's not surprising you get the same kind of outcome,” Ichigo said drily. “If you want a different outcome, different is what you need. Otherwise, you're just sabotaging yourself.”

Homura crossed her arms and looked downright sulky.

Ichigo let her stew for a minute before venturing, “So I heard that the new Nagisa girl is the one that you finally snapped over.”

“You are all terrible gossips,” Homura hissed.

“Basically,” Ichigo admitted, unrepentant. “Because we care. What is it about that kid that has you so prickly?”

A muscle jumped in Homura's jaw. “In every other timeline, she becomes the Witch that often kills Mami. Her weapon looks like the form that devours Mami. And it seems likely she met Mami in those timelines, too. And ate her anyway.”

Oh.

Well.

That... actually explained a lot.

“Uh... she's not the Witch, though,” he said cautiously.

Homura looked at him sideways and spoke as though he was stupid. “I am aware of that.”

“You don't act like it. Don't take it out on her.”

“You say that as though it is a simple thing.”

Ichigo scrubbed his hands through his hair and sighed. “I know it's easier said than done. But, like... some of my best friends are people who tried to kill me the first time we met, so....”

“Perhaps I am not as forgiving as you.”
“But what is there to forgive?” Ichigo asked. “That kid hasn't done anything in this timeline.”

Homura leaned forward and looked at him sideways with the detached, morbid interest Ichigo saw on people looking at car wrecks. She tilted her head back and looked at him with steely, heavy-lidded eyes. “If I was to turn back time again,” she said with predatory slowness, “would you expect me to apply such goodwill to Sōju? Would you hate me if I put a bullet through her Soul Gems at my earliest convenience because of what she did in this timeline, but had yet to do in that timeline?”

Ichigo scowled and jabbed a finger at her. “You are making an unfair comparison and you damn well know it. That Sōju girl was a serial killer of her own free will for months, not a soul insane with grief. And Nagisa is not insane with grief.”

“Yet.”

Ichigo heaved a frustrated sigh, dragged his hands down his face, and wondered if her obstinacy was real or a front. “Right. Fine. Whatever. I'm not gonna argue over splitting hairs with you.”

She cut her eyes away again. Ichigo hadn't meant it as an accusation, but it seemed he'd nailed her ploy to a wall.

“Actually, wait, no, I am gonna split hairs,” Ichigo declared to her immediate glare. “Didn't you say Madoka has turned into a Witch before?”

Homura flinched and gave him a look that screamed how dare you. “Yes.”

“Right. But whenever you loop, you don't blame her for turning into a Witch before, right?”

The magical girl stared at him blankly.

“And you're getting along with Sayaka this time even though she's turned into a Witch a lot, right? Because you're actively trying to? Get along with her, I mean.”

Homura's face did not change.

“Have you ever seen the other girls— Mami and... Kyōko, right? Have you ever seen them turn into Witches?”

“Yes,” Homura admitted grudgingly.

“You said Nagisa's weapon reminds you of her Witch. Does that happen with the other girls?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

Homura shifted in discomfort and emotionlessly said, “The Mermaid Witch uses Sayaka's cutlasses. The Dress-Up Witch uses Mami's ribbons. The Wǔdàn Witch wields a spear, though it is different from Kyōko's.”

“But you can work with those girls when you try, can't you?”

Homura frowned and averted her eyes.

Ichigo tilted his head and considered her for a minute. Thinking aloud, he said, “But Nagisa's new, so you don't know her and you're not used to having to try with her.” He waited for her to deny it,
but she didn't. “Seeing her weapon is like a slap in the face or something. And you knew her Witch
before you knew her, which is backwards from the other girls.”

After a pause, Homura nodded once.

Carefully, Ichigo said, “And dealing with her's on top of all the other new stuff you never had to
deal with, right?”

“Yes.”

“I think you're just... really overwhelmed,” Ichigo ventured after a thoughtful silence.

Homura looked at him briefly, then back to the river. “...Yes. I am,” she said reluctantly.

Yes, yes, yes. She admitted it! Uh, now what? “So like... I think you have way too much on your
plate to eat yourself. Share some of it. Dish it out. Delegate, as Tōshirō would say,” Ichigo said
more firmly. “If you let some of us take on more of the figuring things out and whatever— if you
can trust us with that without you having to be directly involved or controlling everything— you
have more time to just... be.”

The girl looked at him askance with a frown of confusion.

“I mean... hang out with your friends. Learn more about Nagisa so she's more than just the face of
that one Witch. Chill behind the curtain while the rest of us are on stage. Wait for a scene change
before coming on so things aren't chaotic. Stop trying to eat breakfast, dinner, and dessert at the
same time.”

“Now you are mixing your metaphors,” Homura said tartly.

Brat. “Oh, hey, you're actually listening to what I say,” Ichigo retorted with a grin.

Homura sighed and tipped her head back to look at the sky. “It is... difficult to do so.”

“To listen to me?” Ichigo teased.

She gave him an unamused look. “You know what I mean.”

“Just kidding,” he said with a smirk. “I know. But it's just a different kind of challenge. And you're
damn good at rising to a challenge.”

She looked at him searchingly for a long minute. “You have... faith... in me?”

“Absolutely,” Ichigo said without hesitation. He still sucked at fine manipulation of his own
reiatsu, but he tried to will his earnestness to reach her. “You just have to have some faith in me. I
don't expect you to be... flawless or perfect or one-hundred-percent badass amazing. Everyone
stumbles. But I'll be behind you to catch you when you do. Everyone will, really. But I swear I'll
have your back. Never question that you have my support. And I'll make for damn sure that if you
go back again, you have the right stuff to give to another me to make sure that stays true.”

Homura stared at him for a long while, then asked, “Because I am vital to your interests? Or you
pity me?”

Trying to push him away again, make it impersonal. “No,” Ichigo disagreed with a scowl.
“Because that's what big brothers are for.” He leaned toward her until he was nearly forehead to
forehead with her and fiercely looked in her startled eyes. “You're my honorary little sister now.
You're not getting rid of me. Anyone who messes with you messes with me— which is why I'm going to be tag-teaming with Dad to set Sandal-Hat straight. He pulls shit you can't work around without cracking his skull, or setting his shop on fire starts sounding like a good idea, you call me. I'll have words with him. With my fists if necessary.”

Wide violet eyes shimmered with wetness. Most of his words seemed to have sailed over her head as she just stammered, “B-brother?”

Ichigo's face softened in affection. “Yep. Get used to it.” Taking a deep breath, he continued, “So you can talk to me about how shitty things get. I have at least some experience with the whole fighting the odds for your friends thing. I don't mind if you come crying to me over some way the world is screwing you over. I can relate,” he said ruefully. “I don't mind if you come cry to me over something you think is silly, either. Sometimes it's the little things that bug us the most, yeah?”

“I can't— I can't— cry,” Homura said hoarsely.

“Yes, you can.” He tilted his head and debated whether or not to say something. Screw it. “From what little I could hear from my room the other night, you cried with the twins.”

It had been agony to stay in his bed and listen to her muffled sobs through the wall as she vented to Karin and Yuzu. He was powerless to fix it even though he desperately wished he could swoop in and play hero for her. The new powerlessness gnawed at him, made him strain to not charge off and do something— something— probably something monumentally stupid. But her muffled voice rising and falling and wobbling and shaking and choking and breaking had—

Zangetsu had finally sighed and pulled Ichigo into his Inner World to spar.

Homura shook her head. “It's— it's different. With you. With... others.”

“Why?”

The girl twisted her skirt in her hands and looked like she was struggling for words. “I need to be— to look—” she released her clothing and gestured frustration with her hands— “If I want to be respected by those of you who are older, I must behave appropriately. And that does not include crying.”

Ichigo looked at her askance for a moment, then lightly said, “It's okay to cry. Adults cry. I cry sometimes when it looks like nothing I do is helping save someone from danger. Didn't I just tell you I outright bawled on a battlefield last year?”

Homura looked up at him from behind her bangs, eyelashes damp. “I cannot allow myself to despair. I must force myself not to.”

True. But— “Better to let it out than bottle it up until you can't hold it anymore.” He smiled wryly. “Didn't I just say? Splashes are better than explosions.” When she just frowned down at her shoes again, he reached over and tilted her head up with a gentle fingertip to her chin. As soon as she looked at him, he smiled as gently as he could. “Besides, what kind of big brother would I be if my little sister couldn't come crying to me about anything and everything without worrying I'd think any less of her?”

Homura's face shifted with a jumble of emotions leaning most toward grimaces of anguish between hesitation and a look like he was some kind of mythological creature she had stumbled upon. She choked on a quiet sob and raised her arms, still looking wary, but Ichigo could see the moment when her wall crumbled. Tears streamed down her face and she leaned toward him. He hugged her
and let her just cry for awhile.

“Tell me,” he said in an undertone when she slowed.

“It's har-ard. Ev-er-ry-one is the same and different and it's hard to be— to be— but I want to be with— I want— but it— it—”

“It what?” he murmured.

“It— it hurts. It hurts.”

Ichigo mentally pumped a fist in victory as he patted her shoulder. It was like pulling teeth, but yes! Progress! He took a deep breath. “Sometimes moving forward is like crawling over hot coals and broken glass. But if you keep going, you'll eventually come out on the other side. You'll get through it. And we'll carry you over whatever patches we can. In the meantime... well, since it's gonna hurt anyway, you may as well grab some hot coals to throw at enemies along the way instead of trying to avoid the unavoidable.”

Homura snorted and warbled a crying laugh into his shoulder. Beautiful.

“I— I'll try,” she rasped. “But I... don't want to go back again,” Homura admitted quietly. “Things are... better this time. Even though it's still... hard. I want this to be the last time. I'm... tired.”

Ichigo heaved a deep sigh. God he hated that they were probably sending her back again. “I understand. I hope for that, too. But you have to prepare just in case.”

“I know,” Homura mumbled.

“And I know you kinda have to be tough as nails up in Mitakihara even if you get close to your friends again. But you don't have to be like that with me and Dad and the girls, okay? And you can let Tōshirō and Sandal-Hat and Tessai take over some of the toughness when you need to check out for a bit.”

Homura nodded, then sat back and rubbed her eyes. After a deep breath, she tilted her head toward the sky with her eyes closed and just sat quietly for a bit. Ichigo let her. A few minutes later, she opened her eyes and leveled her face again. She looked far more at ease.

“Better?” Ichigo asked quietly.

Violet eyes slid his way and watched him pensively. “Better,” Homura said firmly.

A slow grin stole over Ichigo's face. “I'm glad.” He glanced at his phone for the time and realized it was mid-afternoon. “We have a couple hours before the girls get out of school,” he said, glancing at her and raising his brows. “Anything you wanna do or see?” Homura shrugged disinterestedly, so he thought hard. Ichigo couldn't think of any attractions or movies or anything. He thought back over their conversation. “Wanna go home and you can start teaching me about Shakespearean ballet on the glorious internets?”

Homura turned and gave him her full attention, eyes brightening with interest breaking through clouds of melancholy. “Yes.”

“Awesome.” Ichigo slapped his hands on his knees and stood. “Pick up your trash and let's go. This should be fun.”

The walk home was quiet but comfortable. Ichigo thought— hoped— he had gained some ground
with her. Now he had to keep it well enough to pass on.

Well, he had a lot to write about now. Like... he needed to buy another notebook. Also, he needed to look up some ballet stuff or something on his breaks between sessions of studying the old Quincy histories Ishida was delegating to his housemates to read for clues. Maybe find some kind of meaningful ballet-ish gift to give Homura to take with her... beyond.

God, he really did have a big brother complex.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I've always felt like there's too much ballet associated with Homura in Rebellion, the Madogatari Concept Movie, and now her transformation in Magia Record for it to be entirely coincidental. Thus my headcanon.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
ZWEIUNDSECHZIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter somehow mutated into a character study of Urahara and Benihime because they just kept talking and I was okay with their examination of motives. Idk idk.

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
My headcanon is that Benihime has a collection of different kinds of looms and sewing-related stuff in Urahara's Inner World. So, like... while I think you can get the gist of their conversation without specifics, you may want to look at my list of weaving terminology before you read this chapter for more detailed understanding. I have Benihime extensively use it as metaphor. The list is here: corisanna.
Deviantart.
com/journal/Weaving-Terms-Info-as-regards-Benihime-717849840

IF YOU'RE EXTRA CURIOUS, I included some YouTube videos afterward to support why I think making Urahara's zanpakutō that sews and “restructures” would also be a weaver-- how it does suit his complex, scheming, meticulous, inventive mind.

95% of anything involving Benihime is my own artistic license since we got so little info in canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ZWEIUNDSECHZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Kisuke saw Hitsugaya and Tomoe off to school on Monday morning like a good uncle and immediately sequestered himself in his labs once more. He was certain he had perfected his surveillance drone design as much as he could with the information he had; now he just had to replicate them with superficial differences. He was deep in his work when Tessai buzzed him from the shop.

“Boss, you might want to come out here.”

“What for?”

“I sense two slightly elevated reiatsu signatures coming straight our way. Doesn't feel hostile, but since they're a rarity up here....”

Tossing his magnification goggles aside, Kisuke rose and sang, “Coming right up~!”
He was innocently fussing around behind the counter when the possessors of the reiatsu crossed the wards onto the property without triggering alarms. Good—well, hopefully. Kisuke made a point of not looking toward the door until the shop bells jingled. He turned and paused briefly, keeping recognition off his face by force of will before greeting the guests. “Welcome to High Spirits! I'm Kisuke Urahara. How can I help you?”

“Ah, my daughter recommended this shop,” the brunet man said as he adjusted his grip on the toddler in his arms.

“Is that so?” Kisuke asked cheerfully. “May I ask who she is?”

“Madoka Kaname,” Tomohisa Kaname said. “She told me she and her friends came to visit your nephew and she sampled the merchandise.”

Kisuke let his face brighten. “Miss Kaname? Oh, my, yes. Such a kind girl. And your name?” he asked as a formality.

“Tomohisa,” Madoka's father said. He poked his son's pudgy cheek and said, “And this is Tatsuya.”

At his name, the toddler perked up and shouted, “Hiiiiiii!”

“Hellooooo!” Kisuke crooned back with a silly face that made the toddler giggle. Mentally, he was evaluating both their reiatsu signatures and trying to rearrange puzzle pieces. Kaname's father and brother had spiritual potential. That had never been considered. The mother? Hitsugaya hadn't mentioned anything, and he was diligent in his reports. Yoruichi, though....

Tomohisa glanced around the shop soberly, then eyed Kisuke for a long minute. “You're the real deal.”

“Indeed, I am,” he said with an amused smile.

“Are you the one who gave my daughter a protective charm bracelet?”

“Ahhh. Yes, that was me.”

“Thank you,” Tomohisa said with a solemn nod. “Do you have any more of them?”

“I designed the two I made for your daughter and Miss Miki specifically tailored to them, but I could make more. Why do you ask?”

Tomohisa pursed his lips and considered his words. “There have been some... odd things I've been noticing lately. Spiritually speaking, I mean.”

Kisuke revised his findings: The father had weak powers and was aware of them. “Oh, my. Are you spiritually aware?”

Smiling wryly, Tomohisa said, “Not enough to really do anything. I can hear spirits. Sometimes see them, depending on how....” He struggled for words, gesturing vaguely with his free hand. “How strong they feel. But mostly, I sense them. It's difficult to describe. Like... the closest thing I can think of is how you can walk in a room and pick up a lingering smell that tells you something has been there, like that someone baked bread or made coffee even though there's no bread or coffee left in the room. But not a scent. Just....”

“A feeling. That makes the hair stand up on your skin,” Kisuke finished, fascinated. How the hell
had he not considered this possibility when he doing cursory research on all the known magical girls' families?

Cursory. Dammit. Nothing could be taken at face value with this situation. He should have known better.

Too much to investigate at once. It was making him sloppy. He fiercely hated it. Loved new information but hated when he couldn't absorb it all at once. When he had been dealing with Aizen, the Hōgyoku, the Arrancar, and the Visored, he had nearly a hundred years to research and plot, familiarizing himself with every aspect in minute detail. He had even gotten nearly two decades of research on Quincy tossed in just in case it would be useful when dealing with Ichigo's hodgepodge of powers. But with this situation, there wasn't enough damn time to learn as much as he needed to. Which was why he needed Akemi to go back. If he could just distill information faster, she wouldn't need to. So he needed to cram as much research as possible into each timeline to minimize her repetitions.

“Yes. Exactly.”

What? Oh. And now Kisuke was distracting himself.

Slow down before you drop the shuttle through the warp, Benihime scolded him in a whisper, her voice like rustling silk.

Kisuke thought for a moment, then waved Tomohisa over. “Please, come in the back and sit with me. I think we should talk more and we may as well be comfortable.”

He nodded in parting to Tessai and led the father and child through the connecting hallway to the living quarters, and from there to a tea room he had rigged with cameras and sensors. Tomohisa pulled some toys out of a diaper bag and plopped his son among them on the floor before retreating to the table with Kisuke, who set out tea.

Kisuke folded his hands together on the tabletop and said, “So, Mr. Kaname. What are your concerns?”

Tomohisa frowned. “There have been a couple times when my daughter came home with a sense of... something dark clinging to her. It fades very quickly— probably because of her power—”

Kisuke raised one eyebrow and reached for his cup. “You are aware of her power?”

“I'd have to be completely without power and utterly oblivious to notice it,” Tomohisa said drily. “Especially since it skyrocketed a few weeks ago.”

Kisuke paused in lifting teacup to his lips. “You are aware of her power?”

“Her power practically exploded when she was asleep a few weeks ago. It woke me out of a dead sleep,” Tomohisa said gravely. “I checked on her and she was twitching and making faces as though having a nightmare. She was glowing pink and the stuff on her shelves was rattling around.”

What.

“I couldn't wake her up even by shaking her and flaring my own power. I was like a garden hose fighting a river. I... kind of panicked. Thought maybe she was having a seizure. I left the room to get my wife but Madoka's power suddenly stabilized and settled. I peeked in her room and she was sitting up like nothing had happened. Later, she mentioned something about a dream. Her power
has been slowly strengthening ever since. It jumps a bit more every time she comes home with that feeling of darkness like the cursed spirits I used to run into before I moved here.”

What.

“I think her power kind of... burns it off, or purifies it or something. It's always gone by morning.”

What.

Kisuke stared, mind whirling. “Cursed spirits?”

“I think? That's what my grandfather called them, anyway,” the man answered, further upsetting Kisuke's mental chess set. “They always have white masks and holes in their chests. They look like monsters and are see-through. I thought they were demons until I saw one with my grandfather and he explained what little he knew.”

“Wait. Spiritual awareness runs in your family?”

Tomohisa shrugged. “To a degree. But not everyone gets it.”

This was delicious information. “Do you see those spirits often?”

“Hardly any since I moved here when Madoka was a baby— Tatsuya, no, don't touch it.” The man frowned at his son until the child came down from his tiptoes at the edge of a bookshelf. When the toddler lost interest and tottered back to his toys, Tomohisa continued, “And when I do, it's on the edges of town, several years apart. Very few plain ghosts, even. That's actually why we moved here. My wife had a long international business conference here when Madoka was four months old. We came with and rented an apartment for a month so Junko wouldn't be separated from our baby and we could stay after for a vacation. I didn't encounter a single spirit the entire time we were here. It was much safer for me and Madoka. My wife put in for a transfer here before the last day of the conference and we only went back to our apartment in Soma to get our things. We figured we'd tell Madoka when she was old enough to know to keep it secret. Have a vacation in Soma or somewhere with a lot of ghosts to teach her what to look for and what to run from.”

Boom. Entire game board changed. By how much? “Is your wife spiritually aware?”

“Not at all!” Tomohisa laughed. “But she knows I am, and that Madoka is. She knew I was before we married and thought it was cool. She knew Madoka was before we even left the hospital with her— she caught me talking to a couple ghosts that went to Madoka's crib to look at her. Then I ended up quitting my job when Madoka was two months old when I saw a cursed spirit hanging around her daycare. I could at least get her away from them when they popped up.” He nodded toward Tatsuya. “Our son also has some power. That's why I came to your shop. I want something like that bracelet for him, too. And I'm considering having a talk with Madoka. I haven't seen those spirits here, but with the dark feeling that clings to Madoka sometimes and that cat spirit that got in our house... and all since her power spiked... I worry it's not coincidence.”

Kisuke stared. “Cat spirit?”

“I don't know what else to call it. I haven't seen it myself, but Madoka said it was a white cat. It got in her window— supposedly. I don't know what would have happened had her friend's cat not been there. I'm looking into getting a cat for us. They're great at detecting spirits, after all.”

Kisuke stared. Yoruichi was going to get grilled over this. She should have told him.

How lucid were you during her verbal report? Benihime asked, slow and derisive.
...Shut up.

Then stop running yourself into the ground trying to do everything at once and sleeping only when your mind completely shuts down, Benihime snapped. You do yourself and the others no favors. Gathering strands inattentively and spinning poorly results in a tangle, not a tapestry—nor even a proper thread. Carefully—

—de-gum, brush the silk fibers from the cocoon and unravel, spin even thread, dye appropriately, respect the loom, weave neatly, be methodical. Yes, I know.

Do you, now? Benihime said archly. You do not act it in recent days.

It was easy to forget how much of a smartass she could be when she went long stretches without being talkative.

Do not speak of me so crudely, Benihime sniffed. Changing the topic, she said, Your guest will doubt your sanity soon.

Yep. Tomohisa was looking at him a little oddly for his long pause. What were they saying?

He was speaking of the morning the Incubator made the mistake of invading his daughter's bedchambers while your cat was guarding her, Benihime drawled.

“I think I heard about the incident secondhand,” Kisuke said. “Could you refresh my memory?”

Tomohisa recounted his outsider view of what had happened when Yoruichi fought the Incubator. “A few hours after Madoka went to school, I went in to clean up the fur and blood from the fight. I didn't sense any... power from the stuff. But the fur started... kinda evaporating. Then no cleaners touched the blood. I got suspicious, so I tried charging the water with my power. The blood came out then. So I know it's a spirit of some kind. I just don't know what. And Madoka says she's seen it around since. It disturbs me.”

Kisuke stared. That was priceless intel about the little monster. His mind spun with possibilities.

Tatsuya squealed and wiggled onto Tomohisa's lap. Tomohisa bounced him on his knee but kept his eyes on Kisuke. “I noticed you have some kind of... protective thing over the property when I came in. Could I commission you to do something like that over my house?”

Kisuke was doing a lot of staring today. “Of course.”

“How much would it cost?”

“I don't charge for things like that,” Kisuke said, waving a hand dismissively. “The shop is for shiny things that are popular with people who think supernatural stuff is cool, with some minor protections built in. I do well enough from it. Critical things like wards to protect children with powers... no charge.”

“I insist,” Tomohisa argued. “Safety like this—” he gestured at the room to indicate the whole building—“is invaluable and worth paying for.”

“Invaluable. Exactly. No charge.”

“I insist,” Tomohisa repeated stubbornly.

Kisuke sighed fondly. May as well make use of it. “You are aware of Miss Akemi, correct?”
“Yes. My daughter’s new friend. She’s been to our house several times. Sweet girl, if very withdrawn. As powerful as Madoka has become recently, too.”

Now that he said that... Tomohisa was right. He had noticed that, known that, but hadn't thought deeply on it. Kisuke picked apart implications, thought about things that had been written and said about Madoka, and came up with questions, questions, questions. “About when did Madoka's power escalate?”

“Hmmm.” Tomohisa looked toward the ceiling in thought. “Mid-March, I think. A few days before she met Miss Akemi.”

Kisuke's mind ground to a halt and restarted at a feverish pace. That timing likely aligned with Akemi's reset point. He was going to have to rake over this conversation with a fine-toothed comb when he looked at the surveillance later. He needed to run more scans of the girls. So much new information to pick apart, on top of what he already had! Both excellent and a logistical nightmare.

“Huh,” Kisuke said thoughtfully. “Anyway, are you also aware of Miss Tomoe?”

“Yes. I haven't met her, but my wife told me about her.”

“I don't know if you are aware, but Miss Akemi and Miss Tomoe are orphans. Mother hen them a bit. Maybe have them over for dinner sometimes. They need it. Promise to do that, and I will consider the wards more than paid for.”

“Barter, huh?” Tomohisa said with a smile. “Surely there must be something else...? I'm mother henning Miss Akemi anyway.”

Grinning widely, Kisuke made an expansive arm gesture and said, “Then you've already made a down payment, my friend.”

Tomohisa laughed. After a minute of comfortable quiet, he asked, “Will the wards keep that cat-thing out of my home?”

Kisuke sobered. “I designed them to be... pretty much overkill and so dense anything supernatural besides spiritually aware humans without ill will would at the least have extreme trouble getting through, but there are no guarantees with that thing. I haven't been able to study one to know exactly what they are.”

With a small gasp, Tomohisa asked, “So you do know the thing I'm talking about?”

Kisuke went quiet and stared pensively at his teacup as he considered his words and strategy carefully. Tomohisa waited him out until he slowly admitted, “I do. It's very elusive of adults. It is some kind of trickster entity that preys on young girls with spiritual power.”

The father's entire body tensed up. “Preys on them how?”

Again, Kisuke carefully mulled over his words. Akemi would probably be furious if she found out, but the potential... “It offers them a contract. A deal with the devil, as it were. It offers to grant them a wish and does not tell them that they are purchasing it with their soul. It targets young girls who don’t know to be suspicious of such a proposition.” Tomohisa's horror was palpable, so he looked up at the father with a sharp grin. “It offered a contract to your daughter. But between Miss Akemi's warnings and Madoka's knowledge of contracts through your wife's conversations about business deals, she turned it down. So has her friend, Miss Miki. Given advance warning, your daughter and her friend have been good at poking holes in the creature's sales pitches. They hate it.”
Tomohisa closed his eyes and heaved a deep sigh of relief. After a moment, he opened his eyes in surprised realization. “Miss Akemi's warnings?”

“Unfortunately, it succeeded in tricking her some time ago.” Note to self: really don't tell Akemi about this part of the conversation.

Benihime objected, shoved mental images of Akemi, Hitsugaya, Yoruichi, and Tessai giving him various looks of disapproval into his consciousness with a bonus image of Isshin and Ichigo looming murderously, then ominously declared, We will have words about this, Kisuke.

Fantastic.

Still, he had to continue. Stoke sympathy. “She unwittingly sold her soul in a bid to save a friend's life. It also preyed upon Miss Tomoe when she lay dying in the car accident that killed her parents two years ago. Desperate situations where questioning a lifeline is all but impossible for adults, let alone children. Miss Tomoe only recently learned of the deception, so she is... mentally fragile right now.” Kisuke paused to take in Tomohisa's outraged expression. “My nephew found out about Miss Akemi's situation when a mutual friend who had also been tricked died. We've been working together on investigating the Incubator ever since in an attempt to break its hold on the souls it swindles from girls. We're making steady progress, but it is slowed by how careful we're being with letting it figure out exactly how much we know. We moved here specifically to up our game against it, so to speak.”

Tomohisa's stare was hard and angry. “If there's anything I can do, please let me know. I will do everything in my power to help.” He pulled back with a self-deprecating smile and continued, “I may not have a lot of power to work with, but still.”

“I will keep that in mind. Sometimes, someone like you can be a valuable asset that can go unnoticed by the suspicious.” Tilting his head in thought, Kisuke asked, “You've never seen the creature yourself?”

“No.”

“Neither have I, actually. I wasn't exaggerating when I said it avoids adults.” Kisuke stared at the ceiling pensively. “My nephew has only managed to encounter it a couple times when he's with the girls we try to save from contracts. I wonder if it actively avoids being seen by people with spiritual awareness...?” He called out down hall, hand to mouth. “Tehhhhh-ssaaaaai~! Can you bring me the composites we made of what the Incubator looks liiike?”

“Be right there, boss,” Tessai's voice came from a distance.

The two men sat quietly until Tessai appeared with a folder containing a sheaf of papers. Kisuke took it graciously, rifled through them, and lay three out on the table for Tomohisa to see. It had turned out that Akemi's sketches had been most accurate of those made by the three girls who had contributed. Hitsugaya and Yoruichi had offered only the slightest of refinements. 

Tomohisa slid the drawings closer to him one by one and stared at them, apparently searing them into his memory as he absently brushed his son's grabby hands away from the papers. He grimly said, “It's very distinctive. I'll keep an eye out for it”

“If you do see it, please pretend that you don't. That you don't have enough power to be able to see it, I mean. It has been near enough to you to sense you're not completely powerless but your power does feel very subtle, so it should work.”
“Don't react to it?” Tomohisa said darkly as he looked up at Kisuke over the rims of his glasses with heavy-lidded eyes. “It targeted my daughter.”

“If you truly want revenge, not breaking cover so we can continue to investigate it would be more effective than approaching it in anger. Just report its movements.”

Tomohisa pursed his lips and sighed, looking down to the sketches again. “Right.”

A man of reason. Thank God.

After a pause, Kisuke ventured, “May I ask your address, Mr. Kaname? I'll look at satellite photos of your neighborhood to design the wards.”

Tomohisa drew a deep breath. “Of course. And my son's... bracelet?”

“Do you think he would leave a bracelet alone?” Kisuke asked, amused by the sight of Tatsuya with most of his hand in his mouth. Except for his pinkie finger, which was up his nose.

“He... would probably chew it, actually,” Tomohisa said with a small smile. “An anklet, maybe?”

“Sounds good. I'll make some for you and your wife, too. Less flashy than your daughter's.”

The father grinned. “Actually, Junko wants one like Madoka's. Says it's very cute. She loves cute things. Wears a barrette with a little black bow on it to work, even.”

Kisuke laughed. “Well, then! I'll make her a pretty one!”

They parted on pleasant terms, Kisuke standing at the gate to wave at Tatsuya as he played peek-a-boo over his father's shoulder until they turned a distant corner. Kisuke's face immediately sobered. He whirled around on his heel and marched back into the shop, straight past Tessai, and down into a different lab. He inhaled sharply, exhaled slowly, considered priorities.

Protections for the Kaname household. Spiritual awareness history of the Kaname line. How the father's power factored into previous timelines— had he been involved in Madoka's actions in a way Akemi was unaware of? What about the mother's knowledge? The strange development of Madoka's powers and their strengthening around the time of Akemi's reset point. Looking into Miki's family history for similar trends. Attempt for the other Mitakihara girls, but all of their families were dead so there would be nothing he could measure. Figuring out what the barrier over Asunaro was and deciding on a course of action regarding it. Studying over forty Soul Gems, four Grief Seeds, and the two imitation Grief Seeds, all of which could not be sent to the past. Figuring out how Soul Gems turned into Witches and why Witches spawned pocket dimensions was of particular interest, on top of what method might be used to turn a standard soul into a Soul Gem. Tinker with his gigai equipment to better experiment on the attachment and detachment of Soul Gem to body. Figure out why the hell a costume change was involved. Tracing the path of the Sōju through Japan and figuring out why they had appeared in this timeline but not others— it seemed less important, but they and other interlopers needed to be headed off in future timelines. Find out if there was any archival mention of the Incubator in shinigami records. Look into the apparent historical disappearances of shinigami for correlation. Figure out what history the Incubators had with the Quincy— well, at least Ishida had Ichigo’s little group working on finding evidence to work from. Figure out which of the missing and dead girls from the stack of information from the last timeline were magical girls and which incidents were caused by Witches. Set Tessai on looking for cases that hadn't been in the media. Get into Asunaro and get a copy of that detective's file on decades of missing girls. Keep a watchful eye on Tomoe's likelihood to go on a misguided killing spree. And and and and and.
Most importantly: Repairing the damage to his relationship with Homura Akemi. Everything would fall apart without her. Her regression had infuriated the Kurosaki men, who split the blame for it between Sōju and Kisuke—and weren't shy about saying so. Isshin's call in the wee hours of Sunday morning had been particularly scathing. The only good to come out of Akemi's setback was that it caused the entire Kurosaki family to rally around her even more fiercely. She needed that.

Akemi seemed to relax a touch when exposed to Tessai's quiet, mellow seriousness and had yet to bristle in response to him. Yoruichi had said she had decently thoughtful conversations with the girl while she prepared munitions. Hitsugaya seemed to have effortlessly slipped past her armor with some combination of seriousness, frankness, and commiseration about something he refused to speak of with Kisuke beyond a curt \textit{we share certain similar circumstances}. So it \textit{was} possible to interact with her in a productive way that went beyond superficial and strictly as needed regarding plain information. Others did it.

\textit{And then there's you}, Benihime said sarcastically.

\textit{And then there's me}, he thought to his blade. \textit{You have words, do you?}

\textit{Indeed I do}, she said evenly. \textit{Your body requires rest. Let us adjourn to your bedchambers so that you may join me within.}

\textit{That's what she said}, Kisuke thought back on reflex. Benihime was not amused even though she usually enjoyed bawdy humor. As soon as he got his body horizontal in his bed, she yanked him into their Inner World and let him fall into a vat of water she was warming to boil silkworm cocoons in.

Kisuke dragged himself up over the wooden edge, gasping, and looked at her through dripping bangs. “I see I’ve displeased you, madam.”

“Quite,” the personification of his blade drawled in her smoky voice as she stood by a doorway framed by red silk curtains, arms crossed and face deadpan as she tapped a folded fan against one shoulder in annoyance. “Next time, it will be boiling.”

“Noted.” Kisuke grimaced and rolled over the rim of the vat, stood, and wrung out his clothes. He knew from experience that she wasn't kidding.

Benihime watched him dispassionately for a moment then turned away. “Come. We have much to discuss.”

Kisuke followed. His blade was one of the few entities that could make him feel like a chastened child. They wove through a maze of draperies, sewing machines, spinning devices, and looms of varied ages and cultural origins, each with its purpose. He recognized the path immediately and was not surprised when Benihime pointed at the drawloom she had taught him on when he was first trying to achieve shikai so very long ago. It was always her way of passive-aggressively implying she was dragging him back to basics because he was neglecting her teachings or advice.

“Sit down and weave,” Benihime snapped.

Nodding silently, he stepped within the frame and sat on the bench. First thing was to analyze what Benihime had laid out for him to weave. The warp was entirely composed of shimmering lavender and only wide enough to make an obi. Shuttles of various colors were set out before him to form the weft—white, amber yellow, azure blue, burgundy, sparkly bubblegum pink, and more lavender. The weft already woven started with a stripe of pink. He looked around, then up at his blade. “Where is the pattern?”
“Make one up as you go.”

Odd, but okay. After a minute of thought, he set out to weave a tiny checkered pattern using five of the colors with a solid stripe of the pink between each row of squares to match the first pink stripe. He slipped into the familiar rhythm of counting, opening and closing sheds with the treadles, slinging shuttles through at intervals, and battening, the clacking of the parts of the loom a constant as he lost track of time.

“Stop.”

He complied. Benihime leaned over his shoulder and scrutinized the six centimeters of fabric, then leaned back with a disdainful sniff.

“It is wrong. Unravel it.”

“There’s no pattern for it to be wrong.”

“It is not the design I am looking for. Therefor, it is wrong.”

“But—”

“Unravel it. And do not dare waste the thread.”

So he painstakingly dismantled the cloth one pick at a time, reeling the thread back onto the shuttles in a mind-numbing exercise of tedium.

“Weave again.”

“What design do you want?”

“Something pleasant.”

“That's not very specific.”

“Weave!”

So he wove a set of simple stripes, using the burgundy every other stripe since she was fond of reds. She stopped him at six centimeters again, scowled, and pronounced it another failure. When he finished unraveling it, Benihime swept one voluminous crimson sleeve over the shuttles. More shuttles with yet more colors were present in its wake— lemon yellow, candy apple red, orange, black, mulberry purple, powder blue, coffee brown, olive green.

“Again.”

Kisuke thought he saw where this was going. He set out to make another set of stripes.

Three centimeters in, Benihime swooped in while he had the lavender shuttle in his hand and snatched up the the coffee, powder blue, and olive, then deliberately smacked his hand with the olive shuttle to stop him mid-pick, wrapped it around the beater, and sent it back through the shed at an angle. She jabbed the other colors through the warp in different directions, tangling them in and out of the shed through multiple strands; somehow, a shuttle of coral and a shuttle of variegated red-and-white thread came to be tossed in and dangled haphazardly with the others. Kisuke sat motionless and evaluated the mess.

“Keep weaving. Make it beautiful.”
He shuffled around to retrieve the discarded shuttles from the floor and pass them back up through the warp. His blade allowed him to do that, but Benihime viciously rapped his knuckles with her folded fan when he tried to backtrack the shuttles and undo the tangles to resume his pattern without flaws.

Oh, she had the war fan today. Kisuke was pretty sure she'd just cracked half a dozen small bones with its iron plates.

"Keep weaving."

Kisuke grimly complied. The pattern was a mangled mess and his dominant hand ached as he went through the usual motions. It was impossible to make an even pick and the olive thread limited the movement of the beater so much that he was forced to stop at the five centimeter mark when the slack had been used up and essentially bound the beater in place.

"Why did you stop? Keep weaving."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Kisuke sighed. "You interfered with my loom in the middle of my pattern instead of telling me I would need to change it." He sat back, scrubbed his face with his hands, then winced and flexed his dominant hand.

"Frustrating, is it not?" Benihime asked coolly.

"Yes."

"Even more frustrating that you were not allowed to correct the damage? That you were expected to complete the piece smoothly despite it?"

"Yes."

Benihime ran one finger along the taut olive thread that trapped the beater. "Cutting this and leaving that color out of the cloth from that point would be the simplest way to salvage the rest, would it not?"

"Yes." He met Benihime's eyes. "I understand."

Benihime stood silent for a long while, staring at him flatly and tapping her war fan against her upper arm. Her disappointed frown was made all the more vivid by her crimson lips. He bore her stare patiently—he deserved this.

"I warned you that she has a weaver's mindset like your own and that interrupting her weaving without notice would anger her, did I not?"

"Yes." Again: Chastened child.

"But you did not take my warning seriously because you so rarely encounter another weaver, she is young and inexperienced, and the exotic new threads she brought you enthralled you like a child with a new toy."

Kisuke looked aside guiltily.

"You were cocky about your prowess and presumed she would bow to your expertise and vast
experience. You assumed your own superiority and that it would automatically be recognized by one who has only ever known her own loom, her own patterns, her own thread, her own spinning wheel, is self-taught.”

Kisuke stared at his loom, eyes drawn to the lavender warp.

Benihime side-stepped to hover behind the loom and glare at him ominously. “I will repeat myself now that you have ears to hear me: Homura Akemi is too like you for you treat her as you do most others you plan around. That girl is a warrior like your protégé before her, but she is far more critical and less trusting than Ichigo Kurosaki. The boy you first took under your wing was willing to cooperate with your directives without questioning your identity and motives, but not so with this girl. Kurosaki thought he had a straightforward task set before him: Rescue a friend. He was oblivious to conspiracy and content to remain so if he could accomplish his goal. Everything else was unimportant unless it was a direct threat to his friends. Akemi has a similar mindset and target but she is not so naïve as Kurosaki was. She has endured too much to not be aware of the potential for conspiracy and betrayal. You simply cannot treat her the same as you treated Kurosaki. Your usual weave poorly suits her. Adjust accordingly or your cloth will be weak and useless, easily torn, completely unable to withstand the very literal test of time.”

The silence after her pronouncement was heavy as her eyes bored into his. Kisuke thought through her words, remembered something Yoruichi had said, and slowly asked, “You also think she is like me?”

Benihime rolled her eyes and said, “I will not repeat myself again.” She canted her head to one side and gave him a significant look from heavy-lidded eyes. “Homura Akemi may be a child more than three centuries younger than us but she has constructed a custom loom with no guidance, meticulously wrapped her warp, woven a pattern of her own design, then unraveled her weft when her completed pattern is unsatisfactory and tried again with adjustments for previous mistakes. Dozens of times on the same piece— enough to drive the best of weavers mad. Truly, she is a prodigy. That she has not snapped and burned her loom to cinders in frustration is a testament to how patient and determined a weaver she is— how masterful she could become with formal instruction. Interfering with her loom without warning will only cause her to rebuff the attempt and try to attack your own in defense or revenge— or could be the stressor that finally wears her warp so thin as to break. All of her weaving and unraveling and weaving and unraveling does not happen without consequences of wear and tear, after all,” she said as she lightly ran one hand along the lavender threads stretched before her. “Thread frays when subjected to enough friction.” The spirit selected one taut thread and rubbed her finger on it until it broke, the long end rebounding toward Kisuke's face with a twang. Benihime leaned forward, the loops of her elaborate hairstyle draping themselves over her shoulders and cascading down to the loom like skeins of black silk thread as she huskily asked, “Whyever would such a weaver entrust you with thread from her own spinning wheel— or accept thread from yours— if your behavior gives her the impression that you will bind her loom with it?”

Every word was true. “What do you suggest I do, then?”

Benihime straightened and looked at him like he was an idiot. “Instruct her, of course. Your cat already figured that one out.” She moved aside then slowly stalked around the loom toward him, free hand caressing the wooden beams as she passed. “Akemi is talented despite her errors and struggles with her rough loom. It is to be expected, being self-taught with simple patterns and homespun thread; with professional guidance and more experience, she could be a master. She is intelligent enough to realize this if you—” Benihime stopped near him and angrily beat her folded fan on a beam to emphasize each suddenly shouted word— “do not provoke her unnecessarily! Alienate her, and she will never allow you near her loom again. If she welcomes your tutelage, you
have a greater chance of subtly changing her weft with just a pick here and a pick there every few dozen times she opens her shed.”

“As Aizen did with everyone he encountered before his defection,” Kisuke said darkly.

“To a degree,” Benihime said with a shrug. “But your motive is to strengthen her cloth, not weaken it to ensure your own is always of the most exquisite quality by default.”

Kisuke looked up at her with a small smile. “Still resent that, do you?”

Benihime’s red lips curled into a sneer. “If one must resort to sabotage of other looms to be lauded as the most skilled weaver, one is not as skilled as one would like to believe oneself. Instead, one is admitting that they cannot compete on even terms, stunting growth in so doing.” The blade spirit leaned in close to him and lowly threatened, “Don’t you dare do that to yourself and this child, Kisuke.”

He smiled weakly. “How could I do so with you as my conscience, milady?”

The woman scowled, grabbed his jinbei, and wrenched him first backward and then closer to her. “By not listening to me,” she hissed. “As you seem fond of doing these last few weeks.” Benihime leaned still closer, pressing her forehead and the tip of her nose against his. His entire field of vision was filled with her blood red eyes. Her lips brushed his as she plaintively whispered, “Do you plan to discard me as Aizen discarded Kyōka Suigetsu when he thought himself so superior he no longer needed to listen to her? No longer needed her at all? Love me and leave me when you get what you want from me?”

Revulsion exploded through Kisuke and made him ill. The accusation was a completely unexpected blow—a low blow, really, and a manipulative one, but that was Benihime. That was him. When it suited their interests, they mercilessly leveraged weak spots and insecurities—even their own.

“Never,” he croaked.

“Will you not merely listen to me but also take my counsel seriously?” she rasped softly as she pressed her cheek against his and breathed on his ear like a lover.

“Of course.”

Benihime released his clothing, straightened, and patted his cheek in condescension. “Then-list-ento-me,” she enunciated slowly.

Kisuke smiled weakly. “What is your counsel, milady?”

The blade spirit looked at him speculatively for a moment before sitting beside him on the bench with a sighing of silk-on-silk as she arranged her ornate kimono around her, facing the opposite direction so they could see one another's faces.

“You need to be more personal and open with her, obviously. You are observant enough to see that she needs that from other people. That it works for other people. It applies to yourself as well. You must be not a distant provocateur but a direct mentor. Far more direct than you were with the Kurosaki boy.”

Kisuke hesitated and considered his words. “I'm... not sure I'm fit to.”

“Based upon what?” Benihime asked airily, very obviously already knowing the answer.
Kisuke sighed, rolled his shoulders, and cracked his neck. He hated to admit it, but he had to be honest. “Mayuri Kurotsuchi.”

Benihime tossed her hair haughtily with a sound of annoyance. “Attempting to reform that man was one of our greatest mistakes. We were optimistic to the point of naïveté. We should have recognized bad thread when we saw it and torn that weft out when we had the chance.” She reached up and pressed one crimson nail into his cheek. “But we were young, and we know better than to fashion asbestos yarn into clothing now, do we not?”

“Yes.”

The spirit drew her nail down his jaw and coyly asked, “Do you think Homura Akemi is raw asbestos?”

“No. Not at all.”

“I see.” Benihime tapped her finger against his lips as if to imply secrecy between them. “Do you fear you will restructure her raw silk into spun asbestos?” she asked in a whisper.

After a long silence, Kisuke breathed, “Yes.”

Benihime leaned back and looked at him with fond exasperation. “Darling, that girl is more likely to spin herself into the center of a spider's web without your guidance than with it. You will do her more harm by not acting.” When he glanced away thoughtfully, Benihime's hand darted after him and pulled him back toward her with a finger to the chin. “Weavers like us do have a propensity for going astray; for egotism, for thinking our ability to control events around us is both superior and the apex of morality, for seeing ourselves as Moirai or Norns or what have you. We do. But that largely happens when left to our own devices. When we go without anyone to critique our work in progress from someplace other than the bench. Some errors are more easily seen from beside or above the loom— mirrors only go so far. When all you see is your own cloth before you, the weave can become mesmerizing. That was Aizen's problem. Tragically poetic, in a way; ensnared by the reflection of his weaving on the mirror beneath it, yet unable to see its flaws because he fell in love with the glimpse of himself he saw through the warp. A modern Narcissus.” Benihime sighed and mournfully said, “Such a shame. A waste of talent. He could have woven so much good in the world had he not spun himself a cocoon he could not emerge from. One no amount of boiling could de-gum— fit only for burning.”

Kisuke had the sudden mental image of the butterfly-like monster Aizen had evolved into on his quest to godhood and laughed himself breathless until he neared passing out in his own Inner World. A sly smile danced across Benihime's lips as she watched him collect himself.

“You fear raising another weaver like Aizen because your guidance did not redeem Kurotsuchi.”

And there went the laughter. Her words were like a physical blow.

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Benihime leveled a flat stare at him. “Kurotsuchi started as asbestos and was not only content to remain asbestos, he reveled in it. It was not our method that was flawed, but our choice of raw material.”

“Garbage in, garbage out,” Kisuke said ruefully. Applying the universal rule of coding to weaving amused him.

“Precisely.” Benihime inclined her head thoughtfully and said, “While I am glad that you take the potential impact of your patronage seriously, I think your worry is excessive.” She reached over his
shoulders and loosely clasped her hands behind his neck. “Learning to weave alone is what twisted Aizen. That is why you must weave with Akemi. Beside her, in addition to above her or across the room from her. And teach her to weave herself into others and others into her with strong bonds. Right now there is more danger from her continuing to weave by herself than in learning better weaving with you. Guiding her from a distance and keeping her at arm's length is how you will convince her that she is nothing more than a tool to you. A drudge in your textile mill. A means to an end. That is what will drive her further into solitude and arrogant pride in her cloth.” Benihime leaned in close to him, chin dipped so she was looking up at him through her hair. “She is now Penelope. Do not let her become Arachne, Kisuke.”

Kisuke closed his eyes and breathed deeply, centering himself. “You're right, of course.”

“I am always right,” Benihime said crossly. “I never expected it would take so long for this fact to penetrate your thick skull, but here we are.”

A wide grin stretched across Kisuke's face. “Now, to figure out how to get closer to her....”

Benihime leaned back and looked unimpressed. “You know how. You are not stupid, Kisuke. You are an obstinate hermit crab who hates emerging from his shell any more than absolutely necessary. And even then, you favor pincers.”

Kisuke arched a brow and playfully said, “Are you calling me a crustacean, madam?”

“I am,” Benihime confirmed with a smirk before sobering again. “The others get personal with her, for one. They are also very forthcoming with her, obviously. If you volunteer information regularly, it will be less noticeable when you do strategically omit some.”

“Oh? Still omit some?” he teased. “I thought you said—”

Rolling her eyes, Benihime drawled, “Do not act as though there is no middle ground between complete openness and complete stonewalling, you fool. You play in that gray area all the time. You just need to refine your technique and degree of obfuscation for this application. Skewing heavily toward more transparency.” She let go of his shoulders and poked one finger into his chest. “This is why you will disclose today's meeting with Tomohisa Kaname when Akemi returns. The information is harmless in the scale of things considering what we have explained to her about spiritual awareness and could prompt her to examine her memories of past timelines in a new light. It could be very useful and she is intelligent enough to recognize the potential.”

“She will be furious that I explained part of the contract to him, though. Acted without her input again.”

“It is unavoidable. You merely have to phrase the revelation in a positive light and redirect her into seeking significance to the new information.”

“Merely,” Kisuke echoed drily.

“Merely,” Benihime said with a snobby inclination of her chin.

“I'll have to push that to the top of my To Do list.”

Benihime's eyes narrowed. “Speaking of—”

“Damn.”

“I don't exactly have a lot of time to work with, milady.”

She dismissed his objection with a wave of one crimson sleeve. “And you are wasting what little you have trying to weave five overlapping patterns at once. You are slowing yourself down and approaching a great deal of this situation inefficiently. You cannot continue to weave like this. Your cloth will fall apart.” Benihime jabbed her folded war fan into his sternum so hard it knocked the breath out of him and declared, “Unravel your flawed cloth. Dismantle the warp and adjust the heddles. Be more careful with your weft. Your shuttles have been unstable lately.”

“You do so hate when I hurry,” Kisuke said ruefully.

“A stitch in time saves nine,” she snapped. “Be deliberate. Methodical. You do not have the luxury of a century of idleness to design your cloth this time. You are forced to weave quickly to clothe the unclothed, but that is no excuse for poor workmanship.”

“Ahhh, such a cruel taskmaster!” he teased.

“Such an impudent student,” the spirit of his blade retorted with faint amusement. “In all seriousness, though, you simply do not have the resources to weave this piece alone. Given time, you weave intricate beauty from a thousand heddles and a hundred shuttles. When you try to do so in haste, you stray dangerously close to errors in the weft that ruin the pattern.”

“What would you suggest, Princess?”

Benihime side-eyed him with disdain as she slowly said, “Make some use of the pretentious drawboy we had to leave our lovely Seireitei loom to, ob-vi-ous-ly.”

Kisuke laughed aloud. “Still resent that, too?”

“It was a masterpiece. That asbestos-stuffed drawboy is unworthy of it,” she sneered. “Take advantage of his jealous possession of our loom to partition our weaving, but ensure every pass of the shuttle stings his fingers.”

Kisuke grinned. Indulging Benihime's grudges could be so entertaining sometimes. Well, technically, Benihime's grudges were his own suppressed grudges, so he was indulging himself. But also.... “What? You want him to prick his finger on a spindle? I don't think anyone would kiss him to wake him up to actually be useful. Unless you're volunteering to be the gallant Princess Charming, milady?”

“Begone with you, knave,” Benihime said with fond annoyance before she pushed him off the bench backwards and he woke in his bed.

He stared at the ceiling, breathing deeply and planning. After awhile, he pried himself out of bed and headed for a lab. He had a lot of arrangements to make.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As far as I could tell / remember from the show, Kyubey is shown in the same room with Junko but not with Tomohisa. I decided to make something of it. If I'm wrong... ARTISTIC LICENSE LOL.

But like... watch the PMMM episode 11 scenes of Madoka coming home from
Sayaka's funeral and Madoka and Junko at the shelter, looking at it as if Junko *knew* her daughter was involved in spiritual bullshit no one else had a hope of countering and which had probably gotten her friend killed. (°_°)

I am aware that my Benihime is similar to Senjōmaru Shutara. It annoys me because it was unintentional-- Benihime's personality has been my personal headcanon for a lonnng time and the sewing/weaving aspect was only added once Urahara's bankai was shown. We could go with the similarity being a testament to Urahara being on par with a Royal Guard, I suppose. Especially since Urahara is stated to have created his healing hot spring based on analysis of Kirinji's originals and the Quincy considered him one of the... Special War Powers or whatever that awkward phrase was.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
DREIUNDSECHZIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks for the patience. Life happened (in a good way) and the characters fought my plans for them. (A pitfall of getting to the point where “the characters practically write themselves.”)

I'm citing artistic license on Uhrmann/Bartels. As of this posting, there is no official imagery for Uhrmann's Grief Seed, Witch Kiss/labyrinth door, or labyrinth. The translation of the Image Note for Uhrmann/Bartels didn't mention the labyrinth, so I'm making inferences. Also, THANK YOU ANON TRANSLATOR FROM AO3!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DREIUNDSECHZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Going back to school was strange for Mami. It felt like she had just missed one day even though she knew she had missed three, plus the usual Sunday. Her sense of what day it was had been messed up. It was strange to do her morning routine anywhere but her apartment, strange to have eaten a breakfast cooked by someone else at a table with other people, strange to take the train to school, strange to go to school with someone instead of alone. She wasn't used to meeting up with others outside the school yet, either. The overall effect was dreamlike.

Kisa and Hanako noticed that she entered the classroom beside Hitsugaya and looked positively smug. Mami felt her face warm and averted her eyes. At least they waited until the first break period to pounce on her. She rattled off the excuse about an emergency Mr. Urahara had helped her work out and did her best to argue that she had only made friends with Hitsugaya because of mutual acquaintance with Homura Akemi in the year beneath them, but they looked skeptical and kept glancing his way. For his part, Hitsugaya was sitting at his desk and mostly ignoring the guys trying to draw him into their conversation in favor of doing something on his phone, his face shifting between bored and irritated as he occasionally gave them one- or two-word answers.

They sat on the roof with the underclassmen at lunch again. It was oddly awkward without Homura, even though the absent girl had listened to them more than she spoke the one time they did it before— before the incident. Conversation was light, the most serious topic being one of the underclassmen's classmates who was still in the hospital after a serious accident. Sayaka and Hitomi seemed equally happy about his recent turn for the better.

“I mean, I wish it would heal faster,” Sayaka said to Hitomi as she stabbed at her bento, “but he hasn’t had another setback since they slowed down on that breakthrough treatment and he's even gotten a bit more feeling back in his fingertips so it's hard to really complain, too.”

Mami made a sympathetic sound but kept her mouth shut. The word wish put her off now. It was a
good thing the boy had begun to improve on his own; otherwise, that could have been a real wish and—

Nausea made her pause in the middle of the motion of putting food in her mouth. She forced herself to complete the action, but it felt like she was chewing sawdust.

The rest of the day went by in a blur until Mami found herself at what seemed to be the underclassmen’s usual sidewalk café. Sayaka mentioned they had started going there because Homura’s cat often waited for her to get out of school, so her friends had decided to do their after-school relaxing or homework outside so they could pet her. Hitomi drifted away first, causing Mami to wonder anew whether she would have been as busy with extracurricular activities had her wealthy parents lived. Mami and Hitsugaya walked Madoka and Sayaka home before turning north. When they got off the train and approached the shop, Mami fidgeted uncertainly.

“Ah, Mr. Hitsugaya—”

The boy sighed. “Just Hitsugaya is fine.”

“O-okay.” Mami picked at the twisted strap of her school bag. “I was wondering... Do you think we could just drop off our things and go on patrol for Witches?”

He turned his head to her with an eyebrow raised and said, “I don't mind, but may I ask why?”

“It's just... I'm... restless, I suppose.”

Hitsugaya looked at her thoughtfully for a moment and asked, “Want to keep yourself busy?”

Mami relaxed with relief. “Exactly.”

“Sure, then.”

They were quiet until they reached the shop. Mr. Tsukabishi told them Mr. Urahara was in one of his labs and to not disturb him unless it was absolutely necessary. Hitsugaya acted like this was a normal thing, so Mami didn't say anything until they dropped their school things in the living area.

Hitsugaya turned to her and tucked his hands in his pockets. “You have a preference for where to go?”

“My usual patrol rounds, I suppose.”

The boy nodded once. “Lead on, then.”

In her mental map, Mami knew she usually passed a couple city blocks away from the shop when she was halfway through rounds that had her apartment as a start point, so she adjusted the pattern for having the shop as a start point. The two took to the rooftops, Hitsugaya seeming to easily recognize the search pattern she used. Mami wondered if Homura used a similar pattern.

“Out of curiosity, why don't you go farther east?” Hitsugaya asked her as they turned south at the Kazamino city limits.

“That's another girl's territory,” Mami said bitterly, thinking of her former apprentice.

“Ah. And farther north?”

“That's Pleiades Saints' territory,” Mami answered more easily.
“Pleiades Saints?”

“A team of seven magical girls,” Mami explained. “Well, six now. I saw in the news that Michiru died a few months ago. I think she was attacked in her home by either a Witch or a rival.” She had a sudden idea. “I wonder if Sōju got her?”

“What makes you think that?” Hitsugaya asked.

“The news showed that her house was damaged as though from an explosion, but there was no burn damage. It looked like what I've seen caused by magic before.”

After a minute of thought, Hitsugaya said, “Well, ambushing someone in their home does sound like something Sōju would do.”

Mami scowled. She was generally diplomatic with other magical girls, but she would gladly fight and kill that monster. It was a disconcerting feeling she hadn't thought herself capable of. She was glad she could only really remember white and purple frills and brown hair—it was hard to obsess over the girl when she couldn't put a face to the name.

“Anyway,” Hitsugaya called out, “so you not going farther north has nothing to do with the barrier over Asunaro?”

Mami stopped on the roof of an apartment building and waited for him to stop near her. “What barrier?”

Hitsugaya frowned and looked north. “It's so subtle you can't really find it unless you're looking for it,” he explained. “We discovered it by accident when Akemi crossed into it and it made her forget the Incubator while she was inside.”

“That's... disturbing,” Mami said slowly.

“That's why my uncle chose to have his shop so far north when we moved here. He's studying that barrier.”

“Oh.” Mami crossed her arms and frowned in thought. “Speaking of the shop, how does that... deep part work?”

“You mean how is it bigger on the inside than would seem possible from the outside?”

“Yes.”

Hitsugaya rocked his head back and forth in a gesture of uncertainty. “I'm not exactly an expert in that area, but it's a kind of... combining magic and physics to make a pocket dimension that my uncle can control. It's an extremely complicated thing. But as eccentric and obnoxious as he can be, the man is an innovative genius.”

“I see.”

They continued their patrol, zigzagging down the city limits until they reached the edge of Shinchi. Mami was about to lead them west when her Soul Gem glowed faintly. Both stopped on a rooftop and were quiet as Mami swayed her hand around like a compass needle. When they had a direction to go, they did so until the Soul Gem's yellow glow was brighter; when the glow stayed constant across a few blocks, Mami pointed down to the street: time to be more meticulous. Hitsugaya nodded and descended into an alley beside her.
It took another twenty minutes of dowsing to find the labyrinth by a pet shop's rickety gutter downspout. Mami and Hitsugaya stared at the sigil and tried to figure out what it was so they could have at least some clue what they might find inside.

Hitsugaya tilted his head and squinted. “I think I see an umbrella with a little bow on top and a split handle, but I have no idea what everything else is.”

“I see the umbrella, too,” Mami murmured. “Maybe the rest is... pink clouds with pink rain bending up to rain under the umbrella?”

The boy straightened and frowned. “I guess that wouldn't be the weirdest thing a Witch would have.”

Mami laughed as she triggered her transformation. She conjured a rifle and smiled at him. “Shall we?”

Hitsugaya held his right hand out to his side. The flicker of pale blue light Mami had seen him use at the shop appeared. He wrapped his hand around it, then an ice flower blossomed at one end and a beam of magic shot out and turned into a sword made of ice. While he was making a few warm-up swings, ice arced around his neck like loose armor. He met her eyes and seriously said. “Ready when you are.”

Mami led him into the labyrinth with a sharp nod. They immediately stood back to back and took in their surroundings. The first thing they noticed was that it was pouring rain.

“Well, I guess you were right,” Hitsugaya muttered.

“Half-right. It's not pink,” Mami said with a smile.

They were standing in the middle of a cobblestone street with picturesque old European storefronts and cafés lining the sidewalks. At the far end of the street to Mami's left, the distant Eiffel Tower was just visible through the mist; to Mami's right, the street led to... another Eiffel Tower. Okay. Both had giant multicolored bows tied to their pinnacles, the loose ends of the ribbons waving like flags. The streets were lined with narrow swirls of brass with gaps in their centers. Before they could really consider whether or not that was something to worry about, the ground and buildings began to make a series of mechanical clunking sounds. Doors popped open down the entire length of the street like the old automaton clocks Mami had seen in antique shops. Every door spewed automatons at even intervals, each mechanically raising and opening an umbrella as they exited.

Each doll looked like it had been artlessly sculpted from clay and painted with eye-searingly clashing bright colors. They were faceless and their sculpted and painted “clothes” were skin-tight for the masculine figures and futuristic space girl hoop skirt dresses for the feminine figures; all had some kind of boots. All carried umbrellas— cute translucent ones Mami saw offered at convenience stores for cheap on rainy days for the feminine figures and impractically tiny fashion accessories for the masculine figures. While none of them had the support poles that usually moved such automatons, they all glided along the brass tracks on the street. They flowed into an intricate but repetitive pattern around Mami and Hitsugaya, revolving in place as they moved along. They didn't move otherwise and did not attack.

“I don't sense a Witch,” Mami announced.

“Just Familiars, huh? What a pain.”

Mami's lips twitched upward as she took aim with her rifle. “Let's see what happens.” She shot one of the automatons. The others moved through it as it fell apart and its clay melted in the rain. No
reaction. “Huh. This should be simple.”

“You never know,” Hitsugaya said quietly. “Let's stay where we are. Watch each other's backs and let them come to us on the tracks.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The duo methodically attacked the clay figures as they approached in an assembly line to their destruction. It was like a shooting gallery for Mami—she repeatedly conjured a row of guns spaced just so and waited for the next batch of Familiars to line up with them before shooting. Hitsugaya slashed through half a dozen at a time, his sword easily cleaving through clay like a scythe reaping grain. It took probably thirty minutes to whittle the Familiars down while holding their ground, but the time was worth the reduced risk. Eventually, there were only a handful left at the far ends of the street. Hitsugaya murmured to Mami and she carefully sniped the remaining Familiars from afar while the boy guarded her back. Soon, the labyrinth wobbled and faded from existence, leaving them by the pet shop's downspout once more.

Mami released her transformation and watched Hitsugaya drop his sword, which evaporated before it hit the ground. His neck guard dissolved as he scrutinized the downspout and stepped up to it. Lightly running his fingers down it then looking up toward the roof, he frowned and said, “They really do seem to always haunt places relevant to their... themes.”

Oh. Rain gutter. Rainy labyrinth. “Ah, yes. Sometimes the tie can seem... abstract. But it's often the case.”

Hitsugaya hummed in thought and stepped back. “Do you want to complete the patrol or go straight back to the shop?”

Mami bit her lip. “Let's finish the patrol. I-if that's all right with you. If a Familiar is running around, there may be a Witch nearby. I don't want anyone to get attacked.”

The boy nodded and said, “Where next?”

They completed Mami’s usual circuit without further incident just in time for a late dinner at the shop. Or maybe Mr. Tsukabishi had specifically timed it for their return. Despite everything that had fallen apart around her lately, it was one of the most relaxed patrols she had been on since the days when Kyōko had been her cheerful apprentice.

I'm not alone anymore, she thought as Mr. Tsukabishi dragged a tired Mr. Urahara to the table and the four of them had a wonderfully mundane dinner.

Late that night, Kisuke sought Hitsugaya, told him to leave the gigai and follow him, shoved a couple suitcases at the disgruntled captain, and slung a big pack of supplies on his own back. They left Tessai to mind the shop while Tomoe slept and set out for Soul Society.

“You could have told me you arranged a meeting,” Hitsugaya snapped at him in the Precipice World.

“Not with Miss Tomoe constantly in earshot,” Kisuke answered distractedly, mentally going over plans for probably the hundred-and-sixty-third time.
Hitsugaya grumbled but didn't argue further.

The captains and lieutenants of the Thirteen Divisions were already assembled in the First Division meeting hall when they arrived. They were also displeased by the late hour. Hitsugaya rid himself of his suitcases as though they were hot coals and hurried to his spot. Kisuke took a deep breath, pondered the threads the room gave him to work with and the thread he had brought with him, and set his loom.

His warp was the collected shinigami; his weft was a briefing about the base magical girl situation barring all mention of anything having to do with time manipulation or knowledge of the future, but with heavy stress on the disturbing similarities observed between the Incubator's methods and Aizen's early experiments in which he preyed upon souls in the Rukon to combine into an imperfect Hōgyoku. He lay each thread out carefully, his words designed to cause specific reactions in those present— piquing interest in some, boring others, and sowing empathy or moral outrage among those who could be affected by such emotions. The only thing that didn't go quite as expected was the boredom he desired of Kenpachi Zaraki not being shared by his tiny lieutenant, who had a notoriously short attention span for anything not involving observing violence, making mischief, or eating sugar. Then again, she was a powerful young girl and he was talking about other powerful young girls being preyed upon. Sympathy?

Yachiru had climbed from her usual perch peeking over Zaraki's shoulder while clinging to his back to a fully visible crouch on his shoulder, leaning into his head and digging her fingers into his scalp while watching Kisuke with an uncertain scowl that reminded him of a territorial cat.

“Hey, Kissy-kissy,” she called out when he paused.

Kisuke looked directly at the apparent six-year-old. Her dark pink eyes looked redder than he remembered. “Yes, Lieutenant Kusajishi?”

“Do Incatbunnies bleed?”

“Yes,” Kisuke answered slowly. “Yoruichi says it tastes somewhere between rabbit and cat, with a tingle.”

The little girl licked her lips and yanked on her captain's shaggy hair. “Kenny! Let's kill 'em!”

The big man barely reacted to his hair nearly being torn out by the roots. “Tch. Boring small fry. Even the Witch things sound boring if little living girls can take 'em.”

Yachiru's cheeks puffed out as she pouted. “But Kenny, it tricks 'em into fighting!”

“So? You fight fine.”

The pink-haired girl gave a quiet screech and clawed his head. “But little living girls aren't like me! Their feelings are squishy and killing makes 'em sad! They need to grow up more before they like killing things! The Incatbunnies don't let 'em grow up to kill better! No fair!” When Zaraki just rolled his eyes and looked away, she hauled off and punched his cheekbone with one little fist. The man's neck audibly popped as his head whipped sideways.

Everyone stared. What the everloving several levels of hell.

“But Kenny! If the Incatbunnies eat up all the best fighter girls before they grow up and come here, we can't recruit 'em for Eleventh! We don't have enough girls!”

Zaraki actually looked mildly interested. “…True.”
Kisuke's mind broke. “Wait. Say that again.”

The pink terror blinked innocently at him, mollified now that her captain was under her sway. “We can't recruit 'em for Eleventh?”

“The other part.”

“The Incatbunnies eat up all the best fighter girls before they grow up and come here and we don't have enough girls?”

Kisuke kept staring at her as his mind rebooted.

*From the mouths of babes,* Benihime drawled in his head, sounding like she was shaking her own.

Some of the others present looked like they were putting pieces together. Kisuke turned to the contingent from Eighth Division and slowly asked, “Captain Kyōraku, Eighth still handles the registers for Shin'ō Academy and the Thirteen Divisions, right?”

“Yes,” Kyōraku replied lowly. “From the entire nine hundred and seventy-two years we've bothered keeping such records.” He dipped his head and peered up from under the brim of his wide straw hat with sharp eyes. “I'm guessing my division is going to be figuring out how many female recruits we've been getting over the years.”

“Compile data on male and female academy recruits overall and also specifically the number of those from the Rukon and those born in Seireitei. Twelfth can crunch the numbers. If there's a downward trend in proportion of female recruits from the Rukon with no corresponding drop in those born in Seireitei...” An entire new angle of inquiry spread before Kisuke. On top of the other hundred balls he was juggling.

Kisuke suddenly, intensely sympathized with Homura Akemi.

Captain Unohana inclined her chin in a thoughtful gesture and coolly observed, “I have long thought there should be more female shinigami than we have. And the disparity has become gradually more noticeable over time.” That was significant coming from a woman who had been one of the founding members of the Thirteen Divisions.

Shinji raised his eyebrows and said, “You think this critter's been poachin' our talent before it can get to us?” His eyes darted from face to face. “If it is, ain't that sabotaging us?”

“Intentionally or unintentionally? Or as an added bonus to whatever its goals are?” Hitsugaya wondered suspiciously.

Kisuke met the Captain-Commander's calculating eyes and deeply wished to jump to the classified meeting that would happen after the current meeting.

“Kisuke Urahara,” Yamamoto rumbled, “please continue. Display your artifacts and explain your suggested course of action.”

So Kisuke picked up one of the suitcases, opened it, and turned it around to show everyone the contents. Ten Soul Gems rested in foam padding, gold and jewels sparkling in the low light. “Each of these is the condensed soul of a spiritually aware girl. Hitsugaya and Akemi confiscated forty-three from the magical girl serial killer. I have brought twenty of them for Captain Kurotsuchi to study.” He set the open case on the small table that had been provided to him and removed a Soul Gem that looked like a shimmering emerald, then chose callously provocative words. “Please pass her around to examine her.” Then he deliberately stepped to his right and gave the Soul Gem to
Captain Ukitake first so it would have to be passed to everyone else in the parallel lines of officers before it reached Kurotsuchi—both to frustrate his former subordinate and because he knew the man probably wouldn't relinquish the Soul Gem once he had it in his hands.

Kisuke rattled off his observations of Soul Gem mechanics while watching the officers' faces as the Soul Gem made the rounds. Ukitake was predictably appalled and looked at the egg with pity. Rukia Kuchiki took it gingerly and held it toward Eleventh. Zaraki didn't care enough to take it, but Yachiru did. The little girl scowled at it for a moment before quickly shoving it toward Kensei, then scrubbing her hands on Zaraki's haori as though she had touched something distasteful. Kensei glanced at it with a grim face and passed it to Mashiro, who held it by top and bottom between thumb and forefinger, lifted it up to the light, and sadly said, “she's so pretty,” before carefully handing it to her co-lieutenant Hisagi. The young man glanced at it with a deeply disturbed expression then passed it to Komamura, who took it in one large paw and looked at it carefully. The big dog-man's face was unreadable but his ears turned flat against his head before he passed it to Iba, who frowned and passed it to Shinji. The de facto leader of the Visored also held it up to the light and turned it this way and that with a grim face. “Poor kid,” he muttered as he passed it to Hinamori. The brunette looked like she might cry angry tears as she ran a thumb over the circular medallion near its base. She passed it to Rose, who looked at it with cold detachment before passing it to Kira. The de facto leader of the Visored also held it up to the light and immediately passed it to Sasa kibe, who inspected it closely with an inscrutable face and walked it over to Yamamoto. The old man cradled it in his palm and stared hard at it before returning it to Sasaki be with a scowl. His lieutenant walked it over to the second line of officers. Soi Fon turned it to assess every angle with a hard face and carelessly shoved it at Omaeda, who looked bored and passed it to Unohana. Her heavy-lidded gaze as she examined it was ominous.

Unohana looked up and met Kisuke's eyes. “This child's reiatsu is quite distinctive. Budding plants and spring-like rejuvenation. A healer?”

“I have no way of knowing right now, but I thought as much,” Kisuke answered.

The healer nodded once and politely passed it to Isane Kotetsu. The tall silver-hired woman looked like she might cry as she passed it to Byakuya Kuchiki. His face was aloof as always as he inspected it and passed it to Renji Abarai. The redhead looked outraged and his hand shook. He looked up at Kisuke and gruffly asked, “That thing did this to Ichigo's sisters' souls?”

“Yes.”

Renji clenched his jaw and visibly bit back words. He jerkily passed it to Kyōraku, who took it reverently and examined it with a melancholy expression. Nanao Ise took it from him and only touched it with the tips of her fingers, lips pursed as she memorized it and passed it to Hitsugaya, who had already seen it and immediately passed it to Matsumoto. The normally cheerful woman looked heartbroken and protective. She hesitantly held it out to Kurotsuchi, who snatched it from her fingers without bothering to hide his impatience.

“Twenty, you said?” he asked in a clipped tone.

“Yes,” Kisuke replied.

The other scientist began muttering to himself.

“I also brought two Grief Seeds and an unknown object that appears to be an imitation or derivative of a Grief Seed.” Kisuke closed the current suitcase and picked up a smaller one. He opened it and removed said objects, then gave them to Ukitake to start the process over again. Yachiru eyed them suspiciously and refused to touch them. Zaraki didn't care, so Mashiro darted
around him to take the items from Rukia.

No sooner had Mashiro taken them than she hissed, threw the objects at the floor, and jumped back.

“The hell was that for?!” Renji shouted. “Those are kids' souls!”

“Not the squiggly one!” the usually-bubbly woman said with disgust. “It feels like— like— *that night.*”

The Visored in the room tensed. Kensei cautiously approached the squiggly pseudo Grief Seed, squatted near it, and held a hand out. He stopped a centimeter away from it, lips curling into a sneer. “She's right.” Looking up at his colleagues, he growled, “This damn thing feels like whatever the hell Aizen infected us with. Not the same, but similar enough that it's unmistakable.”

Kisuke looked at him with narrowed eyes. “We never did figure out precisely what he used to initiate the transformation,” he mused. “And it *did* have an effect similar to Hollowfication on the Miki girl....”

“*Now* you tell us,” Shinji droned. “Thanks for the warning, Kisuke.”

“My apologies,” Kisuke said with a bow of his head. “While I did not witness the effects on the living girl myself, Captain Hitsugaya did.”

Everyone turned to Hitsugaya, who was frowning severely while looking toward the silver spindles. “I didn't see the actual transformation— just its end result. I'm not sure if it transformed her physical body or encased it or what.”

“Labyrinths do tend to distort reality,” Kisuke interrupted as thoughts occurred to him. “Miss Miki mentioned that the Familiars stretched her like taffy, which should be physically impossible. I wonder if the doors to labyrinths are some kind of reishi henkan-ki...? But... stranger.” Yet another point of investigation.

“What was this transformation?” Unohana asked.

Hitsugaya shifted uncomfortably. “It was... like a Witch, but not nearly as strong.” He looked at Kisuke, who interpreted it as not wanting to reveal Akemi's observation of it having been visually halfway to Miki's actual Witch form. That was for the private briefing later that would include the time travel. “But also... it felt like the energy that an earthbound soul generates when its chain is consumed and it turns Hollow. Not the same, but—” he glanced at Kensei and echoed his words— “similar enough that it was unmistakable.”

“What did it look like?” asked Hinamori.

“Like... a mermaid. About the same size as Miki, except for the extended tail. Blue scales, webbed fingers with claws, gills on her ribs, tattered pink and blue ribbons for hair and... kind of like a cape and skirt, I guess, with a metallic knight's helm over the top half of her face like... a... Hollow... mask,” he finished slowly with another look at Kisuke.

Kisuke always had mixed feelings about brainstorm sessions that bore fruit. So interesting, but so much more to look into.

Kensei carefully picked up the Grief Seed and its warped twin by the little silver ornaments on their crowns, holding them away from his body like they might explode. Once he had passed them to Komamura, he looked at Kisuke murderously. “This fucker's Hollowfying little girls?”
“Apparently,” Kisuke answered mildly. Exactly the reaction he wanted from the Visored in Seireitei. “My working model is that becoming a Witch is a form of Hollowfication.”

The items reached Rose, who stared at them coldly. “Have you told the other Visored in Karakura?”

“No. Not in detail. I'm not sure how Hiyori will handle it. I heard she nearly came to blows with Karin Kurosaki and Homura Akemi upon meeting.”

“Hiyori started it, didn't she?” Shinji asked morbidly.

“Yes. Lisa said the tongue-lashing Ichigo gave her afterward was glorious.”

“Ah, ta be a fly on that wall,” Shinji sighed wistfully.

Rose's eyes slid to look at Kisuke. “Telling her may get Hiyori to be more cooperative.”

“Or get her to fly off the handle, dependin’ on her mood,” Shinji drawled. “We all kinda have a thing about assholes Hollowfying other people's souls, but Hiyori also has shit impulse control.”

Rose hummed in unhappy acknowledgment and passed the items on.

Yamamoto cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. “Now, Kisuke Urahara. Your advice for our response, if you would.”

Kisuke was vaguely amused that Yamamoto always avoided addressing him with any kind of title. “I would recommend each division look into its logs of shinigami that went missing in the World of the Living for unsolved cases where no Hollow was discovered on follow-up, for starters.”

“Our divisions should all have the basis for such reports from our investigations to retrospectively try to figure out which disappearances had been Aizen's doing, like Captain Shiba,” Hitsugaya said. “As I recall, most were inconclusive. Perhaps doubly so, now. But we can assign officers to dig farther back.”

Yamamoto nodded. “You all have these reports to start from?”

Everyone murmured or nodded agreement except Zaraki.

“Captain Zaraki?” Yamamoto said sternly.

“We got it!” Yachiru chirped. “Pinball-head did it!”

Kisuke didn't know why Zaraki didn't just drag Third Seat Ikkaku Madarame with him to meetings. He handled much of the nuts and bolts of running Eleventh and would probably actually give a damn about at least some of the things discussed. Maybe.

“Yes. Well.” Kisuke cleared his throat. “If any of your divisions kept records of subordinates who returned and reported something that sounded like extreme hallucinations that may actually have been labyrinths, that would also be good to know.”

“Fourth would have those records collected in one place,” Unohana said. “No need for the others to look.”

Kisuke nodded sharply. “Captain Ukitake, I would appreciate it if your division could compile everything you have on the greater Mitakihara area. Patrol history, incident reports, everything. Even if it looks innocent or unremarkable. As far back as you have it.” Captain Ukitake gave him a
businesslike nod. Kisuke turned to the contingent from Sixth Division. “Captain Kuchiki, I would very much appreciate if you could request that the Kuchiki archivists research certain historical topics. I can give you a list, if you should accept.” Byakuya inclined his chin in assent. Kisuke let an obnoxious grin overtake his features and turned to Twelfth. “Then, Ma-yu-riiiiii~”

“Don’t tell me what to do, you buffoon,” Kurotsuchi sneered as he shoved the Soul Gem at his lieutenant in favor of looking at the Grief Seed and its imitation.

“Why, I would never even think of it,” Kisuke cooed from behind the fan he brought out with sleight of hand. “I just wanted to give you several dossiers of information for your little darlings to play with.” He mourned that he couldn't bring himself to include data acquired from Twelfth's databases and disclosures in the last timeline to rile the man up by giving the impression he'd been hacked unnoticed. Kurotsuchi would throw himself into overhauling the security measures on his systems before studying the Soul Gems. It would be fun if they weren't so pressed for time.

Next time around, perhaps, Benihime muttered sulkily. She loved to see Mayuri squirm but practicality came first. Save it for if you ever need to distract him from investigating Akemi. Especially since you will be acquiring even more disparate information this time. You can falsify an extensive system breach and make him too apoplectic to care about anything else. She disdainfully sneered, Selfish boor.

Good idea, Kisuke thought to her.

The meeting soon wrapped up, everyone dispersing quickly as they headed to their beds—or labs, in Kurotsuchi's case. Kisuke was satisfied with his cloth for the moment. He and Hitsugaya adjourned to Yamamoto's office with Ukitake to have a private briefing involving everything that had been glossed over to conceal the time travel, then returned to the shop. Hitsugaya went to bed, but Kisuke retreated to his own labs. He had work to do on the Asunaro surveillance drones.

One of the Incubator's Asunaro terminals perched on a streetlight and observed the Pleiades Saints fighting a pseudo-Witch while contemplating the overarching situation. It was tempted to suspect these girls of collusion with Homura Akemi—especially Umika Misaki—but that seemed extremely unlikely. The Pleiades Saints were uncommonly inventive with their magic, yes, but the barrier they had cast over their city would make it nearly impossible for them to be meaningfully involved with anyone in Mitakihara.

The Incubator did wonder what Misaki and Kanna could accomplish if they allied with the residents of the magic shop, but that was unlikely to happen. The situation in Asunaro was devolving rapidly; the Pleiades Saints might soon cease to exist. Six were starting to split into factions regarding the pet project that replaced their seventh; two had decided to prioritize the current iteration of their project even if it meant their original goal would be sacrificed, one was desperate for the original to be recreated, one resented that obsession, one was sliding into insanity unnoticed, and one was actually a disguised infiltrator who brought to mind the human expression “wolf in sheep's clothing.” The project herself was a wildcard. The Pleiades Saints were a self-contained rolling disaster the Incubator could only watch because the magical girls had also targeted themselves in the erasure of the Incubator from the memories and perception of all within the barrier's borders.

It was a regrettable situation. The Incubator could only accomplish anything in Asunaro if the
barrier was broken. Its terminals had studied it for months and found it so sturdily woven from the five girls’ magic supporting Misaki's base spell that they postulated it could withstand losing more than half the anchors as long as Misaki was alive. It could possibly stand if Misaki was eliminated but all five of the other girls remained alive and stable; fortunately, that was no longer possible. The Incubator did not bother trying to dismantle the barrier because it would be a pointless expenditure of energy. It would collapse whenever Misaki finally succumbed to despair. Even though the Incubator could not form new contracts within it, the barrier worked to their advantage by limiting the Pleiades Saints' Soul Gem collecting.

Incubator terminals could wander freely through most of Asunaro, but the one place they most wanted access to had been warded against them before the magical girls had cast the larger barrier. The Incubator knew the Pleiades Saints kept their collection of dormant magical girls underneath Mirai Wakaba’s museum, but it could not access the hidden chamber. They deeply wanted to free those magical girls from the suspended animation the Pleiades Saints had put them into to prevent them from turning into Witches while the team looked for a nonexistent cure. The Incubator's investment of energy lay inert instead of accumulating profit, which was bothersome. The only way it could get in was if Misaki or two other Pleiades Saints died or turned....

...Or if the barriers were subverted in some other way. Perhaps by the infiltrator, though her obsessions made her unreliable. Perhaps by the residents of the nearby magic shop who had so much expertise in warding and seemed to be allied with Homura Akemi in human moral outrage. Those humans could enter Asunaro and interact with everyone within, while the Incubator could not. They would not be able to see the Incubator terminals following them. They might be sanctimonious enough to track down the Freezer and release the magical girls within— those wards would not specifically target the humans as they did the Incubator's terminals. Even though that raised the possibility of recruiting an entire force of magical girls to their cause, the sheer demand for Grief Seeds would eventually be their downfall as it had been for every group, team, guild, and alliance of magical girls throughout history.

Whichever pillar crumbled first, all the Incubator needed was patience. And patience was practically its lifeblood. If it was very lucky, all its problems would solve each other without its interference.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *sound of roller coaster cars cranking uphill*

Sayaka’s Magia Record transformation finally came out. I need a joke comic of Homura hurling Sayaka at Kyōko by the cape like in the clip, but with Sayaka visible and making funny faces instead of wrapped up in the cape and Kyōko making a shocked face in the background.

...Kinda like the time Ichigo hurled Rukia at Renji by the obi, now that I think about it. Oh my God
Ichigo and Homura ARE siblings
A/N: Well, I managed to get farther ahead sooner than I thought. Three characters staged a month-long strike to protest that my original plans had become out-of-character for them as they developed and I had to adjust plot to match. Which was a major pain because it messed with the calendar and who was where when. But I worked something out and the characters started working again.

It fascinates me that I've solidified my concept of these characters so strongly that “they” flag me down when I'm “forcing” them to do a thing “wrong.”

VIERUNDSECHZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Akon trudged into the Twelfth Division labs at dawn on Tuesday, clinging to his large thermos of coffee for dear life and already itching for a smoke. He sat at his desk, pressed a button, and watched his computer boot up as he savored sweet, sweet caffeine. Peace in the lab. Yes.

When his captain materialized from the shadows like a ghoul, Akon didn't even flinch. “Good morning, Captain.”

Kurotsuchi looked more irritable than usual—must've pulled another all-nighter. He carelessly tossed a tablet onto Akon's desk. Rude. “After your initial rounds, your project for the day is to study this evidence and research the relevant areas in our databases. Double check the integrity of any sensors involved. Report anything interesting to me.” With that, Kurotsuchi went his way muttering something about modifying lapidary saws. Akon stared after him.

Well, that was ominously vague.

Curious but also in possession of a healthy sense of self-preservation, Akon set aside the tablet and went through his daily start-up routine as ordered. Thinking ahead, he set up several diagnostics to run on various sensor arrays before the bulk of the workforce showed up and slowed scans down.

After an hour of checking on various experiments and specimens, Akon finally sat down with the tablet. At first he didn't understand why the hell he had been given articles about such seemingly mundane occurrences in addition to the on-site sensor data Urahara had sent, but he slowly became engrossed by the details and speculation about the patterns formed by them as described in the accompanying notes. Akon went through everything a second time, outlining a research plan. After mid-morning rounds, repairing his eardrums after an unexpected explosion, and lunch, Akon sat down to research in earnest. The more data he compared, the more he frowned.
That couldn't be right.

But the more he looked, the more all the various points of investigation agreed. What they agreed upon made no goddamn sense, but that many independent points of confluence was hard to argue with. No wonder his captain had been grouchier than usual and demanded sensor evaluation. Time for independent confirmation.

Akon went to the Spiritual Wave Measurement Lab and approached Rin Tsubokura. More considerate than his superior, Akon got Rin's attention then stood back and silently waited for him to finish what he was doing. Ten minutes later, Akon gave Rin a blank research outline with no context as a control. Rin eyed him curiously but Akon refused to elaborate.

Four hours later, Rin appeared in Akon's doorway sporting an uncharacteristic frown.

“Yes?”

“This makes no sense.”

Akon sat back. “I'm not the only one, then. Any ideas?”

Rin looked down at his tablet doubtfully. “I suppose that sector of the remote sensor array could be compromised. I ordered Kajiura's team to manually inspect it and overhaul it. I don't really think they'll find anything, though—the likelihood a cluster of errors this dense would go unnoticed for almost thirty years is very small.”

Akon leaned on one elbow and propped up his head. “What do you propose, then?”

“On-site readings,” Rin said, pursing his lips. “The portable reishi analysis machine has more delicate capabilities than the wide-scale sensor array. I'd...like to confirm these readings before you report to Captain Kurotsuchi. Have proof that it's not long-term shoddy maintenance.”

Keep his department alive and sane if possible, Akon translated. “That won't be necessary. Kisuke Urahara has been on-site and provided data. It looks like it correlates with our remote readings, but I'll forward it to you for review. There are also potential sites of disturbances with aberrant readings in the information I held back. Dig into those and compare with our existing data. If you need anything new, outline it and I'll forward it to Urahara to gather on-site.”

Rin nodded and bit his lip in worry as he looked down at the tablet again. “The discrepancy between what the readings are and should be is...disturbing. But I think it went unnoticed this long because the readings blend in with others in the area. They don't look abnormal if you don't cross-reference population demographics. We've only really poked at population numbers when looking for an explanation for a sudden increase or decrease in spiritual density and Hollow population. This has been steady—not suspicious.”

“Assign some people to look around Japan for other population centers whose readings don't seem to correlate with number of occupants.”

Rin looked dismayed. “That'll take forever.” He sighed and nibbled his thumbnail. “Maybe Hiyosu can write a program to flag potential points of interest for further study,” he muttered, gradually more quietly.

“Have him do that while you compare our data to Urahara's,” Akon said with a firm nod. “It would be useful if we end up expanding the scope beyond Japan. Lieutenant Kurotsuchi is also involved in the overarching investigation, so if Hiyosu needs more programming talent to draw from, tell him to go to her.”
Rin's eyebrows knit in worry. “This is part of something bigger?”

“Possibly. I don't want to give you confirmation bias with details and I don't have all the info either, but it may be an enemy conspiracy of some kind.”

Rin grimaced. “I'll sideline as many assignments as possible to prioritize this, then.”

Akon smiled thinly. “I appreciate it.”

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Homura had a thoroughly domestic breakfast in the Kurosaki household, spent the morning in the clinic with Isshin having discussions about the Precipice World between patients while Ichigo did classwork, ate lunch with them, and left shortly thereafter. The hotheaded blonde who had verbally attacked Homura and Karin was not present when Ichigo took Homura to Urahara Shop to use the reishi henkan-ki. This time they were escorted by a short, dark-haired young woman who exchanged pleasantly sarcastic barbs with Ichigo the entire trip. Homura observed Rukia Kuchiki carefully, thinking of how she had been described as *one of the family around here* in the previous timeline. Captain Ukitake was waiting for them at the end of the tunnel again; it turned out Kuchiki was his second-in-command. Homura was allowed to walk to the edge of the Senkaimon platform once more to look at Seireitei in daylight. The city was vast, but its circular edge bordered a yet larger sprawl of more spaced-out buildings and rolling countryside. Kuchiki told her about the Rukon districts where most souls resided. Then they turned and traversed the Precipice World again, emerging in the basement training room in the magic shop. Ichigo gave her a warm pep talk and a hug which she hesitantly returned as Kuchiki looked on fondly. Then they were gone and Homura was alone with Mr. Tsukabishi.

“Captain Hitsugaya and Miss Tomoe are at school. Boss is in the courtyard with his project.”

Curious, Homura made her way up through the trapdoor and navigated to the courtyard. The gray sky was heavy with the promise of rain, which made her blink in disorientation for a moment; it had been sunny in Karakura and Soul Society. She stopped in her tracks at the sight of Kisuke Urahara standing in front of the open pigeon coop, arms spread and completely covered in birds. There were even three perched on his hat.

Urahara spun around to face her and cheerfully greeted, “Welcome back, Miss Akemi!” as pigeons flapped their wings for balance and resettled on him. He looked like a manic scarecrow with dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep.

“What are you doing,” Homura said flatly, not even sure she really wanted to know.

“Well, I purposely chose a property with a koi pond and installed a pigeon coop so they would be visible from the tall buildings around us so the Incubator could see them,” he explained. “I've also been throwing birdseed out in the yard and leaving dishes of water and food out for other critters every day. I wanted to establish a reputation as an eccentric friend to all creatures!”

Homura stared through a long silence. Morbid curiosity won out. “Why?”

“Partly to encourage local stray cats and dogs and crows to hang around and make life difficult for the Incubator,” Urahara said with a sly smile. “I even have a few raccoons showing up every night from the storm drains! Did you know raccoons are also spiritually sensitive? It's true!” He laughed and swayed his arms to make the birds flutter around again. Without waiting for a reaction from
Homura, he cooed, “So there is that, but I mostly did it so I could replace the real pigeons with these surveillance drones!”

“...Pigeons. For surveillance.” Homura looked at him sideways and doubted his sanity. “Why?”

Urahara grinned wickedly. “Yoruichi did report that the Incubator told the girls it doesn't bother avoiding columbids because they're too dumb to notice it. If a pigeon starts pecking around within sight of it, the Incubator could decline to avoid it. I want to use that to monitor its movements. I just had to make gigai that looked like pigeons but which contained concealed surveillance equipment like camera eyes while looking completely natural. The hardest part was actually creating Mod Souls with no sentience but which could recognize Incubators and follow remote suggestions in a way that was believably pigeon-like. That and making sure each drone physically matched the lured bird it was replacing. That will be an ongoing thing as new birds show up for snackies.” Urahara made a kissy face at a pigeon that pecked at his unshaven cheek. He raised his arms suddenly and cackled, “Fly, my pretties, fly! Ah-hahahahaha!” as the startled birds took flight.

Obnoxious and eccentric, but brilliant, everyone always told Homura.

“Where are the original birds?” Homura asked with dread.

“In a coop in one of my labs, which has a trap door into the inside of this pigeon coop. It's disguised. Don't worry— I'm taking good care of them.”

Homura stared for a moment, then dully said, “Those poor birds.”

“You wound me, Miss Akemi.” The shopkeeper grinned, looked her over, and commented, “You seem to be more relaxed.”

“Yes,” Homura agreed.

“They're good for you.”

“Yes.”

“We need to sit down and have a talk.”

“Yes.”

Urahara looked pleased.

They went inside and sat down to tea provided by Mr. Tsukabishi. There was a long, awkward silence as they stared at each other and listened to the scattered patter of a drizzle starting up outside. Homura decided to take the initiative and be halfway diplomatic.

“I... appreciated the... downtime. I was able to slow down and think. I had no opportunity to do so last week. I had no time to adjust to your arrival before a sudden transition into an unfamiliar life-and-death emergency.” Homura pursed her lips and considered her words carefully, uncertain about how to express some of her thoughts. “I think... the reaction... stacked? Accumulated? Or... was intensified by the Sōju situation. That the horror of the events that followed... magnified my reaction by association.” She looked up at the shopkeeper darkly. “Do not misunderstand me to mean that your invasion is... water under the bridge. I am still very angry. I am just practical enough to realize your presence has tangible benefits. I am very aware that in your absence, my only options on Wednesday night were death, turning, or Madoka or Sayaka wishing my body healed. You and the others have my gratitude for that.” Homura canted her head to one side and
looked down her nose at him disdainfully. “Your presence is not the true problem. The lack of coordination is.” She leaned forward with an intense expression. “Never surprise me like that again.”

Urahara met her eyes solemnly and nodded. “I will strive to be more partner than interloper.” He smiled faintly. “I’ve had it pointed out to me that we have similar mindsets regarding gathering and sharing of information and plans. That we both are used to being in control by virtue of knowing the most about any given situation. It makes sense that we would... clash, especially as we both come from different angles of understanding of events we did not realize were interconnected.” He tilted his head and gave her an even look. “I request that you acknowledge that cooperation is a two-way street. You need to meet me in the middle.”

Homura pursed her lips and inclined her chin. “I shall endeavor to do so.”

The scientist weighed her with his gaze and nodded firmly. “Let us begin anew.”

“Yes.”

They sipped their tea quietly for a couple minutes in a way that made Homura think of some kind of peace ritual. Then Urahara took a deep breath and looked at her seriously.

“In the spirit of cooperation, I wish to inform you that Tomohisa Kaname visited the shop while Miss Kaname and the others were at school yesterday.”

Homura blinked slowly as her mind stumbled on the information. “What? Why?”

“Please bear with me,” Urahara said with a placating gesture. Instead of answering directly, he asked her questions. “Have Miss Kaname's parents ever seemed to know that something... odd is going on?”

She looked down at her tea and frowned in thought; he let her. “I am... uncertain.”

“Have you ever noticed a difference between how Miss Kaname's parents react to their daughter staying out late or otherwise behaving differently because of her magical girl duties, versus how Miss Miki's parents react?”

“Yes,” Homura answered immediately. “Mr. and Mrs. Kaname have always been far more permissive than Mr. and Mrs. Miki. Sayaka is good at hiding it, but she gets in trouble for going out late. Madoka's parents are... concerned, but do not yell at her or ground her. They tell her— and sometimes me or the others— to be careful, take care of herself, to tell them if there is a problem she needs help with.” She thought for another moment. “Madoka has said... that her parents give her advice when she speaks to them in general terms about the social dynamics of the local magical girls. But they do not pry.”

Urahara looked down at his teacup with an unfocused but thoughtful expression as he ran one finger around the cup's rim. Homura let him think until it seemed he had gotten quite lost in his skull.

“Mr. Urahara?”

He started. “Oh, sorry.”

“What happened?”

Urahara took a deep breath and said, “Apparently, Tomohisa Kaname is modestly spiritually
aware. And knows his daughter is powerfully so. And Junko Kaname is not spiritually aware, but knows her husband and children are.” One corner of his mouth quirked. “Mr. Kaname noticed his daughter’s protective charm bracelet and came here to seek more for the rest of the family. Then he noticed our wards and asked if I could construct some around the Kaname house.”

Homura stared with wide eyes, lips parted in surprise.

“You never noticed, I take it?” Urahara asked.

“No.” Homura’s brows knit. “How could I have missed it?”

Urahara hummed as he took a sip of tea, then said, “I’ve been thinking about that. Part of it could be simply not thinking to look, but have you ever been near Mr. Kaname without Miss Kaname nearby?”

“I do not think so,” Homura replied as she lifted her own cup.

“Your senses may have been washed out by her reiatsu,” Urahara said with a nod. “Her father is far less powerful than she is—as is her brother. It could be like trying to hear snapping fingers over a drum line. Think of how other people’s reiatsu is muffled if you are very near Ichigo when he’s bothered and the others are calm. Except the power differential between Miss Kaname and her father is far greater than that between Ichigo and his family.” After a pause, he added, “Ah, that could explain Yoruichi not mentioning anything. I’ll have to ask her.”

“I see.” Homura frowned. “Did you learn anything else?”

“Yes, actually, I did.” Urahara tapped his fingers on the side of his cup. “The family was originally from Soma. Mr. Kaname was aware of Hollows, but called them cursed spirits. His grandfather had some spiritual awareness and passed down what he knew. Mr. Kaname is only powerful enough to see Hollows translucently instead of solidly. The Kaname family moved here when Madoka was a baby because her father noticed Hollows sniffing around her and he accidentally discovered that there are no Hollows in Mitakihara when they visited for a few weeks. Mrs. Kaname takes such things seriously enough to immediately transfer here for the safety of her child.” He dipped his chin and peered at her with sharp eyes from the shadow cast by his hat. “Mr. Kaname has sensed the Hollow-like energy coming off his daughter after she has been in a labyrinth and noticed that her power burns it off by morning.”

Homura stared at him, dumbfounded. Then she took her turn to absently look at her tea while her mind raced, turning over memories in light of the new information.

Urahara stayed quiet for a long while, either watching her or idly running his fingers along his teacup. After awhile, he prompted, “Does this information change your understanding of anything from past timelines?”

“I am... still uncertain. I need to think about this.”

“I understand,” Urahara said with a pleasant nod. “I must also tell you that he asked about the cat-spirit that got in his daughter’s room.”

Homura raised a brow in inquiry.

“He saw the fur and blood the Incubator left behind after Yoruichi’s attack. He said the fur evaporated and the blood came out when he charged the water with his power.”

Homura’s other brow joined the first.
Urahara rocked his head and hesitantly said, “I explained the Incubator to him in general terms.”

She went rigid. “What.”

“I told him that we are investigating a spirit-creature that offers girls a wish in exchange for their souls, without telling them they are selling their souls. I made no mention of magical girls as such.”

“What?”

“I told him his daughter had been offered such a contract, but that she turned it down due to her knowledge of contracts from her mother... and your warnings.”

“What?!”

Urahara looked grim. “My apologies, but I told him you had completed a contract to save your best friend's life.”

Rage. Hot rage. Such a significant breach of secrecy, and behind her back—! Her blood rushed in her ears. She opened her mouth to reply but could find no words.

“I did so to increase his likelihood of cooperating with us by stoking moral outrage. He is furious at the Incubator and willing to be used as a tool to thwart it. He requested wards to keep Madoka even safer than just the bracelet could offer.”

Homura narrowed her eyes at him, noticing his use of Madoka's given name and safety to draw her focus. She said nothing, but his face told her he noticed that she noticed all the same. Homura felt like there was an invisible chessboard between them on the table; they were still playing against one another instead of opposing the Incubator as a unified force.

“I do apologize for not consulting with you first, but I hope you can understand that Mr. Kaname took me by surprise and I felt the benefits of seizing the opportunity he presented outweighed the drawbacks of proceeding without you.”

Homura only noticed that she was gripping the table's edge to restrain anger when one of her nails broke from the pressure of drawing the fingers back as though clawing something. She closed her eyes and forced herself to take deep breaths.

“I—”

“Shut up and let me think!” Homura snapped without opening her eyes.

Urahara fell silent.

She knew she needed to calm down and be more productive than lashing out. What he had done was done. Anger over it would not be helpful. Homura grasped for something calming to focus on and settled on the mixed memories of Madoka and Yuzu braiding her hair. Deep breaths. After several minutes of calming herself and thinking, Homura slowly opened her eyes and frowned severely at Urahara.

“Tell me what he knows.”

If Urahara was put off by her barking orders, he didn't show it. He laid out what Madoka's father seemed to already know and what he had been told the day before so neatly it may as well have been an itemized list complete with bullet points. Homura sat impassively through it all, making a point of sipping from her teacup as though unperturbed. Urahara went quiet again when he was
done, leaving her to her thoughts for several minutes.

Gritting her teeth, Homura said, “I will... concede... that your choice of action could have practical benefits in the future. I also am grateful that you volunteered this information as soon as I returned. However,” she snapped with a scowl, “you must make surprising or not consulting me more of an exception than a habit.”

Urahara grinned faintly and dipped his head in assent. “I will do my utmost.”

“Do you have any plans regarding Mr. Kaname?”

“Not at the moment, though I have a couple ideas that would possibly involve telling him or even his wife more—”

“What do you mean, tell his wife more?” Homura demanded. “You spoke with her?”

“Not at all!” Urahara said with a cheerfully dismissive wave. “But in marriages as apparently healthy as the Kaname's and considering her prior knowledge of her family's powers, I would be very surprised if Mr. Kaname hasn't shared everything with her by now.”

Homura frowned, unconvinced, but gestured for him to continue. “You were saying?”

“Ah, yes. I wish to more thoroughly assess the pros and cons of any use of them and consult you before acting since you know them better. I have some time to actually give that some thought now. Until today, I had been focusing on finishing the surveillance drones. Our dearly departed Misses Sōju pushed me quite behind schedule,” he said wryly. “I had originally planned to deploy the drones this past Friday.”

Homura poured herself another cup of tea and breezily declared, “If I do end up having to go back again, I plan to kill them on sight.”

Urahara's sharp grin bordered on bloodthirsty. “Please, do. Just be mindful of who sees or otherwise knows you do it.”

“Of course.”

“Or see if you can taunt them into showing you the Soul Gems again first.”

“Oh, I have a few ideas,” Homura said coolly. She poured more tea into his cup while he let out a conspiratorial laugh, then said, “Dr. Kurosaki told me you have assigned him to investigate Sōju's movements from the time of her disappearance from her home to allow Mr. Tsukabishi to pursue other tasks.”

“Yes,” Urahara said with a nod of gratitude as he took his tea. “The late Misses Sōju bequeathed us a fortune in objects and information to study. I simply cannot spare time to investigate their path of destruction now that we don't have to worry about their interference, plus I need Tessai's assistance with the surveillance network and other specialized tasks. Isshin is decent at tracking things like that through news sites so he'll have a package neatly arranged for you to plan counter-strategy against them if you have to go back. Probably also a list of potential identities for those forty-three Soul Gems, too. I don't know if he'll finish it by the turnback point but at the very least he should have a good foundation to build on.”

Homura nodded and quietly thought more. “Do you really plan to ward the Kaname household?”

“Yes,” Urahara replied as he set his teacup down after a sip. “Tessai is doing the bulk of the prep
work and charm construction so I can focus on experiments and research.”

“That is reasonable,” Homura said pleasantly.

“I'd like you to observe when we do the installation so you can see practical application of theory.” Urahara tilted his head in inquiry. “Have you had time to read the introduction to ward theory Tessai gave you last week? I know you've been... quite busy.”

Homura hummed a negative and shook her head. “I had planned to look at it tonight. What he explained to me on the tour last week sounded like an extension of barrier-type kidō, so I reviewed the introductory booklet on that this morning whenever Dr. Kurosaki was with patients.”

Urahara nodded agreeably. “I'm also having him compile some reading material on intermediate kidō theory for your reference. We are very busy right now, but if you can get a solid foundation in theory it will be easier to teach you kidō when one of us does have time.”

“I appreciate that.” After a prim sip of her tea, Homura casually asked, “Are you seeking to distract me from something?”

Urahara grinned. “Is giving you material to read at your leisure a distraction?”

“That is not an answer.”

The grin widened. “You know, if Yoruichi and I were still captains among the shinigami and you were an academy graduate, we would be fighting each other tooth and nail over which of us would recruit your sharp mind to our divisions.”

“Still not an answer,” Homura said lightly, “but I would lean toward Tenth. If nothing else, I know their captain is sane.”

Urahara's surprised laugh was unexpectedly entertaining. He spoke with good-natured ease. “To answer your question: Yes. But it has to do with incomplete research I wish to delay sharing until I have conclusive results. Speculation can be counterproductive.”

Homura eyed him skeptically. His word games and deflections were too similar to those employed by the Incubator for her comfort, but she had promised Ichigo she would try. “I do not believe you,” she said bluntly, “but I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. For now.” She looked at the clock and stood. “I am going to meet the others as they get out of school. I do not know what we will do afterward. Call us if you need us.” With that, she pushed her hair back and left.

Kisuke watched the girl leave and considered his tea again.

Benihime was smug. What did I tell you?

“To paraphrase, I believe you said she is intelligent enough to recognize that she could benefit from my presence, information, and instruction if I don't provoke her fight or flight response,” he murmured into his teacup. Kisuke took a swig of tea and continued in thought, That she is hyper-aware of the potential for conspiracy and betrayal, but volunteering information regularly will make it less likely she'll notice when I strategically omit some. He smacked his lips and sighed, “Ah, too bad she noticed.”
Of course she did, Benihime sniffed. *This is the first time she got information from you without prying it out with a crowbar. Be consistent and the suspicion will lessen.*

*If she's as like me as you think, she'll never fully trust what I say,* Kisuke thought.

*Of course not,* Benihime said with a scoff. *That is why I said lessen, not disappear.*

Kisuke smiled ruefully. *Right as always, milady.*

Benihime preened, then commanded him, *Now get some sleep, you overachieving idiot.*

*There is so much to be done, though.*

*Better to do it with a well-rested mind,* Benihime retorted. *Ye gods, I haven't had to scold you about this so frequently since you were first promoted to captain.*

Kisuke smiled into his teacup and reminisced about the first weeks he had begun to convert Twelfth Division into a scientific powerhouse. *Those were good times.*

*They were, yes. But you collapsed in exhaustion three weeks in, you fool.*

*This is also true,* Kisuke thought wryly.

*Let your avian surveillance system collect data and go to bed,* Benihime commanded.

Kisuke laughed aloud. *“As milady wishes.”*

Benihime projected the sense of a condescending sneer, sniffed something sarcastic about wishes, and withdrew into her dim chambers strewn with red silk and incense.

A nap *did* sound good. And it was usually beneficial to look at things with a fresh set of eyes after a break.

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Madoka's heart skipped a beat when she read the text message Hitsugaya had sent her while she and Sayaka were packing their school things and waving Hitomi off as she rushed to a student council meeting.

*Akemi is feeling well enough to leave the shop now. My uncle says she is coming to meet us after school.*

Sayaka's phone trilled a moment later. Their eyes met and they smiled with relief.

They met up with Hitsugaya and Mami in the courtyard and left together. Upon rounding a curve in the path leading away from school, they found Homura holding a black umbrella and absently scanning the wooded area bisected by the stream. The tension Madoka had held since Saturday night released all at once at the sight of her friend looking so much calmer than she had. Madoka couldn't help herself— she dropped her bag and umbrella and rushed to hug Homura with a tearful, “I'm so glad you're okay!”

After a moment of hesitation, Homura's free arm came up and lightly returned the hug. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I am happy to see you again.”
Madoka giggled through her tears and hugged her friend harder. Homura was happy to see her! Happy!

“Good to see you out of your funk, Stranger Danger,” Sayaka said with a grin.

Homura nodded at her and murmured a thanks of some sort. Hitsugaya and Mami's greetings were more subdued, having been pretending that they saw her holed up at the shop each day. Mami did look relieved, though.

“I would like to go to our café,” Homura said pleasantly, “but perhaps we should make our purchases and take them to the shop to relax.” She looked into the woods on her left again. “I think I saw an Incubator in a tree.”

Everyone's moods soured. Sayaka turned toward the trees, cupped one hand beside her mouth, and shouted, “What have we told you about stalking, you little creep?! We're not buying what you're selling! Scram!”

Madoka and Mami giggled despite their unease and even Homura and Hitsugaya had ghosts of smiles. Sayaka flipped her short hair in an imitation of Homura and looked pleased with herself.

It took them an hour to get to the café, watch Sayaka needle Hitsugaya at the pastry counter, and troop up to the edge of Mitakihara on the train. They spent another hour eating their purchases and doing homework. Sayaka and Madoka jealously watched Homura blaze through all the classwork she had missed as though it was simply review. Mami's laughter was musical and Homura actually smiled several times. Madoka was sad to see it end, but it was getting dark and she and Sayaka had parents to display good behavior to, so they needed to go home. They were just picking up their school bags when Mami's phone rang.

“Ah, it's Nagisa,” Mami said worriedly. She picked up with a beep and a, “Hello? Are you all right?” Her face got more troubled from there. “We'll be there soon,” she finished. After she hung up she glanced between Hitsugaya and Homura. “Nagisa says there's a labyrinth near her apartment. She hasn't seen anyone go in and is staying outside it like we told her to.”

Homura stood, tossed her hair over her shoulder, and coolly said, “Let's go.”

“Guess that's our cue to leave!” Sayaka chirped awkwardly. “You kids have fun with your superhero stuff, yeah? I want to hear stories!”

Homura initially looked disgruntled but rolled her eyes and stepped away. Hitsugaya and Mami followed her. They were already taking to the rooftops when Tessai was escorting Madoka and Sayaka out the front door and handing them their umbrellas. They watched their friends disappear and stared at the empty sky for a long minute.

“They'll be fine,” Tessai soothed. Both girls turned to him. He smiled. “They're all competent and very alert now. They know the importance of watching each other's backs. They'll be fine.”

“What if they aren't?” Madoka asked, unable to keep the worried squeak out of her voice.

“That's what me and the boss are here for,” the big man rumbled, something hard and scary gleaming in his usually gentle eyes. “Go home. I'll tell them to message you when it's over.”

Madoka and Sayaka agreed. The entire trip home was accomplished in utter silence as both of them fidgeted nervously.
Nagisa stood under a ragged awning with her umbrella angled outward to block more of the rain as she fidgeted uncertainly and chewed a nail. She watched the wavering air over the fire hydrant outside the abandoned construction site Daddy had warned her not to cut through on the way home from school because stray dogs lived there. It hadn't been super smart to do it even if she did feel much safer with Yo-yo trotting along at her heels, but it was raining, she had wanted to get home fast, and she had galoshes to keep the mud off her shoes so she had done it anyway. Yo-yo had hissed and puffed her fur at a couple scrawny dogs that were sitting in the openings of a pile of huge pipes, but they had only whuffed halfheartedly and stayed in their dry shelter. Nagisa had thought herself home free when she ducked through a hole in the chain link fence and nearly ran smack into a pink labyrinth sigil in her hurry to get out of the worsening rain.

Yo-yo had yowled, dodged in front of her, and turned to face her with her hackles raised. Nagisa hadn't really needed the warning; she jumped aside quickly, tripped on the uneven pavement, and scrabbled backward until she hit a light post. She panted in fear for a minute, then relaxed enough to pick up her discarded umbrella and move farther away. Yo-yo followed her, staying between her and the fire hydrant even though the sigil faded once she was away from it. Now the cat was crowding at Nagisa's legs and meowing while Nagisa waited for Miss Mami to show up and help her, like she had been told to.

Nagisa startled when Miss Mami dropped to the sidewalk from a nearby rooftop. She wasn't surprised to see Mr. Hitsugaya with her, but Nagisa tensed when Miss Homura alighted on the pavement with them. The dark-haired magical girl noticed and tilted her head aside with a frown as her companions sought the entrance to the labyrinth.

“We fought in a Familiar labyrinth with this symbol yesterday,” Mr. Hitsugaya said.

Miss Homura glanced at him as Yo-yo trotted over to her and wove through her legs in greeting. “Oh? What was in it?” Then she knelt and scratched Yo-yo's chin and ears as Miss Mami described everything they saw and did.

“That—that sounds easy,” Nagisa said hesitantly.

“Just because they did not attack last time does not necessarily mean they will not attack this time,” Miss Homura emotionlessly said with a dismissive wave. She paused as she noticed Nagisa’s flinch. Miss Mami and Mr. Hitsugaya turned and gave Miss Homura the same kind of flat look Mommy used to give Daddy when he did something she didn't like. Miss Homura stared at Nagisa until it made her nervous and on the verge of tears, then took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “I apologize,” she said solemnly.

“What?” Nagisa repeated.

“I apologize for being short with you,” Miss Homura said. “I am aware that my impatience with newer magical girls is a problem. I am most accustomed to fighting alone or with equally experienced combatants. I will try to improve my attitude and be more cooperative.” She pursed her lips then added, “I also owe you an apology for Saturday night. I was unnecessarily cruel. I will endeavor to control such behavior.”

“What?” Nagisa repeated.

Miss Homura frowned and knitted her eyebrows. Mr. Hitsugaya's mouth twitched with amusement and he said, “Akemi is sorry she was mean to you and will try to do better from now on. She's not
used to working with beginners, so she keeps expecting you to act like you have a lot of practice and gets mad when you don't. She knows it's wrong and is sorry she hurt your feelings.

Nagisa blinked away her tears. “O-oh.”

Miss Homura looked at him sideways. “Did you really need to translate that?”

Mr. Hitsugaya returned the sideways glance and droned, “Obviously.”

Miss Mami lightly covered her mouth to stifle a laugh then turned to the sigil. “Miss Akemi is right, Nagisa. Always expect the possibility that Familiars may behave differently in a Witch's true labyrinth.” She turned to Miss Homura and raised her brows. “Do you have a preference for how we handle this?”

Miss Homura looked surprised for a moment, then thoughtful. “If it looks the same as the Familiar labyrinth, I think you two should handle the Familiars in the same way. If it is just another Familiar labyrinth, I will talk Momoe through the reasons you fight as you do. If the Witch is inside, I will guide Momoe through defeating it.”

It was Nagisa's turn to look surprised. “Really?!”

“Of course,” Miss Homura said as she triggered the violet light of her transformation. “If you practice with supervision, you will be in a better position to fight if you are caught by yourself another time.” After a pause, she quietly added, “I told you last week that I am concerned that you could be overwhelmed in battle because you have little experience. Now that the emergency has passed, I have time to help you make sure that never happens.” Miss Homura cocked her head in thought and said, “Give me your backpack and umbrella. I will put them in my shield so they do not get in your way and you do not lose them.”

“Okay!” Nagisa scrubbed an arm across her eyes, sniffled, and chirped, “Thank you sooo much!” She handed over her things and triggered her own transformation with a wobbly smile. Miss Mami looked at the two of them with warm affection as her own costume appeared from yellow light and Mr. Hitsugaya swung his ice sword around to stretch his arm. Yo-yo sat on a stoop and watched them.

The labyrinth looked just like Miss Mami said, a pretty little village on a rainy day with swirls of metal on the street. Miss Mami looked around with narrowed eyes. “There's a Witch in here. I can feel it.”

“Doesn't feel particularly strong, but you never know if weak enemies are going to be tricky,” Mr. Hitsugaya muttered, shifting to have his back parallel to Miss Mami's as he also scanned the opposite area.

“Shield your Soul Gems,” Miss Homura ordered as she tugged Nagisa's poncho to get her to stand between Miss Mami and Mr. Hitsugaya, violet light swirling into a small cage around her own diamond.

Miss Mami turned to her in confusion. “Sōju isn't a problem anymore.”

Miss Homura met her eyes with a grim frown. “Familiars and Witches can get lucky and hit a Soul Gem in the middle of battle. I have... seen it happen. Several times,” she said heavily. “Instant death with no chance of recovery.”

Miss Mami went white and swallowed hard, one hand darting up to brush against the yellow jewel on her hat. Nagisa covered the gem on her tummy with her palm.
Mr. Hitsugaya briefly closed his eyes and looked... Nagisa didn't think tired was the right word, but that was the closest she could come to describing his downcast face when he looked at them over his shoulder. “That, and friendly fire. We could accidentally hit each other in the fog of battle, as I hit the Soul Gems in the battle with Sōju. Better to be safe. I should have reminded you in the last one we fought, Tomoe.”

“It is best to make it a habit,” Miss Homura added.

A loud clunking sounded from the ground beneath them and the doors of every building popped open. Nagisa and Miss Mami made shields for their Soul Gems as they all watched to see if the automatons would act the same. When the others said they were acting the same, Miss Homura took a deep breath and quietly said, “Miss Momoe, your lesson will now commence.”

Nagisa snapped to attention, determined to make Miss Homura proud. “Okay!”

“Why are Tomoe and Hitsugaya standing back to back?”

An easy one! “So no one sneaks up on them!”

Miss Homura nodded. “Why are we standing between them?”

“Umm.” Nagisa peered around them at the approaching automatons. “Cuz... cuz they know how to fight the other thingies?”

“Yes. And also?”

Nagisa noticed that Miss Homura wasn't looking at her, but all around them. “Looking... oh! If they fight the thingies, we can look for the Witch!”

“Good,” Miss Homura said with an approving nod. “This time, I will look for the Witch. I want you to watch Tomoe and Hitsugaya fight. Pay attention to things they do and try to figure out why they do them that way. Where they hit things, why they hit them where they do, why they choose to pause before an attack, everything.”

“Okay!”

So Nagisa spent the next ten minutes turning from one combatant to the other, awestruck by the smooth, efficient brutality with which they dismantled whirling clay figures as they approached.

“Oh, Nagisa,” Miss Mami called out pleasantly as a bank of big guns blew the heads off half a dozen automatons, “Why are we staying still instead of moving around? Why aren't we chasing them?”

Nagisa made uncertain sounds and turned to look at Mr. Hitsugaya, whose feet were planted solidly as he swept his sword at the necks of another half dozen automatons that were—

“They spin right into your attacks!” Nagisa answered excitedly. “It's easier than chasing!”

Mr. Hitsugaya actually huffed something like a little laugh and Miss Mami sang, “Ding-ding-ding! Nagisa wins a prize~!”

“Yay! What kind of—”

“I think I see it,” Miss Homura interrupted.

Everyone's smiles fell. Mr. Hitsugaya grimly asked, “Where and what?” as he cut down more clay
“Is that a problem for you?” Miss Homura asked airily. “And I think it is the pink and white dog down Tomoe’s side of the street.”

The boy scoffed. “Annoying, more like,” he drawled. “Go do the interesting part.”

“Eh? What dog?” Mami asked worriedly, trying to peer past the automatons she was destroying.

“It is slinking around low to the ground over a block away,” Miss Homura said as she squinted through the rain. “You are aiming at heads instead of looking down. Momoe and I will take care of it.” Nagisa froze as Miss Homura turned her intense violet eyes on her. “Come with me.”


Miss Homura tilted her head and looked at her for a long moment, then turned and walked straight for a row of quaint storefronts. Nagisa gasped as a row of automatons approached her, but they were eliminated by golden blasts from Miss Mami’s guns. Miss Homura looked at Nagisa over her shoulder. “Come. Tomoe and Hitsugaya will cover us.” She didn’t so much as flinch as her hair whipped in the backwash of icicles the size of Nagisa’s arm rocketing past her like machine gun fire to take out a fresh wave of automatons as they emerged from a newly-opened door, which was soon blocked shut with more ice. Miss Homura frowned with a touch of impatience, so Nagisa hurried after her.

They jumped up onto an awning and hopped along the street from window sill to ledge to lamp post. The Familiars endlessly emerged from doors, but stayed on their tracks. Miss Homura stopped on a little balcony about two blocks from her friends and pointed down into the spinning automatons. “There. That is the Witch. What do you notice about it?”

It really was a dog. It reminded Nagisa of drawings of poodles, a skinny white body with puffs of pink fur on its ankles and tail with a wafting mane of pink fur from the shoulders up. The mane shifted in a way that reminded Nagisa of fire, ignoring the rain that should have made it lay lakes. Multicolored ribbons were tied in bows throughout the mane. The Witch was turned away so she couldn’t see its face, weaving through the whirling automatons and pawing at them as if begging for their attention. It wagged its tail hopefully and whined as it cast about. Nagisa wanted to run up to it and hug it all better.

Miss Homura would probably not like if her first words were It's so cute!

“It... it looks like a sad puppy?”

After a pause to purse her lips, Miss Homura said, “Looks like is the key. It is not really a... sad puppy.” Her distaste was obvious and made Nagisa swallow nervously. Miss Homura noticed and sighed. “Looking cute is a trick to make you think it is less dangerous than it is.” Nagisa didn’t understand the strange look Miss Homura was giving her. “Even cute... dogs... have teeth.”

“Oh.”

“How would you attack it?”

Nagisa couldn’t keep the distress off her face at the prospect of attacking the poodle looking for a nice person to pet it. “I— I don't know.”

Miss Homura stared at her neutrally for a moment then said, “Its trick is working on you.”
Tears welled in Nagisa's eyes. She needed to be grown-up. “I— I'd— use my bubbles.”

“How so?”

Nagisa looked at the pitiful creature nudging at automatons for pets the way Yo-yo did at home and sniffled hard. “I— can't.” The tears spilled down her cheeks and left scalding trails of shame in their wake.

Miss Homura shifted awkwardly, sighed, and brushed her hand against Nagisa's shoulder. “Pretend it is just a toy.”

“But I—!” Nagisa clamped her mouth shut before she could say that she didn't like hurting toys either, face burning as she felt how much of a silly little baby she was next to Miss Homura. She took a deep breath and shakily said, “I could— I could trap it in a big bubble and get small-bubbles inside and make them explode inside the big bubble.” That poor not-a-puppy. She felt horrible.

But Miss Homura looked like she approved. Cold approval, but approval. Possibly even a little impressed? “Do it.”

Nagisa's face froze. “But— but—”

“Momoe— no. Nagisa.” The older girl's face fell from sternness into something tired, like Mr. Hitsugaya's had been earlier, and she heavily said, “I need to know that you can protect yourself. I need you to not let your feelings get you killed. Please.”

Nagisa swallowed a lump in her throat as she looked at Miss Homura's face. Those violet eyes looked haunted and seemed like they were looking through Nagisa instead of at her. Unbidden, Nagisa heard what Miss Mami and Mr. Urahara had said after the older girl had run away:

*She has seen too many magical girls die.*

“I won't die,” Nagisa blurted without thinking. Miss Homura's hand jerked away and her face looked shocked. Nagisa wiped her face on her poncho and straightened to look at her ashen-faced mentor. She hardened her face with determination, clenched her fists, and earnestly repeated, “I won't die!” as firmly as she could. “I'll do what you say, Miss Homura! I'll be a strong magical girl just like you!”

Miss Homura's face contorted oddly, somewhere between disbelief, relief, and despair, which made no sense to Nagisa. Her mentor's mouth opened and closed soundlessly; words seemed to fail her.

Nagisa breathed deeply, straightened her spine, and asked, “You— you'll watch my back like Miss Mami and Mr. Hitsugaya do, won't you?”

Miss Homura's eyelashes fluttered in astonished blinking before she controlled her face and nodded seriously. “Of— of course.” She shook herself slightly, cleared her throat, and pulled a rifle out of her shield. “Whenever you are ready,” Miss Homura said more evenly.

Nagisa took one more deep breath and jumped down from the balcony with her horn at the ready. The Familiars didn't attack her, so she carefully dodged them by avoiding crossing the brass tracks. When she was closer to the Witch, she nervously looked back. Miss Homura was completely still in her perch, rifle braced on the rail of the balcony as she tracked Nagisa with her face to the scope. The older girl noticed Nagisa looking, pulled back from the gun slightly to look at her and nodded reassurance, then returned to intently watching everything around Nagisa through the scope.
Nagisa felt so much better knowing Miss Homura really did have her back. Like how Miss Homura didn't even have to check to see if her friends were protecting her.

When Nagisa was close enough for a clear shot, she inhaled deeply and blew on her horn. The Witch heard the sound and turned as the big bubble trapped it. Nagisa jerked back in surprised fear as she finally saw the poodle's face. The wide, dark-lashed eyes were spiraling with many colors and its mouth was a cavern of terrifying teeth as it attacked the inside of the bubble and slavered all over it. The bubble held, though, so Nagisa relaxed minutely and stepped closer on wobbly legs. By the time she reached the bubble, she was trembling all over.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

Nagisa settled the mouth of her trumpet right up against the big bubble. She had an up close and personal look into the Witch's snarling maw as she leaned toward the mouthpiece. It took effort to defy her instincts screaming that she needed to jump back because the creature was going to bite her face, but she managed.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

“I'm— I'm sorry, puppy,” she whispered. Then Nagisa blew her horn.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

The stream of smaller bubbles threw the Witch against the far side of the big bubble and soon held it in place as though trapped in a spherical ball pit. It yipped and flailed uselessly as Nagisa backed away and stepped on a brass track. She only vaguely heard the loud cracks of the shots Miss Homura fired to methodically behead every clay automaton that spun toward her.

“I'm— I'm really s-sorry, puppy,” Nagisa whimpered as her vision went blurry with tears.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

She screwed her eyes shut and pressed the button on the side of her horn to make all the little bubbles explode. The Witch-dog made a horrible yelp of pain before falling silent. Nagisa dropped her trumpet and covered her face with her hands.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

Nagisa felt when the labyrinth collapsed and they were back in the real world. She tearfully peeked over her fingertips and saw the Grief Seed floating in the center of her big bubble, which was now hovering over the fire hydrant. She stared blankly at it until she felt a hand lightly settle on her shoulder.

“You did very well... Nagisa,” Miss Homura said softly.

*I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl, I'm a big strong magical girl—*

Nagisa's face crumpled, her legs gave out, and she plopped down into a muddy pothole and wailed.

*I want my mommy, I want my mommy, I want my mommy—!*

Chapter End Notes
........WITCH DATA........
UHRMANN, the Canine Witch with a craving nature. She has taken on the form of a
dog in the vain hope of being loved by all. Humans who enter her barrier can't help
but embrace her in concern. One hoping to defeat her can do so by feigning love.

Minion: BARTELS, whose duty is interior design. They have no will and are simply
mannequins who revolve in place. A canine witch, unloved by anyone, was unable to
create minions with free will.

§ x § x §

A/N: Quit playing games with my heart, Nagisa.

Someone protect this child from me. Or me from her. She “rebelled” and refused to be
happy about being a ~big kid~ and defeating the specific Witch I chose for her based
on it being easy whoops. Got right up to the scene and my inner sense of her just
balked and I fell apart.

(irl, I have an old dog and I am being forced to confront her inevitable mortality.
Then I basically wrote Magical Old Yeller.)

I really do appreciate your patience and warm welcome when I manage to finally post.
You're the best readers.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy(???) 3rd birthday, Infinity!
Omg where did the time go? *ugly cry*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FÜNFUNDSECHZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

To say that Homura was out of her depth would be a gross understatement. Faced with a bawling, traumatized child, her mind completely shut down. All she could do was stand and stare uncertainly at Nagisa as the girl wailed her little heart out in a pothole. She should do something, but drew a complete blank. Madoka would know what to do.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mami cooed as she swept past Homura, opened her arms, and descended on Nagisa with an embrace. “I know it was hard and scary, but you did so well!”

Nagisa was beyond words, but threw herself into Mami’s arms. Mami didn’t seem to mind being knocked onto her rear with her lap full of bawling child; Homura knew she would not have handled that well. Homura stared as her once-upon-a-time mentor rocked the girl, rubbed her back, and made quiet, soothing sounds into Nagisa’s hair. Yoruichi trotted over from her lookout post and paced circles around the two magical girls as though anxious to lend comfort, but remained silent. Homura startled slightly when Hitsugaya tapped her shoulder and held the Canine Witch’s Grief Seed out to her. Homura silently took it and stored it in her shield, then turned back to the other girls morosely.

“We heard you shooting,” Hitsugaya prompted her in a murmur.

Homura breathed deeply and centered herself, trying to unfreeze her mental gears. “She stumbled back onto a track in the middle of her attack. The dolls are not particularly dangerous, but still. She had a hard enough time as it was.”

His eyes slid from her own to Nagisa and back again, evaluating. “She took it out herself?”

“Yes.” Homura reached up and tiredly rubbed her brow. “It looked like a cute poodle, for the most part. So to her....” She trailed off and sighed. “She really is too innocent for this,” she added in a whisper.

Hitsugaya gave her a long, piercing look that made her uncomfortable.

“What?” she snapped irritably.
The shinigami heaved his own sigh and scrubbed a hand through his hair as he let his ice armor dissolve. “Later,” he said gruffly.

Homura narrowed her eyes at him and opened her mouth, but he stepped away from her and more loudly asked about what to do next.

Mami nudged the little magical girl's shoulder and gently said, “Nagisa, baby, is your daddy at home?”

Nagisa's words were unintelligible but the shake of her head was adequate. Mami looked up at them and raised her brows in inquiry. Homura and Hitsugaya traded glances and shrugged. Mami breathed out a little sigh and said, “My apartment is closer than the shop.”

“Your apartment it is, then,” Hitsugaya said with a nod. “Can you stand?”

Mami looked down at how Nagisa was sitting on her, then back up at him. “I might drop her,” she said ruefully.

Hitsugaya looked at Nagisa with regret as though he was the one who had made the little girl fight, fueling the regret Homura was feeling herself, and stepped closer to the two girls on the ground. He knelt, lightly touched Nagisa's shoulder, and cajoled her into letting go of Mami. She eventually did so, but immediately threw herself at him and clung to him. After a moment of surprise, Hitsugaya's face eased and he lifted her; the little girl shifted her grip and wrapped her limbs around him while she cried into his neck. The boy looked deeply uncomfortable, but the weeping girl didn't notice. He rubbed her back hesitantly in a attempt to comfort her. Homura thought the two looked like siblings with their matching white hair.

Good. People would be less likely to question a teenage boy in a school uniform carrying his soaked, crying “sister” “home.”

Mami stood and brushed dirty water from her skirt and Homura picked up Yoruichi. They hopped rooftops northeast until they were a few blocks from Mami's building, talked Nagisa into dismissing her battle costume, and went to Mami's building on foot. The evening commuters returning from work peered at the soaked quartet from under their umbrellas. Hitsugaya would make a vaguely apologetic face at them and the adults would look at him with fond approval and carry on with their business instead of thinking he was kidnapping a child.

Soon they were standing in the foyer of Mami's apartment with puddles of rainwater forming under them. Homura put Yoruichi down and flinched in annoyance when the cat immediately shook water out of her fur and sulkily licked her paws. They stood there for a moment as they processed what a mess they would make and listened to Nagisa, who had downshifted into tired, guttural, voiceless sobs.

“I have a mop,” Mami finally sighed in resignation.

“Wait,” Hitsugaya said. “I can do something. It'll be cold, though.”

The shinigami shifted Nagisa to one hip, lifted his freed hand, and muttered something with a frown of concentration. Blue-white light flickered over his palm and the air temperature dropped sharply. Moisture condensed and swirled toward the light. The girls shivered as the water in their clothes and hair chilled drastically before being caught in his magic and drawn away. It surprised Nagisa into blinking and looking up, then becoming entranced by the ice flower growing over Hitsugaya's hand. He moved it so she could see it better since it seemed to distract her, then took his shoes off using just his feet to draw water out of them. Homura and Mami followed suit and
removed Nagisa's shoes for her. Yoruichi made a show of snarling as the water in her fur was pulled away as freezing mist. They were soon dry but shivering.

“Tha-that’s use-useful,” Mami said with interest as her teeth chattered.

Hitsugaya hummed agreement and handed Nagisa the completed ice flower. The girl didn't seem to notice how cold it must have been. Shock?

Mami chafed her hands up and down her arms trying to generate warmth. “Come on. I'll get us blankets and something hot to drink.”

Yoruichi look off to wander the apartment, looking like she was just sniffing things curiously but probably making sure there wasn't an Incubator lurking around to eavesdrop. Homura joined Nagisa and Hitsugaya at the table, overriding her instinct to help fetch things in favor of watching Mami bustle about. She knew Mami's apartment like the back of her hand but couldn't reveal that. Instead, she conjured her shield, fetched Nagisa's things, and silently watched the shinigami awkwardly coax Nagisa into releasing him. He was unsuccessful at anything but prying the ice flower out of her hand and putting it on the table until Mami showed up with a thick blanket to wrap her in and a mug of hot cocoa for her to drink. Even then, she plopped right back into Hitsugaya's lap and leaned against him once bundled up, just facing the ice sculpture on the table instead of him while she sniffled between sips. Resigned to being Nagisa's chair, Hitsugaya just sighed, asked Mami for green tea instead of cocoa, and declined a blanket.

Mami smiled at him with something between affection and teasing. “You would make a good big brother.”

Hitsugaya sputtered a denial and looked away. Mami and Homura shared small smiles.

Mami joined them at the table and they spent a good fifteen minutes just warming up in silence. Homura had no idea how to start and was grateful when Mami took the initiative.

“Nagisa,” Mami said hesitantly, “I think... maybe you shouldn't fight in labyrinths.”

The little girl jolted to attention in protest. “I want to be a strong magical girl like you and Miss Homura!”

Mami looked down at her cocoa and looked conflicted. Homura knew she was aware that her strength was partly faked, but wasn't sure if she’d admit it aloud.

“I'm... not as strong as you think I am,” Mami said slowly.

“Few magical girls are,” Homura added, quiet and somber. “Forcing it has become key to preserving our sanity, is all.”

Mami startled and looked up at her with wide eyes. Hitsugaya looked at her sideways with a neutral expression. They had both noticed that she included herself in the statement.

“We are all damaged in some way,” Homura continued. “Some of us are just better at pretending it away than others.”

“That's not true!” Nagisa argued.

“It....” Mami said hesitantly, voice small, “It really is.”

Nagisa's face looked like the two senior magical girls had just taken a jackhammer to the pedestal
she had put them on.

“Once you become as jaded as I have to survive, you will never be the same,” Homura said. “We would spare you from that if at all possible.”

Fresh tears streamed down Nagisa’s cheeks. “I’m— I’m not a b-baby. I can help. I’ll be okay. I’ll be b-better next time.”

“Maybe so,” Homura said as she looked at her mug. Then she raised her eyes to pin the little girl with a hard stare. “The issue is that we would prefer that you not. We do not want you to fight.”

Nagisa flinched at the rejection. Mami looked miserable but didn’t disagree, instead adding, “We will share our Grief Seeds with you. But we want to keep you out of labyrinths.”

Yoruichi slunk out from under the table and curled up in Nagisa’s lap as the girl shook her head in denial. “I’m a magical girl! I’m s’posed to protect people! You said so when I met you!”

Mami cringed. “I was... at least partly wrong.”

Hitsugaya interrupted the magical girl business for the first time, gently but firmly saying, “Their duty to protect is what drives them to protect you, Mo— Nagisa.”

“We would have prevented you from becoming a magical girl had we known the Incubator made you the offer,” said Homura.

“Like... how Miss Akemi kept Miss Kaname and Miss Miki from contracting,” Mami said slowly, seeming to understand Homura’s actions more completely. As if she had factually understood her reasoning but the depth of feeling hadn’t fully hit her.

Well, at least dealing with Nagisa would have some kind of positive impact despite it falling apart.

Shaking with anger, Nagisa shouted, “I’m coming with you! We’ll fight together! I’ll be safe with you!”

“No,” Homura said flatly.

“I— What if I just fight Familiars? I can do that!”

Mami closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as she sat ramrod straight. She opened her eyes and gave Nagisa a stern look. “No. If you do show up, I will bind you in ribbons and shield you to keep you safe. End of discussion.”

Nagisa's face crumpled. She threw her empty mug at Mami, jumped to her feet, and shouted, “You're mean!” as Yoruichi scrambled and yowled at her sudden eviction from Nagisa’s lap. Mami’s battle instincts kicked in and she caught the mug before it could hit her in the face. Nagisa grabbed her things and ran for the door sobbing, doubled back for her shoes, and hurried out into the hall. Mami half-stood to follow her but Homura barred her with her arm.

“Let her go.”

“But—”

Hitsugaya stood with a sigh. “I’ll follow her on the rooftops and make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid on her way home.”

Turning to him, Homura said, “Take Yoruichi. Drop her by Momoe’s apartment. She thinks
Momoe belongs to her by now and will at least protect her from the Incubator.”

The shinigami gave her a businesslike nod, looked at Mami and said, “I’ll be back in a bit,” picked up Yoruichi, and hesitated before exiting by the front door instead of the balcony.

Once he was gone, Mami’s eyes teared up. “We were cruel.”

“Mm.” Homura sipped her cocoa then said, “I am... glad you are capable of it.” She needed to shore up the bridge she was building with Mami, so she haltingly continued, “I... initially had difficulty steeling myself like that to protect other girls. Even if it hurt them.”

Mami didn't say anything, but she stared at Homura for a long time. Homura bore the scrutiny patiently. At long last, Mami quietly said, “All of this—” she waved her hand vaguely— “has been harder on you than you let on. On your attitude, I mean. I knew the rest was hard. But... the way you behave with other girls.... ” She paused for a long moment, thoughtful. “You... didn't used to be like this, did you?”

Homura couldn't decide whether or not to be glad Mami could be very insightful when in her right mind. “Correct.”

“What... did you used to be like? Before all this?”


The look on Mami's face said, you are none of those things now and that is tragic, but she remained silent.

“What were you like?” Homura asked distantly.

Mami smiled bitterly. “Happy. And whatever the opposite of lonely is.”

Homura merely nodded. They sat without speaking for a long time, simply keeping one another company and listening to the pattering of the rain while they shared cocoa. Homura didn't know what this Mami was thinking, but she wished she could ask a Mami of dozens of timelines past if training Madoka, Sayaka, and Homura— even Kyōko, in the time before Homura's reset point— to overcome fear and gentleness in favor of battle readiness had been as depressing as trying to teach Nagisa. It probably had been, since it seemed to involve breaking girls of that which was warm and soft to make room for cold and hard and that Mami had done it for at least four girls in that timeline. Upon reflection, Homura understood Mami's homicidal madness then far better now that she felt the guilt from her guidance of Nagisa backfiring. She sifted through old memories with new understanding.

“If Soul Gems give birth to Witches, then we have no choice but to die!”

Sayaka reduced to a Grief Seed by Homura's bombs in too many timelines to count.

“I thought Sayaka was a lost cause and that the only thing we could do for her was put her out of her misery.”

Kyōko, burying grief in anger, slamming a fist against the nearest object in the train station as she failed to restrain tears. “Sayaka—!” Miserable.

Mami, seeing with sudden, horrifying clarity that she had cheerfully led her friends into inescapable condemnation to become that which they fought. “We have no choice but to die!”
Miserable.

Kyōko's Soul Gem shattered by Mami's bullet.

“Put her out of her misery.”

Mami's Soul Gem shattered by Madoka's arrow.

“Put her out of her misery.”

Madoka, kneeling on the train platform, sobbing for her lost friends— three dead in one night. “I can't take it anymore!” Miserable.

Madoka laying in the rubble of Mitakihara, shakily holding up her blackened Soul Gem. “Could I ask you... for one more thing? I... don't want to become a Witch.” Miserable.

“Put her out of her misery.”

Homura, screaming in agony as she pulled the trigger and Madoka's Soul Gem shattered. Miserable.

Karin draped over Homura and rasping, “She was better off that way.” Miserable.

Karin, staring at Yuzu's empty body, screaming screaming endlessly screaming. “I'D RATHER DIE!” Miserable.

Karin again, listlessly wandering Urahara Shop like a haunted ghost, scratching at ribs she now remembered as a cage for her sister's corpse. “I'm really sorry about this.” Miserable.

Homura herself threatening to kill the Sayaka of the timeline before this one if the stubborn girl refused to use a Grief Seed. Miserable. Both of them.

When it came to her threats against the last Sayaka, Homura didn't even know whether she had been serious or bluffing anymore. If she had been serious... hadn't that been similar to what that one version of Mami had done?

“I thought Sayaka was a lost cause and that the only thing we could do for her was put her out of her misery.”

Homura looked up at Mami through her bangs, took in the way her former mentor was silently crying into her cold cocoa, and wondered about the line between miserable and lost cause.

Perhaps they weren't so different. Perhaps Mami was no weaker than Homura. Perhaps the Mami of the time before had merely edged over the line into lost cause territory a hair's breadth before Homura herself. And Homura now realized she had been straddling that border for a long time—that she had cracked in the same instant, just more shallowly. That had been the timeline that broke the old her and left the current her to carry on, after all. She had thrown away nearly all sense of self and radically changed her very personality, vowed to never rely on anyone anymore, and spiraled down through more than time alone. Deeper and deeper, vision dimming and narrowing, only staving off completely drowning in despair by stubbornly holding her breath beyond reason. But no one could hold their breath forever.

How deep would she have sunken and how soon would she have drowned without that chance encounter with the Kurosaki girls? How soon would she have lost herself completely and become a Witch? Or worse?
"We have no choice but to die!"

"The only thing we could do for her was put her out of her misery."

If Mami noticed the teardrops falling in Homura's cocoa, she was polite enough to not comment.

Nagisa was still shaking with shame and rejection when she got back to her shabby apartment building. Her hands refused to cooperate, fumbling with and dropping the keys. She gave up and plopped down on her hands and knees to just try to breathe.

"Meow."

Nagisa startled as Yoruichi threaded through her arms and purred. "H-how did yo- yo?" Of course, the cat just leaned into her arms. Nagisa automatically pet her, then stopped and pushed her away. "You're Miss H-homura's kitty, Yo-yo. Go ho-ome."

The cat refused, doubling back with an annoyed meow to demand chin scratchies.

Pushing the cat away several times as she snifflled became pointless, so she picked up her keys and unlocked the door with a sigh. Yoruichi made to dart inside but Nagisa blocked her again. After a struggle of pushing the cat away with her foot and trying to pull her leg back in and close the door before the cat could slip through, the best Nagisa could do was getting only one paw stuck in the door so she couldn't close it without hurting Yo-yo. Fresh tears welled up in Nagisa's eyes as the cat meowed plaintively and she thought of the not-a-puppy’s yelps. She held the door where it was with one hand, took a step back, and wiped her tears on her arm. Why should she think she had any business fighting Witches if she couldn't even manage a cat?

"What do I do?" she whimpered to herself.

That is your choice, Nagisa Momoe.

Nagisa's eyes went wide and she whipped her head around to look into the dim apartment. Sitting near the little shrine to her mother was Kyu—the Incubator.

I can lure the cat away if you like, it offered. Then we can talk. It seems you have had a break with the others. I am concerned.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she tried to blink away her surprise. Struggling to make her mind work right, the first thing she blurted out was, “Get away from my mommy.”

Yoruichi's paw went still. Something nudged the door; Nagisa glanced down and saw Yoruichi's nose poking into the opening and sniffing.

The white creature stilled and looked at the shrine and urn as if just noticing it. Oh, I beg your pardon. It stood and walked to the other side of the room. I apologize. Human grief rituals can be somewhat beyond me.

Yo-yo's paw resumed scratching and struggling more desperately, but Nagisa held the door where it was. A question that had burned in Nagisa's heart since her mother died rose to her lips unbidden. “Could you have made Mommy's cancer go away?”
Red eyes blinked. *Had you asked, yes.*

Nagisa shook in disgusted rage. “Why didn't you say so?”

*You did not ask. You knew your wish as soon as I offered you a contract. I have had other girls make wishes to make another human happy prior to death, so it was not unreasonable to me. It swished its tail and cocked its head thoughtfully. For example, a mere few months ago, a girl north of Mitakihara had a grandmother who was on her deathbed, unlikely to regain consciousness and likely to live at most a few days without artificial life support. The girl respected the process of life and death as taught by her grandmother enough that her wish was simply for her grandmother to “return to her normal self until her lifespan runs out.” She was satisfied to acquire a day of normal domestic happiness with the woman before she died instead of watching her languish on her deathbed. The creature bowed its head. I thought you wanted something similar.*

“I— I did, but— but I would've— if I knew— I w-would've—”

Kyubey sighed as Yoruichi snarled and thrashed at the door. *I apologize. I was so certain you were firm in your choice. It perked up. Perhaps I could have you speak with other girls before I grant their wishes so you can make sure this does not happen to anyone else?*

Nagisa went still and turned the idea over in her head. “But Miss... Miss Homura said you take our souls out to make us magical girls,” she said slowly.

*Correct. Before Nagisa could ask a follow-up question, Kyubey innocently asked, Would your soul becoming a physical object have been worth your mother's life?*

It was like a punch to the gut. All the air fled her lungs and she felt ill. “Yes,” she whispered. “But — but I—I messed up.”

Kyubey blinked at her and reiterated, *I cannot undo your choice, but if you like, you can try to educate other girls and help them in labyrinths.*

*Nagisa's face burned with shame again. “Miss Mami and Miss Homura said I sh-shouldn't fight.”* They cannot give you orders, Kyubey said, sounding like it was frowning though its face was still.

“But— but I cried after the labyrinth this afternoon.”

*Many magical girls cry quite often when they are still beginners. Mami Tomoe cried after her battles for months when she first contracted.*

“She did?” Nagisa asked in surprise. “But she's so strong.”

*You can be, too, given practice,* Kyubey said encouragingly. *You did well in the fight against Ayase and Luca Sōju, did you not?*

“*I di— um. Miss Homura got angry about it.”*

*I suspect Homura Akemi has ulterior motives for discouraging girls from developing their talents. When Nagisa made a confused face, it said, I think she has a hidden reason for stopping me from helping other magical girls become strong.*

Nagisa frowned hard and the words of others rang in her memory.

*“Never do that again! We could have killed you by accident, thinking you were safe when you were*
behind the enemy. The enemy could have taken you hostage. Never do that ever again!”

“She has seen too many magical girls die.”

“I need to know that you can protect yourself. I need you to not let your feelings get you killed. Please.”

“Miss Homura is nice and sad and doesn't want magical girls to die,” Nagisa said sharply. She stood straighter. “I don't want other girls to die.”

All humans die eventually, Kyu—the Incubator said mildly. Most do not have the opportunity to die for a purpose—especially those as young as you. Given the choice, would you rather die in the course of saving lives that their existence be less fleeting, or in a meaningless automotive accident?

Nagisa hesitated uncertainly again, vaguely noting that it sounded like Yoruichi's free paw was clawing the wood of the door. The cat yowled more loudly than Nagisa had ever heard her. It brought to mind Mr. Urahara's words.

“I think I'll send Yoruichi home with you. She will protect you if the Incubator comes and tries to talk to you. It can say some tricky things.”

“You're trying to trick me,” Nagisa said stubbornly.

Why do you think it is I who am trying to trick you, when Homura Akemi is obviously pushing you away and not telling you something? It looked at its swishing tail and lowly said, What do you think Homura Akemi was doing when she was in seclusion at that shop this weekend? The inhabitants of that property are concealing something. The Sōju situation resolved rather well for all of you, so why would she hide? How did they so rapidly change Mami Tomoe after she moved in? Have they done something to her?

Furious, Nagisa opened her mouth to yell a defense about Miss Homura getting help, but she choked it back when Yoruichi gave another of her loud yowls and reminded her of Mr. Urahara's words again. Plus other words.

“Yo-yo hates the Incubator and will fight it off tooth and claw.”

Too angry to speak, Nagisa countered the Incubator's accusation by stepping aside and swinging the door wide open.

Yo-yo stumbled as the door she had been pressing on gave way, but immediately recovered and rocketed at the Incubator in a flurry of teeth and claws. The Incubator dodged and flickered around the apartment faster than Nagisa had thought possible as the black cat chased it. The creature made a break for the open door, jumped to the street-facing second floor railing, and was about to kick off from it when Yo-yo caught up to it with a better jump. They tumbled over the edge and fell together as Nagisa gasped and ran to look down. Both creatures did that funny cat thing where they twisted midair and landed on their feet in the scraggly bushes below. Yoruichi attacked again, clamping her teeth down on the back of the Incubator's neck and shaking it. The Incubator writhed and made one long ear pry the cat's teeth off it and clubbed it away with the other ear. The black cat scored one last hit, biting the end of the Incubator's tail and being dragged halfway across the street before she lost her grip. Bloodied white fur disappeared in a blur as it fled. Yo-yo darted back and forth, hissing, spitting, and jumping with her hackles raised as she sought the enemy.

Nagisa didn't feel particularly bad about the Incubator's injuries, but that itself made her feel bad even though she was glad it was gone.
“Sacchan, what just happened?”

Nagisa turned to her left. Daddy was standing near the stairs, holding his worn briefcase and looking out at Yo-yo, who was still yowling around the street in blatant challenge. A tabby cat slunk out from underneath a car and ran in terror as Yo-yo locked onto it and charged just enough to scare it off.

“What do you mean, Daddy?”

Daddy looked from her to Yo-yo to her to Yo-yo and rubbed his eyes. “Did— was that— did something come out of our door?”

“What?” Nagisa blurted in surprise.

“What was Yo-yo chasing?” he asked.

“Uh. Uh.” Nagisa looked back and forth between her father and the cat, who was so riled up she harried a dirty, tired construction worker who had just gotten off a bus. The man didn't have the energy to do more than irritably shove her away from his ankles with his work boots.

“What has her so angry?” Daddy asked as the construction worker shoved Yoruichi away and slammed his door in her face on his first try.

“Ummmm... there was a white kitty in the house when I opened the door and Yo-yo got mad.”

“Huh. I didn't see anything. I must've just missed it.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, then pressed on his closed eyes more firmly like he did when he got the headaches that made him see funny lights. “What was a strange cat doing in our apartment?”

Nagisa avoided his eyes and tried not to panic. “Um... I... I just got home and I dunno.”

“You just got home now?” Daddy asked with his eyebrows scrunched together. “Where were you all afternoon?”

“I... I went to see Miss Mami and her f-friends.” Tears welled in her eyes again. “We talked about... things.”

Daddy's face fell and he quietly asked, “About Mommy?”

That was a good reason to cry. “Yee-eahhh.”

Daddy held out his arms and she ran to him. He patted her back and said, “We'll be okay, Sacchan. And I got some time off so we can be together. We'll figure things out. Mommy would want us to.”

Nagisa cried. Mommy would want to be alive.

Tōshirō scowled from his position on a rooftop nearby and watched the Incubator land on a billboard across the street from him to nurse its wounds. That had to be a deliberate choice— a dare for him to react or attack. A taunt. When it glanced back at him, Tōshirō crossed his arms over his chest and glared.
“You're doing yourself no favors,” he said loudly, wondering if the thing could read lips or hear better than humans. “It's not like you to be this blatant.”

I thought one such as you would be aware of the intersectional nature of blatancy and subtlety, it replied pleasantly before flickering away.

Ominous. What had it said to Nagisa?

Kisuke was drowsily sipping tea and watching the sparse drizzle making rings in the koi pond that sparkled in the lantern light when Hitsugaya and Tomoe returned. Without Akemi. And it looked like Tomoe had been crying and Hitsugaya was concerned.

“Welcome home,” Kisuke said softly. “It doesn't seem to have gone very well. Where is Miss Akemi?”

“Akemi wanted some quiet time to think alone in her apartment,” Hitsugaya said disapprovingly. He heaved a sigh. “The labyrinth was easy. It was the aftermath that went sideways.”

Tomoe sniffled. “Poor Nagisa.”

Kisuke searched their faces, solemnly patted the boards and invited them to sit, then called out for Tessai to bring more tea. The two took turns describing the evening's events. When they were done, he sighed and said, “We'll have to figure something out for Miss Momoe once she calms down. At least Yoruichi won't let anything happen to her.”

“What if Nagisa tries to go into a labyrinth by herself?” Tomoe asked quietly.

A lazy grin stole across Kisuke's mouth. “Oh, that kittycat has her ways. And remember that Miss Momoe has the charm bracelet. One of the little bells and whistles I put in it was a minute signal that trips an alarm here if it disappears— such as by going into a labyrinth.” He sipped from his cup and said, “Let Miss Miki and Miss Kaname know you're unharmed. Tell them a rough summary of what happened, including that the Incubator made contact with Miss Momoe.” After a pause, he added, “Ask Miss Kaname to check on Miss Akemi periodically through the night.”

Tomoe stared dully into the courtyard and seemed to withdraw into her own mind as Hitsugaya tapped out text messages and discussed Kaname's replies, which were as Kisuke had expected. Hitsugaya raised a brow at his lack of surprise for some, but didn't directly comment. They sat in comfortable if morose silence for awhile as the scent of Tessai cooking dinner wafted out to them. Their meal was subdued. Tomoe looked lost afterward.

“Miss Tomoe, do you have anything you need to do tonight?”

The girl blinked owlishly and shook her head.

Kisuke smiled slightly. “Would you like to join Tessai as he finalizes ward design for Miss Kaname's house?”

Perking up in interest, Tomoe asked, “Wards?”

“Like those protecting this property,” Kisuke said with a vague gesture around them. “Apparently,
Miss Kaname's father is spiritually aware. We spoke in person yesterday and by phone while you were gone this evening. He requested wards and plans to speak with Miss Kaname tonight about some... family history she was unaware of.”

“O-oh. That's... Is that good or bad?”

Kisuke chuckled. “Good, I think.” He smiled at her and said, “So if you'd like something to do that may be mutually educational, Tessai said you would be welcome to join him.”

“Mutually educational?”

Tessai hummed agreement. “I hope to see how our techniques may remind you of anything you are capable of so we can compare. And you may learn something in the process. I've given Miss Akemi some literature on theory, but she has initially focused more on studies in healing others.”

“Has she?” Tomoe asked brightly. “It can be very difficult, especially at first.”

“Perhaps you could work with her,” Kisuke cheerfully suggested.

Tomoe smiled and chirped agreement, snatching the opportunity to do something constructive with both hands. She soon joined Tessai and Hitsugaya in cleaning up before their project. Kisuke smiled faintly at them bustling around with dishes before retreating to his labs.

He had Soul Gems to study.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you for sticking around with me through three years of writing this monster. Some of you reviewers have been with me since the beginning; special thanks to you, and I'm so happy I've managed to keep you interested this long hahaha. I would have lost steam long ago if not for everyone's continued feedback. You have helped me grow as a writer and overcome some very difficult times. I love you for it.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Madoka shook out her umbrella on her doorstep before entering her house and putting it in the umbrella stand. She was slipping her shoes off when Mama padded into the front hall in sweats. Madoka blinked her surprise and said, “Oh! You’re home early, Mama.”

Mama smiled and walked up to her. “I just felt like it,” she said breezily as she brushed raindrops off Madoka’s shoulders. “Why don’t you go hang your uniform up to dry and get into something warm?”

“Okay,” Madoka said slowly, then retreated to her room. She chewed her lip as she changed. This wasn’t a common thing for Mama. Not since Tatsuya was around a year old. Worry for her friends made her tuck her phone into the chest pocket of her pajamas.

Dinner was early but pleasant and warm as always; however, tension started knotting in Madoka’s gut. She couldn’t pin down why until they cleared the table and Papa said, “Sweetheart, have you done your homework?” while Mama put ice in a tumbler and got out a bottle of scotch. They wanted to Have A Talk.

“Yeah. We all went to Hitsugaya’s house and worked together,” Madoka said slowly as she dried her hands on a dishtowel. Were they going to grill her about why she’d been out late so often? She started considering excuses. She sucked at excuses.

“Good. Sit at the table,” Papa said. “Mama and I need to talk to you.”

“Oh— okay. What about?”

“Your new friends, some things that have been happening, and some—” Papa glanced at Mama—“family history.”

“...What?”

“Let’s sit, Madoka,” Mama said quietly.

They took their usual places at the table. Madoka fidgeted nervously as Papa gave Tatsuya some toddler-safe toy cars to play with on his high chair and Mama idly played with her tumbler of scotch on the rocks. The sound of the wheels on the tray and the clinking of the ice seemed
unnaturally loud to Madoka. She glanced between her parents warily. Mama took a deep breath. “We wanted to wait a couple more years, but circumstances have forced our hand.”

“What?”

Papa sighed softly. “We know that a spiritual threat has targeted you and Sayaka and that your newer friends are fighting against it.”

Madoka’s brain broke. She stared blankly for a long moment before she could manage, “W-what?”

“We knew something was going on,” Mama said with a wry smirk, “but we weren’t absolutely certain it was both spiritual and not coincidental until you came home with that bracelet.”

“What— what about it?” Madoka stammered as she held her wrist to her chest protectively.

“It has strong protections on it,” Papa said plainly. “I know this because I am spiritually aware myself. Not particularly powerful, but aware.”

Madoka’s brain broke into smaller pieces. “What?”

“We began to think something spiritual was going on when you brought Homura home,” Mama said. “Papa could feel how strong she is. Her power is as strong as yours. We thought maybe that drew you to each other unconsciously.”

“I’m— I’m as strong as Homura?” Madoka blurted. No way!

Mama and Papa grinned faintly. Papa said, “Definitely.”

“O-oh.” Madoka didn’t have any idea how to process that.

“Your power seems to have matured last month. Since you met Homura, you’ve been getting a tiny bit stronger.”

“You’re growing up,” Mama said wistfully, then sipped at her scotch.

“Then there's the residual curse that clings to you sometimes,” Papa continued. “It reminds me of the cursed spirits I used to run into before we moved here.”

The doubly broken pieces of Madoka's brain broke still more. What kind of cursed spirits? Did he mean Witches? Or... Mr. Urahara had said something about another kind what felt like ages ago, but they'd never come back around to the subject. Now it was her parents talking about it? “Why— why didn't you tell me? Um, til now, I mean.”

“First, we wanted to wait until you were old enough to know to keep it a secret from most people. Little kids tend to blurt things out and we didn't want you to be... thought of as odd by your peers,” Mama answered. “Cursed spirits went looking for you when you were a baby when we lived in Soma. We moved here because there weren't any here. Papa doesn't even see many ghosts here. So we thought you could have a normal life until at least high school, when you'd have more self-control and better judgment of who it was safe to tell and how to do so carefully.”

That made sense.

Mama drummed her fingers on the tumbler and continued, “We’ve been teetering on the fence about whether to tell you these past few weeks, but we wanted you to come to us, if possible.
You've asked some generalized advice that gave us clues to what you were doing, so we thought you would open up more soon.”

“But, as we said, circumstances have forced our hand,” Papa said.

Mama nodded with her eyes closed, then looked at Madoka affectionately. “Madoka, you grew up to be a good girl. You don't lie and you don't do anything bad. You're always trying hard to do what is right. You're already a wonderful child. We didn't want to do to you what our parents did to us. We trust you— that you would have come to us eventually.”

Madoka frowned and glanced back and forth at her parents' unhappy faces. Her grandparents were rarely spoken of. “What did they do?”

“Spiritual awareness runs in my family, to some degree,” Papa said. “Not everyone gets it, though. My mother didn't get it and my father didn't bring anything like that to the table when he married into the family. My grandfather on my mother's side was fairly strong and could have taught me a lot, but my parents didn't want me to become involved in anything spiritual. I think they were mostly afraid for my safety. I understand that now that I have you and your brother, but they didn't handle it well. Refused to acknowledge I'd be safer if I actually learned more about my powers— like they thought my not learning would keep things away from me. They tried to keep me away from Grandpa. They knew I still ran into spirits, good and cursed, and obsessed over everything I did. Didn't allow me outside by myself until I forced it when I started middle school, always had to know where I was every minute of the day, demanded I go into excruciating detail to tell them every interaction I had with spirits or oddities. It was so... claustrophobic that I started lying to them. Hiding things from them. It started with spiritual stuff but spread to everything. We got into a cycle of them pressing harder and me expanding my lies until they didn't really know me anymore. I moved out as soon as I could. Tried to learn as much as I could from Grandpa before he died. That got through to my parents after a couple years, but we were never able to completely repair the damage. We came close when Mama and I got married—”

“I was so wonderfully normal to them,” Mama cooed with obviously faked nostalgia.

“—But we got into arguments over my choices for you regarding your powers when you were a baby and we stalled.”

So that was why Madoka mostly knew her paternal grandparents through birthday presents and holiday cards.

“My parents smothered me for different reasons,” Mama said as she played with the ice in her tumbler. “We were well-off. They controlled every minute of my life. I had no say in anything. Schedule was very similar to your friend Hitomi's, but possibly worse since I was much younger than her when my parents started pushing me. No downtime to myself, no room to breathe. I snapped when I was around your age and began a glorious rebellion. Refused lessons, ran away repeatedly, drinking, smoking, was even in a gang at one point.” She looked at Madoka sideways with a sharply wry grin. “It's probably a good thing they disowned me and said I'd never amount to anything. I rebelled against that by becoming the top student in school even though I hated it, then throwing every advancement in their faces. And here I am today,” she said with an expansive gesture and satisfied smirk, “a happily married woman with two wonderful children, angling to be CEO of a multinational corporation. I'm pretty much living the dream.” Her face went dark as she poured herself more scotch. “And there they are, old and lonely because they were too stubborn to admit any wrongdoing. I broke contact with them when they refused to come to my graduation. Your uncle tries to start peace talks every few years, but they never go anywhere.” Mama took a slow sip of her scotch, breathed deeply, and locked eyes with Madoka. “We absolutely do not want
to drive you away by smothering you. You are your own person and we respect that. We're closer
to you than our parents were with us because we've left you enough wiggle room that coming to us
is an attractive option instead of an obligation. But we've come to the point where not taking the
initiative to get involved would be irresponsible of us.”


Her parents traded quiet glances for a minute, then Papa took a deep breath and said, “I went to
High Spirits when you were at school yesterday.”

Oh no.

“Mr. Urahara told me some things about the... Incubator. But I got the distinct impression he was
holding back.”

Ohhh no.

Why hadn't anyone at the shop mentioned this? Wait— did Homura know about this?

Madoka stayed silent, lips pressed tightly together as she glanced from parent to parent and thought
about loyalties. She didn't want to come anywhere close to betraying Homura's confidence. But...
these were her parents.

Papa paused, plainly reading her expressions. She was terrible at keeping guilt off her face. He
came to some kind of decision and firmly said, “I want to help. So does your mother.”

“We need to know everything,” Mama said just as firmly. “We can pry it out of that guy, but we'd
rather get it from you.”

Ohhhhh no.

And yet... she really, really wanted her parents on their side. She didn't want to hide things
anymore. If they really had spoken to Mr. Urahara, there was no point denying anything. It was
probably good they weren't demanding she never hang out with Homura ever again. Depending on
how much they knew, anyway. If she told them more, would they try to force them apart? She
couldn't allow that. She would not do that to Homura, who so obviously needed friends.

A vague flash of a dream: Brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—

A sharp breath—

Brave girl falling falling falling out of the sky in the distance reaching for Madoka hoarsely
screaming screaming screaming desperation as red eyes pink light—

“What are you afraid of?” Mama asked.

Madoka startled and looked at her, mouth working speechlessly before blurting, “I— I don't want
you to— to keep me from helping Homura. She's... so sad and lonely and even if things are scary I
want to help her because it's not fair she's been alone a lot and she saved me and um. Um.”

Babbling. Could not stop babbling. “She's trying to— to save lots of people, and I can't do a lot— I
promised her I wouldn't do a lot 'cause she wants me to be safe, but I can— I can be her friend. So
when what she's doing is hard on her, she can come to me and... talk, or something. You know.”

Her face was so hot she was certain she must be bright red.

Mama's face softened with affection. “I'm so proud of you.”
Mind screeching to a halt, Madoka stammered, “W-what?”

“Here we are confronting you, and your primary concern is supporting your friend who is dealing with hardship.” Mama smiled. “My kindhearted little girl.”

Madoka’s face went redder and she bashfully mumbled something. Even she didn't know what.

“Will you tell us?” Papa asked gently.

Hesitation made Madoka stall with, “It's— it's complicated, and— and it's hard to believe—”

“Silly,” Mama said warmly, reaching over to tap Madoka's nose and make her squeak. “You wouldn't make up anything outlandish. Not now that you know we believe in spirits and special powers and whatnot.”

Their faith in her warmed her heart. Madoka took several deep breaths while staring down at her hands knotted together in her lap, then looked up at Papa. “What... do you already know?”

Papa looked at her thoughtfully, probably decided not to call her out for stalling and getting the lay of the land she had to work with, and calmly repeated everything he had been told. She was glad to see that he and Mama were angry at the Incubator, but panicked over Mr. Urahara having not said anything about magical girls. That was, like... the least believable part.

What was she supposed to do? No one at the shop had told her not to tell them....

Would Homura be mad if she told?

“We know you're probably running into some kind of cursed spirit and that you and your friends have enough power to fight them,” Papa said slowly. “Your great-grandfather was able to fight weak ones. We know you can't help but attract them and that denying it and asking you to just avoid them is pointless. Could be worse than facing it head-on.”

“We know you're in danger— that your friends are in danger,” Mama said seriously. “We know whatever is going on is very important. If there is a way to help, we want to do it. If all we can do is support all of you, we want to do that. But we need to know what we're all involved in.”

“We?” Madoka whispered.

“We,” both her parents affirmed.

“We!” Tatsuya shouted. When they all looked at him, he proudly shoved the front end of a big plastic car in his smiling mouth and drooled. His contribution broke the tension and made them all smile.

Papa turned to Madoka with a little grin. “Besides, I already promised to watch out for Homura and your friend Mami in exchange for wards on our house and protective charms for Tatsuya, Mama, and me.”

That was... unexpected. “Oh.”

A warm hand took hers. She turned and looked at Mama, who earnestly said, “We trust you. Please trust us.”

Madoka drew a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and began to talk. She told them everything. All that Homura had told her, all she had experienced. It soon became obvious that she had never seen her
parents truly enraged before. Then she got to the night of the carousel labyrinth and broke down sobbing before she could continue past the point where she jumped in the portal herself. She didn't hear anything her parents said to each other, but Mama held her and guided her to the master bedroom while Papa put Tatsuya to bed. The three of them cuddled together on her parents' bed as Madoka choked out the events of that horrible night and the morning after. Madoka could feel Mama's tears on the crown of her head and that Papa was trembling.

“D-don’t get ma-ad at Ho-omura,” Madoka begged between rough breaths. “I— I ran in the labyrinth myse-self. She sa-aved us and almost— almost d-died. And— and her fruh-friends healed us and got us protections and—”

“We understand,” Mama croaked, then kissed her hair while Papa squeezed her hand. “We understand, baby.”

“What hap—” Papa's voice broke; he cleared his throat and tried again. “What happened after that? Mama said she met Mami, so something....”

Madoka collected herself for a bit, then relayed the rest of the week, Mami's panicked awakening, and Homura's breakdown and flight. “And she— she came back today, and she's doing a lot better. But she and Mami and Hitsugaya went off to fight a Witch when we left the shop, s-so... I don't know. B-but Mr. Tsukabishi said they'd call us when they're done.”

Mama took several deep breaths then roughly said, “Those. Poor. Girls.”

“Mr. Urahara said they're trying to figure out what this Incubator is and how to stop it. Right?” Papa rasped.

Madoka nodded and could only hum agreement.

“Whatever he needs,” Mama said in a guttural snarl. “Whatever they need. Anything. Anything.” Her voice kept rising hatefully. “If not for Homura and the others warning you, protecting you, you could have— that demon— you could have—” Madoka felt her mother's nails bite into her skin as the woman squeezed her possessively.

“Whatever we can do, we'll do it,” Papa said in a growl Madoka had never thought him capable of. “Anything to stop this— this monster.”

“You're— you're really not mad at them?” Madoka squeaked. “For— for getting me involved?”

“No,” Mama said. “Absolutely not. And I'm so proud of you.” She sat back and turned Madoka's head to face her. Mama looked fierce. “So. Proud. Of you.”

“Eh-eh?”

Papa squeezed her shoulders. “Like Mama said earlier: You're always trying hard to do what is right. Even when it's hard.” He smiled despite the tear tracks on his face. “It sounds like you and Sayaka are just the kind of friends those girls need. You're priceless and you're our baby girl.”

“Young woman,” Mama said warmly, brushing Madoka's hair away from her face. “Now—”

The instrumental of the chorus of *Let It Go* rang out from Madoka's pocket. Gasping, Madoka scrambled to retrieve her phone. The ringtone was interrupted by it starting again— texts were coming in quick succession.

“What is it?” Papa asked as she tapped out her password.
“Hitsugaya,” Madoka explained breathlessly. She paused, then let her parents read with her.

- Safely returned from errand.

- Momoe very upset. We stopped by Tomoe's apartment to talk.

- All told Momoe she should not do such errands anymore as we think she is too young. She argued then left, crying. I followed her at a distance to make sure she got home safely.

- Yoruichi ran off a white cat that had gotten into Momoe's apartment.

Madoka inhaled sharply and felt her parents tense as they waited for more messages. The Incubator had approached Nagisa. The pause between messages made Madoka anxious.

- Momoe safe with father and Yoruichi for now.

- Tomoe says she and Akemi had an upsetting conversation when I was away. Both looked like they had been crying. Something about feeling guilty about guiding Momoe through the errand in the first place.

- When I got back, Akemi refused to come to the shop with us. Insisted on going to her house to “think by herself.”

- We are all worried about her state of mind. She refuses our calls and does not answer our texts.

- As we have said, she actually listens to you when she is upset. Would you mind checking in on her periodically through the night?

Madoka swallowed hard and looked up at her parents, whose faces were grim. They glanced at each other then down to Madoka.

“Whatever you need to do,” Mama said. “You can even go to her if you want.”

“Ask him if he knows when she ate last,” Papa said. “If you can't convince her to come here on the phone, I'll send food with you.”

After a moment of hesitation, she texted Hitsugaya. His reply made Madoka gulp.

- What did you tell your parents? We don't want you to get in trouble and I don't know if Akemi is in a state to play along.

Fingers shaking, Madoka tapped out, - Everything.

There was another pause that went on so long that it made Madoka sweat nervously. Would he be angry?

- Everything everything?

- Everything everything, she replied. She bit her lip and added, - And they told me a lot of things. Did you know my papa went to the shop yesterday?

- Yes. My uncle told me. I apologize for not bringing it up. I was distracted.

- We will be warding your house tomorrow evening.

Madoka glanced up at Papa, who nodded. Mama murmured, “I'm taking all of tomorrow off work
to be ready.”

- How did your parents take everything everything? Did they believe you? Are they angry?

Madoka’s face firmed in determination. - They believe me and aren't angry at us and want to help any way they can.

Mama stroked her hair and kissed her temple.

- That's a relief.

- Do you think Homura will be mad at me? Madoka asked.

- Possibly. But it probably won't last long. Just stubborn yourself through anything she says. You know how she is.

- She resisted telling Yumi and Kikyo's father at first but came around pretty quickly when he was understanding. Just tell your parents not to push her too much with questions right now. We can talk more as a group tomorrow.

“That's fine,” Papa said.

- Also, Tessai says since lunch she's only eaten whatever snacks we had this afternoon. If you can get her to eat, that would be good.

Papa kissed Madoka's cheek and declared, “I'll start cooking right now.” He stood and strode out of the room with purpose.

- I'll try right now, Madoka texted. Taking a deep breath, she opened her conversation with Homura and tapped out, – Hi, Homura. I'm glad you're safe. Do you want to talk?

Madoka sat quietly and waited what seemed like forever for a reply, her mother a reassuring presence beside her.

- No, Homura eventually replied.

- I'm worried, Madoka said.

- You needn't be, Homura replied.

- I still am, Madoka said stubbornly. - Come stay at my house tonight.

- I am fine.

- No you aren't.

No reply.

- I want to help. I promised I wouldn't do the dangerous things, but I want to be there for you.

No reply.

- If you won't come here, then I'm coming over to your place, Madoka texted with a stubborn pout.

No reply.

Madoka huffed in exasperation and Mama shook her head with a sigh. The phone trilled.
- Any luck? he asked.

- She answered at first but stopped. I'm going to go to her soon.

After a minute, he replied, - Good. I'll text you if I sense her move. If she runs I'll just have to track her down and haul her to the shop. Wallowing could be dangerous for her, as you know.

Madoka swallowed hard. Right. She looked up at Mama and said, “I'm going to get dressed, okay?”

Mama smiled sadly and said, “Take care of her. Bring her home if you can. Don't worry about how late it is if you can get her here at all and don't worry about going to school tomorrow if you can't coax her into coming here. This is one of those things more important than a day of school. We'll cover for you.”

Madoka's eyes teared up all over again and she threw herself at her mother. “I love you so much, Mama!”

Mama's hug was so tight it left her breathless, but hers probably was as well.

An hour later, Madoka splashed through puddles up to Homura's doorstep with a backpack full of food, an overnight bag, and a folded umbrella. There were lights on inside, at least— she had half expected it to be dark. Ringing the bell got no response. She tried again a few times, then took a deep breath and started endlessly knocking on the door with the handle of the umbrella. If Homura wanted to do stubborn, she could do stubborn, too.

Ten minutes of relentless knocking later, Madoka heard the deadbolt and door chain rattle. She lowered her arm as the door opened. Homura stood silhouetted in the doorway, face in that all-too-common expression of blank detachment, and didn't say a word of greeting.

“I brought you food,” Madoka said with a fierce pout, daring her to argue.

“I have food here,” Homura said.

“Have you actually eaten any of it since you got home?”

Homura just stared.

Madoka scowled. “Let me in. Please.”

Their staring contest was a challenge for Madoka, but Homura eventually looked away and took a step back to let her enter. Madoka slipped off her shoes and decided to wait to talk until after she had gotten some food in Homura, who passively watched her. At least she was dry and in warm pajamas. Madoka stepped around the doorjamb into the living room and jumped back with a shriek.

Guns.

Guns everywhere.
Many different kinds of guns. Big guns, little guns, simple guns, fancy guns, everything in between. Boxes and boxes and boxes of bullets and things that looked bigger and more frightening than bullets.

“What— what's this?!” she shrilled.

“Munitions,” Homura said blandly.

“But what are they doing on the floor?!”

“I am loading my new supply.”

“New supply?”

“I stole more from the yakuza and JSDF in... Tokyo when everyone else was asleep.”

Madoka whipped her head to her friend, panicked. “You stole from the yakuza and JSDF?!”

Homura shrugged disinterestedly. “Because of my magic, they have no way to know it was me. Even if they did, I am not worried about humans coming after me.” She looked at Madoka's face, which must have been horrified. “Do not worry. No one has ever traced the thefts to me.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“What do you mean, ever?!”

“I have been taking their weapons for several years.”

Madoka could only stare, mouth hanging open in shock.

Homura tilted her head to one side and asked, “Are you afraid?”

She shook herself and mulishly said, “No.” They had another staring contest. Madoka finally said, “I'm going to reheat this in the kitchen.”

“Suit yourself,” Homura murmured. She drifted over to a row of handguns, knelt, and mechanically started loading one.

Madoka watched her for a minute before marching into the kitchen and taking it over. Given the opportunity, she checked all the cupboards and fridge. There was a decent amount of dry goods, but practically nothing in the fridge. Cookware looked unused and the packaging for the food Papa had sent her before was clean and neatly stacked on the counter. Madoka wondered if this was why the friend Hitsugaya had mentioned always buried the girl in homemade food and mailed her baked goods.

She was sooo telling Papa about this.

As soon as she had the food reheated and plated on the table, Madoka went back to the living room. She opened her mouth to speak but bit her tongue and waited until Homura put the gun she was loading into her shield before saying, “Dinner is ready. Please come eat.”

Homura blinked up at her owlishly, but complied. They sat and ate together in silence for a time. It became progressively more awkward as minutes dragged by.
“So, um. You... um, you were doing much better this afternoon,” Madoka finally started. “What happened... after? I mean, um, to upset you?”

Homura watched her silently as she chewed, eyes boring into Madoka. “Did Hitsugaya send you?”

“No— not really,” Madoka stammered. “He said the labyrinth was easy but something happened after and you were upset and asked me to check in on you by phone but I decided to come be with you instead.” Babbling. Ugh. Nerves.

“Why?”

“Because I care about you and you being sad makes me sad.”

Homura canted her head to one side and stared at her more.

Madoka tried to keep her face firmly earnest but she kept faltering under Homura's scrutiny. She wondered what her friend was thinking about so deeply. “I know— I know they said you said you wanted to think alone but I was worried and they were worried and I didn't like the thought of you being sad by yourself so I, um, I....” She looked down at the table and trailed off into insecure mumbling.

“I will be fine,” Homura eventually said with a sigh. “I was merely reminded of something. Someone.” She paused, then hesitantly continued, “My... original team. It made me see some things in a... new light, I suppose.”

Madoka looked up shyly. “Would you... tell me?” She fidgeted with her fingers. “You know— just to get it out?”

Another painfully long silence as Homura stared at her with a frown. Just when Madoka decided she wouldn't be getting an answer, Homura quietly said, “I have never had to guide such a young magical girl before. Never had one actually look up to me like that.” She looked down and pushed her food around her plate. “I... think I understand the leader of my first team better now. Why she snapped like she did.”

Madoka watched in silence as Homura internally debated continuing. When Madoka realized she was staring, she averted her eyes and ate more of her second dinner to try to encourage Homura to eat. Her friend seemed to automatically copy her. After another couple minutes of silence weighing whether to probe that wound, Madoka softly prompted, “Can you explain? If— only if you want, I mean.”

Homura's mouth tightened at one side as though chewing her cheek. “I think... I have always worked with older magical girls, often those who do not trust me or like me. I did not act as any kind of mentor. It was... easier to tell myself their mistakes were their own responsibility. That their difficulty adjusting was weakness. But... Momoe....” She trailed off with a frown. Madoka waited her out for a couple minutes as Homura wrestled with thoughts and words. “I felt... responsible for teaching her. I pushed her hard when she was obviously afraid and vulnerable to the Witch's sympathy trap. I wanted to break her of that for her future safety, but I....” She pursed her lips and considered her words. “Momoe insists she wants to keep trying to push past it, but I... it had not struck me how difficult it is to teach that to someone, especially someone younger than me. It feels... cruel.” Closing her eyes, Homura heavily continued, “The leader of my original team... she was older than us and taught that to all of us. One by one, she helped push us through so we could survive in battle. I realize now that she probably hated doing it. But she also balanced that with optimism, teamwork, friendship, and encouragement to embrace our wishes and the rewarding feeling of protecting people. Actively helped some girls formulate their wishes. We all looked up
to her. So when she discovered we would eventually turn into Witches, and that she had encouraged us down that path and broken that part of us for worse than nothing....”

After another solemn silence, Madoka hazarded a guess. “You... think she felt like it was her fault? And that she wanted to save you all from— from turning into—?”

“Yes,” Homura whispered, eyes still shut. “I always told myself it was because she was weak, but... perhaps it was something different. And perhaps I am not very different from her after all.” She opened her eyes and looked up at Madoka. “I apologize for worrying... everyone. I just... needed to straighten everything out in my head without distraction.”

Madoka stayed respectfully quiet for a minute, then stood and walked over to Homura's side of the table to bend down and embrace her shoulders. “Thank you for telling me. I understand why you wanted to think through it. It must be very hard.”

Homura didn't react to the hug, but quietly said, “I wish I could talk to her.”

“What was she like?” Madoka asked, smoothing Homura's hair like Mama did to her when she was sad.

The magical girl's voice was heavy and weary when she eventually whispered, “Very much like Mami Tomoe.”

“Oh.” Madoka thought for a minute, then said, “No wonder you were afraid of how Mami would react when she woke up. And why you're so... careful about how to teach her about Witches.”

Homura pulled away and looked at Madoka's face searchingly. “You do not think I am being overly cautious?”

“Knowing this? Not at all,” Madoka replied with a gentle smile.

“I see.”

Madoka watched her thoughtfully for a minute then said, “Would you like to go to my house?”

“I need to finish with my weapons.”

“After that? Mama and Papa are worried about you.”

Homura frowned up at her. “Why?”

“Oh.” Whoops. “W-well... um....”

Her friend's eyes narrowed. “What did you tell them?”

Madoka awkwardly blurted out everything and cringed at the various facial expressions Homura made. Madoka felt awkward awkward guilty awkward.

When she was done, Homura huffed and looked aside with her arms crossed. “I hate when Urahara is right.”

That made Madoka draw up short. “Wh-what?”

“He told me about your father's visit before I went to meet you after school. I was angry he told so much—” Madoka cringed— “and he said to expect your father to tell your mother everything. I didn't expect them to learn everything else. Some, but not all.”
Madoka wanted to crawl under a rock and die of shame. “Msorry,” she mumbled meekly.

Homura sighed deeply. “I will get over it.” She looked up at Madoka cautiously. “How... did they react? They believed you?”

Drawing up in pride, Madoka passionately said, “They believe me. They're angry at the Incubator and want to help fight it and feel bad for you and the other girls and want to help you all and they're not angry at you for talking to me about everything because you kept me from selling my soul and, umm... ummmmm... yeah.”

“That is... good,” Homura sighed with relief.

“Yeah.” Madoka shifted awkwardly and said, “So you wanna go to my house after you finish your things?”

Homura pursed her lips and looked down at her plate. “Not... really.”

“Okay. I'll stay here with you, then,” Madoka said with forced bravado, hoping Homura wouldn't argue. “Mama and Papa said I could and that I don't even have to go to school tomorrow if you need me.”

The girl did look up at her and arch an eyebrow, but her lips curved into the slightest of smiles. Yes!

After washing dishes together, they went into the makeshift armory that was Homura's living room. Madoka carefully perched on a couch and watched Homura's methodical work. Interestingly, her friend's face gradually relaxed.

Madoka waited until the magical girl was between weapons to comment, “You're really good at that. I mean, I don't know guns or whatever, but you go so... smoothly.”

Homura tilted her head to glance at her. “I have a great deal of practice. It is... almost like autopilot, these days.” She looked back down to the guns and brushed her fingers over the next one in her assembly line. “Maintaining weapons is... calming.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Homura didn't look back at her, but continued talking calmly while opening boxes of ammunition. “I... think it is the repetitive nature of the task. And its simplicity. I do a lot of thinking when maintaining weapons.”

“Ummm... good?” Madoka said uncertainly. She was glad Homura had something like that, but was conflicted about what that thing was.

Homura must have understood perfectly because she briefly turned to give her a tiny, amused smile. Amused. Smile. Wow. It surprised a nervous giggle out of Madoka as Homura faced the guns again and picked one up.

“Do— do you want me to shut up?” Madoka whispered.

Her friend was silent for a moment, then answered, “No. As long as you don't make sudden loud exclamations as Sayaka tends to do. I... like listening to you. Your voice is also... soothing.”

Madoka's face burned and she mumbled a denial.
“So,” Homura said airily, “your conversation with your parents.”

“Y-yeah?”

“How are you handling what they told you?”

The question came as a complete surprise. “Ummmmmm.” Madoka tapped a finger on her lips and looked at the ceiling. Quiet clinks and clicks sounded out from across the room as she thought. “I understand why they didn't tell me. And I'm okay with it.” She looked down at Homura again to watch her industriously handling guns. Talk. Something to talk about. Well, she had told Homura's secrets, so maybe... “I found out why I don't really know my grandparents. On— on Papa's side, there was weird... spirit-drama. And on Mama's side there was... drama-drama.”

“Oh?” Homura said with cool interest.

“Wanna... wanna hear about it?” Madoka asked.

“Do tell,” Homura murmured.

They settled into a routine, the metallic clinking of bullets and clicking of magazines filling in the spaces between Madoka's quiet words until well past midnight.

Kisuke had long since decided that one of the hardest tasks in science was figuring out what questions to ask— which most needed to be asked and would garner the most relevant and useful answers. He needed to understand Soul Gems, Grief Seeds, and whatever the pseudo-Grief Seeds were, but which perspective would be the most informative and relevant? When he had been researching everything involved in Aizen's plots, the subjects were often already narrow enough and within his existing areas of most intense interest that much of it had been intuitive. This mess with magical girls was entirely different. Trial and error showed strong ties to his existing interests in Mod Souls, gigai, and kidō, but the physical makeup of the objects of power screamed to him of significance. The gemstones-and-metal theme seemed constant across objects. Were they really made of a spiritual equivalent of gold and silver, silicate and oxide and sulfate and phosphate minerals? Was it simpler? More complex? Would exploring that facet— Kisuke could feel Benihime roll her eyes in the middle of spinning thread— be useful or pointless? He didn't have time for wild goose-chases, but understanding every grain of information available was what had led to foiling Aizen's plans. Better to know than not.

Earth sciences had always been an idle curiosity for him but not something he had ever needed to delve into very deeply, so he wanted to build a new foundation with as few assumptions as possible. Between his more urgent projects and attendant research, Kisuke had been feverishly buffing up on modern gemology, mineralogy, petrology, metallurgy, and some basics of jewelry creation combining gems and precious metals. Once he had a more stable foundation, he could branch out into more experiments.

Kisuke's second hardest task in science was often determining whether he had the appropriate equipment to run the tests that would answer the best questions. Then there was the weighing of the merits of destructive and non-destructive testing. Kisuke would prefer to avoid damaging the Soul Gems, as he was certain Kurosuchi would be doing such tests himself. In fact, he would bet good money the man was already trying to figure out how to subject the samples to laser-induced
breakdown spectroscopy and create thin sections to examine by petrographic microscope without completely destroying the Gems in the process. Any scientist would have to crack a few eggs to make an omelet—

_Really, Kisuke?_ Benihime drawled.

—so the failures would be an acceptable loss, but he preferred the losses to be on Kurotsuchi's side of things.

Perhaps Kisuke would fiddle with trying to get the gold settings off one Soul Gem and whine to Kurotsuchi about a failure if doing so compromised the integrity of the jewel itself. That would prompt Kurotsuchi to attempt to one-up him. That was the one test he could think of that could be closest to a fifty-fifty chance for a positive, non-destructive result. If it was destructive... well, Kurotsuchi could have his fun trying to make it non-destructive, Kisuke could get his information, and the poor girls' souls would be intact and none the wiser once time was rewound.

So: Non-destructive testing. Looking at the three Soul Gems available to him in Karakura with a gemological spectroscope, refractometer, and dichroscope had been interesting but inconclusive enough that Kisuke wanted to design new, specialized versions of the tools. Now he had boxes of various styles of each tool to take apart and shuffle around and recreate using more spiritually-inclined materials. Hachi had notified him that another shipment of gemological equipment had been delivered to Urahara Shop and was waiting to be fiddled with. Now that the drones were finished and maintenance had been passed to Tessai, Kisuke had time to work. Play. Work.

He was sprawled out on the floor among technical manuals and mechanical schema when the communication system buzzed and Tessai hazarded, “Boss, you at a stopping point?”

Kisuke blinked in disorientation as he came out of academic trance and frowned at the speaker across the room. “I can be.”

“Can you come to the monitoring station?”

“Sure. Who's watching Miss Tomoe?”

“No one.” The dryness of Tessai’s voice made Kisuke picture his face as exasperated but unsurprised. “Tomoe and Hitsugaya have been asleep for hours.”

“What time is it?” Kisuke asked as he shambled to his feet.

“Three.”

Kisuke stared at the speaker for a long minute and could only say, “Oh.” He cracked his neck with a wince. “A.M., I hope?”

“Yes.”

“Don't judge me, Tessai.”

“Of course not.”

“Liar.”

“Come here.”

So Kisuke wound through the halls and entered the surveillance room and its bank of softly
glowing screens. He glanced at the monitors for the shop out of habit—no one wandering the halls or in the rigged rooms. All dark. Good. He looked at Tessai. “How's the pigeon network going?”

Tessai grunted and tapped around a keyboard. “We need to tweak and streamline the incident flagging and notification priority settings. Something interesting happened but it didn't escalate to notification of an ongoing incident or even throw a notification after the fact. I found it digging in the queue.”

Kisuke grimaced. “Ugh, I hate being in beta.”

Tessai glanced back over his shoulder and raised a brow. “No, you don't.”

“I hate beta testing with limited time,” Kisuke elaborated. He scratched his unshaven chin and muttered, “We need to expand stationary sensor deployment farther into Asunaro and Kazamino now that Sōju isn't tripping us up. Have redundant data streams to prevent this kind of failure. Maybe have more pigeons carry and deposit them...?”

“That reminds me.” Turning back to the screens, Tessai pointed at a cluster of five off to the right and said, “Before I forget, I commanded five pigeons to get around the part of Kazamino where the Michaels girl was found dead this time last time.”

A smile ghosted across Kisuke's face. He was always happy when Tessai anticipated something he wanted to do but hadn't said because he'd been whisked away by other thoughts. “The article said the body was in the church, yes?”

“Correct. I have one of the birds reprogrammed to behave as though its wing is injured to excuse it hiding in the roof. I looked up the blueprints with the city and compared it to the crime scene photos from the case files we hacked last time. I can get the drone through the eaves and ceiling space to see the nave. It'll be in place around sundown to monitor the inside all day Thursday.”

“Excellent.” Kisuke paused. “What is today?”

“The wee hours of Wednesday,” Tessai said drily, glancing at him sideways.

“Right.” Kisuke pouted and added, “What did I say about judging me?”

“Please sleep after this.”

“Meh.”

Tessai rolled his eyes. “All right. So the thing I found.” Tessai tapped and clicked around and called up a video to the large central screen. “Hitsugaya said Tomoe called the girls in Asunaro the Pleiades Saints, right? And said there were seven, but Kazusa's death should have knocked them down to six?”

“Yes.” Kisuke tilted his head curiously. “Should have?”

“A drone caught a seven-girl team fighting a monster a few hours ago.”

“Really?” Kisuke said, intrigued. “Perhaps they recruited another girl?”

“I don't know. But there's some...odd things. Several anomalies. Watch it first.”

Tessai clicked play and the video showed three magical girls lead a many-legged, fluffy blue centipede monster the size of a semi truck into an empty lot, where four more girls promptly
dropped in behind it to box it in. The battle was a fascinating demonstration of teamwork with diverse weapons and abilities. The monster's limbs were mismatched in the extreme, human, animal, and insect, at various sizes. The limbs were smaller and more human-like near its “head,” which had mothlike antennae and big compound eyes above a human mouth open in a silent scream. Six of the girls went airborne with handheld weapons and wands brandished, shouted something, and brilliant lines of light lanced from point to point among them to form a hexagon made of many triangles and other symbols too blurry to make out on video. The six girls dove down and away from the monster; their spell expanded as they went, creating a rainbow net to hold the monster down. The seventh girl perched on a nearby roof, held up a polearm that looked like a large wrought-iron cross, shouted, and generated an intense beam of purple-to-black energy which lanced out at the monster and incinerated it. When the light faded, a girl in orange and white darted forward to catch a woman who was falling from the monster's blackened, disintegrating husk. The magical girls converged on the pair and had a quiet conversation as one of them picked something small up off the ground and looked at it, then handed it to her teammate in a teal paratrooper-like costume. Paratrooper-girl immediately put the item in some kind of containment jar. Four departed by rooftop, leaving the girl with short orange hair with two girls—one with long indigo hair and one with short black hair. They dismissed their costumes, roused the unconscious woman, and seemed to put on a decent ruse of having found her while walking by. They helped her get her bearings before leaving on foot.

Kisuke stared at the screen for a long minute after Tessai paused it. After some thought, Kisuke said, “I have several questions.”

Tessai nodded curtly and picked up a clipboard he had scribbled on. “No labyrinth. A human fell out of the apparent Witch similar to how Hitsugaya described Miki being freed from the mermaid transformation. Various techniques and their similarities to kidō. The intricate combination of powers.” He looked up at Kisuke seriously. “And then the oddities with their identities.”

Eyebrows raised, Kisuke prompted, “Oh? Do they match the girls described in the final info-dump from Twelfth in the last timeline? From Abarai's report?”

“Yes and no,” Tessai said with a sigh as he brought up two school ID pictures—the girls with orange hair and indigo hair, respectively. “Kaoru Maki,” he said as he pointed to the orange-haired girl, and “Umika Misaki,” he said as he pointed to the indigo-haired girl. “Abarai's report mentioned a Kazumi Subaru, but there appears to be no such person in Asunaro or surrounding cities.”

Kisuke blinked slowly and turned to Tessai. “Pardon?”

“She doesn't seem to exist. No school records, birth records, hospital records, residential records, nothing. Abarai's report said she lived with the other two. Those two do have the same address, but no one else is registered as living there aside from Misaki's parents, who are overseas.”

“Where are they? And Maki's, too.”

“Going by financial records, Misaki's are in the U.S. and Maki's are in Hong Kong.”

Kisuke tapped his fan on his arm and pursed his lips. “I am noticing a trend of girls with absent families being targeted to contract. Not exclusively, but frequently enough to be a thing.”

Tessai rumbled dark agreement and moved on. “None of the costumes on these seven girls match the brief descriptions in Abarai's report. Not even Maki and Misaki. Misaki's is close, but Abarai's report mentions a beret with a bow and a short cape, not a nun-like veil and knee-length cape.”
“...What?”

Tessai held his hands up in an expression of confusion. “No idea. And I don't see anyone with, I quote, *ridiculously long black hair and a poofy white dress shaped like a bell or jellyfish*.”

Kisuke stared at the screen more. “This situation just gets stranger and stranger.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “We'll have to ask Miss Tomoe what she knows about the Pleiades Saints. Descriptions and such.” Then he smiled fondly. “Whichever of them came up with the Pleiades Saints and Star Cluster pun for a group of seven magical girls is a nerd after my own heart.”

Tessai barked out a surprised laugh and said, “Yes. Yes, she is.”

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly as he thought, Kisuke clapped a hand on Tessai's shoulder and said, “Good work. Keep looking into that tomorrow. For now, get some rest. We have warding in the afternoon.”

“I presume you will be retiring for the... morning, too, then?” Tessai said archly.

Kisuke turned away without answering and shuffled through the doorway, whistling innocently. “GO TO BED, BOSS!” Tessai shouted out the door.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: clank clank clank

It's been implied in bonus materials that Junko hated school and was probably a delinquent. Considering her businesswoman result, I have this mental image of young Junko being in the same gang as Tohru Honda's mom Kyoko in Fruits Basket. I kinda picture Junko telling Madoka stories about ~The Red Butterfly~ lol.

* Regarding Kisuke admiring the Pleiades Saints' name being a pun: プレイアデス聖団 Pureiadesu Seidan, literally: Pleiades Holy/Saint Party/Group プレイアデス星団 Pureiadesu Seidan, Pleiades Star Cluster
One kanji difference, same pronunciation. Pleiades is a constellation containing seven stars representing seven sisters. The girl who came up with the name is also the character who came up with the attack names for the group's members, and those are often puns/media jokes, too. The joint attack mentioned is Episodio Incrocio (“Crossover Episode”) if you want to look up a pic. My darling nerd.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm alive lol. Thanks for all the well-wishes. It's been kinda rocky but my brain hasn't completely dribbled out my ears yet. Not for lack of trying lol. I meant to post this last night but I fell asleep.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SIEBENUNDSECHZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Sayaka was glad to wake up to a text notification from Madoka saying she’d be dragging a “much better” Homura to school. Her mother looked at Sayaka oddly as she plowed through breakfast and practically skipped out the door even before the woman could leave for work. When she rounded a bend in the creek path to school and saw Madoka happily standing with Homura, who looked calm and damn near pleasant, Sayaka wanted to cry with relief. Instead, she joyfully shouted, “Heeey! Stranger Danger got a visit from the goddess of cheering people up!”


If that wasn't an invitation to continue, nothing was. Sayaka ran up to them with stars in her eyes and her hands clasped to her chest as if in prayer, gushing, “Please bestow your blessing upon me, O goddess of all things loving and cheerful! I am your loyal servant! I worship you!”

Madoka's face was bright red and she was spluttering incoherently. Homura laughed outright. It was a good sound. Victory!

Smiling slightly, Homura rummaged in her bag and offered Sayaka a little cellophane bag of cookies tied with a blue ribbon. “A benediction upon thee,” she said solemnly.

Sayaka squealed, let her bag fall off her shoulder, and threw herself to her knees in front of Homura, looking up in joking adoration and making glory hands around the suspended cookies. “All praise the goddess Stranger Danger!”

“You have problems,” Hitsugaya's voice drawled behind her.

Sayaka whirled as much as she could on her knees and jabbed an accusing finger his direction. “Shun the unbeliever who rejects the sweet blessings of Stranger Danger! Shunnnn!”

Hitsugaya rolled his eyes. Beside him, Mami laughed so hard she cried.

“Awww, what did I miss?” Hitomi mourned as she came up the path.

“Miki invented a cult,” Hitsugaya said.
“Religion!” Sayaka protested.

Hitsugaya stared her dead in the eye. “Cult.”

“Rude!”

“So?”

“Oh, my.” Hitomi covered a grin with one demure hand. “The cult of Stranger Danger?”

“Church!” Sayaka insisted.

“Is the temple an unmarked van?” Hitomi asked slyly.

Sayaka jabbed her finger at Hitomi in outrage. “Slander!”

“Do you want the cookies or not?” Homura asked mildly. “My arm is tired.”

Sayaka gasped, turned back to Homura, grabbed the cookies, and cried, “A thousand apologies, my goddess!”

Mami's laughter approached breathless wheezing. Sayaka was winning at life today!

She floated through the school day, high on the contentment of the two magical girls. Both did still have subdued moments where they stared off into space and looked sad or blank or haunted, but they were much improved so Sayaka chalked it up as a win. It became her mission to make lunch on the rooftop as entertaining as possible. Some guy tried to tease Hitsugaya for eating lunch with a bunch of girrrllllls in the hallway on the way back to class. Hitsugaya just rolled his eyes at the bait like a responsible and mature person, but Sayaka threw herself into his side and forcibly linked elbows with him while shoving him into Madoka and pulling Hitomi along on her other side, loudly saying, “WOW, JEALOUS MUCH?” with wide, mockingly innocent eyes. The boy who had shouted looked flustered as his classmates laughed at him, but the temperature dropped suddenly and Hitsugaya looked like he wanted to murder Sayaka with his mind or skewer her with icicles or something, so she let go of him and sprinted toward the stairwell. She dragged a spluttering Hitomi in her wake, not bothering to even try suppressing the ugliest laugh she had ever laughed in her life, and almost fell down the stairs.

Sayaka decided to be cautious and not rib Hitsugaya's avoidance of sweets at the café, also putting as many people between him and her as possible. His glaring technique really was champion-level. Once Hitomi hurried off to her Rich Girl Lesson of the Day, everyone headed to Madoka's house. The unmarked van she had seen parked behind High Spirits sat at the curb.

Turning to Madoka with joking awe, Sayaka gushed, “Madoka, you have your own temple to Stranger Danger?! Are you her secret priestess?!”

Mami giggled as Madoka and Homura kinda choked. Perfect.

“I thought Shizuki saying unmarked vans were temples for your cult was slander this morning,” Hitsugaya said drily.

“Rude!” Sayaka declared.

“True,” Hitsugaya countered.

“Ruuuuuuuuude!” Sayaka said stubbornly.
“Oh! Um, before we go in,” Madoka interrupted, “Everyone should know Mama and Papa know everything. So we don't have to hide things.”

This was news only to Sayaka. “What?! Since when?!”

Madoka’s explanation on the slow walk to her front door was brief but fascinating. At least the others save Homura didn't seem to know the details— Sayaka hadn't been the only one left out of that loop.

When Madoka was done, Sayaka said, “Wow, your parents had secret lives! Like superheroes or spies or something!”

Homura rolled her eyes tiredly and Madoka hesitantly said, “Not— not really.”

Sayaka was still snickering as they all removed their shoes and dropped their bags in the foyer. She could hear two male voices in the distance, speaking in a singsong talking-to-babies tone. Tatsuya must have roped them into something with his cuteness.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Madoka's mom said. “It's good to see all of you at once for a change.”

The five of them turned to look for her and found her walking down the hall toward them with casual purpose. It was weird to see her in anything but business attire in the middle of the week. It was weird to see her in daylight in the middle of the week.

“Hi, Mrs. Kaname!” Sayaka said with a wave. “Good to see you, too! How's work?”

Mrs. Kaname lazily waved a hand to her side and nonchalantly answered, “Oh, just kicking corporate ass and taking idiots' names, as usual.”

Sayaka grinned widely. Madoka's mom was a total badass. Also, she was the only adult Sayaka knew who didn't care about cussing. “Hell yeah!”

The woman gave a brief grin, then turned to look at the three newcomers to their circle of friends and stepped closer. She looked at each of them searchingly for a minute, then said, “Thank you.”

They were all surprised. Mami stammered, “Wha-what for?”

Mrs. Kaname smiled. “For all you've done for Madoka and Sayaka. Teaching them, protecting them.” She turned to Homura and stepped even closer. “Especially you, Homura.”

“What?” Homura said blankly.

“Madoka told us just how much you've risked your life to protect her and the other girls. That you've nearly died twice in the last few weeks in fighting for them.” Mrs. Kaname looked at her with genuine affection, head tilted to one side with a sad smile as she reached forward and brushed Homura's hair away from her face. “Thank you.” She paused, then carefully said, “I heard from Kisuke that you... lost your parents. Awhile back. So I want to speak to you for them: I am so proud of you. I'm certain they would be, too.”

Homura's eyes widened and her face slackened into dull surprise as her entire body tensed. Mrs. Kaname's lips quirked up more and she gave Homura a light hug. Homura was stiff and silent in the embrace, but didn't shove her away. Her face looked like she was so shocked she didn't think what was happening was real. Mrs. Kaname patted her cheek and turned to Mami.
“You, too,” Mrs. Kaname said. “Madoka told me a bit of what she knows. That you protected her and Sayaka twice and went through something horrible. Thank you. And I’m proud of you, too.”

Mami’s stunned face crumpled and she teared up. She actually stepped closer to Mrs. Kaname to meet her hug halfway, shoulders hitching with suppressed sobs as she clung to the woman, who rocked her in place gently and made soothing sounds. Homura kept staring at Mrs. Kaname in bewilderment.

Sayaka smiled warmly at the scene and traded an equally warm glance with Madoka. Mrs. Kaname was a master of knowing just what to say. Both of them wanted to be as cool as her someday.

Once Mami pulled herself together, Mrs. Kaname wiped the tears from her cheeks with her thumbs and murmured a question to her. Mami nodded; Mrs. Kaname patted her shoulder and turned to Hitsugaya as Mami blotted her eyes on her sleeve. Hitsugaya had respectfully averted his eyes from Mami’s crying and was staring at a wall with a neutral expression. Mrs. Kaname grinned and said, “You, too, Tōshirō. Thank you for helping.”

Hitsugaya darted a glance at her and opened his mouth as if to object to her use of the name, but snapped his mouth shut and mumbled, “You’re welcome.”

Mrs. Kaname ruffled his hair with a grin and cooed, “Your father is very proud of you, by the way,” as he squawked and batted at her hands.

“His dad?” Madoka said curiously.

“Yep! Wonderful man!” Mrs. Kaname said, backing away with a little laugh.

“You know him?” Mami asked.

“Just met him today,” Mrs. Kaname said with a wink. “Come join us in the living room!”

They watched her go; then Sayaka whipped her head to look at Hitsugaya with delight. “You didn’t say your dad would be here!”

“Yeah. Well.” Hitsugaya refused to look at her, mouth closed in a tight line and face slowly flushing as he jammed his hands in his pockets. “We needed a fourth person to anchor the wards properly, so... yeah. He came from Tokyo.”

“Why doesn’t he live here?” Madoka asked.

Hitsugaya still avoided their eyes, frowning unhappily now. “Partly business. Partly to be near... his specialist. Doctor. Hospital.”

Sayaka went still and thought of Nagisa and her mother. She swallowed hard and said, “Is he— is he—? Um....”

“Mr. Hitsugaya is much, much better than he was even a year ago,” Homura said quietly. “He just needs to be cautious and prefers to be near the team familiar with his case because he occasionally has—”

“—Episodes,” Hitsugaya muttered darkly.

“Hitsugaya did go to my school and did become my tutor, but we first met in the cardiac ward when he was visiting his father,” Homura explained with a melancholy glance at her friend. “He and his uncle sensed me and got... curious.”
“She was holed up in a waiting room with windows facing the botanical gardens to see the cherry blossoms,” Hitsugaya added. “She didn't seem to realize she had power, so we didn't mention anything. Not until—” He looked directly at Homura and softly said, “We should have. Would have, had we known what would—”

“What's done is done,” Homura said with a shrug. She pushed her hair over her shoulder and looked calmly back at him. “If you try to apologize again, I will tell Kikyo about the hallway scene this aft—”

“Shut up!” Hitsugaya screeched quietly. He looked down the hall and back, eyes paranoid. “If they find out—!”

Sayaka could feel her mouth turning up into a wicked grin despite herself.

Hitsugaya saw and snarled, “I will make your life a living, freezing hell if you say a word, Miki!”

Sayaka couldn't restrain another ugly laugh. When she had it under control, she made the hand motion of zipping her lip, turning a key, and throwing it away. “My lips are sea-sea-seal—” Nope. Giggles were too much.

Hitsugaya dragged his hands down his face in frustration. Mami stifled a laugh and patted his back, then turned to Sayaka and mirthfully said, “If you tell, I'll never bake you a cake. Ever.”

Sayaka's face fell. She looked at Homura, who was coolly examining a lock of hair she was twirling around her fingers. “Stranger Dange—”

“Homura,” Madoka interrupted cheerfully, “if Sayaka tells, don't give her anymore cookies or candy. Ever.”

“All right,” Homura agreed immediately, voice sly-pretending-to-be-casual.

Sayaka turned to Madoka in outrage. “How dare you use your priestessly influence for evil?!”

Madoka had the audacity to wink playfully. Then her face shifted into approval before she turned and beckoned them all to follow her. Sayaka grinned widely.

Gloomy mood successfully lifted!

They all trooped along after Madoka and went into the living room, where they found Mr. Urahara and Mr. Tsukabishi plus a pale man with long white hair in a low ponytail sitting on the floor around Tatsuya while Mr. and Mrs. Kaname watched with amusement from a couch. Tatsuya toddled around between the men and seemed most interested in Mr. Tsukabishi and Mr. Hitsugaya, repeatedly marveling at Mr. Tsukabishi's size and Mr. Hitsugaya's cheer and long hair. Mr. Urahara had his fan out and would goofily hide behind it whenever Tatsuya looked his way, making the boy squeal happily.

Mr. Hitsugaya turned to face them in the doorway, his face lighting up with joy. “Shiro—”

“NO,” Hitsugaya interrupted.

“—chan!”

Hitsugaya put his face in his hands.

Sayaka slowly turned to look at him, an evil smile creeping onto her face. “Shiii-rohhh-chaaan?”
He glared at his father and sarcastically said, “A\textit{ million} thanks... Dad.”

This just made Mr. Hitsugaya grin with even more intense cheer as he stood and approached them.

“Is that any way to greet your father?” Mr. Urahara teased from behind his fan. He got a dirty look for his trouble.

Mr. Hitsugaya laughed, then introduced himself. “Hello, girls. I'm Jūshirō Hitsugaya. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

Everyone returned his greeting, but Sayaka followed her introduction with, “Wow, you have matching names!”

Mr. Hitsugaya looked beatific. “Yes! We're both—”

“\textbf{DON'T},” Hitsugaya snapped, going red in the face.

“—Shiro-chans!”

Sayaka giggled at Hitsugaya's grimace. His face changed to embarrassment as his father whipped candy out of his pockets and shoved it into his son's hands. Hitsugaya immediately shoved it at Homura, who looked at it blandly for a moment before shoving it at Sayaka, who squealed happily and juggled it into her school bag.

Mr. Urahara stood and clapped his hands loudly. When they all turned to him, he eagerly said, “Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats and I will present the Kisuke Urahara Spiritual Home Security System! Yours for the low low price of existing and being decent human beings!”

They all took positions on and against couches to watch Mr. Urahara's animated lecture. Sayaka found herself mostly staring blankly as he babbled. He used words she knew, but in a nigh-incomprehensible way.

“Application of force necessary to compromise cubic wards would be manageable for many entities, but compromising a dome or sphere would require drastic increase in force—”

“By nesting wards to force sequential collapse upon attack, failure of the cubic structure would serve as an alarm and delay tactic while the attacker has to work harder to compromise the interior dome—”

“Designed the initial dome anchors to serve as a dead man's switch, such that failure would rotate the ward to secondary anchors and trigger the \textit{catastrophic security response} everything else is intended to partially disguise—”

“Partial rather than full disguise because, as in horror movies, knowing something is \textit{there} but being unable to tell what heightens caution and fear response, serving as further deterrent—”

“Weaponizing a Sword of Damocles, in a way, ahaahahahaha—”

Sayaka furrowed her brow. \textit{Wasn't... wasn't a sword already a weapon?}

“Anyway, as in architecture—”

“Concentration of stress in corners causing material fatigue to the point of disastrous structural failure—”

“Even distribution of stress on curved structures—”
“Why airplane windows are rounded instead of cornered—”

“In-flight metal fatigue failure at square windows leading to explosive decompression and mid-air break-up of de Havilland Comet 1 airliners in the 1950s—”

Sayaka felt her face twisting in confusion. *How the hell had airplanes become relevant?!*

“Tensile strength translated from physical to spiritual— or magical, as it were—”

“Thus, even a modestly intelligent attacker would concentrate on overloading the corners of a cubic structure—”

“Monolithic dome—”

“Structural integrity—”

“Implies a sphere, though the bottom half is subterranean—”

“Interior of the Pantheon, for example— well, if the top of the vertical drum was at ground level —”

“Again, tensile strength—”

Sayaka traded a lost glance with Madoka, then looked at everyone else. Aside from Mami, Mr. Hitsugaya, and Mr. Kaname looking like they were following the gist of the lecture despite struggling with technicalities, no one but Sayaka and Madoka seemed completely out of their depth. Embarrassing.

Hitsugaya's dad must have noticed their glazed-over expressions because he looked like he had been startled out of a trance and smiled apologetically at her and Madoka.

Mrs. Kaname was next to notice. She grinned and summarized, “Round structures are stronger than boxy structures because science, so he's going to put a round shield inside a dummy boxy shield. Except the round one is *also* a dummy for the *real* round one, which he's leaving peeking out a bit to freak out the Incubator into not touching the whole mess.”

“Oh,” Madoka said.

“Why didn't you just *say* so, Magic Man?” Sayaka grumbled with a sideways glance at Mr. Urahara.

“I did,” Mr. Urahara said with a spark of amusement in his eyes.

“Stop being a smart-ass show-off,” Hitsugaya sneered. Sayaka thought his father might scold him, but he just peacefully sipped his tea. Cool. Another parent who was relaxed about language and politeness!

“*You* followed it,” Mr. Urahara said with a pout.

Hitsugaya's cheek twitched in irritation. “*I* have previous instruction in warding and its relevance to physics and architecture, you idiot.”

“*Homura* followed it.”

“I study physics quite extensively,” Homura sniffed.
“Why?” Sayaka demanded, mystified. She hated that subject.

Homura met her eyes, considered, and coolly answered, “Ballistics.”

Mr. and Mrs. Kaname looked grim, but Sayaka didn't get it. “Say what?”

Mami nodded in understanding. “The physics involved in use of firearms.”

“And other munitions,” Homura added lightly.

“Gun science,” Mr. Tsukabishi clarified.

Sayaka stared at the blonde. “You studied it, too?”

“Of course. I do use guns, after all,” Mami said pleasantly. “I believe we told you being an effective magical girl requires diligent study. We weren't exaggerating.” She gave a self-deprecating laugh and added, “My focus seems to have been far more narrow than Miss Akemi's, though.”

“...Homura.”

Mami blinked at the other magical girl, surprised. “What?”

Homura kept her gaze on her cup, studiously avoiding Mami's eyes, and murmured, “Call me Homura. If you want.”

Mami's stunned face quickly blossomed into a beaming smile. “Only if you call me Mami!”

Awesome. It confused Sayaka that Homura was so... open today given how badly things seemed to have gone the night before, but whatever. Homura's mind was kinda twisty, anyway. She'd take it.

There was more Magic Man chatter that made more sense to her, then he said he'd explain other stuff after they put up the wards. So they all trooped outside to help unload little decorative garden lanterns that were way heavier than they looked and move them to the specific places Magic Man and Mr. Tsukabishi wanted them. The two shopkeepers wrangled something bigger into the house and shoved it in a closet in the middle of the building. Something something keystone. Then Mr. Urahara, Mr. Tsukabishi, Hitsugaya, and his dad went to the four corners of the property and each took a lantern. Homura hovered by Magic Man and attentively listened to his quiet description of what they were doing. Mami did the same by Hitsugaya and Madoka's parents stood by Mr. Tsukabishi. Sayaka and Madoka drifted over to Mr. Hitsugaya and must have looked completely lost because he smiled sympathetically again and explained some things in very simple terms between each step of muttering magical gibberish and glowing choreographed magic tricks. She and Madoka did end up understanding a bit more, at least.

Then everyone walked from the corners of the property line square to the points inside. Mr. Hitsugaya apologized and said he had to concentrate more for the stronger circle part, which was totally fine by Sayaka. She just appreciated the different colored lights and junk that happened. It was like a miniature fireworks show without the obnoxious booms. She glanced around at other houses and wondered what neighbors would think they were doing.

Madoka leaned over to her and murmured, “Did you feel that?” when the first dome of color flashed and disappeared.

Sayaka closed her eyes and leaned forward. She wasn't sure why, but it was like straining to hear something. Except not. Something felt a bit... odd, but she couldn't name it. Kinda reminded her of
when a storm was coming in... but also not. The men must have done another thing because she did feel a sudden pulse of tingling pressure. Her eyes flew open and she gasped, “Whoa, yeah!”

Mr. Hitsugaya glanced at them over his shoulder. His face was thoughtful instead of scolding, but Sayaka snapped her mouth shut anyway.

By the time they were done, Sayaka recognized the feeling from crossing the property line into the High Spirits courtyard. She mentioned this to Madoka, who said it still felt different. They got another interested glance from Mr. Hitsugaya.

“How do you think it's different?” he asked Madoka.

“Ummmm.” Madoka closed her eyes and breathed slowly, face turning into a frown of concentration. Sayaka was relieved to see she also looked like she was listening to something. “There's... something missing?”

“Yes,” Mr. Hitsugaya said. “Can you tell what?”

Madoka's lips turned down harder and her brow scrunched up. She opened her eyes, bit her lip, and looked up at him with embarrassment. “I don't know.”

“Now, don't look like that!” Hitsugaya's dad grinned and patted them both on the shoulder. “Excellent for beginners with no training. Both of you. With time and study, you two could be formidable. Hopefully when you are much older.”

“Why is something missing?” Sayaka asked.

“A couple of the friends who helped put up the other wards before the Incubator knew to watch out for this kind of thing either couldn't come or thought it wiser not to. The most noticeable difference probably comes from absence of one person who uses... a different kind of magic. We'd prefer not to let the Incubator know the identity of the person capable of using that kind of magic.” The man smiled and added, “Don't worry. Tessai compensated for that in the ward design. They're just as strong as the others.”

Once they were all inside and gathered in the living room again, Mr. Hitsugaya politely banished Mr. Urahara to sit in a corner to entertain Tatsuya and took over explaining other spirits to them—the kind that had nothing to do with magical girls and Witches. Mr. Kaname contributed a lot of experiences to the discussion and made Sayaka wonder if she would see the ghosts with chains on their chests if she went to Soma. I see dead people! That could be super cool.

“What I'm curious about is what the cursed spirits really are,” Mr. Kaname said. “The ones with the masks and holes.”

“Cursed is... one way of putting it,” Mr. Hitsugaya said with a pensive glance at the ceiling. “Corrupted is probably a better word for it, though.” And so he explained Hollows.

Annnd Sayaka wasn't so sure about going looking for ghosts anymore. I'm food for dead people! wasn't as cool.

“That's cruel,” Madoka said tearfully. “Are they stuck like that forever?”

“No,” Mr. Hitsugaya answered slowly. There was a long silence as Homura and everyone who had shown up in her wake traded glances, obviously if silently debating how much to say.

Hitsugaya heaved a deep sigh and said, “Defeating them with... magic by breaking their masks
usually purifies them of the corruption and whatever sins they committed while a Hollow so they can cross over.”

“Usually?” Mrs. Kaname said darkly.

“If they were... evil enough in life before they turned Hollow, the Gates of Hell appear and they get dragged in.”

Everyone stared.

“It doesn't happen as often as a lot of living people would expect,” his father added. “The standard for irredeemable evil is very high. It's... unsettling when it happens, though.”

“So, like... what should we do if we run into a Hollow?” Sayaka asked after a long silence. “We're not magical girls and we can't make ice swords. Do we just run?”

“Running would be your first option,” Mr. Urahara said from his corner. “But fighting is also available to you. Many people channel their magic through a physical object to use as a spiritual weapon. Metal is generally best, but you can improvise with almost anything you see lying around.”

“Kikyo favors soccer balls,” Hitsugaya said.

“I have used a golf club and a large piece of rebar,” Homura added.

Mr. Urahara nodded at the examples and said, “And an employee at a previous shop of mine uses baseball bats. People who can't see Hollows assume he's acting out an imagined game.”

“And the idiot legitimately does whenever he's bored,” Hitsugaya muttered.

Sayaka perked up. “Baseball bats?!”

“Oh! You were carrying one when I met you!” Mami said. She looked at Magic Man and explained, “I put my magic in it for her!”

“Can I do it myself?!” Sayaka asked eagerly.

“Most likely,” Mr. Urahara said. “You just need to practice.”

Mr. Hitsugaya smiled and said, “You were able to sense the wards. That's a good first step.”

Homura was eyeing her thoughtfully. When she saw Sayaka notice, she said, “I could... teach you how to do it. I think. I have never taught someone who was not contracted.”

“It'll be a learning experience for all of you!” Mr. Urahara said cheerfully. “If there aren't any more pressing questions, let's break out the food!”

“Food?” Madoka asked.

“For the housewarding party!” Mr. Urahara crowed with a grin as he waved his fan around.

What a dork. Sayaka loved it.

There turned out to be a feast waiting to be served in the kitchen. Mr. Tsukabishi had brought chafing dishes with amazing food to add to Mr. Kaname's amazing food. They ate in the living room instead of at the dining room table, finding perches everywhere and chattering merrily while
the teenagers finished homework. Mr. Hitsugaya was wonderfully knowledgeable of history and taught them more interesting detail about the Shinsengumi in a single cheerful storytelling session than Sayaka had ever absorbed from boring schoolbooks.

Sayaka was reluctant to go home when her mom called looking for her after getting home from work late. Again. She felt like she belonged among the raucous group, but her mom wouldn't let her stay the night like Mami and Homura, who had been claimed as extra daughters by a slightly inebriated Mrs. Kaname. Sayaka had been claimed the same way years ago, of course, but her mom forcibly separating her from her friends when Mami looked unreservedly happy and Homura was actually freaking smiling made her feel resentful.

Everyone from the shop gave her a ride home, but of course Sayaka would laughingly tumble out of the unmarked van full of men and a teenage boy just as her father finally approached the gate to the apartment complex after his own late night at the office. She would never forget the stunned and appalled face he made. Mr. Hitsugaya headed off a volcanic eruption when he got out and smoothly steamrolled her dad with a charming introduction featuring epic aristocratic politeness and gushing about Sayaka asking smart questions about history and being some kind of good influence on his son to loosen up a bit. Said son objected from the van, but was silenced by his uncle's fan bopping him on the head. Her dad was thrown for just as much of a loop as when Mami had pulled something similar and parted from Mr. Hitsugaya to walk up to their apartment with her in a baffled silence.

He came to when they got inside and her mom frowned at her. They grilled her for half an hour before she finally snapped and yelled, “You have no problem with me being friends with Kyōsuke and hanging out with him and his family, so why is Tōshirō such a big deal?!”

Their mouths opened and closed in surprise before finding words and arguing with her, but she rolled her eyes and stomped off down the hall without listening.

Why couldn't her parents be more like Madoka's? And Tōshirō's, actually. It would be nice to have hers trust her judgment for once.

Ugh.

Upon reaching High Spirits, the four shinigami immediately headed for the labs for a long discussion without having to account for Mami Tomoe's presence. Kisuke led them into the surveillance room, where Tessai had set up a card table for them before they left for the Kaname house. He glanced at the monitors as Hitsugaya disinterestedly asked, “How was the trip from Tokyo?”

“Oh, marvelous. Modern trains are really quite wonderful,” Ukitake answered offhandedly while digging a sheaf of papers and file folders out of a suitcase. “Much smoother than the ones Shunsui insisted we ride atop a couple hundred years ago.”

Kisuke turned to him with a grin. “I didn't know you two did that!”

Ukitake laughed. “I think most shinigami did at some point when they were new. And still do today, really.”

Nostalgia made Kisuke smile. “They were so fascinating. One of the innovations that inspired me
to go into science on top of kidō theory.” Sighing fondly, he added, “Ah, the Industrial Revolution. So fun.”

“Can we get started?” Hitsugaya grumbled.

Kisuke traded amused glances with Ukitake, but they both sat and got down to business.

“I brought copies of the last ten years of patrol and incident reports for the region,” Ukitake announced as he set a stack of ten folders on the table. “I had my officers focus on intensively compiling, organizing, and annotating these before going further back. The next decade should be ready in another few days. I’ll have my lieutenant bring them to you.”

“Anything stand out?” Kisuke asked as he rifled through the stack.

“Two unseated soldiers MIA eight years apart on opposite outskirts of the Mitakihara metro jurisdiction with no Hollows found upon investigation,” Ukitake replied. “Which does happen from time to time.”

“I really want to know how much of our 'average' MIA rate among less-experienced soldiers is due to Witches instead of Hollows,” Hitsugaya muttered.

Ukitake nodded grimly and added, “Five cases of moderate to extreme injuries.”

“Only five in ten years?” Kisuke asked with interest. “That's low.”

“We thought it was average because the data on spiritual density indicated low Hollow presence,” the captain explained. “I had Rukia cross-reference with Fourth Division. Four from the very outskirts seemed normal and cited Hollows, except for one seventeenth seat nine years back who ventured closer to the center and returned saturated in Hollow reiatsu, badly injured, and semi-coherently rambling.” Ukitake pulled out one particular file and glanced at a paper within. “Spoke about clouds with teeth, flying fish with bird wings, and a waterspout with arms.” Frowning severely, the captain added, “I remember that one. He looked traumatized and... almost drugged, but didn't remember a thing when he recovered. His direct CO had to reassign him to desk duty. We all thought it was due to a head injury he had sustained. Retsu examined the scans again and remembers thinking it was more severe a reaction than she would expect from the degree of injury. So we've mutually agreed it's at least a possible Witch attack.”

They continued in the same vein for another half hour when an alarm pinged from the surveillance equipment. Tessai was at the controls in a moment.

“The tweaks worked. One of the Kazamino drones near that church has a magical girl in sensor range.” With a series of clacking keys, Tessai put the feed in question on the large main screen. “Strong Hollow-like reiatsu coming from her.”

They all watched a girl stagger around a corner, cradling one arm to her abdomen and leaning on some kind of staff as she navigated the dim streets. Tessai hopped to another pigeon-camera further down the street when she disappeared from view. She dragged herself up the steps into the church and closed the door behind her. Switching to the drone hiding in the rafters, the interior lights let them see her costume more clearly: The main body was a short black smock almost entirely covered by a rust red pinafore with random white blotches on the skirt that reminded Kisuke of a red toadstool. The smock and pinafore flared out over puffy, knee-length cream bloomers. She had matching stockings, dainty little black shoes, shoulder-length black gloves, a ruffled capelet fastened to her collar with gold rosettes, and a black-and-cream bonnet decorated with large gold roses. She looked very much like a nursery rhyme shepherdess, especially with her gnarled
wooden shepherd's crook wrapped in leafy gold vines. A gem at the clasp of her capelet sparked red and black. She leaned heavily on her crook and panted as blood spattered to the floor beneath her.

“Bethany Michaels?” Kisuke demanded.

Tessai stabbed at keys and brought up the girl's school photo. They glanced from it to the magical girl's features and lank honey-brown hair as she lifted her face to look at the church's altar. “I think so,” Tessai said gruffly.

They watched in silence as the girl painfully made her way to the altar and fell to her knees. The shepherd's crook clattered to the floor and dissolved in red sparkles as she clasped her hands in prayer.

“Forgive me, Lord,” she loudly hiccuped through her tears. “Forgive— forgive Marina. Please! We—we were tempted by— we— I—” Curling down and forward, she wailed, “Lord, please forgive us! Please save us! We never meant to become— we just wanted to save the innocent from Witches in your na—!”

The Soul Gem at her throat burst into light and reformed as an egg, causing her costume to disappear and leave a school uniform. She only managed a gasp before the blackened Soul Gem exploded. They made out the growing hollow silver pendulum Yoruichi had described after Chiasa's fall just before the camera and other sensors were overwhelmed by static. When it cleared a minute later, the only thing on the screen was Michaels' beaten body, still partly bent in prayer with fingers tightly clasped despite having been blown aside into a pew.

Just like in the crime scene photos from the time before.

“Any readings that could be a labyrinth?” Kisuke asked.

“Negative,” Tessai huffed in frustration. “Can't say whether or not the instruments are the problem. Whether flawed from the beginning or due to damage.”

Kisuke took off his hat and tiredly scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I thought I hardened the drones enough. The sheer energy released by the transformation is greater than I anticipated.” He had even taken into account the peak energy released by the Pumpkin Witch magical girl turning back into a Witch and frying his equipment. Maybe those instruments had fried too early to be accurate? Maybe proximity was still a factor? Bother.

Hitsugaya and Ukitake's disgusted outrage was palpable, the air charged with frost and lightning. Ah, both only knew the process in theory in this timeline.

“Make copies of this recording,” Ukitake ordered. “One each for Kurosuchi, a captain/lieutenant meeting, Isshin, and Ichigo's group. I'll have Rukia distribute them.”

“Works for me,” Kisuke said with a gesture at Tessai, who began the task. He turned to the other seething captain and said, “Hitsugaya. I'll send you and the girls hunting for this Witch after school, once I can show you news reports to avoid suspicion from the Incubator.”

Hitsugaya gave one sharp nod and asked, “Any news on the Pleiades Saints?”

Kisuke looked at Tessai, who pulled up the footage of the fight. After viewing it, Ukitake asked for a repeat and watched with it even greater focus. “I want to know what that joint kidō is,” he said with fascination. “If that's even what it is.”
“The complexity is intriguing,” Tessai agreed.

“Has anything else interesting happened?” Hitsugaya asked.

After explaining the oddities with comparing them to Abarai’s report from the first timeline and the mysterious nonexistence of Kazumi Subaru, Tessai added, “And actually... I haven't seen the Incubator in any of the video.”

Frowning, Kisuke said, “Keep watching. We have no idea how many bodies it has here. If there are only a few, it could take a bit to spot one.”

“We should ask Tomoe if she can identify the Pleiades Saints by the video,” Hitsugaya said thoughtfully.

Kisuke raised a brow at him. “And let her know we have surveillance?”

“Let her participate,” Hitsugaya said evenly. “It will both give her purpose and show her we're serious about countering the Incubator. I also wonder if she'll have any information on that monster. She didn't see what happened to Miki. Maybe she knows something and we've just not explained what we saw properly.”

“We can't tell her about it looking like Miki's potential Witch form, though,” Kisuke said.

Hitsugaya shrugged. “Maybe that's a good thing. She can look at it without that bias and have other ideas we're distracted from seeing.”

“Oh.” Kisuke stared at him, then vaguely ceilingward. “This is true....”

Ukitake leaned over and poked his shoulder to bring him back down to Earth. “How goes the Soul Gem analysis?”

“Slow. Still looking at modifying equipment before I take risks,” Kisuke answered. “How goes Kurotsuchi’s research?”

“He's already broken three Soul Gems,” Ukitake said distastefully. “He's in a temper. All of Twelfth is terrified.”

Kisuke allowed his grudge to show on his face for once. “Terrifying researchers is not conducive to getting quick and effective results,” he grit out. In his head, he faintly heard the clacking of the beater of the loom Benihime was working at get faster, louder, and more aggressive with their resentment. “It's a good way to cause procedural errors. The laboratory is a completely different atmosphere than the battlefield, were terror can actually induce learning in the right sort of person.”

Ukitake and Hitsugaya eyed him in a frankly judgey manner, neither particularly liking what rumors they had heard of the crash course he had given Ichigo but unable to deny the existence of subordinates who didn't quite get things until their lives depended on them to survive a mission.

They soon wrapped up their discussion. Ukitake nodded his satisfaction and said, “We'll have to get together again once we know more. Keep up the good work. Now, I think we all need rest. Shiro-chan—”

“UKITAKE.” Hitsugaya growled.

The man blithely ignored him. “—Has school in the morning and I have a train to catch back to
Tokyo. And you have a long day of research ahead of you, Kisuke.”

“I'm fine for another few hours,” Kisuke said with a dismissive wave. “I can help Tessai go through more video, at least.”

Tessai laid a heavy hand on his shoulder as Ukitake smiled in a way that reminded Kisuke of Unohana. “Go to bed, Kisuke.” *Or else*, added the smile.

“You planned this,” Kisuke complained with a pout.

“Of course!” Ukitake said cheerfully.

Kisuke sighed and acquiesced. If he made a breakthrough tomorrow, it would probably be best to be as alert as possible. Even so, it took a long time to fall asleep in defiance of the constant undercurrent of urgency he felt.

Among clips that were glanced at in the dead of night but determined innocuous was one of a girl with curly brown hair throwing handfuls of seed to a flock of pigeons that contained one drone. Tessai had watched it with sound because the drone detected reiatsu and her mouth was moving as though speaking. It turned out she was just making adorable cooing sounds to the birds. She approached the drone, cooed at it, and gave it a curious look. After a moment, she declared, “You're a *quuiiet* little guy, aren't you? How *cuute!*” with a giggle and tossed an entire fistful of birdseed for the drone to join the other birds in fighting to devour. The girl fondly watched the scramble of feathers, glanced at her phone, and wandered away.

Tessai’s lips had twitched into a little smile as he noted the teen as a potential magical girl to follow up on later, then jumped to the next clip in search of the Incubator.

Perfectly innocuous.

Chapter End Notes

**A/N: CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK**

Somewhere in the universe, Tōshirō fervently prays Sayaka never meets Rangiku and Karin.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Homura woke before everyone else on Thursday morning. She lay still and let her eyes wander her surroundings, sleepily processing that she was on the floor of Madoka's bedroom. It felt very similar to waking in Karin and Yuzu's room. The girls had bedded down on blankets when Mr. Kaname gently reminded them they had school in the morning. It had been very much like the slumber parties in earlier, more innocent timelines. Quieter without Sayaka and Kyōko, but... happy.

When she shifted and turned her head to see her friends, Homura couldn't resist a smile. Madoka and Mami were still asleep, peaceful faces framed by their loose hair. The braids they had playfully made the night before were largely unraveled, separated strands curling around their shoulders. Homura deliberately lay silent and seared the soothing image and feeling into her mental treasure trove of Good Memories until Mr. Kaname knocked on the door to wake them.

Getting ready for the day wasn't as loud and hectic as in the Kurosaki household— except for Mrs. Kaname's screams upon waking. Homura was momentarily caught by surprise by the realization that Madoka derived as much glee in waking her mother as Isshin took in waking Ichigo. It broke her brain; that was something she wasn't sure she wanted to think about, so she didn't. Instead, she checked her text messages, read about the incident at the church in Kazamino, and mused on the previous day's performance as she brushed her hair.

They had all done well sticking to the backstory as set out in the notebook Hitsugaya had brought her the day she found him on her doorstep. She thought. No one had voiced any doubt, at least. Homura was surprised that acting like she had known them all for years had come as naturally as it did— especially when she had known them for less than one full timeline.

Mami seemed to thoroughly enjoy herself cooking breakfast with Mr. Kaname. It made Homura think of Yuzu. Once coffee had brought Mrs. Kaname out of her semi-coma, she entertained them with some stories of crushing her enemies at work, mentioning each by biting insult rather than name. Homura thought maybe Karin could be similar to Junko when she grew up.

No. If. If Karin grew up.

Or maybe when, after all?
Homura wondered when she had reverted to thinking she could possibly save everyone beyond just Madoka.

The morning was so domestic and soothing that Homura worked overtime focusing strongly on everything she could. She wanted to remember this if things went badly and she had to jump back again. Mami and Madoka giggling from either side of Tatsuya's high chair as they played with him and his food would be a particularly good memory to hold onto.

The walk to school was hurried yet relaxed. Meeting up with Sayaka, Hitsugaya, and Shizuki was pleasant. Classes went smoothly and there was actual laughter at lunch. Homura was again surprised by how Mami and Shizuki seemed to click. There was a brief downturn when Sayaka spoke about Kamijō getting frustrated with the slowing of progress with his hand, but Homura and Hitsugaya successfully redirected the gloom by pointing out that slow progress was still progress and the lack of regression was promising, then telling stories about Homura and “Mr. Hitsugaya's” progress through treatment. Homura was impressed—Hitsugaya had obviously studied the alleged illnesses in detail and spoke of them easily.

Still, Homura made a note to consult with Urahara about Kamijō. Maybe it was time for another boost to his hand. Urahara was so busy that the shadow from the brim of his hat no longer completely hid the dark circles under his eyes, so maybe Mr. Tsukabishi could spare some time to go over things with her. Or maybe Hitsugaya knew some healing? Whatever. That could come later.

The rest of the school day passed quickly and uneventfully. They trooped over to the cafe and knocked out their homework over snacks and banter. Homura was stunned when she actually felt a momentary pang of regret when Shizuki left. That had never happened before. Shizuki had always been something of an annoyance. Even the train ride and walk to High Spirits was pleasant. Then they turned into the courtyard and saw Urahara standing in the front door, face grim. Everyone immediately sobered.

“What happened?” Hitsugaya demanded.

“I think something in the news is actually a dead magical girl,” his “uncle” replied bluntly. Urahara turned to go in and beckoned them to follow.

Time for the next scene of their play.

They settled in the back sitting room. Urahara opened a cabinet and revealed a TV screen Homura had no idea was there. He showed them news reports about the discovery of the girl in Kazamino and the disappearance of her friend.

“They're being cagey about specifics and the media isn't whipped into enough of a furor to encourage leaks,” Urahara said afterward. “But we hacked into the police department's systems and —”

“Waaait wait wait wait wait wait,” Sayaka interrupted. “You hacked the cops?!”

“Yes,” Urahara said nonchalantly. He paused thoughtfully, then amended, “Well, technically it was Tessai this time, but you get the idea.”

“You're hackers?!” Sayaka demanded.

“Why would you do that?” Mami asked warily.

“Because authorities certainly would not consult us to examine the scene for signs of spiritual— ah,
magical—disturbances,” Urahara said matter-of-factly. “We don't change or destroy anything. We just look when we've heard a news item that seems like it could be related to the things we investigate. It helps us determine a pattern.”

“Hackers?!” Sayaka repeated, eyes wide. No one answered.

Homura idly wondered where hacking fell on Sayaka's scale of justice—or if it got a special pass for coolness. It could go either way with her.

Mami's doubtful expression tightened into grudging acceptance and she gave Urahara a slow nod.

“Anyway,” Urahara continued, “we viewed the crime scene and postmortem photos. Michaels was beaten and slashed quite extensively. What struck me as potentially relevant is that some of the wounds look like claw or blade marks, but her clothes weren't torn.”

“You think perhaps she and her friend were magical girls, the friend died in a labyrinth, and Michaels got out but died of her wounds,” Homura summarized.

Lied. Whatever.

Urahara nodded sharply. “It would make sense if her normal clothes replaced her costume. If that was the case, we have no idea whether the Witch was actually defeated,” he said. “I think you should patrol nearby to see if you can find one.”

Actually the one Michaels had turned into. Whatever.

Mami shifted uneasily and said, “That isn't my territory.”

“Oh?” Urahara said with mild surprise. “Are you on good terms with the magical girl who works there?”

“No,” Mami said with a brief, pained grimace. “We had a falling out awhile back.”

“Kyōko Sakura, correct?” Homura said coolly. When Mami looked up at her in surprise, she added, “I know of her by reputation. She...does not play well with others. Right?”

Mami closed her eyes and sighed. “She used to. But not since her family died when her wish went wrong. Her entire attitude towards being a magical girl changed. She's very bitter and...cynical, I guess. Selfish.”

Madoka and Sayaka gulped and looked nervous. Mami had just confirmed what Homura told them.

Homura tapped her fingers on the table and frowned skeptically. “I have been patrolling western Kazamino,” she said. “I have yet to run into any magical girls.” Which was very odd, now that she thought about it.

“What?” Mami blurted, eyes wide. “But...she's so territorial!”

After a moment of silence, Homura said, “That is what I had heard, as well. But I have not seen her.”

Why hadn't Kyōko attacked her yet? Homura had been so busy that she hadn't given more than a passing thought to being glad she didn't have to juggle Kyōko's aggression on top of everything else. There were timelines where she never showed up, but they were uncommon. Well, wait; timelines in which Mami survived had become rare as time passed, and Mami's death was often
what prompted Kyōko to move into Mitakihara if Homura herself didn't go poke her with a stick first, so maybe it worked out.

Still.

An uncomfortable silence stretched for a long minute. Then Urahara said, “Before you go, I have something else I'd like to ask you, Miss Tomoe.”

“What would that be, Mr. Urahara?” she hedged as she picked up her teacup and watched him over its rim.

“Can you tell me anything about the Pleiades Saints?” Urahara asked. “A summary out loud now, and maybe write more down later?”

Mami frowned. “Is this about the Asunaro barrier Hitsugaya told me about?” she asked.

“Yes,” Urahara said curtly. “If it makes people forget the Incubator, we may have to convince their team to believe us about it. The more we know about them, the better we can present our case and get them to help us figure out the barrier.” He tipped his head so the brim of his hat cast deeper shadows on his face and lowly added, “If that barrier was to be deployed against us....” He trailed off ominously and let them imagine worst-case scenarios.

“Oh.” Mami frowned in thought. “Well, I met Michiru Kazusa back in November. I saved her from a Witch. She later told me she contracted that same afternoon. Her wish was... sweet,” Mami said sadly.

“What was it?” Urahara asked.

“Well, her grandmother was dying,” Mami answered. “She was at the point that she was semi-conscious and had days left without life support. Miss Kazusa told me she knew her grandma wouldn't want life support but Miss Kazusa didn't want her grandma to spend the rest of her life... like that, so she wished that her grandma could be her normal self until her lifespan ran out so they could have time together before she passed. Miss Kazusa said it was wonderful and her grandmother passed peacefully.”

Hitsugaya and Urahara blinked their surprise. “That's... actually pretty mature,” Hitsugaya said.

Mami nodded. “I thought so, too. Anyway, shortly after that, she saved six girls from another Witch. They had all been Kissed and were about to commit mass suicide. Miss Kazusa said they all immediately became friends and contracted to be with her.”

“That sounds impulsive,” Hitsugaya said with a frown.

“Miss Kazusa said their wishes were interesting,” Mami said with a shrug. “The only one she told me about was the one who asked for a literary agent who would appreciate her talent to notice her writing and treat it with respect. Something about her having written a story and a shady agent just stealing it and putting someone else's name on it.”

“That also sounds fairly wise,” Urahara said with interest. “Self-restraint. She could have asked to be a famous author, but she went for something more complex and specific that had minimum space for going sour and didn't decrease the effort she must put into her goal. Do you know which girl it was?”

Mami looked at the ceiling and thought. “I think she said Uniko— no, Umika. No last name.”
Urahara looked fascinated in a way that told Homura he knew something about that name. “Hmmm. I'll have to do some poking around for an author with that name. Unless she uses a pseudonym...? Hmm. Did you meet her?”

“No.”

“Too bad. Do you know any of the others?”

“I once met Niko and Satomi when I chased a Witch a bit past our border,” Mami said. “I didn't get their last names. They showed up with Miss Kazusa as I was picking up the Grief Seed. Miss Kazusa introduced us. They were nice. Niko was... funny. In a kinda sarcastic way.”

Urahara nodded and scribbled on a notepad, then asked, “Were they in costume? Do you know anything else about them?”

“I'll have to think back on what we talked about,” Mami answered. “But yes, they were in costume. Niko wore a teal costume that looked like a paratrooper uniform, but with a skirt— she even had a parachute backpack. She had a... what is the old-fashioned hat pilots used to wear?”


“Yes,” Mami said with a confident nod. “And goggles pushed up on her head.”

“What color was her hair? And how old do you think she was?”

“Really pale blond, in pigtails. And... around my age, I suppose.”

“Got it.” Scribble scribble scribble. “And the other girl?”

“Satomi. She was older,” Mami said. “Maybe sixteen or seventeen? Really sweet. Very... huggy. She has brown hair. I think. Her costume had a long, poofy lavender skirt with ruffles on the hem.” She closed her eyes and thought. “She had... black cat ears in her hair. Like a headband, I mean. Oh! Her boots— the toes of her boots were shaped like cat paws. I remember telling her they were cute.” Mami opened her eyes and asked, “Is that okay?”

“Excellent. Thank you,” Urahara said as he scribbled more. He paused and took a deep breath. “Well. I think you should patrol near that church. Stick together. Try to make nice with that other girl— Sakura something?”

“Kyōko Sakura,” Mami said softly.

“Yes, that's right,” Urahara said, nodding to himself. “I think you should wait until dark to patrol. Less chance of the authorities seeing you if they're still investigating the area around the church. They're not releasing it to the media, but they have crime scene photos of a blood trail on the sidewalks. Stick to the rooftops.”

Homura and Hitsugaya nodded firmly. Mami said, “I would like to do my usual patrol until then, if possible.”

“I have no objections,” Homura said with a casual shrug. There were still several Witches she had yet to encounter in this timeline. Maybe they could take one out.

Their meeting broke up soon after. They escorted Madoka and Sayaka home before taking to the rooftops of Mitakihara. By mutual agreement, they started in Nagisa's neighborhood. Finding nothing, they briefly perched on a billboard across from the little girl's apartment. The curtains
were open; Yoruichi was laying on the window sill, tail lazily swishing about. There was movement behind her and Homura could sense Nagisa was within. The feline shinigami couldn't give much of a sign that she sensed them, but she looked out the window at a passing car and yawned widely.

*Nothing happening here. I got this,* Homura and Hitsugaya interpreted.

The rest of the Mitakihara patrol was uneventful. After stopping at High Spirits for dinner, they set out for Kazamino. The church at the center of their agreed upon search pattern was indeed cordoned off by police and surrounded by a candlelight vigil. A couple Homura presumed were the dead girl's parents were giving a tearful, gut-wrenching speech to the crowd and a couple news crews. The missing girl's parents were next, pleading with the community through the cameras. The trio watched in grim silence for a few minutes, unable to hear the words but understanding by sight alone.

Homura wondered if the others were also thinking it wasn't fair that girls who actually had people who cared enough to mourn them had been convinced to contract and throw their lives away.

Eventually, Hitsugaya brushed the girls' shoulders and murmured that they should move on. Their rooftop search was more subdued than their earlier patrol, but also uneventful.

Homura didn't like it one bit.

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Sayaka puttered around her home the rest of the evening, doing anything to distract herself from worrying about her friends. She cooked a more complicated dinner than usual, ate because she wasn't in the mood to have her schedule orbit around her parents' today, and set the rest aside for whenever her parents would come home, then read manga while upside down on the couch until she heard the door rattle and open. After nine at night. Feeling petty, she didn't move from her position, instead swinging her feet above the back of the couch as a taunt while she re-read one of Sailor Mars' battles and imagined herself fighting at the fiery girl's side.

“What have I told you about sitting on the couch like that?” her father asked sternly.

“That it's unladylike,” Sayaka droned as she flipped a page. “I really don't care when I'm at home. There's no one here to see me ninety-five percent of the time, anyway. Dinner's in the oven.”

“Young lady—”

“Thought I wasn't ladylike,” Sayaka interrupted blandly. She wasn't really sure why she was goading her parents. It felt satisfying, but she'd probably regret it later.

“Don't speak to your father like that,” her mother said evenly. Obviously pissed, but restrained. At least her mom was attentive and emotionally intelligent enough to realize escalating would only make it worse. Especially after the night before.

“Sayaka Miki, if you don't snap out of that attitude of yours, I'll ground you from doing anything but school,” her father threatened, oblivious to making things worse— as usual.

They had already gone off the rails, so Sayaka lightly said, “And you'll be around to enforce that *when, now?”*
“You—!”

“Minoru!” her mother snapped.

Dad made a frustrated sound and stomped off down the hall with a, “You handle her, Kotone!”

Mom sighed harshly. “Don't you dare behave like this at the symphony tomorrow.”

Sayaka actually sat up and looked her mother with a frown. “I told you I'm not going until Kyōsuke can play again.”

“You're going whenever I say you go!” her father yelled from down the hall.

Sayaka rolled her eyes as her mother huffed and pressed finely-manicured fingertips to her temples. “Your father has been invited to an outing with an artist the label is trying to sign once her contract at her current label comes up for renewal. She's bringing her daughter, who's your age. That's the entire reason your father was invited— no one else has a kid in the right age range. This could be a major opportunity for advancement. You are going and you will display proper manners and be friendly with that girl.”

Opportunity for advancement. Of course. Keeping up appearances only went so far without more money to back it up.

“Is she being forced to go, too?” Sayaka asked snidely.

Mom closed her eyes and appeared to pray for patience. Gritting her teeth, she said, “Even if she is, it's your job to make her happy she came anyway.”

“I wasn't aware I was your employee,” Sayaka said archly.

“What has gotten into you lately!?” Mom finally snapped. “Is it those new kids!?”

“What,” Sayaka said blankly.

“The older kids. The ones you stayed out late with. Especially the girls,” her mother said heatedly. “The blonde's a sweetheart but you need to realize that you aren't like them.”

“What's that supposed to mean!?”

“They don't have parents to answer to. You do. Y—”

Sayaka sprung up from the couch, eyes wide with outrage. “How dare you!”

Mom plowed on. “Young ladies can't run around all hours having random sleepovers in the middle of the school week! Their parents are probably spinning in their graves for shame!”

“How dare you!?” Sayaka repeated, her vision nearly whiting out from her fury as the blood rushed in her ears like the sea. The pages of her manga crunched in her fists as she mentally contrasted her mom with how Madoka's mom had treated Homura and Mami. “You know nothing about what they go through! If they need support at midnight on a Wednesday, I'm going to be there for them! Being— being sad doesn't wait for— for weekends, or business hours, or whatever! I'm going to help them with whatever they need whenever they need it!”

“Stop putting your friends before your family!”

“Why!?” Sayaka yelled, throwing her arms wide. “You don't!”
Mom reared back as though slapped.

“Do you even have friends? Or just coworkers to impress?!”

“That's— how dare—! We care about you!”

Sayaka's anger swelled and crested like an unstoppable wave. “Even when you're not at work, you're working or want to be alone! You don't want me to make noise or bother you! You just have me run errands for you! You barely talk to me at dinner! You only know my friends' names because you worked with— for— their parents!”

“That's not true!”

“Oh yeah? What's the name of the transfer student girl?” Sayaka demanded.

Mom stared blankly, lips opening and closing like a fish wearing lipstick.

“Come on, Mom. I told you this, like, at least a few dozen times over the last three weeks.” Sayaka raised her brows mockingly. “What's my nickname for her? Why do I call her that?”

“I— you—”

“I thought so,” Sayaka muttered. She whirled on her heel and flipped her hair away from her face. “I'll be in my room if you need a temp worker.”

She very deliberately pictured and emulated Homura's mannerisms when furious as she forced herself to proudly stride down the hall without stomping. Sayaka passed her father with her head held high. After giving her father a cool stare, she entered her room and fought to not slam the door. Once it was closed, she sagged back against it and slid to the floor with tears in her eyes. Her thoughts were a jumble of nonsense now that the confrontation was past. All she could do was cry and bite her lip to not make noise as she lifted her free hand to scrub at her face.

Sayaka went very still and pulled her arm back. It took a minute to figure out the strange feeling, but she soon noticed a fine mist was soaking into her pajamas as though someone had spritzed the cloth with a spray bottle of water. She pushed her bangs out of her face to see better and found her hair a bit damp. The manga made the wrong sound when she dropped it, so she looked at it. Water was beaded on its cover and the pages were wet.

What the hell?

Homura parted with the others at High Spirits to go to her own home for the night— really, she still hadn't adjusted to being around people so often and needed a break. A package on her doorstep contained another shipment of cookies from Yuzu; her friend had noted Homura's mention of marzipan cookies during their last sleepover and gone hunting for the ingredients to make them, bless her. Homura hadn't eaten any since her parents died. She nibbled on some and read the kidō and healing theory texts she had been given until she fell asleep, wondering how long it would take Mr. Tsukabishi to identify the two Pleiades Saints Mami had described. She wanted more tutoring in healing but all her teacher options were occupied with other things.

Even though Sayaka started out oddly subdued, Friday's school day passed so normally that
Homura didn't know what to do with herself. This made three days in a row of almost feeling like a Typical Middle School Student—not even an outcast!—and it was becoming bizarre. She liked it, but was wary of allowing herself to get used to it.

After their now-usual stop at the cafe, Homura led Mami and Hitsugaya on the usual patrol then back into Kazamino. They were in the far southern corner where Kazamino, Mitakihara, and Shinchi shared a strange three-way border when they finally got a lead and found a labyrinth in a park dense with trees. Specifically, it was in the center of a playing field surrounded by brush, all in the shadow cast by a tall building between it and bright moonlight. The portal's sigil was a red sunburst.

The Shadow Witch. Great. At least their trio had the perfect skill set to take her on: ranged attacks all the way.

Homura and Mami transformed. Hitsugaya called Urahara with his phone in one hand while creating his ice sword with the other. Just as he returned the phone to his pocket and they were getting ready to hop in, they were interrupted by Hitsugaya's phone shrilling. He answered it on speaker.

Before he could say anything, Tessai's voice boomed, “Momoe's bracelet signal disappeared. I think she entered a labyrinth.”

Mami gasped and moved to jump west, but Homura grabbed her shoulder and said, “I will see to Nagisa. You two take this Witch before she moves. We cannot afford to waste time finding her again.”

“But—!”

“Tomoe, she's right,” Hitsugaya interrupted. He looked at Homura with the grim calm of an officer as Mami shrugged Homura's hand off her. “If it's not an easy one, focus on protecting Momoe and stalling. We'll take care of this one and back you up as soon as we can.” He stepped to stand directly in front of her and reached forward to clasp her shoulder as though encouraging her. “Be careful.”

Out of Mami's line of sight, his eyes flew from Homura's to her shield and back again with his eyebrows raised. Homura stopped time.

“What am I walking into?” Hitsugaya demanded as soon as the world lost its color. He stood utterly still. Good. He knew that he needed to be in the same position when time resumed so Mami wouldn't notice.

“The Shadow Witch,” Homura said coolly. “The labyrinth is pitch black at the bottom. As you climb, it will get lighter, but you will remain in shadow. Familiars are large hands that run around on their fingertips and can fire bolts of magic, plus some snakelike things that rise out of the floor. When you get to the top, you will be on the shoulder of a statue with its arm extended, holding a monstrance that looks like the door sigil. The Witch is a shadow figure kneeling in prayer. When you get too close, sharp tree branches will shoot out of her back.”

“Tree branches?” Hitsugaya said skeptically.

“Enormous ones. They will become an entire tree at high speed. It is best to have one person distract with ranged attacks to the back while someone else sneaks around to attack the Witch from the front.”
Hitsugaya sighed deeply. “Fun.”

“Mami is excellent in this labyrinth, by the way. She is sometimes capable of taking out the Witch from behind with an overpowered Tiro Finale.”

“Good.” Hitsugaya tilted his head slightly. “Any idea what Momoe got herself into?”

Homura pursed her lips. “I know of a few options. Things have been so different that it is hard to say.”

“Joy. Go ahead and drop the stop.” When she did, he took a step back, lifted his phone, and barked, “Tessai. Coordinates?”

Homura listened, nodded, and rushed westward. As soon as Mami and Hitsugaya's magic disappeared into the labyrinth, she activated her sand timer and leapt through time to reach Nagisa.

Furious. She wasn't sure who she was furious at yet and the why was still nebulous, but furious all the same.

Yoruichi did her damnedest to yowl, snarl, claw, and attack her way into getting Nagisa to turn around and exit the labyrinth. She was knocked away when the kid transformed; then the magical girl's horn tooted and Yoruichi was suddenly dodging bubbles.

“Stay still, Yo-yo!” Nagisa complained. “I'm trying to protect you! Get in a bubble!”

Yoruichi voiced her opinion of that with all the rage her cat body could express.

Nagisa pouted, huffed, and started running deeper into the labyrinth. Without even looking around.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuuuck. Damn kids who needed to prove themselves!

She had trailed the little girl through the apartment complex and toward the dumpsters, feigning interest in the items destined for the trash. Yoruichi noticed the heat haze over the nearby flower planter a moment before it flared to life into a hexagonal labyrinth sigil that looked like crossed sewing needles behind a long yellow flower Yoruichi felt like she should recognize, surrounded by faux stitches; there was something curved and striped extending from the sides, but Yoruichi couldn't figure out what they were in the moments she had to see them. Nagisa had gasped in fear, then stiffened her spine and headed straight for it. Yoruichi had jumped and set her claws in the kid's dress, but the magical girl went inside anyway.

Now Yoruichi found herself in a waxen tunnel with honey oozing down the walls. Buzzing echoed from a distance. Great. She chased Nagisa through the tunnels, noting the delicate clusters of Venus fly traps and vines tucked into the joinder of wall and floor. Yoruichi soon had Nagisa in sight and decided to not distract the girl while she fought the first wave of Familiars, which were hornet-like beings nearly half Nagisa's size. Their bodies were yellow with stubby black legs; each appeared to have been skewered by a pin, with the pinheads as their heads and the sharp end as stingers. Their antennae and wings looked like narrow green leaves. Yoruichi dodged around them, acting like a pissed off cat while keeping one eye on Nagisa, ready to blow her cover and save the girl if necessary, but was surprised that the kid was managing fairly well.
Then she sensed Akemi's angry reiatsu from back at their starting point and Nagisa took off running, apparently trying to get deeper before the older magical girl could haul her out of the fight altogether. Yoruichi followed her again, playing cat and mouse until Akemi could catch up to them.

Mami frowned at the labyrinth, hazy gray shapes shifting in the light filtering through the frosted glass panels of the many overlapping, colorless rose window frames that surrounded them. It had the intrinsically big feel characteristic of cathedrals. She glanced down at herself and found that despite the apparent diffused light she was in such deeply black shadow that only the faint glow of her magic gave her form any definition. Glancing at Hitsugaya, she noted it was the same for him — he glowed with the blue-white light of his magic, his ice shining past the shadows he had been engulfed in. They looked at each other— well, Mami thought they did— then looked up. And up, and up, and up. Sloping, softly glowing white paths decorated with artfully swirling white briar patches trailed upward, interspersed with grand white marble staircases that floated in the air unsupported. The rose window walls, if they could be called such, were constantly drifting and rotating in different directions, forms twisting like tree branches and adding to the uneasy atmosphere. Upon closer scrutiny, the upward path seemed to wind around a large, curved structure. Far, far up, there was a horizontal extension that ended with a red glow, the only independent color Mami had seen in this monochrome world. She cast her senses about as she felt Hitsugaya doing something similar with his own magic.

“The Witch is above us,” Mami declared.

“Yeah,” Hitsugaya agreed.

Though it was difficult to look up for too long due to a bright white light shining from the distant apex of the labyrinth, Mami could see vague movement along the path above. Dark shapes shifted as though on patrol. It was a long path that would take a while to fight their way through. Frustrating— Mami wanted to get to Nagisa now. “Back to back seems to work for us,” Mami said after a moment of thought. “Let's go up the path carefully and cover each other's backs whenever there's a swarm.”

“Try to keep moving, though. We need to catch up to Akemi.”

“Mm. I'll take left, you take right.”

“Let's go.”

They ascended at a quick walk, weapons at the ready. The lowest levels had them carefully picking their way across uneven ground and tripping on steps before Mami sighed and flared her magic to make light at the same time Hitsugaya huffed and smacked the ground with the tip of his sword to send a glowing trail of ice ahead of them. They looked at each other in surprise and Mami found herself actually laughing in a labyrinth. Hitsugaya gave her a brief, tight grin and faced forward, all business in an instant. They moved more confidently once they reached the parts of the path that faintly glowed. It was far too peaceful for Mami's liking; fortunately, Hitsugaya was a quiet enough partner that she heard the brambles rustle slightly in the moment before they were beset by snakelike shadows. They guarded one another and lashed out, quickly defeating the Familiars. After a pause to listen, they proceeded without having to speak to one another.
The labyrinth soon became much brighter, a glaring white that made Mami's eyes hurt. That whiteness made it much easier to see their shadowy enemies by contrast, though; she and Hitsugaya cut a swath through the beast-headed snakes almost as easily as grass.

“Above!” Hitsugaya barked.

Mami startled— stupid not to look above, stupid!— and conjured a floral kaleidoscope shield over their heads. She heard multiple somethings slam into it as she picked off some more snakes. When she was able to look up, she saw several large, spider-like shapes scrabbling around. A glance found Hitsugaya squinting up at them thoughtfully.

“Whatever they are, if they came from above once, they'll probably do it again.”

“I agree,” Mami said evenly. “From here on, I'll keep an umbrella over us.”

Hitsugaya snorted amusement then said, “Drop this one so we can see what they are and get rid of them.”

The spider-like black shapes turned out to be disembodied hands taller than they were mincing around in pairs on their fingertips. As agreed, Mami took the hands on their left with her guns while Hitsugaya launched ice at the ones on their right. It was a simple enough battle; soon, they got moving and kept a steady pace as they plowed through Familiars. They relentlessly pressed upward along uneven white ground and intricate white tile and elegant white marble steps, slashing and shooting through them as they rushed past, jumping out from between pairs that tried to clap closed on them, and dodged around energy attacks launched at them by pointing and mimicking a gun. Sometimes new hands would fall from above and try to swat them like flies, but they would bounce harmlessly off Mami's shield-umbrella and be unable to recover before the pair of fighters was gone.

The briar patches on the main path got larger and wilder as they climbed. Halfway up, they began to see the white briars develop into actual trees. As they ascended, the path and central structure became shadowed once more. By the time Mami and Hitsugaya reached the top, they were pitch black. A final staircase rose along the central structure and led them to a sloping platform that stuck out as the structure continued upward. When Mami stepped forward and looked up, it became obvious that they had climbed an enormous statue of a crowned woman, its head still towering above them. In context, she realized they were standing on the statue's extended arm. At the far end, the arm ended in a fist holding up a massive red monstrance. A shadowy figure knelt as though in prayer at the juncture of hand and wrist. It looked like a girl with hair made of loose vines and fused legs that transitioned into widespread roots, hands clasped reverently before her bowed head. The Witch was completely black. Beyond the monstrance, a stationary rose window emanated harsh white light.

“Looks too easy,” Hitsugaya muttered.

“Hmmm. Let's see what happens,” Mami said as she conjured a huge coil of ribbon and turned it into a cannon-sized blunderbuss pistol. Best to go for quick overkill when they needed to hurry and get to Nagisa. “Tiro Finale!”

The floral cannonball blasted forward. A tree burst from the Witch's back, but not quickly enough to be of any use. The projectile shattered the contorting wood and obliterated the Witch. The light and darkness of the labyrinth wobbled out of existence and left them standing in the park, looking across at the Grief Seed as it drifted to the ground.
“Huh,” Hitsugaya said after a moment. “That was both impressive and anticlimactic.”

Mami laughed, then dodged as her instincts screamed of danger. She heard the screech of metal against Hitsugaya's ice sword. A glance over her shoulder made her heart freeze.

“So it is you!” Kyōko Sakura roared in hatred.

Less than two kilometers away, Sayaka sat in a chair at the symphony determined to be as sullen as possible. Something made her twitch warily, but she couldn't figure out what. She was disinterestedly applauding a flute solo when she felt something that made her tense and think, *Hitsugaya-Mami-fire?*

“Bathroom,” Sayaka muttered to her mother as she staggered out of her seat and hurried for the exit.

Sayaka charged past the bathroom as quickly as she could without running, cut across the empty lobby, and almost tripped down the fancy marble stairs as she felt Hitsugaya's magic blare a kind of alarm some dark corner of her mind translated to *DANGER HELP HURRY* and a hot magic vibrating with rage.

There probably wasn't much Sayaka could do, but maybe she'd be able to help somehow. She needed to be helpful. So she hopped in place to take off her fancy shoes and sprinted toward the magic as though lured by siren song.

Madoka dropped her toothbrush with a gasp and looked at the eastern wall of the bathroom for a long moment. Her mouth worked voicelessly until she screeched, “Papa! Mama! Something’s wrong!”

Kisuke glanced up from his research as alarms shrieked through High Spirits.

Homura, Nagisa, and Yoruichi were oblivious in their labyrinth.

“Tocco del Male!”

The red eyes of Incubator terminals watched every site.

Chapter End Notes

WITCH DATA

?????

?????

Minion: Berthold, whose duty is to swarm intruders.
ELSA MARIA, the Witch of shadow with a self-righteous nature. She continually
prays for all of creation and drags all life equally into her shadow without breaking her
posture. One hoping to defeat her must know the blackest anguish.
Minion: Sebastian, whose duty is to blindly believe.
Minion: Julia, whose duty is to compel prayer.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Tōshirō parried the redhead's spear, forcing it aside. The haft shrieked its way down along his ice blade until the spearhead hit the ground, at which point the magical girl used it like a pole vault—how metal firm enough to resist a blade was so flexible was beyond him—to redirect her flight toward Tomoe feet-first. The blonde tripped backwards and dodged too slowly to avoid getting nailed in her left shoulder by the red magical girl's boots. They tumbled across the sod together in a tangle of limbs until a glowing yellow ribbon shot out to one side and wrapped around a tree, allowing Tomoe to haul herself out. She stared at the other girl with wide, horrified eyes.

Tōshirō pushed his gigai into shunpo and took up a guard position just in front of her, since she seemed to be in slow-reacting shock. Without taking his eyes off the recovering redhead, he barked, “You know her?”

“It's— it's Kyōko,” Tomoe stammered.

Kyōko Sakura. The aggressive magical girl who shared a rocky history with Tomoe. Great.

Something was off, though. From what Akemi had told him, he expected Sakura to be quick and relentless. Now that the advantage of surprise was lost, Sakura was moving as though exhausted. She pried herself to her feet using her spear and didn't attack immediately—just stared at them like a starving predator. There were dark circles under her eyes, which were wide and not quite sane.

A starving predator was dangerous in an entirely different way than a focused warrior.

“I thought you respected territory, Mami!” Sakura snarled.

“I— I do!” Tomoe said. “This time was just— we tracked—”

“Don't lie!” Sakura shouted as she twirled her spear into a ready position. “Someone's been poaching my kills for weeks and you just proved it's you!”

“It wasn't me!” Tomoe shrilled.

“Liar!”

And then Sakura was a red blur aimed straight at them. Tōshirō leapt forward to meet her and
parried again, sword in a two-handed grip for added strength. She was ready this time; her spear snapped into multiple segments connected by chains. The sections that made contact with Tōshirō's blade doubled over and bound it. Tōshirō yanked the blade left and down enough to drag the girl in that direction, then released his right hand and slammed his elbow back up into the girl's face, pivoting to put his entire weight behind the thrust. Effectively clotheslined, her head and upper body stopped but her lower body kept going, ending with her falling backwards. Sakura dropped her spear and gracelessly cartwheeled away as it dissolved in red sparkles.

Tōshirō had expected a counterattack—perhaps a roll into a foot sweep, not breaking the flow of the battle. Instead, she regrouped and spat out blood and teeth while he created another ice sword.

“Hey, Mami!” Sakura shouted as she conjured her spear once more. “You gonna just stand there and let your knight in shining armor fight for you like some damsel in distress?!”

“I— I don't want to— Kyōko, please—!”

“Tch. I thought you'd've gotten stronger by now, but you got weaker!”

“Kyōko—!”

“Go ahead and cry so I can lose my last shred of respect for you,” Sakura taunted. She brandished her spear, broke it into segments, and made it snake through the air in ever-growing and shifting loops.

*Variable length like our shikai chain,* Hyōrinmaru observed with interest.

Tōshirō was tempted to use shikai, but didn't want it to be seen. Instead, he intently watched the looping chains and rods in search of a pattern while the two magical girls had an argument he only listened to with half an ear. He spotted a pattern, waited for the opening, and launched himself through it with his sword braced horizontally. Sakura screamed as he slammed the flat of the blade into her ribs and caused ice to gush out from the point of contact and restrain her. In the moment before she flared her fiery reiatsu and burned his arms, Tōshirō had a clear, close-up view of the Soul Gem centered over her collarbone.

Black. Streaks of red, but black.

Shit.

He jumped back from the scalding steam generated when Sakura's flames met his ice and engaged in furious combat with the redhead. She made up for waning magic by running on pure rage, eyes wide and murderous as she attacked from all sides. This was going to end very badly if she went Witch. Tōshirō and Tomoe didn't have trackers on them to signal their allies like Momoe had—*stupid, stupid oversight*—and they were beyond the current range of the surveillance drones, so he flared his reiatsu as strongly as he dared while undercover. If they ended up sucked into a second labyrinth, the abrupt disappearance of his reiatsu should be a signal of its own.

Tōshirō caught a glimpse of Tomoe standing and gaping at them. He had an idea and roared, “Her Soul Gem's too dark! Get the Grief Seed!”

Tomoe shook herself and cast about as the duel continued. A second and forever later, she yelled, “I have it!”

“Whip it at her Soul Gem with a ribbon!”

But it was too late. Sakura stumbled out of their last clash, Soul Gem bursting from her chest and
reforming in egg shape as her costume disappeared and left her in ragged jean shorts and a dirty jacket. Tomoe only had time to gasp as the blackened Soul Gem exploded.

Tōshirō grimly darted forward through the dark gale, grabbed the fallen magical girl's body by the back of her jacket, and hurled it out of range just before he and Tomoe were dragged into Kyōko Sakura's personal hell.

Homura ran through the hive labyrinth without bothering to shoot any Familiars she encountered. She had always found this labyrinth more annoying than dangerous, but she had no idea whether she should trust that this time, nor did she know how Nagisa would handle the swarm in the main chamber. So she froze time on every straightaway and only dropped the stop at intersections to sense out which path Nagisa had taken. She'd stand and fight once she found the girl.

It took longer than she preferred to reach the main chamber. Yoruichi was tensely perched on the ledge of the hexagonal tunnel opening. Homura stopped beside her and looked out at the arts-and-crafts disaster. The walls were honeycombs, some obviously tunnels but others mere ledges. Round sloping paths curved around the open air haphazardly, each spring green with assorted yellow, red, and pink embroidery, ribbons, and buttons. There were also occasional clusters of puffy fuchsia curls striped with yellow stitches. Clusters of plants and vines were tucked here and there. Those annoying hornet-pin Familiars were buzzing around the vaulted chamber as usual and Nagisa Momoe was frozen mid-jump into the middle of them, bubbles streaming from her trumpet. Several hornets were trapped in bubbles behind and above her on her arc of descent.

Huh. Useful.

Deciding to watch the girl for a minute before making her move, Homura dropped the stop. Nagisa continued to descend with a long note on her horn and Yoruichi startled violently, yowling as she jumped into a wall with her hackles raised. Not knowing whether there was an Incubator or other interloper watching, Homura drily said, “It's just me, Yoruichi.” She sighed and added, “You tried. Salmon for you tonight.”

Yoruichi meowed annoyance and threaded through Homura's legs. Maintaining her cover. Good.

“I'm busy,” Homura said irritably as she shoved the cat away with her ankle and watched Nagisa below.

Yoruichi writhed with an angry hiss, insistently threw herself against Homura's shins, and made a show of being an uncooperative nuisance. Homura made a show of impatiently not paying attention to her, repeatedly sweeping the cat aside with her feet.

Nagisa was doing surprisingly well. Her bubbles made the hornets far less of a pain than was usual for this labyrinth. Whenever a loose Familiar bumped into a bubble containing a trapped one, they were sucked in. The air was soon full of spherical hornet traps, which Nagisa eventually detonated. Even though the girl looked frightened, Homura found herself impressed. However, she didn't let it show on her face as she crossed her arms in response to Nagisa glancing up at her in fear.

A louder buzz came from far above. The huge form of the Pin Witch emerged from a honeycomb tunnel that looked too small to hold it and dropped into the air. It was a strange black beast, vaguely canine haunches and back legs dangling from a bulbous body whose silhouette reminded
Homura of a thin-necked vase with a diamond-like bulge just below the lip. This odd neck supported a giant pinhead, black with cartoonish floral designs in yellow and fuchsia and topped with bent leaf antennae. The belly of the beast sported a target of alternating black, yellow, and fuchsia rings with the bullseye in red. Its wings were elongated and curled, patterned with the same stripes as the target; it wielded a barbed lance of a stinger from its bottom.

Homura looked at Nagisa and saw the girl gulp nervously, then steel herself to fight it. She didn't know how she felt about that; she had decided she didn't want Nagisa to fight, but this entire situation drove home that she really did need to be trained. It made Homura sick.

Struck by a thought, Homura stopped time when she next made contact with Yoruichi and said, “Watch out. When that Witch feels threatened, a second Witch will appear and change the labyrinth.”

“What?”

“As magical girls, they were sisters,” Homura explained. “Beware vines with Venus flytrap mouths.”

“Oh,” Yoruichi said dully as she stood still. “Oh. The flower on the labyrinth door was a damn pitcher plant, wasn't it?”

“Yes. The other Witch is part pitcher plant, as well. But with teeth.”

“Crap.”

Homura dropped the stop and finished the movement of shoving Yoruichi away. She watched with interest as Nagisa frantically blew huge bubbles, which gathered over her like a canopy of soap suds. The Witch bounced off them at first, then angrily scrabbled down into them. Nagisa was still adding to the pile; once the Witch had wiggled down into the vertical center of the bubble bank, Nagisa pressed a button on her horn that made all the bubbles shine with eldritch sigils, then pressed another button that detonated them.

The entire labyrinth shook with the giant hornet's death shriek. Homura braced herself as the labyrinth came alive with vines and sewing supplies. She watched critically for how Nagisa would react when the suspended path she was on moved and showed itself to be a massive vine. The little girl tripped and fell with a scream, caught completely off guard.

Well, she had done decently to this point. Best to use this as a lesson.

Homura leapt forward and snagged Nagisa out of the air, then bounced around until she could set them on a ledge with no tunnel stemming from it. The little girl tried to stammer something to her, but Homura waved a hand dismissively and kept her eyes on the changing labyrinth. “We will speak later. For now, make your bubble shield and observe.”

Nagisa squawked but complied. Homura narrowed her eyes at one particularly thick vine as it rose and a pitcher plant flower unfurled from its end. The petals peeled back to reveal they were edged with sharp teeth; a dark birdlike tongue emerged from its throat with a screech. It would be easiest to stop time and just lob a dozen bombs down its gullet, but that would teach Nagisa nothing and she had no way of knowing if there was an Incubator terminal lurking around to watch her. Pretending to teleport was a different matter from perfect defeat in an instant. So she stalked around passively and waited for the Witch to reveal its full body. The long neck and flower head were attached to a giant red pincushion that waddled around on stubby vine legs; a set of the puffy fuchsia curls with yellow stitches turned out to be its tail. Overall, the impression was of a huge
turtle. A jungle of vines with \textit{Venus} flytrap heads featuring yellow floral embroidery flailed around in search of prey.

Homura clinically assessed it and considered the sort of tactics she would want Nagisa to learn. Decision made, she jumped into the fray, bouncing trampoline-like from fluffy fuchsia swirl to a Familiar head that whipped her upwards; she controlled her flight and continued upward by using the Familiars but not actively engaging them— not wasting magic on them. When she was high enough for the Witch's head to be oriented almost completely vertically, she started pulling bombs from her shield and dropping them into the snapping mouth. After about twenty— better to go for overkill than underkill— Homura bounced to the ledge Yoruichi was pacing on, picked her up, pulled the remote detonator from her shield, and thumbed the switch.

The Pincushion Witch exploded spectacularly, green plant matter generating choking black smoke until the labyrinth wobbled out of existence and left Homura and Nagisa standing in a flowerbed by the dumpster behind the little girl's apartment complex. Nagisa looked up at her in defiant fear, a child caught playing with fire by her babysitter.

Homura had a full head of steam and opened her mouth to lecture the little idiot when her phone shrilled the ringtone she had assigned Urahara. She answered it while glaring at Nagisa and snarled, “What?!”

“Tessai picked up something in Asunaro, but Hitsugaya and Tomoe are in trouble,” Urahara's voice said breathlessly among the sound of hurried footsteps as he moved through the bowels of the shop. “Hitsugaya flared his reiatsu high enough to be felt here and it abruptly disappeared. I'm on my way now. You'll be faster.”

Homura made a wordless growl of frustration, then jabbed a finger first at Nagisa then at her building and furiously hissed, “Get in your house and stay there until I have time to deal with you!” She leapt to the top of the apartment complex without waiting for a response, trusting Yoruichi to enforce her order if necessary.

Time froze at her command and she rushed through it, hoping there was something to destroy at her destination. She needed something to lash out at. Badly.

Sayaka's breath came in harsh pants as she ran the last bit through the park where she felt the magical alarms, bare feet painfully slapping into the gravel of the side paths. She staggered to a halt at the edge of the brush and stared with wide eyes as Hitsugaya fought a magical girl with fiery magic. They were lit largely by their own magic in the shadow of the nearby building, so all Sayaka could clearly make out of the girl's appearance was a polearm, a long ponytail, and flashes of burgundy. For some reason, Mami was just standing in one place. Sayaka could hear voices shouting, but couldn't make out the words. Mami startled and began casting about for something on the ground; she held it up with a shout. Sayaka was just desperately thinking that the only things she could possibly use as a weapon were her heeled shoes when the opponent staggered back, red and black magic flashed on her chest, and there was an explosion of dark Witch magic.

The sight of a magical girl turning into a Witch was even more horrifying than Sayaka had imagined. She felt it in her bones; remembered the twisting and despair when Sōju had transformed her. Sayaka's mind jumped tracks to hyperfocus on the body Hitsugaya hurled away from the epicenter of the explosion. When Hitsugaya and Mami disappeared into the new labyrinth, Sayaka
stumbled out of the brush and approached the body. She ran clumsily, staggered, and fell to her knees by it. Hitsugaya had managed to throw the body into moonlight, so Sayaka could see the girl's unhealthy thinness, the dark circles under her dead red eyes, blood and bruising around her mouth, and—

Tear tracks running down her cheeks. Empathy punched Sayaka in the gut.

*Thank you*, said the Incubator.

Sayaka slowly looked up and found the little creep sitting nearby, innocent as a fluffy cat, and croaked, “What?”

*I did warn you this could happen.*

She thought back to the night the Incubator had spoken to her from her window ledge and shook with fury. “Mami hasn't— hasn't—”

*Mami Tomoe just witnessed her former partner hatch into a Witch. She knows the truth and that all allies hid it from her. It began grooming its face with a paw and nonchalantly added, The truth will accelerate her descent into despair. It is highly probable she will become a Witch now. Homura Akemi and Nagisa Momoe are beyond reach. Do you think that boy can defeat two strong Witches by himself?*

“What— what are you saying?”

*If you were to contract, you could at least prevent the boy's death*, it suggested.

Helpless rage flooded her mind and overflowed as distress. “I— I—”

*Which is the least acceptable outcome by your moral standards: Allowing your soul to be detached from your body to save your friend's life or refusing and allowing your friend to die?*

Sayaka thought of the unexplained *extenuating circumstances* that *forced Homura's hand to contract—to save her friend's life*. This was a trick. This was the Incubator playing to vulnerability. She knew it, and yet... her friends neeHomura materialized out of thin air, leg halfway through the arc of motion that carried her glowing boot into the Incubator's skull at such velocity that Sayaka could barely see it. The crunch of bone was loud, but the creature didn't make a sound otherwise. Sayaka's eyes were trying to track the thing's flight when she was wrenched up by her hair and Homura was glaring into her soul with violet fire in her eyes. Something like static electricity made the hairs on Sayaka's arms prickle and the atmosphere was so heavy she couldn't draw a proper breath.

“You will *hide* with that body and not say a *word* to any other Incubator terminal that shows up or I will make you regret your *entire existence,*” Homura snarled. She dropped Sayaka and added, “Tell Urahara to only come in if we're not back in thirty minutes.”

Sayaka nodded her terrified understanding but Homura was already charging into the new labyrinth.

She was staring at the body and her surroundings trying to figure out what to do with the dead magical girl— *how to hide a body on her friend's request, stuff like that* actually happened in real life, *what the hell*— when a *crack!* sounded nearby. Sayaka screamed.

“What happened?” Mr. Urahara demanded with an intense stare.
Sayaka babbled everything she had seen and Homura's order. The man frowned, pulled a phone out of an inner pocket in his haori, checked the time, and put it back. He lifted his head and assessed the abandoned battlefield as Sayaka hesitantly mentioned the Incubator's ploy, which made him whip his head to look at her. Mr. Urahara was pissed.

“Um… Mr. Urahara? I'm— I'm sorry—”

“No, no, don't apologize,” he muttered. “That thing's ability to manipulate children is repugnant. I'm impressed that you managed to hesitate. Many children jump at the chance.”

Sayaka was never particularly fond of being called a child but she kept her mouth shut.

Mr. Urahara heaved a sigh and bent to look at the body, pale in the pool of moonlight. “Ah, this must be the Kyōko Sakura Miss Tomoe told us about.”

Sayaka remembered the conversation with Homura from what felt like forever ago.

“She can be extremely aggressive, but… not necessarily terrible. She is very cynical. Something terrible happened to her. She fights off idealistic magical girls who are more concerned with fantasy than reality to teach them a lesson. She sometimes allows Familiars to roam until they consume enough souls to spawn a new Witch, then defeats the Witch for its Grief Seed.”

The words echoed in Sayaka's head as she watched Mr. Urahara cast a spell on the body and close its dull eyes. The tear tracks on the girl's gaunt face were more visible in the green light.

“It may not be as black and white as it appears at first glance, Miki.”

“It is like slowly starving.”

“Maybe this Kyōko just needs the right sort of… support. Rumor says she was once Tomoe's partner. Do you think Tomoe is the type to associate with someone with no redeeming qualities?”

Sayaka's ugly sob surprised her. She choked on it, but soon gave in and cried, feeling sick. This girl could never be redeemed now. According to Mami, this girl's wish destroyed her family; now she had fallen victim to the Incubator's plot after visible suffering. It was tragic. So Sayaka wept over the body of a girl she had never met, the taste of saltwater heavy on her tongue.

Tōshirō examined his new surroundings. They were on a dark red stone pathway with low block walls on either side; it reminded him of the battlements of a castle. The environment was dimly blue like a foggy night during the full moon. He could see that the sloping red stone paths extended in all directions on multiple levels, suspended in thin air and melting into the fog. Multicolored goldfish half his size lazily swam through the air, occasionally shining when they neared one of the many swaying black lanterns emitting faint red light. The goldfish and pendulous lanterns weren't currently attacking, so he kept his sword ready and allowed himself to mostly focus on Tomoe. The magical girl remained sprawled where she had fallen, face frozen in shocked confusion as she shakily looked around.

“Tomoe,” he said softly.
Tōshirō snapped his fingers loudly and more firmly repeated her name. This time she blinked and stared at him, eyes distant.

“Tomoe, stand up,” Tōshirō barked in his Commanding Officer Voice.

She automatically complied, leaned on a battlement, then looked around. “What— what just— what just happened?” she whispered.

This was bad. All their plans for breaking it to her gently had just gone up in flames. “Tomoe—”

“Kyōko was— where's Kyōko?” Tomoe looked at him plaintively. “Her Soul Gem— it— she—” The magical girl slowly shook her head and rocked herself. “No. No.” The horror of understanding was dawning on her face. “No. No. This isn't happen-ing. No. No.”

Tōshirō frowned in concern and stepped toward her. “Tomoe—”

He felt Akemi appear behind him. He was glad until he saw the instantaneous fury on Tomoe's face.

“This?!” Tomoe shrieked. “This is what you've been keeping from me?!!”

“Tomoe,” Tōshirō hedged at the same time Akemi said, “Mami—”

“It is, isn't it?? ISN'T IT?!” Tomoe choked on a sob; the sparkle of floral magic at her fingertips made Tōshirō sidestep to put himself between Tomoe and Akemi to block an easy shot— just in case her mind cracked. “Magical girls— Soul Gems— we— we turn into—?!” She lurched forward and dry heaved, then looked up at them with rage. “How could you keep this from me?!!”

“I did not wish to upset you,” Akemi said evenly.

“Upset me?! Upset me?! You don't want to upset me?!!” Tomoe shriilled. “How could I not be upset?! How can you not be upset?!!”

“Enough time has elapsed since I found out that I have become somewhat numb to it, personally,” Akemi answered. “I have other things to—”

“Do?!” Mami demanded, appalled.

“Worry about,” Akemi corrected.

“Other things to worry about?!” Tomoe screamed. “When you know what we— we— what we turn in— int—” She couldn't finish her words, overcome by uncontrollable sobbing.

Tōshirō didn't like the unstable edge her reiatsu was taking on. “Tomoe—” he tried again.

Akemi inhaled deeply behind him. “You have a choice to make. Move forward and—”

“Choice?!” Tomoe screeched. “Choice?! If Soul Gems give birth to Witches, we have no choice but to—!”

Tōshirō stepped forward sharply, grabbed her shoulders, and shook her. “Don't finish that sentence!” he commanded. “It may seem that way, but it's not.” Tomoe looked at him in despair. He noticed the darkness in the floral Soul Gem in her hair, then forced himself to look her in the eyes. “It's reversible,” he said with conviction.
“Hitsugaya,” Akemi hissed in warning.

“What's the point?” Tomoe wailed. “Our souls are— are rocks, we turn into— into— Why bother when we'll just kill—” She drew up short and looked even more horrified. “Oh, God, how many girls have I ki-illed?”

“None,” Akemi said bluntly. “They were already dead.”

Tomoe keened like a wounded animal.

Tōshirō whirled to glare at Akemi over his shoulder and snapped, “You're not helping!” She lowered her eyes and looked away. Tōshirō turned back to Tomoe and ordered her to look him in the eye. When she did, he firmly said, “You ended their suffering. Their despair. Without a way to turn—”

“Stop,” Akemi said loudly.

Tōshirō turned to her in confused frustration

“We do not know if an Incubator is in here to eavesdrop,” she said solemnly.

“She turned right in front of us. There wasn't a terminal outside—”

“There was when I got here.”

Tōshirō raised a brow. “Where is it now?”

Akemi haughtily pushed her hair back. “If my kick did not achieve low Earth orbit, it was not for lack of trying.”

Now she could make jokes. What the hell. “So... it's gone?”

“That one, anyway.”

“Right. Fine. Anyway, we saw Sakura turn. The Incubator had no opportunity to get in and lurk until we showed up.”

Akemi inclined her chin in acknowledgment of the logic. “Continue.”

He turned back to Tomoe. “Without a way to turn Grief Seeds back into Soul Gems, defeating Witches was a kindness.” He hoped she was too shocked to think of the Incubator eating them.

Tomoe heaved deep breaths. “Reversible— without—” She startled and looked at him more attentively, a drowning person grasping at a lifeline. “Do you mean—” Tomoe swallowed hard and her voice dropped to a whisper. “You have a way to turn Grief Seeds back?”

Tōshirō smirked. “Yes.” He allowed it to widen and sharpen into something predatory then tipped his head forward to look up at her, inviting her into conspiracy. “And the Incubator doesn't know.”

She stared at him in silence for a long time, then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Eyes still closed, she whispered, “We can save Kyōko?”

“We can save Kyōko,” Tōshirō and Akemi answered simultaneously, voices confident.

Tōshirō leaned back and watched Tomoe for a minute, then asked, “So, do you want to help?”
“Yes,” Tomoe replied immediately. “I just— I just need—a moment.” Her face crumpled in distress again and she shuddered with repressed emotion as she tried to control her breathing.

“Good.” He glanced up at Tomoe's dark Soul Gem, then down to where she held the Shadow Witch’s Grief Seed in one white-knuckled fist. Tōshirō took his hands off her shoulders and reached down to gently pry Tomoe’s fingers open and take the Grief Seed. She watched him lift it. He paused and gestured at her Soul Gem, suddenly feeling like touching it without permission would be extremely rude and invasive. “May I?”

Tomoe nodded, so he tapped the Grief Seed against the muddied flower. Tōshirō watched the darkness siphon out until the yellow jewel shone brightly. He pulled back and looked at Tomoe’s face again. “Better?”

“Better,” she said quietly. “I— I can think better. Thank you.”

He gave her a brief smile, then stepped back and offered the Grief Seed to Akemi. “You need to use it before we move on?”

“I suppose I had better,” Akemi sighed. She took it, tapped it against the jewel on her hand, then stored it in her shield. “Tomoe, shield your Soul Gem.”

“O-oh.” Tomoe brushed a hand up by her hat. Tiny *flowers* bubbled around the shield she conjured. Then she lowered her hand, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply as she forced herself to stand tall. When she opened her eyes, she appeared to have switched mental gears. “What is our plan?” she asked as she looked around the labyrinth. They all turned outward to inspect the fog. The lanterns and fish still hadn’t shown signs of hostility.

“Stay near each other so we do not get separated in this fog,” Akemi said. “Much of this place looks identical. Perhaps we should mark our path as we progress.”

“I'll leave ice as we go,” Tōshirō volunteered.

Akemi nodded. “Mami, you and I will face forward. Hitsugaya, rear guard. We can adjust if the Familiars require different tactics.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tōshirō said as he rolled his shoulders and neck, then tested his scalded arms for range of motion.

Tomoe stared at him. “Where are your sleeves?”

“Burned off. I stopped it before it got deep in the skin. Burns are second degree at worst,” he assessed clinically as he coated his arms with a thin layer of semisolid ice and recreated his ice bracers over the slush.

Tomoe gasped quietly and held a hand in front of her mouth. “I— I didn't even— notice! I'm sorry!”

“You were in shock. I'll be fine.” Tōshirō looked at her seriously. “Let’s get this over with.”

Tomoe shuddered but pulled herself together and looked down the path, then at Akemi. “I'll take right, you take left.”

Akemi eyed her carefully— particular attention was paid to the locations of each of their Soul Gems relative to one another— and nodded.
They set out in a triangle formation with Tōshirō at the rear. He frequently turned to walk backwards with light steps as he left footprints of frost in his wake. It was only a couple minutes before they ran into the Witch's patrolling Familiars, white paper dolls of women with the black hair and narrow eyes of traditional East Asian art on blocky heads, each wearing colorful paper robes and bearing either spears, banners, or torches made of giant matchsticks. Tōshirō largely let the girls fight with ranged attacks while he watched their rear. It proved a smart choice when they turned a corner and reached a crossroads that already bore his trail of frost; their party walked straight into a group of the Familiars they had simply dodged before and got stuck fighting on two fronts.

The Familiars were frustrating. Their spears could extend like Sakura's. Their heads often turned into spearheads that looked like stylized diamond dragon heads which they then launched at the party by extending their necks in unpredictable patterns, the clinking of chain mail scales echoing in the fog. That was annoying enough without the addition of fiery projectiles and the torchbearers' ability to conjure more Familiars by lifting their matchsticks skyward with a tinkling of bells and burst of orange light.

“I told Miki to tell Urahara to come in if it took more than thirty minutes,” Akemi said irritably after eliminating another mob. “Let's—”

“Wait, Miki?” Tōshirō said in confusion as Tomoe said, “Sayaka's outside?”

Akemi paused and looked at them. “Yes. You didn't know?”

“No,” both replied.

They all stared at each other. Akemi shook her head, dismissing the tangent, and said, “I would prefer to rush through to the Witch. If the Familiars mob behind us, we can just take them out with attacks that cover more area.”

Tōshirō and Tomoe nodded, Tomoe looking uncertain. The three abandoned methodical combat and sprinted through the labyrinth together, Akemi spraying machine gunfire ahead of them as they progressed, muted reports echoing in the fog. They crossed their own marked paths several times, but eventually found their way to a higher section that widened dramatically. Akemi stopped at the implied entrance to the area, grabbing Tomoe to force her to do the same.

When Tomoe looked at her quizzically, Akemi said, “This place looks different. And don't you feel it?”

The air was heavy and oppressively warm with the Witch's presence. Tōshirō scanned in all directions, including above them. “Where is it?”

Akemi threw her mostly-spent machine gun over the ledge and pulled a grenade out of her shield. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, she pulled the pin and hurled it into the middle of the brick courtyard. Nothing appeared when it exploded. She frowned severely. “I think it will only show itself once we move in closer,” she guessed.

Or, more likely, stated from experience.

Akemi looked sideways at Tomoe. “Can you do this?”

Tomoe trembled and looked distraught, but nodded and conjured five rifles to float in front of her. They cautiously moved forward as a group. Nothing happened until they were nearly halfway into the wide area. At that point, there was a flare of Hollow-like reiatsu and a loud rattling of chains as
strands of burgundy diamonds materialized and formed a multilayered cage around the area.

“Those— that's Kyōko's lattice barrier,” Tomoe said in a strangled voice.

No one had a chance to reply before there was a sudden burst of flame above the red stone on the far side of their new cage. It generated dark smoke in a circle, which whirled and then dispersed horizontally, revealing Kyōko Sakura's Witch.

A paper doll rode astride a paper horse. It, too, wore colorful robes, though far more intricate and colorful than those worn by the Familiars, dominated by brilliant red but featuring wild swirls of other colors, bright florals, and a geometric pattern on the underskirt. Tōshirō was suddenly struck by the resemblance to the costumes for the female warrior roles in Chinese operas; in context, the Familiars had also been dressed as such— the Witch's backup dancers, as it were. The Witch's neck consisted of the collar and burner of an oil lamp; instead of a head, it had a large open flame. It bore a huge black double-headed lance that shimmered with hints of color in the candlelight.

A paper doll being imitating a beautiful actress imitating a glorious warrior, topped by an unsecured flame that could consume it at any moment. Tōshirō wondered what that said about Kyōko Sakura.

The Witch's mount looked like it had been assembled from shapes cut out of paper with a disorienting black and white geometric pattern printed on it, then had been embellished by hand-drawn swirls of ink for a mane. Its legs were spindly and its stiff tail made Tōshirō think of a shape cut out of a black doily. Dangling from the horse's collar was a large pendant shaped like a diamond with concave sides. It was red and black, making Tōshirō think of the corrupted Soul Gem he had seen on Sakura's chest. The horse stirred and pawed the ground with a restless whinny as the Witch readied its spear with a rustling of paper.

Tomoe crumpled to her knees with a quiet whimper, rifles unraveling into ribbons and melting away. “K-Kyōko?”

Tōshirō exchanged a glance with Akemi; they silently agreed Tomoe wouldn't be much help in this battle. Akemi sighed, pulled a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher from her shield, and said, “Let's end this quickly.”

As soon as he grunted agreement, Akemi shot the RPG. It nailed the Witch in the torso as Akemi discarded the launcher and retrieved another. The horse reared up and made a sound like a girl's voice imitating an angry whinny while its rider brandished the spear over its flaming head as though leading a charge, singed and ripped but intact. The circular whirl of smoke appeared before it; without warning, a fireball blasted out of it at them.

Tōshirō stepped forward and created a wave of ice in front of them with a horizontal swing of his sword. It held, but only just, melting to a thin sheet like a glass windowpane that collapsed into slush when the flames dissipated. Tōshirō scowled; as far as raw power went, this Witch might very well be his equal with his limiter on.

When the smoke and steam cleared, there were five copies of the Witch arrayed across the entire battlefield, none showing signs of damage.

“What the hell,” he couldn't help but mutter.

“Rosso Fantasma,” Tomoe gasped.

“What's that?” Tōshirō asked with an edge in his voice as he evaluated the layout of the enemy position. Were they illusions like Aizen's? Afterimages like Soifon's?
Tomoe took several deep breaths that sounded like she was fighting the urge to vomit. “Kyōko's—Kyōko's confusion tech-nique,” she explained shakily. “She has il-lusion ma-gic a-and used to make copies of herself or other thi-ings to confuse the en-emy. But if she, um.... Sometimes, the copies aren't jus-ssst illusions. They can— theyyy can—”

Three of the mounted warriors brandished their spears and conjured flames.

“They can attack!”

Tōshirō generated ice again; no fool, this time he kept slicing his blade back and forth to throw a steady stream of it. Akemi disappeared from his side and reappeared in front of Tomoe, who was still sitting on the ground looking dumbstruck, then brandished her shield while radiating violet reiatsu as a backup in case he failed. His ice held again, but sweat beaded on his brow and rolled down his temples.

Definitely our equal while limited, Hyōrinmaru observed in his head.

Five of my equal, Tōshirō thought with a mental groan as he tried to see see through the steam and smoke. When it thinned, he dully added, Correction. Seven of my equal.

We may have to lift the first limit, Hyōrinmaru muttered.

Tōshirō grimaced; he really did not want to do that. “Ideas, Akemi?” he demanded.

“Attack as many at one time as possible.”

Tōshirō eyed her, picking up the hint and glancing at Tomoe. He didn't want to reveal Akemi's time magic and he really thought Tomoe would do better if she took an active role in the defeat instead of sitting passively. If she could be pushed out of her shock, anyway. So he used his Talking To Rookies On Their First Truly Dangerous Mission voice to bark, “Tomoe. We need you.”

Tomoe blinked up at him with wide eyes, not bothering to hide her horror. “What.”

Akemi gave him a not-terribly-subtle what the hell are you doing look. He chose to ignore it.

“Get up.” When Tomoe just kept staring, Tōshirō growled, “Do you want to save your friend or not?”

Tomoe sputtered uncertainly, so Akemi huffed irritably and added, “Do not be a damsel in distress, Mami. You are better than this.”

Tomoe flinched; the echo of Sakura's earlier words must have stung. “But— but—”

“Hitsugaya. Watch my back,” Akemi said curtly as she turned to face Tomoe.

Tōshirō raised a brow but didn't object, simply saying, “Make it fast. I don't like the light those four are making,” as he eyed the pinkish flames warping the air in front of some of the copies.

Akemi clicked her teeth and stepped right up to the space directly in front of Tomoe, grabbed the girl's neck ribbon, and bodily hauled her up by it until their eyes were equally matched. “If you want Kyōko Sakura to be saved, you must cooperate with us and defeat her Witch.”

“It's— it's so— so cruel!”

“Sometimes one must be cruel to be kind.”
“Wh-what?”

“Incoming!” Tōshirō shouted as the pink lights flashed, the four copies of the Witch disappeared or transformed, and four brilliantly glowing lances shot at them. He dodged left while Akemi yanked Tomoe to the right. The four lances struck their former position at the same time and obliterated the red stone, leaving a huge crater, then flashed and turned back into copies of the Witch. The three other copies charged their split positions as though jousting. Tōshirō allowed the one targeting him to get near, dodged the lance to get in close quarters, and beheaded the horse with a two-handed upward stroke from his blade. The horse crashed into the stones with the sounds of ripping paper and neighing. Its unseated rider hit the ground with a clash of jingling bells and chains. Tōshirō darted closer and drove his blade straight down into its back; he intended to extinguish the flame head with ice but the stab caused the whole thing to dissolve into smoke.

Tōshirō turned toward the girls when he heard gunfire and saw violet light in his peripheral vision, but noticed and parried another lance. The Witch rode past and out of his reach, swirling with smoke and generating another copy. Both circled back and charged him in unison with a clatter-crunch of paper hooves. He ran to meet them, dropping into a slide between them as he braced his sword horizontally to slice the legs off one paper horse. It went down like the one before it. Tōshirō had no sooner dispatched the rider than he was evading the copy. He dodged right into one of the giant spears of pink light. His reaction was quick enough to avoid losing his head but the Witch scored a crushing blow to his left shoulder. Tōshirō roared in pain, rolled with the hit, and lurched back to his feet in time to dodge more hooves, spears, and flames. He searched the battleground and was surprised by how far he was from the girls— and how many copies of the Witch were galloping, rearing, glowing, and smoking.

It’s herding us apart, he realized.

Akemi’s voice was furiously shouting something, but he couldn’t understand what over the din of battle. He couldn’t even see the girls for longer than a flash here and there between dodges and parries. Tōshirō fought as well as he could with one arm hanging useless and considered his narrowed options: lift his limit, hope Akemi threw caution to the wind and stopped time for a simultaneous kill, or hope it had been thirty minutes and Urahara was on his way. Only the latter was actually attractive.

Suddenly, the floor of the entire battlefield was flooded with the amber light of Tomoe’s reiatsu, floral kaleidoscope patterns flaring across the stone surface like ripples on a pond.

“Legare Vasta Area!” Tomoe’s voice screamed.

Ribbons. Ribbons and eldritch flowers everywhere. Blasting straight up like sprouting vines, snaking through horse legs to hobble them, grabbing spears out of the air, snaring riders and throwing them to the ground; red ribbons even swirled at Tōshirō’s feet and whirled into a crisscross lattice-like shield for him. He stood on guard and panted as he watched the girls methodically destroy each bound entity until the third from last proved to be the Witch’s true body, its destruction triggering the collapse of the labyrinth.

Surreality wobbled and dissolved into reality, leaving them in the shadowed park once more. Tōshirō took stock of his surroundings and found Miki huddled over Sakura’s empty body and Urahara standing over them with his phone in his hand as though checking the time. The man’s shoulders relaxed a bit, but he frowned severely at the party’s injuries. All turned when Tomoe made a strangled sound. The girl staggered over to where the Wǔdàn Witch’s Grief Seed had drifted to the grass. Tomoe fell to her knees before it, picked it up, stared at it, and wailed.
WITCH DATA

MELITTA, the Pin Witch with an allegiant nature.
CARMELI, the Pincushion Witch with a self-serving nature.
Two sisters, both Witches. The elder sister captures prey and liquefies it; the younger sister then turns that liquid into nectar. One is a pin, while the other is a pincushion. They'll be together forever, friends forever.
Minion: Berthold, whose duty is to swarm intruders.
Minion: Justine, whose duty is to ensnare intruders.

OPHELIA, the Wǔdàn Witch. Her nature is abandonment. A Witch who eternally wanders with hollow footsteps within the fog. She can no longer remember what the horse that always accompanies her was.
Minion: Zoe, whose task is to march.

A/N: I almost used that first scene as the cliffhanger for last time, but I thought it would be too mean. LOL.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Kisuke pursed his lips and took stock of the situation. Sakura's body lay at his feet, functionally dead. Miki was crying over it; the crying struck him as odd but a low priority curiosity. However, why she was actually present, wearing a formal dress, and bleeding from her feet while a discarded pair of formal shoes lay on the ground nearby was possibly important. The three combatants looked roughed up and singed, but not terribly so. The worst visible injury was to Hitsugaya's left shoulder. Akemi's face had shuttered into an unreadable mask. Both were watching Tomoe carefully. Tomoe was crying her heart out over Sakura's Grief Seed, reiatsu unstable but not as dark as he had expected given the circumstances. The secret source of Witches had been brutally thrown in Tomoe's face before they could break it to her gently. She had at least some preparation this time, but how she would react was anyone's guess.

Miki straightened from her bowed position to look at the three with relief. “You're back!” Her face fell again. “You're hurt!”

Hitsugaya sighed heavily and said, “We'll be fine.” Neither he nor Akemi took their eyes off Tomoe, wary of her mental state. Akemi maintained the little shield over her Soul Gem.

Kisuke clapped his hands loudly to draw attention. “Well! I think we've had enough excitement for one night. Don't you?”

Tomoe turned to look at him over her shoulder, face painfully incredulous. “Excitement?!”

“A euphemism by which I mean a string of horrible things we really need a break from,” he clarified.

Tomoe’s lips quivered and fresh tears welled in her eyes. “Oh.” Then she stilled and looked up at him hopefully. “Hitsugaya said—”

“That we should retreat to the shop to discuss where we go from here,” Akemi interrupted loudly.
It took a moment for Tomoe's confused frown to clear in understanding. “Oh.” She suspiciously looked around the brush and rooftops as though searching for spies.

Kisuke wondered if Akemi and Hitsugaya had skipped to what would have been Step Five or so in their original plan and told Tomoe they had secret means to revert Grief Seeds. The blonde was distraught but not insane.

Akemi cautiously glanced at Kisuke before turning her eyes back to Tomoe. “We should go now. Before anyone finds us with a body.”

Tomoe's breath hitched, but she dragged herself to her feet with the Grief Seed cradled near her heart. “I—” She stopped and took a shuddering breath when her voice caught. “I'll— carry— her,” she said in a guttural rasp. Her steps toward the body were painfully slow.

“How— how will I get there?” Miki asked as she scrubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“Why are you even here?” Akemi snapped.

Miki jerked her head up angrily and snapped back. “I was at the symphony and felt Hitsugaya calling for help!”

“Idi—!”

Kisuke put two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. When they both looked at him with sour faces, he focused on Miki and demanded, “How far is the symphony?”

“I dunno, a few blocks that way,” Miki said with a careless wave toward the southeast.

After a beat of silence, Kisuke said, “And you sensed the... magic and its message?”

“Duhhh,” Miki replied, all snarky teenager. “It'd be hard not to notice ice and fire smacking around.” She sniffled, coughed, and picked up her shoes by their heels with one hand, completely unaware of how significant her words were.

Kisuke's brows rose, as did Hitsugaya's. The young captain asked, “You could identify the elements?”

“Duuuuuuuuuh,” Miki repeated sarcastically. “You were both blasting your magic all over the place!”

Kisuke shared a long, considering look with Hitsugaya, who ran a hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. “I told you we need to talk about her.”

“So you did,” Kisuke said with his own sigh. Yet another ball to juggle.

“What talk what about me what?”

“Your magic getting stronger,” Hitsugaya explained. “But we have to deal with... this,” he said with a wave around he field, “before we deal with that.”

Miki stared, surprised into silence before saying a simple, “Oh.”

No one spoke for an awkward minute.

“In all seriousness, Sayaka,” Akemi said, “why were you at the symphony? I thought you said you would not attend until your friend could play violin again.”
“I told you that?” Miki blurted in surprise.

Kisuke kept his face neutral. Akemi had probably slipped.

“Yes,” Akemi said easily. “At the cafe the other day. Right, Hitsugaya?” Hitsugaya agreed with a straight face.

“Oh.” Miki shook herself. “I was there because....” She trailed off and very obviously cast about for a good lie, then scowled and took a deep breath, steeling herself to speak an embarrassing truth. “Because my parents needed an extra in their show to impress a client and wouldn't take no for an answer.” Miki looked up at them with defiant challenge.

No one commented on the implication of a less-than-ideal relationship with her parents. Kisuke made a mental note to amend his file on Miki.

“So. How am I getting to High Spirits?” Miki demanded.

“I can carry you, I suppose,” Akemi sighed.

“Don't you need to get back to your parents?” Hitsugaya asked.

Miki stood and waved a hand dismissively as she strode to Akemi. “I'll figure out an excuse.”

“They will not be happy with that,” Akemi said flatly.

“As if they're ever happy with me,” Miki sniffed. She threw her short hair over her shoulder in an echo of Akemi’s habit. “I'm a big girl. I can handle it.”

“If you say so,” Akemi said doubtfully.

Hitsugaya looked at Kisuke as Sakura and Miki were being lifted and asked, “So, what are we going to do about... this?” He waved his good arm around the field, indicating the ice, burns, and divoted sod from the earlier duel.

Kisuke shrugged. “Not much we can do.” Not without giving themselves away to the Incubator as when his people cleaned up in Karakura. “Dissolve your ice and let the authorities make of it what they will.”

Hitsugaya sighed tiredly and flexed his reiatsu, causing the ice to fall apart and the water to disperse into the atmosphere. “Shall we go?”

Kisuke looked to the girls. Miki was on Akemi's back and Tomoe cradled Sakura in her arms, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. Kisuke heaved his own sigh, said, “Let's,” and took to the rooftops to lead them back to the shop.

He made sure to lead them slowly to allow himself time to consider potential changes to their plan. So many options and no way of knowing which was best. It would be a long night.

Sayaka's second rooftop journey to High Spirits by piggyback was far less hectic than the first one. She was also able to think clearly this time. Being unable to help was frustrating. Watching the fight and not knowing how to use whatever power she had made her feel shame.
She was useless. A background character in a second show in one night. Another supporting role, except this show had far higher stakes than her parents' social schemes. She needed to break type and become useful.

Sayaka made up her mind a block away from High Spirits. She just needed to get through this scene’s conclusion before seeking a promotion from extra.

The group alighted in the alley behind the shop and crossed the back threshold onto its grounds. Sayaka relaxed at the sensation of crossing the wards— this place was safe. She had just noticed a car beside the shop's van when a figure jumped off the back porch and ran toward them.

“Is anyone hurt?!” Madoka cried.

“Nothing life-threatening,” Mr. Urahara answered easily. “Why are you here?” he asked mildly as Homura set Sayaka down.

Sayaka hissed in pain. The cuts and scratches on her feet had clotted but putting her weight on them now that adrenaline wasn't screaming through her bloodstream felt like treading on knives. She was pretty sure there was gravel embedded in her soles.

“I felt— something. Like— a lot of... magic, I guess?” Madoka said tearfully after hugging Homura. She threw herself at Sayaka next; Sayaka's remaining tension immediately evaporated and she took a deep, steadying breath. She wondered if Madoka had switched to a shampoo that smelled like roses. “I told Mama and Papa and we called the shop and Mr. Tsukabishi said to come here so we all did.”

Sayaka didn't miss the look shared by Hitsugaya and Mr. Urahara. It was exactly the same look they had exchanged about her.

Madoka led them to the shop, walking backwards and babbling. “Papa is in the kitchen making tea and snacks and Mama is setting up futons with Tatsuya just in case and—” she gasped and looked worried as they stepped into better light and she could see the red-haired magical girl in Mami's arms. “Oh, no! Who's that?! What happened?!”

Mami's face crumpled in distress again. Homura quietly answered, “Kyōko Sakura. She turned into a Witch in front of Mami, Sayaka, and Hitsugaya.”

Madoka's horror and concern were obvious. “Oh, no!” She looked quickly from Mami to Homura. “Did she—?”

“I saw,” Mami whispered.

“O— oh.”

“You knew, too?” Mami asked dully.

Flinching, Madoka answered, “Y-yes. I'm— I'm sorry.”

Mami cut her eyes away, then looked up at Mr. Urahara. “Is it safe to talk now?”

“Yes.”

She inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders. “Hitsugaya said you know how to turn Grief Seeds back into Soul Gems.”
Sayaka and Madoka whipped their heads to look at first Mr. Urahara, then Homura and Hitsugaya. “What!?” they both blurted.

“We do,” Mr. Urahara said with the slightest of melancholy smiles.

“Why didn't you tell us!” Sayaka demanded of Homura.

“Operations security,” Homura replied, pushing her hair behind her ear as she let her magical girl costume dissolve into her school uniform.

“If we didn't tell you, you couldn't discuss it in an unsecured location and be overheard, thus revealing information that could endanger both our mission and our means of reverting Grief Seeds,” Mr. Urahara explained. “Now, let's get inside and get fixed up.”

They all trooped into the back of the building and navigated the winding hallways to that same room they had been healed in on the night of the carousel labyrinth. Mrs. Kaname looked up from spreading out the final futon. She took in injuries and faces with quick, sharp glances; her mouth turned down into tight anger and fierce sympathy as Mami approached the first futon with leaden steps, knelt, and gently lay Sakura's glowing body on it, then straightened her friend's limbs and neatened her hair and clothes. In the light, the redhead's disheveled and too-thin state was far more blatant.

“Oh, Kyōko,” Mami said weakly. “Why didn't you come to me?” Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as she sat back and hugged herself.

Mrs. Kaname sat by the nearby table and opened her arms wide. “Come here, Mami,” she said gently.

Mami looked up at Mrs. Kaname with a painfully lost expression on her face. Madoka's mom beckoned with her hands again, face soft with concern. Mami's breath hitched; she dragged herself onto all fours and crawled to Mrs. Kaname, then threw herself into the woman's arms and cried.

Sayaka's phone rang. She glanced at it absently, saw it was her mom, dropped her shoes, and swiped to ignore the call. A lot of eyes were turned her way when she looked back up. Her phone rang again.

“If it's your parents, you should probably answer it,” Mr. Urahara said.

She looked at the phone, considered, decided on a strategy, and blurted, “Someone make me cry. I suck at faking. Be brutal.”

Of course it was Homura who took up that challenge, immediately and dispassionately declaring, “You should never have gone to the source of the magic because you are a liability in battle, not an asset, and you foolishly nearly let yourself be tricked into contracting besides. Your presence was worse than useless.”

Everyone but Mr. Urahara turned their heads to look from Sayaka to Homura to Sayaka as though watching a train wreck in progress. It was like multiple stabs to Sayaka's heart. She was genuinely bawling when she answered her phone. “Wha-aaat!?”

“Where are you?!” Mom hissed quietly.

“A-rou-nnnd.”

“Where— are you crying?!”
“Mayyy-beee.”

“What happened?! Where are you?!”

Sayaka took a deep breath and focused on the lie. “Whe-en I saw the flauuu-tist so pr-roud after hi-is so-lo, I thought of Kyōsu-ke and— and—” Sayaka looked at the dead body on the floor and sobbed harder. “I— could-n’t. I could-n’t.” I couldn’t help you. I’m sorry.

“Oh— oh— Sayaka, I didn’t think— where are you?!”

“Why do you care?”

“What?”

“You-ou knew and you still made me go-ohhhh. Why do you care now?” It was a valid, burning question on her part. Really, Sayaka didn't understand how her parents so often failed to anticipate how she'd react to things when they should have more than enough hindsight to make the things that would upset her obvious. She would have cried on her way home or maybe hidden in a bathroom to cry at the symphony even if it had been an uneventful evening. Sayaka knew she would have lost it even if she had actually tried to be a good prop. It was just a matter of time.

After all, the violin solo that should have been Kyōsuke's had been only eleven minutes away when she left her seat.

Fuck trying to be a good prop. She was done throwing herself at her parents' feet for scraps of attention.

“Sayaka, I—” Her mother actually sounded hurt. Huh.

“Wait no shut up I don't want to know,” Sayaka interrupted flatly. “I mean I already know. They're watching, aren't they”

“No, Saya—”

“Tell your audience some sob story about your daughter and her tragic prodigy friend,” Sayaka said bitterly. “Maybe you can win some sympathy points. Tell her how much your family values musicians or whatever. I'll be more useful by not being there.” As always. To everyone.

That would change.

Sayaka listlessly looked around the room as her mother sputtered objections. Homura, Hitsugaya, and Urahara's faces were carefully neutral, eyes tactfully averted in a facsimile of respect for her privacy even though they heard every word. Madoka looked like she would cry. Mrs. Kaname looked worried. Mami was too busy crying into Mrs. Kaname to notice anything. Kyōko's body was too dead to express an opinion.

She stared at the dead body, remembered the girl's fall, flashed back to her own bone-twisting transformation, and broke down sobbing again.

“Sayaka, please, where are you?!”

“Traipsing about with orphans,” Sayaka sneered as she scrubbed tears from her face. “Gotta help 'em make their parents spin in their graves by having a slumber party on a school night. Just like you said.”
Her mother's offended gasp was perfect accompaniment to the sight of both Homura and Mrs. Kaname making identically murderous faces at the phone.

“Sayaka, you're scaring me.”

“That's new,” Sayaka observed idly, wondering if Homura would be capable of magically traveling through her phone to kick her mother in the face. If anyone could do it, it would be Homura. The magical girl looked like she was seriously considering doing so. Sayaka should probably be bothered that the prospect didn't bother her. Meh.

Voice small and tearful, Mom said, “Saya— ka—”


“Wha—? What?”

“Don't you have a show to get back to? No, wait: Two shows, right? Double feature!”

“Sayaka—”

“I'm gonna go be a menace to society with my orphan friends who commit the horrible crime of doing each other's hair while talking about how life sucks without parents. We can compare notes,” Sayaka announced. “I'll show up when I show up. Just like you. Don't worry. You never do.”

“Sayaka—!”

Boop. Sayaka ended the call. She looked around at all the faces. Even Mami was staring now. The silence dragged.

“What?!“ Sayaka snapped defensively. Her phone rang. She dismissed the call. It immediately rang again, the screen displaying her father's number this time. She dismissed the call and set the phone to Do Not Disturb before she vindictively turned it off entirely. Let them see what it was like to go straight to voicemail over and over and over.

The entire conversation made her feel... empowered. Like she had wrested control of her life into her own hands. She was done with their bullshit and no longer afraid of letting them know it. There were far more frightening things in the world.

“Did she really say that about the girls?” Mrs. Kaname asked lowly.

“Yes!” Sayaka answered with angry cheer.

“Oh,” Mrs. Kaname said in a quiet voice silky with threat, face eerily calm.

Scheming.

Sayaka almost felt bad for her parents.

“Anyway!” Sayaka said loudly. “Don't we have a lot to do right now?”

Mr. Urahara picked up on the hint and smoothly said, “Everyone on a futon. Healing first.”

“Kyōko first,” Mami objected stubbornly.

“No. Healing first,” Mr. Urahara said. “I can't revert her to a Soul Gem myself. I need to call in help.”
“So call the help, Magic Man,” Sayaka said with a roll of her eyes.

Mr. Urahara looked at her. She couldn't decide what the look on his face was. Partly amusement, though. “We need to figure out some logistics first. How to get them here without revealing them to the Incubator, yes, but also...” He trailed off and looked at Kyōko's body.

Homura looked at the body as well and heaved a melancholy sigh. “We will not be able to let her walk out of here without revealing to the Incubator that we can revert Grief Seeds. We may have to move her. And magical girls who come back from being a Witch... often do not react well.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mami.

Hitsugaya pinched the bridge of his nose and tiredly said, “We need to figure out how to keep her from committing suicide before we can calm her down— and make plans for how to calm her down.”

“What?” Mami said in a small voice.

“A friend of ours— the first we reverted— shattered her own Soul Gem,” Homura said quietly. “We did not realize how much of her time as a Witch she remembered— that she remembered pulling her sister's corpse into her labyrinth and trying to kill us— so we did not address it.”

“Sakura doesn’t have that added grief to deal with, so she may not react as badly,” Hitsugaya continued. “But we need to prepare for the worst.”

“Can I help?” Sayaka blurted as a nebulous idea began to take shape. “I— I remember the— the —” She gulped and steadied her breath. “In the carousel thingy. When I was turned into the— the mermaid. It— maybe I could... talk to her?” she suggested, voice rising hopefully.

Hitsugaya, Homura, and Magic Man stared at her, visibly dumbstruck. In any other situation, it would have been hilarious.

“Oh,” Homura murmured.

Mr. Urahara scratched at the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. “That... might be a viable solution,” he said distractedly. Sayaka could see the intensity of thought in his gray eyes, saw them moving and looking at something only he could see as he considered and rejected and adjusted possibilities. He came back to reality and firmly said, “Healing is still first. I need to think. Everyone who's injured get on a futon.”

“I healed myself already,” Homura said with a dismissive hand gesture.

“Miss Tomoe?” Mr. Urahara prompted.

Mami sniffled and said, “Oh. Oh. I can do that. Yes. I'm not— not hurt much, anyway.” She sat up straighter and looked like she was trying to pull herself together. “I— I can help heal?”

Magic Man stared at her for a moment, thoughtful, then asked, “Can you do burns?”

“I think so?”

He nodded firmly. “Please work on my nephew's arms and tutor Miss Akemi on the process. She needs to study healing of others.”

“My shoulder's dislocated,” Hitsugaya declared.
“Oh. How fun,” his uncle deadpanned. “Want me to relocate it?”

Hitsugaya grimaced and agreed. Sayaka wanted to ask them to do it somewhere else because the sound of Tessai fixing Madoka's shoulder haunted her nightmares, but she needed to show she could handle everything about this mess to be taken seriously. So she forced her face into neutrality and didn't flinch at the horrible sound through sheer force of will.

Magic Man looked at Sayaka and asked, “I think I saw that your feet are injured?”

“Yeah.” Sayaka inhaled deeply and settled her mind. “Couldn't run right in heels. I have a bunch of gravel in my feet.”

“Well, that will have to be removed before we can heal you,” Mr. Urahara said.

“I'll do it,” Madoka's mom volunteered. “Water, cloth, tweezers, and antiseptic?” she asked in a businesslike tone as she stood.

“Coming right up,” Magic Man said with tired cheer as Madoka's dad entered with a tray of snacks and tea.

Sayaka grit her teeth and refused to show pain as Madoka helped her hobble to a futon. She opted to stay sitting up instead of lying down so she could watch the magical girls working on Hitsugaya's arms. Magic Man and Tessai had been able to heal without being magical girls. Maybe Sayaka could learn. Maybe she could be useful that way.

“Sa-ya-sa, Sa-ya-sa.”

Sayaka turned and looked at a corner of the room she hadn't paid attention to. Madoka's baby brother was strapped into his car seat and looked like he had just woken up.

“Sa-ya-sa, Sa-ya-sa,” he chanted sleepily.

“Hey, Tatsuya,” she greeted with a weak smile.

“Sad?” he asked.

“What?”

He looked at her like she was a puzzle and said, “Sa-ya-sad?” Tatsuya looked past her and saw the other teenagers. “Mi-mi-sad?”

“Mimi?” Mrs. Kaname wondered as she prepared supplies. “Oh, Mami.”

Mami looked up. “What?”

“Mi-mi-sad?” Tatsuya repeated. He looked at Homura. “Mu-ra-sad?”

“What,” Homura said blankly.

Tatsuya squirmed against his harness. “Sad, sad, sad. Hugs? I hugs.” He reached out his arms as though trying to hug them from a distance and looked disgruntled that he couldn't get closer. After a wordless screech, he shouted, “Out! Out!”

Finding him cute and hoping to stave off a tantrum, Sayaka asked, “Wanna come sit on my lap?”

“Yeah!”
Madoka unstrapped him and let him loose to toddle to Sayaka and throw himself into her side. Sayaka found herself hugging him back fiercely. It was like holding a teddy bear; she felt calmer.

“Good hugs?” he asked.

“Yep! Thanks!”

Tatsuya smiled and drooled. “I back, I back,” he said before toddling to the next futon over and throwing himself into Homura’s waist. “No sad!”

Homura relaxed and awkwardly patted his head. Tatsuya giggled and threw himself at Mami, whose tense posture eased somewhat as she cooed over him. Hitsugaya wasn’t upset but Tatsuya looked at his injuries, said “ouch, ouch,” and gave him a hug anyway; the teenage boy looked surprised and ruffled the toddler’s hair. Then Tatsuya saw Kyōko’s body. He frowned and toddled over to her, expertly evading Hitsugaya’s grab with magical toddler skill.

“Tatsuya, no,” Mrs. Kaname scolded.

Tatsuya dropped to all fours by the body and looked at the redhead’s bloodied mouth intensely as Madoka scrambled to grab him. He dodged again and pointed at Kyōko’s face. “Ouch, ouch.”

“Yes, she's hurt too,” Mrs. Kaname said as Madoka scooped him up.

“Fix!” Tatsuya commanded them.

“We will, Takkun,” Madoka said, then kissed his head. “It’s gonna take a little while.” She smiled at his impatient huff and added, “Weren't you going to sit on Sayaka's lap?”

The toddler blinked up at his sister and looked at the other teenagers for a long moment while chewing on one hand. Tatsuya’s face went stubborn and he announced, “Mimi need.”

“Eh?” Madoka wondered.

“Sayasa sad, Mura sad-sad, Mimi sad-sad-sad-ouch,” Tatsuya explained firmly. “Need more hugs.”

Everyone stared.

“Hugs ouchies bye-bye,” Tatsuya squirmed in Madoka’s arms with a grunt of effort and reached toward Mami. “Mimi! I hugs!”

Homura looked between Mami and the toddler speculatively and said, “Go ahead and hold him, Mami. I'll clean Hitsugaya’s arms myself first.”

And so Tatsuya ended up cuddling in Mami’s lap and Madoka sat by Sayaka, who hissed at the sudden sting of Mrs. Kaname starting to clean her feet. Madoka took her hand and leaned into her side to support her. Sayaka thought Madoka’s rose shampoo smelled even stronger in the closed space of the room. Maybe she used matching body wash?

Mr. Kaname served them all tea and cookies so new they were still hot from the oven. This amused and touched Sayaka—Madoka’s dad was a nervous baker and must have been incredibly anxious to have thrown together cookie dough so quickly. Sayaka focused on the tastes to distract herself from the pain in her feet and watched Mami and Tatsuya; they had a plate to themselves and Tatsuya was shoving cookies in Mami’s face with a bossy look as if he was giving the teenager medicine. As time passed, Mami’s face smoothed and she actually managed small smiles as she
shared cookies with him.

The power of cuteness was amazing.

Sayaka drowsily watched the two magical girls pointing and discussing anatomy and Hitsugaya's injuries between bouts of doing glowy stuff with their fingers while Tatsuya watched from Mami's lap, eyes wide in wonder. Homura was exceedingly familiar with the structure of the shoulder, arm, and hand— more so than Mami, even. She spoke of difficulty with nerve damage and they pressed on Hitsugaya's arms to figure out how much had been inflicted by the burns. Sayaka was able to follow some of what they were saying because she had done research in the same vein after Kyōsuke's accident.

Wait. If Sayaka could learn how to heal... maybe she could help Kyōsuke on top of helping the magical girls!

Sayaka soon lost track of time. Madoka's mom moved from Sayaka to Kyōko, washing the girl's dirty, bloody face and combing her tangled hair with the care of a mother tending a sick child. Tessai showed up at one point to heal Sayaka's clean feet and explained that Mr. Urahara was calling a lot of allies to make arrangements.

Mrs. Kaname's phone rang. She tugged it out of a pocket in her sweatpants and looked at it, face suddenly going cold and calculating. “Sayaka, it's your mother,” she said.

Sayaka pouted stubbornly. “Whatcha gonna do?”

“Hmmm.” Madoka's mom tapped a finger against her chin while her eyes did the exact same calculating movements Mr. Urahara's had done earlier. “I'm going to buy you time. Everyone be quiet.” Lips turning up into a bland smile as she sat by her husband at the table, she answered the phone. “Ah, Kotone. I wondered if I would be hearing from you.” She tapped her nails on the table lazily.

“Yes, Madoka did hear from Sayaka.”

“No. A friend of ours has a family emergency, so we're up at their house to help for the night.”

“That is none of your business, Kotone.”

“No. But Tomohisa and I allowed Madoka to go out and find her.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, don't even try it, Kotone. Madoka had her phone on speaker because Sayaka's state worried her so much. I know what Sayaka said happened. Being that upset is perfectly reasonable for the things you said and the situation you put her in.”

“It became my business when your daughter called mine in hysterical tears because her parents didn't respect an honestly mature gesture of solidarity with poor Kyōsuke right after insulting new friends who have shown her their pain,” Madoka's mom snapped with a scowl. “Your daughter is one of the more empathetic people I know— one who actually acts on her empathy. You should be proud of her principles, Kotone, not crushing them.”

“That is exactly what you're doing. She wears her heart on her sleeve so it's easily wounded. You shouldn't be the one stabbing it. I would think tonight would show you that you're driving her away.”

Her smile widened into something sweetly poisoned. “Oh, Minoru. How lovely to hear from you.”
“That's not the best way to get anyone to cooperate with you, you know.”

Mrs. Kaname arched her eyebrows. “Minoru, I am stunned by just how much more mature your teenage daughter is than you. And that's saying something.”

She laughed lightly. “You're not going to intimidate me, Minoru, so I suggest you stop trying.”

“Oh? You'd really risk me putting your treatment of your daughter into the official record of a police report when the officers come looking? And risk me explaining my encounter with law enforcement to HR and my peers in charge of the actual contracts with your employer?”

“I didn't think so,” she cooed.

“Now. You two really fucked up this time. I will intercede and try to coax Sayaka down so she doesn't outright run away. I suggest you stay the hell out of— no, you shut up. If she stays with us, she isn't on the street. Do you want her on the street?”

“No. That tactic is exactly what drove me to run away at her age and get involved with a lot of unsavory things out of rebellion. You'll pour fuel on the fire. Let me handle this.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I'll let you know when she's safely with us, Kotone. I'm a mother myself. Yes. Let her cool down while you take this opportunity to realize how deeply you hurt her with your neglect.”

“You obviously did, Minoru, or she wouldn't have run out into the night bawling.”

“For God's sake, take a look at yourselves in a mirror. Figure out why your daughter thinks you see her as nothing but a pawn on a chessboard. Because that's all on you.”

Mrs. Kaname clicked her tongue in disapproval. “That's exactly the attitude that got you into this mess. Look at your life. Look at your choices,” Mrs. Kaname said mockingly before she hung up.

Everyone stared at the woman in awe as she daintily sipped from her teacup. Even Homura and Hitsugaya looked impressed.

Junko Kaname was Sayaka's freaking idol.

“Thank you,” Sayaka said quietly.

Mrs. Kaname smiled warmly. “You're quite welcome. I've wanted to do that for awhile now, haha.” She turned to Mr. Urahara. “That takes care of Sayaka's parents. What do we do about this girl?” she asked with a nod toward the fallen magical girl. “If her parents report her missing, we could have a major problem added to the mix.”

“Kyōko's parents are dead,” Mami said dully. “She ran away from foster care. Last I heard, she lives in hotels she pays for by breaking into ATMs.”

“You— you said her wish went wrong and it made her bitter,” Madoka said slowly as her parents looked heartbroken. “What happened?”

So Mami explained the clusterfuck that was Kyōko Sakura's life and the fallout of her wish. Sayaka only realized she was clenching her fists in fury when her nails bit into her palms and drew blood. Madoka cried. Homura and Hitsugaya's faces went cold and angry. The sound of ceramic breaking drew their attention to the table.
Madoka’s dad looked the angriest Sayaka had ever seen him. His teacup was in a few large pieces on the table and his hands were in a tense position Sayaka likened to throttling someone. “Because she had powers?” he growled. “Because she dared to innocently try to help him? His first thought was to blame his daughter instead of the—the being that tricked her? No concern for her, just a— just a tantrum over not being popular without help? Killing his entire family over it?!?”

“What a selfish, deluded asshole,” Mrs. Kaname sneered.

Kyōko’s father was probably lucky to be dead already because the Kaname parents looked like they would gladly tear him limb from limb with their bare hands.

“All right, how is everyone doing?” Mr. Urahara asked from the doorway. Everyone turned to him; he glanced at each of them before his gaze settled on Hitsugaya’s arms, which were bandaged in Mami’s glowing yellow ribbons. Magic Man looked intrigued, but didn’t say anything about it.

“What’s the plan?” Mrs. Kaname asked, all business.

Mr. Urahara looked amused. “You assume I have one.”

Mrs. Kaname rolled her eyes. “I know your type. You wouldn’t be here unless you had one.”

Magic Man’s face slowly lit up with a sly grin. “Perceptive.”

Sayaka didn’t have the patience for witty grownup banter. “Just tell us the plan already, Magic Man.”

Mr. Urahara blinked slowly at her with a tilt of his head. Sayaka just scowled at him. He raised a brow but didn’t say anything about her snippy interruption. “Well, we still need to not arouse suspicion in the general public, so you will all go to school tomorrow. It’s only a half-day. I know it will be difficult—” he darted a sympathetic glance toward Mami, who hugged Tatsuya closer to her and looked mournful— “but you don’t need to pretend nothing is wrong. I couldn’t possibly expect you to do so. To excuse any potential absence next week, go ahead and tell people a friend of yours died. It's technically not a lie and it will make people both sympathetic and likely to leave well enough alone if you say you don’t want to talk about it.”

Mami’s lip quivered, but she nodded her acceptance. Sayaka put her hands on her hips and challenged him. “So what are we actually gonna do?”

Mr. Urahara looked oddly curious before his face softened into tired concern. “In addition to the healer, the family that is allied with us is going to come here. Magical girl sisters whose father and brother are completely in the know and have experience with the supernatural. They have a way with people. My hope is that Miss Sakura and Miss Tomoe can benefit from their support.”

Sayaka opened her mouth to question that—she was suspicious of these unknown strangers—but snapped it shut when Homura said, unprompted, “They are very kind. Odd, eccentric, and... energetic, but kind.” The magical girl folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them with a hesitantly soft expression. “They are... like... family. To me,” she added quietly.

That was like screaming those people’s weird awesomeness from the rooftops as far as Stranger Danger was concerned, so Sayaka refrained from voicing any suspicion and instead decided she wanted to meet these people.

“So, what, we’re coming here after school?” Sayaka asked.

“If you want,” Mr. Urahara said with a shrug.
“When will these people get here?”

Why did Magic Man look so interested? “Shortly after you get out of school. They have covers to establish, too. They'll stay for at least a couple days, not leaving the shop so the Incubator doesn't know they're here.”

“How will they get here?” asked Madoka's mom.

Mr. Urahara smiled widely and explained something about portals and dimensions that Sayaka followed better once she ignored the more sciencey words. Then he exhaled loudly and clapped his hands together. “Well. I think we had better all get rested. Miss Miki, I suggest you go home.”

“No.”

“I'm sorry?”

“No,” Sayaka repeated stubbornly. “I'm not gonna be left out. Mrs. Kaname gave Mom and Dad an excuse for me to stay away from home. I'm not going back. They went too far this time. I've had it.”

Magic Man stared at her for a long minute before slowly asking, “You have a plan?”

Sayaka straightened her spine and raised her chin with a defiant expression. “I'm gonna go to school like a good girl so they can't complain about that at least. I'm gonna try harder, too. I wanna look like I'm the one being mature about it. I'll text them sometimes and say junk like sorry, I'm in a meeting, I don't have time to chat and whatever so they know I'm alive and making a point.”

“Is that really mature, though?” Homura muttered.

“When will you go home?” Hitsugaya asked before Sayaka could retort.

Sayaka shrugged snobbishly with a dismissive wave of her hand and answered, “Who knows?”

Magic Man frowned and opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Madoka's mom. “Leave her to me, Kisuke. I was in a similar position at her age and know how to manipulate her parents,” she said briskly. “You worry about the hocus pocus angle, I'll handle the teenage girls.”

“We,” said Madoka's dad. “We will.”

Sayaka almost laughed at how blatantly relieved Magic Man was by that.

They wrapped up about an hour later. Madoka's dad left to pack up stuff from home so the family could camp out at the shop for a few days. Madoka's mom texted Sayaka's mom that Sayaka was safely with the Kanames just before the Kanames took a guest bedroom with Tatsuya. The teenagers all pulled the futons into a circle and bedded down for their second depressing slumber party with a glowing corpse. It was an awkward setup. A dim little lamp was placed near the door so everyone could get to the bathroom without tripping on anyone else. Sayaka lay staring at the soft green glow around Kyōko with Mami and Madoka, planning and strengthening her resolve. Finally growing sleepy, Sayaka allowed her eyes to wander the room. Two futons lay empty. Hitsugaya and Homura sat propped up against the walls in a corner, wide awake and staring at Mami from the shadows.

Sayaka drowsily thought about the story of Homura's team leader who had snapped and shattered her friends' Soul Gems, noted the subtle wariness in the two friends' postures, and felt her heart crack a little bit more. It wasn't fair that they had to worry about Mami’s sanity and whether she
would attack them. It wasn't just. She looked to Kyōko's soulless stillness; that wasn't mere injustice; it was an atrocity.

No part of the magical girl system was fair to anyone.

No part of the Incubator's actions were just.

Her resolve crystallized. She would be useful in the righteous war against the Incubator. Absolutely had to help them bear that burden.

Sayaka Miki would be useful or die trying.

Two high school girls stood alone in a dim, cavernous hall that echoed with the splashing of running water.

"At least make Kazumi suffer the same fate as those girls."

"What are you talking about?"

The first voice giggled. It wasn't a particularly sane giggle. "You're bad at lying, Saki. If Umika weren't around just now—"

Saki reared back, fear quickly chased from her face by anger. "SHUT UP! I'M NOT LYING!"

"I'm telling you." Tapping footsteps joined the echoes of the fountain. The girl leaned close to Saki and conspiratorially whispered, "I know everything, okay?" She leaned in closer, smiling lips brushing the shell of Saki's ear as she breathed, "Fantasma Bisbiglio."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy funtimes! :D

Fantasma Bisbiglio = Ghost Whisper

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter killed me to write. I almost broke my plot five different ways hahahahahacry

The first chapter with Kyōko, Sayaka, and Karin in the same room is also the one with the densest carpet f-bombing and disparaging nicknames for the Incubator lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EINUNDSIEBZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

"Kaoru. What if the Evil Nut isn't the cause? I mean, what if this time was another failure?"

"It-it'll be fine. Ev-everything's going well, right? It won't be a repeat— I've already had enough of repeating! You should, too! No, you of all people should understand the most, Saki!"

“What do you think, Umika?”

"I agree with Kaoru. Objectively speaking, everything is going smoothly this time. Almost perfectly."

"Really? Can we really rely on our magic so much? I'm scared! I know that Kazumin is important to us. But I keep thinking that... if we keep using our magic like this, then maybe we'll turn into Witches, too! Just like— just like—"

A long pause as two girls stared at the third. “This isn't like you, Saki.”

"How so? Is it so strange for me to be concerned?!"

"No. Everyone is concerned. But... Saki never calls Kazumi Kazumin. The only one who does is...."

The surprised silence lasted but a moment but felt like forever. Saki stood slowly.

“Watch out, Kaoru! That's—!”

Chaos ensued.
Once everyone else fell asleep, Tōshirō took turns as sentry with Akemi, napping in shifts while watching Tomoe for signs of mental breakdown. He twice conjured a handful of graupel to lightly toss at the magical girl to shock her out of thrashing nightmares; Tomoe had jerked with a sleep-muffled squeal at the cold and briefly woken up, but he had already sublimated the ice so she fell back to sleep right away. Once, he woke up in the middle of one of his off-shifts when Hyōrinmaru alerted him of another reiatsu fluctuation, but found Akemi frozen in a reaching pose as Kaname rolled over with her eyes barely open and hooked her arm in Tomoe's, then glowed faintly pink. Tomoe settled without waking up and Kaname drifted off again.

Tōshirō met Akemi's eyes, which were wide with surprise, and muttered, “We really, really need to talk about their powers. The toddler, too.”

Akemi looked back at the sleeping girls and nodded warily.

It was Tōshirō's turn to be awake when Kaname's little brother trotted into the room giggling and belly-flopped onto his sister while shouting, "Mo'nin'! Mo'nin'! Up!"

Kaname woke, grabbed him in a hug, and rolled sideways to trap and tickle him into screaming laughter. They served as an alarm clock, waking the other girls. Tōshirō watched for a minute to gauge Tomoe's mental state, then left for his room once Akemi was alert enough to be on guard. His silenced phone's screen was swarming with notifications from Urahara— texts of things the man couldn't say in front of the girls. Joy.

Everyone convened at the dining table about forty minutes later. Tsukabishi was nowhere to be seen, kitchen and cooking duty having been claimed by Mr. Kaname so he could prioritize research. Miki dropped into a chair and tugged at the uniform she borrowed from Akemi because Kaname's was too small. Kaname arrived and plopped her brother into a high chair, which Mr. Kaname must have brought over in his dead-of-night luggage run. Mrs. Kaname arrived in business attire. Kaname blinked in surprise and said, "You're going in on a Saturday, Mama?"

“I took Wednesday off and don't know if I'll be going in Monday, so I have some catching up to do,” the woman explained over her coffee. Then she winked at them all and said, “Let's all work hard to reinforce our covers like a spy ring, okay?”

Miki perked up. Akemi looked at Miki with dismay.

Akemi ate sparingly and stood before everyone else. “I want to check in with Momoe before school. Hitsugaya, get some of the spare Grief Seeds from Urahara and carry them in case Mami needs to purify her Soul Gem.” She raised a brow expectantly, so he nodded agreement. “I will meet you all at school.”

The train ride and walk to school was subdued despite Miki and Kaname chattering in an awkward attempt to cheer Tomoe. When they walked up the creek path, they found Akemi standing morosely with Shizuki. The girl met them halfway and took Tomoe's hands in hers as she tearfully said, “Miss Akemi told me about your friend. I'm so— so sorry. Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you.”

Tomoe's grieved expression was genuine. She nodded at Shizuki, unable to speak.

The blonde remained speechless all morning, dully staring at the ground, desk, or whiteboard and leaving Tōshirō to explain the cover story. He escorted her to her seat. Teachers and classmates alike looked at her in sympathy. He stood at her elbow and glared at gawkers when she made no move to leave her seat at breaks. Those two girls who acted like they knew Tomoe came over and consoled her during one break, but Tomoe remained largely unresponsive. Tōshirō could feel her
reiatsu darkening throughout the morning; halfway through the shortened day, he approached her during another break with a Grief Seed in his palm and tapped it against her Soul Gem ring. No one else in the class could see the two objects, so it probably looked like he was lightly touching her hand to comfort her. Tomoe looked up at him and quietly thanked him right as the bell rang. Tōshirō could feel every eye in the room on him as he returned to his seat. He could only guess what they were thinking.

Probably something extremely embarrassing. He was intensely glad Miki wasn't in this class. It was bad enough that she'd be meeting Karin with the ammunition she already had.

After school, everyone in the know lurked at the edge of the property line of Miki's condo building. Tōshirō stretched his senses and didn't detect any souls in Miki's unit, so Miki took Akemi up to her place to filch some of her belongings and pack them in the magical girl's shield while the rest stood as lookouts. Miki was peeved when the two girls rejoined them; everyone wisely avoided asking about it.

Mrs. Kaname was already “home” and in casual clothes when they returned to the shop in early afternoon. Urahara and Tessai appeared as they were setting down their school things. After a brief talk, all save Tatsuya and Mr. Kaname headed down to the underground training area. Akemi and Tomoe carried Kaname and Miki while Tsukabishi carried Mrs. Kaname for the freefall from the trap door to the ground far below. The girls shrieked the whole way down but the woman laughed and her eyes were wild with joy. Probably an adrenaline junkie. Then Tsukabishi and Urahara activated the reishi henkan-ki.

Karin and Yuzu were the first out the portal, each of their faces determined. Both bore large camping backpacks; a soccer ball in a net dangled off Karin's and some kind of special cooking pans clanked on the outside of Yuzu's. Both twins scanned the room and locked onto Akemi.

Yuzu chirped, “Hi, Homura! Hi, Tōshirō!”

Karin gave an exaggerated salute and shouted, “Yo, Homurapunzel! Heyyy, Tōsh!”

Akemi's cheeks colored as Tōshirō sighed and waved. Those two were lost causes. Miki was entirely too interested in his and Akemi's reactions. He resigned himself to an unholy Miki-Kurosaki partnership then and there.

Suddenly, Akemi jolted and looked like she had realized something. “Ah! Wait!” she cried out, eyes wide. “Mami, everyone, don't panic, Ichigo is just—!”

Kurosaki and his father exited the reishi henkan-ki, followed by Kurosaki's friends. Tomoe, Kaname, and Miki sucked in a collective gasp and looked surprised to say the least. Tomoe's Soul Gem ring sparked yellow as she identified Kurosaki's overwhelming moonlight-and-embers reiatsu as a potential threat. Tōshirō cursed under his breath and grabbed her wrist to jar her out of transforming.

“—very powerful,” Akemi finished with dismay.

How the hell had Kurosaki's absurd power not struck them as something worth mentioning?

“Oooopsie-daisy,” Urahara trilled. At least he looked genuinely embarrassed.

“Oi! Kurosaki!” Tōshirō snarled as Tomoe's eyes wildly darted from person to person in search of threats. “Learn some damn control!”

“Oh, fuck,” Kurosaki blurted.
“Onii-chan! Language!” Yuzu scolded.

“I mean— hell, I'm sorry—” His reiatsu lightened by half, wavered, and rose back to about three quarters of his resting power as his control slipped. “Dammit!”

Karin waved her arms over her head and shouted, “Don't worry, Ichi-nii is a total softie! He just sucks at suppressing his magic as much as a snowman sucks at swimming!”

“Hey!”

Tōshirō couldn’t hear whatever it was that Ishida muttered from his distance, but it made Kurosaki’s face and ears go red.

The twins strolled up to the group from Mitakihara. Karin eyed the people new to her and looked at Tōshirō. “Real names or fake names?”

“Fake names?” Miki asked.

Tōshirō’s eye twitched. “Do you have any sense of subtlety?”

Karin shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Tōshirō rolled his eyes and looked Miki’s way “These are the girls we've been referring to as Kikyo and Yumi,” he explained. “We've concealed from the Incubator that they know anything and would prefer to keep it that way. Think you all can keep your mouths shut about their names—”

“And presence,” Akemi interrupted.

“And presence,” Tōshirō said with a nod, “outside the building?” He stared Miki dead in the eye, certain she was the blabbermouth of the Mitakihara group.

Miki flushed, obviously understood his implication, and looked fierce. “Absolutely.”

Urahara watched her curiously and traded a glance with Tōshirō, who thought of the texts Urahara had sent him overnight. Something about Miki really did seem to have changed since the debacle the night before.

“In that case,” Karin said loudly, “KUROSAKI SUPPORT SQUAD ACTIVATE!”

And she says she's not like her father, Tōshirō drily thought to Hyōrinmaru.

Yuzu cheered and looked determined. The twins launched into energetic introductions featuring a lot of dramatic hand gestures. Their brother walked straight to Akemi.

“Yo,” Kurosaki said quietly. “How you holding up, Stopwatch?”

Akemi glanced at him and then all around the cavern, looking shy. “I— I'm— m-mostly— okay,” she stammered.

Kurosaki grinned faintly and ruffled her hair. “And partly lying. But that's okay. I understand.”

Akemi’s face went red and she looked down at her feet. She looked her age for once, a girl embarrassed by her older brother. Her demeanor very obviously fascinated Miki, who started scrutinizing Kurosaki like he was a living riddle.

“Why do you call her Stopwatch?” Kaname asked with interest.
“Inside joke,” Kurosaki answered with a sly wink at Akemi.

Isshin approached Akemi and spoke quietly with her for a moment before squeezing her shoulder and looking up. “Lead on, Kisuke.”

Half an hour later, the entire mob was seated in the dining room eating a late lunch and talking strategy.

“Do you want me to start with her Soul Gem or her body?” Inoue asked.

“We healed her body as well as we could while everyone was at school,” Urahara said.

“There isn't really anything we can do about the malnutrition, though. Or replacing her teeth. Not on short notice,” added Tsukabishi.

“I can fix that!” Inoue declared with cheerful determination.

“How?” asked Mrs. Kaname.

And so the Karakura mob explained Inoue's reality-rejection powers to the stunned Mitakihara group. Tōshirō wasn't sure how smart that was.

“You see why we want to keep her a secret from the Incubator, Miss Miki?” Urahara asked at the end.

Miki could only nod, eyes wide. Then she found words. “She's— she's a walking Undo button!”

Karin choked and spewed soda onto her plate. After hacking so hard her brother thumped her on the back, Karin cackled wordless agreement.

They all went to the back room where Sakura's body lay in stasis. Most of them stayed back near the table while Inoue knelt by the redhead and let her fairies flutter around to inspect the body. Satisfied with her evaluation, she firmly said, “Sōten Kisshun. I Reject.”

Tomoe knelt on Sakura's other side and looked at her friend through the golden dome of Inoue's power as the body gradually filled out over the course of fifteen minutes until she looked as though she had never been starving in the first place.

“That was so weird,” Mrs. Kaname blurted when Inoue pulled back.

“Ah, you couldn't see anything but the body, right?” Urahara asked.

“Nope,” Mrs. Kaname confirmed. “It was just like a time lapse movie.”

Urahara looked interested for a moment, but went serious again. “Now for the main event.” He reached in his haori and pulled out the small isolation tube containing Sakura's Grief Seed. “I think you should sit at the table for this, Miss Inoue.”

“There's something in there?” asked Mrs. Kaname.

“Yes. You can't see it?” Urahara asked as he opened the lid and scooped up the Grief Seed.

“Also a nope!”

“Interesting.” Urahara set the Grief Seed down at an empty space at the table. “Whenever you're ready, Miss Inoue.”
Inoue bounced over to the table and settled herself by the Grief Seed. Her three friends arrayed themselves around her protectively. Tomoe knelt at the table and stared hard at the Grief Seed as Inoue held up her hands, breathed deeply, and again said, “Sōten Kisshun. I Reject,” while everyone hovered around the smallish table. The golden shield snapped into place over and around the Grief Seed and siphoned off darkness.

And siphoned.

And siphoned.

Inoue's friends started to shift around uneasily. Half an hour in, Kurosaki glanced up at Urahara where the scientist was watching intently and said, “Hey, it's... it's taking a lot longer than the last one.”

Urahara's eyes didn't move from the Grief Seed. “From the readings I took, this one is far more powerful.”

“You could have said something!” Kurosaki snapped.

“He told me,” Inoue breathed. “I just have to pace myself. Look, it's getting a little bit red.”

Another half hour later, the Grief Seed was a uniform, dull opaque red and Inoue was tiring.

“Inoue. I think you should take a break,” Sado murmured with worry.

“I'm almost done!” Inoue objected.

Indeed, the jewel's clarity began improving more quickly, shifting to a cloudy burgundy before red light blossomed from the crown of the Grief Seed and flowed downward around the silver spindle like flower petals. There was a pulse of energy as the hollow space filled with red reishi. The silver, eye-shaped decoration atop the Grief Seed shimmered and filled out with red light, the metal shifting from silver to gold. Gold settings burst out and wrapped down the egg-shaped jewel, met beneath it, and filled out along the bottom to form a golden cup.

After one last pulse of light, the golden shield dissolved and Inoue pitched forward in exhaustion. Her three friends grabbed her arms and shoulders to keep her from slamming her face into the table and pulled her upright; her head lolled back and she started laughing. “Yay! I did it!” Her face went slack and her eyes started to roll back in her head but she blinked fiercely and blurted, “I'm hungry!” Her chin dipped toward her chest as she fell asleep upright, then she jerked her head back up with surprise and repeated, “Wow, I'm hungry!”

Kaname's father stood and made a determined face. “I can fix that. Tessai, can I use the kitchen?”

“Of course.”

Kaname's father hurried out of the room, muttering to himself about food.

Inoue slowly teetered to her left and fell asleep against Sado's bicep. Sado stayed still while Ishida and Kurosaki fretted. Urahara told them to keep waking her before she could drift into sleep so deep they wouldn't be able to rouse her to eat. This led to shoulder-shakes and pokes and resulted in Inoue repeatedly jolting upright and announcing her hunger before keeling back into Sado's arm.

“How are you doing, Mami?” Kaname asked gently.

Tōshirō looked back at the magical girl and found her staring across the table at Sakura's brilliant
red Soul Gem in disbelief. Tomoe leaned over the table and reached for the egg, fingers quivering as they stretched and grasped just short of Sakura's soul. Karin gently pushed it closer to Tomoe with a brush of fingertips to its gold base. Tomoe lifted it reverently and just stared in silent shock for a long time.

“Mami?” Kaname tried again.

“It's— tr— rue,” Tomoe rasped. “You— saved— her. It's— true. Oh, God, it's true.” She cradled her friend's Soul Gem to her heart and cried, “Kyōko— Kyōko— I'm sor— Kyōko!”

Kaname leaned into her and wrapped her arms around Tomoe in a loose hug, making soothing sounds as the older girl wept. Phantom rose perfume teased everyone as she raised her reiatsu and used whatever empathic calming ability she had. Isshin and Ishida looked surprised, but kept silent when Urahara gave them a little shake of his head.

Later. Again.

Mr. Kaname returned with a plate stacked high with cookies and set them on the table in front of Inoue. “I'll make something more substantial, but start with these,” he ordered her. He didn't really have to, as Inoue was already stuffing her face. Mr. Kaname left with an amused smile.

“Right,” Urahara said with a clap. “Let's jump right into waking her up. Miss Tomoe, I think you should do it. Please get close to her, but don't put the Soul Gem in her hand yet. Tessai and I are going to put barriers around her so she can't injure anyone or run if she wakes up in a panic.”

“Transform so it will be easier to bind her with ribbons if she fights. Shield your Soul Gem,” Akemi advised.

Tomoe looked stricken. “You think she'll try— try to—”

Akemi sighed. “Not necessarily on purpose. Remember how you reacted when you woke. Only add the trauma of remembering you tried to kill a friend after your soul was forced to twist into a monster.”

“Oh.” Tomoe sat straight and took a deep breath, tipping her head back with her eyes closed. She breathed like that for several seconds, obviously grounding herself, then wordlessly triggered her transformation. Mrs. Kaname jumped and blinked hard.

“You see her costume?” Urahara asked.

“Y-yeah,” she said with wide eyes.

Tōshirō wondered why Akemi looked utterly baffled. If she wasn't saying anything, maybe it was related to a different timeline?

“Interesting. Did you see the light show?”

“No.”

“Huh.”

Tomoe held a hand up to her Soul Gem and made a barrier around it. At Urahara's direction, she moved to Sakura's side. Tōshirō joined her opposite the magical girl and conjured some ice armor but no sword, ready to help subdue Sakura if she reacted violently. Over the next ten minutes, Urahara and Tsukabishi layered multiple kidō barriers around them, then remained ready for
anything on either side of the barriers. Karin and Yuzu transformed—God, that was still weird—and blocked the doorway. Akemi transformed and moved to stand between Sakura and everyone sitting at and standing behind the table as Mr. Kaname reentered and plunked a steaming bowl of rice, vegetables, and meat in front of Inoue, who immediately grabbed the chopsticks and ate. Everyone else with powers watched closely, ready to react to anything.

Honestly, if Kyōko Sakura could manage to escape them, she damn well deserved to.

“Miss Tomoe,” Urahara said gravely. When Tomoe broke her stare at her friend's face to look up at him, he said, “Once you put the Soul Gem in her hand, immediately take it back.”

“What?” she asked with surprise.

“As long as we keep it within one hundred meters of her, she'll be able to control her body,” he explained. “If she fights too much or is suicidal, we can just have one of you run off until she separates from her body again. Then we can figure out something more drastic.”

Tomoe swallowed hard and nodded.

Urahara took a deep breath and looked at him. “Remove the stasis whenever you're ready, Tōshirō.”

Tōshirō looked at Tomoe and raised a brow in inquiry. She took another deep breath and nodded. The stasis was quickly dispelled. Tomoe gulped and lowered the red Soul Gem to Sakura's hand with a tremble of anxiety.

As soon as the jewel touched Sakura's skin, her eyes flew open and stared at nothing. She inhaled sharply while arching off the futon. Tomoe reluctantly pulled the Soul Gem back to cradle at her chest. Sakura's eyes darted around the room with horrified paranoia and she flailed her limbs in an attempt to scramble upright as thin tongues of flame lashed through the air around her. Tomoe shoved the red Soul Gem at Tōshirō; once he took it, Tomoe leaned over Sakura and gripped the hyperventilating girl's shoulders. Sakura screamed and thrashed in an attempt to shove Tomoe away.


Sakura's wildly rolling eyes settled on Tomoe's face. She shook all over, expression some kind of deep existential horror mixed with shock, and lifted her arms up toward Tomoe with a sob. Tomoe let go of Sakura's shoulders to embrace her and pull her up into a sitting position. They cried and rocked while clinging to each other for dear life.

Tōshirō looked down at the Soul Gem in his hand and saw it dimming, so he took one of the Grief Seeds from his pocket and tapped the items together in an attempt to keep the magical girl stable. He tucked both into the palm of one hand to maintain constant contact and resumed watching for signs of attack.

“I'm—sor—ry—I'm—sor—ry,” Sakura gasped into Tomoe's neck, voice hitching.

“Shhh, it's not your fault. It's not your fault.”

“I—was—n't—thin—king—I—was—n't—” Sakura paused for a deeper but still reedy breath before continuing. “You—would—nev—er—take—my—take—my—I—don't—know—why—I—hurt—you—He—was—right—I—I'm—so—sor—ry—”

Tomoe gave her shoulders an extra squeeze and roughly said, “Your Soul Gem was too dark. You
couldn't think right. You were desperate. I don't blame you.”

“I— do—”

“Please don't.”

“He— was— right! I'm— a—!” Sakura choked on her words. “I'm— a— Witch!”

“You— you were,” Tomoe said, voice breaking. “But you're— better now, okay?”

“Dad— was— right!” Sakura rasped, then wailed, “I'm a Witch! He was right!”

“NO,” said half the room.

Sakura acted like she hadn't heard them, dragging fingers down her scalp with white knuckles and staring into space. “Whyyyy— I— a Witch?! How?!”

Tomoe pushed Sakura away but maintained a grip on her shoulders. Sakura looked confused and lost. Tomoe firmed her face into righteous anger. “Kyubey hid this from us. It's—” She looked around the room, casting about for someone to explain.

Akemi spoke up. “This is the intended fate of all magical girls,” she said solemnly. “The— Kyubey designed this system specifically to farm us for magical energy.”

And just like that, the air sizzled, the Soul Gem in Tōshirō's hand burned, and Sakura's face instantly snapped from vulnerable trauma to red-hot fury— a safer emotion. “WHAT?!”

“It— it hides a lot of things from us,” Tomoe added quietly. “I don't... understand a lot yet, but....” She swallowed hard and stared Sakura in the eye fiercely. “I want to find out everything it's done and— save— girls— from— turning—” Tomoe broke down crying again and drew Sakura back to her in an embrace. “I saw you— I saw— Oh, Kyōko, I never want another girl to go through what you did. Never. Never.”

Sakura shook with rage in Tomoe's arms. “I'll kill it,” she growled with wide, feral eyes focused on nothing. “I'll fucking kill it. I'll kill it. Roast it. Stab it. I'll kill it.”

“That is the eventual goal, yes,” Urahara said loudly.

Sakura's eyes darted around the room with actual awareness this time, noting each person in the crowd with a warrior's threat assessment before focusing on Urahara. “What.”

“We want to stop it,” Urahara said.

“Who the hell're you?” Sakura asked with a blank expression.

The scientist removed his hat and bowed with a flourish. “Kisuke Urahara, humble magical merchant, at your service.”


Sakura looked at Karin and blinked slowly, as though disoriented or not quite awake. She eyed Karin and Yuzu and their costumes for a moment, glanced at Akemi and her costume, then looked back to Karin. “Who the hell're you?”

“Karin Kurosaki, proud founding member of Team Fuck Up Incubigbad. Welcome to the club,” Karin said with a sassy salute as her sister frowned at the language.
Sakura stared. She looked interested but suspicious. “Ink what?”

Mami sat back and rubbed tears from her cheeks. “Kyubey even lied to us about his— its name. It's really called Incubator.”

“What the fuck kinda name is that?” Sakura asked, face and voice deadpan.

“The kind of name to fuck with,” Karin replied as though it was obvious.

Yuzu sighed and looked aside, resigned to the cussing.

Face pleasant, Karin continued, “I'm fond of Incubastard. Incubitch and variations like Incubitchface. Incubutthead.”


“Incuburglar.”


Karin preened. “So, like, yo,” she said with a sharp wave, “we're gonna stop the Incubluffer from Incublabbering its Incubullshit and Incoercing girls to Incucontract by Incubeating it to Incubits.”

She topped it all off by pointing at Sakura with double finger-guns while grinning.

Tōshirō was sorely tempted to palm his face. Because it was ridiculous, not part of the plan, and yet somehow working. Because Sakura stared at Karin, interest piqued and face betraying that she was having some violent thoughts which pleased her; that expression was slowly mirrored by Karin, who added a smirk. Pretty much everyone else stared at them. Tōshirō wondered at Karin's skill in derailment. Well, and whether it was even a deliberate thing. It was hard to tell with her sometimes.

“So!” Karin said as she jauntily slammed her hands onto her hips and shifted into a cocky pose.

“Are you on our side, or do we need to keep you in those barriers for your own safety?”

Annnd Sakura tensed as she suddenly, truly registered that she was penned in and surrounded.

Tōshirō really did palm his face. “Real subtle, Karin.”

“Subtle schmuttle,” Karin sniffed. “Kyōko's— your name is Kyōko, right? —Kyōko strikes me as the practical type.”

“She has been conscious for all of ten minutes, Karin,” he objected flatly. Roughly seven of which had been spent bawling in existential horror.

“So? That's long enough.” Karin raised a brow at Sakura. “Don't need flowery shit, just get to the point. Am I right? Cubecrater fucked you up, it's knocked you on your emotional ass, time to get back up and plot your glorious roaring rampage of revenge, right?”

The smile Sakura gave Karin was so viciously bloodthirsty that Tōshirō checked her Soul Gem to make sure she wasn't on the verge of Witchy meltdown. The crystal was still bright red. The Grief Seed beside it was getting full from keeping it that way, though.

“Who the hell're you and why the fuck do you have my Soul Gem?!” Sakura snarled, then launched herself at him.
Crap.

Tomoe scrambled to get between him and Sakura, arms spread wide to hold her friend back. “Kyōko, no!”

“The hell, Mami?!” Sakura roared. “He has my fucking Soul Gem!”

“And he'll give it back when we're sure you won't kill yourself!” Tomoe cried. Literally.

Sakura went still and quiet. “What?”

Tomoe tried to speak, but couldn't, so Tōshirō said, “Magical girls who we've brought back from being Witches before have reacted... poorly.” Sakura stared at him in bafflement so he added, “We don't want you to shatter your Soul Gem like they did.”

“Huhhh?” Sakura frowned then rolled her eyes like she was surrounded by idiots. “If I shatter my Soul Gem I can't use it to skewer and barbecue that motherfucker.”

Tōshirō stared. So did others. They were doing a lot of that. They were so far off the rails they may as well have skipped planning altogether.

“See! Told you!” Karin crowed.

Maybe it was actually a Kurosaki-Sakura alliance he needed to worry about.

Sakura stared Tōshirō dead in the eye. “Tell me who you are or I'll set you on fire.”

“He has your Soul Gem, you know,” Akemi observed idly. Tōshirō wondered if that actually made any difference.

“I'm creative,” Sakura said with a dismissive wave as she glanced at Akemi. “Who the hell're you, purple girl?”

“Homura Akemi,” the magical girl said with a polite nod. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Sakura's lip curled and she looked like she would mock Akemi but Tomoe said, “They're my friends, Kyōko. They're nice. They've helped me a lot.”

Sakura stared at her skeptically for a moment, then looked aside. “Tch.” She looked back up at Tomoe, disgruntled. “You're too quick to trust people who're nice to you, Mami.”

Tomoe flinched.

Sakura looked at Tōshirō again, calmer but still pissed off. “Again: Who the hell're you? How the hell do you know Mami?”

Sayaka Miki chose that moment to be the obnoxious little monster he had expected her to be around Karin. She grinned widely and conspiratorially said, “That's Tōshirō Hitsugaya. He's Mami's boyfriend.”

Tomoe sputtered incoherently and waved her arms in denial. Tōshirō rounded on Miki and snarled, “I am not!” as Karin made a loud sound of interest. He knew he was doomed in that moment. And that was before Sakura seized the opportunity to thrust her arm past Tomoe and snatch her Soul Gem and the Grief Seed out of Tōshirō's hand while they were distracted. Dammit.
“Oh, good job, Miki,” he sneered acidly as Sakura transformed into her burgundy battle costume. At least she hadn't conjured that spear. Yet.

Miki rubbed the back of her neck nervously. “Ahahaha, whoops!” Then she blinked and stopped. “Hey, you’re the one who let her grab the thing!”

“And who distracted me?!”

“Tōshirō, you've been holding out on me,” Karin crooned.

“I have not!”

She looked at Tomoe. “Is he a good kisser?”

Tomoe squawked and turned red. Tōshirō shouted, “I've never kissed her!”

“Taking it slow, huh?” Karin asked casually. “That does seem like you.”

“Damn you, Kurosaki!”

“Oh, I'm Kurosaki now, huh? You must be really angry.” Karin made an obviously faked contrite face. “Sorry to pry into your love life.”

“I don't have a love life!”

Kurosaki, the orange-haired bastard, mirthfully said, “Methinks he doth protest too much.”

“Haaa, I was right! He really is your knight in shining armor, Mami,” Sakura said airily.

Tomoe spluttered in an attempt to speak, gave up, and buried her face in her hands.

“Ooooh. Tell me, tell me!” Karin gushed.

Sakura looked at her with a smug smile. Apparently, teasing Tomoe overrode her trauma. Fabulous. “When I went batshit and tried to kill her, he kept throwing himself between us and taking all the hits.”

Karin's face lit up and she looked at Tōshirō, clasped her hands beside one cheek, and cooed, “You're such a noble boyfriend, Tōsh.”

Tōshirō joined Tomoe in burying his face in his hands. He gave up. Arguing just gave them more ammunition.

“Awww, they're so shy,” Miki said in the same tone, cupping her cheeks in her hands. “How cute.”

“Do I need to give you the 'hurt her and die' boyfriend talk?” Sakura said gleefully.

Others in the room were enjoying the scene far too much for Tōshirō's liking. He dragged his fingers down his face in frustration. Karin Kurosaki, Sayaka Miki, and Kyōko Sakura were going to be a triad of terror. They would be the death of him. Or he would lose control and be the death of them. Whichever.

Karin understood his silence and posture because of course she did, so she laughed at him before looking to Sakura again. “ANYWAY, are you in?”

“Pfft, hell yeah,” Sakura sniffed. She looked around the room more calmly and stopped on Inoue,
who was finishing off her bowl of food. “Long as you got food.”

Kaname's father looked indignant and determined. “Absolutely. As much as you want.”

“Sold,” Sakura said with a smirk.

“Are you hungry right now?”

Tōshirō—and probably everyone—thought of Sakura's malnourished state before Inoue's intervention as Sakura loudly answered, “HELL YES I AM.”

“I'll be in the kitchen,” Mr. Kaname said with satisfaction. “I'll keep cooking until you tell me to stop.”

“Yesss!” Sakura said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation.

Urahara cleared his throat. When Sakura raised an imperious eyebrow at him, he said, “So. Can we take down these barriers or are you going to burn down this building and run?”

“As if I'd run from a personal chef,” Sakura scoffed with another roll of her eyes.

“He's not—” Tomoe started, then interrupted herself. “You know what? Sure. Sure he is.”

Yuzu threw a hand in the air as though volunteering in class. “I'll cook for you, too! I love cooking for friends!”

“Did anyone else notice she didn't say she wouldn't burn the shop to the ground, or was it just me?” Ishida muttered.

Sakura gave Yuzu the same disgruntled and skeptical face she had given Tomoe. “I'm not your friend.”

“You will be!” Yuzu declared, pumping both fists with determined cheer.

Sakura stared at her for a moment, then turned to Karin. “She's gonna get herself killed by a rival one of these days.”

“Over my dead body,” Karin said with a threatening sneer.

“How about no dead bodies,” Mrs. Kaname said mildly.

“Eh. That'd be nice, but it's not realistic,” Sakura said with a shrug. She levered herself off the floor and stood. “Anyone got any Pocky?” she asked as she stretched and popped her spine.

Akemi reached into her shield and pulled out an unopened box of Pocky. She held it up and smoothly said, “I have plenty.”

“Dude. That's my favorite flavor!” Sakura crowed. She glanced at Urahara and Tsukabishi, whom she had figured out were maintaining the barriers. “Let me out so I can get my Pocky.”

“Please address whether you intend to set this place on fire,” Ishida said loudly.

“Eh,” Sakura said with a shrug, “if I burn this place I'd burn the food and that'd be a waste.”

“She's... more concerned about the food than the people,” Ishida said with numb incredulity.
Urahara and Tsukabishi traded long glances and dropped the barriers. Tsukabishi said, “How about we all move up to the dining room so everyone can sit?”

A murmur of agreement went through the assembled allies. All the magical girls dismissed their costumes. Sado and Kurosaki helped Inoue to her feet, arms hooked in her elbows as she swayed drunkenly.

“Wha's wr'ng wit'er?” Sakura asked around her third stick of Pocky.

“She expended an extreme amount of magic using a special ability to heal your body and revert your Grief Seed into a Soul Gem,” Akemi replied, matter of fact. “We are forcing her to remain conscious as long as possible to eat. The energy from it will aid her recovery.”

Sakura froze in place and even stopped chewing, watching Inoue's progress to the door with an unreadable expression. She held up her left hand and looked at her Soul Gem ring, then down at her body— specifically, where her bare midriff peeked through her partially-buttoned jacket. She poked her abdomen with one finger, then wandered to one side to test her hip, then slid her hand up to feel under her jacket— checking her ribs. Considering her previously malnourished state, Tōshirō inferred she was figuring out that she wasn't as bony as she had been. Sakura looked up and watched Inoue wobble out the door into the hallway, face a combination of mystified and troubled. She was so lost in thought that when Tomoe took one of her hands and tugged her toward the door, she followed docilely.

Tōshirō followed them out, shadowing Sakura in case she did anything unexpected. Well, her fairly sane behavior now was unexpected, especially as compared to her initial reaction upon waking, so... yeah, Tōshirō was feeling a bit paranoid. His entire body was tense and waiting for anything, the words his other self had written about the other Karin's madness echoing in his thoughts. Surely it couldn't be this easy. So he leaned against the wall by the door as Tomoe tugged Sakura down to sit and Kaname plunked down beside her and unconsciously raised her calming reiatsu. Sakura didn't react to that, but glanced at Tōshirō sideways.

*I know why you're over there, you jerk*, her disdainful face practically screamed. Tōshirō held her gaze unrepentantly. Sakura's face eventually eased into approval of all things before turning back to the table.

Mr. Kaname brought in two steaming bowls of food for Inoue and Sakura and disappeared back into the kitchen. Both girls dove right in, though Sakura seemed almost frantic and shielded her bowl with one arm while shoveling noodles into her face with zero regard for table manners. Tōshirō frowned and caught Mrs. Kaname frowning. He met her eyes and realized she understood how desperately hungry Sakura must have been for quite some time. There was a quietly protective, indignant fury in her eyes that jarringly reminded him of Matsumoto. Tōshirō glanced at Isshin and found his former captain wearing the same facial expression. The man met his gaze grimly. Tōshirō knew they were both thinking the same thing: Kyōko Sakura ate like a starving recruit from one of the Eightieth Districts of the Rukon, the wild and lawless areas farthest from Seireitei where competition was as fierce as food was scarce. Which implied a lot about her.

Sakura finished her bowl first. Akemi solemnly took box after box of variously flavored Pocky out of her shield to give to Sakura, who devoured it in a way that absurdly reminded Tōshirō of an electric pencil sharpener. Inoue finished her bowl in time for Mr. Kaname to bring more food. Inoue went more slowly while Sakura inhaled her second serving. Mr. Kaname brought Sakura a third as Inoue blinked sleepily and pitched forward toward her empty bowl. Sado caught her and scooped her up. Kurosaki and Ishida hovered around him, but he shook his head and nodded toward everyone at the table, then carried her out of the room to find somewhere for Inoue to sleep.
Sakura slowed and watched them leave as she slurped noodles, eyes serious and considering.

Sakura ate at a more normal pace when her fourth bowl was brought out. Urahara took a deep breath and said, “Right. I think it would be best if you tell us how you came to be in such dire straits.”

The redhead put a piece of chicken in her mouth and chewed slowly as she scrutinized him. The silence dragged as she thought. Finally, she swallowed and countered, “How about you tell me where the hell I am and who the hell you people are first.”

“Fair enough,” Urahara said with a quirk of his lips.

And so began the grand explanation shared among various people at the table as they snacked on cookies from a monstrous stash Yuzu had brought with her. Sakura weighed every speaker with a bland stare beneath heavy eyelids, eating blindly to focus on them. She merely glanced at Sado's return and didn't physically show any reaction to anything they said, but her reiatsu slowly burned hotter with rage. Tōshirō raised his own icy reiatsu to counter it when he saw sweat beading on foreheads. Sakura tilted her head to look at him with an amused smirk for a moment. Her reiatsu settled lower in an apparent attempt to control herself, but it soon burned hotly again. The scent of roses gradually competed with the scent of the food as Kaname watched Sakura earnestly the entire time. The fire of Sakura's soul remained banked. For now.

Sakura was silent and calculating for a long while after the explanation. Everyone let her think, just watching her chew Pocky at a more leisurely pace. At long last, her lip curled in disgust and she said, “Tch. Shitty deal, and I'm still gonna kill that fucking demon for not laying it out up front, but we shouldn't've been surprised. You get what you pay for.”

Everyone stared.

“...What?” Tomoe asked.

“Miracles aren't free, y'know,” Sakura said with a glance at her former mentor. She picked up a new stick of Pocky and loosely waved it around like a teacher's pointer, eyes closed. “I learned that the hard way. If you wish for hope, an equal amount of despair'll be rained down on you, too. That's how everything stays in equilibrium and the world's balance doesn't get disturbed.”

That was far more philosophical than most of them had expected, as evidenced by surprised faces all around.

_She is the daughter of a passionate, zealous religious leader_, Hyōrinmaru reminded Tōshirō. _She was likely immersed in theology and philosophy from the cradle. Her difficult life may have caused her to question or reject her father's dogma, but any mental conditioning to analyze things in abstract philosophical terms may be indelible._

Oh. That was something that had been completely glossed over in the tentative and very skimpy dossier Urahara had compiled on Sakura based on Akemi's stories. It was also likely a major building block they really needed to take into account. Actually, it could prove useful.

“That's not... true...,” Kaname protested softly.

“If it wasn't true, no one'd have to wish for anything 'cause the world'd be all sunshine and daisies by now instead of the survival-of-the-fittest cagefight we got,” Sakura argued, punctuating the harshness by chomping down on the Pocky like a predator going for the throat of prey.

“You do have a point,” Urahara said with a nod. “Cynical, but valid.”
Sakura tilted her head back and glanced at him sideways. “You'd better not just be humoring me.”

Urahara's mouth widened into an entertained smile. “I'm not.”

“That's not what your face says,” Sakura drawled.

“Oh, no, far from it,” Urahara demurred with a wave of his godforsaken fan. “I'm amused that someone as young as you can discuss philosophy so easily. Amused in a good way. It's refreshing.”

That was at least a partial lie. Everyone at the table knew it, with the possible exceptions of Kaname, Miki, and Tomoe. Sakura watched Urahara a moment longer before turning away with a sniff, deciding against challenging him further. For now.

“Whatever.” Sakura pulled another stick of Pocky out of the package and gestured vaguely with it. “So when're we going hunting?”

“What?” asked Kaname.

“Hunting. Going—” Sakura mimed walking with the fingers of one hand— “hunting.” She abruptly mimed stabbing something. “You all say the Catbastard has lotsa bodies, right? So if we hunt down and roast every one of 'em, we're set, right?”

“It is not so simple as that,” Akemi said firmly as people stared more.

“Why the hell not?”

“It is a waste of magic and effort to eliminate bodies when it has an endless supply of them.”

Sakura raised an eyebrow. “How d'you know they're endless?”

Akemi scowled. “If they are not endless, they are at least the functional equivalent against a force as small as ours.”

Tōshirō wondered about how the numbers would work out if the Thirteen Divisions threw their entire force into hunting down terminals. They would need a decent estimate of how many terminals there were first, though. And a way to track them, since they didn't seem to have reiatsu — or had reiatsu that was undetectable. Hmm. He'd have to ponder that.

“Hmph. Then what's the point of this little secret clubhouse thing you all got going on?” Sakura taunted. She leaned forward and looked up at Urahara through her bangs, eyes contemptuous and skeptical. “You said you wanna stop the hellspawn. How?” She reached to Tomoe's space at the table without breaking eye contact with Urahara and carelessly slung the empty teacup and saucer skittering across the table at him. “Tea parties?” she asked mockingly.

Urahara, also refusing to break eye contact, caught the chinaware with a deft movement and a rattle of porcelain, face a picture of serene interest that told Tōshirō the scientist was utterly fascinated by the girl. Heaven help her.

“Kyōko!” Tomoe hissed. “Don't be so rude! They saved you!”

“Hey, I didn't fucking ask anyone to save me,” Sakura snapped back.

“But you needed saving, and they were there, sooo...,” Karin said with a lazy hand gesture.

Sakura turned a disgruntled scowl at her. “Your walking do-over giver wasn't there. I was batshit murderberserk but I remember that much. You all had to haul her ass over here from wherever the
fuck you came from. You planned this shit.” She bared her teeth and looked around the table. “You assholes brought me back so you'd have a magical girl in your debt to follow your orders. Fuck you. I'll do this my own way.” Sakura stood abruptly and transformed.

Tōshirō sidestepped to block the door. Others at the table protested and Akemi lifted her arm as though to call her shield, but Miki slammed her hands on the table and shouted, “Don't be such a selfish bitch!”

Sakura locked onto Miki and furiously screamed back, “I'll be a selfish bitch if I damn well want to!”

Miki’s big mouth bought them the precious seconds needed for Urahara, Tsukabishi, and Isshin to throw basic but overlapping barriers up around the room without Akemi’s timestop. Not just the exits— the entire room, all angles of escape. Even the potential to blast through walls and ceiling was blocked.

“Son of a bitch!” Sakura snarled as she kicked the table in rage. The wood she made contact with splintered with a mighty crack! resulting in a split clear through to the other side and jagged faults through the rest of its surface. She jabbed an accusing finger at Miki. “You did that on fucking purpose!”

“No I fucking didn’t!”

Tōshirō narrowed his eyes as he felt Miki’s reiatsu fluctuate and sensed the room become significantly more humid. Hyōrinmaru perked up with interest.

“Ah, my poor table,” Urahara mourned.

Kaname’s reiatsu spiked high enough that Tōshirō was surprised she didn’t glow. The room suddenly smelled intensely of roses. “Stop this! We're on the same side!”

“Rest in pieces, darling,” Urahara continued.

Kaname swiped her arm to jab her finger at Kaname. “Stop doin’ that warm-n-fuzzy-drugs thing with your magic you sneaky little bitch!”

Kaname looked hurt and confused to the point of tears. “I— I’m not doing anything!” she cried in a panic as Akemi transformed and snarled, “Shut your filthy mouth, Kyōko!”

“Make me, Purplebitch!”

“Fine!” Annnnd then Akemi stood and was on the verge of launching herself at Sakura. Isshin snagged her by the collar before she could move forward. Tomoe grabbed the hem of Sakura’s ruffled tailcoat and pulled downward with a hiss of Sakura’s name. Sakura ignored her.

“Are we gonna throw down?” Karin asked casually. “'Cause this looks like a throwdown about to happen.”

“How about no,” Mrs. Kaname said drily.

“How about you shut your fucking face, hag?” Sakura sneered.

Kaname gasped. Mrs. Kaname smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. “How about you get a hold of yourself and stop throwing a tantrum?”
“I’m not throwing a fucking tantrum!”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Karin drawled.

“Fuck off!”

“Tch.” Karin leaned forward, elbows on the tilted shard of table in front of her, and propped her chin up in her hands. “Do you even remember what you're screaming about, dumbass?”

Sakura shook with fury and her mouth opened soundlessly a couple times before she shouted, “Shut the fuck up or I'll kick your fucking teeth in!”

So the answer was possibly no. She was arguing for the sake of arguing now. Great.


Tōshirō glanced at Urahara and wondered why he was allowing this escalating disaster to continue. The man was watching the girls with the fascination of a scientist observing an experiment. Great.

“Fuck—” Sakura began.

“All of you shut up!” Yuzu roared with a flare of yellow reiatsu as she abruptly shot to her feet.

Yuzu.

Roared.

The Mitakihara contingent was merely startled, but every other Kurosaki in the room was suddenly white-faced with terror and Kurosaki's friends looked like they had just witnessed a portent of the end times. Tōshirō was pretty firmly in their camp. Akemi eyed Yuzu sideways and leaned away.

“We are trying to have a civil discussion here, not angry screaming cussing Olympics!” Yuzu continued.

“I'm sorry,” Karin immediately apologized, voice small and meek.

Was this even real life?

“You!” Yuzu said with a jab at Miki, “She asked a valid question!”

Miki's lip jutted out stubbornly. “But she—!”

“Shut up,” Kurosaki breathed with a wary eye on his little sister.

“I'll get to her! But you didn't have to be so confrontational!” Yuzu scolded.

“But—!” Miki began. She shut up when Akemi clasped her shoulder and shook her head. Miki finally registered Akemi's caution and seemed to decide that if Akemi was balking, there was probably good reason to back off. Surprising.

“You!” Yuzu shouted as she pointed at Sakura, “You didn't have to be so dramatic!”

“I'm not fucking dra—”
“I SAID TO SHUT UP, SO KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!” Yuzu screamed.

Sakura shut up in sheer surprise. Karin flinched even though she wasn't the current target of Yuzu's wrath.

“We healed you because it was the right thing to do! Wanting your help and wanting you in debt to us are two different things! Your question about our plans was obviously disingenuous because you didn't wait for an answer before rejecting them! You jump to whatever conclusions won't challenge your cynicism— cut off whatever has the potential to contradict your worldview! Won't even listen to it! Don't lash out just because you're afraid of being wrong or losing control of your coping mechanism for handling the damage your father did to you!”

Sakura physically staggered two steps back and looked like she had been slapped into wide-eyed silence.

Ah, yes. Tōshirō had forgotten how Yuzu could wield her ability to read people as a deadly weapon. This was beyond anything he had personally witnessed, though.

“And we just told you Madoka and Sayaka aren't contracted! They don't know how to use their magic! Madoka wasn't trying to do anything to you!” She left Sakura to gape and rounded on Akemi. “And you should know better than to take her bait!”

Akemi didn't even try to reply, just looked away and grudgingly nodded.

Yuzu rounded on her sister. “And you need to learn when poking someone with a sharp stick is counterproductive and keep your snark to yourself!”

“Okay,” Karin immediately agreed.

Yuzu stood over them as everyone remained completely silent and let her just calm her breathing and give every one of them a challenging stare. “Now. Is everyone capable of hashing this out without acting like tantrumy kindergarteners testing out the naughty words they heard the grownups say?” When everyone either stared or nodded, Yuzu gave a sharp nod of her own.


They did so, Sakura looking spooked and moving with the slow caution of someone who had just discovered their close proximity to landmines.

Yuzu sat, cleared her throat, smoothed her skirt, and directed a sunny smile at Urahara. “Shall we continue?” she asked politely, demeanor as pleasant as the clear blue sky after a hurricane. “I believe the topic was what our plans are.”

“...Right,” Urahara said. “Well. We've been in something of a holding pattern for several days. I have ideas for moving forward, but I would like some additional information first. Miss Sakura?”

Sakura eyed him, somewhere between wary and sulking. “What?”

“Could you please tell us how you came to be in such dire straits?” he repeated his earlier question. “The Incubator has manipulated at least two magical girls into targeting our operations. I'd like to figure out if it did the same with you.”

Sakura fidgeted with the broken table and reached into the wreckage to save her box of Pocky. She brushed wood shards off it and inspected it with a troubled expression. “Kyub— the Incubator didn't send me or anything.”
“It may not have needed to,” Urahara said quietly. “Not directly.”

A foil wrapper crinkled as Sakura studiously peered inside at the snack and tipped the sticks out to inspect them for splinters. “I guess.”

“Kyōko. Please,” Tomoe said gently with a light touch to the girl's upper arm.

Sakura sighed deeply. “Fine.”

When she didn't continue, Tomoe hesitantly prompted, “You said... something about someone poaching your k-kills?”

Sighing tiredly, Sakura scrubbed her face with one hand and said, “The last Witch I fought was... I dunno. Three or four weeks ago?”

Tōshirō narrowed his eyes and saw the others who knew about Akemi's true situation also look suspicious. That was soon after Akemi arrived in this time.

“Where was it?” Urahara asked with quiet interest.

“By some fancy-aaa—” she glanced at Yuzu and modified her language—“paaants old-fashioned tea house on east side.”

Urahara scratched his chin in thought. “You encountered none after that?”

“All I'd find was Familiars, and not a lot of 'em,” Sakura answered.

“Where?”

“East side, mostly to the north. I couldn't find a damn thing on west side or to the south.”

“That is interesting,” Akemi said coolly. “I ventured into western Kazamino on occasion—”

“You were the poacher?!” Sakura demanded.

“In part, perhaps. My apologies,” Akemi said with a sober nod. “I did not intend to poach. I trespassed to investigate the suspicious deaths and hunt Sōju. I encountered...” She lifted her hands and started counting on fingers. “A Box Witch Familiar, the Class Representative Witch—”

“Say what?” Miki sputtered with a partially-suppressed laugh.

“She and her Familiars wore school uniforms and the entire sky was filled with school uniforms on clotheslines and falling desks. I have reason to believe she was once Noriko Chiasa, who was a class representative,” Akemi explained bluntly.

Several people winced. Miki looked abashed and stammered, “O-oh.”

“The Scribbling Witch's Familiar, the Scribbling Witch herself was right on the border....” Akemi trailed off and glanced at Tōshirō. He stared back at her, unsure what she wanted.

She did not enter the Shadow Witch's labyrinth with you and thus cannot name it without drawing suspicion, Hyōrinmaru murmured.

“Then there was the Shadow Witch last night,” Tōshirō finished. “Three Witches and two Familiars.”
Akemi nodded. “All save the Class Representative Witch were on the western border. There should have been more to the east.” She spoke with firm certainty. Tōshirō would bet his haori she knew from experience in previous timelines.

“Bethany Michaels presumably fell in the church where her body was found in east central Kazamino,” Urahara said speculatively, “and her friend Marina Sakamoto went missing the same night. Whether she died or became a Witch, we cannot say. We can't even say for certain that Sakamoto was a magical girl, though it seems likely.”

“They're both magical girls,” Sakura said. “A team. I ran into 'em a couple times.”

Tōshirō noticed Akemi's genuine surprise as she asked, “Did you fight them?”

“The first time, yeah,” Sakura said while shoving a stick of Pocky into her mouth. “Had to spook the little rookies into not being idiots and staying the—” she glanced at Yuzu—“away from my territory. Second time, they weren't in costume. I was ready to teach 'em a lesson when they cried that they couldn't help coming into my place 'cause their parents hauled 'em up to church there. So I told 'em I'd leave 'em be if they don't transform in my territory.”

“That was nice of you, Kyōko,” Tomoe said softly.


Ah. Parents and daughters and church. Sore soft spot.

“Where was their actual territory?” Urahara asked.

“East Shinchi, on the coast,” Sakura answered.

Tōshirō could practically see Urahara collecting and considering puzzle pieces as he nodded slowly and asked, “So you don't think they would have come up into the southern end of your territory to hunt?”

Sakura snorted. “I put the fear o’ God into 'em. I wasn't kidding when I said they cried that second time. They're terrified of me.”

“Are there any other magical girls in your area?” Isshin asked.

“Yeah, but I haven't seen 'em lately,” she answered. “I didn't get their names. They were pretty flash-in-the-pan. Beat 'em down to show 'em who's boss and they stayed the hell away from me after.”

“They were likely starved out,” Akemi murmured as she frowned at the table in thought. By you was implied. “The Incubator deliberately contracts too many magical girls in one area to make competition fierce enough to force creation of Witches by Grief Seed starvation in order for the strongest magical girl in the area to harvest them. It is the only way to make the system sustainable.”

Sakura went perfectly still and stared at Akemi for a long moment. Her silence dragged; eventually, she looked ill and faintly said, “Oh.”

Urahara allowed her a moment to think before gently prompting her to continue. “So the lack of Witches in the east side is currently unexplained, but that lack explains why you became a Witch.” Sakura shuddered. “What I am curious about is how you came to be so... gaunt.”
Sakura shifted uncomfortably. “It was weird. The longer I went without a Grief Seed, the hungrier I got. I tried to only use my magic to douse for Witches and bust ATMs for money. If I found a labyrinth, I went in without transforming and backed out when it was just a Familiar. I got... pretty desperate.” She focused on a new stick of Pocky, playing with it at her lips and refusing to look at anyone. “I stopped busting ATMs to save magic and went to pick-pocketing and shoplifting. But I got slower and hungrier. The stuff I was gettin'd usually be fine but I couldn't get enough. No matter how much I ate, I kept losing weight. I... My memories of the last few days or week or whatever are kinda dark and spotty. I remember feeling Mami transform and just... losing my damn mind,” she said softly. “I don't even remember getting to where we were. The fight... that's clear. Mostly. It took every drop of what I had to fight without blacking out. I think I thought... I'd die, but take... Mami... with... me.” Turning her face away from Tomoe's sad gasp, Sakura trailed off with, “And then... I was a Witch and....” Her expression shuttered into blankness and her reiatsu quivered with dark horror.

Tomoe and Kaname simultaneously hugged her from both sides, arms gentle as they both cried. Sakura blinked in surprise and glanced at each in confusion, but didn't say anything. Kaname's reiatsu rose gently; Sakura obviously noticed but allowed herself to relax into it this time. Her own unstable reiatsu settled.

After a respectful silence, Urahara thoughtfully said, “If you were trying to conserve magic, you may have been unconsciously tapping your body as a source of energy. The longer you went without purifying your Gem, the more outside energy you would have drawn from your body. You may have gotten to the point where it was simply unsustainable.”

Sakura shrugged, not caring.

“So, you remember your time as a Witch?”

Sakura wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed, face pained as she closed her eyes and gave another full-body shudder. “Yeah.”

“Let's talk about that later, Kisuke,” Isshin said firmly, voice a veiled command. “She's had a rough enough day.”

“My apologies,” Urahara quickly said.

Sakura didn't reply, rocking herself as Tomoe and Kaname hugged her more tightly.

“Kyōko. Bring out your Soul Gem,” Akemi ordered. It said a lot that Sakura immediately complied and held it up in her palm without raising her head. The red Soul Gem was muddy with despair. Akemi scowled and barked, “Inoue is unavailable. Hitsugaya, are any of the Grief Seeds you have still usable?”

“The third one should be able to take another hit,” he replied as he pulled it out of his pocket and approached the table. He stood behind Sakura and reached over her to tap the Grief Seed against the Soul Gem. It didn't completely drain of contamination, but it was pretty close.

Urahara sighed. “Tōshirō, give those to me. I'll store them. Everyone else... do what you want til dinner, I guess.”

“Do... you want to lay down for awhile, Kyōko?” Tomoe asked gently, pressing her cheek into the crown of Sakura's head.

“No. No. I wanna— I wanna be— distracted.”
“Do you like video games?” Karin asked pleasantly.

Sakura slowly looked up at her. “Yeah.”

Karin sprang to her feet. “Great! I brought every console, peripheral, and game I own!”

“...We were gonna kill each other earlier,” Sakura said in a tone that doubted Karin's sanity.

“Eh. Water under the bridge,” Karin said lightly. “Orrr we can beat the hell out of each other in a game instead of real life.”

Sakura stared dumbly for a long moment, then smirked faintly. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

The kidō barriers were removed and everyone broke up. Tōshirō accompanied the teenagers to the room destined to become the Den of Games and watched the girls draw Sakura into their circle until they were all acting like they hadn't just been at each other's throats. Sakura still looked haunted, but she soon became absorbed in fierce gaming rivalry with Karin.

Well, they hadn't actually come to blows and Sakura was... decent at compartmentalizing and tentatively sane. As was Tomoe. Or maybe they were good at hiding it.

Tōshirō allowed himself to hope.

Five of the Pleiades Saints arrayed themselves around Umika's living room in subdued quiet, aching with grief. Kaoru and Umika leaned against book cases. Mirai tried to comfort Saki on one couch. Niko perched on the edge of the couch that had been flipped over in the earlier fight. Everyone studiously ignored the wreckage of the chandelier that had been dropped on Kaoru during the incident.

Umika was the first to finally speak up. “Niko, have you found her?”

“Non,” the girl with pale blond hair whose eyes were glued on her phone answered with a French accent, trying for lightheartedness and failing. More normally, she added, “Looks like she's unconsciously using magic to make herself undetectable.”

“What do we do now?” Kaoru wondered brokenly.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: RIP Tōshirō's dignity
we barely knew ye

Yes, my Homura has stolen a ton of Kyōko's favorite food and hoards it in her shield. She tells herself it's to bribe Kyōko like they're dog treats but we all know that's a lie.

...Mostly.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Isshin decided to go with his previous strategy of letting his girls work their magic on Mami and
Kyōko. He left them in the sitting room to bicker over and eventually play games and opted to sit
at the card table temporarily replacing the shattered dining table. He was joined by the Kaname
parents, who were fascinating people. After awhile, Junko disappeared and returned to retrieve
their son from his nap then plopped him in his high chair. The toddler looked at him curiously,
then smiled and drooled.

Isshin's heart melted. That cuteness was a devastating weapon. He couldn't resist playing peek-a-
boo and causing babygiggles. So nostalgic.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Yuzu pulling Mami behind her. Yuzu had her Mission Face
on and Mami looked baffled as she was dragged into the kitchen. His daughter raided the cabinets
and hauled things out of her camping bag. Mami hesitantly followed Yuzu's orders. They were
soon baking and talking, Yuzu encouraging and Mami subdued. Isshin smiled at Yuzu when she
glanced his way and made a shooing motion while crinkling her nose. He proudly reciprocated and
turned back to the Kanames, certain his daughter had things well in hand.

A collective shout rose from the impromptu game room. Ichigo roared, “DAMMIT!” and Kyōko
screeched, “Fuck you and your blue shells, Karin!” while Isshin's other daughter cackled
maniacaclly.

“Ah, she's so energetic,” Junko said with a sad smile. “I wonder how much is genuine and how
much is forced.”

“Hmm, hard to say,” Isshin pondered. “So far, she strongly reminds me of my Karin. She puts up a
front like that. I can usually figure her out, but I've known her since she was born.”

“Her parents should be sitting at this table with us,” Tomohisa said darkly. “I hope that monster
had to look his God in the eye and answer for what he did before he went to Hell to roast for
eternity.”

“I'll drink to that,” Junko said with a sneer before she sipped her sake.
Isshin dearly wished to know if the skeletal gates of Hell had opened for Reverend Sakura. If the weasel had wriggled his way into Soul Society, Isshin hoped it was to one of the Eightieth districts and that the man had just enough reiatsu to feel hunger. Let him starve and struggle to survive in a violent world like his daughter. Let him hear the spectral breath of Famine rattle in his ears every waking and sleeping hour as his body consumed itself.

Isshin was far from a perfect father and definitely could have done more to ensure his son didn't take all the blame on himself in the aftermath of Masaki's death, but the idea of ever blaming his child and opting for pater familicide as a solution was such anathema to him that every physical and spiritual particle of him was violently repulsed. Violently. Violently.

Junko cleared her throat. Isshin looked up at her and found her in ruthless businesswoman mode, eyes drilling into his over her cup. “So. Do you know Kisuke's plans?”

Isshin sighed. “Vaguely. In broad strokes. Except it keeps changing or stalling when these crises happen. He's a genius but there's only one of him.” He sipped his sake and swished it around his mouth as he thought. “The overall goal is to stop the Incubator, but we still know so little about it and the changes it makes to girls' souls that the immediate mission is research for the adults and talking prospective magical girls out of contracting for the kids.”

“Know thy enemy,” Junko muttered. “You said before that you've been training your girls and have a project assigned by Kisuke. What does he have you looking at?”

“Tracing Sōju's path of destruction to get an idea who the confiscated Soul Gems might be. See if any bodies were found quickly enough to be on life support, get an idea of density and location of magical girl population, et cetera.”

“Hmmmm. I wonder if I could be of use for research,” Junko mused. “I have access to a great deal of local and international resources. I wonder if marketing statistics could be mined for anything useful.”

“Marketing statistics?”

“Oh, you know— population stats, micro and macro market demographics, search engine history stats, ad clicks, contacts in other countries who can dig deeper if I word it as being about a secret new product under development. Kisuke said it's global, right?” She stared blankly at the ceiling, voice thoughtful. “Obviously, there wouldn't be records of magical girls per se, but perhaps local demographic data could be cross-referenced with whatever you find to extrapolate a pattern to search for elsewhere. Develop some kind of formula to predict where there may be magical girls using methods similar to how we target advertising.” She knit her brow, then perked up. “Ah! Or look for search queries referencing both 'magical girl' and terms like 'Kyubey,' 'Incubator,' 'Soul Gem,' 'Grief Seed,' whatever. You know— to control for people looking up entertainment. This is the Internet Age— some girls must have Googled around about it looking for information or advice.”

Isshin stared. Part of the wider problem was lack of data for Kisuke and Twelfth to crunch because their preexisting research had such a narrow focus.... If she already had data that had been processed beyond the raw state Twelfth was gathering... and prospects beyond what they were even looking for....

“Ohhh, you have ideas,” Junko crooned. Her mouth curved into a predatory smirk. “Maybe I should update my resume and give it to Kisuke.” The light-yet-not laughter that followed reminded Isshin of Kūkaku whenever she had gotten one of the Shiba men to admit to something that merited her oncoming wrath. I have you where I want you and am going to enjoy this laughter.
Junko Kaname may not have powers in the spiritual sense but Isshin had a feeling the Incubator might one day regret ever targeting her daughter. She was a woman not to be crossed.

They all looked up as Mami approached them with cooling racks and timidly said, “Ah, there’s not enough counter space. Is it okay if...?”

“Of course!” Isshin replied. The girl soon returned with a sheet of cookies fresh from the oven and scooped them onto the wire racks. When she turned to leave, he stole a glance at Yuzu— back turned washing some dishes, yes!— and reached—

“Don't you dare touch them, Daddy.”

Isshin withdrew his hand as though burned and cried, “Daddy would never!” Her back was still turned. Damn, she had gotten good.

“Daddy will always,” Yuzu chirped. A timer chimed. “Mami, can you get that?”

“Oh.” Mami blinked and shook her head as though to dispel the wistful longing on her face. “Of course. Of course.”

Isshin frowned and wondered what specifically had her looking at them like that. Then Karin howled as though stabbed and Kyōko and Ichigo roared with laughter. Sayaka's voice trilled something mocking, Madoka squealed, and Uryū screeched, “FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, KUROSAKI!” No clue which one, but he sounded scandalized.

“Ah,” Tomohisa said sagely as he raised his glass. “Teenagers.”

Kisuke retreated to his labs, sat at his desk, and promptly plunked his forehead down on its surface several times.

Must you be so melodramatic? Benihime drawled.

“Yes,” Kisuke said aloud. “It's this or throw things.” He went still with his forehead on the tabletop.

Benihime sighed. Ten heddles, ten thousand threads, it would seem.

Kisuke weakly clunked his head on the table one more time and groaned. On top of the strengthening manifestations of Kaname's and Miki's powers— which really needed to be addressed— the previous night's events and Kyōko Sakura had casually dropped a fresh batch of riddles in his lap. Or perhaps more accurately, throat-punched him with them.

Sakura seemed like a throat-punching kind of person.

Right. New questions.

First, the mysterious lack of Witches in Sakura's territory. Coincidence seemed unlikely if Akemi was disturbed. If the dearth of Grief Seeds in Sakura's territory had been deliberately orchestrated, who was the culprit? The most obvious suspect was the Incubator; the most obvious motive was to eliminate their resistance with an overwhelming Witch. Hitsugaya had texted him that morning that Sakura's Witch had been so strong and complicated to fight that he had been pushed to the verge of
shikai or limit release even with backup. That was one hell of a weapon to throw at them; it would be overkill against most humans with spiritual powers equal to Hitsugaya's disguise. Which implied he was not the primary target.

So. Acquisition of said weapon. In the Incubator's place, Kisuke would have countered Sakura's impressive dominance of all threats in her territory by removing the resources that allowed her to maintain that dominance— removing the possibility of collecting Grief Seeds. It was the most logical way to push a magical girl as powerful as Sakura to a critical point. The question was how to pull it off. The simplest answer was that the Incubator could divert Witches. The question then was how it would accomplish that— directly, or through magical girl agents as shepherds? Directly or not, how?

If it could aim Witches, the timing of Momoe's disappearance into a labyrinth in her apartment complex was possibly a deliberate ploy intended to split the team. The long distance between the two labyrinths made Akemi the most logical choice for which member to split off, as it was no secret she could travel quickly. Akemi's timestop-pretending-to-be-teleportation sliced off nearly all travel time, save for the moments she allowed herself to appear en route to give the illusion of a range for her "teleportation." Kisuke wondered if she had bothered to keep up that charade in crisis. If she had traveled farther than she had previously allowed herself to be seen, they could have a problem. Kisuke didn't know what kind of problem, but he hated showing his hand to an enemy.

All right. Other things that had potentially broken the Incubator's hypothetical plan; it was likely a combination of small factors. Akemi and Hitsugaya's phones allowed for coordination with their base of operations, so their separation wasn't as dire a problem as it could have been and Akemi knew she needed to rush back to her team. The potential to save Wits—

...Wait. Hitsugaya had written that they didn't sense Momoe's disappearance. If it hadn't been a coincidence and the intent was to split the party, that implied that the Incubator may have factored the phone communication into its plot. Which would mean it not only intended for Akemi to return to the battle site, but it had at least suspected that Momoe was subject to some kind of remote monitoring— and they had confirmed it. Fuck.

Benihime huffed irritably. While it was likely pure conjecture on its part, I would recommend you submit the schema for the bracelets to Kūkaku, Akon, Yamamoto, Kyōraku, Ukitake, and Unohana for independent review. Possibly the Shihoin clan, as well. Perhaps you did not obscure the tracking signal as well as you thought in your distracted haste.

Kisuke clunked his head on the table again. Seeking peer review. Possibly from the Shihoin noble "Guard of Godly Gear" and traditional leaders of the Special Forces. The elders of which still resented him for “inspiring” their “princess” to go rogue even though Aizen's machinations to push them that far had been revealed and their group's defection had been vindicated. If he had fucked up, they'd gleefully rub his face in it. “Politely.” Joy.

All right. So. Moving on. The potential to save Witches was the ace up their sleeve that prevented Tomoe from turning or simply descending into homicidal backlash. Without that knowledge, she likely would have turned and forced whichever teammate had gone into Sakura's labyrinth with her to battle two powerful Witches after having already fought through one labyrinth. If Akemi had taken much longer, Hitsugaya would have had no backup when Tomoe turned; he likely would have survived the endurance test despite that, but the Incubator didn't know that and he could have blown his cover to do so. From the Incubator's point of view, Hitsugaya's death would have then forced Akemi to confront two strong Witches alone. Absent knowledge of her time manipulation, that was a wise course to eliminate a single magical girl who used mundane weaponry to conserve
magic and had already fought through a labyrinth containing two Witches. Would be a clever way
to push her to the brink of turning or being unable to shield her Soul Gem from destruction.

And then there was Miki. The proximity of the Shadow Witch's labyrinth— and thus the
confrontation with Sakura— to Miki's location was suspect. Especially since the Incubator made a
direct recruitment pitch to force her hand. Why would it want her to, though? Why add backup to
the equation? Why unlock the powers of a confirmed enemy?

Kisuke sat and turned that over for a long time, untangling threads and laying them out in his mind.
He considered Miki's temperament, her reactions, Akemi's reports of other versions of her....

Sakura's words popped into his head out of nowhere: “Had to spook the little rookies—”

He sat up suddenly and thought to Benihime, *Throwing an inexperienced and potentially
overconfident rookie into a pit with two extremely powerful Witches would either get Miki killed or
turned or get Akemi killed or turned trying to protect her and fight at the same time. Or both. If
only Akemi died, Miki has a certain charisma about her and such a strong sense of justice that she
would likely move to replace the gap in our team— to be our magical girl who talks other girls out
of contracting. Killing her or forcing her to turn by exhaustion from multiple consecutive battles
would rob us of that backup asset.

If all went as planned, our entire known current and potential fighting and peer-recruitment force
would have been decimated, Benihime said coldly. The Incubator likely suspects more of our
alliance is capable of fighting, but such a loss would potentially force us out into the open. The
Incubator truly has expanded its target set beyond Akemi to root out and eliminate our entire
resistance.

“Not unexpected, really,” Kisuke said as he stared into space and pictured connections as threads.
There was a gaping hole in the tapestry. “Akemi has said that in every timeline, the Incubator is
aggressively interested in contracting Madoka Kaname,” he slowly thought aloud. “If this entire
debacle was a plan... it would have left Kaname untouched.” Kisuke paused. He scrubbed his face
tiredly. “And potentially unprotected. Save for her wards. And she sensed the fight from that
distance... if she hadn't called the shop first, she could have gone running out into the night by
herself. Or with her parents, who would be liabilities. Gods, letting her come here last night
without a powerful escort was *stupid.*”

*We got lucky,* Benihime said sullenly. She hated luck. Too fickle. *Tsukabishi should have known
better than to advise her to leave the wards.*

Kisuke chose to save that argument for another time. “The lack of protection beyond her property
line would leave her vulnerable if she tried to go about life as usual. We haven't publicly shown
any other allies young enough to shadow her to school as a bodyguard.”

*She and her family all have the bracelets,* Benihime joined him in pondering, *but there is a limit to
how much they can mitigate. And they will not protect everyone in this city. If Walpurgisnacht was
to descend in the wake of the deaths of all of her friends, not knowing our true capabilities....

“Kaname might think she has literally nothing to lose and contract to stop it despite the
consequences to her soul. Then immediately turn into a powerful Witch for the Incubator to
harvest. Checkmate.” Kisuke leaned over the table and pressed his thumb and forefinger into his
eyes to stave off a headache. “Gods, this is like sifting through Aizen's plots all over again.
Magnificent.”

*Be thankful their paths never crossed,* Benihime murmured darkly.
Kisuke couldn't suppress a shudder at the mere idea.

*We also may have to tell our allies about shinigami and our capabilities,* Benihime sighed. *If for no other reason than to lower risk of them contracting or doing something irreversible in an emergency. We may not be able to interrupt every attempted manipulation the way Akemi did last night. We are not omniscient.*

Kisuke plunked his head on the desktop again. Benihime had a point. He should probably actually consult with others before doing so in order to keep stories straight. *If* he chose that path at all.

His brain hadn't been this messy since his escape from Soul Society after being framed for Hollowfying the Visored. Weeks spent desperately researching and designing ways to help them had left his mind in tangled knots once the situation had stabilized. Kisuke saw himself going down that same road. He groaned and hit his head on the table again.

*Calm yourself,* Benihime snapped. *You should now know better than to hastily weave a dozen patterns across each other at once, as we did back then. Set the shinigami loom aside for future consideration and tend the loom bestowed upon you by the little red spitfire. Sew their cloth together later.*

Right. Okay. Moving back to other angles of investigation newly brought up. He sat up and shuffled his stuff to drag out some paper and started outlining things before he forgot.

Akemi's blatant confusion when Junko was able to see Tomoe's magical girl costume. At least he could set that aside as something to ask about next time he managed to get Akemi in private. Well, as crowded as the shop was now, maybe he should just text her and have her text a reply.

Soul Gems' apparent ability to convert physical energy to spiritual energy to stave off final corruption. Was that standard or an ability only available to magical girls with Sakura's degree of power? Was it a conscious or unconscious act?

Sakura's instinctive conjuration of flames even though she had no physical contact with her Soul Gem. Were all magical girls able to use their abilities as long as their Soul Gem was close enough to allow them control of their bodies?

Her philosophical analysis of the Incubator's system. Something about it struck him as significant.

Her intriguing and really goddamn obvious question about the Incubator's terminals: “How d'you know they're endless?” Taking Akemi's word for it without closer questioning had been sloppy.

Confirmation that Marina Sakamoto was also a magical girl and she and Bethany Michaels shared territory on the coast. Actually, Kisuke should probably start a map of territorial possession in the area. And one of where Akemi most frequently associated a location with a particular Witch to compare to this timeline and document anomalies. And one of the homes, schools, and death sites of suspected and confirmed magical girls; possibly a new one for every timeline from now forward. And one with a more definite outline of the Asunaro barrier. He'd have to do it in something akin to Photoshop so he could toggle overlapping layers. Maybe have the girls themselves draw things on paper copies to convert later?

He needed a dozen of himself. Really.

What manner or clarity of memories did a reverted Witch retain? Had they been “conscious” while Witches? That was going to be a tricky subject to talk about. He'd likely need the assistance of the more parental adults and empathetic kids to tease out that thread from Sakura.
And then there was the person of Kyōko Sakura herself. Her behavior was as capricious as wildfire, able to switch directions in the breeze from warm and lazy to deadly inferno in an instant. She had suffered a degree of trauma second only to Akemi's and also brutally suppressed it. Must have, for her to have not turned after her family's deaths. Both girls became cynical, but whereas Akemi went cold, Sakura went hot. Rage was Sakura's sword to strike that which would wound her heart and cynicism her shield to prevent attachment or optimism—if she didn't allow herself to hope or trust in the first place, she couldn't be disappointed. Her reawakening showed that it was possible to overwhelm her emotional fortress and revealed what her mental state was like in her fallout shelter beneath a mountain of defense mechanisms. Which was both worrying and encouraging.

Speaking of defenses, Kisuke wondered if Sakura noticed just how much Yuzu had known about her situation in order to stab at the heart of her defense as accurately as she had. Hopefully, she had been too stunned. If it came up later once she had time to think.... Note to self: Send old articles about the Sakura murder-suicide to everyone from Karakura and say that he had done research on her when her name was mentioned by Tomoe, then he had sent it to everyone so they'd have an idea of what trauma they might have to deal with. Plausible deniability that wouldn't implicate Tomoe beyond telling those in the shop the previous night, lessening the perception of Tomoe as a gossip and glossing over Akemi's knowledge.

Right. Moving on. Back to Sakura. He had noticed the exact moment when the girl grasped the lifeline of rage and blame of the Incubator as a focus—to repurpose her guilt and horror into something that could be directed outward rather than at herself. That could end up being useful if they could rein it in and control it. If being the operative word; backfiring was just as likely. Kisuke really wanted to talk to Akemi about past experiences with Sakura and which levers were useful and which were detrimental. For now, Kisuke had a tentative perception of Sakura's outward personality as halfway between Karin and Hiyori, who had similar defense mechanisms with one having a default state of sarcastic nonchalance and the other defaulting to aggressive bitterness. Perhaps a dash of Ichigo's tendency to blame himself for harm to people he loved and hold onto it until it was beaten out of him.

Akemi's brief profiles of the Mitakihara magical girls had described Sakura as brash, rough, vicious, hotheaded, and so cynical that she was able to accept the truth of the magical girl system the best out of any of the four girls. Akemi had written about her abilities, her lone wolf attitude, her prowess in battle, and her tenacity. Had mentioned certain ways to trigger her softer, idealistic side to rise from its self-imposed coma. Akemi had not mentioned how sharp Sakura's mind was under her abrasiveness—and Kisuke was convinced it was even sharper than Sakura had shown, considering what he had seen was in the immediate wake of major trauma and surrounded by people she didn't trust. She reminded him of when Yoruichi was in a snarly mood when they were the shinigami equivalent of young teens, which was a slightly horrifying thought because it raised the possibility of her being relentless, rebellious, and violent in her use of a devious intellect against those who pissed her off. Yoruichi had turned to pranks; Sakura could very well escalate to sabotage or personal warfare if they pushed her too hard or in the wrong direction. Yoruichi may have been like that had she spent a few years surviving in a distant Rukon district instead of a posh ancestral estate.

Now there was a thought that gave him chills.

Kisuke had accounted for the likely rebelliousness; he had not accounted for the extent of the intelligence that could be behind it. Aside from his usual backup plans, that was. Sakura was good at seeing the bigger picture in abstract and wary nearly to the point of paranoia when it came to commitment and letting anyone influence her, which Kisuke thought raised the risk of her identifying inconsistencies in their stories. He hoped someone in their group could wrangle Sakura
into some semblance of cooperation. Anyone who could cook well was likely on the shortlist. Tomoe had history with her, but it remained to be seen if Sakura's dismissal of their old resentment was permanent. Tessai had managed to scrounge up Junko's sealed juvenile record, which revealed she had probably been similar to Sakura when she was a teen gang member on the streets. Junko was probably their best asset to throw at Sakura, paired with Tomohisa to cook for them. And possibly the Kaname children with their soothing reiatsu, but only if Sakura wouldn't bristle at it as a manipulation. Tatsuya's reiatsu was far weaker than Madoka's and he would obviously be too young to control it, so he would probably be less likely to provoke Sakura if he used it. Depending on how Sakura behaved with very young children. Which Junko and Tomohisa had agreed to test for.

He slid his chair over to a computer and tapped keys to bring up the surveillance of the room the teens had claimed for their games. He unmuted the live stream and listened; their mob was raucous and yelling, bickering and laughing. Including Sakura, who was intensely focused on the TV. Kisuke pulled up the recording, rewound to their entrance, and observed Sakura when Junko asked all the kids to keep quiet until the toddler woke up from his nap. Sakura looked blatantly suspicious that it was a ploy of some kind, but complied for the entire time from then to Junko's reappearance with her son. When the toddler waved at her, she returned it automatically, then caught herself and went red.

Good. She was a sucker for little kids. Possibly something to do with her dead little sister.

A dead little sister was a distasteful and potentially dangerous lever, but he'd use it if he had to.

Right. So. He had been forced to divert attention from existing projects and collected a lot of new things to study. Which meant the Asunaro investigation had stalled. Again. The drones had picked up activity in Asunaro, but it was inconclusive as the magical girls in the video had been moving quickly through the dark and were lost between drones for several minutes at a time. Kisuke sighed and brought up the composite of the surveillance Tessai had cobbled together. Paired with reiatsu sensor data, they could tell only that six magical girls bounced around a seventh, chasing her north until they were beyond cameras. Kisuke decided to refrain from any conjecture until they had context for the situation. He really needed to saturate the area with more cameras.

And that was on top of studying gemological equipment to convert into something useful for Soul Gem analysis. And all the existing leads and new questions.

Kisuke pushed away from the desk, rolled the office chair halfway across the room, and spun it in a circle with his hands covering his eyes while he let out a frustrated, “GRAAAAHRRRRRRR!”

Benihime did not approve.

Maybe he actually needed two dozen of himself.

Kyōko did her best to bring out her gamer persona while also thinking through the clusterfuck she found herself in. Whenever she felt herself getting upset, she forced her attention on the games and teasing people until it eased up; then she could resume her thought where she had dropped it. Sizing up how the others reacted to her was also a good exercise. She was pretty sure Karin and her brother were onto her but pretending not to be. The giant was the only true mystery, neutrally existing—a human boulder. Glasses-nerd and Mami's knight in frosty armor watched her warily
from opposite ends of the room, not quite relaxed enough to hide that they were blocking exits.
Probably wise of them, though it sucked for her. The lighter, softer members of the group acted
like they bought her calm as genuine. Even Mami, who should have fucking known better. Sayaka
mostly seemed to, but would occasionally cast a searching glance her way.

Yuzu also seemed to buy it without any visible suspicion, but Kyōko refused to be lulled by her
sweetness after witnessing the explosion that brought everyone else into line. Including Homura,
who was largely aloof if Pinky wasn't being made to cry. Including Kyōko herself, which pissed
her off. Including Yuzu's impressively powerful father and monstrously powerful brother, who had
looked downright ready to piss themselves in fear after just the first sentence—which hadn't even
been directed at them. That Yuzu's entire family reacted like that was not lost on Kyōko; if Little
Miss Sunshine could bring that pack of powerful weirdos to heel, she was a force to be reckoned
with and thus not to be provoked without a plan. Or brute force, which was probably a capital-B
capital-I Bad Idea in this secret clubhouse full of stupid powerful people who liked and/or feared
the girl.

Kyōko was generally homicidal, not suicidal, after all. And Kyubeycidal, now.

Generally. Usually. With a couple exceptions which she immediately buried under embers again,
hoping the memories would burn off. Now that she really was—had been a Witch, she kept
hearing echoes of the things her father had said between discovering her secret and going on his
own Inquisition.

A witch among you must be put to death. You are to put them to the sword and erase their sorcery
from this earth with cleansing fire; their blood will be on their own cursed hands which signed
their pact with the Devil.

Fuck that.

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live; for all they touch that was good is cursed.

Her mind was an asshole sometimes.

Playing games for hours helped beat her mind into submission. The other girls were decent
company for the most part and the adults mostly left them the hell alone and were permissive as
fuck when it came to their rowdiness. Well, except for that first hour when Pinky's mom stood in
the doorway and pleasantly/ominously told them they could be as loud as they wanted after Pinky's
baby brother woke from a nap. Kyōko doubted the sanity of having a toddler in the same building
as her when she woke up primed to fight, but whatever. She didn't trust there really was a toddler,
but she hated when little kids cried so she clamped down on her volume for the bickering over
which game to play and who would play it. Just in case. Until Pinky's mom appeared in the
doorway with an actual toddler, who gave her a bleary smile. He waved shyly; Kyōko waved back
before she could stop herself.

Damn. She was such a sucker for little kids. When they weren't crying, anyway. Crying made her
think of Momo wailing days befo—

"Please! I didn't dooo anything, Daddy!"

Could her mind just fuck off? Damn. She hadn't even heard the kid cry to set her off like that.

Emotional instability, Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown had said. Kyōko glanced at her Soul Gem
ring and found it dim. Dammit. This despair shit was like a disease.
Annnd that Sayaka girl was looking her in the eye way too solemnly. It wasn't pity, really, but whatever it was pissed her off. Kyōko curled her lip in a sneer. Sayaka frowned, but that look didn't leave her face. It made Kyōko bristle. Then Pinky glanced at Kyōko and her magic rose a bit. Kyōko resisted the relaxing contact high at first but gave in when she kept hearing Momo cry in her head. Her raw nerves were soothed and her mood leveled out.

It was both creepy as hell and a relief that Pinky was some kind of magical aromatherapy antidepressant.

It was also part creepy, part relief when Yuzu hauled Mami out of the room saying something about baking. She didn't really want to be alone with the new people. Kyōko was still conflicted about Mami, but waking up from her hellish nightmare world to the concerned face of the girl she had considered an older sister back in the day had been comforting. Mami seemed willing to let bygones be bygones, but she also seemed to be in as much shock as Kyōko herself so who knew. Maybe they'd fight about it again when Mami got over the shell shock. Kyōko was also conflicted about their point of contention a year back— letting Familiars feed long enough to turn into Witches in order to get Grief Seeds. It was immoral as hell, but Kyōko had run out of fucks to give about morality after—

... Anyway, Kyōko thought the new information about the system... didn't exactly justify her actions, but supported her view of how important it was to get Grief Seeds. Of course, it also revealed use of Grief Seeds was like magical cannibalism, so. Yeah. That was extra fucked up. If that wasn't the height of sin, she didn't know what was.

_I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins. You will eat but not be satisfied; your stomach will still be empty. You will store up but save nothing, because what you save I will give to the sword._

Her hands shook. She tried to hide it by tipping her head to let her hair block Orangeygo and Karin's view of her face, gripping the game controller harder, and leaning forward as though intense, but Pinky and Sayaka could see her face and weren't fooled. They didn't say anything, but they looked worried. Sayaka even glanced at Kyōko's Soul Gem ring, which affronted Kyōko though she couldn't say why. Well, actually, she could— girl thought she might go Witch again.

Kyōko clenched her jaw and put her mind on lockdown again, severing that train of thought and burying her despair under the burning coals of sheer fucking spite.

Ah. Warm.

Anyway. Kyōko wasn't in the mood for a round of I-told-you-so with Mami, so she hoped the girl would have the tact to not bring it up. They had more important things to do than bitch each other out. Kyōko did, anyway. She hadn't made up her mind what to do about everything. She seemed to have been caught up in some kind of secret guerrilla resistance movement. They wanted her cooperation, yeah, but they also wanted her under their authority. To take orders. They hadn't said as much, but it was there if you read between the lines. Kyōko was off-balance, not stupid.

One of the things that had struck her during their storytelling session was that everyone deferred to Urahara and Homura as though they were equal leaders. They hadn't been named as leaders, but the two had tag-teamed for the majority of the explanation; others chimed in to support their statements, but those two held all the cards. That was interesting in and of itself, but Kyōko was also one-hundred-percent goddamn certain they weren't showing her all their cards. They spun a compelling tale, but Kyōko noticed... gaps. She hadn't asked much, wanting to see what they volunteered before being pressed so she could think about it and press hard. Forcing herself to be
patient was a frustrating struggle, but she was way too outnumbered and uninformed to be anything but careful.

Scorched earth was her favorite tactic, but sometimes it worked best if you knew which plot of earth needed the *most* scorching.

Kyōko lost track of time between the games and the shouting and the magic potpourri and eventually the smell of food cooking. It was dark out and apparently ridiculously late when they were all summoned back to the dining room, though. Huh. She plopped in a chair between Mami and Madoka again and wondered where the hell the adults had gotten a new, bigger dining table and how they got it so fast. Orihime was helped into the room by the three guys who hovered around her like mother-henning bodyguards. The older girl flopped into a seat and let her eyes wander around the room; they stopped on Kyōko and blinked.

“**Oh! Let me see your Soul Gem,”** Orihime blurted.

The boys all said, “**Orihime—**”

The young woman waved them off and said, “**I told you, purifying a Soul Gem is waaay easier than reverting a Grief Seed.**”

Kyōko didn’t want to expose her Soul Gem but she could see and feel its dimness and wanted to avoid Witching the fuck out *more*, so she cautiously manifested its egg form in her palm, hand curved to protect it. Orihime made a hand gesture, babbled some nonsense, and suddenly two little fairies darted out from her hair and fluttered around Kyōko’s Soul Gem. Kyōko watched with wide eyes as they chattered and chirped then made a magic shield of some kind over her hand that drew off corruption as black smoke.

Well, she thought they might be fairies. Weird-ass fairies, though. They started out looking like colorful paper airplanes and opened up to look like origami of plucked chicken wings. Or something. One set of wings looked like a little floating red kimono bent into that shape and the other kinda like... praying mantis arms? *Okayyy.* Kyōko leaned closer and squinted. The red kimono thing was a kind of floating hood for a dark-haired girl in a pink... short hanbok with kimono sleeves? *Okay.* That one peeped and hid in her hood. The other fairy had blond hair in a topknot-ponytail thing, wore a red tunic, and had two-toed bug-like legs. Kyōko had no idea if it was male or female. That one grinned and fucking *winked* at her, then chimed something unintelligible but unmistakably teasing.

*“The hell?”*

The little critter laughed. Kyōko wondered if she had been drugged for real. Or if this was a really weird labyrinth.

*“Shun’ō likes you!”* Orihime cheered as the golden shield dispersed and the fairies darted over to flit around her head.

They had *names.*

*“Oh! You too, Mami! I’ll clean your Gem! Anyone else?”*

Mami hesitantly brought out her Soul Gem and allowed it to be cleaned. Kyōko frowned at how dark it was, but watched closely as the fairy-bugs did their thing again. When they were done, Kyōko eyed Orihime, who giggled and woozily announced her hunger.

Game-changer. Do-over giver *game-changer.* If Kyōko could get that woman on her side, she
could focus on a campaign of terror against the Incufucker without wasting time on Witches. She'd just have to get enough food to keep her recharged. Boom: Soul Gem jumper cables.

She caught sight of Urahara watching her out of the corner of her eye. Kyōko looked at him more directly; his face was calculating and one corner of his mouth turned up slightly as he met her eyes. She got the distinct impression he knew exactly what she was thinking. Ass. He was dangling Orihime's usefulness over her head like someone tempting a dog with a treat.  
*C'mon, girl, do a trick!*

Kyōko sneered at him. The asshole grinned back.

Little Miss Sunshine, Pinky's dad, and the giant-with-glasses brought out platter after platter of food. Kyōko stared at the spread in awe. She hadn't eaten like this since... well, that year between her wish and Dad going all avenging angel. Maybe not even then.

“Family dinner time! Wooo!” the crazy Manchild Dad cheered.

Kyōko couldn't stop herself. “You people aren't *all* related, are you?”

“Nope!” He grinned widely and threw her a double thumbs-up. “But we're all family here anyway!”

Kyōko scowled. “I ain't—”

“All. FAMILY,” the guy repeated with intense cheer, jabbing his thumbs out more forcefully.

“All family!” Yuzu gushed with a sweep of her arms and adorable smile. She even struck a cute pose like a princess in a cartoon movie. Just needed a poofy dress and worshipful animal friends.

“All family,” Pinky's mom said fiercely as she raised her glass. Her eyes bored into Kyōko's until she had to look away, uncomfortable.

The toddler banged on his high chair tray and squealed, “Ah fammy!”

There was various cheering around the table. These people were nuts. Kyōko half expected them to start chanting *one of us! one of us!* They were nuts and she didn't want to get sucked into their little cult.

But they had information. And a Gem-washer. And food.

Every bit of home-cooked food they gave her was so fucking delicious that Kyōko decided to at least go through the motions of cooperating. For now. She'd find out more about whatever the hell they were doing if she played along. Everything they had presented so far made her inclined to cooperate, but her survival instinct was too strong for her to commit based on their word alone. She wasn't convinced of good intentions as easily as Mami. So she'd bide her time, gather information, and eat her fill of the *fucking glorious* food they gave her. She wanted a bottomless storage thingy like Homura's Pocky-pit so she could squirrel some food away when she left and went to ground to consider her revenge options.

Dinner was winding down and Kyōko's mouth was full of Mami's peach pie— damn, it had been thirteen months and three weeks since she last had some— when Urahara dropped his fan out his sleeve with a flourish and smacked it in his other hand.

“So! Let's talk revenge,” he declared with a sharp grin.
Fuck. Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown had her number.

Kyōko swallowed and eyed him suspiciously. She was glad she was good at playing with fire. “You gonna actually tell me the plan this time, Creepyhat?”

Karin drawled, “Well, you didn't exactly let us ans—”

“Do not,” Yuzu interrupted pleasantly.

Karin stuck another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth and sulked. Heh.

“My hat isn't creepy,” Urahara whined with a pout.

“Issha whole package,” Karin muttered around her spoon.

“Isshin! Your daughter is cruel! Such disrespect! In my own home!”

“None of my children respect authority,” the burly man deadpanned. “You should know this by now.”

Yuzu pouted. “That's not true, Daddy!”

“We respect mature authority figures,” Karin muttered again.

“WAHHH! DADDY IS MATURE!”

The hell.

Orangeygo scowled and threw a cookie at his father's face. “Shut up! This isn't the time, Old Man!”

The cookie broke in pieces and fell to the floor. Kyōko went still, breathless with sudden fury.

Manchild Dad gathered cookies to himself and cried, “MY CRUEL SON HAS DECLARED WAR! DADDY MUST DEFEND HIS HONOR! SURRENDER NOW OR PREPARE TO FIGHT!”

“Oh my God,” Karin grumbled with an added cringe of embarrassment.

Kyōko saw flames as the next cookies were thrown. She opened her mouth to yell, was so angry she choked on the words, and—


—And Kyōko became too surprised to speak.

She could feel that her jaw had dropped and her mouth was open, so she shut it. The Kurosaki men looked at Homura with confusion.

Orangeygo haltingly said, “But—we had that flour war and—you didn't—–”

“Mind the company you keep,” Homura snapped at him. She looked at Kyōko and coolly said, “I apologize on their behalf. They have never known food insecurity.” The violet eyes that looked into her own made Kyōko wonder how she understood. Especially without having been choked by Kyōko's furious hands first. Homura seemed like the hoity-toity never-hungry-a-day-in-her-life type.

The Kurosaki men suddenly looked deeply ashamed. It was gratifying even though Kyōko felt her
own face reddening. *Mind the delicate fee-fees of the widdle girl who's starved several times and'd lick that off the floor even if it was ground into crumbs, guys. Fuck.*


There was a long, awkward silence in which the screedly-deedly of the fork tines on Kyōko’s plate grated at all their ears. Eventually, Urahara repeated the fan-slap and cheerfully declared, “AS WE WERE SAYING: REVENGE!”

“Ah *bennnd*!” the toddler squealed.

“Revenge is good,” Kyōko made herself say airily. “What’s your plan, man? If it *is* tea parties, I'll fuck off 'n do my own thing.”

“Focka-fīn!”

Several people choked on either food or laughter. Kyōko stared in horror first at the toddler, then at his parents.

“No no, sweetie, that's a big kid word,” the mom said with a wry grin.

Tatsuya pouted. “I big!”

This would be about the time Kyōko’s father would have gone ballistic. Even in the days *before* he went and drowned in the deep end of the booze pool. ~Corrupting the youth~ and whatever. She was dead meat.

Pinky's dad chuckled and said, “But you're not as big as Kyōko.”

The toddler turned to Kyōko and shouted, “I big! Yeah, Koko?”

Kyōko just stared, first at the kid then at his parents.

Tatsuya scowled. “Koko! Say I big 'nuff!”

“Uh.” Her brain had short-circuited. Why weren't the parents acting pissed?

“*Nope. Nice try,*” the mom laughed. Her kid huffed and shoved a cookie in his mouth until his cheeks puffed out. The woman looked at Kyōko and said, “I generally don't mind cussing, but please limit the worst ones around Tatsuya. He's too young to know when it's a bad time to repeat it.”

“Uh— uh, yeah,” Kyōko stammered. Maybe they just didn't want to scare the toddler by yelling? “Uh... sorry?”

The dad waved her off. “You didn't mean any harm. Just be careful from now on.”

“...Okay?” What the fuck. These people were nuts.

“Can— can we stay on-topic?” Frosty asked with tired dismay.

“No,” Karin said flatly.

“Again: REVENGE!” Urahara declared with arms spread wide.
“Go on,” Kyōko said blankly, still weirded out.

“What is the first step of the best revenge?”

“Know~ thy~ ene~my~,” Pinky's mom sang.

Urahara jabbed his folded fan at the woman. “Correct!” He smacked the fan in his hand and met Kyōko's eyes. “If you want to destroy an enemy, it's best to know everything there is to be destroyed.”

“Duh?”

“So we're focusing on research for now. Paired with preventing contracts and keeping contractees from turning.”

“That sounds... slow.”

“It can be,” Urahara admitted with a nod. “Slow and steady wins the race.”

Kyōko made a face and was about to needle him when Karin piped up, “It's like an RPG. Level-grinding and finding all the secret weapons and shhhhhhh—” a glance at her sister and the toddler—“stuff before curbstomping the final boss.”

Kyōko stared at her and deadpanned, “I hate RPGs. They're too slow.”

Homura glanced aside and muttered something under her breath.

“What was that?” Kyōko snapped.

“Nothing,” she said with a completely straight face.

Kyōko scowled, but Urahara resumed his speech before she could pursue it.

“The thing about research is that it can be slow but it doesn't have to be boring,” he said with a smirk. “I don't expect you to learn a scientific discipline or crack the books or anything. Some of the research is figuring out the extent of the powers of magical girls— your maximum output, destructive potential, endurance, self-healing, et cetera. Part of it will be seeing how much it takes to overload my equipment so I can keep making it stronger— which would require extreme displays of power. I have a huge subdimensional training area where you can go all out without worrying about property damage.”

“...What?”

“He means a—” Karin started.

Kyōko cut her off with a dismissive wave. “I know what the words mean. But why?”

“Well,” Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown said lightly, “Understanding what the Incubator does to your souls is important— if we know what it is capable of doing, we may gain an edge in figuring out how to defeat it. Looking for individual weaknesses to compensate for with training and teamwork is important if we end up going to war or something. But also....” He dipped his chin and looked up at her from the shadow of the brim of his hat with a bloodthirsty grin, gray eyes gleaming. This was his face behind the clown mask. His voice dropped to a sly near-whisper. “If we know every. single. detail. about how Soul Gems work, we may be able to develop ways to enhance their functions.”

Urahara's grin widened. He so had her number.

“There is one aspect you will likely find distasteful, however.”

Fuck. Here came the catch. “Yeah? What's that?”

“You can't leave this property.”


“You can't leave this property.”

Kyōko leapt to her feet and slammed her hands on the table. “LIKE HELL I CAN'T!”

“Ly kell!” the toddler shouted in a mimicry of her rage. He even banged on his tray.

“You can't leave if you don't want to doom us all to failure if not death,” Urahara said coolly.

“THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!”

“You were already used in one assassination attempt,” the asshole said. “Should you leave, you not only open yourself up to being used again, but you'll also give away that we have a trump card, even if you don't tell the Incubator who or what that trump card is. What degree of escalation do you think the Incubator would resort to if it knew we have secret means to save its prey from its trap?” Urahara tilted his head and added, “It tried to turn Miss Tomoe into a trap. It turned the Sōju sisters into a trap. It turned you into a trap. What other magical girls will it manipulate into coming after us? What new trap would it devise?”

Kyōko stared, shaking with outrage. She could see their trap closing on her. Could feel it. She needed leave right goddamn now. “Fuck you— I'm out!”

“You won't leave,” Urahara said calmly even as others tensed.

“Watch me!” Kyōko snarled. She transformed and turned to leap for the door.

Blocked by giant-with-glasses, whose hands were held up and sparking with magic. Fuck.


“Forgive me,” Urahara said mildly. “I should have said you can't. Literally will not be able to.” He wove his fingers together and rested his chin on them. “Have you noticed the wards? Did the girls explain that they prevent intrusion earlier?”

“Yeah,” she said with a suspicious glance at said girls as she stepped aside and angled herself to be able to see all potential opponents. It had sounded similar to her own barriers so she hadn't paid it much attention after hearing it kept Incufucker out. Had even shoved the feeling of the wards to the back of her mind in favor of more pressing issues, like getting her brain to stop throwing old memories at her.

“Foul witch! Your evil shall—!”

“What most of the girls don't know is that the wards have two optional protocols I had Tessai activate before we woke you.”

Several people shifted uneasily, apparently surprised. They stayed quiet, though.
“Oh?” Kyōko kept her eyes on Urahara, kept her face defiant, but mentally scrabbled at her sense of the wards.

Frighteningly complex even at a glance. She'd been sitting in a snare this entire time, too distracted to notice. She was a frog in water coming to boil. Fear crept in through chinks in her armor like suffocating smoke. She couldn't think. Couldn't think. Trapped.

“Most relevant at the moment is the inversion. That protocol prevents escape. Either for all except whoever is keyed in, or for only designated magical signatures. Like yours.”

“Your evil shall be confined! This shall be the tomb of your sorcery!”

Her rage burned pure and hot, consumed her fear. “SO I'M A PRISONER?!?”

“I would prefer for you to be a house guest,” Urahara said with a shrug.

“House guest or house arrest?!” The fucking gall. She cast a betrayed glare at Mami. “Did you know they'd do this?! Lock me up and throw away the key?!?” Mami shook her head hurriedly, looking shocked. Her magic felt alarmed-confused.

Well, that was... good and not. Good that Mami wasn't in on stabbing her in the back. Bad that the people casting themselves as the good guys were keeping shit from her, too.

“That's not the plan at all,” Urahara said. His calm was infuriating.

“Ain't it?!!” She didn't like how shrill her voice sounded. It reeked of desperation. So she manifested her spear and whirled it into a defensive pose as a show of strength. “You just said you're going to keep me shut up underground!” Kyōko ground her teeth and made a decision. When it came down to it, if she needed an ally— "Mami! Let's bust out and get the fuck outta here! Before they lock you up, too!"

The blonde let out a distressed little gasp and looked at the faces around the table.

“You misunderstand,” Urahara said. “I have no intention of confining you.”

“Your evil shall be confined!”

“I have no intention of forcing you to cooperate in our research, even. You are free to do as you will within the bounds of the wards.” He straightened and picked up his tea as if there wasn't a spear pointed at his face. “The second secret protocol is a modification of a spell called, by hilarious coincidence, Kyokkō.”

“The hell is that?!”

Giant-with-glasses cleared his throat. “Bent Light.' It hides the physical form and magical signature of a target— a magical mirage.”

Kyōko refused to look away from Urahara, who she thought was the biggest threat. “So what?!!”

“So you can go outside of the building. We set it so everyone who enters the property is invisible from outside the wards,” the giant explained. “The Incubator will be suspicious when people disappear from the yard upon entry, of course, but we have some other plans to mislead it as to what we're hiding. And it won't see others talking to empty air.”

“Oh, because that's so much better!” Kyōko sneered. “I'll have a prison yard! Great!”
Urahara set his teacup down and tapped its rim. “I would prefer that—”

“You would prefer, you would prefer!” Kyōko mocked. “What about what I would prefer?!”

“Don't you want revenge?” the asshole asked lightly.

“Why would I ever agree to any of this— this— just for—” Kyōko shook in outrage and waved her spear around, struggling for words. She felt like her mouth was only good for spitting lava; her tongue tasted of char. Thinking was hard.

“You get what you pay for,” Homura said softly.

Kyōko's neck actually popped from how hard she whipped her head to look at Purplebitch. “What?!”

Homura's face was all business, her voice cool. “A house to live in. Food to eat. Games to play. The opportunity to get stronger, but no obligation to do so. Protection from the Incubator's manipulations.” She tilted her head and watched Kyōko with hooded eyes. “Soul Gem purification on demand.” Homura lifted her chin and raised a brow. “In exchange, your only sacrifice would be to stay within the property line until needed in battle. Even then, you would be under no obligation to fight. I would think that a bargain, objectively speaking.”

Kyōko's jaw dropped at having her own philosophy thrown in her face. This bitch. This bitch.

She hated her. Hated her. Hated her!

Bitch was fucking right.

But— “And what the fuck would you get outta this deal if I just hang around and play video games?! Huh?! How would that be worth it?! What's worth that?!’’

“Your safety,” Pinky's mom said, heading off everyone else.

Bitter laughter fell out of Kyōko's mouth before she could stop it. “The fuck you mean 'my safety’?! That's worthless!”

“Not to us,” Manchild Dad declared.

“What good does it do you?!”

“Peace of mind,” Pinky's dad said.

Kyōko's face twisted in confusion. “The hell're you talking about?!”

“The thought of you out there in the streets by yourself and hungry is painful,” Pinky's dad said.

“The thought of you fighting alone with no one to watch your back would make us lose sleep,” said Manchild Dad. His son firmly agreed.

“The thought— If— I don't—” Mami stammered, looking uncertain about speaking with the adults. “The thought of you maybe— m-maybe turning into a Wi-itch again is— is— unbearable,” she continued as tears spilled down her cheeks. “You're— you're my— I want you to be safe, Kyōko!”

Why did her throat hurt so badly? Why wouldn't her mouth work? Why did her eyes burn?
Smoke. Surely. Flames licking—


_But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and SORCERERS, and idolaters, and ALL LIARS, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death._

“Koko?” a little voice said.

Kyōko blankly looked at toddler she completely forgotten there.


“Don't cry,” Kyōko rasped, whispers echoing head at just expression on face.

“Ouch, ouch. Koko sad,” Tears welled up and he sniffled. His voice wobbled when he offered, “I hugs ouchies bye-bye?”

“Kyō-ko, will-ill you kiss-issa ouchie better?” Momo whimpered between her sniffles as Kyōko tended the scrape on her knee when they were little.

Kyōko dropped spear with clang dissolve. Vision dimming voice hollow, said, “Shut up.”

“Tch. _Rude_,” Karin.

same time scold

“Kyōko!” Homura.


“Kyōko, I'm— I'm scaaared—”

“SHUT UP!” she roared.

“K— Kyōko—” Mami stand up

Tatsuya's breath hitched hE began cry in earnest. leaned forward highchair reached arms out for heR, fingers grasping empty air, squeaked, “Too _much_ a sad! I help Koko with'a ouchies! Let me hugs! I help Ko-kohhh!” And then was bawling.

“HELP! KYŌKOHHH—!”

Kyōko's hands flew up and gripped her skull, claw scalp. Room ran away. tunnel of shadow.

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Smell blood, sound wailing, sound nothing, sight nothing, sight darkness, smell smoke, sight _not nothing_, sight limbs, flicker-flame, roasting meat, creaking rope, Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh—

_And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; for by thy sorceries were all the pious deceived!_
Inoue! Her Soul Gem!” Frosty shouted, far-a-far-a-far-a-way.

Kyōko came back bit at feel of two fairies' itty-bitty bodies actually slamming into collarbone either side of Soul Gem her chest. Golden dome burst into place close-quarters firework, dazzling vision even before looked directly. Ears ringing sister cries, she focused the light as tunnel receded. Teeny-tiny fairy-bugs gripping hem of opening in her coat teeny-tiny worried expressions on teeny-tiny faces. Her Soul Gem very dark. Smoke-not-smoke burned off it. Ah, grease fire—smother it. Voices swam through ringing ears.

“—The baby out of here!”

Crying going away

“Pushed her— edge—”

“So sudden—”

“—L at once like that?!”

“—Fuck's sake, Ura—! Did— have to—?!”

Warmth around her. Arms around her. Grounded.

“I'm here, Kyōko. It's me,” Mami soothed voice waver. “It's Mami. Kyōko, can you hear me?”


Mami's breath hitched. “Oh— oh, Kyōko—”

“—Is Momo?” Frosty?

“—Was her sister,” Mami answered.

“Oh. Fuck.” Orangeygo?

“Crying trig— flash—?” Nerd?

“Despair—” Purplebitch

Warm hand on her sweaty cold brow, pushing bangs. “Kyōko. That's over. Come back here. To the shop. Look at me, Kyōko.”

Kyōko let her eyes wander. The floor very close. When did come up like that? The grain the wood was swirly. “Hear Momo but she's dead,” she mumbled.

The sound Mami's throat made was very strange. Mami trembled. “I— I don't—” Mami not talking to her but okay. “I don't know what to do,” Mami squeaked.

Quick steps “Kyōko.”

Kyōko was burning at stake why wasn't the floor burning it wood why— Hands on her cheeks, cupping jaw like Mom, lifting—

“Kyōko. Look at me.”
Kyōko looked up, dazed. Bosslady Mom.

“Do you understand that she's not here?”


Bosslady Mom looked sadangry rubbed thumbs on her cheeks. Wet. “Homura?”

“Yes?” Purplebitch hedged while Kyōko dully said, “S not my name.”

“How could her Soul Gem cause this?” Bosslady Mom barked.

“Ah.”

Kyōko blinked a bit and looked around hazily. Purplebitch transformed and holding up the Pocky-pit.

“Distressing emotions cause a Soul Gem to darken. As the Gem gets darker, the despair intensifies; this causes the Gem to darken still more.” Purplebitch held Kyōko's gaze. Purple eyes cool in the smoke. Kyōko grasped at her words. “It is a feedback loop of despair. Hallucinations are not unheard of.”

“Lucinaysin,” Kyōko slurred.

Bosslady Mom kept rubbing her cheeks with her thumbs “Kyōko. Look at me.”

“Kay.”

Different kinda purple eyes searching hers. “Do you still hear her?”

Distant crying, chest feeling lighter. Can't look away. “Kinda.”

“All right.” Bosslady Mom nodded like a decision. “You just keep looking at me and listening to me until you don't hear her anymore, okay?”

“Kay.”

Smile like Mom when she was sick, fingers brush away sweaty bangs. “This is why we want to keep you close. We don't want this to happen to you when you're by yourself. We don't want you to suffer.”

Bosslady Mom didn't get it. “But I gotta. Dad said.”

Sharp breaths around the room. Bosslady Mom's face angry underneath.

“Your father was wrong.”

“I'm a Witch. I corrup— ted... the con— gregation.” Old dead words fell out her mouth as she heard Dad say them in head, voice burn away like paper, monotone. “Consult God’s instruction and the test— imony of warning. If anyone doesn't— speak according—”

“Please stop, Kyōko.”

“—To this word, they have no light of— dawn.” Despair dulling but words still there. “Distressed and h-hungry, they'll— they will—” voice crack
“Oh, sweetie, no.”

“Roam— roam through the land; when they're famished, they'll become enraged and— and, looking up— will curse—” Kyōko looked ceilingward and felt wet on her face.

“Shhhhhhh.”

Shaking. “—Curse their God. Then they'll look toward the earth and see— only distress and— darkness and fearful gloom, and they'll— they will be thrust into utter dark— dark....” no more energy, no more voice

“We won't let that happen. You've had enough darkness in your life. You never deserved it in the first place.”

“I—” lost.

“Kyōko. Look at me.” Manchild Dad.

She did, let eyes wander to him. When he get so close?

Firm face, unhappy, angry under. “People say those things when they're afraid of people with powers like ours. People get angry and reject things when they don't understand them or are afraid. A lot of the time, it's because the thing would challenge their entire worldview. Right?”

She stared blankly.

He looked at golden glow below her chin, back at her face. “Think, Kyōko.”

...Maybe?

“People like that think they know all the rules for how the world or people work and try to force new things to fit those rules,” Bosslady Mom explained. “So they don't look for more information. They don't try to explore their rules to see if they were based on a misunderstanding. They double down. They hate being wrong.”

Manchild Dad nodded. “And they get furious at the thing that didn't fit. They say awful, hateful things to make it go away or stop. Things like what your— father—” he spat the word— “told you.”

Clicking heels. Purplebitch Homura standing behind Manchild Dad, who was on the floor with her so Homura standing taller. Ha. “Kyōko. You were just very angry because you were afraid of what we might be doing and that you might be trapped, were you not? That your understanding of the situation was shaken?”

Kyōko blinked slowly and thought. Like slogging through mud in smoke. “...Yeah?”

“Did you think terrible things about us?”

Words drifted back to her, drifted past her lips quietly as falling ash. “Liars... shall have their part in... the lake which burneth... fire and brimstone: the... second death.”

“Oh. Well.” Someone else far away.

“Fuckin' yikes.” Karin?

“That is the kind of reaction people without powers often have toward people with powers,”
Homura said patiently.

“...Oh.” Made sense. Actually, she kinda knew that. Room was coming back into focus and light. Kyōko blinked and looked down at her Soul Gem. Dim but much cleaner. Fairy-bugs looked tired.

“It was irresponsible of your father to turn on you. He never should have said such horrible things. You did not deserve that, and you do not deserve to suffer for his irresponsibility,” Bosslady Mom said, voice thick.

Kyōko stared at her.

“We're sorry we lied to you,” Manchild Dad said. “We were worried you might get upset like this if we told you everything as soon as you woke up. We always intended to tell you the truth; just in pieces so you'd have a break between each new thing.”

“We wanted to spare you something like this,” Bosslady Mom sighed. She brushed Kyōko's sweaty bangs aside again. “I'm sorry Tatsuya was the straw that broke your back. His dad and I will try to keep him from crying around you.”

Tats— oh. Yeah. Toddler. The memories were swimming back to her as the smoke wafted out of her head. “Oh. Fuck. I scared the hell outta him, didn't I?”

“It's fine,” Bosslady Mom soothed. “You weren't yourself.” She looked at Kyōko more closely, still stroking her hair. “You're coming back to us.”

Kyōko didn't know if that was supposed to be a question so she just stared.

The golden light at her chest flickered. Orihime breathed, “Guys, I—I'm sorry, I can't— not much longer. Still tired from— not enough back.”

Bosslady Mom tapped Kyōko's nose to get her attention. “Do you still hear her?”

Kyōko opened her mouth, stopped, then said, “No.”

Manchild Dad relaxed with a sigh of relief. Bosslady Mom smiled and said, “Welcome back. We're happy to have you.”

Her throat hurt again. Couldn't swallow right.

“Miss Sakura.”

Kyōko turned her head with effort to look at Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown. He was standing and looking concerned, hat held to his chest.

“I was perhaps too blasé in my explanation of the situation. My apologies.”

Kyōko stared blankly at the man for a long moment then blurted, “You suck.”

“You would not be the first to say so, Miss Sakura.” Urahara strode over to where Bosslady Mom and Manchild Dad were sitting with her on the floor, carrying his cane instead of his fan. His voice and face were melancholy. He watched Kyōko but said, “Miss Inoue, disengage Shun Shun Rikka and rest.”

The golden shield dissolved in sparkles and the fairy-bugs drunkenly wobbled through the air to perch in Orihime's hair. Her giant friend caught her when her knees went out.
“Miss Sakura, I think you should rest for awhile. You are... tired. We can talk more when Miss Inoue has recovered enough to intervene if things go sideways again. So you don't turn into a Witch.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“May I have your permission to... sedate you?”

Kyōko narrowed her eyes. “With drugs?”

“If you would prefer. I was going to use magic. I know a sleeping spell.”

Kyōko stared. The pieces of her mind were slotting together; she remembered the earlier discussion better. Still didn't trust him, but... so goddamn tired. She scowled. “I guess. But you'd do it anyway, wouldn'tcha?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Urahara said as he put his hat back on and stepped up to her. He leaned over Bosslady Mom's shoulder to hold his hand in front of her face. Kyōko sensed the gathering of magic as he murmured, “Hakufuku.”

Kyōko's vision wobbled in and out of focus, overlaid with shifting purple light. Dark cherry blossoms drifted down from... above? Their scent mixed with Pinky's rose aromatherapy magic and all the tension just bled out of her. She felt very disoriented and sleepy, but... not in a bad way.

“See you soon, Miss Sakura. Sleep w

The dining room was silent for a long minute. Everyone took in the scene now that the crisis had passed. Junko cradled Kyōko's sleeping body like the girl was her own daughter. Isshin stayed kneeling nearby looking deeply sad. Urahara stood over them and just stared thoughtfully.

After what felt like hours of stillness, Urahara sighed, “Well. That went well.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am aware my Scripture is incorrect in parts. Reverend Sakura was excommunicated for twisting his base religion; the dub has Kyōko say he preached things that weren't in or were different from the Bible. Kyōko is most familiar with her father's... interpretation, for lack of a better word.

Kinda basing some Kyōko stuff on conversations I've had with friends who were raised in various denominations but left/rejected them in their teens or later. Also basing some of her outlook on the tendency of children to assume their family dynamic is the “normal” one even if it's abusive. Also, there are a couple scenes from PMMM Portable in which Kyōko reacts poorly to Tatsuya crying in public. Including a flashback to when she was little.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with
timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
**Chapter Notes**

A/N: It feels like forever since I wrote Homura's POV. I've been showing others' perception of her character development to avoid some redundancy in her thoughts as timelines go by. I feel rusty.

Ugly crying because my children finally obeyed me
Part of the delay was my mental Homura and Kisuke not cooperating.

Go read and review M. N. Nep's “Smoke and Mirrorless Flowers”! It's an AU with a different plan for when Kyōko woke up and it is amaaaazing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**DREIUNDSIEBZIG**

**TIMELINE X+N+1**

Homura glared at Urahara when he declared that things had gone well. Most of those present did, really. Everyone understood that he had been going for some kind of dark humor, but no one liked it. Mrs. Kaname slowly raised her head from looking at Kyōko's peaceful face, expression morphing from the one Homura's mother had made when she cried about other children being mean to her in kindergarten to the seething rage Homura's mother had shown when Homura told her the teacher had done nothing about the teasing. Mrs. Kaname shifted Kyōko's body and pushed her toward the Kurosaki patriarch.

“Here, Isshin,” Mrs. Kaname said with the calm of a peaceful jungle clearing just before a jaguar dropped out of a tree to take down a deer. “Please hold her.”

Everyone eyed her as she stood and stalked toward Urahara. It was all of three steps, but it was like watching a hunt.

“Kisuke,” Mrs. Kaname said pleasantly. “What was that?”

Behind her, Homura heard Karin's quiet oooooooo of dark anticipation followed by the bling! of a phone's video camera activating.

Urahara had the sense to not stall and innocently ask what she meant for once. “That was me drawing the majority of her mistrust onto myself in a way that made you all visibly angry at me to make everyone else seem like allies grudgingly putting up with me because I'm useful. To put you all on equal ground. It had to be a genuine reaction on your parts. You should be able to get closer to her now by playing up that disapproval and commiserating with her.”

Mrs. Kaname nodded thoughtfully. “I see.” She crossed her arms and lightly tapped one finger
against her cheek. “Did you push her toward a breakdown on purpose?” she asked lightly.

“Not to that extent,” Urahara answered with appropriate gravity. “I simply intended for her to become quite angry at me and for everyone else to take her side while talking her down.”

“Did you happen to consider that ploy could go south in an instant with just the wrong words?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Kaname turned her head and looked at him sideways. “And you did it anyway. Without warning anyone.”

“Yes. It worked out in the end.”

Mrs. Kaname frowned and nodded slowly as though taking time to absorb his words. Then her hand lashed out and slapped him across the face. Hard enough to turn his head aside and let her manicured nails leave scratches on his cheek.

Homura narrowed her eyes. Urahara had allowed that hit to land. Did Madoka's mother understand she was furthering his stated plan?

“That was for Kyōko.” Mrs. Kaname returned her arms to their idly crossed position. “I won't stand for you playing games with these girls' lives, Kisuke,” she said, sweetly threatening.

Urahara slowly turned his head back to face her. “I would prefer to call it a strategy rather than a game, madam.”

“Your preferences have little bearing upon our reality, sir.”

Homura needed a copy of Karin's video.

“I also do not appreciate that you are using that same strategy on everyone here,” Mrs. Kaname continued.

“I'm sorry?” Urahara said innocently. Stalling.

Wrong move.

This time, Sayaka and Ichigo joined Karin's quiet oooooooooo.

Mrs. Kaname bared her teeth in imitation of a smile. “You say you wanted us all to band together for her sake. That first part is the primary goal. You set her up as bait to make all of us who met for the first time today form a team bond rapidly.”

Ooo, she did understand. And was playing along by calling it out.

Urahara stared at her, eyes wide and brows raised, visibly impressed. “Quite astute,” he conceded. “You have a good eye for social maneuvering.”

“I'm an executive in a multinational corporation,” Mrs. Kaname said drily. “It's in my job description.”

“This is beauuuutiful,” Karin whispered. She sounded somewhere between gleeful and tearful.

“She's my hero,” Sayaka whispered back to her in the same tone. “You'll send this to me, right?”
“Hell yeah.”

Homura, for her part, was completely reevaluating Madoka's mother and moving her to the highest ranks of potential usefulness in picking apart enemy strategy. She felt foolish for ignoring the woman across so many timelines just because she had no magical powers. Homura was struck again by how she had limited her own options before this timeline.

“Which is why you're addressing this in the open instead of privately,” Urahara said with an amused smile.

Mrs. Kaname smirked. “If you're going to play games, I'm going to teach the kids how to play. Calling out bullshit when you see it is a valuable life skill.”

“True.” He tilted his head curiously. “Surely you must recognize there are critical processes which are most efficiently handled via social engineering, no?”

“Obviously,” Mrs. Kaname said with a condescending eye roll. “I don't know where you learned to rely on it so extensively, but this kind of situation is exactly the sort where straightforwardness nets the best results. These girls have had enough social engineering from the Incubator. We're supposed to be their safe port in a storm on that angle.”

Guilt made Homura's stomach roll. She buried it under admiration for how skillfully Mrs. Kaname was balancing on the line of calling Urahara out while using the same tactic. Better than Urahara, even.

They'd make a terrifying team. Might already be a terrifying team if they really had spontaneously slid into a good-cop-bad-cop routine.

“This is exactly why I volunteered to handle the kids,” Mrs. Kaname continued. “You're a bachelor uncle with no experience with teenage girls. You are so wrapped up in your research that you see them as subjects rather than peop—”

“I wouldn't go that far—”

“Let me finish. Your research takes precedence. You are obviously the perfect person for that job. You have the skills, knowledge, and mindset. You are absolutely vital. However, your laboratory mindset isn't staying in the lab. That's also not necessarily bad; you just let it intrude more than it should. It works out sometimes but it's inapplicable at others. If you can't separate the two, you need to stick to Research and Development and leave Human Resources to me.”

Urahara barked out a startled laugh.

“I fail to see the humor in this, Kisuke.”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” Urahara chuckled with a little wave. He offered her a self-deprecating grin. “You just sound so much like someone else who has lectured me on that in the past. It caught me by surprise.”

Mrs. Kaname bit her cheek and narrowed her eyes. “That implies you don't learn, Kisuke. I suggest you correct that.”

“I shall endeavor to do so, madam,” Urahara said while tipping the brim of his hat at her. “I leave the children in your capable hands.”

Madoka's mother eyed him skeptically, then nodded and turned away from him. She looked around
the room and declared, “I think it's time we all get some rest. Tomorrow will probably be a bit rough as well. Get some sleep.”

After a general murmur of agreement, Homura trailed behind Isshin as he carried Kyōko's sleeping body to the game room behind the other girls. She stood back and watched the other teens quickly shove furniture aside and unfurl sleeping bags while Isshin stood by the door, unconsciously rocking Kyōko with a worried face. The others cleared a path for him to step through and lay her out on an open sleeping bag. He straightened and shifted uncertainly, wanting to do more to help.

Yuzu patted his arm and smiled. “We'll take it from here, Daddy. Don't worry.”

Isshin laughed weakly. “Don't ask Daddy to do the impossible, baby.” He scrubbed his face and scratched his stubble with a deep sigh. “Yeah, I know.” He looked around the room. “Good night, kids.”

There was a chorus of good nights and all the boys were promptly kicked out of the game den to bed down in Hitsugaya's bedroom. Mami knelt beside Kyōko and fretted with the girl's long hair, straightening and carding out nonexistent tangles. She sat back and bit her lip. “I wish we had been able to wait for her to change.”

Homura sighed. “It could not be helped.”

“I know.”

Yuzu stepped up and eyed them with her hands on her hips, then nodded. “We can at least take off her boots,” she said firmly. Mami nodded; she and Yuzu each removed a boot. Yuzu reached for Mami's. “Here, I'll put them over by the wa—”

“No,” Homura interrupted. Everyone looked at her in confusion; she stared back solemnly. “Leave them near her feet so she can see them when she sits up.”

Everyone looked baffled. Sayaka became their spokesperson and asked, “Why?”

Homura frowned at the boots and thought of another Kyōko. One in a timeline where the girls were establishing an uneasy five-way alliance as Walpurgisnacht approached. They had just arrived at Mami's apartment; Kyōko had refused to take her shoes off at the door and Sayaka had called her rude.

"Like hell’m I leaving these babies outta my sight," that Kyōko had sneered.

"What, you think some little shoe gremlin will come out and snatch them?" that Sayaka had laughed.

That Kyōko had gone red and defensively retorted, “These are the best shoes I've ever owned! I ain't losing 'em!”

That Mami had murmured a quiet oh and soothed, “Kyōko, this is my home. The other girls won't steal them and no one else will come in.”

That Kyōko had eyed them suspiciously and gestured at everyone else. “You can't speak for them. I don't trust 'em. If I have to bug out when they try something, I want my damn boots! I ain't going in a shoe store barefoot!”

That Madoka had tilted her head and innocently asked, “Won't— wouldn't you just wear other shoes until you got new boots?”
That Kyōko had bared her teeth, anger not completely covering embarrassment, and snapped, "These're the only shoes I own!"

Homura realized she had tipped her hand and sighed. How to spin this? "Mami said she is basically homeless. It would not surprise me if whatever she carries on her person is all that she owns. Those boots look well cared-for and like they were expensive when new. I do not want her to wake and think we stole them."

Sayaka cringed and looked abashed in the exact same way her other self had during that other conversation. Karin and Yuzu eyed Homura, likely wondering if Homura actually knew that from experience. Mami looked at Kyōko sadly as Yuzu set the boots at the foot of Kyōko's sleeping bag and Madoka smiled at Homura.

"That's very thoughtful of you," Madoka complimented her. "I never would have considered that." She smiled brighter. "It's almost like you know her."

Oh no.

Karin and Yuzu eyed her.

Sayaka perked up with realization. "Yeah! Like with the food fight thing! How'd you know that?"

Karin and Yuzu eyed her.

Homura pursed her lips and kept her eyes on Kyōko. She finally settled on saying, "This is not the first time I have encountered a homeless magical girl." It was true.

Karin made an abortive head and shoulder movement that may have been a snort or laugh and turned away. "Welp, zip 'er up and get changed. It's time to crash," she called over her shoulder.

Homura was tempted to throw something at her.

"Bed time!" Yuzu chirped.

Both of them. Throw something at both of them.

"What time is it, anyway?" Sayaka wondered.

Karin looked at Homura gleefully, about to say something smart, so Homura quickly said, "I'll check." She pulled out her phone and absently murmured "one-twenty-eight" as she noticed a text from Urahara.

- When everyone is asleep, do that trick and fetch everyone in the know. We need to chat.
- Leave Miss Inoue to sleep, though.

Joy.

Homura lay in the dark and reflected on the afternoon and evening while waiting for the others to fall asleep. Mami was dealing with reality far better than she had in any previous timeline. She was still lost, heartbroken, and horrified, but it seemed they had found the right quantity and quality of people to keep yanking her back from falling off the cliff into insanity. It was a relief to see, but Homura also felt some guilt and hurt that she had never managed to be enough for Mami by herself. She tried to suppress that because she recognized it as illogical, but it kept creeping back and arguing that Mami should have been the easiest to support because of their similar
backgrounds. Instead, Mami's sanity always slipped through her fingers as she tried to hold the girl up.

If Mami lived long enough to learn the truth, anyway.

Homura was better with Kyōko. Maybe because they had similar lack of faith in humanity? Maybe because they were both blunt and practical? Maybe because they had both had their naive idealism crushed out of them? Kyōko's coarse behavior often irritated Homura, but she had mostly learned to tolerate it. She would forever be mystified that Kyōko, of all people, was the girl she got along with best after Madoka, but it was a constant. One that should be useful, given that this Kyōko was largely accepting her new reality but needed to be guided into accepting allies. Homura had some strong guesses on how to nudge her into place.

The irony of her trying to convince someone to accept allies was not lost on Homura.

This Kyōko was behaving about as Homura had expected given the circumstances. Except for the quickness of her Soul Gem's darkening. Homura supposed it made sense in the aftermath of her world tilting on its axis but it was inconvenient. With Orihime exhausted, Homura would need to go scrounge up new Grief Seeds as backup. Bothersome. But she dutifully pored over her mental catalog of known Witches for those that had and had not been defeated this time.

The day must have been exhausting because it didn't take as long as Homura expected for everyone's breathing to even out in sleep. She damped her magic as much as she could when transforming, froze time, and roused Karin and Yuzu. They walked to Hitsugaya's bedroom as a human chain; inside, they found all the boys sitting around with old books, frozen mid-bickering. Karin took the initiative to hurry forward and shout “boo!” as she slammed her free hand on Hitsugaya's shoulder, then cackled at his scream of surprise and reflexive attempt to punch her—an attempt only because Karin removed her hand from his shoulder and let him freeze again.

Karin turned to Homura and gleefully said, “Please tell me you mess with people like this.”

“Not particularly,” Homura replied with a shrug. “Not outside of battle, anyway.”

“Ooooo, you are missing out,” Karin crowed. Her eyes were bright and looked like she had ideas.

Homura traded a neutral glance with Yuzu. They mutually decided to leave Karin to her fantasies. Dissuading her wasn't worth the energy of arguing and asking her to elaborate would only encourage her.

“Save your evil plots for later,” Homura said drily. “You startled him so you get to risk injury pulling him into the stop.”

“I should probably poke him with a stick and let him freeze that instead of my arm,” Karin said, looking around the room.

Homura felt a bit spiteful on Hitsugaya's behalf, so she let go of Yuzu's hand and let both sisters freeze, moved to stand behind Karin, pulled a golf club from her shield, and jabbed Karin in the back with it.

“Here,” she said blandly.

Karin screeched and arched away from the contact, but Homura pressed forward with her.

Ah. Satisfying.
Karin whipped her head around to look over her shoulder and shouted, “You just said you don’t do
that!”

“I made an exception for you, since you seem so fond of the technique,” Homura replied smoothly.

Yuzu giggled. “You deserved that, Karin.”

“Pssh. Whatever.” Karin reached behind her and grabbed the golf club by the rod, yanking it away
and saying, “Just gim—”

Karin and Yuzu froze as soon as Homura let go of the golf club. She just stood and looked at Karin
with a slight smile on her lips for a moment. Then she returned to her starting position and slipped
her hand into Yuzu's.

“—me thAH!”

Yuzu's ugly laugh reminded Homura of Sayaka whenever she provoked Hitsugaya.

Karin glared for a moment, but broke out into laughter. She managed to get Hitsugaya into the stop
without losing any limbs to frostbite, but the boy's snarling diatribe in the face of Karin's mirth
spread frost at his feet. Still muttering resentfully, Hitsugaya cast the yellow rope spell and brought
Ichigo, Sado, and Ishida into the stop with minimal screaming. Homura led them to the kitchen like
a teacher guiding kindergarteners with a walking rope. They found Isshin sitting on the floor in a
corner, back pressed against the wall, arms braced on his knees, and holding a hand out as though
to shake hands with empty air.

“The hell is Goat Face doing?” Karin muttered.

“He managed to anticipate you wanting to mess with him,” Hitsugaya bit out.

“Awww. No trust.”

Hitsugaya muttered darkly.

Ishida adjusted his glasses. “He's psychologically prepared for a sudden contact. We should have
thought of this.”

Indeed, Isshin's reaction to the yellow spell snaring his wrist was a minimal jerk of surprise before
standing calmly.

Soon, they were all sitting around a cluster of card tables in the cramped surveillance monitoring
room, tied together by the yellow rope spell— Hainawa, Hainawa. Had to remember that. She
narrowed her eyes at a bank of monitors that were shut off and wondered what Urahara was
observing that he didn't want them to know about. Karin caught her eye with odd movements,
playing with the tea that had already been set at each place at the table when they arrived in the
same way she had when Homura was proving her abilities. One time, the girl looked right past the
floating stream of tea to meet Homura's eyes and flicker her own toward the same monitors, then
ignore them in favor of playing with the tea while Urahara shuffled papers and multiple tablets.

Yeah, I noticed that, but it doesn’t surprise me and is a low priority— ignore that for now, Homura
interpreted. She primly picked up her teacup and sipped, deciding to follow Karin's lead.

Urahara cleared his throat. “Shall we begin?”

“Yeah,” Karin said idly, still playing with her tea. “Question.”
“Yes?”

“How did it feel to get owned so hard by Madoka's mom?”

Ichigo and Isshin's cackling was loud and full of schadenfreude. Yuzu didn't object to the implied you deserved that. No one did.

Urahara blinked slowly and looked like he hadn't anticipated the question. “Well....” He scratched his chin. “I can see why she is so successful.”

“That's not an answer, you slippery little weasel,” Karin drawled.

Yuzu didn't object to the insult, concealing her outrage behind a pleasant face.

Mr. Tsukabishi thoughtfully commented, “Mrs. Kaname reminded me of Yoruichi... having words with you.”

“Maybe we should introduce them,” Isshin said with a sly grin and viciousness in his eyes. “With Yoruichi as a human, I mean.”

Urahara didn't hide his wariness at the prospect fast enough. Homura made a mental note to make that meeting happen. Somehow.

There was more sniping and scolding before the meeting began in earnest. Urahara bore it all patiently, but it annoyed Homura because it was playing right into his stated plan of making them band together while he lurked in the shadows doing research. Getting raked over the coals was part of that plan, though a few barbs seemed to pierce him and make his face go blank for moments at a time. Of course, he could be faking that. Who knew?

The meeting began with everyone reporting what they had observed, what they had learned, and the questions those developments had elicited— getting everyone on the same page. Mr. Tsukabishi took notes while Urahara's eyes alternated between drilling holes into speakers and going unfocused to ponder something. The scientist went last; his contributions and questions went on and on and on and on and set Homura's mind to whirling even when he didn't pause to actually ask her about something. The long list of unknowns made Homura uneasy, like each was a block being added to a wall they had to climb.

There was a long silence after everyone had reported and their discussions had been pursued to their ends. Urahara stared at his teacup as he tapped his fingers on its rim. Isshin and Ichigo watched him like they were dreading something— like they could guess what the man would say next. It put Homura on edge.

“Given this mountain of unknowns and the escalating moves made against us,” Urahara said with painful slowness, “I think it would be in our best interest for Miss Akemi to go back in time again.”

Silence.

And the block wall fell on top of her.

“No!” Karin snarled. “We're not doing that to her!”

“Things are going well this time!” Yuzu said heatedly.

Homura stared at them, speechless.
“You really think the constant near-death experiences are *things going well*?” Ishida asked.

“Everyone's still alive and sane! And friends!” Yuzu argued. “We magical girls— we're *used to* risk like this! This is our lives!”

“Yuzu—” Isshin stammered, looking heartbroken.

“Shut *up*, Daddy!”

Isshin stared, mouth closing slowly.

“You should know this as— as shinigami and Quincy! You *know* this!”

Karin crossed her arms aggressively and sneered, “Why the hell does she have to go back just because we don't know things?”

Urahara was looking Homura dead in the eye the whole time. “Miss Akemi. Does your time travel work beyond your stated reset point?”

Homura stared back, white-faced. Everyone looked at her. She opened and closed her mouth, then quietly answered, “I do not know.”

“Have you ever tried to go back to *before* March sixteenth?”

“Ye-yes,” she whispered. The admission pained her.

“Did it work?”

“No.”

“Have you ever tried to go back to *after* March sixteenth? For example, to a point where things in the contemporary timeline had been going well but were about to go badly, so you could avoid that with hindsight?”

Her eyes burned. “Yes.” She hated her voice for squeaking.

“Did it work?”

“No.”

“Do you know why your wish to save Miss Kaname dropped you into your hospital room on March sixteenth instead of, say, the moment you first met her— a day later?”

Her mouth opened and closed. “No.”

“Would it be reasonable to infer that while you know your time powers have rules, you do not know the full extent of those rules? Those limits?”

Homura couldn't breathe for hurt rage.

Karin looked at her face and threw her teacup at Urahara. It froze in midair. She snarled and shouted, “Are you gonna get to the fucking *point* or is this just Trash-Talk Homura's Powers Day?!”

“I do not intend to tra—”

Urahara sighed. “My point is that while we have rolled with the punches so far, there is no guarantee we can continue to do so. Not with the Incubator escalating to trying to assassinate all our known fighters and introducing new variables to the timeline. There may come a point where it learns enough of our abilities, knowledge, and connections to overwhelm us. If that point should come after May first...” His face went tired and sad as he looked at Homura. “Would you be able to reset the timeline at all in case of disaster after May first? Would you go all the way back to March sixteenth no matter how far out we get? Would you only be able to go back six weeks? What if something goes wrong and we figure out that the point where it went wrong is seven weeks behind us? What if—”

“Kisuke,” Isshin said just as tiredly.

Homura startled at the feel of Yuzu's hand on her shoulder. She looked at her friend and was baffled when the girl dabbed her face with a napkin.

“The fact remains that the descent of Walpurgisnacht and your reset point are a mere two weeks away. We simply do not have the resources to figure out everything at play in Mitakihara and surrounding cities in that frame. We need to accept reality.”

A dam within Homura broke. Words spilled out of her mouth in a desperate rush. “Why bother wasting resources on the surrounding cities at all?! It's never been a problem for me before!”

“We have discussed this, Miss Akemi. At length. If the barrier which blocks memories of the Incubator was to be deployed against us—”

“It never has in past timelines!”

“The Sōju were never deployed against you in previous timelines. Yet they were this time. How do you know who or what else the Incubator has in its arsenal?”

Homura pressed her lips together, then crossed her arms and averted her eyes.

“It has plainly escalated your priority in its threat assessment compared to other timelines. Though we don't know for certain what entity created the barrier over Asunaro, we must consider the strong possibility that it was the Incubator— maybe a last-ditch effort to counter a threat that comes unacceptably close to some line which it does not wish to be crossed, or perhaps the acquisition of knowledge that it absolutely cannot allow to spread. Barring assassination, causing your enemy to forget you are their enemy is an elegant resolution. Especially as it would allow the magical girls within to continue their progression toward becoming Witches. Risk management with loss prevention, so to speak.”

“You're implying the Incubator sees the magical girls in Asunaro as an existential threat,” Ishida observed.

“Yes. Maybe. Which is why I want to know who they are and what they know.”

“They may have forgotten what they knew,” Hitsugaya said skeptically.

“Which makes the Asunaro barrier even more important to study. Figuring out exactly what they forgot could be priceless intel.”

“Assuming the Incubator is the one who crafted the barrier,” Hitsugaya countered.
"Assuming so, yes." Urahara crossed his own arms and sat back. "Even if it was someone else, their knowledge or skills could be useful. That barrier is intricate. It snuck up on Yoruichi. I don't think you quite grasp how exquisite it must be to do that."

Homura seethed. "I will grant that it is a promising venture," she grit out. "Even so, I do not see why resetting time would be necessary to continue investigation."

Urahara pursed his lips. "Have you been listening to this discussion at all? Are you that recklessly intent on denying reality?"

It was like being slapped. And choked.

"Don't be so cruel!" Yuzu said through tears.

"Reality is cruel," Urahara said dully.

"Fuck you!" Karin snarled. She and her brother looked ready to scale the table and attack the scientist.

Homura just felt empty.

"You've all known this was a possibility. You wouldn't have been composing time capsule notebooks if you didn't. In that vein, we should devote more time to assembling and distilling our information for our next selves."

"I know you are capable of better socialization than this, Kisuke," Isshin growled.

Urahara took his hat off and rubbed his face with a heavy sigh. Without the shadow of the hat's brim, the dark circles under his eyes were far more evident. "Miss Akemi. I do not intend to hurt you with this. I intend to save you the pain of allowing your reset point to pass and coming to regret it with all your being—to regret whatever terrible things happen to your friends with all your being. I... know regret like that. I don't want that to happen to you. I don't want you to have to go back, but I don't want you to lose what little control you— you!— have over the situation more. Not just for our sake, but for yours.” He looked at her earnestly; let his mask slip and his overwhelmed haggardness show through. "I cannot express in words how much I regret being unable to save you this pain— regret my... inadequacy in the face of this challenge. I cannot fully comprehend the effect what I want you to do will have on you, though I understand it is a terrible thing to ask. A monstrous thing. But if it will save you and others in the end, I am willing to be your monster."

Homura stared at her lap, twisting her skirt in shaking fists.

"I have racked my brain many a night trying to find another way out," Urahara said mournfully, so quiet she could barely hear him. "If I had been able to find any alternative with a failsafe even half as powerful as your trump card...." He trailed off.

Didn't commit to what he would or would not do if he found such an alternative. Made it sound like he'd tell her and opt for using it, but didn't say so.

Homura should be angry at the similarity to the Incubator, but she was just... tired. "Is that what I am to you? A trump card?" She heard sharp inhales around the table but didn't bother looking up.

"Absolutely not," Urahara said firmly.

She looked up at him through her bangs. "You don't act like it."
Homura was done listening. She severed the kidō rope to evict everyone from her timestop and left the room, navigated the halls in a daze, paused to peek in at the sleeping Mitakihara girls, and left the shop. She wandered the city listlessly for awhile, halfheartedly considered hopping on a train, decided that would be immature, and scaled a tall building to survey the frozen city for something to do, someplace to go.

Kyōko had said Sakamoto and Michaels' territory had been the coast of Shinchi and Kyōko was absent from Kazamino. She shouldn't run into any opposition if she went east to be alone for awhile.

Ichigo blinked several times in surprise. One moment, Homura was sitting at the table looking tired but defiant. The next moment, she glowed violet, the yellow band of Hainawa broke from her wrist, and she disappeared when the world regained its color. Urahara morosely allowed Karin's unpaused teacup to nail him in the forehead, then looked down at the puddle and broken pieces with a sigh.

“Oh, good job, jackass,” Karin sneered. “Now she's done a runner.” She sat back and clapped.

Her sarcastic applause continued as Urahara blinked owlishly and mused, “Ah. Perhaps I should have added Miss Akemi to the inversion to keep her from leaving.” He ordered Tessai to track Homura from the control room.

“That would have been worse,” Chad said quietly as Tessai rushed away.

Isshin pinched the bridge of his nose. “You're better than this, Kisuke.”

Urahara sighed again at the blatant disappointment.

“I'll go to her,” Ichigo declared, standing abruptly. His father gripped his arm and held him in place.

“Let her cool her head awhile, son.”

“Actually, Hitsugaya should go,” Urahara interrupted. “We can't have Ichigo reveal himself and his power beyond the wards. Not yet.”

Ichigo ground his teeth, clenched his fists, and growled expletives under his breath.

“She is denying reality,” Uryū said grimly. “That's not good.”

“Not unexpected, though,” Isshin sighed. “We've asked her to form emotional bonds and now we're asking her to throw them away in a couple weeks.”

“Which is why I really think now is the time to reveal the time travel to the Mitakihara girls,” Urahara said. “Give them a couple weeks to create their own time capsules and reassure her. But if we tell them against Miss Akemi's wishes, that would be a dire betrayal and we could lose her. Besides, we can't prove it to the others without Miss Akemi's cooperation. So we need to convince her.”
“That'll be fun,” Uryū said darkly. “If we can find her.”

“How far could she have gone?” Yuzu worried.

“With her powers, she could have flash-stepped down to Fukuoka while time was stopped and be on a boat to Korea for all we know,” Karin answered with a shrug.

“No. She'll be nearby,” Tōshirō argued.

Karin arched a brow at him. “Oh?”

“She wouldn't abandon Kaname,” Tōshirō reasoned. “And we can clearly sense Kaname is still in the building.”

He was right. Even Ichigo could discern that; her power was too gentle at rest to be called a beacon, but its presence made him think of ambient light. Like when the world had a soft pink glow if conditions were right at sunrise or sunset. Soothing.

“Speaking of,” Isshin said. “Reports of her power were *not* exaggerated. Wow.”

“Maaannnnn, Kyōko was *right* when she called it warm-n-fuzzy-drugs magic,” Karin said. “I mean, damn. No wonder Homura hasn't Witched out.”

“What do you mean?” Tōshirō asked slowly.

Karin looked at them like they were idiots. “Her best friend is a walking magical antidepressant when she's worried about someone. You saw how she worked on Kyōko and Mami without— uh —” she waved a hand as she searched for a word— “consciously trying. At our sleepover a couple weeks back, Homura said one of the frustrating things is that no matter what she does, she can never convince Madoka to not want to help her. Not even if she's mean. Madoka's just that damn *genuinely nice.*”

“And if she always wants to help Homura or is always worried about her... and they're in the same room at school almost every day...,” Yuzu said softly.

Ichigo whistled lowly. “A daily dose of sunshine and roses to keep the darkness away.”

Urahara's eyes went unfocused and he looked like he was playing with puzzle pieces. Whatever he thought, he kept it to himself. He jammed his hat on his head and stood, absently rubbing the scratches Mrs. Kaname had left on his cheek. “I'll leave her to you, then.”

Isshin nodded sharply and narrowed his eyes at Urahara's hand. “Don't heal those scratches, Kisuke.”

Urahara turned melancholy eyes on Ichigo's father and murmured, “I didn't plan to. I know I earned these.” He sighed and moved to the doorway, posture closer to defeated than Ichigo had ever seen. “I'll see you in the morning.”

On some level, Sandal-Hat's weary, overwhelmed demeanor frightened Ichigo. He wasn't used to seeing Urahara anywhere near out of his depth. It was jarring.

Tōshirō rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. “I'll set out. Hopefully, she'll have calmed down some by the time I find her.”

“You think you have enough sway to get her to come back?” Uryū asked skeptically.
Karin scoffed. “Tch’yeah. She won’t tell me much about why they get along aside from him being a boring professional, but she respects him.”

“Why do you get along so well, Tōshirō?” Ichigo asked. He really, really wanted to know.

“None of your business,” the captain replied curtly as he stood.

“So something super duper personal,” Karin translated.

Tōshirō gave her a flat look. She stared back. They had some kind of silent conversation with facial expressions before both rolled their eyes and Tōshirō turned to the doorway.

“Oh! Wait, Tōshirō!” Yuzu gasped. “Stop in the kitchen. Look in my pack for a shiny purple box. Take it to give to her when you talk.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “And what would I be giving her?”

“Marzipan cookies,” Yuzu answered, eyes bright and fierce. “She loves them.”

“Ah. I'll get them.” Tōshirō turned to leave again.

“Oh, hey, Tōshirō!” Ichigo called out.

Tōshirō looked back and growled, “What?”

Ichigo looked him in the eye, determined. “You tell my sister that I'll make sure my past self will still be her big brother even if I have to reach through time and kick my own ass.”

Tōshirō stared. Everyone did.

“That makes no sense, Kurosaki,” Uryū muttered.

“Pfft, if anyone could do it, it'd be Ichi-nii,” Karin said with a smirk. She saluted Tōshirō. “Hey, Tosh. Include me in that.”

“Yeah!” Yuzu said with sparkly eyes, clenching her fists.

Tōshirō's face softened into something fondly amused before he nodded and left.

The rest of them sat in silence for awhile before breaking up to go to bed, at a loss for what else to do. Sleep evaded Ichigo; every molecule of him strained to go find Homura. He couldn't relax until she was safe.

It took Tōshirō well over an hour to find Akemi. He had to rely on process of elimination and his own eyes because she was obscuring her reiatsu. She absolutely would not be in Asunaro and probably wouldn't be in that one magical girl's territory in the part of Shinchi due south of Mitakihara; she wasn't on any of the skyscrapers in Mitakihara and wasn't at her townhouse. Wasn't in the unoccupied Kaname home or Tomoe apartment. Wasn't watching Momoe. She may have gone west, but Tōshirō gambled on east. Sakura dominated Kazamino but was out of commission, so Kazamino would be the safest place to get lost from a magical girl's perspective. He searched high buildings to no avail; stopped and racked his mind for ideas.
“Stars are better,” she had said last time he sought her out.

Right. So. Maybe someplace ideal for stargazing? Which meant less light pollution. He scoured the coast and finally found her up in northern Kazamino, by a wooded park not far from the Asunaro barrier. She was sprawled out on her back at the end of a goddamn stone jetty sticking out into the goddamn Pacific Ocean after three in the goddamn morning.

Tōshirō alighted on the sand near the jetty and loosed his control on his reiatsu, notifying her of his presence as a courtesy. He half expected her to flicker away, but she didn't. So he strode along the gravel path atop the jetty until he was standing over her and peered down at her face. She reluctantly met his eyes. They stared at one another for a bit before Tōshirō decided to start things. He held up the purple box by its silver ribbon and blandly said, “Yuzu sent cookies.”

Akemi sighed and looked aside. “Of course she did.”

“Mind if I sit?”

“No.”

He sat to one side of her and shifted the gravel around into something less painful, then tugged the ribbon and opened the box. He offered her a cookie. “Here. Eat at least one or Yuzu will flay me alive.”

“Pout at you,” Akemi corrected.

“Same thing.”

Akemi hummed and took the cookie.

They sat in silence for awhile, Tōshirō gazing out at the moonlit waves as they crashed ashore and Akemi gazing skyward while nibbling cookies.

“I don't want to go back,” she said at long last.

“To the shop or the past or both?”

“The past.”

“I wouldn't want to if I was in your shoes, either,” Tōshirō admitted. “Do you understand why Urahara thinks it necessary?”

Akemi heaved a deep sigh. “Yes.”

Tōshirō scrutinized her face. From what he could see in the darkness, she didn't look angry anymore. Even her reiatsu didn't feel angry. Akemi was just the epitome of bone-deep weariness. “You're not angry anymore,” he observed, hoping she'd respond to the prompt.

“No.”

So much for the subtle way. “Why not? If you don't mind me asking.”

Akemi mulled the question over and hesitantly replied, “I understand his...” She waved a hand around vaguely, looking for a word. “...Position. I have taken it myself many times.”

“What do you mean?” Tōshirō asked, brows knit.
“If it will save you and others in the end, I am willing to be your monster,” she quoted Urahara. Eyes wandering the heavens, Akemi softly explained, “I have taken that position with Madoka and the others in past timelines. Done cruel things to them, threatened to kill them—to save them. I understand. That he thinks it is necessary—and that he hates that it is necessary.”

It took a minute for Tōshirō to decide how to react. “I'm glad you have that insight,” he finally said.

“Mmm.” Akemi met his eyes and looked exhausted. “I still don't want to go.”

“I understand.” It wasn't fair. It wasn't.

They sat in companionable if melancholy silence for awhile, appreciating the stars and waves and the salty sea-spray on their faces. After awhile, Akemi hesitantly said, “May I... ask you a... favor?”

“Depends on what it is,” he hedged.

“Tell me about Urahara. His... history. And the war.” She looked him in the eye. “Karin has said you do not like to leave people in the dark unnecessarily. I want to know. Tell me.”

He stayed quiet and considered his options. “I can do that. May I ask why, first?”

The magical girl frowned and looked up at the stars again. “I want to know how... what led to him being... ah, how he... is. And why you all mostly accept it.”

“You mean what made him a secretive ass with a tendency to not explain plans and act on his own even if it pisses off literally everyone he knows?” Tōshirō asked drily.

Akemi tensed and turned her head to look at him as though startled; whatever realization his words prompted, she kept it to herself. She looked back to the sky and quietly said, “Yes.”

Tōshirō mentally rifled through the extensive, century-deep debriefings from all parties he had read after the Winter War, considered the best way to start the story, decided, and changed positions to face and scan the shore. When Akemi raised a brow at him, he muttered, “I don't want the Incubator sneaking up on us and eavesdropping.”

“Ah.”

Paranoid, he pulled his legs up to prop his elbows on his knees and leaned onto his forearms to hide his mouth—he still didn't know if the little monster could read lips at a distance and didn't want to find out the hard way. Tōshirō took a deep breath and began nearly one hundred and twenty years back.

Urahara's background in covert ops and as warden of Seireitei's prison while serving as Shihoin's subordinate. His promotion to Captain of Twelfth Division and his restructuring it into a scientific powerhouse. Shinji Hirako promoting Aizen to Lieutenant of Fifth Division specifically to keep an eye on him. Aizen experimenting in ways parallel to Urahara, each creating what would come to be called a Högyoku—but with very different methods and motives. The string of suspicious disappearances, the threat of which escalated to the point of first sending a captain and lieutenant to investigate with some subordinates, then to a team of captains and lieutenants being sent to find the missing captain and lieutenant. How Urahara delegating collection of research samples to his lieutenant had put her in harm's way at the same site.

Now that Tōshirō thought about it, guilt for that could explain a lot about the man's tendency to do
research himself. Akemi's face showed that she might be having the same realization.

He continued. Aizen, Ichimaru, and Tōsen's betrayals and the Hollowfication of the investigation teams and Urahara's lieutenant. Urahara and Tsukabishi's use of forbidden techniques to rescue the transforming shinigami; their framing, arrest, and rigged trial for the entire incident, ending with Central 46 sentencing the two to exile in the World of the Living stripped of their powers. Central 46’s order of execution for the Hollowfied shinigami— the Visored— as monsters. Shihoin breaking in and sweeping them all away to a hideout where they could plot to stabilize the Visored and bide their time until they could move against Aizen. Aizen, Tōsen, and Ichimaru's ascent to captaincy over the next few decades. Aizen's illusions, atrocities, and quiet sabotage. Urahara's struggles to destroy his Hōgyoku so it couldn't be used by Aizen. The entire debacle with Kuchiki and Kurosaki; his secret attempt to seal Kuchiki and the Hōgyoku into a reiatsu-swallowing gigai and how it backfired.

Or didn't.

Tōshirō still wasn't sure if Kurosaki's subsequent invasion of Seireitei to rescue Kuchiki had been one hundred percent unintended by Urahara that night he “stumbled upon” the aftermath of the Hollow attack on the Kurosaki household. It did force Aizen into the open and lead to a sea change in shinigami society, which neatly dovetailed with Urahara's goals.

Compared to the textbook recitation of the events of the distant past, speaking about the traitors' actions while using Kurosaki's invasion as cover was difficult. He was only able to speak of the Battle of Fake Karakura Town by focusing on Urahara's role in it— the many gambits he had run, how he used Shihoin and Isshin and others as willing pieces on a battlefield game board in his effort to defeat the megalomaniac. And so on.

The eastern sky was softening with dawn and the stars were disappearing by the time he was done. Akemi rarely asked questions. She drank in the information and let it settle, turned it over, let it settle.

“So. Urahara is a... complex character,” Tōshirō finished slowly.

“I see,” Akemi breathed. Closing her eyes, she quietly repeated, “If it will save you and others in the end, I am willing to be your monster.”

Tōshirō wasn't sure he was meant to respond to that. “It's... history would seem to show he lives by that, I suppose.”

Akemi hummed something that might have been agreement, then whispered, “I still don't want to go back.”

“I know.”

Tōshirō waited for her to say something, but she didn't. Didn't elaborate, didn't argue. She just lay on her back on the gravel, hands neatly clasped at her waist, hair splayed out in windblown tangles. If not for her breathing, she would look like a pale corpse prepared for burial at sea. Like someone who had died of exhaustion and was ready to float away, forever beyond reach.

Suddenly irrationally desperate for a sign of life, Tōshirō blurted, “Kurosaki said, and I quote: 'You tell my sister that I'll make sure my past self will still be her big brother even if I have to reach through time and kick my own ass.'”

Akemi snorted; her mouth reluctantly turned up at the corners. “Of course he did,” she said softly.
“Karin and Yuzu echoed the sentiment.”

She opened her eyes and sighed up at the sky. “Of course they did.”

Tōshirō watched her for a moment. She was not at peace, was still conflicted, had a spark of tired defiance in her. But she was... stable. He thought of something encouraging but second-guessed himself.

But it seemed she had been watching at him in her peripheral vision. “What?” she asked.

For someone worse at socializing than he was, she could sure nail some subtle things. Or maybe he wasn't being subtle. “I don't want to give you false hope....”

She raised her brows at him. “But?”

“But... there's a non-zero chance Kurosaki could stumble his way into doing something we'd consider impossible.”

Akemi stared at him. “What do you mean?”

Tōshirō scrubbed a hand through his salt-stiff hair and looked out at the sunrise. “I mean, he went from random teenager who could see ghosts to ascending to something near godhood and taking down another near-god in the span of less than a year, while acting as catalyst for a lot of social change in another dimension. After poking holes in the defenses of a citadel that stood unbreached for centuries and turning some officers to his side— with less than two weeks' dedicated training and little information. You can never really rule anything out with him.”

She frowned in thought, then let her eyes wander to the sky. He let her think for awhile and just watched the water. The sun had crept over the horizon when she finally spoke.

“We should hunt a Witch before we go back.”

Tōshirō blinked at the tangent. “Oh?”

“We need a Grief Seed on hand if Miss Inoue is indisposed.”

“Ah.” He levered himself up and stretched stiff muscles. “Ideas on where to find one?”

Akemi stood and sighed, “In any other timeline, I would say yes. Things are unpredictable this time.”

“Dowsing it is, then,” Tōshirō said as he strode back up the jetty, tugging his phone out of his pocket. “I'll let them know we'll be awhile.”

“Thank you.”

He halted and glanced up mid-texting. “Huh?”

Akemi didn't look at him, just idly looked at the dawn and murmured, “Thank you,” then passed him to head for shore.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: The more I let Junko lead me in that opening scene, the more I realized she's similar to my Benihime to a certain extent.

Writing Karin, Yuzu, and Homura as sisters gives me life.

Some fun story-related stuff has been happening on my Tumblr. Come say hi and join me in egging on the fanartists.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter turned into taking my more emotionally stable Kyōko voice for a test drive to figure her out. She dominated the entire chapter.

The only flashback dialogue not from or derived from a canon source is the part about the shop.

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Kyōko woke slowly, her body the most relaxed it had been in... a really long time. She shifted and stretched and opened her eyes to bright morning sunshine and blinked the glare away. The ceiling above her was unfamiliar for a minute, but finally pinged as the game room in that crazy... magic shop, they had called it. She was surrounded by the sounds of people breathing and something tap-tap-tapping. A drowsy look around found Mami on her right and Madoka to her left. Mami's face was worried even in sleep but Madoka's was peaceful— as was her magic. As she woke up more, Kyōko studied that magic and decided the girl really did just radiate a soothing aura by default. It was low-key and nebulous in sleep, but there. If she wasn't contracted— another glance at her ring finger confirmed that for like the hundredth time— then Kyōko supposed her magic needed to go somewhere. It didn't seem to have a focus, just spilled out. Curious, she stretched her senses toward Sayaka.

Her magic was in a similar nebulous and unfocused state, but she had far less of it and it didn't... spread. Kyōko thought it through and decided to look at the two in video game terms: Madoka's magic was the only one in their party that had a constant area of effect. Sayaka's was... triggered upon attack, like auto-counter? Or something. Whatever.

Distantly, she wondered if she was so calm because of the best sleep she'd had in memory, having eaten a beyond-decent meal, being at the epicenter of Madoka's area of effect, or... that spell. Right. She'd been put to sleep by a spell. After—

Kyōko tensed and thought of the night before; she whipped her hand up and splayed her fingers to look at her Soul Gem ring. It was a bit dim, but not terribly so. She let her hand fall to the... sleeping bag. Okay. And thought. The drowsiness was actually helpful; it forced her to think more slowly. Some of the previous night was hazy with rage and... paranoia...? and despair. She had been choking on smoke and Momo—

*Nope.* Chop that thought off at the knees. NEXT.

Right. So. There had been a lot of information, some promising stuff, and that string—*rope*— attached: staying within the property line.
Which... yeah, the guy had been a dick about it, but damn she had overreacted. That smoke of despair and paranoia had cast a much bigger shadow than there really was. She wasn't happy about it, but turning the tables by tricking Incufucker and giving it a Very Unpleasant Surprise down the road by popping up and barbecuing it while it wondered how the fuck she was alive was a fair trade.

Also: the food.

Kyōko lifted her hand more slowly and frowned at her Soul Gem ring again. Her greatest asset had now been revealed to be her greatest liability and it pissed her off. That it could mess with her head added insult to injury. She curled her lip into a sneer at it.

Yet another reason she never should have contracted.

“I hope you're not getting any ideas.”

Kyōko nearly jumped out of her skin and bit her tongue while stifling a screech. She sat up and whipped around, wide awake and searching for threats. All the magic had felt asleep—!

“Over here.”

Bosslady Mom was sitting by the window in her pajamas, a laptop balanced on a gaming console. Ah—the source of the tapping. Which she should have noticed had stopped. Damn. The woman twiddled her fingers in a wave and smiled slightly. “Good morning.”

“What.”

“Good morning,” she repeated quietly. “Did you sleep well?”

“Uh— yeah, I— uh— I did.”

The woman smiled more broadly and Kyōko saw the resemblance to Madoka. “I'm glad to hear it. You had a rough night.”

Kyōko's face heated up in embarrassment. “I'm— I'm sorry about— uh— about— uh—”

“Don't be,” Bosslady Mom said with a little wave. “You were under immense stress, had more dumped on you, and your Soul Gem was working against you. Everyone understands.”

Kyōko's face burned hotter. She really didn't know how to react. Squirming awkwardness was something she hadn't felt since that time she took Mami home to meet her family.

Bosslady Mom tapped some keys on the laptop, closed it, and looked up at her. “Wanna get first dibs on breakfast, Early Bird?” she asked with a wink and a gesture at everyone still asleep.

“Uh— okay?” Kyōko replied warily.

The woman waited in the doorway for her while she untangled herself from the sleeping bag and grabbed her boots. Kyōko scrutinized the sleeping girls so she'd know what their faces were like when they were unguarded. She couldn't see Karin's face because she was laying on her belly, spreadeagled with her face planted in a pillow. How the girl didn't suffocate was anyone's guess. Then Kyōko noticed an empty sleeping bag, took attendance, cast her senses around, and blurted, “Where's Purplebitch?”

“Homura,” Bosslady Mom corrected with a twitch of her lips.
“Yeah, her.”

Bosslady Mom beckoned her over. “She and Tōshirō went out to hunt Witches before dawn.”

Kyōko followed her, baffled. “Why?”

“To have Grief Seeds on hand in case of... emergencies.”

Like Kyōko's epic nuclear meltdown. Cue full-body cringe. “Oh.”

Bosslady Mom pretended not to notice. “I need to bug Tessai and see if Tōshirō has texted an update. It's been a couple hours since the last one. If they don't find anything soon, they should drop by to eat and rest.” She opened the door to the dining room and kitchen and called, “Good morning!” at the occupants while the smell of glorious food punched Kyōko in the face.

Manchild Dad was slumped on the table, worshiping a coffee mug. Pinky's dad and the Giant With Glasses were cooking. Pinky's baby brother was in his high chair; he looked up from his food to cheer, “Mama!” He blinked in surprise, then squealed, “Koko!”

“Good morning, baby,” Bosslady Mom cooed as she pressed a kiss into his hair. “Is breakfast yummy?”

“Yeah!” Tatsuya waved at Kyōko and shouted, “Koko! Come eats!”

Kyōko slid into a seat near the toddler and tucked her boots behind the table leg. Why the hell couldn't she make eye contact with a toddler? “Yo. I guess... Sorry I scared you. Last night,” she muttered.

“It okays,” he chirped as his mother put her laptop on the table and wandered into the kitchen, where her husband swatted her hands away from something. Tatsuya went quiet for a minute while Kyōko stared at the grain of the wood of the table—it was a far sturdier table than the one she broke—then hesitantly said, “Um, Koko?”

“What?” she muttered with a sideways glance at him.

“Um.” Tatsuya gnawed on his pinkie finger, then whispered, “Papa Mama sayed little-kid cry-cries make Koko a'scared 'n mad 'n sad?”

The parents were watching her even though they were playing keep-away with a strip of bacon. Manchild Dad's eyes were on her, too. Kyōko shifted uncomfortably. Could this get any more awkward? “Y-yeah. I guess.”

“Why?”

“Tatsuya, no,” said the dad.

“You don’t have to answer that,” said the mom.

Kyōko stared at the boy for a long minute. “It's... okay,” she absently said to the parents. Momo had also been a whywhywhy whywhywhy toddler. Kyōko distantly remembered that giving an actual answer could forestall tantrums. And she really didn't want to deal with that again. “Uh, crying makes me think of... someone who cried that I... can never see again.”

Momo's despairing voice echoed in her head. “I'm hunnnngryyyyy, Kyōkoooor! Thaaat's not sooooup, it's waaatterrr!”
Kyōko sighed tiredly.

Tatsuya looked utterly heartbroken. “Oh.” His eyes teared up, but he startled and covered his face with his hands. “I s-sorry. I try not'a cry-cries, 'kay Koko?” he said with a wobbling voice.

“Uh... thanks, kid.” Before she really knew what the hell she was doing, she had patted his head like she used to do to her sister; Kyōko jerked her hand back as though stung.

The toddler either didn't notice or didn't care. “We eat brekkis!” He shuffled the food on his tray, grabbed something, and offered it to her in one grubby fist. “I share for happies!”

“Uh... thanks,” Kyōko said, obligingly holding her hand out to accept whatever sticky gift he would give her.

“We'come!” Tatsuya squealed.

Kyōko looked in her hand. It was a peeled wedge of apple. Of course it was.

“Kyōko, I'm— I'm hungry—”

“It'll be okay, Momo. Father's teachings are going to reach everyone. When that happens, we'll be able to eat as much as we want. Until then, let's make do with this.”

Momo, face alight with joy. “An apple!”

Mom, a hand brushing her cheek in surprise. “Oh, my, did... somebody give it to you?”

Kyōko had stolen it in desperation. She met her mother's eyes and knew the woman understood it was stolen goods.

“How kind. In that case, Mother will cut it up for you,” Mom said with a smile. She was desperate, too.

Dad, face warm but odd, a plate of peeled apple wedges in his hands. “Here's your share, Kyōko.”

“But... this is all of it, isn't it? Let's all share it. I can't eat all of this alone.”

Dad, a fake smile on his lips. “Go ahead and eat it. You're the one who got it, after all. We don't need it.”

He knew.

He knew he knew he knew he knew he knew he knew he—

And thou shalt remember all the ways which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every WORD that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.

“What are you waiting for, Kyōko? Eat it.”

Could her brain give her a break for one. goddamn. DAY?!

She popped the apple into her mouth and viciously crushed it with her teeth as if she could crush the memory out of her. When Tatsuya giggled and offered her another slice, she took it and
immediately tossed it in her mouth. Crunch, crunch.

“Would you like pancakes, waffles, or eggs?” Pinky's dad asked as Boss lady Mom danced to the table with a plated omelet that looked like restaurant-quality.

“Uh... pancakes.”

“Bacon or sausage or both?”

“...Both.”

“Coming right up!” The man hummed cheerfully and bustled about with pans.

Kyōko didn't know how the next half hour managed to be both the most relaxed and most awkward breakfast in memory, but it was. Maybe because she rarely interacted with adults these days? Everyone else in the building started trickling in after that. Mami hugged her desperately until Karin tugged at her collar and told her to let Kyōko breathe. Breakfast turned into a grab-what-you-want-from-a-platter affair instead of the cook-to-order service Kyōko got. Karin and her ridiculous father got into a fight over the last pancake; it set Kyōko's nerves on edge, but most of the other people were snickering or rolling their eyes. She supposed the fork duel was funny. But still.

Orihime stumbled into the room and blurted, “Food.”

She waved those guys off and plunked into a chair. Everyone shoved platters her way so she could stuff her face, which she promptly did. Orihime scanned the table and spoke around a mouthful of food to hopefully ask, “Donutsh?”

Madoka's dad and Yuzu immediately stood with expressions like they had been given a mission of dire importance to the continued existence of humanity. “We'll make some!” they declared together before attacking the kitchen.

Kyōko watched Orihime eat in her peripheral vision and managed to stay straight-faced while cringing internally. The young woman had exhausted her magic twice over for Kyōko's sake. Kyōko owed her and had nothing to give her. She made a note to find a way to settle that debt.

The first plate of donuts was set in front of Orihime just before Kyōko—and almost everyone, it seemed—sensed two irritated magical signatures approach. Homura and Mami's knight in frosty armor stomped into the room looking bedraggled and pissed off. Her costume and his clothes both bore random large holes with singed edges and their movements crackled with static electricity. Homura's tangled hair seemed to be floating a bit from it; the boy's hair looked spikier than Kyōko remembered. Both had patches of skin that looked like big road rash scrapes.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Karin drawled as Homura furiously reached into the Pocky-pit. “Did you make a new friend?”

Frosty glared at Karin as Homura flung two Grief Seeds at the table so hard the spindles lodged in the oaken surface. Kyōko joined others in leaning forward to squint at the Grief Seeds. The sides of the first had a kinda windmill pattern and the top was crowned with a tulip ornament. The second had sides that made Kyōko think of castle walls with a circular pattern and an ornament that reminded her of the weird stubby key to her mother's antique music box.

“Oh, fun ones, huh?” Karin commented.

“I hate those Witches,” Homura snarled.
“You can't not tell us about them,” Karin goaded.

Frosty leaned past her and jabbed a finger at the first one. “Lightning and seaweed tentacles while walking on rough seawater that couldn’t decide whether to be solid or liquid,” he growled. Then he pointed at the second and sneered, “Sand.”

“You're pissy because of a little sand?” Karin laughed.

“Sand everywhere, in everything, and used as a weapon,” he added.

Sayaka eyed their scrapes and drawled, “Oh, so that's why you look like someone took sandpaper to you.”

“Oh, no, you got sandblasted,” Karin cooed, hands to her cheeks in fake concern.

Homura looked murderous, but Frosty flatly looked Karin dead in the eye as he stepped up to her, tapped a finger to her breakfast plate, flared his magic, and encased her food in a dome of ice. Sayaka immediately huddled over her own plate with protective arms.

“Hey, Tōsh, don't ruin food— it's rude,” Karin said innocently, gesturing at Kyōko.

Kyōko felt her eye twitch. She couldn't decide which one of them to be angry at.

Frosty— Tōshirō met Kyōko's eyes and gave her a respectful nod. “It's not ruined. She just has to work to get to it.”

“Awwwww, such considerate revenge,” Karin tittered.

Tōshirō placidly tapped his knuckles at the back of her neck and dropped a fistful of hailstones into her pajamas.

Karin leaped up with a screech and flailed around, ice pellets scattering everywhere. “TŌSHIRŌ, YOU ASSHOLE!”

Homura gave a short, vindictive laugh. This appeared to shock the others more than the bratty bickering.

The boy ignored Karin's writhing and looked at Sayaka with his brows raised. Sayaka grabbed her plate and dove under the table with it.

Everyone looked entertained instead of angry. Kyōko felt like she was in a sitcom or something.

“I'm glad you're back safely.”

Everyone looked to the doorway. Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown stood there looking sleepy and relieved. Kyōko wondered where the claw marks on his face came from.

“You were gone a long time. I was worried,” the man added.

Kyōko wondered why he glanced at his nephew but mostly stared Homura in the eye as he said that. There had to be context she was missing.

Homura sighed and went to push her hair over her shoulder, but grimaced and shook her hand out as static made her hair cling to her sleeve. The movement made the curtain of hair cling to her face over a big scrape; hair from her other side drifted over and clung to that. She sputtered angrily and stamped a foot in frustration.
“Sadako, Sadako!” Karin laughed.

“Sadako, Sadako!” Tatsuya parroted.

“Go take a shower and get out all your hair stuff,” Yuzu ordered as she put another plate of donuts in front of Orihime.

“You will take any excuse to play with my hair, won't you?” Homura asked dully.

“Yep!”

“Tōshirō. Miss Akemi,” Urahara said. When both looked his way, he said, “Why don't both of you go get cleaned up? Then I'll heal you and you can eat breakfast.”

“I can heal myself,” Homura sniffed.

“Please don't,” Urahara said quietly. “I think it would be best for you to conserve your magic for now. Until Miss Inoue recovers.”

Homura's mouth twisted in distaste but she huffed agreement and swept out of the room, immediately followed by the boy.

Urahara watched them go, then turned to face Kyōko. He looked her up and down and asked, “How are you feeling, Miss Sakura?”

Kyōko eyed him for a minute with her own sour face, considered reactions, and settled on a curt, “Better.”

“Physically? Mentally? Magically?”

“All of ’em,” she answered with a roll of her eyes. “If nothin' else, at least you're good for knocking people out.”

His flinch warmed her heart. Kyōko also liked the way the others at the table were eyeing him.

“I apologize again, Miss Sakura,” Urahara said quietly as he took off his stupid hat and held it over his heart with a bow of his head. “My behavior was out of line.”

“You're an ass when you're tired, Kisuke,” Manchild Dad drawled.

Bucket Hat Magic Science clown put the hat back on his head and blinked owlishly at Karin and Yuzu's dad. “So I am told.”

Boss lady Mom cleared her throat and sipped from her coffee mug.

“Yes, I am,” Urahara corrected himself.

“Tired?” Kyōko asked airily. Psh. Like sleepiness was any excuse for by the way, you're under house arrest— why so upset?

Mami shifted in her seat and said, “Ah, you wouldn't know, but... Mr. Urahara didn't sleep at all... yesterday night. Morning? After— after our fight and— and when we got you back— he spent all night and morning calling allies and... arranging things.”

“Arranging what?” Kyōko asked.
“Getting us here without Incubastard knowing,” Karin said grudgingly as she commenced chipping ice away from her plate with a fork. “Had to call in some favors. Sicced Tōshirō's dad on the geezer who was bitching about if it was really necessary and junk.”

Orangeygo crossed his arms and nodded. “Rukia texted me that he was pissed when Gramps suggested we avoid trouble and just leave you as a Grief Seed for now.”

Kyōko's breath caught. Fury and terror churned in her gut.

He added, “Rukia also said uuTōshirō's dad basically shouted the old man down. She thought he'd actually throw lightning at the jerk at one point.”

“But Mr. Hitsugaya is so nice,” Madoka said with wide, innocent eyes as Sayaka emerged from under the table and looked interested.

Manchild Dad smiled humorlessly. “Jūshirō is very nice. But if there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that the most sweet-natured and patient people are the most terrifying when they're pushed into actually getting angry.” He and everyone glanced first at Yuzu, then at... Bosslady Mom? Both smiled beatifically.

“Beware the fury of a patient man, as Dryden would say,” Urahara said with a faint twitch of his lips. It turned into sleepy surprise as the giant with glasses—Tessai, Tessai—shoved him into a chair and set food in front of him.

“Jūshirō has been... unhappy that we haven't reverted most of the Grief Seeds we've found,” Manchild Dad continued, “but he recognizes that we rarely have the girls' bodies to put their souls back into and we can't constantly run Orihime into the ground. He recognizes that studying them in the near term may allow us to save them all in the long run. And that's why he's been... unhappy about the Soul Gems we confiscated from Sōju, but hasn't objected. We don't have bodies to put them in. I'm trying to trace Sōju's route to see if any bodies were found soon enough to be on life support and try to figure out who's who, but that's going to be... difficult. Hopefully, studying them in the meantime will help save them.”

Kyōko swallowed hard, seeing the logic but not liking the sound of that. Other girls at the table looked similarly uneasy. Creepy thoughts of Frankenstein experiments drifted around in her head. “What... do you mean by study?”

Urahara sighed and rubbed his face. “As I said last night, if we know everything there is to know about Soul Gems and Grief Seeds, we may be able to figure out how the Incubator makes them, how the transformation functions, may be able to exploit that knowledge. One of my biggest hopes is to find a method to revert Grief Seeds that doesn't rely exclusively on Miss Inoue's powers. She's not an infinite resource.” He glanced at said young woman, whose head was doing the jerky motion of trying to stay awake while she finished her donuts. “My greatest struggle has been developing methods and equipment that can run non-destructive tests on the Gems and Seeds themselves. Many methods of analyzing normal gemstones require partial or total destruction and I absolutely do not want to accidentally destroy a soul.”

Kyōko's stomach rolled. There were a lot of pale faces around the table.

“Anyway,” Manchild Dad said with a knock on the table to draw attention back to him. “Tōshirō's father was adamant that since we had both your soul and your body, you should be restored as soon as possible. A lot of us made the argument, but Jūshirō was the one who could get in the old man's face.”
Whoever the hell Jūshirō Hitsugaya was, it sounded like Kyōko owed him as well. Great.

“Who is this old man who has so much authority, and what is the basis of his authority?” Boss lady Mom asked coldly, eyes hard.

Kyōko joined her in watching everyone's reactions closely. There was a lot of uncomfortable and uncertain shifting and eyes jumped between Urahara and Manchild Dad.

Looking for a cue as to what story to go with.

Kyōko sniffed with disdain. “You all suck at not being suspicious.”

Nervous laughter around the table. Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown looked at her in a way that screamed fascination. Knowing he was a scientist, that look made Kyōko wary.

“It's... complicated,” Manchild Dad said weakly.

“I thought you dislike that answer,” Homura's cool voice said from the doorway. Everyone turned to look. She was wearing a loose dress and had her hair up in a big towel-turban on her head. Her scrapes looked smaller than they had now that the blood was washed off her skin. Still looked raw and painful as hell, though. The dress' lack of cover for arms, legs, and collar revealed electrical burns, too. No wonder she'd been cranky. “You certainly disapprove when I use it regarding magical girl matters.”

Kyōko watched how the magical adults reacted to the impudence as Madoka scooted her chair over and fetched a spare one from another place at the table, then hurried to drag Homura to the chair by the wrist. Homura complieddocilely. No one showed anything but mild surprise. They weren't angry at Homura.

“That's— I— you— it's—” Manchild Dad spluttered.

Homura gracefully sat and smoothed her dress. “If you say 'that is different,' I will call you a hypocrite,” she said lightly.

Manchild Dad's face colored. Urahara gave a short laugh.

“Do not think I will not apply the same standard to you, Mr. Urahara,” Homura added as she primly sipped from her teacup.

“I do not doubt for a millisecond that you would do so, madam,” the clown said with a bow and flourish of his hat.

They were all playing the same game. The adults were treating her like an equal. Or she was behaving like an equal and they were just allowing it. Hmmmmmmmmmmmm.

“Hmph.” Homura turned to Boss lady Mom. “The simplest explanation is that our alliance to study and counter the Incubator has significant overlap with but is independent from an organization of the spiritually powerful which protects souls and polices common supernatural threats like Hollows. That organization prefers strict secrecy and is headed by an old man who is extremely powerful. Part of our cooperation agreement stipulates that we not speak of them if at all possible. For operations security.”

Urahara grinned at Homura and added, “We frequently bend the terms of the agreement nearly to breaking, so this is one taboo we would prefer to avoid disclosing in its entirety. For now. Sharing may become necessary but we need to display a good faith effort to avoid it to maintain access to
resources. Most importantly, our method of transportation that avoids Incubator detection. We could manage without, but it would be an unnecessary strain—and dangerous. It's bad enough that we have to navigate magical politics to get what we want.”

“Politics,” Karin muttered derisively as Bosslady Mom nodded thoughtfully. Still suspicious, but thoughtful. Kyōko decided she liked the woman. Especially considering the night before—

Lop that thought off at the kneeeeeeees.

“Um, Mr. Urahara?” Sayaka said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

Sayaka frowned and fiddled with her teacup. “If Mr. Hitsugaya yelled at the old leader guy... is he part of that group?”

Urahara's grin widened. “Yes. He is. And he has considerable political clout. He's our liaison.”

“What about TōHitsugaya?” Mami asked softly.

“Technically, yes, he is also a member. However, he chose to dedicate himself to our cause after a friend of his—and Miss Akemi's—fell victim to the Incubator.” Urahara's face went solemn. “She shattered her own Soul Gem in front of them.”

Homura bowed her head and looked grieved. “I would rather not speak of that,” she murmured softly.

Even the others looked painfully sad. Considering that and other references they'd made about rescued Witches killing themselves and others going batshit murder-suicide bonkers, Kyōko could respect that. She hated speaking about her father's adventures in that pit of despair and having seen him hanging from a rafter; she couldn't demand it of Homura. Or Tōshirō, she supposed. She'd hold off on asking the others for now.

“SO. Anywa—” Manchild Dad said with a clap. “The Kisuke who pushed your buttons last night was the Kisuke who'd been awake for two days and was straddling the line between human and antisocial science robot running political chess programming.”

Urahara grimaced but didn't object.

Kyōko shifted around and felt like she was being prodded toward a forgiveness she didn't want to give. Don't sulk, don't sulk, don't sulk. Screw it. “What, so now you think what he did was okay? People were pissed at him last night,” she challenged. From what she could remember, anyway. She wasn't sure who had yelled what at one point.

Madoka's dad coughed lightly and said, “There is a difference between an excuse and an explanation, Kyōko. We don't approve of how he treated you. We had quite a scene after you fell asleep. We are not excusing his actions, but explaining them so you understand them—that they were not borne of ill intent. That you did nothing to provoke his actions. That's on him. Junko... had words with him—”

“And hands,” muttered Karin.

“And nails,” muttered Sayaka.

Kyōko eyed the claw marks on Urahara's face and looked at Bosslady Mom, who innocently
sipped her coffee.

Her husband coughed into a fist and continued, “Yes. Well. Words. Anyway, they came to an agreement of sorts that he will focus on research—”

“And run ideas for plans involving other humans by me,” Bosslady Mom finished.

Bosslady Mom stated it as fact and no one objected, but the way some of the others blinked at her made Kyōko wonder how... “definitive” an agreement they had made before the casual declaration.

The woman looked Kyōko in the eye and asked, “What do you think about staying here and helping us?”

Kyōko turned that thought over in her head and twirled her spoon in her empty bowl. She glanced at Tōshirō as he returned all washed up, tiredly took a seat, and gathered food. He sported wounds similar to Homura's and looked like he'd rather be sleeping. She looked at the two Grief Seeds still wedged in the tabletop and considered that Tōshirō and Homura had spent hours and effort and pain to get them to help her. Thought about them and the other teens; they at least seemed genuine and potentially useful allies. The adults... she wasn't sure. None of these people were one-hundred-percent— except for the toddler and Madoka, for whom even Kyōko's cynicism found it difficult to believe had a selfish, controlling, manipulative, or deceptive bone in her body. Kyōko eyed everyone at the table slowly as she considered options.

Instead of Bosslady Mom, Kyōko looked at Urahara and said, “As if I have any choice.”

“There is one other feasible option, if you insist,” Urahara said. “It would require a significant amount of trust on both our parts, though.”

“Oh?”

“You could go to the Kurosaki home, since they live in a place the Incubator avoids,” Urahara said with a nod in Manchild Dad's direction. “You would still have a perimeter, but it would be a much wider one. And it would probably be best to use a fake name. Just on principle, in case someone mentions you when roaming.”

Kyōko narrowed her eyes. That sounded... not terrible. Except she didn't know the Kurosaki family very well. Manchild Dad put her on edge so far and their family dynamic was bizarre as hell. “Those are my only two options?”

Urahara scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Technically speaking, there are a few other options. However, they would be extremely drastic, possibly distasteful to you, and have the potential to compromise valuable intel about our resources. For one thing, we don't know if you would be able to maintain cover. For another, we don't know if we can trust you to not run off.”

“Meaning yep, those are your only two options,” Kyōko said sarcastically.

“For now,” Urahara said with a sigh. “We need to get to know each other better before proceeding beyond those two, anyway.”

Kyōko narrowed her eyes at Urahara. There was a third, unspoken option: Everyone overpowering her with sheer numbers and actually locking her up, or even snatching her Soul Gem and running away until she disconnected from her body then leaving her body in a freezer or something. They weren't openly using that as a threat, though. What did that say about them?
Everyone let her think. She scowled at her bowl and tapped her spoon on its rim, listening to Karin's increasingly frustrated attempts to chip away Tōshirō's ice. Kyōko looked up when Homura stood with a sigh, reached across the table, picked up the ice dome-sealed plate, flipped it, and cracked it on the table like an egg. The girl set the split ice dome in front of Karin and sat, returning to her waffles and fruit. Karin stared from the broken ice to Homura and back again with the funniest expression on her face as her brother laughed at her and Tōshirō smirked into his croissant.

Hanging out with these people could at least be entertaining, she supposed. And if everyone stayed in one place, she could throw Bosslady Mom or others at Urahara. The prospect of going all-out in some weird-ass subdimension sounded fun, too.

And again, also: the glorious food.

“I'm in for staying here,” Kyōko said slowly. “For now.”

Tense shoulders around the table relaxed.

“What's the plan for today, then?” Kyōko drawled as she leaned forward onto her elbows. She glanced at the other teens. “Is everyone skipping school to party with me?”

“Today is Sunday,” Mami said softly.

Kyōko stared. Last night was Friday? Or wait, was it? Her days were all messed up even before the fight. The last week or so was... blurry.

Mami must have understood her face. She smiled wanly and said, “I lost three days when I was... out. It's... disorienting.”

“Sunday,” Kyōko said blankly. She stared at the table laid out for breakfast and thought of her mother humming a hymn as she gathered the dishes and her father got his things together for his sermon. She shook her head to shake away the memory and repeated, “What is the plan for today, then?”

“Relaxing,” answered Urahara. “You all have had a stressful time lately and need some downtime.”

“And you will also be resting today, Kisuke, or Tessai and I will knock you out with Hakufuku and tie you to your bed,” Manchild Dad said cheerfully.

“I slept this morning. It's almost noon,” Urahara objected with a pout.

Tessai, the giant of a man, stood behind Manchild Dad and adjusted his glasses as he stared his boss dead in the eye. His glasses twinkled ominously. “Sleep more.”

There was more idle conversation after that and Manchild Dad healed Homura while she ate, but soon Tōshirō ditched them to go sleep— “I've had worse, heal me later, wake me up if you want to die”— and all the girls reclaimed the game room. They dragged sleeping bags and furniture around and set to playing. Kyōko twitched to alertness when Homura's magic flared, but upon whipping around to look for an attack she found the magical girl had manifested her shield and was holding it over the low tea table. It was baffling until brushes and combs and bottles of hair products tumbled out as Homura stared at them dispassionately.

“I want one of those,” Kyōko muttered.

“Right?!” Karin agreed. “You can keep everything and the kitchen sink in there!” Then she cupped
her hands around her mouth and sang, “Homurapunzel, Homurapunzel, let down your hair!”

Homura stared at her irritably as Yuzu sorted bottles and tools. Homura reached up and yanked the towel off her head. Everyone paused to take in the long mess of tangles.

Having long hair herself, Kyōko whistled and said, “That's gonna be a bitch to deal with.”

“Have fun taming that, Yuz,” Karin said in dull surprise.

“I will!” chirped Little Miss Sunshine.

Pinky tilted her head and looked interested. “Can I help?”

Homura glanced aside almost shyly and said, “If— you like.”

Well. That was interesting.

The rest of them had just settled on the floor when a little voice called, “Koko!”

Kyōko looked to the doorway. The toddler stood there with his father hovering behind him.

“Koko! I stay?”

His father smiled and said, “He keeps asking about you. Is it okay if he hangs out in here until he wears himself out into a nap?”

“No naps!” Tatsuya squealed. “Fun!”

Kyōko noticed everyone was looking at her for an answer. Huh. “Uh... that's cool, I guess.”

“Yay!” Tatsuya cheered. He promptly ran into the room and threw himself into Kyōko's lap, making her squawk in surprise. The toddler giggled and shuffled around. “Koko play TV?”

“Video games,” she said blankly. The hell was she supposed to do with a lapful of toddler?

“I play, too!”

“Oh... your hands are too little,” Kyōko said, desperate for an excuse to keep him from melting down at a plain no. She wiggled the controller and let him try to hold it. Tatsuya huffed in frustration, so Kyōko cut him off with, “You can... help me play?”

“I help?!” Tatsuya squealed, looking up at her with sparkly puppy eyes.

“Oh... sure.”

And that was how she ended up sitting cross-legged on the floor with a toddler in her lap with his back leaning on her torso, her arms around him so he could see her hands on the controller. The other girls found this so adorable that they occasionally deliberately sucked at the game so Tatsuya could tap some buttons and feel useful.

Kyōko was loath to admit it, but it was... nice. And the toddler had a dialed-down, muffled version of his sister's warm-n-fuzzy-drugs magic. It was... cozy. Comforting. Especially when he laughed. It brought back distant memories of Momo that... surprisingly didn't hurt much. Time blurred pleasantly; when Tatsuya fell asleep in her lap, she didn't bother moving him. Mami was still mediocre at video games and flustered by it. Kyōko decided Karin and Sayaka were at the very least decent company and good at games. Homura was a quiet mystery who could go either way; it
was impossible to glean anything from her while she struggled to stay awake. Yuzu and Madoka were chattering like they had known each other since kindergarten in Sunshine-and-Roses Land while they worked on Homura’s hair.

It was mid-afternoon when Madoka’s dad came in to take Tatsuya from her and put him to bed. Kyōko was surprised to find herself missing his presence. The confusing feeling was interrupted by words that chilled her to the bone.

“Kyōko’s hair is really long, too.”

“I wonder what it would look like in braids?”

“Or curled?”

“Oooooo.”

Kyōko jumped to her feet and blurted, “I feel like taking a walk!” She looked at the wannabe-stylists at the table and their sleepy victim, whose hair was now in two thick braids tied off with red ribbons. Yuzu and Madoka— whose hair was down now that her ribbons had been re-purposed — were looking at Kyōko’s ponytail, not her face. “Ha ha, cabin fever, you know?! Uh, I wanna... look around the building... go outside... something.”

The owners of the amateur salon gave her identical pouts. A bead of sweat trickled down Kyōko’s temple. The other girls snickered at her plight; she glared at them, but Sayaka jumped up, grabbed her hand, and said, “I’ll show you around!”

The blue-haired girl dragged her out into the hallway and gave her a guided tour of the entire place. It became obvious she was making shit up about some of the rooms. It was a good distraction, though, so Kyōko played along. They skipped the door behind which they could both sense Frosty’s magic; Sayaka advised her that he was super fun to tease, but it was best to do it in public where he couldn’t do ice stuff in front of the normals. This led to amazing gossip about a hallway scene featuring Frosty and a bunch of girls. It was almost exactly what Kyōko would have done herself. Kyōko said so and praised Sayaka, who preened.

That was the beginning of more gossip about the other occupants of the building. Kyōko played along with the mockery and slipped in some probing questions now and then. Sayaka was a fount of information. She obviously didn’t know everything about the people who weren’t originally from Mitakihara, but in a way that was more helpful to Kyōko. It was an outsider’s opinion and highlighted what things were unmentioned or hidden.

“And that’s the door to the deep part of the shop.”

Kyōko blinked in confusion and stared at the door at the end of a short hall; that door felt saturated with magic. “Deep?”

“Yeah. We dunno what else to call it,” Sayaka said with a shrug. “Mami said Hitsugaya said Urahara said it’s, like, magic plus physics to make an alternate dimension or something so there can be waaay more rooms in the building than it should hold.”

Kyōko bent forward and squinted at the door. “So... like Homura’s shield? But a bigger opening?”

Sayaka stared, jaw slack, before drawing her face into curiosity. “I wonder?”

Kyōko wanted to explore inside, but she wasn’t stupid. She closed her eyes and reached out with her magic to feel out the magic around the door. Most of it was unfamiliar but there was a fragile
framework that reminded her of her own lattice barriers. She opened her eyes and frowned. “It's warded.”

“Huh?”

“Warded. There's... a kinda fence just outside the door,” Kyōko explained. “Fills the whole hall, floor to ceiling. Doesn't feel strong, so I'm guessing it's an alarm instead of a brick wall.”

Sayaka squinted. “I dunno about that from here, but I think I remember feeling weird when I went back there.”

Kyōko hummed suspiciously. She wasn't in the mood to press things, so she changed the subject. “Why does everyone call this a shop? I ain't seen anything for sale.”

Sayaka brightened and led her back down the main hall and into the shop. She threw the door open with a flourish and shouted, “Welcome to High Spirits!” as if she owned the place.

Tessai paused his typing on a laptop and greeted them mildly from a counter as they stepped out into the shop. There were a lot of tea, herbs, crystals, candles, and other stuff she remembered from a time several years back when her father had taken her and Momo along to preach in the streets again and settled outside a similar shop. Their old man had called it a den of sorcery and witchcraft and been so worried about the poor lost souls of those who owned and shopped within that he would cry and plead with them to abandon their practices. Kyōko and Momo had loved their father's words and how he wanted to save people but were little and had short attention spans; they would peek curiously in the windows whenever he turned away to speak to passersby.

“Please forsake this false temple! 'Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.' The Lord forgives those who repent! Please, save yourselves! Let me help you save your souls! God helps those who help themselves!”

There had been a pair of very polite police officers after a few hours of that. One had bought the girls lunch while the other talked to their father. Kyōko's father had wept over papers for weeks afterward and said they were never allowed to go there again.

That happened a lot, really.

Kyōko's steps into High Spirits were solid and decisive— proud and defiant. She had been and could still become a Witch; a den of witchcraft suited her. She was curious what had made it so awful to her father, too.

“Hey, Tessai,” Sayaka said, “does anyone but us ever shop here?”

“Very few,” he answered as Kyōko wandered over to the crystals. “We included a ward that makes it unlikely that anyone without even a tiny bit of magic will notice it much.”

“Whaaat? How do you make money, then?”

Kyōko looked up from some green and purple crystal labeled fluorite, eyes narrowed. “It ain't really a shop, is it?” Tessai looked at her. She added, “The merch is legit but the point ain't to sell it.”

The big man looked intrigued. “To a degree. We do build protections into things for those who do come. You could say we have... an exclusive clientele.”
Kyōko raised a brow. “Or that it's a front.”

Tessai smiled at her. “You would make a good investigator.”

“That ain't a no.” Kyōko cocked her head to one side and suspiciously asked, “Who bankrolls you?”

“A very good investigator,” Tessai said with a wider smile. “Boss has squirreled away a lot of money over the years.”

“What from?”

Sayaka was looking at her with curious respect. Huh.

“A similar shop that used a candy store as a front,” Tessai replied. “I believe Karin's friends call him the Candy Man. They have no idea.”

Kyōko couldn't hold back a disgruntled pout. “Why didn't you do that here?!”

Tessai's laughter boomed around the shop and Sayaka snorted and snickered.

They spent the next half hour or so perusing the shelves. Kyōko let Sayaka pick up weird things and hold them up to loudly ask Tessai what they did. Kyōko absorbed the information and wondered about warding. They ended up at the counter with Tessai identifying and explaining the uses of the beads on Sayaka's bracelet.

Kyōko leaned in to look at it. “Madoka and the little guy had these, didn't they? But the kid's was on his ankle.”

“Yeah,” Sayaka answered. “Tessai and Magic Man made them for all of us who don't have magic. I mean, can't fight with magic.” Her face hardened. “Yet.”

Kyōko looked up at her and raised her brows. “If you contract, I'll kill you on principle for being such a dumbass.”

Sayaka laughed harshly. “Nah. I wanna learn to use magic like Hitsugaya and the others.” She looked up at Tessai with fierce eyes. “You'll teach me, right?”

“It requires a lot of studying,” the man hedged.

“Actually worth it,” Sayaka declared. “Everyone who's so good at magic is good at school and super smart so I'm gonna work harder there, too.”

Kyōko glanced aside. She didn't have much of an education, really. No way in hell would she say that, though.

Tessai stood taller and stared at the door. “Ah. Someone's coming in.”

“The wards tell you that?” Kyōko asked, casting her senses around. There was something very faint out front.

“Yes.”

The tiniest little old lady Kyōko had ever seen shuffled into the shop with a cane. Tessai welcomed her and she smiled broadly. Everything about her screamed grandma. When Tessai asked her if she was looking for anything in particular, she nodded and said, “Yes. There was a fire at the shop I
usually buy supplies at and a friend recommended you.” She looked around the entire shop and spent a moment staring at each of the three of them. Kyōko felt a touch of magic soft and weak as a light breeze—testing. The old woman smiled broadly. “I see my friend did not exaggerate in her recommendation.”

Tessai went out from around the counter to help her. Sayaka looked interested, but moved toward the door to the back. She gave a slight start and called out, “Oh, Tessai! Where's the fish food?”

“Under the counter.”

“Cool, thanks!”

And then Sayaka was rifling around under the counter; she soon stood with a victory cry and a plastic bin. Sayaka blinked and glanced at the screen of the abandoned laptop, then straightened and beckoned Kyōko to follow her. Kyōko eyed Tessai and the old lady, then decided to go ahead and leave.

Sayaka led her back to the inner courtyard. Kyōko glanced suspiciously at the pigeon coop as they passed it, sensing magic around it but not wanting to draw attention to noticing. They ended up sitting with their legs over the edge of a veranda above a koi pond. Sayaka chattered and threw handfuls of fish food.

Kyōko just stared at the fish and felt deja vu. They repulsed her for some reason; it escaped her for a long minute until realization hit her and she blurted, “There were fish in my labyrinth.”

Silence.

After long pause, she dully added, “They were swimming in the air.”

More silence from Sayaka. Kyōko leaned forward to stare at the koi with unseeing eyes, nails digging into the wooden ledge as she remembered misty fog, red lights, and flying goldfish mottled white and red and gold and black. She jolted and whipped her head up when a hand touched her shoulder.

Sayaka was looking at her solemnly. She was quiet for a moment, then softly said, “Do you want to talk abou—?”

“No,” Kyōko said hurriedly.

“Okay.” Sayaka withdrew and threw another handful of food to the fish. She swung her legs as she watched them swirl around in the water. Hesitantly, she asked, “Do you mind if... I... talk about the... whatever happened to me?”

Kyōko looked away and stared across the pond. She locked her eyes on a little turtle she hadn't noticed sunning itself on a rock. “Whatever.”

Sayaka waited a bit. When Kyōko didn't leave or tell her no, she said, “I was really stupid. It was my own fault.”

“...That ain't what Mami said,” Kyōko muttered.

“Mami is too nice,” Sayaka said.

Kyōko snorted. True.
Sayaka proceeded to retell the story of the Box Witch's labyrinth in far more detail than had been given during the round-table summary. The description of Mami's fall pained Kyōko more than she cared to admit. Homura Akemi's sheer stubborn brutality in battle and refusal to just fucking die already upped Kyōko's respect for her.

“So I was trying— trying to get to Mami's body while Homura was fighting the things that had Madoka,” Sayaka said shakily. She swallowed hard. “And then— then Sōju was right in front of me. And she shoved a black thing in my face. And— it— I—” Choking. Long silence.

Kyōko couldn't make herself turn to look at her, couldn't make herself, like, pat her on the shoulder or something to snap her out of her head. The silence dragged and Sayaka was very still. Finally, Kyōko decided to do something; she awkwardly kicked the girl's ankle.

“Ow! The hell?!?”


“Right. So. Shoved the fake Grief Seed thingy in my face,” Sayaka resumed. She breathed deeply. “Everything... hurt. My chest, my head, my whole body. And I was— it felt like— she had, like, shoved me in a closet full of spikes and slammed the door on me so it was totally dark and I was scared and it hurt and I was— so— I guess it was despair. I thought of all the— the awful or sad things I ever felt and then it was like I was drowning and— I— changed.”

That was... really fucking similar to what Kyōko remembered. Except instead of drowning, she had felt like she was choking on smoke back in her family's house when—

Nope.

Sayaka went quiet and still again, but it felt different. Kyōko hazarded a sideways glance and found her frowning at the water with her brows knit. It looked more like she was trying to put something into words than being lost in memory, so Kyōko faced forward again and waited her out.

“I... felt my bones cracking and twisting and... doing things bones aren't supposed to do,” Sayaka continued slowly. “My whole body... my skin stung and itched like— like a— like I was on a bed of nails or something. I think those were the scales. The fish scales. And... something happened to my ribs,” she said while drawing both hands down along the curve of her ribcage. “And I could... breathe there? But it hurt.”

Against her will, Kyōko's eyes drifted down to the pond and the gaping mouths and fluttering gills of the koi. Bile rose in her throat.

“My nails hurt,” Sayaka added. She held her hands up and wiggled her fingers. “I think they were claws. And they had... fins or skin or something between them. My fingers, I mean. It's kinda... blurry, but I'm pretty sure I was a really weird mermaid.” She held her legs out over the pond and wiggled her feet. Kyōko's eyes jumped to the koi's tail fins.

How the hell was Sayaka able to even look at the fish? They disturbed Kyōko and she hadn't even turned into one!

“Then something was over my eyes, like—” she waved her hands near her face as though tracing something horizontally— “like a knight's helmet visor thing. It had slits in it. I— So. That was... my body. My... mind? That was— that—” Sayaka gulped hard and shakily said, “I was so... I hated
everything. I wanted to kill everyone. And I wanted— to— die.”

Kyōko remembered being big, remembered sitting astride a horse, remembered flames in front of her face, remembered looking down on three figures and wanting them dead with every fiber of her being. Especially the blonde— especially Mami. Kyōko chewed her lip and stared at the fish. But the fish had been there, too, so that didn't help.

“Then suddenly I was wrapped up in ice and Homura was in front of me. Like right in my face,” Sayaka whispered, hunching over toward her knees. “She... had a gun. And— and— sh-she shot me in the face.” She sharply sat straight and lifted her chin, stared Kyōko in the eye. “But I remember her face. She was all bloody but I could tell she was crying and she looked like— like—”

Sayaka swayed in frustration and gestured while searching for a comparison. The girl's face twisted into an imitation of a brand of horror Kyōko knew well; she had most recently seen it on Mami. Kyōko had a suddenly vivid memory of falling, of being bound and struggling as her horse whinnied distress, of Mami and Homura standing over her and Mami's face above a shaking rifle contorting into the terrified-determined-horrified expression Kyōko's father had worn when—

“I understand,” Kyōko murmured heavily. “You can stop.”

They were silent and avoided eye contact for a long while. Kyōko gradually started feeding the fish with Sayaka. Stared hard at the fish and tried to sort through the disjointed memories of her time as a Witch. Sayaka fidgeted uncertainly a lot, but didn't push her.

Eventually, Kyōko dully asked, “Aren'tcha gonna ask me to tell you about my...?”

Sayaka looked at her, opened her mouth, paused, then spoke. “No. I— don't get me wrong, I wanna listen if— I mean— Well, I was the first one to wake up after that— that— and I had to tell Urahara so he'd know what we were fighting and— I— think— He was really nice about it, but I really didn't wanna talk about it so... soon, I guess. Sooo... yeah. I'm not gonna... try to make you do that. But, like, I want you to know... that if you do wanna talk about it, there are some parts you... won't have to explain to me. So maybe it— wouldn't be as hard with me. 'Cause I know. You know?”

“...Yeah.”

They didn't speak for a long time, just tossed food to the fish as the sunlight faded into the orange of twilight until the fish lost interest, too full. They still didn't talk; just sat there until someone came to fetch them for dinner.

The meal was long and lively again, this time with no mention of magical girls or Witches or Soul Gems or Incubators or Grief Seeds. Orangeygo and his friends told some stories about supernatural adventures in their town, but they were entertaining. Watching Orangeygo and Glasses Nerd bicker around their giant friend was very entertaining. Manchild Dad was a manchild, Bosslady Mom told surprisingly hilarious stories of putting assholes in their place at work, and Mami and Tessai got into some bizarrely complex discussion about tea, and everyone else gossiped and joked and laughed and just... it was... nice. Warm and inviting.

Kyōko caught herself cackling with Karin and Sayaka at one point and wondered what the hell kinda people she had fallen in with. It had only been a day and she already found herself wondering if she'd just laugh if they really did start up a one of us, one of us! cult chant.

This was dangerous. Fun and warm and welcoming and safe and dangerous.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: *pinches Kyōko's cheeks*

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Yoruichi was frustrated. She was used to doing covert missions, yes, but she wanted a brief from Kisuke. The one Akemi gave her in a timestop while talking to Nagisa the previous morning had put her on edge and obviously didn't include any of Kisuke's deeper machinations. She wondered if the plan to revert that girl's Grief Seed and recruit her had worked. No updates. Ugh. Being out in the cold was her least favorite part of covert missions.

It wouldn't be so constantly on her mind if her mission was more difficult. She was being spoiled with the fancy tins of cat food Akemi had given Nagisa and spent her time lazing in the windowsill, playing with Nagisa, cuddling Nagisa when she cried, and keeping an eye on her widower father's mental state; if he stayed in bed staring at the wall for too long, she'd go be a typical obnoxious cat and meow and walk on him until he fed her or let her out. He seemed grateful for the motivation after the first time, so she kept it up.

Yoruichi asked to be let out every few hours. She acted like a normal cat, did normal cat things, and patrolled the building's perimeter sniffing for signs of the Incubator before scratching at the Momoe's door to be let in. She scented the Incubator on the rail out front once and the balcony in the back another time; she opted for the typical cat reaction and rubbed her head and tail scent glands all over the railings to scream *MY* territory, *out*!

So. She was obviously still needed here, but she was getting restless.

Though she wanted something new to happen, she was unhappy when Mr. Momoe gathered the wherewithal to take Nagisa for an outing that evening. It would be good for them, but make guarding them more difficult. Which she had halfway wanted, but still. Nagisa had looked nervous and cast many glances at Yoruichi as they prepared to leave; Akemi had stressed to her that she
should keep Yoruichi with her to keep the Incubator away and a movie theater or restaurant or whatever wasn't going to allow a cat inside.

Challenge accepted.

Yoruichi wiggled out the door before the father could shut her in, then stayed far enough away that he couldn't grab her. He eventually gave up trying to corral Yoruichi and took Nagisa's hand. They walked to a train station; Yoruichi managed to board with them. She followed just out of reach for the entire trip. She did not expect to be traveling south into Shinchi—out of Tomoe's territory and into that aggressive girl's. Yoruichi was on high alert from the moment they crossed out of Tomoe's territory. She followed the pair off the train and through the streets; she was curling around Nagisa's legs by a food cart when she spotted something up high. Yoruichi pretended to chase a few pigeons and watch their flight; with the excuse to look up directly, she spotted the marching band magical girl Akemi had described to her. The girl was standing on a rooftop, half-hidden by a roof access shack but plainly watching Nagisa like a hawk in the orange light of sunset.

Like a predator.

The question was whether she was observing with intent to defend against attack... or hunting.

Yoruichi looked away from the girl and toward Nagisa, who was completely clueless. Backup would be a very good thing right now. But she had no way of communicating without blowing her cover. Her best hope was that someone at the shop was paying attention to her collar's GPS tracker. With everything going on, that was unlikely. She didn't know if Kisuke had programmed a proximity alarm for if she traveled too far. Or what he would consider “too far.” Crap crap crap sloppy sloppy sloppy.

She stayed close to the Momoes as they threaded through busy streets and got in line at a discount theater. The magical girl followed them on rooftops, daring to come gradually closer. Nagisa was still ignorant of any threat, swinging her arm with her father as they held hands. Yoruichi risked extending her senses toward the magical girl and cringed internally when she sensed that not only was her reiatsu strong, it was very dark. Alarmingly so.

Yoruichi was struck by a sudden realization as she eyed the girl's costume sideways again: The marching band Witch in the briefs from the last timeline. The powerful one Ukitake and Kuchiki fought. Took out a team in Shinchi. Marching band costume. Magical girl on the edge.

Фииииинииинииис.

Dilemma: Sneak into the theater to directly guard Nagisa, or stay outside and keep an eye on the dangerous magical girl?

Backup would be really good right now.

Sayaka was pretty pleased with how things were going until dinner ended and Mrs. Kaname lightly asked if they had done their homework. She managed to hold in a groan of dismay but knew it was all over her face. That was something she'd have to work on. Time to show she could be a diligent student and earn magic lessons! So they all got their homework out and clustered around the table — even everyone from wherever the hell they snuck in from. Karin and Yuzu had schoolwork, but their brother and his friends bent over super old books and took notes on laptops. The books Ishida
used were super duper extra old and had words on the covers that used the alphabet she knew from English class but Sayaka would be damned if she could understand any of it. She didn't want to look dumb and ask, but wondered what *Chronik des Echten Heiliges Römisches Reich Bayerischer Reichskreis Band VII 1500-1550* could possibly mean. Even Dr. Kurosaki and Mrs. Kaname were doing serious things on laptops. Tessai and Magic Man disappeared into the deep part of the shop to do God only knew what.

Kyōko, the only teen who didn't have schoolwork or research to do, looked bored. She briefly glanced at the math Karin was doing, scoffed, and wandered over to the kitchen. Sayaka wasn't sure why, but it surprised her that Kyōko helped Madoka's dad with dishes. Tatsuya got bored and started fussing and shouting to help, so Mr. Kaname fetched him from the high chair, plunked him on the counter, and had Kyōko “help” him dry plates. Kyōko looked cool with that, so Sayaka reluctantly turned to her homework.

She hated math. She could usually *do* it, but *slowly*. Like, *horribly* slowly without book guidance. Like, too slow to finish tests, forcing her grades down. It sucked. And there Homura, Karin, and Hitsugaya were, blasting through their math with enviable ease. Sayaka stared at her page and began.

When the math genius trio looked like they were wrapping up, Madoka was the first to break and ask, “Um, can— can someone help me?”

Asking for homework help didn't usually bother Sayaka, but she was now trying to look like she was capable of learning things super well. She was reluctant to admit slowness in front of the adults, but she had to learn *somehow*. Sayaka took a deep breath and said, “Yeah, me too?”

Karin was just as good a tutor as Hitsugaya and Mami were at their previous sessions, but Sayaka actually latched onto her words better and didn't need as much repetition. The girl explained the things with a steady stream of sarcasm and... metaphor? was that the word?— like, *asymptotes are electric fences that your line can't cross without getting fried but this hyperbola is a spiteful daredevil and will go as damn close to that electric fence as it can possibly get because screw those jerkass asymptotes*— and things just... clicked better. Sayaka hoped the humor would stick with her like straightforwardness didn't.

They eventually moved on to other subjects; Sayaka wished she had a better attention span. She was bored and impatient. But she saw Homura eyeing her speculatively and doubled down on her effort, maddening as it was. She refused to fail at Step One of her grand plan.

When they were packing up, Mrs. Kaname said, “Sayaka, have you checked in with your mother?”

Sayaka cringed. “No.”

“I recommend you do so. We don't need your parents actually calling the cops.”

Sayaka sighed and fished her phone out of a pocket. She turned it on and watched notifications pop on the screen, fervently glad she had set it to Do Not Disturb so she didn't have to hear ringtone interrupting ringtone interrupting ringtone. She hadn't bothered checking after she went to her place to get things with Homura and found... nothing. No note, no parents, not even the usual guilt-absolving “apology” gift on her bed. Like they didn't care she was gone.

“You... may be jumping to conclusions,” Homura had murmured to her oh-so-carefully.

“*Pfft. What other conclusion could there be*?” Sayaka had demanded.
Homura had cocked her head to one side and suggested, “Perhaps they simply do not know how to react, so they chose to do nothing.”

Sayaka had scoffed and tossed more clothes Homura's way to be stored in her shield. “Oh, yeah, parents of the year, there!”

The magical girl had frowned. “I did not say it was a wise decision. But... it is a decision I have made. And known others to make. When... overwhelmed. A form of freezing. Of fear.”

Sayaka had scowled as she rummaged through a drawer for a distraction. “Why are you on their side?” she had sneered.

“I am not,” Homura had replied as she neatly folded a shirt and slipped it into her shield. “I merely think you are... too close to the problem to see it objectively. Them, as well. Things look bigger than they are when you... press your face near them.” Homura had stepped toward Sayaka and lifted another blouse, holding the cloth so close to Sayaka's face that it brushed her nose and she went cross-eyed looking at a button.

Sayaka had shoved the shirt away. Resentment boiled in her heart. “Psssh. I bet they wouldn't even react if I just dropped off the face of the planet or died or something. As long as I didn't make a scene of it in front of a client.”

Homura had gone very, very still and looked at her with such searching intensity that Sayaka couldn't break eye contact. It had felt like the magical girl was digging in her mind or something. Homura had frowned and firmly said, “You are wrong.”

“Oh— oh yeah?! What would you know?!” Sayaka had snapped defensively.

Homura's eyes had drilled into her more deeply before looking away. She just repeated. “You are wrong.”

Sayaka still didn't know what to make of that exchange.

When her phone finally settled down, Sayaka ignored the voicemail— the inbox had filled that first night so there'd be nothing new in it— and scrolled through the texts. No mention of the evidence of her presence she had deliberately left around the condo when she snuck in with Homura— pots on the stove top, her bed's pillow and blanket on the couch as though she had lain there for awhile, a few other things that should have screamed that she had been there while her parents were away. No mention of her extra clues of taking all the photos of her and her friends off the walls and furniture in her room, of emptying her shelves of manga and music and anime figurines into Homura's shield in a fit of pique to leave her room looking bare and un-lived-in. Her father's texts were angry, talked about how she had messed with his work, and completely missed the entire point of why she had left them— as expected. Her mother's showed more concern, but half of it boiled down to what will other people think if they find out about this? and derailed into worrying about worst-case scenarios like Sayaka throwing her education away and becoming a delinquent like Madoka's mom had done in her teens. She thought Junko Kaname was a bad role model.

Which, like... did not concern Sayaka at all considering how Mrs. Kaname had turned out. But whatever. If that's what they thought she was going for, Sayaka would just have to prove them wrong.

Sayaka unpacked her homework again and ignored the others' confusion as she laid it out on the table and took pictures of every page. She emailed both her parents with the photos attached. She
Dear Sir and Madam,

Please see attached my completed school assignments. I have sought high-quality tutors and take my education seriously. I remain physically safe. As you have demonstrated no regret for or understanding of the issues I cited during our previous communications and do not even seem to have noticed that I visited our residence yesterday, I will maintain my distance for the time being to preserve my sanity and self-esteem.

Regards,

Sayaka Miki

Send.

So there.

“What did you just do?” Mrs. Kaname asked slowly. Her tone made it sound like did you just set something on fire?

Sayaka sat straight and handed her phone to the woman. She'd get it. She hoped.

Mrs. Kaname read it; her face struggled with reactions and settled on a snort and dark baring of teeth. “Well, I don't see this making things any better than they are, but that's a very politely-worded screw you. You could do well in business writing when you grow up.”

Everyone looked at Sayaka curiously but didn't ask. Sayaka puffed up in pride. Madoka’s mom gave the best compliments.

Sayaka closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and reopened them to pin Dr. Kurosaki, the only trained magical adult in the room. She lifted her chin and asked, “Dr. Kurosaki, would you be willing to teach Madoka and me some magic?”

The man looked surprised, then curious. He weighed her with his eyes, then looked at Madoka, who had perked up and was also trying to look as determined as possible. Dr. Kurosaki glanced at his laptop speculatively.

Oh, he was doing... some kind of research. Uhhhhhh, how to recover and not be a demanding child? “Unless, uh... are you too busy?” Sayaka said hesitantly. “I— I'd understand— I mean— um.”

Dr. Kurosaki scratched the stubble on his chin and glanced between them again as even the other magical girls started paying attention. “I... could actually use a break from reading about missing and dead girls. I can talk you through a basic exercise, but after that I think it would save us time if you read up on it while I do research. Or Tōshirō could teach you more— he's quite advanced. Karin and Yuzu have been studying theory between training sessions.”

Written lessons. Ughhhhh. She was way more of a hands-on learner. But Sayaka would persevere. She nodded firmly and asked, “Where would I get the reading stuff?”

“Mr. Urahara gave me some books,” Homura offered.
“I took pics of every page of the first book so I could read it over and over when I have nothing to do,” Karin volunteered. “I can send them to you?”

Sayaka looked in Karin's eyes and decided that the girl knew exactly how she felt about wanting to do something. So Sayaka gave her a small smile and a firm nod. “That'd be great, thanks.”

“Um—”

Everyone looked at Mami, who wavered a moment before continuing. “If you three are studying it, is it a kind of magic that magical girls can learn?”

“Yes!” Karin said with a grin. “It's kinda the same, kinda different for us. But it works. Inkblotter is gonna be sooo surprised whenever we actually let it know we've turned on it.”

“I wanna learn it, then,” Kyōko said from the kitchen. Everyone looked her way; she was leaning over a counter toward them, mouth curved into something that definitely wasn't a smile but Sayaka didn't know what to call it besides bloodthirsty. “I wanna be full'a surprises for that jack—” glance at Tatsuya, who was close enough to hear her— “jerk when I rise from the dead like a fuh— freakin' zombie.”

“I would also like to learn,” Mami said with determination.

“Sounds like a plan,” Dr. Kurosaki said with a fleeting smile.

“That's all well and good,” Ishida said with a glance up from his ancient book, “but the first thing you should do is teach Kaname and Miki some form of flash step so they can dodge or flee threats.”

Dr. Kurosaki looked intrigued. “Good point.” He stood and beckoned with a wave of his arm. “C'mon, kids. Let's go outside in case we have some... surprises happen.”

Meaning in case they were complete disasters at whatever he was gonna show them. Sayaka appreciated the tact, though.

The teenagers all trooped out to the front of the shop and perched on the edge of the veranda. Dr. Kurosaki gave a goofy-yet-helpful lecture that sounded like a less sarcastic version of something Karin would say. Sayaka forced herself to pay attention. Then the man called her and Madoka out onto the path and talked them through some kind of mental looking-for-magic thingy.

“Close your eyes and listen to my voice,” he said.

Sayaka obeyed.

She didn't know how much time passed as she and Madoka struggled with the thing he was trying to teach them, which reminded her of meditation stuff in manga. Kinda like Sailor Mars when she was with her sacred fire or the mountain waterfall or someth....

The... waterfall....

Sayaka thought she might feel something vague and slippery, hear faint rushing, but it kept disappearing. It was nearly in her grasp when Madoka gasped and Sayaka was knocked off her feet. She opened her eyes and gaped.

The yard was awash in pink light and the scent of roses and a strong outward wind-like pressure for a long minute. A column of light splashed against something invisible overhead—the wards?
crystal beads on Madoka’s charm bracelet exploded, then the light and pressure flickered on and off while Madoka clasped her hands over her heart, face confused and afraid and strangely dazed. The pink magic swirled through the air around her longer and longer with each flicker; she looked more and more lost.

“Shh, shh, it's okay, you're doing great,” Dr. Kurosaki said reassuringly, waving his arms to try to get her attention. “You found it. Let go of it now, okay? Let go of it.”

Madoka blinked and reacted slowly. “What?”

“Madoka!”

Sayaka turned to the shop and saw Mr. Kaname mid-leap from the porch. His face was panicked. Hitsugaya and the magical girls on the porch behind Mr. Kaname all looked stunned. Ichigo and his friends tumbled out the door with wide eyes; Tessai and Magic Man followed a moment later, faces serious.

“Madoka! Madoka, are you okay?!” Mr. Kaname shouted, frantic.

Madoka looked around dreamily and said, “Papa?”

Mr. Kaname ran up to her but was suddenly knocked back as though clotheslined when he was a couple meters away from his daughter. His breathing became labored and he looked dizzy. “Mado — ka—”

Madoka swayed and looked at him. Through him. “Oh.” She rolled her head around her neck in a jerky motion like a poorly-controlled puppet and absently asked, “How... do I turn... it off...?”

Dr. Kurosaki stepped closer to her, red magic faintly glowing around his body as he pressed through the pink light to grip Madoka's shoulders. He got Madoka to stare him in the eye and he quietly talked her through something or other. Whatever he was saying seemed to be working because the bursts of magic became shorter and less intense. Mr. Kaname was able to stand and approach his daughter with some difficulty; he hugged her from behind and she relaxed. The magic eased off drastically until there were just random pink sparks in the air.

Magic Man barked something at Tessai, who darted into the shop.

Everyone stared as Madoka wobbled in her father's arms and the air around her shimmered with pink glitter.

“I feel like I just shot happy drugs straight into my jugular or something,” Karin said numbly.

She was right. Sayaka felt ridiculously cheerful. Suddenly, giggles welled up in her chest and poured out her mouth and she was laughing and rolling around on the ground and laughing and laughing and couldn't stop. Tears ran down her cheeks and she could barely breathe.

Something poked her face. Sayaka opened her eyes and looked up to see Kyōko bent over her. The magical girl jabbed a finger in Sayaka's cheek again. Sayaka giggled harder.

“Is it possible to get drunk on magic?” Kyōko asked with a sorta morbid fascination.

Sayaka's laughter rose into a shriek at the hilarious idea and she wondered if the tear streaks on her face looked like rivers and she pictured some famous waterfall or other on her face and laughed harder and—
—her vision blued out.

She hadn't known vision could blue out.

In that moment, it felt like... something broke. Like a dam. It was there and gone in a blink and then she felt... floaty and dazed. Sayaka was content to stay like that but Kyōko's indignant shriek caused her to open her eyes.

Sayaka was sprawled out in a pool of water rapidly turning the ground into mud. Kyōko, Dr. Kurosaki, Madoka, Mr. Kaname, and Sayaka herself all looked like they had been out in pouring rain, drenched with water. They were all staring at her. There were still some pink sparkles in the air but Madoka looked like the impromptu shower had jarred her out of whatever magical shenanigans she'd set off.

The remnants of Madoka's magic had Sayaka giggling at their hilarious faces.

“I think you nailed it with 'drunk,' Kyōko,” Karin called out.

People tried to talk to Sayaka but she was too busy giggling and picturing herself throwing buckets of water at people or little gray storm clouds floating over the others’ heads and raining on them or Sailor Mars meditating in that mountain waterfall and—

“Will you stop it with the goddamn water?!” Kyōko shrilled.

Sayaka just giggled and rolled around in the new mud.

Karin started cackling.

Madoka started giggling in her father's arms. Pink glitter sparkled around like little fairies. Madoka's dad started chuckling behind her, but his face was confused.

Sayaka giggled harder.

There were suddenly two geta-clad feet in the mud in front of Sayaka's face. Magic Man's voice said, “Miss Miki, can you hear me?” somewhere in the distance beyond the muffled sound of ocean waves.

“Y-ye-yeahhhhh,” Sayaka said to the geta through her snickers.

“I need you to control yourself.”

Sayaka had an idea.

“Miss Miki, focus on something. Focus all your thoughts on something.”

“Your-or shoe-oos are sink-king,” Sayaka gasped through giggles. Idea idea idea!

A pause. “So they are.” Said slowly, like talking to someone who had lost all touch with reality. Rude. “Can you sit up?”

That sounded like a challenge to Sayaka, so she scrabbled around in the mud and dragged herself upright because she was awesome and that was easy. She looked down at how her legs were sprawled beneath her at weird angles and laughed.

“Good. Focus on something, Miss Miki,” Magic Man said somewhere above her still.
Sayaka stared at the geta.

“Miss Miki?”

They really were hilarious shoes. Why had they been invented? Something about keeping feet from getting wet or muddy, wasn't it?

“Miss. Mi. Ki.”

She lurched forward and stuck her hands in the mud puddle and looked at the geta more closely. They were doing their job.

For now.

She giggled deviously and wiggled her fingers in the mud.

“Miss Miki, what are you do—?”

Plop. She scooped two handfuls of mud onto Magic Man's feet. This was the funniest thing she had ever done in her life, so she laughed so hard she got dizzy.

“Yeah, she's gone!” Karin crowed.

Madoka’s giggles turned into full laughter, bright and buoyant. More pink light wisped and sparkled around them. Sayaka saw Kyōko sway on her feet and giggle in her peripheral vision. The redhead immediately slapped a hand over her mouth and tried to control herself; she glowed with red magic that made Sayaka think of a person-shaped red light bulb. Hilarious. Sayaka laughed until she cried and crying made her think of water and her vision went blue again and Kyōko let out a wild sound that started as an angry scream and ended in choking laughter and there was more pink light and—

“Well. This was unexpected,” Magic Man said mildly. “I don't think I've ever seen a... magical feedback loop quite like this.”

The last thing Sayaka heard was Dr. Kurosaki sighing, “I think we're gonna have to sedate them.”

Homura hadn't exactly been surprised by the volume of Madoka's magic. It did feel... wilder wasn't the right word. Freer? Less focused than when she was contracted. What she still wasn't used to was the effervescent cheer that washed over everyone within range. Isshin had managed to maintain control by countering with his own magic but Sayaka, so much less powerful and in possession of absolutely no control, collapsed into a puddle of laughter.

Homura kind of felt badly for the girl. She had noticed how hard Sayaka was trying to be responsible and attentive. And there she was, rolling on the ground—

Mud. Rolling in mud because her magic flared in Kyōko's face and suddenly the air in the yard condensed into mist; as soon as the flare sputtered out, the water droplets all collapsed onto everyone near her.

Homura glanced aside at Hitsugaya's sharp intake of breath. He met her eyes and answered her unasked question. “She pulled water vapor out of the air,” he nearly whispered, using Karin and
Sayaka's laughter to hide his voice from others.

She raised a brow at him. *Obviously. So?*

Hitsugaya's brow twitched into brief annoyance. *“Without cooling it.”*

Homura cocked her head and looked at him oddly as another cloud of moisture washed over the people in the yard and Kyōko screamed.

Breath hissed out through Hitsugaya's teeth and he looked more annoyed. *“That's not easy! She shouldn't be able to do that at this volume without training, especially unconsciously, unless she has more p—!”* He visibly bit his cheek and stopped, eyes darting to Mami. Probably something about previous timelines, then.

Homura turned to look at Sayaka speculatively and watched the laughing girl roll in the mud as she thought back to other timelines. Sayaka had always heavily relied on her cutlasses and brute force paired with draining self-healing to make up for what she lacked in skill and finesse. The barriers she made to bounce off of were musical staves, not water. Her affinity for water had always been obvious in the feel of her magic, but she hadn't used it much. Homura frowned and lightly probed at Sayaka's magic; it recoiled and made a... shimmying sensation, as though ticklish. Homura didn't recall it ever being so... reactive.

Sayaka and Madoka's magic plummeted as they were both knocked out with that sleep kidō. Homura didn't pay much attention to the cleanup and the carrying of the unconscious girls, trailing behind absently as others laughingly laid out a rotating path of towels for the muddy people to navigate the building.

Homura sat and drank tea after the wakened girls sheepishly went off to shower and change. Listening to Karin harassing Kyōko to just take some of her clothes was entertaining, but she was unsettled. Something didn't add up. The more Homura thought about it, the more she wondered why Sayaka was always so inept as a magical girl. She had thought it to be Sayaka's average-at-best power, hotheaded impulsiveness, unwillingness to learn, and uncompromisingly black-and-white standards, but... it looked like more than that, now. Maybe? The differences between past Sayakas and *this* Sayaka weren't just novel, but... disturbingly mysterious, now that they stacked up.

*“Unless she has more p—”* Hitsugaya had said.

More power than *thought*? More power than she *actually had* before? More *potential* than the shinigami thought? Than *Homura* had thought?

Homura felt deeply uneasy.

There was some more fun but they all went to bed early and woke equally early. Homura returned the red ribbons to Madoka. Yuzu cooed at the waves in Homura's hair and somehow Yuzu and Madoka ended up convincing every girl who was going to school to braid their hair.

Probably just to play with Homura's hair again, but Homura didn't particularly mind.

Of course, Karin had loudly cried, *“TÔSHIRÔ, YOU SHOUL—”*

*“NO.”*

“But you'll match!”
“Absolutely not!”

“Just a little one! To control your shaggy bangs!”

“MY BANGS ARE NOT SHAGGY!”

“STOP LYING TO YOURSELF AND C’MERE, TÔSH!”

And that was how Hitsugaya and Karin had come to spend half an hour running around the building having a shouting match while Hitsugaya dodged the comb and hairtie in Karin's hands. They occasionally broke into brief spars. None of their hits connected with anything serious, but still.

Kyōko looked torn between being highly entertained and intensely disturbed— mostly when she looked at the adults as though they would go ballistic; then she seemed to be confused that they didn't. It struck Homura as oddly skittish behavior for the redhead. Well, maybe not; now that Homura thought about it, she had never seen Kyōko interact with adults who weren't in some kind of customer service role, like arcade management or restaurant waitstaff. Huh.

“Ahhh, friendship,” Isshin sighed nostalgically over his coffee as something crashed and Karin screeched.

“They're like two puppies play-fighting, careful with the teeth,” Mrs. Kaname cooed. “So cute.”

Kyōko eyed the adults like they had lost their minds.

“Puppies. Hah! I need to remember to use that one on them,” Isshin said with a grin. “They'll scream at me in unison.”

“Oh, Mama, are you going to work today?” Madoka asked as a chunk of ice the size of a soccer ball skidded into the room accompanied by a victory shout from Hitsugaya and a howl of defeat from Karin.

Homura peered at the ice. The comb was trapped within. Nice.

…She probably shouldn't be this calm about the crazy, but... Kurosakis. They made everything they touched ridiculous. Even Hitsugaya. The Kanames and Sayaka had all acclimated quickly, it seemed. Only Mami remained uncertain about the playful faux belligerence. Well, aside from Kyōko, whose semi-paranoid face made Homura wonder what her own had looked like when first adjusting to Kurosaki shenanigans.

Mrs. Kaname winked at her daughter. “Nope! Tessai and Kisuke have something for me and Papa to do.”

Homura had wondered why the two men weren't at the table. Suspicious.

“Is it— is it dangerous?” Madoka worried.

“We're just gathering some information,” Mr. Kaname said cheerfully as he gave Tatsuya a sippy cup.

Homura eyed both Kaname parents. That had not been ano.

“Tessai's been chatting with someone online who has been collecting information about missing girls for years,” Mrs. Kaname explained. “We're going to be meeting her in a cafe. Tessai and
Kisuke will be watching us.”

“Who would that be?” Homura asked slowly.

“A detective,” Mrs. Kaname replied. “Misako Ishijima. I chatted with her a bit. She's been frustrated because her superiors won't take her investigation seriously. It sounds like she believes in magic. Dances around admitting it, though.”

Homura frowned and racked her brain. She vaguely recalled a newspaper article mentioning something about a detective collecting evidence of recently missing girls. Mr. Tsukabishi and Urahara must have tracked her down somehow. Huh.

Why didn't they just go themselves? Why involve the Kanames?

“Anyway, have fun at school, kids!” Mr. Kaname said pointedly.

Sayaka choked on her food and jumped from the table. “C'mon, guys! We can't be late!”

Homura complied, adding another entry to her list of Unbelievably Responsible Things Sayaka Miki Is Capable Of If Properly Motivated.

“Have fun at school, Braid Brigade 'n Shaggy Bangs!” Karin shouted from the front porch as they approached the gate.

“NO! NO FUN!” Kyōko yelled. “REMEMBER TO BE SAD THAT I'M DEAD!”

Karin turned to Kyōko. “WHOA, YOU LOOK PRETTY GOOD FOR BEING DEAD, KYŌKO!”

“DAMN RIGHT I DO!”

“WOW WHAT'S YOUR SECRET?”

“JEWELRY CLEANER!”

Karin and Kyōko cackled maniacally. Homura had been horribly, horribly right about them getting along.

Beside her, Mami quietly chanted, “Don't laugh, don't laugh, don't laugh, it'll be watching, don't laugh.” She was looking down, half-curled on herself, and shaking. A tear rolled down her cheek. But her gold braids didn't hide her face as well as her voluminous pigtails would have in the same pose; it was plain that the shaking wasn't suppressed sobs, but suppressed laughter.

Utterly bizarre. Just over forty-eight hours previous, Homura had been near certain Mami would plunge into despairing insanity. And here she was, struggling to suppress genuine mirth. Amazing.

Homura would miss this timeline if she really did abandon it.

Mami chanted the cover story in her head the entire way to school to keep a smile off her face: *I braided my hair in remembrance of my dead friend and my other friends copied me to be supportive.*
Which was, frankly, a heartwarming story. Kyubey wouldn't believe it, since Kyōko didn't braid her hair, but Sayaka said Homura's foot would crush Kyubey's skull at the speed of light if he— it showed itself, so it wouldn't be around long enough to ask. Mami had glanced at Hitsugaya, remembering his own eviction of the Incubator from her apartment, and found his face grimly serene. So each of their classrooms would have a Kyubey-kicker.

Maybe Mami could beat them to it.

Hitomi was waiting for them on the path when they approached. She expressed concern and support for Mami, who lied and said she had been at her “dead friend's” funeral on Sunday. Then Hitomi commented on the braids. Mami quietly gave the cover story while staring downward. She didn't expect to see Hitomi's bag drop to the ground, nor for Hitomi to kneel next to it and rummage through it with near desperation.

“What'cha lookin' for?” Sayaka asked, fingers twirling the paintbrush-like tail of the little side-braid Yuzu had managed to make in the longest section of her hair.

“Hair ties,” Hitomi responded, voice determined. She rose and held up hey hand, victorious. “Hah! Only one. Hmmm. Madoka, will you please braid my hair?”

Mami stared, speechless, as Hitomi stayed kneeling and Madoka swiftly pulled Hitomi's wavy hair into a French braid. Hitomi met her eyes and smiled the entire time. Mami was completely surprised by the tears in her own eyes.

The girl's concern was based on a lie, but if it had been true...

Mami was genuinely sniffling when Hitomi hugged her upon standing.

They all walked to Mami and Hitsugaya's class first. Of course, Kisa and Hanako noticed all the braids and asked. When Mami explained the cover story again after the younger girls left, they both looked at each other fiercely and darted off. Mami stared after them. Kisa was trying to borrow hair ties and finally near-shouted, “I NEED A RUBBER BAND.” Hanako tugged at her dark hair after casting around and said, “ME, TOO.”

“Your hair's too short— you won't get enough together for a rubber band,” another girl commented.

“CRAP.” Hanako frowned in thought.

A boy a couple rows back jeered, “Just staple it to your skull.”

“PAPERCLIP!” Hanako shouted as she turned to raid the teacher's desk.

“You have good friends,” Hitsugaya murmured.

Mami's heart ached and she teared up again. She missed them.

Neither girl managed to get their hair braided before the bell. Hanako was repeatedly scolded for playing with her hair and paperclips. Braids were finally accomplished during their first break. Come lunchtime, the two tagged along with Mami and Hitsugaya to join the lowerclassmen on the roof. It was quite lively; Sayaka, Hanako, and Kisa instantly and gleefully clicked in a way that made Mami wary. Especially considering their glances between Mami and Hitsugaya.

Still, though. Terrible things had happened. Her world had been thrown off-kilter, she had been drawn into a conspiracy of sorts, and her future was uncertain, but she firmly decided it was worth
it based on the sole fact that she was now surrounded by friends. She wasn't alone anymore—truly, truly wasn't alone anymore!—and that balanced out literally everything. If this was possible, anything was.

Mami wouldn't be like the magical girls before her who had lost control when exposed to the truth. She would be useful and a faithful teammate and prove herself worthy of everyone's friendship.

She could do this. She wasn't afraid of anything anymore.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I love these kids.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: Happy(?) Fourth Birthday, Infinity!

I feel like I should start a college fund for this child lol I write slow OTL Why did I make this plot so complex OTL


SECHSUNDSIEBZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

A paper slipped out of a charred journal. The girl holding the journal picked it up and read it.

—The battles we fought together and the tears you shed belong to you. Your life also belongs to you. So run away. You don't have to believe me, but even if I have to kill the others, I'll protect you. This is my answer to the questions you asked with tears running down your cheeks on that day.

Sincerely,

Kaoru Maki

The reader stared at it for a long time.

She couldn't allow that to happen. She wouldn't allow anyone else to die. Not for her.

In a moment of clarity, she realized what she had to do. A plan came together all at once. After thinking through as many details as she could, she headed for the kitchen.

She knew exactly what she wanted for her last meal.

Junko, Tomohisa, and Kisuke climbed into the shop's van with Tessai after a planning session, leaving Tatsuya with the visitors and especially Kyōko, who seemed reluctantly drawn to him. She barely knew the girl, but Junko's instinct was fairly certain the redhead would protect him
ferociously if anything happened. The others, too, of course, but Junko thought perhaps Kyōko most *needed* an innocent to protect.

They drove to an alley on the edge of Asunaro and disembarked. Kisuke walked forward, tilted his head as though listening, then took another step forward and drew a line across the pavement with chalk. “This is about one meter from the barrier,” he announced. Kisuke and Tessai spent ten minutes setting up various recording equipment and gave them small smartphone-like devices to hold. “Ready when you are.”

Junko looked at her husband. They both took deep breaths, held hands, and stepped over the barrier. They walked a good ten meters in before turning back to face Kisuke.

“Do you feel any different?” Kisuke called out to them.

Junko and Tomohisa shook their heads.

“Tell me... what is an incubator?”

Junko and Tomohisa met eyes with skeptical brows. Junko replied, “A machine that keeps eggs or babies warm, of course.”

Kisuke looked thoughtful. “Tomohisa, do you know of any other usage for the word incubator?”

Her husband frowned. “It's... used figuratively to imply the same thing. As a metaphor.”

“Nothing else?”

“No?”

Kisuke frowned and nodded slowly. Junko felt uneasy, like that was the wrong answer somehow.

After a deep breath, Kisuke glanced at his notepad and asked, “Do you believe in magical girls?”

“Of course,” Junko replied. “We've both seen them.”

“How do magical girls *become* magical girls?” Kisuke asked, eyes and face intense.

“A contract,” Junko answered.

Tomohisa nodded. “The girls make wishes and the fairy grants them in exchange for fighting Witches and collecting Grief Seeds.”

“Then the fairy eats the Grief Seeds,” Junko continued, “which are actually magical girl souls. It's horrifying.”

Kisuke stared at them, blank-faced. “What fairy?”

“Jyubey,” Junko replied, thoroughly confused. “We've been plotting for days about how to stop him.”

“Him?” Kisuke asked.

“Yeahhh,” Junko said slowly. The uneasy feeling was getting stronger.

“What does Jyubey look like?”
Tomohisa frowned in thought. “Madoka said it was a black cat with a white scarf.”

Kisuke's lips pressed into a grim line. “When did she tell you that?”

“The morning it got in her room and Homura's cat fought it off.”

Kisuke chewed on his cheek, then prompted, “You said the fairy eats the Grief Seeds. Are they used for anything else?”

“No,” Junko and Tomohisa said.

“Just to clarify,” Kisuke said slowly, “Magical girls have no other use for Grief Seeds? Besides compensation to the fairy, I mean.”

“No?” Tomohisa replied hesitantly.

Junko tried to read the scientist’s face, then blurted, “Everything we're saying is wrong, isn't it?”

“Much of it,” Kisuke replied curtly.

Well, that was terrifying. Junko swallowed hard and asked, “How could this happen?”

“Why did I send you two down an alley to ask you these questions?” Kisuke countered.

Momentarily stumped, Junko turned to look at her husband. Tomohisa was giving her an equally troubled look. Junko racked her brain. It seemed ridiculous, but there must be a reason. She remembered the planning after the kids went to school, but a lot of the things said were... vague in her memory. Which was very unusual.

They went back and forth in that vein for a good ten minutes as Kisuke tried to tease information out of them and they became increasingly worried by their own answers.

Kisuke drew a deep breath and said, “You are standing ten meters within a barrier around Asunaro that we have suspected of causing some form of memory loss. It is now apparent it is a form of memory manipulation.”

“A barrier?” Junko asked.

“What barrier?” Tomohisa added.

They all stared at each other for a moment.

Kisuke slowly said, “The one we've talked about. That affects memory.”

“What affects memory?” Tomohisa asked.

“The barrier,” Kisuke replied.

“What barrier?” asked Junko.

Kisuke looked profoundly disturbed. After another long pause, he asked, “Why did I send you two down an alley to ask you questions?”

Momentarily stumped, Junko turned to look at her husband. Tomohisa was giving her an equally troubled look. Junko racked her brain. It seemed ridiculous, but there must be a reason. She remembered the planning after the kids went to school, but a lot of the things said were... vague in
her memory. Which was very unusual.

Kisuke and Tessai looked at each other for a moment that stretched into eternity before Kisuke beckoned them to return to the van.

“Do you feel any different?” Kisuke asked them.

Junko and Tomohisa shook their heads.

“Tell me... what is an Incubator?”

Junko and Tomohisa met eyes with skeptical brows. Junko replied, “The creepy little spirit-thing tricking girls into selling their souls to become magical girls.”

“What is Jyubey?”

Junko looked at her husband, confused. Tomohisa turned to Kisuke and said, “Do you mean Kyubey?”


“Fairy?” Junko asked with a frown.

Kisuke didn't elaborate. “Tomohisa, how did Madoka describe the entity that Miss Akemi's cat fought off?”

Baffled, Tomohisa replied, “White cat, but you showed me pictures of it that showed it as a... cat-rabbit thing. The Incubator. We just talked about it.” Obviously.

“Boss, I have an idea,” Tessai said.

Kisuke lifted his chin in assent. Tessai climbed in the van, rifled around, and came out with a tablet. He brought up a scan of one of the drawings of the Incubator and handed it to Tomohisa.

“Take this back to where you were standing,” Tessai ordered.

Curious, Tomohisa took the tablet and walked away from them. Once in place, he looked at them expectantly.

“What is the name of the entity depicted on the screen?” Tessai asked.

Tomohisa glanced down then blinked up at them, still curious. “Jyubey, of course.”

“Describe the image on the screen,” Tessai said.

Tomohisa looked down at the tablet. “A black cat. White face and scarf. Pink-red eyes. Red... teardrop-oval on its forehead.”

Junko's blood ran cold.

*Note to self: Madoka is banned from Asunaro.*

“Get paper and something to write with,” Kisuke muttered. “I want him to draw it.”

So Tomohisa became an impromptu sketch artist. When he was done, Kisuke called him to return. When he did, Tomohisa looked at the notebook in his hand and stared in surprise. They all looked
at the drawing. The creature Tomohisa had drawn was like a palette swap of the Incubator with its longer, rabbit-like ears removed from its head and wrapped around its neck as a scarf.

“This is bad, isn't it?” Junko asked the world in general.

Kisuke didn't speak, but his face said yes, this is bad anyway.

The first part of their mission complete, Kisuke huddled in the passenger seat of the van and feverishly tapped around his smartphone updating their instructions for the second part. The changed text they got on their phones had a new header:

YOUR MEMORY AND PERCEPTION OF THE CONTRACTING ENTITY IS COMPROMISED WITHIN ASUNARO CITY LIMITS

AVOID SPEAKING IN DETAIL ABOUT CONTRACT STRUCTURE AND CONTRACTING ENTITY

Junko glanced at Kisuke in the rear-view mirror as they drove east, turning the new outline over in her head. “You don't even want us to ask about the Jyubey-thing?”

“But I thought you liked to join in the gossip sometimes?”

“Not for now,” he replied. “Save that for the next meeting. Spend this one probing for what data she has about the missing girls. Pursue the human interest angle to hook her. If she's as insightful and observant as her chats make her seem, she could be a very useful resource for intel.”

“Mm.” Sound strategy.

Half an hour later, Junko and Tomohisa strolled into a little cafe on the edge of Asunaro— where Kisuke and Tessai each had a line of sight on them from different rooftops outside city limits.

YOUR MEMORY AND PERCEPTION OF THE CONTRACTING ENTITY IS COMPROMISED WITHIN ASUNARO CITY LIMITS, Junko chanted in her head.

“Outdoor table for three, please— we're waiting for a friend,” Tomohisa told the hostess with a smile. Junko put her specially-purchased gaudy bright red clutch purse with a big bow on the table as their agreed-upon signal.

Time dragged. The meeting time came and went. They were getting worried when a young woman in business dress breathlessly rushed up to them. Her pale blond hair was falling out of a bun in wisps and she looked from the purse to them searchingly.

“Excuse me, are you waiting for someone named Misako?”

“Yes,” Junko said carefully.

The woman's tense shoulders relaxed and she breathed out. She pasted an awkward smile on her face, bowed slightly, and said, “That's me. Misako Ishijima. May I sit?”

“Of course, of course!” Junko said with a grin.

The detective ordered a coffee and said, “Sorry I'm a bit late. My superior sent me on a wild goose chase before lunch. He's irritated with me again.”

“Oh, that's the way of the world,” Junko said with a wistful smile. “Pass him up and send him on a fool's errand or ten someday.”

Misako stared at Junko, surprised. She opened her mouth as though to say something, but held back
and looked thoughtful. “Maybe. It was a struggle just to make it to detective, though.”

Junko’s smile turned a touch bitter. “Good ol’ uphill battle through the glass ceiling, huh?” When Misako nodded and looked discouraged, Junko leaned forward and firmly said, “Stick with it. Have more staying power than them. Collect dirt on them—passively. Make connections in every department, no matter how lowly-ranked the employee is. The higher-ups often see the entry-level employees as scenery and aren’t as careful with their words. Even mail-sorters and toilet-cleaners can overhear or see fascinating things. Do small, ethical favors for people, no matter how low. Especially recent hires and interns. Even something as small as bringing a couple pizzas to their miserable break rooms during a hard week can pay off. Show interest and respect for their tasks—learning basics of how to do their tasks and remarking on how much you appreciate their skill is always good. Especially if you can use that basic knowledge to maneuver stuff higher up to make life easier for them. Something as simple as noticing the entire department complains about how terrible the pens the company buys are and negotiating with Purchasing to change their orders can have a small but lasting effect. Defend them from bullies if possible. Some of those people won’t be low forever or may know someone who isn’t low. A handful of them could look back on you in a positive light if you were the one to help them get ahead and teach them better than your superiors. Build a reputation. An authentic one that won’t fall apart when your enemies poke at it. One so strong that you don’t even have to defend yourself because you’ve cultivated enough people to do the defending for you while you stay above the mess.”

Misako stared more. Tomohisa laughed brightly and admiringly said, “Ah, Junko, when you become Empress of the World, would you do me the honor of allowing me to be your Consort?”

Junko snorted her coffee everywhere at their old joke.

“Well, the problem is... I may have already ruined my reputation,” Misako said. “I got... too excited that I made detective and brought my evidence and guesswork to my colleagues. Even though I held back on actually mentioning... that, they laughed me out of the room. I did manage to get one guy to look at it as potential human trafficking, but... nothing. I’ve had to keep my research on the missing girls secret since then even though it’s getting worse.”

“More girls are going missing?” Junko asked, not touching on whether Misako suspected magic yet.

“Yes. The average over the last two decades or so has been roughly fifteen per year.” Misako's face went cold and angry. “But more than twenty girls have disappeared from Asunaro and the surrounding areas in the last three months.”

“Twenty?!” Tomohisa gasped. Junko felt as shocked as he looked.

“Twenty-three reported since the first of the year, to be precise; there's no telling if there are unreported cases,” Misako said. She dug in her messenger bag and pulled out two binders, then opened the one labeled for Missing Girls in the current year. The detective flipped through pages and pages of photos and information about missing girls. “These girls had neither behavioral problems nor reasons to run away from home,” Misako said lowly. She opened to a page near the beginning and tapped it. “This and the next one are particularly sad. Their disappearances seem to begin the sharp increase. Best friends. Went missing the same day from the same place. And so soon after Airi’s terminal illness was miraculously cured. Her poor parents are beside themselves with grief.”

Junko took the binder when offered to her and looked at the pages. “Yūri Asuka and Airi Anri,” she breathed. “A medical miracle... huh.” A glance out of the corner of her eye found her husband heartbroken and furious. Tomohisa met her eyes grimly; neither wanted to jump to conclusions, but
that sounded an awful lot like the fallout from a wish gone wrong. Damn that Jyub—

YOUR MEMORY AND PERCEPTION OF THE CONTRACTING ENTITY IS COMPROMISED WITHIN ASUNARO CITY LIMITS

“Detective, were the... circumstances of their disappearances... odd?” Tomohisa asked.

Misako eyed them both carefully, weighing them.

“We won't laugh,” Junko said firmly. “We have our own improbable and... ostensibly fanciful suspicions. We won't laugh at you if you don't laugh at us.”

The detective sighed and ran her hands over the second binder. “I... still don't know for sure, but my gut tells me that these aren't usual. Not even as compared to the previous strange disappearances,” she said slowly. Misako paused to stare at the binder before looking up at them and solemnly saying, “I think something is out there hunting girls these last three months. Mostly middle school girls.”

“Hunting?” Junko asked with her brows raised.

“Maybe luring would be a better term,” Misako said.

“Luring how?” asked Tomohisa.

“Texting and messaging.” Misako stood the second binder upright, flipped it so they could see the cover, and tapped it. The title was Mysterious Hyades Message Logs.

Tomohisa frowned. “Hyades?”

Misako nodded. “Odd, huh? It's the name of a group of nymph sisters from Greek mythology.”

Like the Pleiades, Junko thought. A glance at her husband found he had made the same connection.

Misako noticed, but bit her tongue and just watched them a moment before continuing. “I did research hoping to find significance. Myths get weird about how who's related to who; they were either sisters or daughters of a guy named Hyas. He was an archer who got killed by the creature he was hunting; there are a lot of different versions of that part, too. However it happened, the sisters grieved and cried so much that they... became rain nymphs or died and were set in the stars as the head of the Taurus constellation.” Misako frowned at the binder. “I can't figure out how that is relevant, but a few of the missing girls left behind their cell phones. Their texting logs included messages sent from someone who signs off as Hyades.”

“Did the culprit send them?” Junko asked sharply.

Misako sighed. “I don't know. The messages were corrupted and the carriers had no records of an account. The number or IP is spoofed every time and the department designated these cases as lower priority for the Computer Forensics lab so digging deeper has been delayed. Have you ever heard of a chain mail from a name like Hyades?”

Junko wanted those phones. If she could get them to Kisuke....

Tomohisa shook his head; Junko thought quickly. She decided to gamble. “What about Pleiades?”

The detective blinked in surprise. “What?”
“Have you heard or seen anything referring to Pleiades?”

“No,” the woman said slowly. “But I recognize the word from Hyades research. They were... something like half-sisters to the Hyades. Something about Atlas.” Misako narrowed her eyes. “Why do you ask?”

Junko drummed her fingers on the table and considered her options. Her husband looked at her mildly and sat back with his coffee, his signal that he’d follow her lead. Potential responses and possible reactions chained through her mind like branching lightning. She needed to consider that she was working from an incomplete picture of circumstances.

YOUR MEMORY AND PERCEPTION OF THE CONTRACTING ENTITY IS COMPROMISED WITHIN ASUNARO CITY LIMITS

Nothing had been said about the girls themselves, though.

“We have some clues about a group of... girls... who call themselves the Pleiades Saints,” Junko said cautiously.

Misako slammed a steno pad open and started scribbling. “What do you know about them?”

Junko considered the information Kisuke had given them and decided to hold back on names. “There are supposedly six or seven of them. We don't know of any particular goal, but they've had... relations with similar girls in neighboring territories.”

“Territories? Like a gang?” Misako asked sharply.

“Perhaps,” Junko said; that gave her an idea. Dug up some old memories from her teens. She looked down at the binder of message logs and mused, “I wonder if they're allies or rivals somehow...? Hyades and Pleiades, I mean. Since their names are so related.”

Misako froze, stared at her, and her eyes went unfocused as she also thought hard.

Tomohisa eventually cleared his throat to summon them back from outer space. “So. We were saying: Other girls. Pleiades... and others elsewhere.”

Junko shook the cobwebs out of her head. “Right, right.” She rapped her knuckles on the table and leaned forward, sliding into business mode. “So. We have information you want. You have information we want. We suggest a trade.” Junko inclined her chin slightly and arched a brow. “You skirted around directly saying it in the chats, but I want a straightforward, forthcoming relationship. We need to settle one issue first: Do you believe in magic?”

Misako gaped.

Tomohisa was not particularly good at keeping surprise off his face. She'd gone off the rails a bit — that was supposed to be a question for the second meeting. Kisuke could kiss her ass. Junko was going with her instinct.

The detective pondered her coffee and shifted around self-consciously for a moment before hedging, “I've found many things that can only be explained by magic in my investigations. My bosses laughed at me, but there are pieces of evidence that cannot be explained by modern science. And....”

Junko examined Misako's face. There was pain there. Junko softly prompted, “And?”
Misako heaved a sigh and pulled a photo out of her messenger bag, then handed it to Junko. It was of two schoolgirls, one of whom was obviously a much younger Misako. The other girl had green hair in twin braids and looked like a cheerful sweetheart.

“This is... why I started investigating this stuff. When I was a teenager,” the detective explained. “She was my best friend from middle school. Remi Shīna. In our third year, she suddenly disappeared. I've never found out what happened to her. The police couldn't find any leads. But Remi's sister— she was only three then— Remi's sister said—” Misako looked up at them defiantly and slowly said, “that Remi became a magical girl and fought witches that bring disaster upon this world. Which was... very specific language for a three-year-old.”

Junko met her husband's eyes and had a silent debate with him about how far off-script they should go.

Misako watched them closely. “You ask if I believe in magic,” she said. “Yes. I would counter... do you believe in magical girls?”

After one last glance at each other, Junko and Tomohisa frankly said, “Yes.”

“We know they exist,” Tomohisa said.

“We are actually acquainted with several,” Junko added, gambling on the information's value to the detective.

Misako's eyes went comically wide, completely taken by surprise. “You d— you do?! You are?!” Her frankly adorable shock faded into a determined hunger Junko was intimately familiar with. She leaned forward to fiercely demand, “Tell me everything!”

“Ah, there's your fire,” Junko said lightly. She let her lips curve into a predatory business smile. “We need help from people like you to stop this. These girls who are tricked into contracting to become magical girls go through hell.”

“They suffer more than any child should ever suffer,” Tomohisa said gravely.


“They all die young,” Junko said. “Often horribly. At the cost of their souls. All in exchange for a wish. And those wishes often end... poorly.”

Misako's face twisted into a degree of fury that implied violence.

And just like that, Junko knew they had closed the deal before the terms were even proposed.

“So. We would appreciate your help,” Junko said.

“Anything,” Misako hissed.

Junko tapped the photo of Misako and her long-dead friend. “As glad as we would be for your help, I suggest you learn from your friend's example and hear out terms before agreeing. We do not want to emulate the entity who tempts these girls into cooperation with its plot by appearing benign.” Moral bait tossed.

Misako recoiled as though slapped. “Of— of course, ma'am.”

That was a slip. Misako didn't seem to notice it. Junko wondered if the detective was not theirs but
hers.

All the better, really. Also: moral bait taken.

“How much time do you have in your lunch?” Junko asked.

“I managed to finagle the rest of the day off, actually,” the detective said with a wry grin. “It's why my supervisor was annoyed. I figured if your information and cooperation seemed attractive, perhaps I could take you to my apartment to see more of my research.” Misako pointed at the binders. “Those are copies. I'll let you keep them. I have much more at home, covering a much longer period of time.”

It may not have been wise for her to admit she kept a cache of priceless information in her home, but Junko would keep her mouth shut about that for now. “Oh? How far is your place?”

“Northeast, near the waterfront,” Misako replied. “Maybe a fifteen minute drive with traffic like it is now.”

Junko hummed in thought and pulled out her phone. “This wasn't planned. Let me check in with someone we're working with.”

“Oh.” Misako looked a bit surprised. “Someone else?”

Choices. Choices. Junko gambled again. “We actually have allies watching us right now in case this was a trap,” she said quietly.

Misako's mouth dropped open briefly and her eyes went wide. Then her face firmed into cold assessment. “You take this very seriously.”

“Yes,” Junko and Tomohisa said lightly.

The detective's eyes narrowed. “You know who's behind this.”

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Junko rolled her shoulders and swayed her head as indication of uncertainty. “To a degree.” She started tapping out a message to Urahara. “My husband and I are new to this. But our daughter was targeted; so was her friend. They were lucky to have met a magical girl who had become aware of the depth of the deception and warned them about the entire mess before they could be entrapped.”

“We owe that girl and her allies,” Tomohisa added fiercely. “We're going to take down this monster if it's the last thing we do.”

Misako inclined her chin and looked at them with heavy-lidded eyes. “Count me in.”

“Terms, darling,” Junko reminded lightly.

The detective blinked at her and looked chastened before drawing herself up and saying, “Right. Terms.”

“I'll be brief,” Junko said with a faint grin.
The Incubator was highly displeased that Homura Akemi's allies knew to approach Misako Ishijima.

It had observed the woman's investigations for years. She was no direct threat, powerless and ignorant as she was, but she was one of the more tenacious and creative investigators it had encountered across millennia and provided valuable data for its efforts to stymie any potential investigation on the part of the shinigami. The Thirteen Court Guard Divisions had plainly advanced technologically and tactically, as evidenced by the Incubator's observations of the occasional patrols that wandered into magical girl territory despite its efforts to buffer them. Ishijima had attempted to notify superiors of her suspicions, but had been dismissed with aspersions cast upon her sanity. The woman had learned to remain silent until she had sufficient proof—and with human skepticism and law enforcement social structure, she would likely never have “sufficient” proof. The most logical potential venue for her to have caught the attention of Akemi and her allies was via the human “Internet,” the vast intricacy of which the Incubator considered a lesser form of its own consciousness—lesser because the individuality and emotional handicaps of each contributor made it far less efficient than the Incubator's united single consciousness. This “Internet” had evolved to a point where it could pose a threat to Incubator operations beyond the girls who managed to correspond with each other in small local groups that were easily convinced to stay secret—was perhaps on the cusp of some manner of warning system to prevent candidates from contracting. The prospect was unlikely but unsettling.

Unacceptable.

It decided in that instant to allocate a terminal to observe Ishijima constantly instead of cataloging her progress with monthly visits to the home study she had devoted to her research, finally finding the expenditure justified. It needed to observe her use of the “Internet” more closely—especially how she trafficked her data. Perhaps she had outlived her usefulness.

Ishijima's data could be dangerous in the possession of Akemi's allies. The Incubator remained uncertain how many allies the mysterious magical girl might have. It regretted that the residents of their base of operations had been skilled enough to suppress their reiatsu and avoid detection until their wards were deployed. The number of reiatsu signatures embedded in the wards and their possessors' capability to obscure such extensive work was alarming, especially as compared to the obvious warding process on the Kaname property. Deploying wards should have defeated any reiatsu suppression and served as a beacon for an extended period of time. However, the shop's wards had appeared intact with a single instantaneous power spike. The implications were dire; by the Incubator's observation and inference, Akemi's allies were likely part of a network with at least five other members, at least one of which was beyond safe reach in Tokyo—an area so spiritually dense that it was crawling with shinigami. If the white-haired youth had been truthful, they may have left cells of potential resistance in multiple locations.

Unacceptable.

Furthermore, if these humans or their unknown allies continued to work such feats of reiatsu construction, they could alert the shinigami to their presence and thus reveal the Incubator's existence to the spirit army. Provided the shinigami refrained from summary execution, that was. The testimony provided by its assets in the Jūreichi made the possibility of “fair” consideration more likely, though. If Akemi's visible allies passed Ishijima's research to her wider network of allies, it was possible that data could reach the shinigami due to cooperation or human error.
Unacceptable.

There was also the memory manipulation alleged by the Hitsugaya boy to consider. Such direct interference should only be possible if instigated by the Incubator's master, but it would be folly to completely dismiss the possibility that it had been compromised. Even one-billionth-of-one-percent probability of the claim being true was an unacceptable risk.

Everything about Akemi and her allies was unacceptable. The Incubator had lost all but the thinnest sliver of a chance of contracting Madoka Kaname, whose absurdly powerful soul was capable of surpassing the Incubator's quota in a single stroke. Acquiring Homura Akemi herself could accomplish the same goal, but her solid base of allies and use of mundane weaponry allowed her to conserve her reiatsu expenditure and significantly thwart any descent toward becoming a Witch. Had she and her allies not shown themselves so capable, patience could have won her Grief Seed as a prize; allowing her to continue to exist long enough to fail would be a pointless waste of resources if she continued to expand her network of allies as she so clearly demonstrated herself capable of doing in Mitakihara. Which increased risk of exposure to the shinigami.

The threat they posed needed to be negated, but the Incubator needed to remain cautious in doing so. It had evaded shinigami notice for millennia when it managed risks every solar cycle; it could do so again. If the cell of resistance in Mitakihara was in immediate danger of extermination, remote cells might reveal themselves in an attempt to salvage the situation. One moment of panic could scatter their caution to the wind and expose the entire network. If they could be lured to one point, it would be simpler to eliminate a larger swath of the resistance. Even if their combined force could overcome the Incubator's attempt, they would have exposed themselves to subsequent smaller assassination attempts.

Risk management via Walpurgisnacht had been scheduled for the Mitakihara metropolitan area for some time now. Carefully escalating the impact would be an acceptably risky investment to avoid detection by the shinigami.

So the Incubator terminal observing the Kaname adults sat between coffee cups on their table and listened to their conversation with one shard of consciousness as its larger consciousness considered its options.

Kisuke read Junko's message as he half-listened to the trio's conversation continue with his earpiece, then glanced down the block to Tessai's figure atop an apartment building. He looked down at the humans at the café and thought—recalculated plans accounting for Junko's foray into premature but fruitful improvisation—then blindly speed-dialed Tessai.

“Would you feel comfortable taking the risk to tail them?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Tessai replied. “I haven't seen any Incubator terminals. Even if one follows us, the memory manipulation will still allow me to spot the black creature that serves as stand-in.”

“And Junko brought up the Pleiades Saints, so the manipulation doesn’t affect memories of their existence,” Kisuke mused. He drew a deep breath and said, “Go for it. Be careful,” then texted Junko with the plan.
An Incubator terminal observed Nagisa Momoe's apartment from a nearby billboard. The pink-haired magical girl at its side shifted restlessly and irritably grumbled, “Doesn't this brat go to school?”

She has not attended classes in several days, the terminal replied. It had answered variations of this question eleven times in the last four hours; it remained patient, as magical girls near the end phase frequently experienced cognitive difficulties. You will likely need to wait until she emerges to dispose of refuse. Remember—

“Take the cat out first so it can't distract me, yeah, yeah.” She glanced at the terminal skeptically. “You sure the little twit has two Grief Seeds?”

Absolutely.

“Where's Tomoe?”

School. She will not interfere if you are stealthy and act quickly, the terminal replied.

The magical girl heaved an impatient sigh, crossed her arms, and kept watching the apartment building.

An Incubator terminal observed Mitakihara Middle School from a distance, obscured by trees.

An Incubator terminal lightly jumped into Ishijima's car with the humans and settled in the unoccupied back seat next to the Kaname patriarch.

An Incubator terminal perched on a rooftop air conditioner condenser several buildings into the barrier from Kisuke Urahara. Watching.

An Incubator terminal waited for Kisuke Urahara's large male ally to enter the barrier, then trailed behind him across the city.

An Incubator terminal trailed behind the Pleiades Saints' experiment, into Mirai Wakaba's museum, and settled just outside the inner wards as the experiment entered it looking determined. It wondered what she was going to do.

"Everyone, can you hear me? I'm not going to run away anymore. Let's settle this. Come to the Freezer immediately. Everyone must come. Otherwise, I'll break the seal on the Soul Gems here and turn every single magical girl into Witches all at once."
Incubator terminals around the city cocked their heads in interest simultaneously.

An opportunity presented itself. The wildcard would be useful after all. The rolling Pleiades disaster was finally poised at the top of the slope. There was nowhere for it to go but down.

Plans were quickly revised with the computations of thousands of individual terminals' brains. Within minutes, all but six terminals abandoned their posts and initiated retreat from Asunaro and the greater Mitakihara area.

Minimization of loss of resources was a high priority, after all.

Six magical girls were scattered around a dim hall. One was screaming in agony as her magic went haywire. One fretted over the first. Two desperately tried to figure out what the hell was going on. The fifth was held hostage by the sixth, who said, “I started hating you selfish girls.”

“Did you control any of us?!”

Light girlish laughter. “No way! It's fun to watch you destroy yourselves! I just prepared events to make it even more fun!”

“Nagisa, would you please take out the trash?” Daddy asked as he finished cleaning the kitchen.

Nagisa bit her lip and chewed her cheek. That hadn't gone well last time. “...Do I have to?”

Daddy blinked at her and looked surprised. She was always a very good girl about chores. “What?”

Squirming uncomfortably, Nagisa squeaked, “Do I have to do it now? Can it— can it wait?”

Maybe she could get Miss Mami or Miss Homura or Mister Hitsugaya to come watch her. Yoruichi had been acting funny since the night before, prowling around almost constantly, and it had Nagisa's nerves on edge.

Daddy frowned in that way he did when something confused him and he didn't like it. “Is something wrong, Sacchan?”

“I— I don't— I don't want to go outside,” Nagisa said, looking anywhere but Daddy's face.

“But why?”

Nagisa fretted and tugged at her hair and dress. Think think think think think! She couldn't think of anything and lying to Daddy was hard anyway. She tried really hard not to cry, but couldn't stop it. So she covered her face with her hands and whimpered in shame.

Something clinked in the sink and Daddy's footsteps rushed toward her. He wrapped her in his arms and said soothing things. “It's okay. It can wait. Shhh shh shhhhh, it's okay. I'm here.”
kissed her hair. “We'll get through this. We will.”

Daddy thought she was crying because of Mommy. But she wasn't crying for Mommy. She hadn't even been thinking about Mommy.

Nagisa sobbed. What a terrible daughter she was.

Dawning horror. “You made them—the Evil Nuts!”

“I connected your Ex File and Niko's cloning magic. It was easy. Then, I just used Yūri as a mini-boss to spread pseudo Witches. To dirty your Soul Gems by making you use a lot of magic.”

Tomohisa had to admit he was impressed by the detective's building. He idly wondered if she really lived there on a detective's salary or if something else was going on.

“Welcome to my home,” Misako distractedly said to them as they crossed the threshold.

Tomohisa smiled. “Thank you for having us.”

“My information is in the study,” the detective said, stepping into the condo with a beckoning wave to follow her. The no-nonsense drive to her goal of exchanging information with sparing niceties reminded Tomohisa of Junko back when she was seeking her first promotion.

Misako flipped the lights on in what had probably been built to be a bedroom. Instead, there was a desk, a laptop, three book cases filled with binders, a bulletin board with some photos of recently missing girls on one wall, and a large map of Asunaro on another wall. There were multicolored and multi-shaped push-pins stuck in it. Tomohisa and Junko both approached it with interest.

“What does this document?” Junko asked.

Misako approached as well and tapped a small key off to one side. “The usual shape of pin is homes of missing girls. The spherical ones are last known sightings. Colors for both are time bands by year of disappearance. T-pins are body disposal sites. Flat tacks are schools— gold for high, silver for middle, white for elementary.”

“Ooooh, excellent,” Junko cooed.

Tomohisa glanced her way. “This is exactly the kind of thing he said he wanted to make, isn't it?”

“Yep!” Junko chirped with a little clap of glee. “He'd prefer it on a computer, but anything works.”

Misako looked between the two of them, cautious about their mention of an unnamed ally. “I have several versions of this on my computer. This is just so I can visualize it quickly.”

Tomohisa's wife chattered with the detective. He should really be listening, but something felt...odd. Uncertain, he stepped to the large window and peered out at the sea to the east. Not there;
behind him. West. Tomohisa frowned and looked around the room as if he could accomplish anything by staring at walls.

Junko's face went hard and wary. “What is it? A spirit?”

“Spirit?” Misako said with a slow blink of confusion.

“Tomohisa has some modest magical or spiritual sensitivity,” Junko said with a dismissive wave, still staring at him. “Honey?”

“I'm not... sure,” Tomohisa admitted with a frown. He rolled his shoulders awkwardly. “It's... uncomfortable. Tense.”

“This whole situation is tense,” his wife hedged. Leading.


“Do we need to leave?” Junko asked sharply.

Tomohisa let his eyes flutter closed, extended his limited senses the best he could, breathed, breathed— a spiritual _quivering_, like water not quite boiling, not far. “Yes.”

Junko reacted immediately. “Grab as much as you can carry,” she ordered. “Misako, get the most important binders. The ones you have no backups for on the laptop,” she said as she marched to the desk, grabbed said laptop, and started rummaging through drawers and fishing out any storage media she found.

“What are you doing?!” Misako shrilled.

“Tomohisa's instinct doesn't lie,” Junko declared with no room for argument. “If something's telling him it's not safe, it's not safe. We have enemies. Grab the most important stuff and get down to the car now. We need to get back to base.”

“Base?!” Misako sputtered.

Junko whipped around and glared at Misako with fiery command in her eyes. “If you really want to take down this predator, you're going to have to trust us. If you refuse to go to our safehouse now, we will not be held responsible for anything that happens to you.”

“Did you plan this?! To get my information and blackmail me into—?!”

Edginess ramping up, Tomohisa loudly blurted, “We need to get out.” He reached up and self-consciously touched his glasses— which were not truly _his_ glasses; they contained a camera and microphone. “Tessai?” he said anxiously.

“You're wearing a wire?!” Misako shrilled.

“Actually, Misako, if you don't come willingly I will knock you the hell out and drag you with us for your own good,” Junko threatened casually. “Whatever's going on—”

_Click._

Tomohisa turned to the noise to see what made his wife stop. The detective had a handgun and looked furiously paranoid.
“Misako,” Junko said carefully.

“Don't Misako me,” she sneered.

“Aren't you supposed to leave that at the station?” Junko asked mildly.

“Yes. This is a special occasion.” Misako's eyes darted between the two of them. “I was stupid to trust someone again. Even if you do believe me. I won't let you take my life's work.”

Tessai also felt the spiritual tension. He had accessed the condo's balcony via shunpo and was about to enter when he heard the abrupt stop to conversation and Kisuke's voice breathed a description of the live video feed through his earpiece. “Handgun. Not currently aimed at someone, but nearly. Careful.”

Tessai ran a hand over his face and took a deep breath. Right. Probably best to throw a barrier or binding kidō at the woman in the middle of entry. He muttered, “Do you feel that from your vantage point, Boss?”

“Yes,” Kisuke replied. “Faintly. Monitors are picking something up with the barrier—”

“Barrier?” Tessai asked, brows knit.

“Later. I concur with Mr. Kaname. I don't like this.”

“I want to be real. If humans are real and we're fake, then I'll destroy humanity and turn us into the new humans. I can make all of the weapons I want by turning magical girls into Witches! I'll call the new humans the 'Hyades'! It's perfect because we're half-sisters of the Pleiades!”

A multicolored circular sigil appeared in the sky over Asunaro, visible to all with eyes to see it. It shivered with strain for a moment, then shattered violently.

“KYUUUBEEEEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY
Now, to maximize leverage.

Tomohisa staggered under the weight of wild magic and managed to stabilize by taking a knee. Junko and Misako outright fell flat on the floor. The rush of magic ebbed and allowed Tomohisa to blink away his daze as the women struggled to recover. Tomohisa managed to rise to his feet and look around the room. He noted the gun had been dropped. “Is everyone o—”

A white cat-rabbit thing was sitting on a bookshelf just beyond arm's reach, staring at him with beady red eyes.

His mind reeled and he suddenly remembered what it was. Rage flooded his entire being.

Tomohisa moved without conscious thought. He lunged for the creature; it gathered itself for a leap but he managed to grab the end of its fluffy tail as it blurred away. Something in it made a popping sound as it rebounded.

“Where did that come from?!” Misako shrilled, scrabbling away— toward the gun.

“KILL IT!” Junko screamed, clawing at the floor for traction in attempt to rise and do the deed herself.

She needn't have bothered. He was already hauling his arm back and flaring what he could of his modest power the way Grandpa taught him to. Tomohisa swung the thing by its tail and slammed it onto the surface of the desk. The Incubator terminal flailed and tried to escape, so Tomohisa wound up again, roared his hate, and slammed it on the desktop with more force. This time, the head connected with the edge; there was a loud double crack of skull and neck and the body went limp.

Junko let out a sound somewhere between a screech and diabolical laughter, then lunged for the laptop.

Tomohisa's vision whitened out for a moment. He felt dizzy. That had... taken a lot out of him. But now he had a Kyubey corpse. He didn't know what he would do with it, but he felt it was importa—

Snap! Tessai appeared in the doorway, carrying a mangled Kyubey corpse in one fist. Misako screamed and swiveled to shoot him, but he was ready and threw a binding spell at her with barely a glance. “We need to get out now,” he said.

That was when the ebbing magic surged again— this time dark, overwhelming, cursed— and the first of the explosions rocked the building and blew the windows out. Junko had been gathering the items she had dropped when the wave hit; she passed out and fell on top of Misako, who also passed out. Tessai caught Tomohisa by the elbow before he hit the floor. Tomohisa's vision whitened out again; he retained consciousness somehow, focusing every ounce of his being on not losing his grip on the Kyubey corpse. There were more explosions— closer— and the entire building jolted, dropped with a feeling like an elevator, jolted to a stop.

“BOSS, I NEED HELP GETTING THEM OUT!” Tessai shouted. “I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH HANDS TO CARRY THEM AND FIGHT!” Tomohisa hoped their mics were still hot.

Another massive explosion shook the building; the sense of cursed magic emanated from a higher
They were on the twelfth story of a building and the magic felt higher up. And big.

“What— is— that?” Tomohisa gasped. His eyes stayed focused on Junko's senseless body. He knew he wouldn't be able to make it to her.

“Don't kn— OH.”

Silence. Everything went utterly still; Tomohisa blinked hard to fix his vision, certain the world's colors hadn't really dimmed and gone bluish. But he didn't remember hitting his head or anything...?

“I was wondering if you'd come,” Tessai said with relief.

“Yes, I would,” Homura said solemnly. “We are allies, are we not?”

Tomohisa looked up. Homura stood in the doorway in her magical girl costume. She was tied to Tōshirō with one kind of glowing yellow ribbon— rope?— and to Mami with another kind of glowing yellow ribbon. Tōshirō looked grave and Mami— also costumed— looked like she didn't know what the hell was happening but was determined to be there regardless. A second glowing ribbon extended from her closed fist to wrap around Tessai's ankle; a third extended behind her.

Tessai nudged his glasses back up his face with the back of the hand that held the Kyubey corpse. “I didn't think you would reveal the timestop.”

Tomohisa blinked woozily and wondered if he had heard right.

“I would have preferred not to, but some things are more important.” Homura turned her eyes to meet Tomohisa's, then briefly closed them and looked back to Tessai. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. Now. We have work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Fasten your seatbelts, my good buddies.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
One moment, Mami had been sitting at her desk in physics class, idly twirling one braid around her fingers as she watched Hitsugaya solving an equation at the board; in the next, she and Hitsugaya both caught their breath and seized up at a distant eruption of magic. They both whipped their heads to look out the north windows; Mami involuntarily stood for a better view of the distant fireworks display of the Asunaro barrier shattering. Their classmates shuffled and made curious sounds at their behavior, some tittering, others trying to figure out what they heard or were looking at. While they couldn't see the magic, they did have a very good view of the flashing flames of a very large, very physical explosion.

"Take cover!" the physics teacher shouted.

Everyone was hustling around in confusion when sound caught up with light and the northern windows cracked. The glass walls cracked. No explosive shattering, but enough sound and shaking to cause a lot of fearful screaming. Until a hand touched her shoulder and it was suddenly silent. And oddly washed out, as though the sun had been obscured by a storm cloud.

"Tomoe," Hitsugaya said urgently.

Mami turned to his voice. His colors were still bright, but everything else in the room was dimmed and absolutely, impossibly still.

"What," she said blankly. She blinked hard, scrubbed her eyes with her hands, and looked around again, baffled. Homura, Madoka, and Sayaka were at the front of the classroom; all of them were tethered together by a glowing yellow rope whose end was in Hitsugaya's free hand. His other hand clamped her shoulder harder and gave her a light shake as he repeated her name. She looked at him and blurted, "What's this?"

She wasn't even sure what exactly she meant by the question. She was pretty sure the world shouldn't be still and washed out as a desaturated photograph, though. And explosions as big as they had seen were bad news.

"This is my special ability," Homura said solemnly. When Mami looked her way, she continued, "I can stop time—"
“WHAT?!” Mami shrilled.

“RIGHT?!” Sayaka screeched, wild-eyed.

Homura ignored them. “—for myself and for anyone I maintain physical or magical contact with,” she finished. The girl held up the arm without a shield and waved her wrist to emphasize the band of yellow magic tying her to Hitsugaya and the others. Face cold, she barked, “Either tie yourself to us with your own ribbons or Hitsugaya will tie you himself.”

“Real smooth, Akemi,” Hitsugaya grumbled with a dirty look her way. He turned back to Mami and squeezed her shoulder while looking her in the eye. “I promise we'll explain. But we have an emergency to deal with first. We need to at least get these two to the shop's wards.” He inclined his chin toward Madoka and Sayaka. “Are you in at least that far?”

“Yes,” Mami replied immediately. She paused, blinked, shook her head, and frowned. “What about everyone else?”

“We are far away enough from Asunaro for broken glass to be the worst of their problems,” Homura replied. “As long as we contain the threat in Asunaro, that is.” She looked out the windows to the billowing black smoke in the distance. “There is something large and dangerous there. We need to neutralize it before it spreads.”

Mami breathed deeply, swallowed her million questions, transformed, and cast a ribbon that wrapped around Hitsugaya's wrist. He released her shoulder and stepped to the door.

She followed him and the others in a daze as they wove through their school and toward the roof, completely divorced from reality. Madoka seemed as dazed as she was, gawking around at people frozen mid-run, mid-shout, mid-trip. Homura and Hitsugaya were obviously slipping into battle readiness. Sayaka, however, lost her patience and started hounding them with questions as they bent and wiggled and avoided touching frozen people.

“We don't have time for your screaming!” Homura finally snapped.

Sayaka's breath hissed through her teeth. “What do you mean, there's no time?! You can stop it! MAKE TIME to tell us WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING! You can't just freeze time and drag your friends off into trippy— trippy— washed-out bizarro time without even— with nothing more than ’oh, surprise, guys! I can stop time, gotta run!’”

“I did not say that,” Homura sneered. But the glare she threw over her shoulder showed her face was flushed and flustered.

“Close e-damn-nough!” Sayaka screeched. “What the hell, Homura?!”

“We need to work on your communication skills, Akemi,” Hitsugaya drawled blantly as they ascended the last flight of stairs.

“You sound like your uncle,” Homura seethed.

“This is one of those rare times where I won't take that as an assault on my character,” he replied with a shrug.

“Plea— please don't fight, guys,” Madoka said timidly. “Sayaka, don't be so— so—”

“So what?”
“So you,” Homura said acidly.

Sayaka drew breath to yell but Madoka literally clamped her hand over the girl's mouth. Madoka's magic rose like a warm tide. “And Homura, you stop being mean. I know you're— you're really upset, but it's not— not Sayaka's fault. S-so stop being mean to her. I wanna know more, too.”

Homura sighed her frustration as she tugged them all across the roof. “I need to concentrate on figuring out whatever disaster is happening. The others at the shop can explain.”

“How are we getting there from the roof?” Madoka asked. “We can't do the magic jumpy thing.”

Mami opened her mouth to offer to carry one of them as Sayaka threw herself at Hitsugaya's back, put him in something like a sloppy chokehold as she tried to climb him, and snapped, “CARRY ME, JERK!”

Hitsugaya seemed to stop himself mid-instinctive-judo-throw and settle for writhing. “WARN ME NEXT TIME, MIKI!”

Sayaka kneed him in the ribs as though urging a horse forward. “LET'S MOVE IT, SNOWMAN!”

“DAMMIT MIKI!”

Mami carried Madoka on her back as Homura led them across the rooftops. The farther north they went, the more glass damage they saw. They passed birds frozen mid-flight and people frozen milling in the streets in confusion. It was utterly surreal. Their group was silent for the entire trip. It gave Mami a chance to think—to readjust perceptions of Homura.

Time magic. Stopping time. How often had she stopped time? More importantly, how powerful was Homura really? Mami could feel that Homura's magic had latched onto her somehow, was drawing her into Homura's sphere of influence with irresistible force. It was both fascinating and frightening.

When they alighted outside the shop's property line, Madoka and Sayaka regained their feet, and they all entered the courtyard, they found all the outsider allies holding hands on the veranda; Kyōko was at one end looking like she doubted everyone's sanity and Dr. Kurosaki was at the other end, holding his free hand out as if to shake hands. Hitsugaya thrust a hand forward and whipped a glowing yellow rope out to ensnare the man's wrist. Everyone blinked and jumped a bit in surprise. Except for Kyōko, who startled violently and blurted, “What the fuck?!”

“What's happening,” Homura demanded of Dr. Kurosaki.

“Don't know exactly,” the man replied, “but the barrier shattered and something is causing explosions.”

“Feels like a big-ass Witch,” Karin added.

“Where are the others?” Homura asked.

“Kisuke and Tessai took Junko and Tomohisa up to poke at the barrier and meet with that detective,” Dr. Kurosaki explained.

“They— they're by the barrier?!” Madoka squeaked in distress. “By the— the explosions?!”

“I don't know their exact location, but Kisuke texted me a bit ago to say Tessai was following them to the detective's place to get more info. I do know where Kisuke is.”
Homura and Hitsugaya gave sharp nods. “We'll stop with him first,” Hitsugaya said.

“None of you can come with us for now,” Homura announced.

“Like hell we can't!” Kyōko shouted.

“You're supposed to be dead, Sakura,” Hitsugaya argued. He looked at everyone else. “The Incubator doesn't know anyone else is here. Keep it that way until we find out exactly how bad this is.” There were a lot of looks of frustration, but no one argued.

“Mami can go!” Sayaka shouted. “She's not supposed to be dead!”

Mami blinked slowly and looked at Homura and Hitsugaya. Both looked at her in question. She firmed her face in determination; she had vowed to be a useful ally and handling this time magic revelation was her first major test. “I'm in,” she declared.

After a brief discussion, Hitsugaya released the ropes to the girls and Dr. Kurosaki's hand and left their allies in frozen time once more. It was bizarre, but Mami buried the feeling and followed Homura and Hitsugaya north. They soon found Mr. Urahara on a rooftop with a bunch of equipment. He was staring north and holding one hand out to his side. Mami acted before Hitsugaya and lassoed his hand with a ribbon, determined to show she could adapt to new circumstances.

Mr. Urahara turned to them and blinked surprise. “Oh? You let them in on it?” he asked.

“Yes,” Homura said curtly.

“What's going on?” Hitsugaya demanded.

“Something strained the barrier to breaking,” the man said. He pointed to the clouds of smoke and flame. “Then something with a massive Hollow-like or Witch-like energy came up. I saw a dark shape rise before it was obscured. My guess for the explosions is disturbed gas lines, but I could be wrong.” Mr. Urahara looked at Homura. “We'll have to unfreeze to let the smoke clear and see what it is.”

“Where are Madoka's parents?” Homura demanded.

“Put my equipment in your shield and I'll lead you,” he replied. “I was tracking them and Tessai requested help evacuating them.”

Homura impatiently threw tech into her shield and they set off to the northeast. The farther they went, the higher they tried to stay to avoid falling glass; they soon moved to travel in the eastern shadows of high rises to avoid more and more airborne shrapnel that had frozen on its journey from the explosion site to the west. Rebar, slabs of concrete, car parts, and traffic lights were far more dangerous to bump into than jagged shards of glass. Mami felt ill at the sheer scale of the devastation but forced herself to keep going.

Mr. Urahara stopped on top of a high rise apartment complex and said, “They're on the twelfth floor, eastern side, roughly halfway across. I'm going to take pictures,” as he turned to the explosion and pulled something out of a pocket.

Mami followed Homura and Hitsugaya to the building's edge and dropped down with them. They zeroed in on the balcony that had blood spatter and a broken door. Mami's ribbon drifted behind them as they searched the rooms and finally found everyone. Mrs. Kaname and a blonde woman lay in an unconscious heap. Mr. Tsukabishi was holding Mr. Kaname up by an elbow. Both men
also held dead Incubator terminals.

“What the hell,” Hitsugaya muttered.

“Mami. Ribbon to his ankle,” Homura ordered.

Mami obeyed. Mr. Tsukabishi and Mr. Kaname regained color and movement.

“I was wondering if you’d come,” Mr. Tsukabishi said with relief.

“Of course I would,” Homura said solemnly. “We are allies, are we not?”

Mr. Kaname looked up at them, plainly disoriented. Tessai nudged his glasses back up his face with the back of the hand that held the Kyubey corpse and said, “I didn't think you would reveal the timestop.”

Mr. Kaname blinked woozily and looked confused.

“I would have preferred not to, but some things are more important,” Homura said to Tessai. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. Now. We have work to do.”

Mami’s face fell in worry as Mr. Kaname wobbled. “Are you all right, Mr. Kaname?”

“I'll— I'll live,” Mr. Kaname said as he forced himself to his feet and gathered himself. “What's going on?”

“Where's Boss?” Tessai barked.

“On the roof taking pictures,” Tōshirō replied curtly.

“Right. Put all this stuff in your shield,” Mr. Tsukabishi said to Homura. “It all has intel we need. Ah... Tōshirō, take pictures of the map on the wall then roll it up and give it to Miss Akemi. We’ll get more pins later.”

“I can help,” Mami said as Hitsugaya tugged his phone out of his pocket and approached the wall. She moved her hands as though to play cat's cradle and conjured thin ribbons. “What stuff?”

“Binders, books, computer, flash drives, anything not nailed down,” he said curtly as he hauled Mr. Kaname up and settled him on his feet. “Tōshirō, look in the drawers for anything Junko might've missed.”

Mami nodded sharply and launched ribbons around the room, ensnaring items and pulling them to Homura, who plucked them out of the air and shoved them in her shield.

“A gun?” Homura asked with a raised brow.

“Later,” Mr. Tsukabishi said. “Is it safe to put the Incubator terminals in your shield?”

Homura narrowed her eyes at the two dead Kyubeys. “I think so, but I would rather not.”

Mr. Tsukabishi nodded, flicked his fingers, and the yellow rope spell Hitsugaya used flashed out and wrapped around the throats of the two terminals. Mr. Kaname let go of his and Mr. Tsukabishi reeled in the terminals to dangle together from his hand. It reminded Mami of a fisherman carrying his catch on a string. He handed the terminals to Hitsugaya, then knelt and took Mr. Kaname on his back.
“I can carry the women on my shoulders if you tie them to me, but I won’t be able to fight if I do,” he said as he stood.

“I will keep time stopped until they are safe,” Homura said.

So Mami and Hitsugaya helped drape the unconscious women over each of his shoulders and Mami secured all three adults to his body with ribbons.

They returned to the rooftop and found Mr. Urahara frowning at the plumes of smoke and flame with his arms crossed.

“Figure out what it is?” Hitsugaya asked.

“No,” Mr. Urahara said. He did a double-take at the Incubator terminals. “Oh, my, where did those come from?”

“Appeared out of thin air when the barrier shattered,” Mr. Tsukabishi answered grimly. “One was perched on the balcony rail two meters from me.”

Mr. Kaname leaned around Mr. Tsukabishi’s head and somewhat drunkenly added, “One was on a book shelf in the office, just out of arm's reach from me.”

Mr. Urahara and the others all looked surprised. “You didn't see them before?” Mr. Urahara asked.

“No. Not even the apparent stand-in,” Mr. Tsukabishi replied.

“Stand-in?” Homura asked.

“Later,” Mr. Urahara said with a wave of his hand. “This... is disturbing.” He heaved a sigh and looked back to ground zero. “Tessai, drop the adults at the shop and come back. Tōshirō, go with and drop the terminals outside the wards. Put them in stasis. Both of you ward them the best you can.”

“Why not take them inside?” Mami asked.

“If they're even sneakier than we thought, I don't want to risk them becoming a kind of Trojan Horse to cheat the wards,” Mr. Urahara said with a scowl. “Come back and we'll unfreeze time and observe. Don't bring anyone else yet.”

“What about all the people down by... whatever?” Mami asked with a concerned glance at the explosions.

The others were silent for a long minute. Mr. Urahara quietly said, “Anyone near the explosions is likely beyond help.”

Homura softly added, “Magical girls may survive a blast like that if their Soul Gems are protected, but the average human....”

“The most help we can give is to figure out what this is and stop it from spreading to affect more,” Hitsugaya sighed.

Mami swallowed hard and considered the sheer magnitude of the explosions. She clenched her fists at her sides and shook. They were right. This was a disaster. People were surely dead.

Mami watched Hitsugaya and Mr. Tsukabishi disappear in the distance, her yellow magic trailing behind them. It was strange how they waited in time outside of time; time passed for them, but not
for the frozen world. It broke her brain.

Mr. Urahara murmured a question to Homura; when Homura shook her head in the negative, he looked out at the scene with even more worry. They waited in silence forever until Mr. Tsukabishi and Hitsugaya returned.

“Right. So,” Mr. Urahara said briskly. “Tessai, shield us with Danku, please. We’ll watch a bit, see if the smoke clears enough to see what this is before we get closer. Miss Akemi, stop time if something else disastrous happens.”

Mr. Tsukabishi threw a large translucent wall of magic up in front of them and Homura's shield clicked. The world regained color and noise. Shrapnel pummeled Mr. Tsukabishi's barrier, but it held. A black shadow rose through the smoke and flame. Huge. Its silhouette was like an upside-down woman wearing a ballgown and a stereotypical witch's hat. A vaguely thorny mandala glowed behind it as it rotated upright.

“A Witch?” Mami breathed.

“Miss Akemi, is that Walpurgisnacht?” Mr. Urahara asked tensely.

Mami whipped her head from the Witch to him to the Witch. That was a legend!

“No. It is not,” Homura replied, eyes wide and face pale. How would she know?!

The Witch continued to rise through the smoke, giving them a better view. Another explosion blossomed flame and smoke into the air from the eastern edge of the existing conflagration.

“Yeah, gas mains are blowing,” Mr. Tsukabishi muttered. “Domino effect chain reaction, I guess.”

“I wonder if it started out on the ground...?” Mr. Urahara said quietly.

“I have never seen anything like this,” Homura said just before a shockwave of black magic washed through the city faster than they could blink.

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Twelfth Division's Spirit Wave Measurement Lab was full of bright-eyed, focused staff bustling about under the direction of heir department head. While many were doing their usual projects, a small team handpicked by Rin worked industriously to sift data gathered by the fifth version of the search parameters their leadership had come up with to identify discrepancies in population density and spiritual density in the World of the Living. Rin himself was poring over data from Urahara when Akon dropped by to check on the team's progress. He was idly sipping at a thermos of coffee when several of the department's alarms started blaring warnings all at the same time.

Akon startled and dropped his coffee but immediately caught it. Rin stood quickly and looked out at his team in concern. Scientists scurried to their stations with a chaotic urgency akin to an anthill poked by a stick. When they started looking at screens and gasping, Rin shouted, “Hiyosu, status!”

Hiyosu looked at his superior over his shoulder, face pale and eyes bulging more than usual.

“Massive Hollow-like reiatsu in Asunaro. Wave forms appear to be extremely amplified Witch frequency.”
“Classification?” barked Akon.

Hiyosu glanced at his screen again and looked back to Akon in disbelief. “Vasto Lorde Arrancar class.”

Rin inhaled sharply and Akon's brows shot up to his hairline. He opened his mouth to speak, but looked around in confusion as the alarms stopped.

“Uhhh, the Hollow-like reiatsu disappeared?” Hiyosu said as though baffled.

Rin chewed his lip and looked up at Akon. “Should we call for a team to investigate?”

Akon heaved a sigh and thought. Twelfth's Lieutenant smoothly entered the room, requested and received a brief, and said, “Pull up video.”

Hiyosu's hands flew across his keyboard, directing one of the surveillance drones they had deployed and hidden in a tall building in a town to the west of their area of concern. Video of Asunaro that looked like it had been bombed came up. Everyone stared.

“Monitor the situation,” Nemu said. “Attempt to contact Urahara's base. I will notify the command structure and request further instructions.”

One moment, Isshin was nodding at Tōshirō as he prepared to sever Hainawa and drop them from the time stop until he could return with a plan. The next, the world regained color and animation, but no one who was scouting Asunaro was there. They must be doing something in normal time.

“What now?” Ichigo asked.

Isshin sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Let's get these three inside,” he said with a nod to the rescued noncombatants as Tomohisa lost the battle to stay conscious. “Make them comfortable and wait until the others see enough, stop time, and come back. Be ready to be startled if you get pulled into frozen time.”

Nods and purposeful movement from all involved save two.

“Why the fuck are you all so calm about this?!” Kyōko shrilled.

“Yeah!” Sayaka yelled. “A Witch-bomb went off and Homura can stop time?!”

“We know,” Karin said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Kyōko and Sayaka spluttered in search of words for a moment. Isshin left Karin to talk to them in favor of carrying the senseless detective inside. He arranged for the three to be brought to the recovery room and set on futons, then checked for injuries. Finding none, he sat back and let Yuzu comfort Madoka, who was fretting over her parents.

Isshin had just gotten back to the front veranda when the overwhelming Witch reiatsu disappeared.

Gone in an instant.

Everyone stared north. Orihime hesitantly asked, “Did they defeat it?”
“Wait and see,” Isshin said tensely.

They waited. No call, no contact. The minutes dragged into centuries before Isshin's phone rang. He answered it blindly. “Kisuke, what—”

“This is Akon,” the voice on the phone said.

Isshin drew up short and knit his brow in worry. “You guys detected that?”

“Yes,” Akon said curtly. “Urahara, Tsukabishi, and Hitsugaya aren't picking up their phones. What's going on?”

“I don't know, exactly,” Isshin replied as his stomach sank. His instinct said something was wrong if all three were incommunicado. “They and Homura are doing recon. We don't have anyone here who can leave and run up to check on them without giving us away.” Well, save Madoka and Sayaka, who Isshin would allow to leave the safety of the wards over his dead body. They should probably have more visible allies on-site next time around.

“Hold your positions,” Akon sighed. “Lieutenant Kurotsuchi has summoned captains and lieutenants here for an emergency meeting. We'll keep trying to contact the others. Wait for further orders.”

“Right,” Isshin said, fully intending to ignore that if things got weirder.

He ended the call and looked around the courtyard at the grim faces of all the teenagers.

“What now?” Karin asked.

“We wait,” Isshin replied.

No one liked that, but no one argued.

*Be safe*, Isshin willed to his friends up north.

Kisuke tensed and looked around. Nothing seemed to have changed, but that had chilled his bones and Akemi and Tomoe gasped. “Girls?” he prompted.

Akemi turned and looked behind them, then declared. “This is a labyrinth.”

“...What?” Kisuke turned and looked as well. A set of buildings a kilometer away repeated into infinity. “Oh. Well.” Was this good or bad?

Well, more like better or worse. This was already very bad. Doubly so with Akemi saying she had no idea what was happening as this had never happened before.

“I suppose we had better defeat the Witch,” Akemi said irritably. “Stay together. Watch out for Familiars. I want to conserve magic. I will stop time if we encounter a serious threat.”

Akemi led them in a diamond formation. They watched in silence as small figures darted down from the Witch and flew around in the sky, but seemed to focus on one area. Then their group came to a sudden stop as a beacon of white light briefly flashed skyward from that area.
“What was—” Hitsugaya started.

“A contract,” Akemi hissed. “A strong one.”

“Recognize it?” Kisuke demanded.

“No.”

Fuck.

Three small lights rose and darted through Familiars that were flocking around like crows. The indigo and orange seemed to be trying to keep Familiars away from the white light so it could ascend to the Witch, but they all kept scattering.

“Too many Familiars for them,” Akemi muttered. “Probably strong ones.”

Tomoe chewed her lip and shifted uncertainly. “What do you think about drawing off some of those Familiars? So the magical girls closer to the Witch can actually focus on it?”

Kisuke raised a brow at her and considered. “That could work.” And be a minimal risk to their group while they observed how the Witch countered the magical girls. Kisuke had no intention of letting any of his group die today. The city and its occupants would be restored after the reset; they were collateral damage this time. Kisuke just had to make it so Tomoe didn't think they were callously leaving the humans and other girls to their deaths. If the other magical girls survived somehow, that would just be a bonus— their group could get priceless information by being the girls' saviors.

Tessai narrowed his eyes and assessed the battle. “The city’s residents got pulled into the labyrinth.”

Indeed, there were still people unconscious in the streets or stumbling out of buildings and cars in confusion. It looked like there had been multiple car accidents caused by drivers falling unconscious.

“Are these the buildings from the city or copies of them?” Tomoe asked, frowning in thought.

“Who knows?” Hitsugaya said. “It's probably best to assume they're real. The Witch is moving due south. Straight for the shop.”

“But we're in a labyrinth. Does it heading for the shop matter in here?”

“We do not know if the Witch is moving outside,” Akemi said. “It is probably best to assume it matters.”

Hitsugaya hummed. “Let's swing northeast and come in from behind it to pull the Familiars back along the path of what's already destroyed. Just in case damage is reflected in the city once the labyrinth collapses— and to stall it from the shop.”

“When we get close enough, fire ranged attacks at the Witch itself,” Akemi said. “That will probably draw the most Familiars toward us in defense.”

They took off again, swinging toward the coast— well, where the coast had been— and looping toward the Witch's rear. They cut inland at an angle to approach the Witch and got close enough to see that the Familiars were solid black figures shaped like magical girls.
Similar to Akemi's description of Walpurgisnacht's purple-and-starshine Familiars. What the hell was this?

Their group scaled tall buildings, tersely chattered about how to attack so they didn't hit the Asunaro magical girls, and settled on having Tomoe being the sole attacker so she could dissolve her projectiles with a thought if a magical girl strayed into their paths. So they stopped on a skyscraper and stood ready to defend Tomoe, who conjured cannons along the building's ledge as though it was a battlement. She stood in the middle of the line, threw her arms out to her sides, and fired the cannons in sequence from the center. Tomoe's cannons dissolved and were replaced before the brilliant golden projectiles reached their target.

Kisuke wondered why she didn't get multiple shots out of each firearm she used. Hm. Something to ponder.

Tomoe's third volley had just fired when a flock of Familiars turned and shot toward them.

“Well over half,” Hitsugaya said with grim satisfaction. “Let's move.”

Tomoe held a floral kaleidoscope shield behind them and fired random limited-distance pot shots at the Familiars as they took off once more, angling for the path of destruction and merging into it heading north. Kisuke pointed to an observation platform atop a building with only jagged shards of glass in its windows. The five of them alighted on it and stood in a circle, backs facing the center and shielded from above by one of Tomoe's kaleidoscopes, prepared to fight.

The Familiars weren't far behind them. They swooped around their position, girlish laughter ringing out from every angle. Another similarity to Walpurgisnacht. The eerie similarities worried him deeply; he contemplated the problem in the back of his mind as he joined the others in lashing out at Familiars.

It was an excellent way to vent his frustration at yet more variables.

Kazumi almost gave herself whiplash jerking her head up and around at the burst of new magic, red eyes wide as volley after volley of glowing gold cannonballs peppered the side of Dawn of Hyades.

She knew that magic.

Umika fell back from fighting to stand by Kazumi and pointed. “There. Who is that?”

“It's Mami,” Kazumi said in disbelief.

“Who?” Umika asked sharply as a large squadron of Familiars rocketed toward the distant magic, which immediately turned and fled north with several other magical signatures.

“The one who saved Michiru,” Kazumi said, mystified. Had Mami rallied a team of magical girls to help them?

Kaoru alighted beside them, also watching the others' retreat in dumbfounded shock. “Waaahhhhhhh, they drew off tons of Familiars!”
Kazumi shook herself and looked around at much emptier skies. Hope welled in her heart and she smiled. “Teamwork!” she cheered. She set her sights on Dawn of Hyades once more, determined. “Let’s do this and invite them to dinner after!”

Kaoru and Umika laughed with her, then the three of them rejoined the battle.

Akon was extremely conscious of being observed by multiple captains as he worked, could feel their stares as an itch between his shoulders as they watched and expected scientific miracles to fall from his fingers. His tension mounted with every captain that filed into the control room. Then the Captain Commander himself graced them with his presence. The frantic technicians flinched at the feel of his very unhappy reiatsu, but kept working. If anything, they worked even harder. Rin's fingers flew across the keyboard at the terminal he had claimed beside Hiyosu, joining the effort to figure out what the hell was happening in Asunaro. Akon looked around and found that his subordinates were doing their jobs excellently... leaving him nothing to do but observe and wait. And answer questions.

“Report,” rumbled Captain-Commander Yamamoto.

Akon looked around. “Captain Kurotsuchi—?”

Without even glancing at him, Nemu murmured, “Our captain is engaged in a delicate experiment upon one of the Grief Seeds in our custody.” She fell silent, obviously handing the responsibility of reporting to Akon. The Captain-Commander expectantly raised his brows at Akon, who took a deep breath and recounted what he knew as everyone watched the physical disaster on the large monitor.

“No, sir,” Akon answered grimly.

“Were you able to contact our assets in Mitakihara?”

“No, sir,” Akon answered grimly. “Isshin Kurosaki, yes, but not Urahara, Tsukabishi, and Hitsugaya.”

Yamamoto grunted. “Keep trying.”

Obviously. Akon would not roll his eyes at the Captain Commander. “Yes, sir.”

“Out of curiosity, I tapped into the city's CCTV streams. Traffic cameras and stuff.” Rin turned to look at Akon, distressed and confused. “There's no one there?”

“What do you mean?” Akon asked, brow knit.

“No one is there,” Rin repeated. “The city is empty of people.” A few keystrokes brought video up onto the main monitor.
No one in crosswalks. No one on sidewalks. Traffic lights changing at intersections with no cars. The only cars in the videos were unoccupied and not running. Sidewalks coated in shattered glass and blood and dead bodies, but no people milling about in shock as humans tended to do in major emergencies.

“The fuck?” Captain Zaraki said.

“Looks like Fake Karakura,” Captain Hirako muttered.

Akon stared from him to the screens. It did. It really did.

“You said the spike was Vasto Lorde class, right?” Captain Ukitake asked thoughtfully.

“Yes, sir,” Akon replied.

Captain Ukitake crossed his arms and frowned at the screen. “Could it be a labyrinth?”

Silence. Everyone stared at the cycling camera shots of the empty city. That would... make a lot of sense, actually.

“Can they get so big that they pull in a city's entire population?” Lieutenant Ise asked.

Akon didn't like the looks traded between Captain Ukitake and the Captain Commander. They knew something or guessed something. They didn't share. Akon did not like that.

“Urahara's sensors have only been able to detect labyrinths at extremely close range,” Akon said slowly. “The few remote sensors we snuck into Asunaro are fried useless.”

“Still no contact with him?” Captain Ukitake worried.

“No, sir.”

Captain Ukitake looked to the Captain Commander again. “Sir. Do you want us to deploy?”

Captain-Commander Yamamoto scowled. After a tense moment of thought, he said, “No. We will hold for now. I do not want to reveal our involvement if not absolutely necessary.” The old man's eyes shifted to Nemu. “Normal protocol for a high Hollow power spike and disappearance thereof?”

Nemu coolly said, “Remote monitoring for signs of Garganta and property damage. Remote scans of Hueco Mundo for a similar being. Deployment of memory modifiers in cases of Hollows attacking the living, if possible. For an incident of this scale, no direct interference with the living as identifying direct witnesses is difficult and they would be dismissed as misunderstanding what they saw in shock. Deployment of a small team to perform Soul Burials on the mass casualties.”

The Captain Commander grunted an acknowledgment. “We will do that in a while. Let the Incubator think we are slow to respond.”

Minutes dragged into what felt like hours as they waited.

Three battle-weary magical girls stood in a circle on top of a building, held hands, and looked up at
the monstrous Witch. They knew what they had to do to save the city. Someone else would have to succeed at their project. The many innocent lives running around in confusion below were more important.

“I really wanted to eat strawberry risotto with you two again,” Kazumi said wistfully.

“In another life, perhaps,” Umika said softly.

Kaoru just stared up with silent tears rolling down her cheeks, beyond words.

Magic whirled around them more and more brightly. The three looked straight up in determination, squeezed each other's hands so tightly their knuckles went white, and spoke as one.

“METEORA FINALE!”

Tōshirō and the others could not help but whip their heads toward the spike of reiatsu to their south. The three Asunaro magical girls rocketed upward in a tricolor column of light, impacted the gigantic Witch, and burst into a massive triple explosion. Akemi reacted with a deep, rough gasp as though she had witnessed an atrocity. Not taking their eyes off the Witch disintegrating into light, Tōshirō, Urahara, and Tsukabishi all bit out, “What?”

Akemi's voice was distant in horror. “They... they detonated their Soul Gems. All three of them.”

They stared in silence as the sky and buildings wobbled with the collapse of the labyrinth. Their view was soon obscured by the smoke of the real world.

“Detonated?” Tomoe squeaked.

“So—” Akemi's voice cracked. She cleared her throat and said, “Soul Gems contain a massive amount of condensed magical energy.” She drew a deep breath, settling herself. “It is... possible to... self-destruct them like a bomb in... dire situations,” she explained quietly.

“A suicide attack,” Tōshirō summarized softly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Why didn't that happen when— the other girls destroyed their Soul Gems to commit suicide?” Urahara demanded.

“Intent, I think,” Akemi replied dully. “Or perhaps they did it without turning their own magic on themselves. Like the... nutcracker.”

Urahara's eyes went unfocused. Tōshirō heard him muttering something about implosions and explosions as their Soul Phones rang. Great. Twelfth Division registered that. Fantastic. Urahara kept staring toward the initial explosion site as he whipped his phone out and up to his ear.

“Threat neutralized. All allied combatants alive and accounted for,” the man declared in lieu of a greeting.

Tomoe stepped closer to Tōshirō and whispered, “Who is he talking to?”
Tōshirō sighed. “All of this was probably big enough for our allies to detect.”

“No, no. No need to come,” Urahara said distractedly as he paced off to one side with his head tilted to see around something. “It’s quite the disaster but the spiritual aspect seems resolved. Lay low. I’ll contact you after I investigate. Text me the coordinates of the original power spike, though, please.”

Their quintet stood in silence for a couple minutes as Urahara thought. Sirens wailed in the streets below and smoke drifted up to them. Another explosion went off to their west.

“We need to stop this before more people are killed,” Tomoe said with challenge.

Urahara heaved a sigh and scrubbed his face with both hands. “There isn’t much we can do,” he said heavily. “We can’t tell where gas lines are damaged or how extensively. City management should be shutting off the gas soon, if they haven’t already. They’ll know more about what to do. They have emergency plans for disasters.”

“What about the fires?” Tomoe asked defiantly.

Tōshirō bit his cheek. “Technically, I could probably ice the worst ones,” he hedged. “But the question then becomes how suspicious it would be to do so.”

Tomoe’s gaze darted around at the rest of theirs. “You mean— you mean to leave them to suffer?! To die?!”

Tōshirō looked at Akemi sideways and wondered if she’d mention the reset.

Akemi frowned and said, “What if Hitsugaya condensed water vapor and made rain to extinguish the flames?”

Tōshirō grimaced. For such a large area, he’d probably have to lift his first limiter at the very least. Most likely, more than that. Maybe even leave the gigai.

“Absolutely not,” Urahara said curtly. “Water will make it worse unless specifically directed to only collect on combustible solids with minimal runoff until fuel supply is cut and burned off. Even a fog could slow dissipation of fumes. Rain would risk water infiltration into broken natural gas lines and possibly precipitate further explosions. If the gas has infiltrated the sewer system— which it probably has, given the blast patterns of the explosions as they chained down city streets — rain runoff could make the situation more dangerous. With water taking up space, the same volume of gas could travel farther than in a wide, open pipe. Especially if water is flowing away from the leak site; associated air currents could spread it faster.”

Tōshirō blinked his surprise with the girls. Well. That was... actually fascinating.

“We will have to study that,” Hyōrinmaru commented in his head, interest piqued.

“The safest method to stop spread is to cut off the gas flow and let the released gas rise and burn off, which utility workers would know how to do far more efficiently than us,” Urahara continued, still staring around the city. He pulled back to glance at them and scratched his chin thoughtfully. “If clouds should start to build and raise humidity from the coast, it may help stall ignition of secondary fires on the edges of the hot zone. Light rain might be helpful after the gas is burned off. Too much could destabilize trenches and make sinkholes— make it dangerous for rescuers or drown trapped victims.”

“How long til the gas burns off?” Tomoe asked worriedly.
Urahara shrugged and looked at the destroyed cityscape. “Hard to say without knowing how many lines carrying what mixtures of gas were blown.” He looked at Tōshirō. “Do you think you could initiate something like that in a bit?”

Tōshirō squinted around for any Incubator terminals and spoke softly, barely moving his lips. “Coastal fog, yes. More than that... not without revealing more of my abilities than we want the Incubator to be aware of.”

Urahara frowned at a new explosion. “What if you had help?” he asked slowly.

“From who?” Tōshirō asked with a skeptical glance at the man.

“Your father's... assistant,” he replied. “She is still honing her... finesse with her matured power, but if she supplied the cold you could focus on the moisture.”

Ukitake's lieutenant, Rukia Kuchiki, whose zanpakutō was also an ice-type. Reasonable. But—

“Will she be able to use the ability with seals like mine?” Tōshirō asked. He knew she was capable of kidō while in a gigai, but she had always left her gigai to fight with her zanpakutō when they were undercover in Karakura. Then again, she had not yet achieved bankai back then. Hm.

“Oh, yes,” Urahara said. “We'd just have to get her to come in on a train or something instead of bringing her in through the basement so the Incubator doesn't wonder about her popping up unexplained.” He turned to Akemi and raised his brows at her. “Your thoughts, Miss Akemi?”

Akemi frowned and chewed her cheek, staring out at Asunaro and calculating options. “Will Kuchiki be able to keep cover?” she asked.

“She's done it twice before,” Tōshirō answered. “For the... organization. To counter two other threats.”

“Ah. She was on the high school guard duty squad you told me about,” Akemi murmured. “All right.”

Tomoe looked baffled by their exchange, but didn't interrupt until they seemed to have settled on an option. “What if we... blew the gas away?” she asked. “With wind, I mean.”

Urahara looked at her with interest. “You can do that?”

Tomoe rolled her head and shoulders. “To a degree, with my ribbons. In small areas. I can whirl them and make a kind of... reverse funnel.”

Urahara thoughtfully stared into space for a moment, then shook his head. “I'd worry wind would cause more static electricity that could touch off more explosions. That risk is why you are supposed to tap your car to dispel static on your person before handling a gas pump. Different gas, same mechanism.”

Tomoe sighed and looked defeated.

Tōshirō brushed his hand on her shoulder and said, “I know you want to help. This is one of those times where doing nothing is the most helpful choice, as much as we hate it.”

“I understand,” she said miserably. Right before another explosive fireball. Tomoe flinched at the flash and boom.
He sighed and crossed his arms. “Kuchiki and I will need someone to watch our backs later.”

Tomoe understood it for the gesture of cold comfort it was. “All right, I'm in,” she said tiredly. “What now, though?”

“Miss Akemi, please stop,” Urahara said. When Akemi obliged, he said, “Now we investigate the source of this before normal humans can find anything... odd.” He turned to Tomoe and said, “The closer we get, the more gruesome it is likely to be. You don't have to come if you don't want to.”

Tomoe swallowed hard and straightened her spine. “I'll come with.”

“What about fumes?” Tōshirō asked.

“We'll stay close to the ground and I'll maintain a barrier around us,” Urahara said. “We should be able to at least scout a bit. If it's too dangerous for us, it'll be too dangerous for those without powers. We'll pull back and wait for gas to burn off.”

They took to the streets and picked their way through devastation to reach the coordinates Urahara had received. The city was now on par with some of the worst warzones Tōshirō had deployed to for missions to cleanse Hollowfied war dead. Streets had become wide trenches, slabs of asphalt and concrete thrown up against buildings along with cars and shattered segments of pipe. Sidewalks had been buried in debris. Cars, intact and in pieces, were strewn on rooftops and sticking out of walls and windows. Water gushed out of broken mains, which made them all grimace. Worse still, the farther they went the more they encountered broken pipes and fire hydrants spewing fire with water; they passed storm drains and a subway station venting flame.

Urahara sighed tiredly. “It's in the water, sewer, and subway lines. This is a disaster.”

Gravely injured people were frozen crawling, staring into space, crying. Bleeding survivors swarmed around various pieces of wreckage, cooperating to lift and rescue buried survivors. There were also bodies strewn about, dozens of people whose lives had ended in a snap. They tried not to look at those, but couldn't avoid them.

Tōshirō did notice a distinct lack of newly disembodied souls. Something about that put him on edge. There were usually confused dead wandering so soon after these kinds of disasters.

Tomoe held up for awhile, but eventually began to choke on sobs as they proceeded into worse areas and encountered more incomplete bodies than whole ones. Tōshirō and Akemi each took one of her hands and followed Urahara in silence, with Tsukabishi equally silent behind them.

Finally, Urahara glanced at his phone, said, “Around this corner,” and they crested a small mountain of debris to find a massive crater. Everyone stared.

Most of an entire city block was blasted away, reduced to bedrock hosting a rubble pit deep enough for a five-story building's roof to be at ground level. Pipes and wires and rebar jutted out of the rough sides; several of the broken pipes vented the blue-to-orange flames they had seen on their trek.

“This wasn't caused by gas,” Tsukabishi muttered.

“It wasn't?” Tomoe asked, surprised.

“Not enough scorching,” Urahara observed. “And gas lines aren't that deep. Even larger lines near the surface shouldn't make a crater that deep in bedrock.”
Akemi released Tomoe's hand and stepped forward to peer down the slope of debris, look up at surrounding buildings, frown at the empty air where there had once been ground. “I think you were right earlier. About the Witch starting on the ground. Except I would guess it actually burst from underground. That would break the pipes and cause sparks to ignite the gas.”

Urahara hummed thoughtfully. “Whatever would a magical girl have been doing so deep underground before turning into a Witch?”

Tōshirō sighed. “I guess that's what we have to figure out.”

“Could she have been in a subway station?” Tomoe wondered.

Tsukabishi stepped up and pointed. “There's the side of a subway tunnel. On the edge. No sign that the subway crossed here.”

“It would probably be wisest to start at the epicenter,” Akemi said. Shading her eyes, she leaned forward and doubtfully added, “It looks submerged, though.”

No one objected, so they picked their way down the treacherous scree and into the crater proper. They stopped at the rim of a crater-within-a-crater, this one long and vaguely rectangular. A series of columns of marble and glass lay askew at the edges, mostly submerged as Akemi had said. The water was murky and fed by streams trickling down from broken pipes. The area was thick with residual Hollow-like reiatsu.

Urahara pointed to several outcroppings of debris. “The remains of arches. I think this was an underground chamber.” He walked up to the top of a glass column and squinted down into the water. “The liquid in this is still clear,” he said thoughtfully. Urahara rapped on the glass with his knuckle, then pressed his face against it and tried to look inside. He gave up and withdrew with a huff. “Tōshirō, pull out the water.”

Tōshirō raised a brow. “And do what with it?”

“I don't care, just get it out of the way. We'll put it back after.”

_We, he says,_ Tōshirō drily thought to Hyōrinmaru as he approached the water. His dragon snorted in his head as Tōshirō knelt, stuck his hand in the disgusting water, stood, and pulled the moisture along into the timestep. He shuffled off to one side and siphoned water off and froze it into a growing ice column. They all watched in silence as the water level dropped and revealed walls and columns coated in grime. Tōshirō siphoned more carefully, eyeing the integrity of the pillars and willing ice to form to secure some. About fifteen timesteped minutes later, their party descended into the pit.

Urahara scuffed his foot in a wide arc to slop away mud. They all caught brief glimpses of tiled floor.

“What are those?” Tomoe asked, pointing at a series of raised octagons down the center of the chamber.

Tōshirō slogged closer to get a look, took another step and— _nothing to hold him up_—!

_“Tōshirō!”_ 

Tomoe's ribbon yanked him up by his wrist before he could sink past his knees. Tōshirō swallowed his embarrassment and thanked her as she set him on solid ground.
“Hidden ledges! Fun!” Urahara declared with zero humor. “Mind the gap!”

They all hesitantly shuffled around after that, making sure they were stepping onto solid floor before shifting their weight. The ruins had a cathedral-like atmosphere—if the top had been blown off a cathedral, anyway. They muttered questions and observations to each other as they explored. Urahara shoved broken masonry and rebar aside and approached one of the glass columns. He wiped his sleeve against the slime and cleared some glass, peered inside, went very still, and pulled back slowly.


“Tōshirō, wash this glass now,” Urahara ordered.

Tōshirō bit his tongue on his irritation and stepped up beside the man. He lay his hands on the sludge, partially froze it into slush and scraped some aside. Urahara must have thought he was too slow because he threw his arm up against the column and swept his sleeve down its face.

Gasps all around as the body of a teenage girl was revealed floating in the glass tank, pajamas drifting around her pale form.

Urahara turned and hurried away. “Tōshirō. This one. Check this one.”

Tōshirō sloshed after him. They repeated themselves against another glass pillar—tank. It held another teenage girl, this one in a school uniform.

“Do— do they all have— bodies?!” Tomoe shrilled.

They checked.

The answer was yes.

Dozens of bodies of teenage girls had been stashed deep underground in some kind of preservation tanks.

Akemi looked mystified. That was definitely not good.

Tomoe yelped as she tripped on something; Tōshirō yanked her ribbon and returned the favor of keeping her from going down altogether. She also caught herself with one hand on the ground. Except her arm didn’t go as deep as her legs—her hand must have hit whatever she tripped on. Tomoe shoved mud aside to see what she had stumbled upon and recoiled with a scream.

Tōshirō sloshed over, saw an irregular shape already recovered by slime, partially froze the goo, and commanded the slush away. Everyone stared for a long minute. Akemi choked and made a small strangled sound.

Tōshirō sloshed over, saw an irregular shape already recovered by slime, partially froze the goo, and commanded the slush away. Everyone stared for a long minute. Akemi choked and made a small strangled sound.

Tomoe had tripped on the bodies of two teenage girls, one tall, one small. The small one was missing her head and neck. The curve of the wound between shoulders was evenly jagged in the way Tōshirō had found the remains of subordinates who had been chomped on by Hollows with serrated teeth. Large teeth.

“What the hell happened here?!” Tōshirō growled.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Ah, Asunaro. Such cheerful and totally not confusing material.

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
The Incubator terminals that had been following the Kaname adults and Kisuke Urahara's ally went offline immediately following the collapse of the Asunaro barrier.

The Incubator terminal observing Mitakihara Middle School did not flinch at the distant magical and physical explosions, but twitched its ears in confusion when all the adolescents with magical potential simply disappeared. Query?

The Incubator terminal that had finally infiltrated the Freezer was busy.

The Incubator terminal that had been observing Urahara reported that he had blinked out of existence at the same moment the adolescents had. Query?

Searchi— reiatsu signatures all pinging from Ishijima's habitation. Without the reiatsu of the three spiritually weak adults.

?  

The terminal that had been observing Urahara was reassigned to intercept the humans at Ishijima's habitation. It moved accordingly. That terminal allowed itself to be drawn into Dawn of Hyades' labyrinth— the terminal at the epicenter was still busy— and followed the party of five humans at a distance. Curiously, they were bound to one another by magical ribbons and ropes. It observed their stand against the Familiars and noted that they were willing to assist magical girls they appeared to have never met. That could be useful in attempted manipulations.

The terminal that had been assigned to observe the school was reassigned to observe the shop. It moved accordingly.

Evacuated terminals were commanded to resume their posts with caution.

The Incubator terminal that had intervened in the Freezer avoided destruction amid the triple detonation of Soul Gems and acquired its target. Mission accomplished. Regrettable that the investment in the new contractee would not result in a powerful Witch, but she had been a potential bonus at best. It still achieved a net gain.

The Incubator terminal following the Mitakihara party twitched its ears in confusion as the entire group disappeared again. Query?

Searching. Searching.

The Incubator terminal that had intervened in the Freezer reported that its remains were suddenly
warded and hidden by intricate illusions. Query?

Incubator terminals fanning out across the city reported no sign of the magical girls and spiritually-aware humans.

Curious.

The Incubator's wider consciousness processed information. Considering all it observed, the most likely explanation was some form of time manipulation. Considering the behavior of the allies, the most likely possessor of time manipulation was Homura Akemi. The two adult males were possibilities, but they did not disappear and reappear elsewhere unaccompanied like Akemi did. Teleportation had been an obvious conclusion based on limited information; everything that had occurred since the Incubator became aware of Homura Akemi now required reevaluation.

The Incubator did not grant time manipulation lightly. In the rare event it did, the grant always served a greater purpose and was given to a strategic asset.

It now had multiple pressing research topics:

What manner of time manipulation did Homura Akemi possess? It had two main suspicions which required further scrutiny.

When had she contracted and acquired time magic?

What had been Akemi's wish?

Why did it have no record of granting time manipulation? That had at least one possible answer: some manner of time travel. Which it generally only granted to the low-powered or weak-willed, knowing they could not persevere and could benefit the Incubator in the end while canceling out the loss in power investment. But Akemi was the polar opposite of low-powered and weak-willed. A mystery.

What had the Incubator intended to achieve by granting such magic?

Was the current state of affairs according to plan, or had Akemi and her allies broken free of its intended course?

Incubator terminals communicated rapidly. The terminal observing Nagisa Momoe's habitation interrupted with a query. A pause to process; a command was given.

The terminal observing Nagisa Momoe and her father wander out into their building's courtyard with other humans who were far enough from the Freezer to think they were experiencing earthquakes idly spoke to the doomed magical girl at its side, who was looking north at the site of recent battle.

Tomoe and her allies are occupied with the emergency, it said. This may be your best opportunity.

The magical girl looked down at the milling crowd with narrowed eyes. “Hnnnnn. I'll have to get her away from the others if you still want me to stay secret,” she observed. Still capable of logic. A testament to her endurance. She would make an excellent Witch.

The Incubator terminal observed Momoe and the cat in her arms, then said, Perhaps I may be of some assistance.
Yoruichi was so furiously paranoid that she seriously considered shedding her disguise and outright dragging Nagisa and her father to the wards, cover be damned. And that was before the spiritual equivalent of a Hollow-bomb went off up by the shop. Farther away than the shop. She hoped.

She had sensed that corrupted magical girl stalking them all damn night and all damn day. The girl hadn't made a move while they were out in public, trailed them all the way back to the apartment complex, and was camped outside. Yoruichi looked out the window once and barely saw her on a billboard a couple blocks away. Deciding it would be suspicious if she lay in the sill and stared at the girl, Yoruichi spent much of her time pacing and considering options. And then all hell broke loose.

Nagisa froze up in terror at the distant clashing of magic. The girl didn't react to the rumble, nor when her father swept her up in his arms and charged out the door, down the stairs, and into the courtyard. Yoruichi dashed after them and leapt off the stairs to land on Mr. Momoe, clawing his shirt as she clung to his shoulder. He tried to shrug her off, but gave up. He soon set Nagisa down but kept her close; Yoruichi hopped over to Nagisa's shoulders and ended up curled in her arms as she sensed their stalker change position and half-listened to the adults speculating about the distant booms and light tremors.

Then the Incubator's scent tickled her nose and she zeroed in on it as it strolled across the courtyard upwind of her.

This was a trap. It was baiting her away from Nagisa. Why would it bother? Had it figured something out or did it want to keep her from distracting the stalker? Or was her reaction intended to distract Nagisa? All of the above? Refraining from running off to attack the little monster would probably be out of character, but like hell would she leave Nagisa. The girl would either follow her into an ambush or be left exposed; the stalker seemed reluctant to reveal herself to the normals so staying where they were was probably best. But Nagisa needed to be put on alert to the threat. So.

Yoruichi snarled and shifted in Nagisa's arms as if to leap away, deliberately slow enough for the girl to react and hug her tightly. Nagisa turned to see what she was growling at and stiffened at the sight of the Incubator terminal. The girl stood rooted on the spot and Yoruichi had never been so glad to be hugged in a death grip so tight her ribs creaked. No escape for a “normal” cat. She eyed the protective charm bracelet on Nagisa's wrist and considered breaking the malachite bead herself to trigger the shield and distress beacon. That could distract their allies from whatever clusterfuck was happening up north, though. Which might be the Incubator's reason for coming after Nagisa now.

No option was attractive.

The Incubator withdrew without approaching or speaking. Yoruichi tracked the sense of the marching band magical girl; her tainted reiatsu moved again, this time rounding their position and going behind the Momoe's apartment building. Then... inside the apartment building? Then through the entire building, pausing at regular intervals.

What the hell was the girl doing?

A woman standing near the door of her first-floor apartment turned to look inside with a frown a few minutes after the magical girl passed unseen.
“Hey, does anyone else smell gas?”

The breeze shifted and Yoruichi smelled it a moment before the magical girl's reiatsu spiked and individual apartments started exploding. Mass panic ensued. Nagisa was separated from her father in the screaming, confused, running crowd and ran aimlessly herself.

Yoruichi realized their goddamn stalker had caused gas “leaks” in all the apartments and was igniting them as a distraction. Was that her idea, or the Incubator's?

She didn't have time to think as Nagisa rounded a corner straight into a stream of glowing pink hearts. The malachite bead on Nagisa's bracelet shattered and engaged the shield just before impact. They were blown back into the street, but the spherical shield absorbed all the impact and bounced them across into an alley.

The enemy magical girl hopped rooftops and dropped on them from above, sharp end of her band leader's mace aimed at the shield to pierce it. She screamed, “Gimme your Grief Seeds, you little bitch!” as she rushed down. Her mace sheered off to one side, failing to compromise the shield.

Bless Kisuke and Tessai's joint genius at spiritual artifice.

Yoruichi could hear Nagisa's heart hammering loudly; the little girl was too terrified to even scream. The enemy roared her rage and fired a huge blast of pink magic at them, but the shield still held.

That must have been the last of the magical girl's endurance. Her costume burst away from her body and her eyes went blank as her corrupted Soul Gem exploded and turned into a Grief Seed. Nagisa and Yoruichi were caught up in the dark gale and dragged into the new labyrinth among the sound of snare drums.

Yoruichi hoped the bracelet shield would hold up until their allies could show up— and that their plight wouldn't sabotage anything the main group was trying to achieve. She really would rather not blow her cover.

It had been a long time since Kisuke encountered a compound mystery and disaster so complex and with so many actively moving parts that he wanted to scream in frustration, but here he was. How did it keep getting worse?!

When he and the others dropped the stop and entered the shop after their macabre adventure in previously-subterranean Asunaro, it was to alarms blaring and allies covering their ears and looking angrily confused.

Karin unfroze mid-snarl. “—ck's sake, what nAHHH! DAMMIT HOMURA!”

Kisuke ignored her— and his ringing phone. The timbre of the alarms told him exactly what was wrong; he turned on his heel and pointed back out the door. “You four, head down toward Momoe's residence. That's her distress signal, disappearance notification, and a possible Witch creation alarm. I'll call you with better coordinates in a minute. Go!”

Hitsugaya, Akemi, Tomoe, and Tessai all reversed course immediately and ran back out the door without a word.
Please remind me to note that we need more on-site tech staff and fighters next time, he mentally muttered to Benihime. Out loud, he shouted, “How long has that been going off?!” as he charged through the building.

“I dunno, like five minutes?” Karin said as she hurried after him. Other teenagers flocked in her wake.

Kisuke broke into shunpo, leaving them behind to get to the control room. He answered his phone without bothering to listen, snapped, “Call Isshin, I'm busy,” hung up, and dialed Tessai. He was rattling off data to his friend when Isshin arrived with his phone to his ear.

“Kisuke, Akon says they picked up—”

“Hollow/Witch power spike in southwest Mitakihara, followed by disappearance?” Kisuke interrupted.

“Yeah.”

“I'm on it.”

Isshin sounded way more confident than Kisuke thought he actually was when he said, “Kisuke has it under control,” into his phone.

Tessai’s voice rose over Kisuke’s phone. “Boss, we have explosions and fire down here! Momoe's building looks bombed out!”

If Momoe had turned into a Witch on their watch, Akemi would—

Screaming. Screaming sounded like a good option.

“Ah, found the labyrinth!” Tessai continued. “Going in!”

Kisuke stepped back from the console and dragged his hands down his face with a deep breath.

Please don't be Momoe's Witch, PLEASE don't be Momoe's Witch, P-L-E-A-S-E don't be Momoe's Witch—

Isshin eyed him sideways as teenagers started peeking around the doorjamb. “I take it Asunaro didn't go well?”

Kisuke couldn't help the humorless laughter that fell out of his mouth. “You have no idea.”

Various muttering came from the hall. Isshin crossed his arms and looked worried. He held up his phone. “Touch base with our friends?”

Kisuke gathered himself and snagged the phone from Isshin's fingers. Mindful of the teenage witnesses who weren't privy to shinigami, Kisuke bluntly said, “Put Jūshirō, his assistant Rukia, and an experienced tech on a train here from Karakura now.”

A silent pause. Akon's voice uneasily said, “Captain-Commander Yamamoto is here. He requests a status update.”

“How nice,” Kisuke said blandly. “I don't have time for a full—”

“Kisuke Urahara, you will—” Yamamoto rumbled. Joy for speakerphone. On the other end only.
“Genryusai Yamamoto,” Kisuke said loudly, a touch of bitter mockery in his voice, “I will do whatever the hell I think will keep more people from getting killed. Get Jūshirō, Rukia, and a tech on a train here now and I'll give updates once they're on the way. I need them here and I need them to arrive visibly from a place that thing can't monitor so they can come and go without revealing our transit capabilities. That's a four-hour ride so get moving!”

They bickered a bit, but it sounded like Jūshirō and Rukia had heard him, snagged a tech, and gone off to prepare. Jūshirō was one of maybe three people who could do that without getting roasted by the old man. Bless him for using that privilege.

Kisuke wondered how things were going in the labyrinth down south. Was Yoruichi okay? They hadn't spoken in... Kisuke wasn't even sure when they had last spoken anymore. That was bad. He'd left her in the cold. Bad form, that.

“Ah, ignoring the old man and giving orders for him,” Isshin murmured with his face somewhere between appreciative and a grimace. He turned to the doorway and wistfully said, “If things weren't so dire, I'd make some popcorn.”

Ichigo, Ishida, and Sado all looked darkly pleased.

Kisuke's phone rang. He threw Isshin's phone back to him and ignored the squawking from it as he picked up his own. “Tessai?”

“Safe,” Tessai reported. “Minor injuries. We have Momoe and the cat. Defeated the Witch, got the Grief Seed. Couldn't find a body. Gonna look for Momoe's father now. How do you want us to proceed?”

“Bring them up here,” Kisuke barked. A large chunk of his tension dissipated at the news Momoe hadn't turned. “I want everyone who's under our protection in one damn place until we can figure things out.”

If he resists?”

“Then knock him out and drag him here for his own good,” Kisuke replied, thinking of the threat he had overheard Junko make to the detective eons or an hour ago. He ended the call and shoved his phone in a pocket, then threw himself into an office chair and slung himself across the room to a different computer terminal. Kisuke snapped, “Isshin, is he ready to listen yet or will it be awhile longer before his tantrum is done?”

Multiple low oooooooooooo's came from the teenagers at the doorway.

You may regret that later, Benihime drawled. Still amused, though.

Don't care, Kisuke thought back to her.

You may later, she sighed reluctantly.

“He'd like to have a word with you, Kisuke,” Isshin said drily.

Do not dare ruin the weft with your smart mouth in a fit of pettiness, Kisuke, Benihime quietly hissed. Do not give him cause to set fire to the loom in an equally petty fit. We have enough
damage control to do as it is.

Kisuke inhaled deeply, held himself very still, breathed out, and ordered his thoughts. Slow down. Slow down. Slow down.

Haste makes waste. A stitch in time saves nine.

Haste makes waste. A stitch in time saves nine.

Haste makes waste. A stitch in time saves nine.

Kisuke held his hand out for Isshin's phone. If he didn't have witnesses, he'd put it on speaker; the balancing act peeved him. “May I speak frankly, sir?”

“Do you even know of any other way to speak?” Yamamoto growled.

“Several, but most would be inappropriate right now,” Kisuke replied.

“As if you really care about propriety when you're like this,” Isshin muttered.

Everyone present sensed the return of the rescue party. They must have used the timestop. A lot, actually. He'd worry about that later. Instead, Kisuke turned and pointed out the door. “All of you, go see if they need any help!”

Most pulled away, but Sakura narrowed her eyes and clung to the door jamb. “Think I'll stay outta the way,” she said.

Karin paused, then turned back. “Yeah. Me too. Don't wanna crowd 'em.”

“Yeeeeeahhh, I dunno first aid or whatever anyway,” Miki drawled as she joined them, innocently suspicious.

Isshin and Kisuke both looked at the three with the same calling-out-your-bullshit face. The girls stared right back with the same expression. Three impulsively defiant fourteen-year-olds with adrenaline-activated bullshit detectors.

Kisuke wondered if he was going to regret facilitating the three of them meeting.

“Girls, please go,” Isshin said tiredly, a father who knew he had already lost the argument with his kids.

“Not til I know what kinda hell's comin' down on us,” Sakura said bluntly. She turned to Kisuke. “You're pretty decent as a group but I don't trust you as far as I can spit.” Then she raised her chin and half-shouted, “And I don't trust a secret exorcist leader-guy who wanted to keep me on ice to not pull some other shady bullshit!”

Karin and Miki chorused their support.

Isshin choked. Kisuke stared. The chatter from the phone fell silent.

Oh, she's precious, Benihime cooed. And such a good distraction.

Kisuke narrowed his own eyes in thought. He couldn't be snappy and judgey....

“You know,” Kisuke said loudly, “Miss Sakura has a very good point!”
Isshin turned to look at him uncertainly. “She does?”

Sakura's eyes widened in surprise. “I do?”

_Adorable_, Benihime cooed. _Hotheaded, but adorable._

“Oh, yes,” Kisuke said loudly as he swiveled his chair around to face the girls. He gave them a conspiratorial smirk-and-wink. “I agree that we owe the girls at least a _bit_ of transparency.”

“What are you doing, Kisuke?” Shinji's voice said in the background on the phone. He sounded like he was anticipating a train derailment.

“In the spirit of cooperation with magical girl society—” Kisuke saw the girls and Isshin all quizzically mouth _magical girl society?— “I'm going to have this debriefing and planning session _on speakerphone!”_

Boop!

“— _N'T YOU DARE, KISUKE URASHARA!”_ Yamamoto's voice blared from the phone.

“Damn, calm down before you stroke out,” Karin said with a raised brow.

“Yikes,” Miki said disapprovingly.

_This counts as petty, doesn't it?_ Kisuke asked Benihime.

Yes, Benihime replied as she threw a basket of silkworm cocoons into boiling water in their Inner World. She radiated satisfaction. _But it is strategic pettiness by proxy._

With the push of a button, Kisuke had bound the military leadership into at least pretending friendly cooperation to avoid driving off their best sources of intel, made the suspicious teenage girls feel included and vindicated, and hopefully inspired a few captains to rein in Yamamoto's anger at anything the girls stabbed at with their sharp tongues with “they're only children, don't let yourself be provoked by little girls.” The girls were smart enough to have some legitimate criticisms. It was worth having to word himself more carefully. It forced the command structure to word themselves more carefully to avoid revealing that they were an actual spirit _military._

Isshin looked like he was slowly understanding the ploy. Shinji's laughter was tinny through the phone—he got it and appreciated it. The Visored had largely _forgiven_ the command structure headed by Yamamoto but would never _forget_. The growl was probably Yamamoto.

“Hey, kids! How ya doin'?” Shinji called out. “Who we got here?”


“Ohhh, we got a _Kurosaki_ up in 'ere!” Shinji crowed. “Where's your brother? He off causin' a ruckus as usual?”

“Dealing with the literal disaster upstairs,” Karin called. “Which, like... what the hell are you all gonna do about it?”

“We were just getting to that,” Kisuke interrupted. He crossed his legs and set the phone on his knee, beckoned the girls closer, then settled back with his arms folded.

“We dunno much about it yet, girls,” Kyōraku called out as they approached. “Kisuke, fill us in?”
“First, please tell me how you reacted to the situation so I know if I need to put out even more fires,” Kisuke said. “Did you follow standard protocol?”

“Nope,” Shinji said. “Yamamoto had us all hold back til we heard from you to prevent that. Give that squirrelly little abomination the impression we're slow on the draw.”

Kisuke raised his brow. Shinji was helpfully pointing out a potential olive branch. He would be foolish not to grasp it. Couldn't overdo it, though. So he let out a gusty sigh of relief and tiredly said, “Excellent. I appreciate not running into an extra complication and that makes cleanup so much easier.” Praise without excessive gushing.

The old man understood anyway and gave an unimpressed HMPH, which Karin reacted to by silently putting her hands on her hips, pulling a fake arrogant face, and swinging her head to the side and up to put her nose in the air like an offended snob. Sakura and Miki rolled their eyes.

“All right,” Kisuke said with a grin. He needed this entertainment. It soothed him. “Something strained the barrier to breaking. There was an extremely large Witch, but we are not certain that was what caused the collapse. After the barrier broke, the Witch created a labyrinth that looked like a copy of the city and dragged all the city's inhabitants inside,” he explained as the girls and Isshin's faces fell and they paled. His description of the battle that followed made them look ill; when he finished with the triple self-sacrifice, a long silence ensued both in the control room and on the other end of the phone. Kisuke drew a deep breath and added, “We investigated the site of the original disturbance and... I honestly do not understand what we found at all. We warded and hid it after Miss Akemi confiscated the most obvious evidence. I need to go over it again without adrenaline screaming in my brain. Really pick through the site for smaller evidence. What we found is... ominous.”

“Elaborate,” Yamamoto barked.

After another long silence in which Kisuke pondered his phrasing, Shinji asked, “How fucked is it that you dunno what to make of it?”

“Well,” Kisuke replied slowly, “There was a crater fifteen to twenty meters deep and a city block wide. At its center were the remains of an underground chamber. Within that chamber, we found thirty-one cylindrical tanks. Within each tank was the soulless body of a teenage girl.”

Silent horror all around.

“They had trace amounts of identical magic on them that felt like a structured spell, so I think they were under some form of magical stasis that failed,” Kisuke added. “So we put them all under stasis ourselves before... taking possession of them.” He sighed and added, “We also discovered the dead bodies of two more teenage girls. One was decapitated. We didn't see her head, but it could be hidden in the muck or it could have been eaten by whatever bit it off.”

“Bit?” Karin said hesitantly.

“There were teeth marks,” Kisuke explained. He drew a curved line from shoulder to shoulder to demonstrate to those present. “All the way down to her collarbone.”

Miki blanched and gasped softly. “Oh, no, did Homura see—?”

Kisuke nodded.

“Fuuuuuuuuuck,” Karin said, summing up their thoughts as Isshin put his head in his hands. Sakura looked wary— she didn't know that story yet.
“So ya stumbled on a clusterfuck within a clusterfuck,” Shinji summarized. “A mystery clusterfuck matryoshka.”

That startled a laugh out of Karin, who immediately slammed a hand over her mouth to try to catch it. Miki looked surprised and Sakura looked... interested. God help them.

Yamamoto sighed deeply. “What is your proposed course of action?”

Kisuke explained his plan for making the Incubator think the shinigami— “the organization”— remained ignorant of its system. The girls listened, faces keen; they didn't seem to have any objections, as they kept their mouths shut. Even when Yamamoto gruffly poked at his ideas.

“So I'll send you the script and Jūshirō the debrief,” Kisuke wrapped up. “Who are he and Rukia bringing with, by the way?”

“Rin Tsubokura,” Akon answered.

“Ah, his expertise will be helpful,” Kisuke said with an approving nod. The young man was often a nervous wreck but damn did he know his way around sensor programming and maintenance. He would also be a very non-threatening addition to their crowded base.

After promising updates, Kisuke ended the call, relaxed back into the chair, and sighed, “Thank you for your help, girls.”

They all stared at him. Miki said, “Say what now?”

“Your presence and early objections reminded them all that they have new allies to play nice with,” he explained, “and also showed that you were likely more willing to cooperate with my team than them despite your misgivings.” Kisuke scratched the stubble on his chin and weighed each of the girls with his eyes. “They are at an information deficit and know it. They can't afford to alienate magical girls and their allies. You reminded them the old man has already pissed you off and forced them to slow down and consider my plan more seriously. Thank you.”

That was an exaggeration, but not excessively flattering enough of one to draw attention. The girls looked cautiously pleased.

“Maybe you should make a habit of letting us in on all your bullshit,” Sakura sniffed airily.

“Maybe so,” Kisuke said with the ghost of a grin. “Anyway, please really do go up and see if there's anything you can do. I have a lot of typing to get done very quickly.” He raised a brow in inquiry. “Unless one of you would like to take dictation?”

“BYE,” Karin said as she turned on her heel and hurried to the exit.

“NAH,” Miki said, following her.

“Hmph.” Sakura took a lazy step back and raised her arms to fold her hands behind her head. She looked at Isshin and drawled, “You comin' too, Doctor-Man, or you gonna stay down here and talk behind our backs?”

Kisuke could feel Benihime's smirk at the blatant suspicion. They had notes to add to Tessai's note about Sakura having the makings of an investigator.

Isshin laughed awkwardly and followed Sakura out. Kisuke stared at the door for a long minute, settling himself in the glorious silence. Then he turned back to the computers.
If Tessai hadn't summoned him, he wasn't needed for anything pressing. Compartmentalization time. He had a lot of writing to do.

Kyōko didn't really know what to expect when they got back to the recovery room. She felt like she was in an RPG with a slowly unraveling plot; she had the nigling thought that she had to pay attention to every little thing said for clues to get an advantage later in the game. So Kyōko stopped in the doorway and really looked.

Everyone who had been out fighting was filthy all over, but muddy from the knees down. They all reeked. Bosslady Mom and Chef Dad were sitting up groggily and the “detective” was still laid out on her futon, unconscious but uninjured. Madoka was fretting over her parents, but kept glancing over to where Yuzu had moved to fretting over Homura, who was seated at the low tea table and staring into space. Yuzu was speaking to her softly and generally being comforting, but Homura just intensely stared at nothing and didn't acknowledge them or the black cat in her lap; Kyōko thought she looked lost in disturbed thought. Like, thinking really hard. Orangeygo was seated on Homura's other side with one hand lightly resting on her shoulder, thumb rubbing soothing circles into her neck. She didn't acknowledge him, either. Orangeygo turned to look at his father, face pained and frustrated. Plainly, he wanted to do more to help but didn't know how.

“She's having a flashback, isn't she?” Sayaka muttered.

Manchild Dad sighed. “Looks like it.”

“At least she hasn't run away this time?” Sayaka said with a cringing attempt at optimism.

“Flashback to what?” Kyōko asked under her breath. She still thought the girl looked more like she was thinking hard, but info was info.

Her companions glanced at each other. Then Karin whispered, “She saw one of her original teammates have her head bitten off by a Witch. Seeing that headless body today....”

Oh. That was why they had reacted like that when Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown mentioned that.

“By the way, Kyōko,” Sayaka added in a whisper, “never use the saying bite their head off where she can hear you. I found out the hard way.”

Kyōko nodded grimly. She hated the phrase give them enough rope to hang themselves with herself. She could respect that.

Anyway, there was a new addition to the adults. A middle aged man lay on another futon. Frosty was making and applying handfuls of icy slush to some moderate burns. Mami sat near him with a hysterically bawling little magical girl in her lap. This must be the Momoe-and-father that had been mentioned between Bucket Hat Magic Science Clown and Tessai. Mami was patting the girl's back and hugging her, but looked traumatized and tearful herself. The older teenagers looked like they weren't sure what to do.

Manchild Dad put a hand to his mouth and whistled sharply. When everyone looked at him, he
barked, “All right. Who has Grief Seeds? Let me see them.”

The sniffling little kid in Mami’s lap rustled under her poncho and held up two. Tessai held one up and said, “Plus the two in storage that Tōshirō and Homura got.”

Manchild Dad nodded sharply, clapped once, and ordered, “Magical girls, heal yourselves then use Grief Seeds. I’ll heal Tessai and Tōshirō and give Mr. Momoe’s burns a little longer to cool before working on him. Then we can all get on the same page with what happened.” He pointed at Orangeygo’s friends. “You three get in the kitchen and start making tea and putting together snacks. And one of you see if Tatsuya's still asleep. Bring him in if he's awake.”

Kyōko and Sayaka dithered in the doorway as Karin marched over to check in with Frosty, who looked tired and singed. Sayaka went to join Homura's orbit. Kyōko reluctantly made her way to Mami, stood awkwardly for a minute, and settled for sitting behind her and leaning back-to-back. It was all she could think of. Mami leaned back into her, so it probably wasn't the wrong thing to do.

All the other magical girls healed themselves and dismissed their costumes. Doctor Manchild healed Tessai and Frosty, then both hovered over the unconscious middle-aged man and muttered about his burns before healing them most of the way and having Frosty put new snow on them. Weird. At first, anyway; next, they did glowy magic stuff to Madoka’s still-wobbly parents and the other lady and babbled things about magic and souls that Kyōko didn't understand. The clearest thing was “like a spiritual flash burn and shock,” which sounded like something that would require magic to fix. Maybe they had been conserving their magic on that fluffy kid's dad.

“Everyone who's going out on the mission later: eat, wash up, and try to sleep until the backup comes,” Dr. Manchild ordered next. Seeing him consistently acting like a responsible adult was weird.

Sayaka looked like she wanted to say something, but glanced at tired faces and kept her mouth shut. Kyōko didn't. She cocked her head to look around over her shoulder and barked, “So like... we getting any explanations any time soon?”

Because seriously: what the entire fuck was up with people being chill about stopping time?

Dr. Manchild sighed and turned away from doing glowy things to Bosslady Mom to look at Kyōko. “Yes. Soon. But we have some fires to put out first. Literally.”

Oh. The ones Urahara had mentioned on the phone. Right.

The team that would be going back out disappeared down halls to clean up and rest. The rest of those conscious ended up drifting to to the game room, clustering together to watch the emergency coverage of the interrupted apocalypse on TV. Before he went off to clean up, Tessai quietly explained some sciencey junk about why they weren't up there doing something about the hellscape on TV yet; Kyōko only paid enough attention to understand they'd make things worse if they didn't wait, then tuned that out to absorb things from the TV for later grilling.

The Nagisa kid was a mess even while clinging to Madoka-of-the-warm-'n-fuzzy-drugs, so the adults decided to sedate her and let her sleep some of it off. Kyōko thought that was a thin excuse to get the kid out of the way, but her crying was grating Kyōko's nerves so she bit her tongue. Orangeygo's giant friend carried Tatsuya into the room and set him down as Manchild Dad carried Nagisa out; the boy immediately toddled over to cuddle his parents.

The hours dragged. No one spoke. The same information repeated endlessly on the TV with
minimal additions as normals tried to figure out what the hell was going on and how to handle it. It was like a mundane parallel to their waiting for information on the magical aspect. The jerks in the know didn't take it upon themselves to explain anything and the clueless felt oddly reluctant to ask. It reminded Kyōko of a time when she was little, sitting in a bare waiting room with her exhausted mother. She couldn't remember much detail, but knew it had been a hospital of some kind and they were waiting for... something to do with her father. The same cartoon had looped on the crappy TV in the corner so many times Kyōko lost track and started to lose her mind in a bizarre combination of boredom and burning desire to know what the hell was happening. The faces of those in the know were too much like her mom's had been for Kyōko to break the uneasy silence herself. They were stuck in a waiting room next to Hell.

It felt like days had passed when whatever backup crew showed up. Frosty, Mami, and Homura reappeared shortly beforehand, fetched by Orangeygo after getting a text. Three magical presences popped into the wards, one weak and two strong. One of the strong ones shot toward them rapidly. Kyōko slipped into Threat Alert mode and prepared to transform. Then a tall man with long white hair swept into the room, face drawn with worry, and called, “Shiro-chan!”

Frosty sighed at the table and dropped his face onto his crossed arms. “...Dad,” he mumbled.

Kyōko blinked. Okay. Not what she had expected.

Frosty's dad rushed to the table, dropped to his knees, and hugged the boy, who squawked in surprise. The man paid this no mind and sighed, “I'm so glad you're safe!”

Frosty's face went a hilarious shade of pink.

—Wait. Frosty's dad. The guy who was “so nice!” and had “almost thrown lightning” at that geezer on her behalf. Kyōko narrowed her eyes and weighed the man. Hmm.

“Yo, Ichigo,” a low female voice said from the doorway. Everyone looked at the short young woman, but she only looked at Ichigo, face solemn.


“Rukia!” Yuzu cried. She ran across the room and barreled into the older girl. “I'm so glad you're here!”

“Yuzu,” Rukia said quietly as she lightly returned the hug. “I saw the news on the way up. I'll do what I can.”

Tessai the Magic Giant had said something about bringing in a second Frosty to help chill out Hell On Earth. Rukia must be the one; her strong magic was like a crisp winter night and somehow made Kyōko think of the crunch of snow under her boots in silent snowfall.

Urahara appeared so suddenly that Kyōko couldn't help flinching. The man's face was lined and intense. “Rin,” he barked.

“Y-yes, sir?”

A brown-haired figure shuffled out from behind Snowgirl. He was the scranniest, wimpiest, most awkward little nerd-guy Kyōko had ever seen. He looked terrified of his own shadow. And what was with that bangs-in-a-ponytail hairstyle?

“Come. Now,” Urahara ordered curtly before turning on his heel and fucking off into his techie hidey-hole again. The nerd kid— or just tiny guy?— hustled after him with a squeak, the huge pack
on his back jangling as he ran.

Kyōko noticed that the older teens looked kinda disturbed. Snowgirl looked surprised verging on alarmed. “I haven't seen him like that since—” Rukia cut herself off. “You weren't exaggerating, Ichigo.”

Orangeygo just sighed.

Kyōko looked down the empty hall. Possible confirmation the jerk wasn't always an asshole?

Frosty escaped from his dad's fretting— where had all that candy come from?— and grumpily said, “Let's head out.”

Plans were tersely discussed, then Frosty, Frosty Dad, Snowgirl, Tessai, Mami, and Homura left.

Great. Time for more waiting.

Kyōko looked around the room and declared, “You all had better have some damn good explanations later.”

Manchild Dad gave a weak chuckle. “We will.”

“You'd better,” Kyōko reiterated stubbornly.

Her patience was dangerously thin.

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Eighty-three minutes after the fall of Dawn of Hyades, the Incubator terminals that remained in Asunaro sensed the parting of reality that heralded the arrival of shinigami via senkaimon on the far north edge of town. All terminals sought better cover and assessed reiatsu.

Four shinigami, a spectrum of power levels skewing high. They moved slightly closer to the destruction and held position. A few distant terminals could see them on the roof of an apartment complex. The shinigami made no further moves.

Calculations were run; need to know what the shinigami might do merited risking a pair of terminals to investigate. Two terminals rolled in soot and dirt to make their white coats the same drab grays and browns of the dust and smoke coating the buildings and made stealth approaches. One terminal crept up the far side of the building across the street and stayed hidden in shadows to acquire a visual. The other terminal approached the building from behind, scaled the edifice, and padded along ledges to settle beneath the shinigami to acquire audio out of sight in the corner of a balcony.

The four shinigami stood as two pairs. The first was a small woman and a very large man wearing the captain and lieutenant insignia of the Second Division. Ominous. But the lieutenant looked bored and the captain displayed impatience, arms crossed and one foot tapping. They seemed like they did not wish to be present. The second pair was a man in a lab coat and a woman bearing the lieutenant insignia of the Twelfth Division. Also ominous. The man looked frustrated but the woman looked uninterested.

“Well? Where is it?” the diminutive captain of Second Division eventually snapped.
“Can’t find it,” the male in the lab coat said in defeat. “It may have gone back through the same Garganta after causing... this.”

“It may have been a fight between Hollows.” the lieutenant of Twelfth Division speculated. “Perhaps one tried to make an escape and was dragged back through to finish the fight. Or perhaps was followed and their battle ended in defeat of one, which then retreated. There are many possibilities. Even mutual destruction.”

The captain of Second Division scoffed and turned on her heel. “I have a search to conduct in Hueco Mundo, then. Before they cause more chaos somewhere else.” She jabbed her zanpakutō at the air and cut reality to make a senkaimon. “Omaeda!”

The big man jolted fearfully, said, “Yes, Captain!” and followed her into the corridor between worlds.

The female lieutenant sedately turned to follow. The male in the lab coat looked up from his device and said, “Lieutenant?”

“There is nothing else we can do here,” she declared, turning emotionless eyes on her subordinate. “This is beyond memory manipulation. The closest witnesses were probably obliterated. Let the humans make of it what they will.”

The male frowned doubtfully, glanced at the destruction, and said, “Yes, Lieutenant.”

In moments, the fabric of reality knit back together behind them, leaving no trace of their presence.

Interesting.

The Incubator's greater consciousness spent the next hours analyzing the encounter and hypothesizing about shinigami knowledge. They seemed uninterested. Even though they somehow detected Dawn of Hyades’ birth, they interpreted it as a Garganta and thought the destruction was triggered by a Hollow. They remained uninterested in anything save hunting the nonexistent Hollow, which they had simply presumed was no longer present.

Interesting. And incompetent.

The terminal observing the magic shop alerted the greater consciousness to the arrival of the white-haired man who had previously assisted with warding, this time accompanied by two unknowns. So the ploy to draw in allies was bearing at least some fruit.

The Hitsugaya father and son soon led a party eastward, veered north at the coast, and established an encampment on the roof of a building on the shore. Incubator terminals around the bay noted the gradual rise of icy reiatsu—the Hitsugaya boy and the female newcomer—and alteration of temperature and moisture in the atmosphere. Though the pair's influence was subtle, a fog bank gathered on the coast and crept inland; an hour later, a chilly mist began to waft down on Asunaro. Water gathered on solid objects, but there wasn't enough of it to flood the trenches, cause sinkholes, or drown trapped survivors. Flammable structures became damp and the structural fires' expansion slowed, giving the powerless humans precious time to get ahead of each front and battle the flames by mundane means. Evaporation of the falling rain cooled the atmosphere and helped the rain clouds become self-sustaining, increasing the efficiency of the application of reiatsu.

Clever. The pair of humans would likely still be exhausted, but they would have gained an admirable return on investment of resources. From their point of view, that was. The Incubator saw no point in their actions. Still, their operations displayed creative problem-solving and admirable
grasp of need versus ability.

And the shinigami had not displayed knowledge of the empowered humans and their base, nor of the Incubator's system.

Excellent.

Mami hadn't quite known what to expect of their cooldown mission, but it wasn't setting up camp on the roof of a marina while ash drifted down on them like gray snow. Tessai pulled two cushions out of his pack, dropped them, and Tōshirō and Rukia sat. Back to back, both of their faces relaxed into trance-like slackness with heavy eyelids. Both glowed, Tōshirō ice blue and Rukia snow white. The air temperature plummeted. Mami shivered.

Tessai handed out thick blankets for the rest of them to wrap around their shoulders like shawls. “I doubt we'll actually be attacked by anything,” he said, “but stay alert. Don't let yourself get in a torpor from the cold.”

Alert. Ha.

Mami was bone tired and her adrenaline was spent. Her brief nap hadn't helped; she slept little, as had Homura. Mami glanced at the yet-more-mysterious magical girl and wondered what was going on in her head. Homura looked like she was making a neutral face but was unaware her tension bled through as knit brows and pursed lips. Her eyes stared into space, mind a million light years away though her gaze was directed at the city.

Cellophane crinkled as Mr. Hitsugaya opened a candy and gently said, “Think about one thing at a time, Miss Akemi. You're making this more complicated than it has to be.”

Homura blinked owlishly, scowled, and swept an arm out to indicate the orange glow of the burning city. “What about this is not complicated?”

“Very little,” Mr. Hitsugaya allowed with a genial nod as he slipped the candy in his mouth. “But you're distracting yourself considering that. That we can figure out together later. Focus on your most pressing decision to be made.”

Homura stared at him for a long moment. He idly sucked the candy in one cheek and scanned the shoreline for threats. Mami felt like she was intruding somehow. Eventually, Homura archly said, “Oh? The decision has not been made for me?”

Mami wondered why Mr. Hitsugaya looked so sad.

“No,” he replied. “We have our preferences and opinions, of course, but that knowledge is a power of its own. A power that is uniquely yours. We will not take it from you by dictating how much you explain. Even Kisuke agrees that doing so would be a betrayal.”

Oh. Oh. Were they talking about the story behind the time magic?

Homura frowned doubtfully. “And what is your opinion?”

“That the question you should be asking is how far do you trust your friends?” Mr. Hitsugaya
replied immediately. “Both those of us who do not know and those of us who do. You could ask yourself millions of what-ifs, but they all lead back to that question.”

For a moment, Homura's face was achingly vulnerable; then she seemed to put a mask on, face smoothing into blankness as she turned back to the shoreline. Mr. Hitsugaya didn't press her; he just looked sad again.

Mami shivered at the first rainfall. She was becoming more and more uneasy about getting that explanation.

“I wish I was seeing you again under better circumstances, Miss Tomoe,” Mr. Hitsugaya said regretfully.

Oh. It was her turn now.

“Y-yes. Me, too,” Mami replied.

The man looked at her for a minute, sadly curious. “I don't want to presume, but it seems to me you've had a hard time of things these last few days,” he ventured slowly.

“Yes,” Mami replied, subdued. “But... I think I was— am doing better with... everyone around.”

Mr. Hitsugaya smiled warmly. “That's good to hear.” He nodded at Asunaro. “Kisuke said you had a rough experience with the... scenery, earlier?”

Mami swallowed hard. “I've... seen things, being a magical girl,” she explained, “but... not like this. Never so many. Never... in the real world.” She stopped, not trusting her voice, and willed herself not to cry. Her mind unhelpfully supplied imagery of the many dead and dying she had seen that day. At least the timestop had spared her the sounds.

She was startled when Mr. Hitsugaya brushed his hand on her shoulder— like his son had done earlier. He looked at her with sympathy and said, “The first time you encounter such a large-scale disaster is a shock, even if you've seen similar things here and there. It pains me that you kids experience anything of the like, but on such a large scale....” He trailed off and shook his head, then firmly looked her in the eye and declared, “We'll be here for you.”

“Thank you,” Mami said in a near-whisper. After a minute of thought, she ventured, “Tōshirō was... calm, and... comforting. Earlier. So was Homura.”

Mr. Hitsugaya grinned. “I'm glad to hear that.”

Mami fidgeted with her blanket. “Has he... seen...? Before?”

Tōshirō's father looked at his meditating son with deep regret. “Unfortunately, when your soul is as powerful as his, there is no avoiding spiritual trouble. Uncontrolled power is dangerous. Hollows seek you as prey. Once you become proactive, dealing with the dead and Hollows doesn't allow one to avoid such horrific scenes.” Mr. Hitsugaya looked tired. “I hate that he is familiar enough with such scenes to operate smoothly in them, but the alternative could be so much worse.” He turned back to Mami. “I have similar thoughts regarding magical girls. I am so sorry you were dragged into this. But I'm glad you're still here.”

Mami looked away, cheeks warm. “It's— I'm... glad. To be here. With everyone. Even if....” She trailed off to look at the distant fire. After a moment, she came to a surprising realization:

It was true.
She was glad to be with them despite the carnage. It was true, not empty words.

Mami didn't think she could have handled Kyōko's fall and the Asunaro disaster without everybody who had plowed into her life these last weeks. They made her feel strong even in her weakness. Tears welled up in her eyes unbidden.

The prospect of learning their secrets loomed ominously. The prospect of not being told everything loomed... not as ominously, oddly enough. Not anymore.

Mami found words. “Homura?”

The mysterious magical girl looked her way, melancholy, and said, “Yes?”

Mami firmed her face. “I trust you.”

Homura's eyes went eyes round in surprise.

“Whatever you do or don't want to say... I trust you,” Mami elaborated.

Mr. Hitsugaya was surprised, too, but smiled broadly at them. “We'll get through this together, girls. Keep believing in one another and we'll get through this.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I don't know why this chapter was so hard to write. My dumpster fire brain insisted most of it be scrawled on paper first. Blanked at computer, word-vomited on paper. *big shrug*

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
A/N: This chapter is dedicated to the little hellions on the surprise ANAI Discord server who fed me a steady stream of wholesomeness and crack for three days and got my brain really working again. You have them to thank for this lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kisuke basically threw Rin into the control room for his various sensor networks with a command to study them and assess functionality. It was probably best to assume his pigeons lost; whatever was salvageable would then be good news. And Kisuke needed good news.

Well, all their allies were in protective custody. That was good news. Kinda. Sorta. At least they couldn't get killed? Well, unless they killed each other.

Yeahhh, he was delegating crowd control to Tessai, Isshin, Junko, and Tomohisa. Let them keep all the teenagers from destroying the building. He had work to do.

There was so much new information to add to the information he was already juggling. His respect for Homura Akemi maintaining her sanity and conviction across innumerable timelines increased practically by the hour. It was all monstrously overwhelming— and he was an experienced former Special Ops and R&D military officer who had plotted the downfall of a megalomaniac with a god complex over the course of a century, not a random schoolgirl.

You must admit that to her, Kisuke, Benihime said matter-of-factly as she brushed silk cocoons and snagged filaments from them in preparation to unravel them. The plink-plink of plucked string mirrored the tap-tap of his typing. She needs to know you that respect her accomplishments and that you are humbled by the scale of the plot she has been fighting by herself for so long.

Kisuke knew his zanpakutō spirit was right. The question would be when the two of them would actually have a spare moment of privacy to chat one-on-one. Especially with even more people checking into Hotel Urahara.

Leave that for Tessai and the others. Set that aside. Focus.

Right. So. The biggest thing up in the air was how much Homura would divulge. How much she said could send his course in several different directions, which he should prepare for accordingly. He and the others had to help her navigate the fallout without shutting down so she could participate in unpacking the bodies and figuring out what the hell was going on in Asunaro. He needed to think of a more permanent solution to the bandage he'd slapped on the crater; humans
were going to go poking in there sooner than later and he needed more than illusions over ice. He also needed to know what the hell had happened with Momoe. Shop surveillance showed the kid had been sedated, so she'd be no help for now. So Kisuke left his door ajar while typing and waited for his oldest friend.

“You reek of stress, smoke, and sewage, Kisuke,” Yoruichi’s low cat voice eventually drawled. “You owe me an explanation.”

Kisuke turned to see the cat nudge the door closed. Tension in his shoulders relaxed. “Yoruichi,” he sighed with relief. “I'm sorry to leave you in the cold. Things have been so—”

“Shut it,” Yoruichi said with a dismissive wave of her paw. “You'd've done better if you could've. That's done. I just want an update on facts.” She smoothly shifted into human form, stretched, and threw herself into a chair. Gold eyes evaluated him. “You're not taking care of yourself, Kisuke.”

Kisuke pouted. “I will have you know that Tessai and Isshin have been ensuring I get sleep and food these last few days.”

Yoruichi just gave him a skeptical look.

“I've been a tad busy,” he said drily.

“Hmph. No shit.” Yoruichi slouched to one side and propped her chin on her elbow. “I have some very important features to demand for this collar,” she said, fingers ghosting against it at her neck. “We probably could've prevented the fight down yonder.”

Ah, another failure. Great.

Sharp as ever, Yoruichi narrowed her eyes— damn, which tell was he letting slip?— and said, “But that can wait. I heard a sparing version of what happened today. What's your action plan?”

“Sent Twelfth to make a scripted appearance to throw the Incubator off the trail of thinking they know anything or know us,” Kisuke replied. “Gotta figure out a better way to hide a... I guess you could say a crime scene. Ahhhh, if only I could just pick it— oh.”

Yoruichi raised a brow. “Oh?”

“OH!” Kisuke shouted as he jumped up from his seat and slammed a palm into his forehead. “I'm an idiot!”

“Are those words immortalized on surveillance?” Yoruichi drawled as he scrabbled around in his pocket for his phone.

He ignored the question and dialed his shop. His real shop in Karakura. Jinta picked up and boredly said, “Urahara Shop. Whaddaya want?”

“Jinta!”

“B-Boss?”

Kisuke leaned in close to his phone and commanded, “I need you and Ururu to get something out of storage for me.”

“Oh, God,” Jinta groaned. “What?”

“The modified Tenkai Kecchū*.”
Yoruichi crooned her understanding.

Jinta balked. “The say what now?!”

“The—”

“I heard you the first time!” Jinta shouted. “The hell you want those for?! We just put 'em away!”

“Do it.” Boop. Kisuke hung up. He immediately dialed Twelfth Division.

Akon picked up. “How may I be of assistance, sir?”

“I have a project for you guys,” Kisuke said.

Yes. He had a direction. For now. A plan began to block together in his head. It wouldn't solve a lot of his problems, but it could help.

Yoruichi listened to him lay out the plan to Akon, face set in something of an affectionate smirk. When he hung up and stood staring at nothing for a couple minutes, she stayed silent to let him think.

Kisuke breathed deeply and looked to Yoruichi. “Is there any intel from your end?”

Yoruichi sighed. “First: Your shield worked beautifully. But Nagisa saw that other girl turn into a Witch. So we have that to deal with.”

“Why do I even bother wondering if things can get worse anymore,” Kisuke droned.

“Pretty damn sure our friendly neighborhood albino plague rat set that corrupted magical girl on Nagisa,” Yoruichi continued. “It also attempted a ruse to lure me away from Nagisa, probably so she'd chase me and be easily ambushed.”

Kisuke frowned and thought. “…A diversion for us? Or for the girls, since they were closer to Momoe's place while at school? To keep them from backing up Tessai and me?”

Yoruichi threw her arms up in a sarcastically clueless shrug. “The girl stalked us overnight, but stayed hidden until Asunaro went to Hell in a handbasket. Timing is suspicious to me. Especially since she also used gas line explosions as a distraction.”

Kisuke's frown turned hard. “Coordinated attacks?”

“Damned if I know,” Yoruichi replied with another shrug. “Couldn't find her body, but we do have her Grief Seed. If we really want to know, we could purify her and shove her in a gigai for questioning.”

So tempting. “Maybe.”

Yoruichi looked at him for awhile. Kisuke realized he had been pacing and stopped. Yoruichi's lips quirked up. “Go do your thinking in the shower and burn your clothes,” she said.

“What?”

“You reek. That wasn't just mud you were in, dumbass. The others got cleaned up; now it's your turn.” She leaned forward aggressively, eyes threatening. “Then you will sleep or Soul King as my witness I will tie your ass up and throw you in bed.”
Kisuke's world stabilized with beautiful suddenness. He dropped his fan out of his sleeve and fluttered it in front of his face. “Oh, my, Milady Shihoin! Princess of my heart! Shibari is delightful but I have standards! You need to take me to dinner first!”

Yoruichi’s feral grin cheered him immensely.

Madoka was anxious. Her parents were doing much better, but were tired. Yuzu and her family wouldn’t let Papa cook dinner, so Madoka’s family huddled to watch the TV with Sayaka and Kyōko. The images on the screen broke Madoka’s heart, but she was also angry. Sayaka and Kyōko had repeated what they had heard Mr. Urahara say about what happened. They had all pieced together some of what happened to Nagisa. It had all been Witch-related, but the normal people didn’t know that. The news was full of worries about terrorism and people were scared that there would be more any minute. There was no way to tell them the beings responsible for the destruction had been dealt with. It was frustrating. And it all tied back to the Incubator's system.

She thought she might be starting to understand the word “hate.”

Mama told Sayaka to text her parents that she was safe before she ended up reported missing. Sayaka obeyed, but kept making sulky faces at whatever her parents were replying. Dinner was subdued; most speech was things like pass the soy sauce, please, and sorry, I don’t think I can eat anymore. Madoka joined all the other teens to do cleanup; it felt like everyone went deliberately slow to put off going back to the TV room to wait for the others’ safe return.

“The death toll in Asunaro continues to rise,” the anchors said at the top of every hour. “Hospitals in the greater Mitakihara metropolitan area are overwhelmed. Asunaro Dome has become a staging ground for emergency services, shelter, non-life-threatening medical treatment, and temporary morgue. Off-duty doctors, nurses, and anyone with any kind of medical training, medical facility maintenance training, or those who have spare medical supplies to donate are requested to gather there or at nearby hospitals. To quote: even veterinarians can screen and treat many superficial injuries in humans, freeing specialists to do more intricate work. To join the effort, please go to one of the checkpoints on the screen with supplies or proof of certifications to provide medical treatment to be escorted in. Medical-field employment badges stating your position will be sufficient—”

Madoka wanted to do something. They all did. Dr. Kurosaki in particular looked distraught every time the call for doctors was repeated.

At least whatever the damage control team was doing started to have a noticeable effect. Mention of unexpected change of weather and its effect of slowing fires without causing more danger was delivered by newly-hopeful anchors and baffled meteorologists. The tide started to turn in the firefighters’ favor. Yes!

Their morbid watch party was drowsy and fading when the sooty team returned after two in the morning. The soot and ash that had fallen on them made them look like walking stone statues. All but Mr. Hitsugaya were blatantly exhausted, but Hitsugaya and Rukia were being half-supported by Mr. Hitsugaya and Tessai, respectively. They seemed to be struggling to remain conscious. The adults steered them to the table, let them flop down by it, and asked for food and wet cloths; once leftovers were brought in, the adults washed their faces and cajoled the two to eat and kept them from falling asleep on their plates.
Madoka did not like Mr. Hitsugaya's coughing fits. They sounded deep and painful. If they were, he didn't let it show on his face. But still. Didn't he have a heart condition? Or was it lungs?

Mr. Urahara appeared when they were done eating and Hitsugaya and Rukia were being pulled up to their feet to get dragged to bed filthy because they'd probably pass out in a shower and said, “Tessai. Homura. I'm terribly sorry, but I need your help for an urgent project.”

Homura sighed tiredly. Tessai passed Rukia off to Ichigo. Dr. Kurosaki nudged Mr. Hitsugaya aside and took Tōshirō with a sharp hand gesture insisting Mr. Hitsugaya sit. Homura and Tessai followed Mr. Urahara down the hall.

After a long minute of awkward silence, Mama stretched and said, “I think we all need to crash. Everyone's safe now and we obviously can't get explanations yet. Mami, take a shower if you're awake enough; if you can't, don't worry about ruining sheets and just wash tomorrow. Let's get some rest and look at everything fresh in the morning.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Tessai said.

Everyone glanced at the door to the hallway. Tessai and Homura reentered the room looking even more tired than before.

“Wait, what?” Sayaka said. “That was quick.”

Homura raised her arm and waved her shield a bit before dropping her arm and yawning.

“Oh, right, time shenanigans,” Karin said.

“What'd ya do?” Kyōko asked.

“We used an advanced technique to remove the evidence we need and alter the part of the blast crater we disguised so— people without powers can investigate and find nothing magical,” Tessai explained.

The redhead looked skeptical. “That gonna be part of whatever explanation you give us?”

“It can be,” Tessai said with a shrug.


“But Homura should eat something first, right?” Madoka objected. “She just used a lot of magic for Mr. Urahara, didn't she?”

Mama nodded. “Take her to the kitchen and get her something. We'll break this room down for a sleepover.”

Madoka hurried to Homura's side, grabbed her hand, and gently tugged her down the hall and into the kitchen as the others shoved furniture around. She guided Homura into a chair, got her a glass of water, and bustled in the dimmed kitchen, filling a dish with food from the pots the Kurosakis had cooked in. When she brought it to the table, Homura's water glass was empty and her friend was staring into space. She was ghostly gray with ash except for her face, looked weary, and even seemed to have forgotten to transform back into her normal clothes. Madoka peered at the girl's left hand to check her diamond-shaped Soul Gem.

Dim.
Madoka bit her lip.

“Do not worry,” Homura said quietly. “I am nowhere near turning.”

“Oh— oh,” Madoka said with a nervous laugh. “Caught me.” She shifted uncomfortably and suddenly grabbed the empty glass. “Re— Refill, coming right up!”

She hustled into the kitchen and fumbled the glass three times before she managed to fill it. What was she supposed to do? To say?

When she returned to the table, Homura was slowly eating with one hand and had her shield arm draped on the table. Madoka set down the glass and looked at the shield curiously. The swirling pattern was really interesting and reminded her of something, though she couldn’t say wha—

*Spinning black and whi—*

Madoka shook her head. What had that been?

“Are you all right?”

Madoka looked down at Homura’s worried face and gave an embarrassed laugh. “Just— just lost in thought, you know? It’s— it’s been a long day, right? Well, night. Morning. Ahhhhhh—”

Homura smiled softly. Even though it was still quite melancholy, it made Madoka’s heart skip a beat. It felt like nostalgia, like she could count on her fingers the number of times she had seen her dear friend make that face over the last few years and she had really accomplished something by causing her to make it. Especially so soon after the ones at Homura’s house during their sleepover with guns and that one afternoon with Sayaka when Homura had said, “You are truly kindhearted,” and the ones at Madoka’s house when—

...Wait.

“You should go to bed,” Homura said tiredly.

Madoka jumped a bit and pouted stubbornly. “Not yet. Not until you do. You’ve been up just as long as me and you were actually doing things the whole time.”

Homura sighed and went back to eating. Madoka fidgeted, then sat across from her. And fidgeted some more. She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to press her friend for answers, but she didn't know what to say besides questions. And even then, she didn't know what questions. So she sat in awkward silence and stared down at the table because staring at Homura eating would be weird and—

“Mado... ka?” Homura asked slowly.

Madoka jerked her head up. “Y-yes?”

Homura was looking at her but looking through her. Like her eyes weren't quite focused. She looked uncertain and like she was thinking really hard or trying to read Madoka’s mind or something. It was a long minute before she spoke. “Tomorrow, when I tell... everyone. I... want to tell everything. But....”

Madoka looked at her encouragingly. “But?”

“But the truth would be that I... lied to you,” Homura finished.
“Ummm... so?”

Homura drew up short and furrowed her brow. “So?”

“I mean,” Madoka paused and gathered herself, then looked up again. “I mean, that's— that's— already kinda obvious, isn't it? I mean, you didn't tell us about time magic or anything. And that's — that's okay.”

Homura's baffled face was funny but Madoka would not laugh. “It is?”

Madoka sat straighter and lifted her chin. “Kyōko and Sayaka were kinda making a big deal about it and Mama asked them if they'd want just anyone to know if they could do that and especially if they would want it to get back to their enemies and, ummm... so hiding it makes sense to me.”

Homura stared in silence for a long minute. “And... the others?”

“They're... not happy, but I think they're not as angry,” Madoka said after taking a deep breath.

The magical girl sighed, looked at her empty bowl, and mumbled, “What if there is... far, far more to my secret than just stopping time?”

“...Just?” Like, that stopping time was a minor thing in comparison?

Homura looked aside guiltily, then met Madoka's eyes. “Just.”

Madoka felt like time stopped for her even though Homura's shield lay still and silent. She had an overwhelming instinct that her answer would be extremely important. Like she had to stand on tiptoe and dance around landmines. That crucial. She was a bit more aware of magic now; Madoka thought it seemed like Homura's magic was... trembling.

“Is it... something... bad?” Madoka asked hesitantly.

Homura looked away and shrugged. “I don't know.”

Weird. “But all the others know. And they're still with you,” Madoka said slowly.

Homura pursed her lips in thought, then said, “They have outside context from an unrelated... spiritual war... that makes my actions... less....” She waved a hand vaguely, grasping for words. “More... understandable.”

Madoka tilted her head and frowned curiously. “So it's... something that people who've fought... wars... can understand, but... people who haven't fought in wars... might not?”

Homura nodded and looked wary.

“Does that mean... you've fought in wars, Homura? I mean, like... is it a war against the Incubator?”

Her friend blinked in surprise, then frowned in thought. “I suppose... in a sense, that could be true.”

Madoka tried to puzzled through it all for awhile. Homura avoided her eyes. “Why... would you be afraid of us not understanding when we wanna fight it, too?”

Homura's face tightened. “Things... happen in wars. People... do things in wars.” She met Madoka's eyes and looked away again, eyes distant. “Terrible things.”
“Terrible things have been done to you, though,” Madoka said.

Homura's eyes fluttered closed. She looked pained. Like she was trying not to cry.

Rain on her face sparking black shaking shaking shaking gun—

Madoka closed her eyes and steadied herself. She felt disoriented. Had since Homura pulled her into stopped time eons ago, but it was feeling different now. Different. She couldn't put another word to it. Different. Like she was floating a centimeter above and to the left of her body, not quite right, not aligned with her own skin.

“I apologize for keeping you up,” Homura said, voice transforming into cool politeness. “Please, go to bed before you fall asleep upright.”

Eyes fluttering open, Madoka said, “Huh?”

“You wobbled,” Homura said. Her face was going neutral, she was withdrawing, disappearing, retreating back down a tunnel. “You—”

“Don't go away!”

Startlement broke the blankness of Homura's face. “...What?”

Madoka leaned forward desperately and slapped her hands on the tabletop. “Don't pull away like that! Stop it!”

Homura's eyes went wide.

Something welled up in Madoka and spilled from her eyes as tears. She stood so fast that her chair screeched out from under her as she jerked forward to clasp Homura's hands across the table. Madoka tried to make her face as fierce as possible. “If you pull away again I'm gonna follow you! I'm with you! You've always done your best to help me and—and—”

...Always?

“And I— it's my turn to help you! So you— you just— don't you dare run away!” Madoka cried. “In— in your head, I mean,” she faltered, realizing how weird she was acting. What was she even saying? “Don't— I—”

How was she supposed to recover from this babble? What was she saying?

“You may change your mind,” Homura said solemnly. “I have done terrible things in my fight against the Incubator. I—”

“Did you want to?” Madoka blurted.

“What?”

“Did— did you want to do... whatever things?”

Homura met her eyes cautiously. After a long pause, she answered, “No.”

“Did you like doing the things?”

“No,” Homura answered immediately.
Madoka took a deep breath and squeezed her friend's hands. “Then we'll figure it out.”

Homura stared up at her for a long time. Eventually, she whispered, “We?”

“We,” Madoka declared fiercely.

Running and breathing, running and breathing. Again. Tap-tap-tap-tap shoes on the tile, black and white, black and white. Again, running and breathing. Spinning black and white. How many times had she done this? Running and breathing. Climbing stairs and breathing, black and white, spinning, opening a door and breathing, way too high and breathing, buildings aren't supposed to float in pieces like that and breathing, brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—breathing, brave girl is being tossed around like a rag doll—breathing, have to help her—breathing, brave girl falling falling falling out of the sky in the distance reaching for Madoka hoarsely screaming screaming screaming desperation as red eyes pink light—

City in burning ruins—

Brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—

Falling falling falling screaming screaming screaming

Red eyes pink light—

City in burning ruins—

Rain on her face sparking black shaking shaking shaking gun—

City in burning ruins—

Brave Homura jumping—flying back—hitting a building—

Falling falling falling screaming screaming screaming

Red eyes pink light—

“MADOKAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Madoka jolted awake and snapped upright in her sleeping bag, gasping for breath as though surfacing from a deep dive. She couldn't draw enough air into her lungs, couldn't breathe—crunch crunch?—eyesight only flashes, falling, sleeping bags, red eyes, smoke haze, screaming, sleeping friends, pink light, vision fractured kaleidoscope, shaking gun, gonna throw up if it didn't stop spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning—

The morning sunlight was weak and orange and wrong, the pigeons out in the coop were making a racket, everyone was alive again, and Madoka was having a panic attack over a dream she could barely remember.

A warm hand brushed against her wrist. Madoka startled and gave a little shriek. The hand squeezed gently.

“Lay back down,” Homura said, voice thick with sleepiness. “On your back.” Her sleeping bag
rustled as she rolled over and pulled herself up on all fours, then into a kneeling position. “Now.”

Madoka squeezed her eyes shut and obeyed, desperate for guidance she hadn't felt this way in a long time when had she ever—?

“And up on your pillow,” Homura near-slurred. “Open up your chest and take deeper breaths. You're hyperventilating.”

“Hmmmm?” someone off to her left.

“Wassappennin?” Kyōko's voice mumbled off to Madoka's right.

Lots of rustling around her. Waking everyone up nooooooooo—

“Nightmaaa—” Homura's answer trailed off into a yawn.

“Madoka, sweetheart? What's wrong?” Papa's voice said somewhere. Hallway?

A hand brushed aside her sweaty bangs. Madoka opened her eyes and saw Homura's concerned face hovering over her, hair still sooty from— from— the night before. Madoka was overwhelmed with relief that Homura was alive. Madoka dragged herself up, threw herself at Homura's waist, clung to her tightly, and bawled. Homura went stiff, then relaxed and started carding fingers through Madoka’s hair.

Madoka finally started to calm. She felt safe.

Safe from what?

...Couldn't remember.

Tap-tap-tap-tap shoes on the tile, black and white, black and white. Again, running and breathing. Spinning black and white. How many times had she done this?

“MADOKAAAAAAAAAA!”


“Kyōko, go get Tatsuya,” Papa said from— right beside her? When did that happen? “Tell him Madoka needs hugs.”

A rustle of a sleeping bag and the light rhythm of footsteps jogging away down the hall as Papa's hand rubbed her back.

Madoka tried to focus, tried to anchor herself to reality, to Homura's fingers in her hair, Papa's palm on her back, the smell of the laundry detergent on Homura's nightgown combined with soot and ash, the cloth's texture, here and now and here and now, reality. She slowly settled down.

Tatsuya trotted into the room. “Ma-do-ka, Ma-do-ka!”

Very faintly, “MADOKAAAAAAAAAA!”

City in burning ruins—

How many times had she done this?

“I hugs!”
And then Tatsuya was stubbornly squirming between her and Homura to get into her lap and hug her. Madoka released Homura, wrapped her arms around her baby brother, and flopped back onto her sleeping bag. He threw his pudgy little arms around her neck on the way down and hugged. His warm weight on her chest was soothing.

“Uh, hey, Madoka?” Sayaka said hesitantly. “Can you breathe under him?”

Madoka opened her mouth but gave up and nodded. Hugging. Hugging was her priority right now. Tatsuya was warm in more than a physical sense. Like a stronger version of how a cup of hot soup Papa made her when she was sick soothed more than her throat; it made her feel loved and safe. Her world stabilized.

Papa leaned over her and pushed her hair behind her ear. Nice. “What was it, sweetie?”

*City in burning ruins—*

“The— the city,” Madoka stammered.

Papa sighed. “Maybe watching all that coverage wasn't such a good idea. A lot of us had trouble sleeping.”

That wasn't it. She thought. Maybe?

There was more talking around her but she didn't really absorb it. She just cuddled her brother until she felt more normal, then let herself be guided to the breakfast table and held Tatsuya on her lap for a bit.

Everyone looked haggard. Mama and Papa still looked kinda hungover even though they hadn't drunk anything the night before. Mami looked haunted and Kyōko looked edgy. Hitsugaya and Rukia still looked exhausted and were red from scrubbing themselves raw to get the soot off of them after sleeping dirty all night. Homura was missing, taking her turn to scour herself somewhere in the shop. Tessai and Mr. Hitsugaya looked tired but clean and alert. Mr. Hitsugaya was wearing a surgical mask and still having frightening coughing fits; it didn't help that the smoke from the ruins of Asunaro had penetrated the building. The air felt thin; Madoka's chest felt constricted and dry. Tatsuya gave a little cough now and then.

“Everyone's putting a mask on after we eat,” Dr. Kurosaki declared with no room for argument as he helped put food on the table. No one objected.

Mr. Urahara clattered into the room with feathers and ash clinging to his clothes and tiredly said, “That's the last of the pigeons moved inside. Brought in the turtles but the koi are a complete loss. Too much ashfall.”

“Awwww,” Sayaka said. “Feeding them was relaxing.”

Mr. Urahara disappeared down a hall to clean up and reappeared with the science boy who had come the previous night. He looked stressed and nervous, so Madoka gave him an encouraging smile. He *meeped* and fidgeted awkwardly, then took a seat and fumbled with his utensils when trying to get food off the platters.

Breakfast was tense. There were a few attempts at conversation, but they faltered. It was quiet save for clinking cutlery, occasional coughs, and distant sirens. The weight of innumerable unspoken questions pressed down on them all.

Then Homura appeared in the doorway wearing a somber gray dress. She, too, was scrubbed raw.
Her hair was in two rough, wet twintails resting on a big towel draped over her shoulders like a shawl.

They stared at Homura. Homura stared at them.

“Come sit by me, Homura,” Madoka ordered.

Homura drifted to her side and cautiously sat in the chair Madoka had saved for her.

People gave Homura furtive looks between bites of food. Madoka frowned at them in disapproval and Homura ignored them to daintily eat her breakfast. Mama caught Madoka's eye and gave her a warm, proud smile. Madoka's face heated.

Orihime seemed to startle herself, then clapped her hands. “Oh! Let me see Soul Gems!” Those cute fairies sparked and darted from her hairpins.

Mama jolted and stared as they fluttered over to Homura first. “What?!”

Every head turned to her, stares redirected from Homura to a new weird thing.

“You... can see them?” Mr. Urahara asked, face blank in surprise.

“Yes!” Mama blurted, eyes wide as the fairies made their little gold shield-thing. Even Homura looked stunned. “How?! I don't have powers!”

Homura suddenly transformed in her seat with a flash of violet light. Mama gasped and jumped again. Homura's head tilted to one side and she looked fascinated. “Did you see the light?”

Mama nodded mutely.

Homura gave Mr. Urahara a very concerned, searching look, brow raised in search of answers. Mr. Urahara looked like his brain had died. He blinked back to awareness, said, “Hey, Isshin,” and suddenly jabbed Dr. Kurosaki in the chest with the tip of his cane.

The cane went through Dr. Kurosaki's chest and pushed out an exact copy of him in black clothes. The original him slumped forward onto the table with a rattle of cutlery and flatware and the new him fell back onto the floor.

There was a lot of screaming.

Mr. Urahara's eyes drilled into Mama. “Do you see him?!”

Mama sputtered at Dr. Kurosaki as he stood, then shrialled, “WHY ARE THERE TWO OF HIM?!?”

Mr. Urahara's eyes went unfocused and he started making random grasping movements like he was blindly searching for something on the table. Homura reached into her shield, produced a pen and notebook, and passed them down along the table. Ichigo handed them to Mr. Urahara and he immediately started scribbling faster than Madoka knew anyone could write. Then Homura pulled a second notebook and pen from her shield and started scribbling herself.

Rin looked at Mama curiously then glanced at Tessai and Dr. Kurosaki. The second Dr. Kurosaki. “You mentioned spiritual flash exposure, right? To that massive reiatsu spike we detected?”

They nodded and Mr. Urahara leaned in even closer to his notepad and somehow managed to scribble faster.
“Do...,” Mr. Hitsugaya started. He paused in apprehension, then hesitantly asked, “Do we have an entire city of newly spiritually aware humans to handle?”

Mr. Urahara bolted from his chair with his notepad and blurred down the hall. Tessai and Rukia ran after him, as did both Hitsugayas. Dr. Kurosaki did, too, chanting panicked profanity. Rin stood and trailed after them, moaning, “Oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no ohhh noooooo.”

The original Dr. Kurosaki was still slumped with his face in his rice.

Shocked silence reigned for a long time, the only sounds Homura slapping to another page in her notebook, Tatsuya giving another little cough, and Karin casually hauling her father's body up by the collar, pushing his plate aside, and letting his head thump back onto the table.

“What the hell just happened?” Kyōko wondered dully.

“Things got worse,” Uryū said, voice equally flat.

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A soot-camouflaged Incubator terminal sat beside the miniature warded dome around its two broken terminals outside the wards around Akemi's base. Inspection proved it to be far less complex than the other wards. It at least appeared to be free of alarm or trigger mechanisms; a simple barrier. A strong one, but fairly straightforward. Still, caution was warranted with these humans.

Four more terminals perched on nearby buildings to observe from a safe distance. The Incubator used the lone terminal to defuse the wards like a human explosive device. It was more complex than at first glance. Their ward techniques were fascin—

The terminal's input cut as the breach of the wards caused a small explosion.

One terminal remained aloft to watch for threats as three flash-stepped to the blast site. Each clasped a defunct terminal in its cranial appendages. The fourth terminal led them to a small, unoccupied parcel of land so deep within Asunaro that hardly any sunlight filtered through the smoke. The functional terminals gathered the defunct terminals between them and proceeded to reclaim their raw materials.

The Incubator ignored the sound of approaching human footsteps, as usual. Until the shuffling stopped nearby and a human gasped. The four terminals turned as one to look at the human. It wore the bulky garments and respiratory devices common to those humans who specialized in extinguishing flames.

It saw them. And the gory remains of the three defunct terminals.

The human did the repetitive horizontal head rotation humans tended to use when they doubted their vision and used a gloved hand to remove some of the ash on its protective mask. The Incubator used its power to intensify the illumination of its terminals’ eyes by three hundred percent and tilt their heads forty-five degrees left in unison, exploiting the human evolutionary wariness of predators with glowing eyes and unnaturally synchronous movement.

The human staggered back, shook its entire body in rejection of reality, and stumbled past the parcel of land into the darkness of the smoky city. It did not travel far; it must have been just out of
sight because the terminals registered a human male voice using a respiratory device and communication aid to rasp, “HQ, Uchida reporting. Lost, can't read ash— ashy signs, everything looks— looks the same, O2 low. Think— think I'm hallucinating. Orders?”

The human's shuffling movement away from the terminals was slow, scraping, and ended with a quiet impact as it appeared to lose consciousness and fall to the ash-covered pavement.

The Incubator terminals returned to their meal.

Curious.

Useful, perhaps.

Madoka tried to keep her anxiety suppressed, tried to focus on the feel of the filter mask on her face and her half of Homura's hair in her hands as she and Yuzu worked on it and tried to ignore the TV screen. Everyone wanted answers but everyone understood there was some other kind of emergency happening and they had apparently been clued in on more than they were initially intended to have been.

Everyone from Mitakihara wanted to know why everyone else who knew Homura was so accepting of Mr. Urahara shoving Dr. Kurosaki's soul out of his body. Because that was what the cane did. Shoved his soul. Out. Of his body. The people who knew would only say that much as Ichigo hauled his father's empty body up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried him down the hall, grumbling.

It was all so very confusing. And that didn't even touch on how they were still keeping the Momoes and the detective sedated for lack of plans about what to do with them.

Madoka had just tied off Homura's second braid when there was a sharp crack-boom outside.

Everyone went very still and listened, but there was only silence.

"Thunder?" Sayaka wondered.

"Sounded like an explosion," Kyōko said suspiciously as she stood.

Homura stood swiftly and transformed. “Mami, come with me to look.” She darted a glare at Kyōko and snapped, “Stay in the wards. You're supposed to be dead.”

They all still followed the two out onto the front veranda. Mami stood with a rifle aimed out the gate as Homura pulled something like a mirror on a selfie-stick from her shield and leaned against first one gate post then the other to look outside without leaving the wards. She nodded briskly, kept the mirror in her shield hand, and pulled—

“Is... is that a grenade?” Papa asked.

“Yep!” Karin said brightly.

Both girls disappeared.

Both girls reappeared, facing the opposite direction.

“What,” Kyōko said dully.

It would have been funny if Homura wasn't so intensely furious her eyes were flickering violet and Mami didn't look pale and disturbed.

Homura ignored questions and stomped past everyone and into the depths of the shop. Everyone turned to Mami.

“They— the Kyubeys. The Incubator terminals, I mean,” Mami said, looking confused. “The dead ones that were warded outside. They're gone.”

Everyone stared, then Karin lightly said, “Oh. Well, that's not good.”

“Urahara's gonna be pissed,” Ichigo muttered.

Hours passed. They watched the emergency coverage of Asunaro despite knowing they'd regret it in their nightmares. Madoka felt obligated to do so; something like penance for being so near the horror and not helping. If she couldn't help the victims, she'd suffer with them to some small extent.

“The death toll in Asunaro continues to rise,” the anchors still said at the top of every hour.

_Hours._

“Twenty-four hours after the initial blast, Asunaro is a gray ghost town populated by emergency personnel, the trapped, and the dead. Though many structural fires have been subdued, three chemical plants continue to burn. The oil refinery in Mitakihara remains shut down as a precaution. Toxic ash continues to fall. All residents of Asunaro, Mitakihara, Kazamino, and surrounding areas are strongly urged to wear filter masks to avoid respiratory illness or absorption of chemicals; some victims and rescuers are reporting hallucinatory effects. Mandatory evacuation is in effect for the following wards.”

_Helplessness._

“Subway service is expected to remain suspended indefinitely for all surrounding cities as the extent of chemical infiltration and structural damage require extensive inspection. If your place of work remains open for business, please plan your commute accordingly.”

_Madness._

“The site of the apartment complex explosion in southwest Mitakihara remains under investigation, but arson is strongly suspected. At least a dozen residents remain unaccounted for. Eight are confirmed dead. JSDF reasserts that no ties to terrorism have currently been found, but information is being sought from intelligence agencies worldwide.”

_Frustration._

“Even hospitals in Mitakihara are now running low on supplies. Relief is being airlifted in sporadically as aerial visibility allows helicopters to maneuver safely. Officials are contemplating expansion of mandatory evacuations due to extremely poor air quality. Multiple deaths of respiratory distress have been reported.”

_Despair._
Eight words seared into Madoka's soul: *The death toll in Asunaro continues to rise.*

Everyone but Rin reappeared when the clock claimed it was early evening, though the flat orange twilight outside hadn't changed since morning. Dr. Kurosaki asked where his body was; all three of his children casually pointed down a hall like it was a perfectly normal question and he wandered off to repossess himself.

Madoka wondered if her world would ever feel normal again. Her life used to be so... easy. Had it really only been like four weeks since Homura strolled into her life in the hallway at school? It felt like four years.

“All right!” Mr. Urahara shouted. “We are going to eat dinner and then we will have a board meeting!”

“Oh! We haven't cooked!” Yuzu cried in dismay.

“DID SOMEONE SAY PIIIZZAAAAAA?!” a tall man with bright red hair and black tattoos on his brow roared as he emerged from the hall.

“Pizza! Pizza!” sang the bouncy blonde woman behind him.

Both were carrying towers of pizza boxes over their heads. A dignified dark-haired man behind them looked like he deeply regretted his presence.

“Yo, Renji!” Ichigo called with a grin. “Ran! Byakuya!”

Kyōko threw her arms in the air and shouted, “PIZZA!”

“That was easy,” Karin said blandly.

“How did you get that many pizzas in here?” Sayaka wondered. “Everything's closed.”

“Magic!” the blonde trilled with laughter.

They turned off the TV, stacked pizza boxes on the table, and sprawled around on the floor and furniture. The blonde woman was introduced as Hitsugaya's aunt on his mother's side, younger sister to Mr. Urahara; Madoka still wasn't sure if Hitsugaya's mother was dead or not around or what, but it would be rude to ask. The distinguished gentleman was introduced as Rukia's elder brother; Rukia's speech and body language became far more formal in his presence. The redhead was introduced as Mr. Kuchiki's assistant in the same way Rukia was Mr. Hitsugaya's. He seemed to be really good friends with Ichigo and Rukia.

Renji and Rangiku were obviously trying to cheer them all up. Karin gleefully waved Rangiku over to her; Hitsugaya watched from his father's side with a face of utter defeat and dread as they summoned Sayaka and Kyōko. Renji started a rowdy talk with Ichigo that gradually dragged in Rukia and Ishida and got loud. Madoka didn't understand any of the context but they were having fun, if Orihime and Sado's light amusement was to be trusted. Madoka dragged Mami and Homura over to sit by her family.

“You can eat it with your hands, Byakuya,” Ichigo drawled with laughter in his voice.

Mr. Kuchiki raised a brow at him in disdain and looked back at his plate as everyone's attention was drawn to him. He was seated in perfect seiza and had paused with his chopsticks over the slice of pizza. Even though he was dressed like a businessman, Madoka thought he wouldn't look out of place in Imperial regalia. He was just that... regal. Then he positioned his chopsticks over the pizza
as though he was going to pinch off bites like a soft dessert.

“Dude, that's not gonna work,” Kyōko laughed mockingly. “It's too tough t—”

Mr. Kuchiki succeeded.

“What,” Kyōko blurted.

Mr. Kuchiki ignored her and serenely ate his slice of pizza in tiny pieces with a politely neutral look on his face.

Astounded teenagers and young adults ended all their conversations and made a game of attempting the same feat. Mr. Kuchiki eyed their messy attempts with the thinly-veiled disapproval of an etiquette instructor. Madoka thought his magic felt highly amused, though. He kinda reminded her of Homura that way.

It felt like a party. Madoka didn't want it to end. She tried her best to keep it going, but the weight of the discussion to come was too much to hold off for long.

When they all returned to the dining table, their arrangement and seriousness really did feel like the board meeting Mr. Urahara had joked about. Homura carefully sat at the head of the table as though perching in an electric chair. Ichigo resolutely claimed the chair to her left and Madoka slipped into the one to her right. She could see the same things Homura saw this way and stop people from being mean. Ichigo seemed to have the same idea.

Mr. Urahara sat at the far end of the table and silently thought while watching Homura over his folded hands. Tessai served tea and sat by his boss. Everyone was silent for ages. No one knew how to start. Everyone but Mr. Hitsugaya gradually removed their filter masks again and messed around with their tea.

Except for Homura, who seemed to be staring at her reflection in her cup as if it held answers.

Eventually, Mr. Urahara drew a deep breath and said, “So.”

All eyes turned to him. Except for Homura's.

“To recap,” Mr. Urahara said matter-of-factly, “The Asunaro barrier shattered, something caused catastrophic explosions, a giant Witch pulled survivors into her labyrinth, the Asunaro magical girls we wanted to interview died to defeat it, the survivors may manifest powers, the detective who was investigating the Asunaro mess is in our custody with all her data, we confiscated all evidence from Ground Zero and disguised parts of the crater, the Incubator terminals we secured have gone missing, Miss Momoe may have been ambushed in a coordinated attack, and Miss Akemi can stop time.” He looked around as several people snorted or scoffed. “Are we all on the same page?”

Sayaka looked like she was going to sass something but Mama cut her off.

“In words, yes,” Mama answered sharply. She was in executive mode. “I have no memory beyond the... surge.”

“Perhaps a demonstration of Miss Akemi's ability is warranted here,” Mr. Urahara said mildly.

“Ya think?” Kyōko muttered.

“Oooowoo, can we play the tea game?” Karin crooned. “And by we I mean me.”
Homura snorted and made a halfhearted smile.

Karin abruptly stood from her chair and threw her arms wide. “LLLLLADIES AND LADIES AND LADIES ANNND GENTLEMEN! Prepare yourselves for a wondrous feat!” she shouted like a carnival barker.

Yuzu pouted up at her. “I’m the one with the ringmaster theme.”

Karin swung an arm around to point at her. “TOO SLOW!”

“And she says she's not like the old man,” Ichigo muttered.

“Duuuuuuuuuuuue to the nature of the Magnificent Akemi's powerrrrr,” Karin blithely continued, “we shall have to take measures to ensure our puny little minds can merely perceive its existence!”

Homura put her face in her hands.

Madoka got the feeling they had completely jumped the tracks.

Karin gestured grandly at Hitsugaya. “Tōshirō! My lovely assistant!”

“No,” Hitsugaya said flatly.

Karin gestured at Tessai. “Tessai! My lovely assistant!”

Tessai smiled and inclined his chin. The light flashed off his glasses. “Yes, madam?”

“We must all have some form of contact with the Magnificent Akemi in order to defy time beside her!” Karin threw her arms wide. “Tessai! If you would! Please link us with your fantastic Hainawa!”

Tessai held his hands up, made a small gesture, and the crackling yellow rope spell Hitsugaya had used at school snaked around the table, looping around wrists. Mama didn't jump at the magic this time, just stared at her wrist with a coolly analytical expression. Kyōko obviously hated it and tried to shrug it off like a cat on a leash.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Karin shouted. She turned to gesture grandly at Homura. “Now for the main event! Costume change time!”

Homura still had her face in her hands. She transformed without a word.

“BEHOLD!” Karin shouted. “THE SHIELD! OF! TIME!” After a pause, she quietly scolded, “You’re supposed to make it glow and make sounds when I introduce it, Homura!”

Madoka wasn't sure exactly what Homura was feeling aside from probably wanting to melt into the floor and disappear. Wait. Dismay, perhaps? But also... strange... relief? Madoka looked around while she pondered that.

Oh. Everyone was looking at Karin, not Homura. They glanced at Homura, but seemed to be drawn to Karin like passersby to a train wreck. Karin was making a spectacle of herself as a buffer for Homura.

Madoka couldn't help but beam at Karin, who saw and tossed her hair proudly as she turned away.

Karin cleared her throat loudly. “I said— BEHOLD! THE SHIELD! OF! TIME!”
Face still in her hands and shoulders trembling, Homura somehow made her shield whir. Three little circles opened, displaying two glass orbs filled with brilliant fuchsia sand and a center window full of gears.

*How many times had she done this?*

Madoka blinked hard. What an odd feeling.

“Now! The *main event!*”

“You already said that,” Hitsugaya muttered.

“Shut it, spoilsport!” Karin snapped. She lashed out at him across the table and— stole his teacup? Then she tossed the remaining tea down her throat in one gulp.

Mr. Kuchiki’s brow pinched in subtle disgust.

“How could you?” Hitsugaya blurted, appalled.

“You are *excused!*” Karin trilled.

Hitsugaya looked offended. “That was *my* tea!”

“It was *delicious!*”

Hitsugaya’s aunt Rangiku giggled and cooed, “You *asked* for that, Tō-shi-rō!”

Hitsugaya’s breath hissed through his teeth as he reined in his temper.

Renji failed to suppress an ugly cackle. Rukia swatted him up the back of his head.

Nearby, Kyōko had stopped creatively thrashing her arm and seemed about to dislocate her thumb the way Mama had taught Madoka.

Mama quietly said, “I don’t think you can slip ‘em like ‘cuffs, Kyōko.”

“Do you want to hold hands like a séance instead?” Orihime asked cheerfully.

Kyōko huffed and sulked with her arms crossed, face sour.

“Why— why do you both know how to remove handcuffs?” Ishida asked warily.

Mama and Kyōko *stared* at him, expressions completely flat.

“Forget I asked,” Ishida muttered as he quickly looked away.

Homura made a muffled sound. Madoka couldn’t identify it. Something with a screechy keen? Ichigo looked worried.

“Without any further *INTERRUPTIONS!*” Karin yelled in annoyance. She held up Hitsugaya’s empty teacup. “Behold! A teacup!” Her other hand swooped down and snatched up her own teacup, which still contained tea. “Behold! A second teacup!”

“Duh?” Sayaka said blandly, unimpressed.

“Observe!” Karin ordered. She started pouring the tea back and forth between cups. “Totally well-behaved tea obeying gravity like a good boy!”
Homura choked. Well. Sounded like it. She was still hiding her face, curled in on herself. Madoka wondered if she still had heart problems after all.

When Karin finished pouring one last time, she threw her arms wide. Tea sloshed in her father's face but he just kept beaming up at her like she was a celebrity at a stage show. Karin held both cups up high and shouted, “Homura! SPECIAL EFFECTS!”

Click-click-whirrrrrr, went Homura's shield as the tension snapped and she broke down and laugh-cried uncontrollably.

The color of their surroundings faded, washed out and bluish.

Homura held her ribs and shook with the force of her sobbing laughter.

There were a lot of emotions in her voice and her magic... feelings...? Madoka sensed a chaotic jumble there, too. Ichigo rubbed soothing circles into Homura's back. Madoka slipped an arm through Homura's and leaned in close and just... she wasn't sure. She willed Homura to feel the support Madoka couldn't put in words. Unseen, one of Homura's hands grasped her forearm and squeezed so tightly Madoka expected to bruise later. But that was fine. If Homura needed a rock to cling to, Madoka would be that rock.

I get the feeling... that we've done this before?

The fit went on for several minutes. Others looked concerned or awkward or tactfully just didn't look at Homura, eyes wandering the washed-out stillness between sips of tea until Homura put her head down on the table with her arms folded up over it and seemed to do breathing exercises.

“IIIIIIIIN my right hand, an empty cup!” Karin declared as if the long pause hadn't happened, trying to draw attention away from Homura again.

“So we saw,” Sayaka drawled as she looked around the room uncomfortably. Homura's fit seemed to have disturbed her.

“Eyes front!” Karin snapped. As soon as Sayaka glanced back, Karin tossed the cup at her with a flick of her wrist. Sayaka squealed and fell out of her chair to dodge it.

The cup went utterly still in midair a few handspans from Karin's fingers.

“Whoa,” Kyōko breathed.

“That will never get old,” Karin gloated as Sayaka slipped back into her chair with a pout. Karin directed a lazy grin at Homura and added, “Homura's a saint. Do you know how hard I would troll everyone if I could do this on demand?”

Several of the out-of-town allies visibly shuddered.

Karin stretched and stuck her little finger into the loop of the teacup's handle; when her skin touched it, it reanimated and spun like it had been successfully thrown in a ring toss game. She held up both cups. “All right! Watch what happens to the tea if I make sure it's still touching the cups I'm touching while I'm touching Homura. Kinda.” She slowly poured half tea from one cup to the other. It looked normal. “NOW!” she shouted. “Watch what happens if the tea doesn't maintain contact!” She held one of the cups up really high and quickly sloshed some tea over its rim, then immediately pulled the cup away.

Globs of tea froze in midair. It reminded Madoka of photos she had seen of astronauts playing with
water in space.

Kyōko threw herself forward into the table and gaped in awe. Mama and Papa weren't as dramatic about it, but looked stunned.

“Is everyone satisfied that Homura's magic is awesome?” Karin asked assertively.

Homura's shoulders shook with a sound like she was giggling through tears. Madoka squeezed her hand and Ichigo gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“With that, I cede the floor to Homura,” Karin said smugly, then flopped down into her chair.

Homura took a deep breath and sat upright. She met Karin's eyes and Madoka could feel her bittersweet gratitude toward her friend.

Karin grinned widely as Homura scrubbed tears from her cheeks. Everyone stayed quiet and let her collect herself.

Madoka thought back to the argument about Homura's powers that Mama had mediated the night before. All the reasons Mama and Papa had come up with off the top of their heads for why she would hide this from them and why explaining would probably terrify her. Karin and the other allies had heard but mostly stayed quiet and let them work it out themselves; Karin in particular used that knowledge to position herself to break the ice and reduce pressure on Homura— to make it so her friend wouldn't have to struggle with how to start. Madoka knew from experience how starting a heavy talk was the hardest part.

She really needed to find a way to thank Karin.

Homura breathed deeply with her eyes closed for a full minute, plainly arranging her thoughts. Eventually, she opened her eyes and frankly said, “I apologize for keeping this ability secret. I— I just—”

“I get it,” Sayaka blurted. Everyone looked at her. She was frowning in... concern? “We talked with Madoka's mom last night and I've been thinking about it. It's like with the gate thingy and allies and stuff, right? Not telling us so we don't mess up and blab something when talking to each other outside, right?”

Homura blinked dumbly.

“I just— is it okay for you to do this?” Sayaka asked.

“What,” Homura said flatly.

“This,” Sayaka said with a wave at the floating tea globules. “Is it safe?”

“Yes. Why— why wouldn't it be?” Homura asked, baffled.

Sayaka folded her arms and looked even more worried. “I mean, Time Stop kills Sailor Pluto if she uses it.”

“Oh!” Madoka, Yuzu, Mami, and Orihime cried, suddenly worried themselves. That was true! Madoka hadn't thought of that!

Everyone else stared.

“What,” said multiple people.
Sayaka looked at them like they were being deliberately slow. “In Sailormoon? Sailor Pluto? The Guardian of Space-Time? Carries a giant key-shaped staff with a Garnet Orb on top?”

They all stared.

“Oh, come on! This is basic Sailormoon, people!” Sayaka scoffed with a roll of her eyes. She looked at Homura and slowly explained, “Time Stop was the third Taboo of time Queen Serenity told Sailor Pluto about when she stationed her at the Space-Time Door when she was little.”

“This—this isn’t an anime,” Ishida objected halfheartedly. Like he expected to be ignored. Which he was.

“And she said if she—Pluto—if Pluto ever used it, she’d die. But she did it anyway in the Black Moon arc when Prince Demande was about to touch the Silver Crystals from the past and the future together to cause a time paradox and destroy...the universe, or something. ‘Cause she thought it was better to sacrifice her life to save everyone else’s.”

Karin made a kinda strangled gurgle. Homura just kept staring at Sayaka.

“I got that reference!” Renji blurted in disbelief.

“I’m lost,” Hitsugaya said dully.

Sayaka huffed and said, “Homura. Do you get this reference or...?”

“I—I get it,” Homura stammered. “It just—no one has ever brought this up before?”

“How? It’s so obvious!” Sayaka declared with a roll of her eyes. “Anyway, if you get it: Pluto didn’t...what’s the word...advertise that she could stop time.”

Homura nodded slowly.

“And even when she was reincarnated, Setsuna and the others never really talked about it. It was Taboo. Right?”

Homura nodded. Madoka thought her magic felt...dizzy?

“So, yeah, I see why you wouldn’t blab about it,” Sayaka continued earnestly. “And, like...no one was even really mad when they found out Chibi-usa was Sailormoon and Tuxedo Mask’s time-traveling daughter, and she had hidden it from them until it bit them in the ass, so there’s that, too.”

Screaming laughter burst from Karin’s mouth.

Sayaka furrowed her brow and looked at her. “What? What did I say?”

Homura stared at Sayaka with her lips parted. It looked like her brain had shut down.

Karin slapped one hand over her mouth and jabbed her other out to point at Sayaka. She kept shriek-laughing; soon, tears streamed down her face. Beside her, Yuzu stared with her mouth hanging open, wide eyes blinking slowly.

“The hell is wrong with you?” Kyōko muttered warily.

Mr. Urahara hid his face with his fan and started giggling. Ishida clunked his elbows on the table and put his face in his hands like he wanted to escape this reality. Mama slowly turned to look at Homura, speculative. Homura noticed and swallowed hard.
“What? What is it?” Sayaka asked, baffled. “What's so funny about Chibi-usa?”

Homura brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose and rub her eyes, then looked up with a sigh and squared her shoulders. “I am a time-traveler.”

Silence for the space of a breath; Madoka’s mind slowed to a near-standstill.

_How many times had she done this?_

“I get the feeling... that we've... done this before?”

Then Sayaka blankly said, “What,” and Karin and Mr. Urahara were lost to cackling again.

“No fuckin' way,” Kyōko sneered. “You really expect us to believe that?”

Karin wordlessly picked up her saucer and casually slung it at Kyōko like a frisbee. Kyōko threw herself from her chair dodging like Sayaka had before her. Well, with far more grace. As before, the item froze in midair before it got far.

“Yes, we expect you to believe it,” Karin mocked through her giggles. “Have you forgotten the _stopping time_ thing already? You know: _time magic?_ Is it really that far of a stretch to time travel?”

“For real?” Sayaka gasped, stars in her eyes. “You're like— like Sailor Pluto and Sailor Chibi Moon _at the same time_?!”

“No,” Homura said dourly.

_Whose KID are you?!”_ Sayaka plowed on delightedly.

Madoka's head spun with her sense of Homura's magic. Of course! Chibi-usa had traveled back in time to get her parents' younger selves to help her because she accidentally got their future selves rendered comatose!

...Wait.

That... that was probably a _bad_ thing they should hope was _not_ true.

Sayaka clapped her hands and bounced in her seat as she looked around the table. “Are you _Rukia's_ kid? Your coloring's right....”

Rukia sprayed tea from her mouth and nose; the fine mist froze in midair like a cloud. Renji laughed at her.

“Wait! Are you Rukia's kid _with Ichigo_?! Is _that_ why he's so protective of you?!”

Mr. Kuchiki's eyes narrowed. Renji's laugh turned hyena-like. Orihime went red for some reason.

“What?!” Ichigo shrilled.

Karin's laughter rose into an airless whine and she weakly melted out of her chair. Isshin looked gleeful. Sado looked between the proposed parents in consideration.

“Don't gimme that _look_, Chad!” Ichigo snarled, face aflame. “You know _damn well_ it's not true!”

“Do _we_ though?” Sado said quietly with a completely straight face.
Sayaka ignored them. “No, wait— maybe with Ishida?!”

Ishida abruptly stood and held up the wrist with the rope spell on it. “Let me leave,” he said dully. “I'm done.”

“If we have to suffer, so do you,” Hitsugaya deadpanned as his aunt laughed joyfully and Sado pulled Ishida back down into his chair.

Homura finally found her voice and near-screamed, “I'm not anyone's child!”

Sayaka frowned. “Huh? But you were born? Unless you're a clone, you should have paren—”

“My parents are dead!”

“Oh, yeah, right. Sorry,” Sayaka said, crestfallen. Then she jolted and gasped, “Did they die in the future? Are you here to save them?! HOW CAN I HELP?!”

Homura made a sound of frustrated rage and threw her teacup at Sayaka. It froze in the air. Sayaka didn't dodge this time, though.

There was some kind of pain in that rage. Something hit close to home. Some wound had been prodded. Madoka could feel the ache in Homura's magic. Like... that someone was making light of her suffering? But that really wasn't Sayaka's intent, so...

Madoka tugged on Homura's arm and soothed, “She's not teasing, Homura. She's really worried.”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said with an earnest nod. “People don't time travel for just any reason, y'know? What happened?”

“Are we really just believing this?” Kyōko said skeptically.

“Give her the benefit of the doubt for now,” Mama said evenly. She didn't take her eyes off Homura, though. “How far in the future do you come from?” she asked.

Homura visibly forced herself to relax. “From May first.”

“Of this year?” Mama asked with a brow raised.

“Yes.”

“That's not very far,” Papa gently prompted.

“A lot can go wrong in a short span of time,” Homura said mournfully. “Asunaro, for example.”

“Did you... come back... to try to save Asunaro?” Mami asked hesitantly. She looked like she was fighting doubt.

Homura looked her way. “No. This is the first timeline in which Asunaro was destroyed instead of Mitakihara.”

“First?” Papa asked with dread.

“Instead of?” Mami echoed.

“This... is not the first time I have repeated the last... the six weeks leading up to May first,” Homura said carefully. “Usually, Mitakihara is... all but wiped off the map by a giant Witch on the
morning of May first. And nearly everyone dies.”

Sayaka went white.

“Walpurgnisnacht?” Mami breathed in horrified understanding.

Madoka had a sudden sensation of vertigo.

way too high— buildings aren’t supposed to float in pieces like that— brave girl jumping from the building flying up at the—

Nausea made Madoka's stomach roll like she was on an airplane. It even felt like her ears had popped. Dizzy, dizzy, dizzy.

spinning black and white—

It lasted for mere moments, but was like the dropping sensation of a Ferris wheel gondola descending too fast and jolting to a stop.

“Usually?” Papa asked.

“Every time,” Homura amended.

There was a long silence.

“How many... times... have you done... this?” Mama asked carefully. Like preparing to take cheese from a mousetrap.

*How many times had she done this?*

Madoka briefly felt dizzy, but it passed.

Homura sighed and tiredly rubbed one temple. “I am no longer certain. I lost count in the forties.”

“No way,” Kyōko muttered. She looked spooked, though.

“Why so many?” Sayaka asked in confusion.

Homura paused and carefully looked away from Sayaka-- avoided all eye contact with everyone present-- before slowly answering, “People rarely believe what I say and do not heed my warnings. This timeline has been... an anomaly in that way.”

Sayaka looked pained.

“This is... not the first time I have met you,” Homura continued as though the question had not been asked. “Those of you from Mitakihara, I mean.”

Kyōko scowled and snapped, “Bullshit.”

Madoka could feel Homura withdraw a bit. Her friend looked at Kyōko with heavy-lidded eyes and said, “You tend to choke those who waste food in your presence. You hate to leave your boots out of your sight and refuse to replace them even though they are becoming snug as you grow because your mother bought them for you just before... the end. You once had an enchantment technique Mami named *Rosso Fantasma*, but you have been unable to consciously use it since... the end. You hate the smell of sake and the phrase give them enough rope to hang themselves with.” Homura tilted her head and eyed Kyōko's shaken pallor, then softly added, “There was a reason I had your
favorite flavor of Pocky on hand when you woke.”

Homura turned to Mami. “Your wish was to survive a car accident in which your parents died. Your father gave you your flower hair clips as a gift when he returned from a long business trip. Your mother was a fashion designer and made you costumes to play dress-up. You still have them. You would say that it was in case you have a daughter someday, but you would keep them even if you knew for a fact that you would never have children.”

Homura turned from Mami’s stricken face to look at Sayaka. “You did not tell me in this timeline about your vow to not attend the symphony until Kyōsuke Kamijō could return to the stage. Other iterations of you confessed it in a handful of timelines. In the vast majority of the timelines in which you contracted, your wish was to heal his hand.”

“I— I con—?” Sayaka sputtered, shaken. “But— but his hand— it’s getting better?”

Homura stared at her expressionlessly.

“Why do you think that is, Miss Miki?” Mr. Urahara asked gently.

Sayaka blinked slowly at him, then slowly turned back to stare at Homura. Her brow furrowed in thought, then she startled and gasped, “The charts!”

“What?” several people said.

“The charts! On your desk!” Sayaka cried. “At your house! Of arms and hands!”

Homura glanced away uncomfortably.

“I saw you working on Hitsugaya’s arm after that fight!” Sayaka continued. “Did— did you help Kyōsuke?!”

Homura avoided her eyes, twirled a lock of hair around one finger, and quietly said, “For your sake. To keep you from contracting. I am so... tired... of seeing you die.”

Sayaka stared in mute astonishment, mouth hanging open.

Madoka knew tired was not the word Homura truly meant. It was something deeper than that, an intense ache that brought tears to her eyes.

“When—!” Mami blurted. Everyone looked at her. She seemed to be choking on her words in distress. “When— when you say—you say that—” her face contorted in fear— “that you’ve seen too— too many— too many magical girls— die— is— do you— are—?!?”

“I get the feeling... that we've... done this before?”

“—we have no choice but to—!”

Madoka’s breath hitched.

Homura bent her head low and closed her eyes. “That includes all four of you. And Karin and Yuzu. And others.”

Mami burst into sobbing tears. Hitsugaya’s aunt cooed, “Oh, honey,” and hugged and rocked her.

“Homura,” Mama said seriously. When Homura looked at her, she asked, “Has Madoka contracted before?”
Homura nodded heavily. Madoka felt a yawning void of grief that made her tremble.  

brave girl falling falling falling out of the sky in the distance reaching for Madoka hoarsely screaming screaming screaming desperation as red eyes pink light—

Papa shook. Mama grasped his hand; both where white-knuckled and tight-faced.

“Has— has Madoka—” Papa's voice broke— “died? Before?”

spinning spinning spinning dizzy dizzy dizzy—

Homura screwed her eyes shut and stammered through sudden tears and a rough sob. “Ev—! Ev-ery! Time!”

“I get the feeling... that we've... done this before?”

“MADOKAAAAAAANAAA!”

“Madoka!” Mama and Papa

Wood scrape— tick-click-whirrrrrr— clink-crash of falling china splashing tea—

“Stop!”

“—Careful! They—”

“Feedback loop—” Mr. Urahara.

Dizzy dizzy spinning — screaming screaming shaking—

Crying crying sparking—

“What— do—?”

“Both—?”


Madoka realized she was leaning heavily into Homura's side. So disoriented. Did she still have a body? So much pain. Overwhelming. Overwhelming. Overwhelmi—


“Hey. We're gonna stop it.” A strong shake. “Look at me!”

Madoka turned blindly toward him. Couldn't see past pink and purp—

“—Happeni— my daught—?!” Mama scream.

Burning moonlight— protection— safe moonlight bonfire— safe

Despair

Safe

Cold
“I— I don't want— to— become—”

Grief

Safe! Warm!

“—Have no choice but to—”

“—die!”

“—sedate them.”

Warm darkness, sleepy-safe, cherry blossoms weren't supposed to dark purple but they smelled nice so—

Chapter End Notes

* Tenkai Kecchū (転界結柱, World-Shifting Binding-Posts): A device which creates an enormous, one spiritual unit of area radius Senkaimon bound by four linked points. When activated, the device swaps something that it encircles with something else in Soul Society.

A scene of them all having discussions and swapping out bare land into the Asunaro crater between carefully-timed stops didn't flow well and wasn't very important. I might finish it and shove it in Polynomial Expansion someday.

A/N: Feedback fuels me.

If you want to engage in the cracktastic hellscape that is the Discord, you can find us at discord.gg/UZJpPj9

This chapter was replaced with an edited version on November 1, 2019. Reviews with timestamps before that date refer to a slightly different version of the chapter.
Ichigo wasn't sure what the hell was happening.

He was very confused. Disoriented would probably also be a good word. He felt... detached. Distant.

His surroundings were a major part of it, but the abrupt nature of his arrival was the most jarring thing. Also the fact that he had “arrived” anywhere at all. Last Ichigo checked, he was sitting in a chair. There was no chair here. Wherever “here” was.

Right. Back up. Walk through it step by step.

Ichigo had thought things were going... as well as possible, really, with Karin taking the relatively easier part of the explanation so Homura could reserve her emotional energy for the truly difficult part— the time travel. Even that had seemed to start... not as a disaster. Well, a less severe kind of disaster than dreaded. But with his hand on Homura's back he could feel her tremble with restrained anxiety as the moment of truth approached. If she told everything, it would be the moment she recounted many of her worst memories; whether she told the truth or twisted it, she risked destroying the relationships she had salvaged this time around. She was in an unenviable position, stressors piling onto her from so many angles it was a miracle she hadn't cracked. Well, hadn't cracked worse than the laughing/crying fit, which felt more like catharsis than anything else.

Ichigo felt the miserable grief seep into her reiatsu as the time travel was discussed. That was alarming. Then things got weird. Madoka was sitting on Homura's other side and her reiatsu started to... do something. Sitting so close to the two girls let him distinctly feel a subtle push and pull of reiatsu between them— like standing neck-deep in the sea and feeling water currents tug in and out in rhythm. The two girls kept leaning slightly toward each other, then slightly away from each other on some unknown cue. He had never seen anything like it. The closest thing he could think of was when Karin and Yuzu did one of their intuitive twin things, but that was never so... synchronous.
Ichigo looked at everyone else at the table. A lot of them were distracted by the drama, but a handful—his father, Sandal-Hat, Tessai, Ukitake, and Byakuya—were eyeing the two girls somewhat warily. Ichigo looked back to the girls.

Meet and part, meet and part.

“Did— did you help Kyōsuke?!” Sayaka demanded.

Homura avoided her eyes, twirled a lock of hair around one finger, and quietly said, “For your sake. To keep you from contracting. I am so... tired... of seeing you die.”

Sayaka stared in mute astonishment, mouth hanging open.

Ichigo thought tired was not the word Homura truly meant. It was something deeper than that, an intense grief that deadened her eyes.

“When—!” Mami blurted. Everyone looked at her. She seemed to be choking on her words in distress. “When— when you say— you say that—” her face contorted in fear— “that you've seen too— too many— too many magical girls— die— is— do you— are—?!”

Ichigo heard Madoka's breath hitch. He squeezed Homura's shoulder. This was going to be painful.

Homura bent her head low and closed her eyes. “That includes all four of you. And Karin and Yuzu. And others.”

Mami burst into sobbing tears. Rangiku cooed, “Oh, honey,” and hugged and rocked her. Mami clung to her like a lifeline.

Ichigo wondered if Ran had been assigned to tag Mami or if she had just gravitated to the girl.

“Homura,” Mrs. Kaname said seriously. When Homura looked at her, she asked, “Has Madoka contracted before?”

Homura nodded heavily, face grieved.

Mr. Kaname shook. Mrs. Kaname grasped his hand; both where white-knuckled and tight-faced.

Homura and Madoka's reiatsu was still doing that thing. Meet and part, meet and part. But... getting heavier? That wasn't the right word.

Old Man Zangetsu felt intrigued, so Ichigo tossed a curious feeling at his zanpakutō. The spirit hummed in thought then murmured, Kaname appears to be unconsciously attempting to stabilize her mood. But—

“How— has Madoka—” Mr. Kaname's voice broke— “died? Before?”

Homura screwed her eyes shut and stammered through sudden tears and a rough sob. “Ev—! Ev- ery! Time!”

Ichigo's heart broke for her and everything went to hell.

Homura's tumultuous reiatsu had been controlled, but her grip on it was loosened by overflowing grief. It felt like it was pulled to Madoka, then back to Homura. The emotions or the reiatsu? Too dizzying to tell. Meet and part and meet and— part and meet and part and mee—

Pink and purple reiatsu flared. Instead of soothing Homura's pain, Madoka's ability seemed to be
magnifying it. Ichigo felt like he was body-slammed by grief—

Waking up on his back in muddy grass, rain on his face, sound of raging river, Mom sprawled across him, heavy and so so so cold—

Ichigo blinked hard and shook his head.

“Madoka!” Mr. and Mrs. Kaname cried. They leapt to their feet as the timestep ended.

Wooden chairs scraped in a chaotic overlap of sound as the airborne china continued their trajectories and tea splashed onto the table. Everything on the table rattled continuously. Madoka’s parents tried to rush around the table to her.

“Stop them!” Sandal-Hat shouted as he stood.

Tessai snagged Mr. Kaname by the collar and Chad caught Mrs. Kaname by the wrist. Both parents writhed and fought to break free. Mrs. Kaname actually moved to throw Chad, but he was simply too big and she was too distracted.

“Everyone be careful!” Urahara continued.

“They need help!” Mr. Kaname roared. He lurched so hard his collar tore; Tessai wrapped his arms around the man’s chest and barred his arms down. “HELP THEM!”

“We need to break the feedback loop!” Urahara shouted. “CAREFULLY!”

Old Man Zangetsu sighed. This was bound to happen with her lack of training. This child may need some manner of seal or power sink.

Heh. Slap Kenpachi’s eyepatch on Pinky, the Hollow snickered as waves of pink and purple reiatsu and grief washed over Ichig—

On his knees on a rooftop, rain on his face, Fullbring shivering around him and wicking up into Ginjō’s sword, too stunned to do anything but stare down at the broad blade in his chest as his armor burst away from his bod—

Screaming screaming screaming NOOOOOOOOO! screaming screaming screaming MADOKAAAAAA!

Ichigo shook his head and blinked. Everything was too bright. He was having trouble picking people’s words apart.

“What do we do?!”

“Safe to—?”

“Not sure—”

“Both—?”

This needed to stop.

Ichigo squinted through the brilliant light and tried to see the girls’ faces. Both were identically vacant-eyed and confused. They were leaning heavily against each other but seemed unaware of it. Maybe if he could get their attention?

No reaction.

He scowled stubbornly— he was going to help them, dammit!— and put some of his power into it.

“Hey. We’re gonna stop it.” Ichigo shifted and reached to give both a strong shake. “Look at me!”

Homura still stared at nothing. Madoka turned blindly toward him. He wasn't sure if her eyes were reflecting the light around her or actually flickering with pink light. Both girls had tear tracks on their cheeks.

“What’s happening to my daughter?!” Mrs. Kaname screamed.

Ichigo grit his teeth and pushed more power into... some vague sense of middle.

The hell are you trying to do, King? the Hollow asked with morbid curiosity.

Following my gut, Ichigo thought to him. I'll protect them from themselves! I—

Standing in the sands of Hueco Mundo, Orihime finally finally finally safe; jogging to heal Kenpa — lanky man in white flickering into existence in her path— Espada!— “I’m gonna borrow her for a bit” gone gone gone gone GONE, saved and FAILED and gone gone gone gone gone—

Ichigo dragged himself up out of the despair spiral and gasped for air as though surfacing from a deep dive. People were shouting, but he didn't care.

You have no idea what the fuck you're doing, the Hollow deadpanned.

“Ichigo, give it up! Stop!”

“NO!” he snarled at... whoever said that.

Ichigo pushed more power “between.” He would break this endless loop if it fucking killed him.

“We have no choice but to sedate them.”

And that was how Ichigo came to find himself sitting on a slab of concrete in the flooded ruins of a city.

Well, that was the last thing he remembered, anyway.

His first thought was that he must be in the sideways city in his Inner World, but that wasn't right. Nothing was recognizable in the light rain; the city looked like a typhoon had casually razed all of civilization to the ground as it passed. Wan light streaked through gaps in the cloud cover and sparkled on the water.

Everything suddenly shifted out of and back into focus.

Whaaat the hell?

Ichigo was about to ask the uneasy spirits of his blade some questions when he heard quiet shuffling and splashing followed by muffled crying. Concerned, he turned to look behind him and —
“The hell?” Ichigo blurted aloud.

A short distance from his pile of rubble and hidden from the waist up by yet more rubble, two girls in matching Mitakihara Middle School uniforms lay on their backs in the water.

Ichigo slung himself around and vaulted down from the slab, tripped on some twisted rebar hidden in the water, and slogged over to them. “Hey! Hey, are you all right?!”

The girls didn't react.

The Hollow sighed in disgust. *You're an idiot, King.*

Everything flickered, faded out, came back grainy; twin images of the girls overlapped. Ichigo swayed on his feet, then stopped to rub his eyes and shake his head. Disoriented, ugh.

*A memory,* Zangetsu suddenly declared.

*Whose?* Ichigo asked as he stepped around a tall bit of rubble to see the girls' fa—.

Homura and Madoka.

Badly injured, bedraggled, exhausted, arms nearest each other crossed at the wrists, a blackened Soul Gem in each palm.

“Ohhh, nooooo,” Ichigo moaned in dread as everything came back into sharp focus. “Why am I seeing this?”

*Think you got your dumb ass caught in the crossfire. Dumbass,* the Hollow said scathingly. Mocking applause echoed in Ichigo's head, followed by, *Get out. I hate the rain.*

*How would I even do that?* Ichigo thought at him. He made his way to the girls' side and looked down on them. Their sorry state pained him.

*How the fuck'd I know?* The Hollow sneered.

*So* helpful.

Madoka was staring straight up at the sky, a kind of tired peace on her face. Ichigo leaned over and waved an arm in her sight, but she didn't notice. He called their names, but they didn't respond.

He was going to be forced to watch, helpless to change anything.

“I guess... this is the end for us, too...,” Madoka said softly.

“I don't want to see this,” Ichigo said, heart sinking as Homura smiled with the same tired peace and turned her head toward Madoka. Oddly, her hair was in twin braids tied with purple ribbons and she was wearing rectangular glasses with red frames. Glasses?

“You don't have anymore Grief Seeds?” Homura asked, just as soft.

Madoka smiled gently and shook her head.

“I see,” Homura murmured.

*Viewing this... may explain some things,* Old Man Zangetsu said reluctantly.
“I don't have permission to see this,” Ichigo protested.

*I dunno 'bout that, King,* the Hollow said doubtfully.

*The fact that we are able to view it at all may imply permission,* Zangetsu added.

“Can't be sure about that,” Ichigo argued, “and this looks really, *really* personal.”

“Hey. How about the two of us become monsters and really mess up this whole awful world, huh?”

Ichigo's blood chilled at past-Homura's words.

“Until there's no more evil, no more sadness, nothing left at all....,” Homura continued. Her breathing was labored and her eyes were screwed shut. “Let's just crush, crush, crush it all to dust...! Don't you think—” she failed to completely restrain a sob as her voice broke— “that would be great?”

Ichigo swayed again. He wasn't sure if it was whatever happened to him before or if it was the force of his own despair for the girls.

Then Madoka rolled toward Homura and tapped a Grief Seed against Homura's Soul Gem. Homura's eyes opened wide and she sharply turned her head to gape at Madoka with a frightened lack of understanding.

Madoka gave her a little smile and made a breathy sound that should've been a giggle. “I lied earlier. I had just this one left.”

*Kid's as stupidly selfless as you are,* the Hollow grumbled.

Homura gasped deeply with understanding. “No! Why would you—?” She rolled her body to face Madoka and grasped Madoka's hand; she tried to pull the Grief Seed away from her Soul Gem but was too weak. “Why would you waste it on *me*!?”

*That one, too,* the Hollow added as Ichigo swallowed hard at Homura thinking it was a waste to save her.

“Because I want to ask you to do something that only you can do,” Madoka said with a rueful smile. “Homura... you can go back in time, right?” Her voice cracked and started to shake, getting more tearful with each word. “You can change history so it won't end like this, right?”

Homura opened her mouth to speak, choked on her words, and gave a crying hum of agreement.

Openly weeping, Madoka pressed the Grief Seed to Homura's Soul Gem even more forcefully as its purple shine returned. “Then would you... go back and save stupid me before I get tricked by Kyubey?”

Homura's whole body jerked as though electrified and gripped Madoka's hands with something near reverence, then fervently cried, “I swear it! I promise I'll save you! No matter how many times I have to go back and try!” Her voice rose hysterically. “I swear, I *will* protect you!”

Ichigo dragged both hands down his face. So Homura had been directly asked to do this. It wasn't just something she took upon herself, it was something she had been asked to do by her best friend. Or her best friend had reinforced her self-imposed mission.

That *did* explain a lot.
Madoka sagged in relief and smiled through her tears. “Thank you.” Then her Soul Gem sparked black. She bared her teeth in a grimace, convulsed, and rolled away from Homura. Her entire body flailed and contorted as she screamed in agony. Homura cried out in alarm and shot up into a sitting position, then crawled to Madoka. The convulsions stopped, but Madoka still trembled all over. Her face was waxen and pale, eyes unfocused. She breathed heavily for a minute, then rasped, “Can I ask you... one more thing...?”

Homura was leaning over her on all fours, messy braids trailing down into the water. Madoka's free hand wandered around, found the end of one braid, and tugged weakly, rolling hair between her fingers. Beyond words, Homura nodded and made a tearful sound of agreement.

“I... I don't want... to become a Witch,” Madoka whispered.

Homura's face screwed up in confusion.

*Oh, God, it's that memory,* Ichigo thought. Bile rose in his throat. He really *did not want to see this.* But... Homura had to live with it every day. So Ichigo really had no right to complain.

_You're an idiot, King,* the Hollow repeated with disgusted resignation.

Everything flickered and split into slight double exposure, misaligned images jittering apart before snapping back together.

Ichigo reeled. He felt like someone had bashed him over the head.

“There are awful, sad things in this world, but... there are lots... of things... worth protecting, too...,” Madoka continued in a small, strained voice. “I don't... wanna ruin... them. Don't—” she gasped and tensed with pain for a moment—“don't let me ruin them. Please.”

Ichigo swallowed hard. Madoka wanted to be killed to protect the world.

Homura suddenly understood what was being asked of her, reared forward in horror, and wailed, “Madoka!”

Vertigo. Oh no oh no oh no. *Spinning spinning spinning rain on his face—*

Madoka continued staring sightlessly skyward, not even blinking when rain fell in her eyes. She struggled to shift her arm. “Homura, you... finally called me... by my first name...,” she said somewhere between a squeak and a rasp. It obviously took great effort for her to slowly raise her arm and hold up her Soul Gem. “I'm... hap-py...,” she breathed.

Homura abruptly transformed, pulled a handgun from her shield, took aim, and whined deep in her throat with despairing agony as she pulled the trigger.

Ichigo flinched hard at the blast and muzzle flash, but recoiled deep in his soul at Homura's guttural scream of grief afterward. He was very familiar with the feeling behind it.

Everything flickered again and Ichigo woke to someone shaking him, worried voices, and a hand lightly smacking his cheek.

“How...?”

“—Okay, Ichigo?!”

“Madoka!”
“Answer us, dammit! ICHIGO!”

“You can let go of her, Ichigo, c’mon.”

Ichigo couldn’t even identify who was saying what as he swam back into full consciousness. They were confusing and the gunshot and scream were still echoing in his hea—

“Homura!” he gasped as he jolted back to his senses.

His panicked instinct was to grab his sister and keep her safe, take her somewhere safe, but his arms were burdened by— Homura?

How did *that* happen?

A hand thrust into the air between his face and the back of Homura's head and snapped its fingers several times. “Ichigo. Do you hear me?”

Ichigo blinked slowly and followed the arm with his eyes until he reached Urahara's worried face.

“Ichigo,” Urahara repeated, calm but stressed. “Say something.”

Ichigo stared blankly for a moment— processed the words through the loud whine in his head— then blurted, “It was like I was *there.*”

Everyone else shut up.

“Like you were where, Ichigo?” Urahara asked patiently.

“In the ruins. In the rain. With the girls. And the gun.”

*Spinning spinning spinning*—

“Does... does that make sense to anyone else, or...?” Renji said uneasily. Somewhere.

“I couldn't stop it,” Ichigo said dully. His eyes burned.

“Stop what?” Urahara asked.

Ichigo ignored him and dazedly looked down at Homura. He didn't remember doing anything, but it seemed he must have bodily dragged her out of her chair— away from Madoka, who was now missing— but only gotten her halfway into his lap before... passing out? His arms were still around her torso and she was slumped forward onto the table, legs dangling to one side. She was breathing, which was good, but what came as a monumental relief was the lack of bright lights and overwhelming grief.

“Here, Ichigo, give her to me,” his father said tiredly as he reached for Homura.

Ichigo swatted the hands away, shuffled Homura into a different position, tightened his grip, and stood abruptly. He looked around to get his bearings— dizzy, too bright!— then carried Homura out of the room, down a hall, and toward a dark, unoccupied bedroom. Faster. People trailed after him in a parade of noise. *Faster.* Ichigo kicked the door shut in their faces and leaned back against it in exhaustion.

*Spinning... spinning... spinning...*

“*Open this door right now, Ichigo!*” Rukia snarled outside. Ah, her worried snarl. Great.
Hands beat on the door and voices yelled things. Head pounding and ears ringing, Ichigo finally roared, “Shut the fuck UP! I can't hear myself THINK!”

Silence.

Except his own shout hurt his head. Ow.


Spinning...

REALITY.

All right. So.

....

What the hell was he doing, again?

The Hollow scoffed in his head and said, Being a bleeding-heart idiot. As usual.

After a few decades of silently leaning against a door in a dark room while holding an unconscious magical girl in a princess carry also while trying to unscramble his spinning spinning spinning mind, his father's voice professionally said, “Ichigo. Describe your symptoms.”

That... gave Ichigo a solid starting point.

“Killer headache. Ringing ears. Dizziness. Fatigue. Uh....”

“Do you feel like you're going to pass out?”

“Nah,” Ichigo replied.

Spin... ning....

However, “Ugh, I feel like my eyes are gonna explode. Kinda blurry. Burns.”

“Sensitivity to light?” Dad asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

Dad continued to ask him an entire battery of questions as if he was a patient at the clinic. It gradually calmed and stabilized Ichigo. When Dad was satisfied that Ichigo was coherent, he asked, “Son, why did you take Homura in there?”

“Too many people,” Ichigo blurted. “Too much....”

“Over-stimulation?” Sandal-Hat asked solemnly.

“That's a word,” Ichigo sighed.

“Why did you take her with, though?”

“I couldn't just leave her. Not after that,” Ichigo explained, appalled that they even had to ask. God, after what they saw—

Prrrrretty suuure we're the only ones who saw that, the Hollow interrupted. He sounded...
disturbed?

“After what?” Urahara asked after a long pause.

“None of you— didn't anyone else see that? The city and the rain and Homura and Madoka?”

A long silence.

“No...,” Dad hedged.

What the hell.

Spinning... “I swear!” ...spinning... “I will protect you!” ...spin... ning....

Ichigo wanted to press his thumbs into his eyes but couldn’t while holding Homura. He should probably put her in bed, actually.

“Ichigo, I'd like to examine Homura,” Urahara said carefully. “Will you let us in?”

Ichigo closed his eyes and breathed deeply. “Yeah. Yeah. Not a lot of you, okay?”

“Okay,” a few voices said quietly.

Ichigo stepped away from the door. He was gently setting Homura down on the bed when the door creaked open behind him. Ichigo fretted over her like when the twins were sick; patted her clammy cheeks to see if she'd react— nope— felt her forehead— cool. But not dead-cool.

Dad came up behind him and hesitantly laid a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, son.” When Ichigo didn't startle or lash out, he lightly kneaded Ichigo's shoulder. “Hey. We need to get to her.”

Urahara was leaning around his other side, straining forward; Ichigo swallowed the sudden urge to shove him back. Sandal-Hat noticed his arm twitch and pulled back anyway. “I just want to scan her, Ichigo,” he said evenly. “We had to sedate her in a hurry. I want to make sure we didn't overdo it.”

That sounded... reasonable. So Ichigo shuffled aside.

Urahara quietly thanked him and moved slowly to hover glowing green hands over Homura's head. Then his hands started to drift toward her left hand— toward her Soul Gem. Ichigo tried to jerk forward to shield her but his father clamped down on both of his shoulders. Orihime laid a calming hand on his arm— when did she get there?— and softly said something. Asked something.

“W-what?” he stammered.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Orihime asked quietly, brow knit in worry.

“I— I don't— know?” Ichigo answered.

Orihime slowly raised a hand to his face and brushed his cheek— brushed away tears he hadn't realized he was crying. “What did you see?” she whispered.

“I— don't—” Well, he knew what he saw, but... was it really his place to say?

“Orihime,” Sandal-Hat called quietly. He held up Homura's Soul Gem hand. “Please purify her Gem. It's not as bad as I expected, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.”
“Of course!” Orihime responded with subdued cheer. She patted Ichigo's arm and bustled around the bed, Shun Shun Rikka sparking from her hair, bright gold in the dim room.

Like the flash as Homura shot Madoka's Soul Gem.

Ichigo startled violently. His father gripped his arms and held him still as Homura's howl of grief faintly echoed in his head again.

He couldn't focus on anything anyone said through his screaming screaming screaming headache. He squinted to watch Orihime's shield drawing darkness off of the Soul Gem until it shone clearly again. Urahara nodded with satisfaction. Homura was peacefully asleep. Safe.

His sister was safe.

Ichigo's body almost collapsed from the release of tension. Dad held him up and guided him to a chair. His ears were ringing again.

“IIichigooo,” Dad said with wary encouragement. Like when a patient was zoning out on him in a bad way. “C'mon, son. Look at me. Talk to me.”

Wanting to reassure him but not knowing what to say, Ichigo went with, “Hi.” This was apparently the wrong thing because what little he could see of his father's face in the light from the hall got more worried. “Sorry.” Also wrong.

Sandal-Hat came over and held a glowing green fingertip in front of Ichigo's face. Ichigo winced at the light but forced himself to look into it and follow it as if it was a doctor's penlight. “Looking a little shocky there, Ichigo,” Urahara said mildly.

“Oh. That's bad, right?”

“Yes. But it looks like you're coming out of it. I'm not having to give you instructions for this test.”

“His pulse is better,” Dad said.

Oh. Dad was holding his wrist. When did that happen?

Those brats fried what little brain you have, his Hollow said snidely.

“Shut up,” Ichigo said. Dad and Sandal-Hat looked surprised. Whoops. “Not you. My Hollow is being a dick. My head hurts like hell and he's mocking me.”

Dad snorted with reluctant humor.

Sandal-Hat made both his hands glow and touched Ichigo's temples, making his head hurt less.

“Why did you react to Shun Shun Rikka like that?” he asked quietly.

Ichigo breathed deeply and closed his eyes. “It was like the gun. The—” words escaped him—“the light thing when one shoots.”


“Yeah,” Ichigo replied as Urahara stepped back. Ichigo promptly rubbed his eyes. “No one else saw... that?”

“No,” Urahara said solemnly. “What we saw was you shaking both girls, flaring your reiatsu, and
dragging Homura away from Miss Kaname before... it looked like you had an absence seizure, to
be honest.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Dad wearily scrubbed his hands down his face. “What did you see?”

Ichigo opened his mouth, but paused and tried to sense if anyone from Mitakihara was present. He
was even sloppier about it than usual and only felt some of his friends... maybe hovering in the
hallway? The men noticed his clumsy attempt and looked at each other. Urahara conjured a ball of
red light over his palm and told Orihime to close the door, then said, “Tell us, Ichigo.”

“Zangetsu thinks it was a memory,” Ichigo blurted. “Of— of another timeline, I guess.”

“What kind of memory?” Urahara demanded, features suddenly intense in the dim redness.

Ichigo screwed his eyes shut— spinning spinning spinning, the girls' screams, the gunshot. “The
one where Homura... assisted Madoka. In, uh... mercy. With a gun.”

Dad sucked in a sharp breath and Orihime made a sound of dismay. Urahara rifled in his pockets,
did something to a phone he found, and commanded, “Describe it. As much detail as you can.
Before it fades.”

Ichigo hesitated. The vision had been deeply personal— akin to someone seeing his memory of
Mom’s death.

“What are you waiting for, Ichigo?” Urahara asked impatiently.

Ichigo bit his lip and thought aloud. “I'd... rather ask her... permission. First.”

Urahara blinked slowly, like he didn’t understand. Then his face tightened with stress. “We may
need to know this, Ichigo,” he said. “Something important could have been in that memory.
Something an outsider might notice that she did not. Something to tell us how to share memories
again.”

“Yeah, but... I'm not doing that to her,” Ichigo stubbornly declared.

Urahara made a jerky hand movement, stepped away, and dragged one hand through his hair in
frustration. “Ichigo. This is not the time.”

“Compromise!” Orihime suddenly suggested. When everyone looked at her, she clenched her fists
and earnestly continued, “Write it down! Like our journals! Then you have it recorded and can ask
Homura if you can share when she wakes up!”

Ichigo grinned in relief. “Yeah!” He winced at his own near-shout. “I can do that.”

Urahara sighed deeply. “Better than nothing.”

“She'll appreciate it, Kisuke,” Dad chided.

“I know, I know,” Urahara said, defeated. “I'm getting ahead of myself again. Thank you for
slowing me down before I make everything worse,” he added mournfully.

It still unnerved Ichigo to see Sandal-Hat so subdued.

“I'll get a notebook,” Urahara continued as he opened the door. “And a small lamp. To avoid over-
stimulation.” He turned to Ichigo with a wry half-smile. “I presume you want to stay here.”

“Yeah,” Ichigo said. He was smart enough to not nod this time. There was no way he was leaving Homura.

“Miss Inoue, will you come with me, please?”

Orihime bit her lip and looked at Ichigo. He smiled weakly and waved her off. They probably wanted her to look at Madoka. Orihime nodded and slipped out the door.

Karin and Yuzu peeked around the door when Sandal-Hat left. Ichigo waved them in. They split up to fret over Homura and him, then perched at Homura's bedside like bodyguards. Dad fell into another chair with a deep sigh and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, watching all of them tiredly. Chad soon brought in a notebook and lap desk and Uryū set up a desk lamp; both retreated to the doorway without a word and sat outside it— also like bodyguards.

With Homura safe and surrounded by a buffer of friends and family, Ichigo began to write.

Renji felt like he had been dragged into a drama above his pay grade.

That should be normal for literally any drama involving Ichigo, yet here he was. Surprised.

He had thought himself prepared by the sudden top-secret meeting in the Captain-Commander's office. Before he had met Ichigo and been drawn into the guy's orbit, Renji would've laughed at the story laid out to them. But... Ichigo.

Ichigo had collected yet another spiritually aware person with a tragic biography and took up her cause? Normal. Kid revealed centuries-long evil campaign the Thirteen Divisions had been blind to? Normal. Kid had time on a leash? That one was a bit more intense than normal, but in a “yeah, sure, of course Ichigo would find something like that” kinda way. Whatever the hell just happened? The light show and the chill of despair that had run up his spine, suddenly remembering his long-buried grief for the other kids in his old street gang, dead fifty sixty seventy years? Remembering the worst defeats he had suffered? Not normal.

Speaking of....

“What the hell just happened?” Renji asked in the silent aftermath of... whatever the hell that had been.

The table was a mess, items scattered across its splintered surface. Many of the room's occupants had hurried down the hall following Ichigo's dramatic exit. Some hovered around where the pink-haired kid was out cold on the floor in her parents' arms as Tessai ran scans on her. Some of them were still sitting or standing around the table in shock.

Except for Renji's captain, who had tensed and half-stood when everything went to Hell but was now placidly sipping his tea.

Composure. How did the guy do it?

“Damned if I know,” the redheaded Kyōko girl grumbled from her seat. She still looked disturbed
by the things Ichigo's charge had said to her. “Hey, Mami. The thing the shop guys did to them. Was that the spell-thing they used on me?”

The blonde who had been startled out of her tears blinked slowly like her brain hadn't quite caught up with the outside world before saying, “I think?”

“It's called Hakufuku,” Ran said helpfully.

Captain Hitsugaya heaved a deep sigh and bonelessly plunked back into his chair. “I don't like how much power they had to throw at them to sleep them,” he muttered warily. Then he gave Renji a bit of an odd look.

Renji realized he was still standing in a battle-ready position, chair sideways on the floor several paces behind him due to the haste of his rise. Whoops. So he righted his chair and stood by it, unsure of whether he should be doing something. He looked to his own Captain for a cue; cool but meaningful glances told Renji to sit down. Renji did so and looked around at faces. Once again, the sheer tired lack of alarm of the shinigami who had already been stationed in Urahara's Mitakihara hidey-hole struck him as worrying.

“Why are you guys calm about this?” Renji asked before he could stop his stupid mouth.

“Welcome to our special Hell, Abarai,” Captain Hitsugaya said dully, “where everything goes wrong in increasingly bizarre ways day after day after day.”

The clandestine briefing in Yamamoto's office had implied that but it must not have really stuck because Renji still felt like he was in an anime. Which he now found himself fervently glad Urahara's shop brats had forced him to watch when he was stationed with them during the war. Also grateful for the manga he had stol— borrowed—from the kids and read in desperation to not be roped into something more inane by wandering around in his boredom.

He would never, ever admit it to the shop brats.

Rukia reappeared from down the hall, face pinched. She anticipated his question and said, “Ichigo seems to be... mostly okay.”

“Mostly?” Renji asked.

“Seems like he's coming out of some kind of paranoia and has such a bad headache that he screamed at us to shut up and they're not even turning the lights on in the room he holed up in.”

“Why'd he take the kid?” Renji asked.

Rukia lifted her hands in a wide shrug. “All I know is he sees her as a little sister. Which....” Her eyes darted to her brother, then back to Renji. “You know Ichigo and little sisters.”

Renji snorted. Yes. Yes, he did.

There was a lull in conversation as the pink kid's dad hauled her out of the room and people shuffled around in the halls. It felt like the room had been paused in a different way than the timestop. Which was, by the way, equal parts awesome and terrifying.

He spared a single instant to wonder what Aizen would have done with that power before he brutally repressed the thought as a horror too awful to contemplate.

“So did alla you know about the time travel bullshit?” Kyōko asked out of the blue. “Did all your
fuckin’—” she waved her hands sarcastically— “aaallieees know?”

The two other girls who had been out of the loop— hah— tensed and were suddenly very attentive. Captain Hitsugaya heaved another sigh and dragged his hands down his face, looking ceilingward in search of patience.

“The knowledge is very much on a need-to-know basis,” Captain Ukitake rasped. His eyes above the filter mask were sympathetic. “Rangiku, Renji, and Byakuya were only briefed just before they came today. Our leader and his assistant know. Even my best friend doesn't know as of now, though that may change in the next day or so. If word of Homura's powers was to spread...” Captain Ukitake briefly bowed his head, then looked up at the girls with his serious commanding officer face on. “There may be those who would be... tempted. To take her. To experiment on her. To weaponize her. To kill her.”

The three girls looked suitably spooked.

“Please, have patience,” Captain Ukitake said more kindly. “Telling you was a gesture of deep respect. I think she will be inclined to tell you more if you can... avoid being overtly confrontational.”

“She tends to speak at greater length about difficult subjects if you wait her out awhile before asking another question, even if she is silent for awhile,” Captain Hitsugaya said. His tiredness was softened by thoughtful concern. “She is very careful and... deliberate about her words. If I had to guess, it takes her a bit to speak because she figures out how to put something in words in such a way that she is not misunderstood— she is very aware that she is not the best at communicating and is trying to fix it. She responds more to coaxing than commanding. If you rush her, she shuts down. Don't force eye contact.”

“Oh! I didn't know the eye contact thing!” Sayaka said in surprise. “Thanks!” Her brow furrowed in curiosity. “How'd you know?”

Captain Hitsugaya gave her a considering look and quietly replied, “When she gets overwhelmed and runs off, and I hunt her down, I let her know I'm there and just sit with her. She eventually starts talking once she settles. She'll make eye contact sometimes— usually if something you say surprises her— but she's very obvious about forcing her eyes away again.”

Renji tried not to look at the young captain. He wouldn't be able to hide his curiosity about what exactly the guy's relationship with the time-traveler was.

“Whatever you do, do not give Homura Akemi cause to distrust Captain Hitsugaya,” Captain-Commander Yamamoto had said with a piercing glare at each of them. “Her trust in him is vital for any further timelines. Considering... Asunaro—” meaning the spiritual clusterfuck there— “it is highly likely the girl will be going back. If... distasteful... words or actions become necessary, take them upon yourselves. Mind that Captain Hitsugaya may be obligated to pretend objection to sound strategy to demonstrate sympathy to the girl. Captain Hitsugaya must remain beyond reproach.”

Renji was pretty sure that Captain Hitsugaya was in no way pretending sympathy for Homura. The strategy he had just laid out for talking with her sounded very much like the talk Rukia had given him about Ichigo and the other humans before they deployed for their mission in Karakura during the war.

“You'll probably get on fine with Ichigo if you just be your big dumb self and avoid talking rain, rivers, or mothers. And for Soul King's sake do not ever even pretend to threaten his sisters. I won't
save you,” she had hissed.

Trade Rukia's protective anger for exhaustion and you got Captain Hitsugaya's advice. You got empathy.

Renji knew the Kurosaki sisters had dragged the captain into a really weird friendship. If Ichigo had claimed an honorary sister, then it made perfect sense to Renji that she'd be able to drag Captain Hitsugaya into their own weird friendship. That was how Kurosakis rolled, and Homura was an honorary Kurosaki.

Look, it made sense in that weird Kurosaki way, okay?

The question was whether the captain-commander knew it seemed to be a genuine mutual respect if not outright friendship. And whether he would consider the Tenth Division's captain to be compromised. And how he would react.

Wait. If time reset again, the next/past Hitsugaya wouldn't know any of this personally. If he was compromised— pfft — then he would be instantly uncompromised.

The thought made Renji unexpectedly sad. That Homura kid really seemed like she could use good friends. And Tōshirō Hitsugaya could be a hardass stick-in-the-mud, but if Momo and Ran were to be believed, once you fought your way into friend category, he was rock-solid in his support even if it was quiet and gruff.

That time-traveling girl seemed the sort to reject pity but he couldn't help pitying her.

There was another uncomfortable silence that dragged on forever. Then Kyōko huffed and suspiciously continued, “Yeah, well, why were these three brought in on it?”

“High rank in our organization and personal ties,” Captain Kuchiki said smoothly, speaking for the first time since their gathering in the bowels of the shop at their arrival. “We have collaborated to contain large-scale threats in the past.”

“Oh yeah?” the kid taunted. “What kinda threats? What kinda ghost is sooo threatening that it needs alla you to be so teamworky? Or do you all just suck at fighting?”

Captain Kuchiki raised a brow at the rudeness of her challenge. Renji coughed and covered his mouth to hide a smile. He was starting to like the brat.

“I was under the impression that you had been informed of Hollows,” Captain Kuchiki mildly replied.

“Hungry ghosts, boo-fuckin'-hoo,” Kyōko said with a scornful roll of her eyes. “That's basically fighting Witches and I do damn good job of that by myself. Unless you got yourselves a Walpurgisnacht Hollo—”

“We do,” Captain Hitsugaya interrupted her derision. “We told you Hollows can combine and get stronger by eating other Hollows. The most powerful are termed Vasto Lorde.” Captain Hitsugaya tossed his head back slightly, indicating a direction. “The thing that attacked Asunaro? Barely equal to one of the low-end Vasto Lorde.” His eyes bore into Kyōko's, sharp and cold as the blade he wielded. “You won't get very far flying solo once you get past small fry. Then it's teamwork or die. You would do well to remember that.”

Kyōko's mouth worked like she wanted to argue, but instead she looked unsettled then crossed her arms and tried to hide her discomfort with sullenness.
“Lone wolf type,” Captain Hitsugaya had said at their basement briefing. “Prickly. Orphaned when her wish backfired on her. Technically homeless, but good at stealing and scamming her way into stays at hotels instead of sleeping on the streets. Very familiar with death and hunger.”

“She steals food if necessary,” Homura had continued, “but she prefers to steal money from bank ATMs because she knows banks can replace it and her sources of food and clothing do not take losses. She does not want to be responsible for someone’s family going hungry.”

Renji had shared a significant glance with Rukia. He knew she was thinking what he was: remembering their childhood running the streets of Inuzuri together, far out in the Rukon. Struggling to get food and avoid beatings. Surviving as their friends— their family in all but blood and name— died. Renji had glanced at Rangiku, knowing she had a similar history. She had been spared the worst of the fighting by virtue of Gin Ichimaru deciding to protect her in probably the only altruistic whim he experienced in his life. Knowing him, it probably wasn't entirely altruism that motivated him. He had seemed kinda possessive of Ran despite being distant with her. Whatever his motivations, it had resulted in Ran surviving.

The one thing that snake had been good for.

Well, he had also turned on Aizen as revenge for something unclear that was done to Ran forever ago, so maybe two things. One and a half? Whatever.

Anyway.

Yeah, this Kyōko kid wasn't going to be shrugging off the three Rukon-“born” lieutenants anytime soon.

“What're you lookin' at?” Kyōko snapped.

Oh. He was staring. Renji gave her a wry grin. “Just thinkin' you're a real little spitfire.”

The girl's lip curled in a sneer. “I'll spit fire up your—”

“Kyōko!” Mami scolded, appalled.

“Tch.” Kyōko averted her eyes and sulked more.

Considering the state of affairs, it was probably a really bad idea to laugh. But laugh Renji did.

Kyōko scoffed, stood, and loudly declared, “If we ain't getting' shit til they wake up, I'm gonna go play a game.” Then she all but stomped out of the room, grumbling.

“Oh! I'll come, too! Wait for me!” Sayaka called. She huffed and ran when the other girl ignored her and kept going.

Captain Hitsugaya stood more sedately. “I'm going to go sleep. Only wake me to reconvene or let me know if another apocalyptic emergency happens.” He looked at Rukia and lowly said, “You too, Kuchiki. We have to recharge more after what we pulled off.”

Rukia blinked in brief surprise before she remembered she was supposed to be exhausted and said, “Oh! We do!”

Technically speaking, they were both spiritually recovered. Their exhaustion had been from draining the small portion of their power that had been left unsealed. They had released their limiters while deep within various wards and let the majority of their reserved power soothe and re-
energize them before reapplying seals. The kids didn't know that, though. And Captain Hitsugaya looked like he genuinely needed the break, but for exhaustion of his spirit rather than spiritual exhaustion.

Their departure left Renji with his own captain, Captain Ukitake, Rangiku, and Mami. They all looked at each other.

“Maybe we should clean up?” Mami suggested timidly.

“Oh, no!” Ran cried. “You should be with your friends!”

“But—”

Ran hoisted the girl to her feet and tugged her toward the exit. “Don’t worry about cleaning! Come on! I’ll take you to your friends and come back. All us adults can clean! You relax! You’ve had a rough time! You need your friends and something to take your mind off everything!”

Renji was zero percent surprised when Ran didn't come back and he had to clean the room himself, but he'd let it slide this time. For those kids.

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Madoka woke slowly. She felt like she was drifting in air, but realized she was laying on her back. The sandy loam beneath her was soft. A gentle breeze carried the scent of roses. Heat from behind her made her think of a campfire.

Exhaustion weighed down her eyelids, so she only opened them partway. It was dark, but she wasn't frightened. Distant stars gradually sparkled into focus. Bright moonlight highlighted the edges of shapes around her, but she saw no moon and couldn't identify the silhouetted shapes. The moonlight and maybe-fire faded away, leaving darkness and lingering warmth. She wasn't frightened.

She let her mind wander. The visions she had seen were fading. She felt like it was important to remember them, to see them more clearly. Had to try—

Small fingers smoothed her bangs away from her brow. Was her head in someone's lap? Reminded her of Mama. Madoka felt sleepy again. She fought it and murmured, “But... I wanna...”

A quiet voice hushed her. “Not yet.”

“But....”

“Go back to sleep,” the voice whispered.

Madoka’s eyelids were so heavy. Sleep sounded wonderf....

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**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Love you all. Have fun with the edit.
Not sure when the next chapter will happen. Hopefully another brief wait but no guarantees.
Homura woke slowly. A pleasant dreaminess lingered; it was probably the only reason she didn't react violently when she realized that she was not in her chair and someone was holding her hand. At first, anyway; her memory drifted back to her and she felt like her body was bound and she jolted in place with a gasp-- had to escape--!

“Hey, hey, hey, heyyy,” Isshin's voice said gently off to her right. Very close. Warm hand squeezed hers.

Other hand wrapped around her Soul Gem hand, but didn't touch her Soul Gem. Ichigo's voice, hoarse. “You're safe. We've gotcha.”

Twin sounds of sleepy inquiry near her feet. She realized she was in a bed and the “bindings” were bed sheets. How? Last thing she remembered was--

“I... I don't want... to become a Witch.”

Homura's breath hitched and she choked on a sob.

“Shhhhh shhh shhh shhh shhhhhhhhhhh,” Isshin hushed soothingly. Fingers lightly brushed her hair away from her face like her father's once had whenever she became distraught in yet another hospital bed before yet another test, yet another procedure, yet more tubes, yet more pain, yet more strangers wandering into her room at all hours. The familiarity made tears well up in her eyes, though she couldn't tell if it was relief or grief.

“I'sh'wake?” Karin slurred.

Homura opened her eyes, finally near full consciousness from the force of her anxiety. The room was dim, but she could see her surroundings clearly. The magic around her told her she was surrounded by the Kurosaki family. Karin and Yuzu must have been curled up at the end of the bed on either side of her legs and Isshin and Ichigo were seated on either side of her. Her anxiety eased once she recognized the feeling of being in a fortress of moonlight and embers with the company of the difficult-to-describe warm lights of the twins. It calmed her enough to think.

She had been caught in her worst memory and begun to sink into despair. Madoka's magic had... tried to buoy her-- she thought?-- but had been dragged down with her and become an anchor in the
worst way. They had been drowning in each other's magic and despair. Then... Ichigo's magic had... had...it was like he had thrust arms radiating warm moonlight down into the black water, grabbed both their wrists, and hauled them back up toward the surface just before Homura... passed out?

Homura blurted, “Thank. You.”

“Huh?”

Homura turned in bed, tugged her hand out of Isshin's and reached for Ichigo. “Thank. You.”

“What for?” Ichigo asked, face innocently clueless as she grasped his other hand.

Her mouth worked silently as a lot of possible responses fought for precedence. Things like How did you do that? and What were you thinking?! Something like you dummy! was a surprisingly strong one. An exasperated Nii-san! almost made it to her lips but she balked at the last moment. Dizzy. The words that finally fell out of her mouth were, “You saved us!”

“I-- I dunno about that,” Ichigo protested doubtfully.

“I-- I was-- pulling Madoka down with-- with m--” Homura interrupted herself with a gasp and bolted upright. “Madoka!”

Isshin blocked her and gently held her shoulders still, then pushed her back toward the bed. “Madoka is safe. She's okay. The feedback loop was broken.”

Homura shook her head in defiance and pushed forward. “I hurt her, I hurt her, I hur--!”

Ichigo wrapped a hand around her bicep and tugged back. “Nope, nope, nope.”

Karin stubbornly crawled up her side of the bed and tackled Homura back onto the pillow like when she had stopped Homura from getting up when the Kurosaki men were doing their morning ritual at home. Yuzu shoved Isshin's arm away and flopped on Homura's other side a moment later as Homura squawked and flailed.

“If you think Ichi-nii saved, you, then obviously he saved Madoka, too,” Karin chided.

Yuzu wrapped her arms around Homura's and had an audible pout in her voice when she added, “Onii-chan wouldn't save you and not her.”

“Homura. Stop,” Isshin said. “Breathe. Reach out with your rei-- magic. You should be able to sense her.”

Yes. Yes. She knew how to do that. So she closed her eyes, breathed, struggled to order her thoughts. In the distance, sleepy sunshine. Peaceful. Not reeling in despairing madness.

All the tension in Homura's body released at once. Isshin and Ichigo relaxed. The twins cuddled closer.

“See?” Karin said. “If she was in danger, Ichi-nii would be off kicking someone's ass on your behalf.”

“Damn straight,” Ichigo said firmly.

Weak laughter bubbled up from Homura’s chest. Yes. That was true. She settled and really looked around the room. “How did I get he--?” Her question was cut off by an unexpected yawn. Now that
she wasn't keyed up, she was tired.

“Uh,” Ichigo said bashfully.

“Heh. Ichi-nii hauled you down here in a princess carry like a damsel in distress when everything went to Hell,” Karin explained. “He came to when you two got slept and--”

“Came to?” Homura interrupted, worried. She looked Ichigo up and down. “Did I hurt y--?!”

“No,” Ichigo said sharply, face in a disapproving scowl. “It was my own fault. I did something dumb.” His face softened. “We... really need to talk about it.”

Now she was extremely worried again. “What-- what happened?”

“What do you remember, Homura?” Isshin asked.

Homura closed her eyes and leaned back into the pillow. Yuzu started playing with her hair. Soothing. She thought back. “Madoka's father asked if she has died before. I said yes. Then....” Memories of grief rose up, but she stuffed them back into their figurative box and stored them away again with a long-practiced routine, trying to pretend it was like nothing more than putting away heavy winter clothes in spring. “How...? That memory doesn't usually... I learned how to....” Dull it. Suppress it. Avoid, deaden, detach from it. Numb the pain to tolerable levels so she wouldn't-- wouldn't-- break down.

Or worse.

She was... tired.


Homura's heart ached. She hadn't gotten all of it stuffed into that box. “The time Madoka and I survived Walpurgisnacht but nearly turned.”

Isshin tiredly rubbed his face. “Do you remember anything else? After that? Anything different?”

Homura frowned. “It was like... drowning,” she said slowly. “It was like... I was at the edge of becoming a Witch again, like just before Ma-- that Madoka purified my Soul Gem. But... over and over and over.” She allowed her eyelids to fall closed and her voice to drift. “Madoka's magic... was like then, too. But... not? We were drowning in it... dying in it... until Nii-san... pulled us apart...? No. Pulled us... up?” The family went still and silent around her, nearly breathless. How odd. Homura opened her eyes to look at them but they drifted shut again before she could focus. “Ichigo's magic... was... warm. And bright. Like... the moon....”

She was surrounded by it even now, like an invisible cocoon of comfortable safety. It made her feel so safe that she could sleep for days without fear of attack. Drifting, drifting, in an open boat floating along a gentle current as pale silver-blue flames of moonlight shimmered on the wa--

“No, that's not water... that's... glass,” Homura murmured sleepily.

“What's glass?” Isshin's voice asked softly.

Fingers smoothing her bangs again, tucking hair behind her ear. Nice. “The... star water,” she explained. Why was her voice so faint? “Burns. But the fire's... not stars. It's... moon. The... fire is... moon... is... fire... is... moon.”
So sleepy.

“Uh... sounds kinda scary,” Ichigo said with an audible cringe. “Sorry.”

“No, no.” Homura struggled to open her eyes and protest, tried to rise up but just rocked her head and shoulders in denial. So heavy. “Pretty. It's....” Dazzling. Beautiful. Iridescent. Why couldn't she show him? How did he not know? “Spar... kles. Don't... you know? It's... *your*....”

Everything blurred pleasantly into what Homura realized was a dream. Memory. Memory of a dream? Dream of a memory? Laying on her back in a low, flat-bottomed boat and stargazing as she basked in moonlight warm as sunlight, drunk on the heady scent of roses and waterlilies. It was like a single instant held still forever, both ethereal and grounded at once. A summer night crystallized in her memory. Set aside-apart-within to be cherished forever.

Summer night. Summertime. When had she last lived summer? She hadn't seen summer since... before everything. Before everyone.

Before Madoka.

“I want to see summer with--”

Homura stopped and just stared and breathed. Stared at stars that were themselves distant suns. Wanted to--

“Not yet.”

Ah.

Dreams would suffice for now.

Homura's body moved like it was always meant to in this dream. So light and graceful. She stood and danced en pointe with the moon as her spotlight on a stage of shimmering stars. Turned, turned, turned counterclockwise and gathered the roses from the river-stage into a bouquet and inhaled deeply, deeply, deeply.

Ichigo stared at Homura as her sleepy babble quieted and she slipped back into sleep. He wasn't sure how he felt about Old Man Zangetsu's fascination with what she had described.

“What the hell was that?” Karin asked.

“I wonder,” Dad muttered. He sighed and moved for the door. “Get yourselves some more rest, kids. I'll go check on everyone and come back in a bit.”

Yuzu and Karin settled in at Homura's side and fell asleep. Ichigo sat in a chair and tried to relax. His head still felt weird and he was still... kinda detached from his body. Disoriented, though the pain was nearly gone. He could think clearly, at least.

*Good*, his Hollow barked irritably. *Getcher ass in here.*

Ichigo would've sent him the mental sense of a rude hand gesture if Old Man Zangetsu didn't immediately second the request. Instead, Ichigo settled back into a chair and slipped into the
meditation that allowed him access to his Inner World without the jarring sense of getting yanked in by his spirits.

The sky in his sideways city was overcast, a heavy blue-gray that threatened rain. That alone was probably enough to make the Hollow pissy, but the white spirit was ignoring it.

“Look what ya did to my windows!” the Hollow screeched.

Ichigo looked down. A large circle had been scoured into the surface of the glass side of the skyscraper at the center of his Inner World. It was like someone had taken a circular power sander and let it gouge out a wide area with the Old Man's flagpole at its center. There was a sparkling heap of glass powder at the base of the pole.

“Calm yourself,” the Old Man said.

“Fuck you,” the Hollow sneered. He pointed up and down the length of the flagpole. “Your perch is just fine you giant fucking crow. Mine is fucked! Look at this!” He threw himself to his knees and slammed a hand on the rough surface. “Fuckin' look at this!” Slam slam slam slam slam.

Ichigo stared. His Hollow was throwing a temper tantrum over scratched glass. What.

“The FUCK'm I supposed to do with thi-- SON OF A BITCH!” the Hollow snarled as blue blood smeared on the glass from the cuts he gave himself.

Ichigo looked up at the Old Man. “What happened here?”

“You were a dumbass is what happened!” the Hollow answered hotly before the Old Man could.

“You weren't exactly helpful yourself!” Ichigo snapped.

“I warned you!”

“Calling me an idiot isn't a warning!”

“It was a warning to stop being an idiot!”

“Be more specific next time, you ass! WAIT, you said yourself that you didn't know how to leave!”

The Old Man sighed deeply.

Ichigo and the Hollow flinched and went quiet. Ichigo felt childish. The Hollow sulked.

“You should tell Kisuke Urahara about this,” the Old Man said solemnly.

“What even is this?” Ichigo asked.

“Tch. When your dumb ass butted in, we got a tornado in 'ere,” the Hollow answered sullenly. “With a shitload of sand and flowers like stuck-up noble ass.” Byakuya. “Purple fuckin' sand. A giant fuckin' purple 'n pink dust-devil. And it did this!” he shouted and jabbed a finger to point at the windows.

“Is this... bad?” Ichigo asked the Old Man.

“Not particularly,” he replied. “We simply refrained from repairs until you could see this. We can mend it fairly easily, but I believe it is an effect Kisuke Urahara may find enlightening. Leaving it intact may prove useful.”
“Yeah, thanks,” Ichigo muttered. He paced around the circle's edge, eyeing the gouge. “Is there a pattern in it?”

“Faintly,” the Old Man confirmed. Then he tilted his head as though listening. “I believe your father has returned. We can finish this discussion later.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for telling me,” Ichigo said gratefully with a small wave at him. “Sorry about this.”

“Think before shoving your hand in a wood-chipper next time!” the Hollow sneered.

Ichigo rolled his eyes. “You're really not one to talk there. If you saw the blades of a wood-chipper, you'd wanna fight it.”

“Tch. Get the fuck outta here.”

“That wasn't a denial.”

“Get the fuck outta here.”

With that, his Hollow booted him out into the real world.

The next time Homura woke, she felt as though she had a century of rest behind her. It had been a very long time since she felt such peace and safety. Her memory of the first time she woke was glossed over in a dreamy blur, but she remembered... enough.

The Kurosaki family had huddled around her to give her comfort. Homura still sensed them; she pulled herself up to full consciousness and scanned the room from beneath lowered lashes. Karin and Yuzu still bracketed her on either side of the bed, but Karin was snoring in her ear now and Yuzu was murmuring wordlessly in her sleep. Isshin was slumped in a chair, head craned back and snoring at the ceiling. A faint smile tugged at Homura's lips. Her eyes drifted and finally found Ichigo. He was pacing as though agitated but his magic felt... nervous? Homura turned her head as much as she could without smothering herself in Yuzu's loosed hair, intending to watch Ichigo and figure him out.

Her movement must have caught his eye; he startled, missed a step, and jerked his head around to face her directly. A relieved smile softened his face and he stepped over to the bed. “Hey, Stopwatch,” he croaked.

“Ichi... go,” Homura murmured as he leaned over her and the twins. She still felt pleasantly dreamy. Looking up at him surrounded by a faint nimbus from some light source behind him, Homura saw his hair and thought of the orange light of sunset filtering through a field of ripe barley. She had seen that once when she was small, on a long train ride with her parents that passed through farmland on the way to a distant medical center. Barley and wheat and rice and soy stretching to the horizon in every direction as she rested against her mother while her father identified the things rushing past the window to distract her from the pain in her chest. Peace settled over her at the memory.

Ichigo grinned at her. “You look a bit more with it this time,” he said just above a whisper. “How you feel?”

“Sounded like you started dreaming before you were all the way out,” he said with a crooked smirk. “Was it a good one?”

“Yes,” she replied. Homura gazed at the ceiling and felt something like disappointed homesickness at the matte shadows. “Ah. I want to... stargaze,” she murmured. “Especially if you want to talk about... things.”

“Oh, uh, you remember I said that, huh?” Ichigo asked.

Homura hummed confirmation and said, “I suppose the stars are not visible outside, anyway, though.” Then she shifted a bit and pitched her voice louder. “You are all terrible at feigning sleep.”

Isshin choked on a laugh that devolved into a coughing fit. Yuzu and Karin made disappointed sounds. Ichigo's laughter was bright and warm.

“How'd'ja tell?” Karin slurred, not quite awake.

“You all went still and quiet,” Homura explained. “It is unnatural. You are all noisy and active sleepers.”

Karin dropped her head on Homura's shoulder and made a rude noise. Yuzu sat up with a dismayed cry and said, “Even me?”

“You mumble,” Homura said.

“What have I been telling you since we learned words?” Karin mocked. The effect was ruined by the fact it was spoken... pretty much into Homura's armpit.

Homura rolled her shoulder and tried to shove Karin away. “If you drool on me, I will shoot every soccer ball you own.”

“Hey!”

“Nah, Homura,” Ichigo teased. “It's the cleats you need to threaten.”

Karin launched up and reeled to face him, then jabbed a finger his way and screeched, “Traitor!”

Ichigo gave her an exaggerated evil laugh while Yuzu giggled and Isshin guffawed. Homura found herself smiling. She was getting used to this. It felt like home. After basking in it for a moment, she stretched, took a deep breath, and said, “You wanted to talk?”

Somehow, the prospect wasn't anathema. It surprised even her that she wasn't retreating into a fortress. But she felt safe.


Homura frowned in confusion for a moment then said, “Water, please,” and let him hurry away.

They all stared at the doorway; Sado and Ishida peered in around either side of the jamb in curiosity. Ichigo absently waved them off and muttered, “God he sucks at subtlety.”

Karin snorted and said, “Like you don't.”
“Hey, I have my moments,” Ichigo objected good-naturedly as he slung himself into a chair.

“He knows I speak more freely with the three of you than with him, doesn't he?” Homura wondered aloud.

Yuzu smiled confirmation. “He's giving you a chance to tell us to banish him in case you're too polite—”

“Or proud,” Karin muttered.

“--To say it to his face,” Yuzu finished with a warning smile at her twin.

Homura sighed and reflected on the disaster in the dining room. She thought of how Madoka's parents had been so anxious for their daughter-- and how Isshin's face had been set in the same expression when Homura first woke. She wasn't _jealous_ of Madoka, per se, but... somehow, she wanted something similar. And Isshin was similar. Ish. He was even willing and able to stand up to Urahara when the scientist pressed too hard-- and considering what Homura remembered of the scene, he was probably going to be pushing an avalanche of questions onto her. Isshin would step in even though Urahara was his friend. Homura felt strangely safe around the man, now. He had his own interests-- especially where his children were involved-- but she trusted him to also have _her_ best interests in mi--

It suddenly dawned on Homura that Isshin Kurosaki freely gave her what she had desperately wanted from her flesh-and-blood uncle, once upon a time.

Well, not necessarily the... eccentricity. Or his drama or loudness or...manners. Isshin could be awkward and childish, had a reputation among his children as hiding things and having questionable judgment-- though less often now than he once had, Karin had admitted. In many ways, he was a walking collection of parental flaws.

But he _tried_.

He tried more than _any_ adult had since Homura's parents died.

She wasn't his blood kin but he had given her more support and concern in a total of... was it six weeks now, counting the last timeline? Whatever. He had shown her more support and concern in these brief weeks than her blood relative had in the... was it two years in real time since her parents died? Three? _Whatever_. The contrast was drastic.

Homura wasn't interested in replacing her father, but Isshin Kurosaki was-- she could let him be-- replace her un--

“He may stay,” Homura said softly.

Ichigo's brows rose. “You sure, Stopwatch?”

“Yes,” Homura said decisively as she sat up, moved her pillow, and scooted back to lean against the headboard. The twins immediately copied her, their shoulders lightly touching hers. It was comfortably grounding. Homura reached down to adjust her skirt and belatedly realized that she must have dropped her transformation when she dropped the stop upon sedation. She thought. She hadn't exactly been coherent or even seeing “reality” at the time but remembered fingers on her temples and the chaotic gloom smoothing into... dark flowers? Odd. Wait, there had been strong hands on her... shoulder...? and on her waist. Before or after? What had even happened?

“Yo. Yo~oh~,” Karin sang beyond the hand waving in her face.
Homura blinked back to reality and swatted the hand away. “Yes, yes, I'm fine. Just thinking.”

“Knock knock!” Isshin called from the door with nervous cheer. “Can I come in?”

“Yes, please do,” Homura called in return before Ichigo could do more than open his mouth.

Isshin peeked in with a face like a hopeful puppy, then hurried inside. He clumsily clutched a stack of drinking glasses against his chest with one hand and somehow managed to carry two big jugs of water around by their necks in his other hand. It looked painful.

“Ichigo, take them before my fingers break!” Isshin tearfully fake-begged as he struggled to not drop anything.

Smirking, Ichigo lazily reached up and grabbed the tower of cups, leaving his father's other hand in a strained claw around the bottlenecks.

Isshin made a show of looking betrayed, threw his head back to beseech the gods through the ceiling, and bawled, “MA-SA-KIII!” His next words stalled all their long-suffering sighs. “THE KIDS ARE IN A PLAYFUL MOOD! DADDY IS SO HAPPY!”

Ichigo scoff-laughed and took a jug from his father. Homura's lips quirked into a little smile. Isshin noticed and looked like he was basking in glory. Homura's cheeks warmed in... not exactly embarrassment, but she wasn't sure what.

Soon they were settled around Homura, all sipping water and glancing around to see who would begin. Ichigo kept fiddling with a notebook in his lap; the way the others stole furtive looks at it made Homura curious. Ichigo noticed her stare and looked... sheepish? But before Homura could ask, Isshin took a deep breath and began their... meeting?

“So. Do you understand that you got into a magical empathic feedback loop with Madoka?” Homura looked him in the eye and nodded solemnly. Isshin continued. “What do you remember about what was happening? Around you?”

Homura hummed in thought and said, “Not very much. I was... flashing back to... my worst memory... and did not notice much. Yelling, Ichigo's voice saying... something... hands pulling on me, then... dark flowers? That made me... sleepy.” She frowned, then added, “Ah. And Ichigo's magic saving us.”

“How so?” Isshin asked.

Homura bit her cheek, racked her brain for words, and said, “It is very difficult to put in words. Like... Madoka and I were tied to the same cinderblock in... a rough ocean. And Ichigo... tried to pull us both up, then... tried to break the block, or pull the block up by our ropes so we could go up. Toward air. Not literally, but... in feelings.” She stared at the ceiling, unfocused as she remembered the chaos. “I think... we were almost there, when the flowers-- the sleep spell?-- happened.” Homura pursed her lips. “Or... no. Yes...? Yes, almost. But then... I think he sank with us when we got sleepy. Like the spell caught him, too. Ah!” Startled by memory, she looked at Ichigo. “You... somebody said you... lost consciousness?”

Ichigo cringed outwardly the way Homura did internally. “Yeah. Kinda.”

“How did that happen?” Homura asked worriedly.

Isshin sighed tiredly. “He tried to interrupt the loop, was sloppy about it--”
“H-hey,” Ichigo stammered, cheeks going pink.

“--And got himself... tangled. We think.”

When Homura looked at Ichigo directly, he went fully red and started babbling. “Hey, I was right there and couldn't just-- just do nothing. Not with both of you glowing like little pink and purple light bulbs and crying and-- and-- grief just, like--” he waved his hands-- “splashing around like that!”

Homura's own cheeks burned-- she did not remember crying-- but she drew up short and asked, “Splashing... grief?”

“It was wild,” Karin said beside her. “I was down the table a ways so I just felt super sad but some of the people who were at your end of the table....” She looked spooked and trailed off with a glance Ichigo's way.

Ichigo took the obvious cue and said, “Remembered... things.”

Homura felt the blood draining from her face, blush lost. “Things?”

“I dunno about the others but... I had flashbacks to the war,” Ichigo explained. “And... Ginjo stealing my Fullbring. And... the night Mom died.”

Homura's stomach rolled and her mouth went dry. A faded memory of the morning a police officer, the family lawyer, and a social worker walked into her hospital room with somber faces the morning after-- The Fire-- rose in her mind. And Ichigo had actually been present when his own mother died. She felt sick for making him relive that. “I'm-- I'm so sorry!”

“Don't be,” Ichigo ordered stubbornly. “Zangetsu thinks the entire problem is our fault. As a group. Us from Karakura, I mean. We took too long to start training with Madoka then didn't give her something to absorb or control the extra power we woke up. We poked her... magic... with a sharp stick and got too distracted to help her... lock it back down. Leash it. Whatever. Zangetsu's opinion is that it was only a matter of time before Madoka stumbled into another feedback loop like with Sayaka, but with a... negative emotion.” Ichigo gave her a weak smile and added, “He also pointed out... well, at least it wasn't rage or bloodlust that she picked up on?"

There was a terrifying thought. One that broke Homura's brain. Madoka and bloodlust didn't belong in the same sentence.

“Kisuke's gonna go over options with Madoka and her parents when she wakes up,” Isshin said. “To keep this from happening again.”

“She is still unconscious?” Homura demanded with renewed worry.


Homura took a deep breath, released it slowly, and forced tense muscles to relax. Okay. Okay.

After a minute of quiet, Ichigo cleared his throat. When Homura looked his way, he said, “So. Strong emotion. Worst memories. About that.”

Homura frowned warily. He sounded... on edge. “Yes?”

His eyes met hers and cut away in discomfort before looking at her again. “Something... else
happened. Something weird.”

She stared at him and waited. He squirmed under her gaze like a guilty little boy. Homura's worry ramped up several degrees again. “What? What happened?”

Ichigo wet his lips and visibly steeled himself. “I'll... give a short description. Then you can tell me if you wanna kick the others out while I finish. Okay?”

Between his words and his death grip on the notebook, Homura was starting to think she wanted to kick herself out and not hear what he had to say. But that would just come back to haunt her like when any of the others ran off to avoid the truth. She had to listen. “All... right...?”

He breathed out slowly and solemnly said, “I... didn't just see my own memories. I saw... the one you say you saw. I think. That would be my worst memory if it happened to me, so....”

Homura's thought process shut down. Too stunned to think. For an eternity. Eventually, she managed a faint, “What?”

“I saw... you and Madoka,” Ichigo said gently. “From the point where you were laying there talking through... when you...,” he paused, careful with phrasing. “...Did what was asked of you.”

No.

Spinning spinning spinning--

Her empty cup fell from suddenly limp hands.

No way.

Spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning--

Ichigo paused to look at her. Whatever he saw made him cringe. “Sandal-Hat wanted to know what I saw and heard but I said I wouldn't say anything to anyone until-- unless you gave me permission. I'm not-- I'm not gonna blab something I had no right to see in the first place.”

All Homura could do was stare mutely at the pained regret on his face.

No no no no no no no no no no no no no--

Yuzu's hand slipped into hers. “Would you like to talk to Onii-chan in private, Homura?”

Homura's first coherent thought was how considerate. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yeah,” Karin said. “We can stay or go, whichever you want.”

Every Kurosaki was looking at her so earnestly. Tears spilled down Homura's cheeks as she stared at each of them in turn. They were alarmed by her tears, but didn't tell her to stop. To not cry. She met Ichigo's worried gaze and asked, “You saw... what I did? To-- to Ma--?” She couldn't finish the sentence-- the name.

“I... I don't want... to become a Witch.”

Rain on her face sparking black shaking shaking shaking gun—

He nodded, first hesitant then firm.
Homura closed her eyes and pressed her mouth shut on her lip so tightly it hurt and her tongue registered the metallic tang of blood.

Ichigo had witnessed her cardinal sin.

She had spoken of it briefly, before... When? Definitely in the last timeline, but had they mentioned it this time? Homura was too upset to remember clearly. But mentioning it in words and having someone impor-- having someone see it were two very different things. She had shot her best friend in cold blood.

“Yeah. And I heard how she asked you. It'd be... hard to argue against that. Really it... wasn't really fair to ask those things. Of you, I mean. But... you did what you had to.” What was he talking about?

“You don't hate me?” Homura's stupid mouth asked in an embarrassing squeak.

She couldn't see the girls' faces, but both men's fell into sympathy. Ichigo emphatically shook his head no and said, “No way. That was-- that was brave. Of you.” He dragged his hand down his face and added, “I mean, logically, it was the only way you had to spare her... that. You did something for your friend that I... I don't know if I could do it for one of my friends.” Why did he look ashamed of that? “The-- the thing at the end, I mean,” he clarified unnecessarily in a flustered rush, waving his hands. “I'd absolutely time travel as many times as it took to save them. But... the mercy she asked of you after that promise was... cruel. To you.”

Homura shook her head in denial. “No. No, it wasn't. Madoka isn't-- isn't-- cruel--”

“Cruel may be... the wrong word. It sounds like she was... desperate?” Isshin hazarded with an uncertain glance at his son. When Ichigo nodded, Isshin said, “People can do and say very... out of character... things when they are desperate.”

“If not cruel, then at least selfish,” Ichigo amended. Isshin frowned and opened his mouth to interrupt and Homura furiously opened her mouth to argue but Ichigo plowed on regardless. “Not that I can fault her for it. I-- I'd probably b-beg for the s-same thing, myself. Especially if I was... fourteen. But... it was still horrifying that she asked you.”

“Ichigo,” Isshin warned.

“Ah, wait-- it was a horrifying thing to be asked,” Ichigo amended. “Not that she's-- not a judgment against Madoka, I mean. Just... horrifying in general. For you.”

Homura kept shaking her head, exaggerating the movement until her upper body swayed with each turn.

No. No.

The twins squeezed her shoulders and hands.

No.

“It-- was-- f-fine,” Homura grit out. “It was-- my-- anyway-- my faul-- Madoka did-n't-- didn't-- did-n't--”

Ichigo hesitated, then slowly spoke as if each word might trip a bomb. “Even... last time, even K-arin... did it... herself.”
Despite Homura's best effort, a sob rose from her gut and escaped her mouth-- almost like vomiting. She yanked her hands from the sisters and covered her face. She didn't want to think, but couldn't help doing so.

She didn't want to think about her initial hurt anger at the first Karin's frozen look of pleading for complicity in her suicide. She hadn't told anyone about it. Never ever ever would.

Still...

The other girls had all destroyed their own Soul Gems in various ways.

Except for Madoka.

“It-- was-- fine. It-- was-- fine. I-- didn't s-stop her-- did-n't-pro-tect-her-e-nough, so I had to-- I failed, so I had to-- had to--- had to--”

Homura didn't want to think about that and didn't want to think about the stash of big slip-joint pliers she had impulsively shoved into her shield to give out if anyone else ever asked for the same release from her misery and inevitable fate. Didn't want to think about how a past Sayaka had given her that idea.

By example.

Didn't want to think about how close she had come to shooting Sayaka's Soul Gem... was it one or two timelines ago? Didn't want to revisit whether she had been bluffing or serious when that Kyōko had stopped her. Didn't want to think of her satisfaction shooting the Sōju sisters' Soul Gems, how she had cold-bloodedly anticipated it beforehand and now was determined to do it again and again and again as many times as she had to.

Didn't want to think about... didn't want to think. Didn't want to grasp all the conflicting feelings.

“It's not fair,” Ichigo growled through teeth clenched in obvious frustration. “Every time I think I understand how unfair this all is to you, I—” He cut himself off, seemingly at a loss for words. After a minute, he bit down on his knuckle before saying, “But, like... do you understand that you can hate all of it-- hate what desperate things you've been cornered into-- do you understand that you can hate what Madoka asked you to do without hating Madoka? Or... yourself, for doing it?”

Homura peeked at him above her hands. His face was pinched in a scowl of concerned puzzlement. His frown deepened as he scrutinized her.

“You don't, do you?” Isshin asked heavily.

Homura glanced his way and found him watching her as intently as his son. The man's face bore an expression of tired, pained sympathy.

Didn't want to think. Didn't want to feel.

But she... still felt safe.

Homura hesitated before cautiously admitting, “I... don't. Do not know. I mean, I am... not sure. It's... complicated.”

Isshin gave her a ghost of a smile. “I would think so.” He pursed his lips and seemed to debate himself over something as Karin and Yuzu cuddled and comforted her. “I think Ichigo has it a bit wrong-- worded it wrong,” he finally said. “But... I don't want to say definitively, not knowing....”
He trailed off, then gently asked, “Would you be all right with Ichigo telling us what he saw? Then we can talk about it together. As--” His voice stopped even though his mouth shaped a word. As though he dare not cross some invisible line. But the word his lips formed was obvious.

Family.

Homura didn't want to think or feel. Feeling was just... always too much. It was agonizing. But.

Something made her look at her Soul Gem ring. She was reeling in anguish, but... the Gem hadn't dimmed.

What?

She stared at it and tried to center herself. Tried to think. Even though she really really really didn't want to.

She... somehow, she still felt safe.

Homura drew herself upright, pressed herself against the headrest with a straight spine, and inclined her chin as she inhaled deeply. Eyes closed. The world trembled in the balance like a single thread of silk suspending the blade of a guillotine as she breathed, hesitated, breathed--

“All right,” she rasped. “But...” Homura tilted her head toward the hall, eyes still closed.

“Oy! Chad!” Ichigo barked. “Get the door, yeah?”

The door clicked shut. Silence.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Isshin asked gravely.

“Yes,” Homura whispered.

Karin leaned into her and wrapped her arms Homura's waist. Her head lightly bumped into Homura's and stayed there. Yuzu let go of her arm and shifted; with her eyes shut, it took Homura a moment to realize the girl was partitioning hair for braiding.

Was it... really that obvious how comforting it was for Homura to have someone weaving her hair?

Homura kept her eyes shut and listened to Ichigo read what he had written and felt the even rhythm of Karin's breath and tried to figure out just how many strands Yuzu was plaiting into what shape. Ichigo's voice faltered as he went on, stumbled over wording, completely stopped and was replaced by the scratching of a pen as he found something inadequate, rewrote, and resumed talking.

“Then Homura did what Madoka asked... and I was back at the table,” he finished eons later.

Silence.

Karin's shoulders shook and her grip on Homura tightened. Yuzu sniffled and let go of Homura's hair to throw her arms into an embrace that mirrored Karin's.

“Homura,” Isshin said softly.

Homura kept quiet and focused on breathing evenly.

His magic moved closer. Rough fingertips carded through her bangs, combed her hair away from her face, paused at her temple.
Homura kept quiet and focused on breathing evenly.

“Homura,” Isshin said more firmly, right in front of her. His fingertips tapped against her temple. “Look at me.”

Homura blinked the tears off her lashes and looked up. Brown eyes like Ichigo's peered into hers as though searching for something; unlike Ichigo's, they were lined with stress and age. Isshin wiped tears from her cheeks with his knuckles and looked at a loss for words. It... did something to her, made her gaze skitter away from his and toward Ichigo.

Ichigo looked devastated. Haunted.

“I'm sorry you had to see that,” Homura murmured.

“I'm sorry you had to live that,” Ichigo rasped.

They stared at each other.

Isshin's hand was suddenly on the crown of her head, ruffling her hair before settling. The weight was reassuring.

“I'm proud of you.”

Homura threw her head back to look up at him, wild-eyed with disbelief.

Isshin smiled. His watery eyes crinkled with it, deepening his crow's feet. “I'm proud of you,” he repeated in a croak. “That was probably the most difficult thing anyone ever has or ever will ask you to do. And you helped her.”

“I killed her!” Homura cried. “That's nothing to be p--!”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Isshin interrupted with a weak tap of a hand-chop to her crown. He inhaled deeply and continued, “I say this as someone who had family who was... mercy-killed.”

Homura froze and looked at him in bafflement. What?


“Ichi-nii, can you at least remember family names?” Karin asked drily.

“I never met the guy!” Ichigo squawked.

“Neither did I and I know his name's Kaien,” Karin retorted.

Isshin ignored his bickering kids and kept his eyes locked on Homura's. “Kaien Shiba was the lieutenant of Thirteenth Division before Rukia. He was also my cousin. Several decades ago, he went on a mission that went bad. His zanpakutō was destroyed and he was possessed by a Hollow. The Hollow used his body to attack Captain Ukitake and Rukia, who was an unranked soldier at the time. Rukia was the one who ended up... delivering the finishing blow.” Isshin paused, considered his words and heavily continued, “I was a third seat at the time. Different division, but an officer. Captain Ukitake came to me and explained the situation before... the funeral. The Hollow had said it would eat Kaien from the inside out over the course of the night. It would've been... a slow torture of a death. I... thought about it, tried to put myself in... my cousin's place, and... even then, I couldn't be angry at Rukia. The older I've gotten, the more grateful I am for her blade's mercy for him.”
“Grateful,” Homura whispered.

“Grateful,” Isshin repeated with a strong nod. “These days, I might be able to do something like that myself. Might. Depending on who it was. Family... someone I love... would be... extremely difficult. Maybe still impossible. But back then... no way. For anyone, let alone family. I... probably would've frozen.” He frowned in silent thought for a bit. “From what I heard when I caught up with Captain Ukitake after the war, Rukia blamed herself right up until the war. Decades. Hated herself for it. Was ashamed of it. For decades. Thought herself a failure for not saving him in the most ideal way and let that failure define her. Limit her. For decades. Jūshirō said she shrank in on herself, shied away from her potential, closed herself off. Clipped her own wings and refused to fly no matter how he encouraged her. Made no friends, isolated herself. Didn't live, just existed. Even though very few people found fault with her-- and those who did didn't know the context.”

Then Isshin just stared.

Ichigo also stared. Expectant.

Isshin raised a brow at her.

Homura stared back and got the message:

Like her.

Oh.

Isshin must have seen the recognition on her face because his expression warmed. “Rukia was forced to confront that past and its weight during the war. Faced her fear and faced Kaien's younger siblings. Accepted that her actions had been necessary and proper despite their horror. Jūshirō said she was able to reconcile with the past and take up Kaien's banner-- his philosophy, his positivity, his drive to rise up. And his... acceptance of the potential of death. Apparently, he taught the shinigami of Thirteenth the same thing he taught me when I joined the ranks: That if we should die, our comrades will carry our hearts with them. It wouldn't surprise me if Kaien was content to pass his heart to Rukia as he died.”

“Heart?” Homura asked, baffled.

“Not that muscle in your chest,” Isshin said. He pulled his hand off Homura's head and pointed at her chest, then waved the hand in dismissal. “Everything that makes you you. Your hopes, dreams, loves, goals, empathy, memories, ties to others. Every time you interact with someone, a 'heart' is born between you. It's like... an understanding, a relationship as an entity. What you do with it is up to you. Nurture, neglect, reject, treasure. When we die, we don't have anymore input into the 'hearts' between us and others. It's up to the other half to decide what to do with them from then on.” Isshin leaned in and gripped Homura's shoulders, leaned in and looked her in the eye hard.

“You carry that Madoka's heart with you. You carry the heart of every Madoka you ever met. The Madoka who asked you for that mercy deliberately trusted you with hers-- handed it right over. So what're you gonna do with it?”

Homura stared. Dumbfounded.

Isshin pulled back, straightened, and crossed his arms. His mouth stretched into a satisfied smile.

“You think about that, okay?”

Homura's mouth opened and closed several times, struggling for words with her world tilted on its
axis, before she managed to say, “O-okay.”

They were all quiet for a minute, a temporary peace settling over them.

Then Isshin took a deep breath and said, “Kisuke would like for Ichigo to describe what happened and what he saw, then ask him a lot of questions.” He saw Homura tense and added, “As uncomfortable a topic it may be, the fact that Ichigo was somehow able to view a memory of a past timeline means that it's not an impossible thing. If you could share memories with new versions of us every time, things could go... smoother.”

“What if I don't want to share my memories with anyone?” Homura snapped.

“Then you don't have to,” Ichigo declared with a scowl.

Isshin nodded. “It would still be useful to know it's available as an option. Especially if it could be used for Kisuke to give memories of research or training to you.”

Homura pursed her lips. That would be... extremely useful, actually.

“I don't have to tell him all the details about the memory I saw,” Ichigo offered. “I can just say I saw you two talking. He doesn't need to know the words you said to each other. I wanna respect your privacy as much as I can.”

Homura chewed her lip. “What if he says he needs to know... what we said?”

“Then I'll tell him I'll ask you first and if you still say no with whatever reason he gives I'll tell him to fuck off and forget it,” Ichigo said with blatant stubbornness. “We're not stupid. We can figure something else out. He had a plan for passing stuff on before this became a possibility. He'll just have to suck it up.”

“At the same time,” Isshin hedged carefully, “please consider that if you were able to share memories at will, it may be easier to... pick up where you left off with other versions of everyone. By giving us memories of what previous selves did.”

Homura frowned skeptically. “Or I could appear to be an enemy capable of brainwashing.” She looked at Ichigo. “Like the enemy you told me about. With the bookmark-sword that allowed him to insert himself into other people's memories.”

Ichigo went white.

Isshin ran his hands through his hair and sighed wearily. “You have a point. But it could still be useful to know. In case of emergency. And may even help with figuring out how the barrier around Asunaro messes with memory.”

Homura sighed. “You also have a point. Several.” She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing for a long minute while she debated the merits in her head. They let her. Eventually, she looked at Ichigo and nodded. “I... approve of telling him. Without details about the conversation. I...” Homura hesitantly glanced at every Kurosaki. “Talking about that with you is... I can do that. But... I do not want to discuss it with him. At all. I... trust... you to not spread word of it. But... not him. So no details.”

Ichigo gave her a lopsided grin and a lazy salute. “Mission accepted, Stopwatch.”

Homura breathed. In; out. In; out.
She could bear this.

She was responsible for every past Madoka's heart and she would carry them forward come Hell or high water. This was nothing in comparison to what she had borne up to this point. Even if she faltered, she would continue. She had family to shield her from Hell's flames and bear her up above high water now. And even if she had to leave them... well, she would be carrying their hearts with her from now on, so she would be okay.

She would be okay.

She would be okay without their actual presence.

If she told herself that enough, she would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ayyyy. The Kurosaki family took my plan for this chapter and did their own goddamn thing with it. *shrug*
ZWEIUNDACHTZIG

Chapter Notes

A/N: How has it only been like 2.5 months since the last update? Feels like a year. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ZWEIUNDACHTZIG

TIMELINE X+N+1

Kisuke wearily trudged into the surveillance room and dropped into a chair.

Rin eyed him uneasily and let him breathe for a minute before speaking. “Um, sir? I... I know you had me working on the other thing, but I had to come in here when the alarms.... Sorry.”

“That's fine,” Kisuke said.

Rin bit his lip, then ventured, “[...I... don't know what happened upstairs, but... the sensors... the ones inside the wards, I mean....”

“Fried?” Kisuke deadpanned as he listlessly called up sensor data on his own screen.

“Yes, sir,” Rin replied. “[... can understand why. From how that felt from here. Had the sensors been one to two hundred meters away, they would have been fine. But the close proximity....” He sighed and shook his head in dismay. “Hmmmnnn. But if you had them farther away, the wards on the property would block reception.”

Kisuke sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose, pressing on his closed eyes as he tried to stave off a headache. “[... may have to ward a radius of a couple city blocks next time,” he muttered. “Buy myself time to... adjust.”

“Next time? Sir,” Rin asked with a frown.

Kisuke laughed weakly and waved him off. “[Don't worry about it, don't worry about it,” he sang halfheartedly. They had chosen to avoid telling Rin about the time shenanigans so he wouldn't slip and tell Kurotsuchi. Either of them. Kisuke had assigned him a task in another room in addition to turning off the screens that displayed video of the dining room so Rin wouldn't accidentally see the flashes of movement from viewing the timestamp from the outside.

And Kisuke had gone and slipped. Only slightly, but it brought him back to himself a bit. Focus. Focus. Right.

“You can go back to the other thing now,” Kisuke said, dismissal polite but clear.

He set what video and sensor data had been acquired before the power spike to play on a loop and brooded over it, watching dispassionately while leaning on his elbow and tapping his fingers on his
face. Nebulous thoughts drifted through his mind like gossamer threads on a breeze; Benihime would help him try to make something of them later. What a mess. What a fascinating, disturbing, hopeful mess.

Hopeful instead of hopeless was a refreshing change of pace, at least.

Still. Why hadn't he spent this entire godforsaken timeline investigating the possibility of memory transference?

*Because you thought other options would be adequate,* Benihime said. *Then you were understandably occupied with escalating damage control.*

Kisuke sighed deeply, rubbed his eyes, and gazed up at the ceiling in thought as he shuffled priorities again. Which were the most important? The most secret? Which could be delegated? What needed cover stories to be told to who? Who was best to deliver them? Where was truth the best option? What should be saved for next time?

Kisuke really really really didn't want to mess with painstakingly adapting the sensors he had hardened for use around his incomplete Hōgyoku back in the day so that shielding sensors didn't interfere with readings, but it looked necessary. He had hoped to avoid sinking the time to do such a thing. It wasn't something he could delegate in its entirety, though Tessai could help.

*Time. Ha.*

Kisuke wondered if Homura hated the paradox of not having enough goddamn time despite time manipulation.

Anyway. Would there be lasting effects on any of the three who had been in the... resonance? How long would it take to debrief Ichigo, assuming he allowed himself to be debriefed? When would that happen? What should he tinker with first? What did he have time to tinker with before Ichigo was ready? *What the hell had happened when those two's powers went wild? How did it happen?*

There had been two moments when Kisuke felt something near fear: When Ichigo's face went slack, eyes staring blankly into nothingness as reflections of the girls' pink and purple light danced in them; and the shell-shocked paranoia that had Ichigo jumping like a startled bird at Orihime's familiar power. Ichigo's facial expression was nearly identical to the one he had worn the night Kūgo Ginjō stole his Fullbring and left him powerless once more. Ichigo *crying* was something that disturbed Kisuke on a deep, unsettling level.

*“It was like I was there. In the ruins. In the rain. With the girls. And the gun. I couldn't stop it.”*  

Kisuke had known that Homura was downplaying her trauma– especially from that briefly-mentioned incident– but had been too goddamn busy to put the thought the problem deserved into helping her with that. The Kurosaki family was helping immensely, but perhaps it needed to be a more organized effort. Something to consider.

And that wasn't even considering that if *Ichigo* had seen what had happened, there was a chance that *Kaname* had, too.

A monumentally powerful empath, a monumentally traumatized magical girl, and an Ichigo Kurosaki walk into a bar....

Benihime snorted. *Chaos ensued.*

*Chaos ensued* was the theme of Kisuke's life, it seemed.
Kisuke was admittedly not very good at handling other people's emotions and traumas beyond manipulating them. Given the task of resolving them, he was largely adrift except for pushing people to address things themselves. He had boxed himself off to a significant extent when he was in Second Division and though he had come a long way since, he still had one foot in that coffin—and it was the foot that supported him the most when things got bad. Now he had to account for trauma more gently. He had known it on an intellectual level, but somehow Ichigo's tears upon witnessing Homura's memories had driven it home in a way nothing else had quite managed. He had to figure this out as more than just a puzzle.

He would need to convince his next self to do the same. That might be... difficult.

Wait. A copy of Karin's video of Junko lecturing him might be very useful, there. With a bonus warning to take the woman seriously.

“I fail to see the humor in this, Kisuke.”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You just sound so much like someone else who has lectured me on that in the past. It caught me by surprise.”

“That implies you don't learn, Kisuke. I suggest you correct that.”

Yeah. That would be useful.

Persistent beeping interrupted his thoughts. A glance showed that someone was calling the shop phone. Whoever it was, they were masking their number and very stubborn. Kisuke stared at the notification for a solid five minutes before idly picking it up, wondering what delightful surprise was on the other end. “High Spirits. We're a bit busy right now.”

“Of course you are,” a young male voice drawled. “That's exactly why I'm calling. What did you heroes do up here?”

Familiar. Hm. “I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, young man,” Kisuke drawled in return, voice a threatening simper. “With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“Tch. All that mess and you didn't even bother to remember me?”

Egotistical brat.

Ohhh.

Kisuke smirked and waited until the voice huffed, “Yukio Hans Vorarlberna!”

The Fullbringer who had been part of and bankrolled the plot to cultivate then steal Ichigo's Fullbring last year. Smug tech-savvy teenage prodigy obsessed with video games to the extent that his Fullbring used a handheld game console as a focus. Vengeful little snot who had stolen all his father's money and ruined his business, then gloated about how happy he had been when he saw news of the man's suicide.

Kisuke did have to admire the finesse of the revenge even if he did think it was excessive. Excess made sense for a then-thirteen-year-old with the poor impulse control of a child with a gaming winner-take-all mentality and a mountain of resentment, but still. The kid sure knew his finance technicalities and hacking and had covered his tracks skilfully. But his revenge had ruined the finances and careers of all his father's company's employees, which was a step too far for Kisuke. These days, anyway; he favored precision strikes with limited collateral damage now. The little monster had a very narrow view of the world and his actions showed lack of concern for any
consequences that didn't directly affect him.

Kisuke was glad the brat got spanked in battle by Hitsugaya. It had probably been a blow to his ego coming from someone who looked his age. Especially because Hitsugaya had turned that ego back on him in a simple mind-game that made him look like an idiot.

Kisuke wished he had been able to see that. The incident report Hitsugaya had written had been a delightful read.

Anyway.

“...Who?”

“The Fullbringer! From Xcution! Got one over on your designated hero?”

“You are treading on thin ice, my dear Yuuuuu-ki,” Kisuke sang softly.

“You're showing thin skin, Looooser-hara.”

Kisuke was not allowed to string up living teenagers to play puppet no matter how much they earned it.

Pity, murmured Benihime mental voice dripping with disappointment.

Well, Kisuke had been a smartass little shit back in his day, too. Didn't know how he didn't get strangled by someone in the Shihoin clan for it. Two could play the snarky smartass game. He just had to be careful about it.

“Why are you here and what really wiped Asunaro off the map?” Yukio droned.

Charming.

“First: Here? Second: You don't strike me as the sort to care.”

Kisuke had kept track of the brat after the Xcution debacle, of course. The boy had used the fortune he pilfered from his father to found his own entertainment and gaming company, Y. Hans Enterprise. But last time Kisuke checked— three weeks ago when glancing around to see if setting up shop would step on any toes— the Fullbringer didn't have offices in or near Mitakihara or Asunaro. Sendai, yes, but not Mitakihara or Asunaro.

“I came down from Sendai to look sad about a subcontractor's HQ being erased and donate relief supplies for the cameras, then assess fire damage at a distribution center,” Yukio explained grumpily. “And woouldn't you know? The whole map is spiritually nuked and the flashiest wards around are at an address registered to you. And you erased your existence from decades' worth of Karakura records. And inserted a lifetime of records for residence and business in Tokyo. Among other things. Assembled players and changed your entire party's stats. Who are you trying to trick?”

“Oh, my, you really do your research,” Kisuke cooed.

“The wards you have up are weirder than your Karakura wards, not to mention you being away from Karakura at all,” Yukio continued. “What are you warding against?”

“Perhaps I felt like a change of scenery,” Kisuke said breezily. Internally, he noted that if Yukio had spotted his wards, he needed to plan a way for the shinigami to “react” to them upon cleanup. Actually, he had better tell Twelfth to pause the pending mission.
...Wait. *How close had the brat gotten to their location* to pick up their wards in detail?

Yay! More calculations to be run! More notes about next time's security systems to make! Always a joy!

Yukio suspiciously asked, “Who are you hiding from and what are you shinigami doing that blew up an entire city?”

Kisuke raised a brow as he typed a message to Akon. “Oh, my. You think I did this?”

“I think you backed a team of noobs that treated a stealth game as a hack-and-slash and tried to brute force everything with no strategy.”

Kisuke scowled.

“So is it over or is the final boss hanging around waiting to cost me even more money?”

“Well now, that depends on your view of when the game ends, doesn't it?” Kisuke trilled cheerfully.

“Was this a win or a Game Over?” Yukio asked.

“Also depends. Though if it wasn't a win it obviously would be Continue instead of Game Over, since we're alive to have this conversation. In that way, it was a win.”

“What, you? Moving goal posts to start a new game on Easy Mode after a Bad End?” Yukio snarked. “Surprising.”

Kisuke opened his mouth to retort, then paused. “Are you... interested in playing a new game on Hard Mode?” he asked coyly.

“Depends,” the brat retorted. “Am I going to be forced on an escort mission?”

“Do you have subcontractor operations in Mitakihara?” Kisuke asked lightly.

“Obviously. What multinational tech firm doesn't?”

“What if I told you that we expect the next raid to happen in Mitakihara on May first?”

Doubtful silence, followed by a dry, “Got a crystal ball in that magic shop, you swindler shinigami?”

“Wouldn't you like to know,” Kisuke said innocently. “And you have some nerve calling anyone a swindler.”

“You call it swindling. I call it winning.”

“You have a warped definition of winning.”

“The smoking crater where my subcontractor's HQ used to be says you do, too.”

Touché.

Kisuke leaned to one side and propped his chin on his fist. “Why reach out to me? Why bother?”

“I'd rather not attend more employee funerals than I have to,” Yukio drawled callously.
Bullshit. But Kisuke would let it be for now. “Are you offering your assistance?”

“Are you looking for assistance?”

He went silent for a long minute as he considered his options. The brat's technical expertise could be useful. Having a griever in his party might also be useful if he could be aimed exclusively at enemies. And kept faaar awaaay from anyone with the surname Kurosaki. Well, any non-Ichigo Kurosaki.

Kisuke didn't think he would ever understand Ichigo's sheer capacity to forgive. He would have tried to beat some of it out of the boy as a fatal weakness if it wasn't so bizarrely effective at turning powerful enemies into powerful allies. Kisuke just decided to let Ichigo do his thing and exploit the fruits of that forgiveness, quietly bearing what should be Ichigo's grudges and tracking the debts of the forgiven for him.

Yukio was also the sort to keep such a ledger, given his revenge and his background in finance. Perhaps an extra year of life experience had made him aware of the debt he owed for not paying for his treachery with his life.

He was probably also the type to loathe being in debt to someone. Hm.

...And if that was true, Kisuke might be able to leverage that debt over and over in every timeline for different things.

Within his Inner World, Benihime shivered mid-step with a thrill of anticipation.

Kisuke debated internally for a moment before venturing, “I might have some use for a tech-savvy NPC who provides information to the party. The Shinigami Research and Development Institute is rather busy and not well-versed in human media and internet communication and culture.”

“Oh-ho~?” Yukio said airily.

Kisuke could almost see the kid sit straighter in his chair, almost see his chin rise in arrogance.

Benihime hummed and stroked a thread in in a small tapestry in the section of their textile store that was dedicated to the looms of the begrudged. Plucked it with a musical twang; played ego. Slid to resentment and stroked it into a low thrum.

“Quite,” Kisuke chirped. “It is rather inconvenient. I do need to collect information, but I have much more... dire things to be doing to prepare Ichigo for the raid.”

A crimson fingernail moved over several threads and picked at debt, then injured pride.

You owe Ichigo, you owe him, you OWE him, you owe HIM, YOU OWE HIM–

“What kind of information?” Yukio asked stiffly.

Kisuke leaned forward and steepled his fingers, a plan slotting together like a jigsaw puzzle. “In-depth curation and transcription of disaster coverage. Collection of data from human law enforcement, government, and military communications about everything Asunaro. Everything available about whatever buildings and occupants were at the epicenter– records both public and private. A deep dive into internet forums and conspiracy theories regarding Asunaro. Nothing is too outlandish.”

A long pause of silence stretched between them as Yukio undoubtedly ran his own calculations.
“And what would you expect your helpful NPC to do with this information?”

“Turn it over in its entirety, with or without rudimentary organization,” Kisuke answered immediately. “I know exactly what I want to look for. Collecting the raw data and sifting out excessive repetition is what I do not have time for.”

“And you don't trust me enough to tell me what to look for,” Yukio drawled.

“Precisely!” Kisuke sang. “Just like you don't trust me enough to stroll through my front door~!” He didn't bother hiding the sweet poison in his voice. The brat understood they were both playing a game. “But also, I don't want to give you a reason to unconsciously dismiss something that may end up relevant after all.”

“Oh? Has that happened recently?” Yukio asked lowly.

Fuck.

...Admitting it could actually work to Kisuke's advantage, though. Feed that drive to be superior.

“Oh, no, critical hit~” he lilted softly.

“I'll send direct contact information to Kurosaki,” Yukio said smugly before disconnecting the call.

Just in case Kisuke was lying about Ichigo's involvement. To make trouble if he was lying about Ichigo's involvement. Smartass.

Kisuke heaved a gusty sigh and threw himself back in his chair, then wheeled himself around the room while spinning in circles as though recalculating his route in some internal GPS.

It was a risk. A big risk. But with so many other human allies busy or upset, delegating this task could be a major relief. If he got good intel, maybe he could push the Fullbringer into taking on the Sōju-tracking that Isshin was probably going to be way too busy teenager-wrangling to continue.

He needed to talk to Ichigo and give him a heads-up.

---

It turned out Sayaka wasn't a very good Mario Kart driver when her brain was broken and reassembling itself. Kyōko was mostly staying on the track—mostly— but Sayaka kept veering off into walls or nothingness whenever she had another thought. And she was having a lot of jumbled thoughts.

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo went the little thing that dragged her stupid kart back onto the track. Over and over and over.

How many times had they not believed Homura?

“This is... not the first time I have met you.”

Really. How many times?

“I am no longer certain. I lost count in the forties.”
“People rarely believe what I say and do not heed my warnings.”

How many times had they not believed her?

Sayaka looked back on all the serious talks with Homura that she had been around for and internally cringed so hard she thought she would implode.

How many times had they not believed her?

“I am aware of how unbelievable this must sound. So if you are willing to do an experiment, I would like to prove my claim before I move on. As a show of good faith.”

Prove her claim. Show of good faith. Experiment on her.

Madoka looked down at the Soul Gem in her hands. “You— you just gave me your soul?!”

Homura couldn't hide the trem ble of her hand as she put it back on her lap.

Homura had been afraid. And handed her soul over to them anyway.

“I will collapse and stop breathing.”

How many times had they not believed her? How desperate had Homura been to convince them? How desperate had they made her?

“If word of Homura's powers was to spread,” Mr. Hitsugaya had said with a really intense look on his face—protective. “There may be those who would be... tempted. To take her. To experiment on her. To weaponize her. To kill her.”

Yet even though she had been scared, Homura had trusted them enough to perform a dangerous experiment on herself that really gave them absolute power over her. And she eventually told them about the time stuff. Late, but that she did at all was suddenly humbling.

How many times had they not believed her? How dare they not believe her until now?

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo. Your hands shaking in anger wasn't a good thing for driving. That was something she should remember when she grew up. If she ever did.

“You must witness it to understand. I have explained to... other girls, and they did not truly believe me.”

Other girls.

Them.

Sayaka herself.

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

How many times had they not believed her?

Homura looked up at them with sudden ferocity. “To accept a magical girl contract is to sell your soul and sign your death warrant. Do not do it.”

A vision of Homura's temporarily dead body flashed in her mind's eye, seared into her memory. Dull, unblinking eyes and the unnatural stillness of the absence of breath, made all the more
unnerving by how the girl had been staring at her intensely before her face went slack and her body crumpled to the floor.

How many times had they not believed her, that she would resort to something so drastic?

“I have seen magical girls fall myself. My... friends.”

“I am the only survivor of my original team of five.”

Friends. Original team of five. Only survivor.

Us us us Madoka Mami Kyōko– Sayaka herself.

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

“Girls who have already contracted don't believe me when I tell them. They don't want to believe me because it's too late for them. That's why I've taken the time to explain this to you.” Her face went hard but her eyes were desperate. “Please, don't contract and become magical girls!”

How many times had they not believed her? Not taken her advice?

“I know of a girl whose entire family ended up dead because of her wish intended to help them.”

Sayaka glanced at Kyōko and immediately cut her eyes away, ill.

Oh. And the don't-take-her-boots incident.

“That's very thoughtful of you,” Madoka had complimented Homura. “I never would have considered that. It's almost like you know her.”

“This is not the first time I have encountered a homeless magical girl.”

Homura did know Kyōko. And all of the cascading fallout of her wish. Where it led her. What little things she clung to.

“It doesn't matter how well you think you know what you want— or what you think someone else wants.”

Sayaka took a deep breath and thought of Kyōsuke. Her hands trembled on the game controller. Her kart veered off the course again. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

“It almost always goes bad somehow. I—” Homura paused and looked between them with a wretched face. “I— don't want to watch you fall. Either of you. So please: Don't contract.”

How many times had she really watched them actually fall?

How many times had they not believed her?!

How many times had they ignored her warnings and gotten themselves killed– or worse?

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

“I did not know any of this before I contracted. I was tricked. I found out bit by bit afterward.”

“Oh. If you had known, would you have done it?”

The magical girl had stared at her. Sayaka hadn't gotten it at the time, but it was a thousand-yard
stare of... grief? “There were... extraordinary circumstances for me. My hand would have been forced. So given that specific set of circumstances... possibly.”

“My wish... was intended to protect a girl who had already contracted.”

Which of them?

...Wait. What with the way Homura had lost it at the table... the way she tended to listen to her when upset... probably Madoka.

“I believe Homura,” Madoka had stubbornly repeated after that first-not-really-the-first talk.

Had Madoka been the only one of them to believe before this? Wait, but if... if Madoka... died every time, did she contract anyway? Why?!

Sayaka wasn't sure she really wanted to know what had happened there. But–

“My wish... was intended to protect a girl who had already contracted.”

“And how did that work out?” Sayaka's damn fool mouth had asked Homura. “Did it get someone killed like that other girl's wish?”

The now-obvious answer seemed to be yes. All of them. Dozens of times over.

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

Sayaka had never hated herself more than at this very moment. How Homura hadn't throttled her right then and there was a mystery. She would've deserved it. Dozens of times over.

She remembered how Homura had tilted her head slowly, eyes flinty. “I am unsure whether the Incubator is capable of telling direct lies. Just do not automatically believe everything it tells you.”

“But we should believe everything you've told us?” Sayaka had sassed back.

HOW MANY TIMES HAD THEY NOT BELIEVED HER? HOW DID SHE KEEP FROM RAGING AT THEM FOR BEING SO STUPID?

Sayaka thought of the night– just a few days ago– the night Homura wrenched her up by her hair and glared into her soul with violet fire in her eyes as she snarled, “You will hide with that body and not say a word to any other Incubator terminal that shows up or I will make you regret your entire existence.”

Oh.

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

She was stupid. So stupid.

“I... like... you. I do not want to see you sell your soul and trap yourself in that contract. Either of you.”

“You did not tell me in this timeline about your vow to not attend the symphony until Kyōsuke Kamijō could return to the stage. Other iterations of you confessed it in a handful of timelines.”

It suddenly occurred to Sayaka that “Stranger Danger” might be a really cruel nickname.
Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

“In the vast majority of the timelines in which you contracted, your wish was to heal his hand.”

“Did—you help Kyōsuke?!”

“For your sake. To keep you from contracting. I am so... tired... of seeing you die.”

“It would give me greater peace of mind to know you are safely sitting at the café. If you were to be injured because I made a single mistake... I could not bear it.”

How many times had Sayaka contracted and died? She wanted to go back in time and slap every one of her... other selves? Was that a thing?

But really, How many times had she died?

It was a question her mind had been flirting with asking and skittering away from for... how long had they been playing this game? Had either of them even won the race? Had Kyōko set it to just drive endless loo–

...

Oh.

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

Sayaka didn’t ask Kyōko. Kept her mouth shut. Kept driving.

Like Homura did.

Thought more.

“We had seen another magical girl’s Soul Gem turn black and were drawn into her labyrinth. My... friend—our leader—put all the pieces together during the fight and killed another of the girls we were with as soon as the labyrinth was gone. Then she tried to kill me.”

Which of them? Which of them?

“That girl was... a good leader. A good teacher. She was a veteran when I contracted and she taught me a great deal. But the truth broke her.”

A veteran had to be Kyōko or Mami. And Kyōko didn’t really strike her as the leader/teacher type.

...Wait.

“Unless Tomoe learns the truth and does not snap, I absolutely do not want her at my back.”

“She doesn’t want to be here if Tomoe reacts badly,” Hitsugaya had said when they were about to... put Mami’s soul back in her body. “She’s seen it too many times before.”

She’s seen it too many times before.

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

Mami’s face tensed in offense. “What makes you think I’ll react like those other girls? I’m not them!”
Homura stared at her, face disturbingly devoid of emotion and eyes far away for a minute before she pursed her lips, then frowned. She did not answer.

“You don’t know me!” Mami added hotly.

Sayaka glanced at where Mami was cuddling with Hitsugaya’s aunt. The veteran looked deeply shaken and haunted. Had she come to the same conclusion?

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo. Oh, she hadn’t been watching the screen. How long had she been staring?

“Another friend reacted quickly and killed her to save me. But she turned into a Witch a couple weeks later.”

Who turned into a Witch? Who did Mami kill? Who saved Homura, then turned into a Witch herself?

Did it happen different ways different times?

Which one had she been? What had she done?

A vivid and horribly trivial image flashed in her mind: the part in the Sailor Moon manga where Chibi-Usa stole her mother's magical crystal—basically a Soul Gem—on a dare to prove she had power herself, got her family and entire planet rendered comatose by the villain, was tricked into becoming the evil Black Lady—“You have shown me the darkness in your heart; I can help you realize your unknown potential; I can make your wishes come true”—and doing things that eventually led to Sailor Pluto, her closest friend, using Time Stop and dying because she had been such a stupid stupid stupid little girl who didn't understand that the grownups had been trying to protect her out of love.

How many times had she been too stupid to understand that?

“Have you... tried to talk girls like us out of this before?”

Homura’s face went utterly blank as she stared at Sayaka. “Yes.”

“Did... they listen to you?”

“Rarely, if ever,” Homura immediately replied, her face creepily intense.

Madoka hesitantly asked, “What... happened to them?”

Homura's grave face turned to her. “Dead or Witches. All of them.”

All of them.

Had she been all of the different kinds of deaths, at different times?

How many times? How many times had they not believed Homura?

Crash. Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

“Homura had to—had to attack me to help me. I—I was like a rabid dog. I was gonna kill—She had to—she had to—put me out of my—She didn't want to hurt me. I know 'cause I remember her fa-ace. Sh-she was crying.”

Tears spilled from her eyes just as they had at that horrible meeting.
“Psssh. I bet they wouldn't even react if I just dropped off the face of the planet or died or something.”

“You are wrong.”

How many times had she died in horrible ways and how many times had Homura seen it?

How many times had Homura been forced to hold the gun that did it?

How many times had Homura seen how her parents reacted after she died?

Crash. Literally right after her kart got put back on the track. Straight off the track, back again, drip-drop tears, crash.

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

Like Homura kept doing.

Crash.

Wee-oo-wee-oo-wee-oo.

Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and o–

When Madoka... woke... again, she was still in the dark place that smelled of roses. The stars looked... either bigger or closer but definitely brighter and sharper than before. Maybe her vision had been blurry earlier? She had been even sleepier last time, so maybe. There were some pretty, fluffy, glowing white clouds here and there now. They gave everything faint light.

She wasn't really laying down anymore. This time she was propped up into a reclining position, curled in something almost cup-shaped. It felt like... velvet, maybe? Something felt odd, though; she shifted in her seat and heard a strange sound– somewhere between tiny tinkle-tinkle and click-clack. She glanced down and saw that the cup-shaped seat was also full of multicolored... marbles? Wait, they weren't spheres like marbles. Huh. They were varying sizes and glowed to varying degrees of brightness. A lot of them were very dark, though. Curious, she picked up a large, nearly black one to look at.

“Then would you... go back and save stupid me before I get tricked by Kyubey?”

Something lightly swatted her hand. “No, not that one,” a childlike voice chimed. “Not yet.” And the thing was snatched from her hand.

Madoka sleepily blinked at at her empty hand. Okay. She reached for a light one this time, brought it up to where she could see it better. It was a colorless glass bead. Oh, like the sparkly glass things florists used to weigh down vases– ummm... where had she... oh, yeah, like the bouquet Papa gave Mama on their anniversary. She rolled it in her fingers and was surprised to find it kinda squishy. She cupped one hand and put the bead in its palm. The way the bead glowed and sparkled in the starcloudshine reminded her of... something. She brought it up to her face.

She followed Papa out into the garden to watch him. Papa was very tall. He let Madoka hold the bowl of little tomatoes he picked! Madoka watched him water the garden and leeeeaned over the
edge of the brick wall to look at the pretty red and orange flowers at the bottom.

She loved watching the way the water bounced and made sparkly little jiggly blobs on their leaves. She and Papa played the game where they tried to get Madoka to say the name right. It was hard. Nasserums. Nastyrums. Nastarums. Nastashuns.

Nasturtiums.

“See how the sunlight makes the water sparkly and white in some parts?”

“Uh-huhhh.”

“Clouds are made of teeeeeny-tiny drops of water. When the sun shines on them, they turn white. That's why clouds are white.”

“Oooollllooo. There's flowers in the clouds?!”

Papa laughed.

Madoka poked the sparkly dewdrop-like bead in her palm again. Squish, squish, just like back then. She tilted her hand and let it roll off, jiggle-jiggle, just like when disturbed nasturtium leaves shivered and bounced water off them. Plink!

She looked down at her lap again. A small hand was silhouetted in front of the glow of the florists' gems, plucking out the dark ones.

“Why are you doing that?” Madoka asked dreamily.

“You're not ready yet,” the voice chided.

Madoka yawned. “Oh.”

The voice that belonged to the small hand didn't tell her not to pick up any beads, so she hummed and scooped up a handful of purple and pink, some brighter or paler than others and some stuck together.

“You can call me Madoka!” Madoka said to the new girl with the–

–long, braided hair and anxious face.
–long, braided hair and smiling face.
–long, braided hair and sad face.
–long, flowing hair and pained face.
–long, flowing hair and hard face.
–long, flowing hair and cool face.

“A-ah. Mado... ka. My name is Homura Akemi.”

Wait. Wait, what?

“I do not get called by my first name very much,” she said, voice
–anxious.
–cheerful.
–deeply sad.
–frustrated.
–pained.
–distant. Wistful, maybe?

Reverse like a mirror, very wrong. Dizzy-sad.

“Ummm... Miss Akemi?”

“You can call me Homura,” voice–
–like she was suppressing anger with dullness.

Wait, what? Why was she dreaming this?

“Please stay just as you are. Please stay just as you are. Please stay just as you are. Please stay just as you are.”

Wait, what? Why was she dreaming this?

“Because you haven't learned to control these or your powers yet,” the childlike voice said.

“Powers?”

“Powers,” the voice repeated.

Madoka hummed doubtfully. “What are these, though?”

“Memories.”

“But... they were a bunch of the same thing but... different.”

“Of course they are.”

“Why?”

“They overlap, of course.”
“...What?”

The voice just giggled.

Madoka pouted and poured the beads out of her palms, tinkle-tinkle click-clack. She reached for some that were somehow both bright and dark.

The little hand swatted hers away again. “That's enough for now.”

“Why?” Madoka asked, pout turning into a frustrated frown.

“You're not ready yet,” the voice said gravely.

Madoka hummed in frustration. The voice was confusing. “Can't you explain things better?”
“Not yet~,” the voice sang. “And you've been here long enough.”

“Where am I?”

Another giggle. “Inside. You need to go Outside.” The shadowy hand reached closer, arm silhouetted up to the elbow. It turned its hand upside down and folded all but its index finger into its palm. Bright, vivid pink light spiraled to its fingertip and turned into a new bead.

“What are you doing?” Madoka asked, suddenly sleepy again.

“Recording this as a memory,” the childlike voice replied. Suddenly, flat circles of light emerged from the bottom of the new bead and multiplied in an upward spiral until it looked like a rose made of light. The petals folded up around the bead to make it more of a partially-open bud and flashed before the light disappeared and it looked like a normal rose. “Here. Take it.”

Madoka hesitated, then reached out with cupped palms and accepted it. She examined it and found that the bead was barely peeking out from the center of the bud. “Why did you do this?” she asked.

“It's only fair that you get to remember some of this when you wake up,” the voice said. “Just not everything, for now.”

“Why not?”

“You're not ready yet.”

Madoka looked up where she guessed the being's face might be. “When will I be ready?”

“Maybe next time. Maybe the time after. Maybe far away. It all depends on what happens Outside.”

“...What does that mean?”

“Not yet~” the voice sang again. The hand came right up to her face and lightly tapped her nose, teasing. “You've been here long enough, sleepyhead. I hope it was a sweet dream.”

Everything burst into flower petals. Even her seat. She was falling, falling, falling, floated through a misty cloud–

Small hands held a pale blue dewdrop-bead up to be backlit by the glowing clouds and looked through it to see the tiny sliver suspended within. The being hummed, wrapped the bead in a rosebud, and buried it in the earth for safekeeping.

Madoka drowsily opened her eyes again. This time she was in... a bed, but not her own bedroom. Fingers carding her bangs again. Nice. Felt a bit like she was underwater, drifty. Temples throbbing. Ouch.
“Madoka, baby?” Mama.

“Oh, thank God.” Papa.

Both scared. Crying voices.

“Ma-do-ka Ma-do-ka!” Tatsuya. Warm weight on her abdomen. “Yay! Up, up!”

Madoka blinked slowly and looked side to side. Light stabbed her eyes. Mama and Papa were crying and holding her hands. Terror-relief-confusion-terror-relief-confusion.

Tatsuya: HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY HAP–

Someone else: Caution.

She looked toward the caution. Oh. Mr. Tsukabishi, hands held in front of him as if he was ready to catch something thrown at him. Huh.


“Uh-huh,” Madoka answered, voice thick with sleepiness.

Papa practically wilted onto the bed in relief. Mama inhaled deeply several times. Worry worry worry relief worry relief worry re–

“Miss Kaname, are you able to sit up?” Mr. Tsukabishi asked carefully.

“Think so,” Madoka said, a little more awake. It was a bit hard with Mama and Papa holding her hands and Tatsuya on her, but she managed once Papa pulled Tatsuya off her. Mama and Papa sat on either side of the bed and held her. She yawned widely again and asked, “How long was I asleep?”

“Ten hours,” Mr. Tsukabishi replied. “How do you feel?”

“Ummmmmmmm.” She rolled her shoulders and stretched a bit. “A little dizzy? And... a headache?”

“How bad?”

Madoka closed her eyes. “Not... too bad. But my eyes hurt.”

Mr. Tsukabishi hummed thoughtfully. He looked from her to her parents. “Is it all right if I use a spell to help with the headache?”

Mama and Papa looked at each other, then nodded. Madoka nodded and immediately regretted doing so. Ouch. Mr. Tsukabishi approached and held glowing green hands to her temples.

Madoka sighed. Instant relief. Well, way more tolerable.

“Do you want anything?” Mr. Tsukabishi asked as he stepped back. Madoka thought the way he looked at her was weird. He still felt like caution.

“Um... can I have something to drink? Um, please?”

“Of course.” He turned to the door and lightly called, “Miss Inoue?”
Orihime peered around the door from down low, buoyantly cheerful. She smiled brightly and waved at Madoka. “Yes?!”

“Would you get some water, please?”

“Sure!”

Orihime scrambled up and hurried away, singing something to herself.

Mr. Tsukabishi was calmly silent—cautious—the entire time Orihime was gone. Just neutrally watched her parents fret over her while Tatsuya climbed around over her legs. Madoka woke up more as she reassured her parents. Kinda. She felt like she had just gotten off a boat, still thinking she was rocking on sea-legs instead of land-legs.

When Orihime returned with the water, Mr. Urahara was behind her. He looked tired and solemn as he nodded a greeting to all of them and kept his distance in the doorway while Madoka drank. She watched him; he was a muddled combination of cautious-curious-overwhelmed-hopeful.

After a bit, Mama evenly said, “You had better have an explanation for what happened earlier, Kisuke.”

“I know the basics, yes, though I will need to talk with all three of them to figure out details,” Mr. Urahara said with a nod toward a chair in the corner of the room. “Would you mind if I sit with you?”

“Please do,” Mama said in her obviously fake pleasant voice. The one she used on Sayaka's mom and dad.

Mr. Urahara sat and propped his hands up in front of him with his cane. “First: how are you feeling, Miss Kaname?”

“Oh, um... much better,” Madoka replied. She looked at Mr. Tsukabishi. “Oh! Thank you for helping with my headache!”

Mr. Tsukabishi smiled and nodded. He still felt like caution. Why?

Oh, wait. Things had gone... weird. Bright. Her eyes drifted to one of the walls as she tried to remember. There was a painting there. Huh. What had happened after... after what?

Fingers snapping drew her attention back to Mr. Urahara. He looked concerned. “Are you having trouble concentrating?”

“Ummmmm...” Madoka blinked slowly and looked at the ceiling. Concerned-edgy-cautious-loving-worried-protective-cautious-HAPPY-curious-overwhelmed-hopeful-HAPPY-cautious—Snapping again. She looked at Mr. Urahara. He looked more concerned. “I'll take that as a yes.”

Mama and Papa's worry-love spiked. Madoka squirmed uncomfortably.

“Is something... distracting you?” Mr. Urahara asked.

“Everyone is... loud,” she said. Why was her voice so far away?

The lintel of the door was interesting. She floated toward it to look—

Papa patted her cheek. How was he doing that from so far away? “Sweetheart. Sweetie, come on.”
“Oh,” Madoka turned to look for Papa and twitched in surprise. He was right next to her. Wait, he had been holding—was still holding her. How was she floating?

“What’s loud, honey?” Mama asked. Her voice got quiet. “We can talk softer.”

“No, it’s the....” Madoka waved her arms the best she could while being held. She couldn’t find words.

“Are you sensing feelings?” Mr. Urahara asked. “Emotions?”

“Ummm... maybe?” Madoka answered.

“Your magic is still... running a bit high. Loose. Not very controlled,” Mr. Urahara said patiently. “I think you’re too... sleepy to try to hold it in. I think we have to help you do that so you can wake up all the way.”

“Oops. Sorry.” Madoka noticed his hat was gone again. That wasn't right. “Where is your hat?”

Mr. Urahara sighed and looked at Mama and Papa, whose worry-love got... louder. “Mr. and Mrs. Kaname, I think she’s too out of it to make a decision. I think it would be best to present the options to you and she can change to a different option later if she wants– when she's more coherent.”

Mama sighed deeply and squared her shoulders. “Lay them out.”

Madoka tried to focus on what they were saying and the little things Mr. Urahara held up to show Mama and Papa. She really did. But Tatsuya scrunching the blanket in his hands was more interesting. And the texture of the bedsheets. And the way the light from two different directions—the door and a lamp—made overlapping shadows in different directions. Huh. The snapping had a rhythm—

Suddenly loud clapping, very close to her. Madoka startled and looked around. Mr. Urahara was right next to her. No, to Mama. To her. “Huh?”

“Miss Kaname, please give me your hand. Your parents want me to put something on your hand.”

Oh. Madoka looked at Mama and Papa. They smiled but they didn’t hide they were worried. Madoka looked down and held her hands up in front of her face. Cupped them.

The way the bead in her cupped palm glowed and sparkled in the starcloudshine remind—

CLAP-CLAP!

“Miss Kaname. Please give me your left hand.”

“Why left?” she asked with totally-not-a-pout.

“Your right hand is your dominant hand. You—”

“Huhhh?”

“You use your right hand to do everything. If I put this on your left hand, it is less likely that you will knock it off,” Mr. Urahara said patiently. He felt very stressed, though.

“Oh.” That sounded smart.

Madoka offered him her hand. He pressed a flat black pentagon onto the back of her hand. It was squished funny, though, all the sides different lengths and the corners rounded by silver trim. Mr. Urahara started wrapping it with some kind of bandage.

Mr. Urahara went still and looked up at her. “How so?

“It's the wrong shape. And the color is wrong.”

Mr. Urahara stared more. “How so?” he repeated.

“Too many sides. And it should be sparkly.”

“What color should it be?” he asked. He felt... mystified. Whirr-whirrrrrr thinky-thoughts.

“Purple.”

His feel went as blank as his face, then both screamed surprise-fascination-confusion-IDEA. It made her flinch.

“Is the shape supposed to be... a diamond?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” Madoka frowned and touched her suddenly-throbbing head. “Why are you screaming?”

Mr. Urahara’s face went very cold and serious and her sense of him abruptly clamped down so hard it was dizzying. Still there, but like she was on land and he was screaming underwater in a swimming pool, vague, quiet argle-blargle that she couldn't understand.

He shook his head a bit, said, “I'm terribly sorry about that,” and went back to wrapping the thingy onto her hand.

The sudden “quiet” was a relief Madoka hadn't known she needed. Her entire body relaxed as she sighed. Mama and Papa relaxed with her. They both made sniffling sounds like they were trying not to cry and hugged her. Tatsuya tackled her from the front to join the hug.

Madoka looked up at Mr. Urahara. “Thank you.”

He smiled lightly, but his brow was tense. “You are quite welcome. How do you feel?”

“Ummm.... well,” she said thoughtfully. “I have a headache. And I'm... really, really hungry,” she admitted bashfully.

“Okay, we'll get you something to eat,” Mr. Urahara said with a more relieved smile. Then he paused, face carefully pleasant as he suddenly watched her very closely. “Again, I'm sorry the patch was the wrong shape and color.”

Madoka blinked up at him. “Huh?”

“You didn't like the shape and color. I can make a prettier one if you like. I just had to borrow this one in a hurry.”

“What? Oh, no, this is fine,” Madoka said with a nervous laugh. “Um, I don't... really know what I was saying.” She waved her bandaged hand experimentally as she inspected it and said, “I can't even see it, so it doesn't matter anyway.” She looked up at him and smiled. “I'm sorry if I was rude when I was all... sleepy-talking.”

Mr. Urahara stared. And stared. And stared. Then smiled and said, “Do you feel well enough to come out to the dining room, or do you want to eat here?”
“Oh! I can go to the table!” she said as her stomach growled. Embarrassing. “I'm fine now! And I want to check on—” Madoka froze, then threw herself forward on the bed in fear and demanded, “Where is Homura?! Is she okay?!”

Mr. Urahara waved his hands to placate her and said, “She's fine, she's fine! The Kurosakis are with her. Last I heard, she slept for a long time like you did then sat up and talked with them for awhile and is doing well.”

Madoka wilted in relief. “Oh. Oh. Good. That's good.” She looked up and asked, totally not plaintively, “Can I see her?”

Mr. Urahara's face warmed into an indulgent smile. “I'll check in on them. You go get some... oh, my, whatever is the term for a meal at four in the morning?” He chuckled, waved at her, and was gone.

Madoka's legs were wobbly when she stood, but Mama and Papa held her steady until her balance came back. Mama sat with her in the dining room while Papa cooked her favorite foods for a solid hour.

Eating and waiting, eating and waiting.

_Tinkle-tinkle, click-clack_ went her fork and knife as they met the plate.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope everyone reading this is safe and well.

Works inspired by this one:

_Magic Hiden Within_ by Toyu, _beside you (in time)_ by astrologia, _Of Clocks, Demons, Blue Flames, & Red Ribbons_ by Meh (KrisTheCook), _Pluck_ by Lynxkitten, _The Worst Thing Next to Anarchy (Is The Government)_ by astrologia, _A Shanty for the Wishmakers_ by Heartofaquamarine, _Stitches in Time_ by StarFlatinum

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