Unravelment

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Summary

Jūshirō has a new job, but that is not the only event on his mind. Shunsui looks for the beauty that let himself be captured by his lens. Their next encounter does not go as expected, but much still lies ahead.

Multi-chapter modern-world Bleach AU. Shunuki, semi-slowburn romance with a generous pinch of angst, steam, some humour and intrigue.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
'This was one odd day...'

Jūshirō scanned his index fingerprint and opened the door to his studio. Simple actions that made him wind down and feel somewhat safe.

'...But it didn't end up half bad.'

He stepped in and took off his shoes. As if led by the unspoken rules of domestic life, his hand came to his neck and pulled the knot of his jade green tie - the one that made the green of his eyes shine brighter. In sequence, off came the blue jacket and the matching vest, and then the crisp white shirt.

The formal outfit had been parked away for a while, but the shimmer of the silk remained luscious. It had cost him a month's wage, but today, it had earned its price twice over. He had gotten himself a new job. And then, there had been that episode in Yoyogi park, that even now made his legs feel slightly shaky, and his ego shoot through the roof.

Jūshirō had been on and off work since his recovery from illness a few years ago. Before the forced hiatus he had taught in two highly rated public schools in the capital, and had always been praised by his peers. However, upon his return to active life, he had found he was not as immune to infant cruelty as he'd once been.

At first he was mocked for being bald, then mocked for having his hair growing white. The meds had made him sleepy, and unable to reign in the chaos of an elementary school class. Sometimes by invitation, sometimes by simple exhaustion, he had resigned from school after school, a process that had left his self esteem in tatters.

So, when he rose that morning and carefully dressed himself in the blue ensemble, he thought there was absolutely no chance that he'd walk back with a job at St. Ignatius College, the newest catholic school in Tokyo.

First off, there was his past illness. Although years had passed and he'd slowly worked himself back to relative fitness, the principal might deem him sickly, or anticipate the liability of having a teacher on leave every so often. Secondly, there was his long, snowy white hair, certainly not appropriate for a conservative environment, but something he was absolutely unwilling to give up on. And then there was his state of unmarriedness at the age of forty.

Thankfully, the principal had considered the first problem a sufficient justification for the latter two, and chosen to compassionately ignore them all. After all, Jūshirō had in his favor a good track record prior to the "problem", and his stellar results in college, that had landed him a Fulbright.

Perhaps, he mused, the old priest saw in him the potential to take vows, if coaxed towards that path. Unfortunately, he could find no such inclination in his soul. Not after the discoveries he had made about himself during his downtime, and let alone after what had happened at Yoyogi park that afternoon.

He slid out of the shower, dabbing himself dry, and let himself slump back on the bed.

"Can I take a picture of you? It's for a fashion blog." The stranger had said.

Looking at the stranger, Jūshirō couldn't fathom how his three piece suit could possibly interest him. The man was slightly taller than himself, with wavy long hair giving him a somewhat foreign look.
His Japanese was flawless, nevertheless. 'Maybe he has a gaijin father, like me.'

But it was the man's outfit that impressed him the most. Light blue silk scarf over a black and white striped sweater, paired with a knee-length skirt made of floral kimono fabric, and brown oxfords without socks. An outfit that happened to show off a lot of leg, and what legs, dear lord!

Jūshirō closed his eyes and replayed the inconsequential encounter in as much detail as his memory allowed. Not only had the stranger taken his photo, but he had arranged his hair artfully to the side, over his shoulder. A hand had briefly brushed his neck. Had it?

'Am I making it up?'

He would probably never see the photos in print, but the man had shown him some of the shots in the small camera screen. There he was, willowy and pale, against the reds and blues of the murals, and the concrete stairway that leads to Harajuku.

The stranger had asked him if he could use those photos for any purpose, including commercial. He had said yes, without hesitation. Who would buy a picture of him, anyway? But the man had seemed convinced otherwise, and thanked him profusely, before winking an eye and saying "See you around lovely!"

But alas, he would have to set up fort in Yoyogi and hope for the photographer to go there again if he wanted a second rendezvous. They had exchanged absolutely no information, not even each other's names.

Perhaps that's why he felt so unsettled with such brief interchange - so fleeting that in a few days, he could just convince himself it never happened. But at that moment, his body demanded otherwise. So, for once, he decided to ride that high, rather than repress it. His thoughts raced well into the night, a mix of confusion, hope and a teasing of reawakened libido.

As the sun intensified in the early morning, his eyes cracked open. How long had he slept? A couple of hours? Luckily the new job wouldn't start in another week. He found himself naked, the towel crumpled on the floor. Sleepy and soiled by his own deeds, he wondered... 'How much longer can I go on living this way?'
Chapter Summary

Now that lives have intersected, who will make the first move and what will come out of it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the same time, in another part of town, another man woke up with the sun corroding his eyelids. His mouth was dry and sticky, and his body felt beaten up for no good reason.

'Ageing is such a bitch.'

His wristwatch, that lay on the bedside table, showed him that there was not much time for goodbyes. He fastened it around the wrist and slipped into the previous day's jeans and the clean t-shirt he'd been saving for the trip. He stuffed all of his possessions into his backpack and weighed it. Heavy, but not unexpected when you're carrying cameras and lenses enough to start a small shop in the parallel market.

'Why is the house so quiet? Did he go out? ...Nah, probably asleep on the couch.'

As he walked out of the bedroom, into the bright open-plan living area, he saw Shunsui slouching in front of the computer screen, wild brown hair cascading down his bare back, clad only in tight fitting black underwear. 'No time for that either', he decided.

"What keeps you up this early?"

"Editing."

The telegraphic answer poked his curiosity. Shunsui was never this committed to anything. Starrk walked towards the glass desk and leaned on the back of the chair.

"Not bad", he admitted.

On the screen was a single image of a thin man dressed in a suit, standing in front of a red graffitied wall. He didn't smile openly, but his eyes had a hopeful gleam that was almost childlike. He was also extremely good-looking by his standards, and a type he knew Shunsui could go head over heels about.

"New model?"

"Nope."

"Who is he then?"

"Don't know."

Starrk watched Shunsui suspiciously as he fumbled with photoshop.
"Saw him walking by and asked him to take his picture."

"Posting it to the blog?"

"Don't know. Maybe I'll save it for the book."

"You should. It's pretty good."

Shunsui looked up and met Starrk's trademark sleepy smirk -

"What?"

"Have you called him yet?"

"No."

Starrk's eyebrow arched inquisitively.

"Don't have the number."

Starrk laughed.

"He got all flustered and clueless when I asked him for the photo... Like he didn't know he was that gorgeous." he said with a chuckle. "I obviously thought he was acting the part... I mean, who wouldn't want to own a life size poster of him? A real life elven prince... So I just went along with the game... and oh boy, the way he looked at my legs... that was seriously hot! The wild look in his eyes... I had no doubt he'd be the one asking me out, so I didn't say a thing, just waited... but nothing. He just left."

Starrk was now almost in tears.

"He wasn't eyeing your legs, you buffoon, he was baffled by that ridiculous kimono skirt you were wearing!"

"No, he was not. But one way or another, he's gone."

"Gone? In 2016? I thought you were a blogger, not a hermit."

Starrk picked the backpack up from the floor and slung it over his shoulder. Then, as an afterthought he added-

"If you want to see someone again, in this day and age, you do what everyone does, and look them up."

Shunsui felt the other moving away and reached for the wrist, seized it with a light-speed grip.

"Where are you going?"

"Narita."

"New gig?"

"Lily's turning 16 next month. Bringing her on a road trip to Mojave desert. Maybe drop by Vegas for the circus... She's obsessed about the desert. Been begging for it over a year."

"Something to do with her adored father being a creature of the wild?"
"Who knows?"

"Baby momma coming along?"

"Maybe. Why, wanna come? There's room for you in the car. Hell, there's even room for that pretty guy in the picture if you want."

Shunsui snorted and Starrk tried to pull his wrist free, but Shunsui gave it a rough pull that made Starrk lose balance and lean on the chair against his body.

"Will you leave me so unsatisfied?" Shunsui breathed against the exposed skin of his neck. Starrk straightened himself up once again.

"Unsatisfied, use your hand." He said, as he jerked himself free.

"In that case, next time you want to sleep in Tokyo, use a travel agent."

Shunsui smiled triumphantly, but Starrk was not leaving the spar so soon.

"Yeah, because between drinking and fucking you I actually got to sleep sometimes."

"Complaining?"

A teasing smile crept to his lips. He threw the backpack over his shoulder again, and finally made it to the door. Shunsui remained seated, seemingly going back to his work.

"Have a good flight, Coyote."

"See you around, Capitaine."

11:45 was the time of the day that brought both female staff and older students of St. Ignatius College to the vicinity of the running tracks. The new teacher would waltz into the changing room and come out in sports attire, hair tied up and bouncing side to side. He had decided it was ok to run a few laps before lunch when he saw some other teachers using the gym and the pool during breaks. He was, obviously, completely unaware of the groups sitting around and giggling, or the odd admin staff that would pass by and take furtive looks from afar.

Against his expectations, the said teacher had become instantly popular among the other inhabitants of that microcosmos. Truth was, he had expected the place to be much more conservative and stiff, so he was pleasantly surprised to realize it was not so bad. In only a few weeks he had met a bunch of new people, warmed up to his class, and was feeling in general quite contented.

He was assigned to a grade-four class composed of assorted nationalities and backgrounds, among which some local kids with mixed parentage, like himself. The lot was surprisingly more easy going than the kids that had mocked him to depression in the other schools. Perhaps they were just used to seeing all sorts of things. And then, there was wealth. Of course money can't buy happiness, but it was apparent that these kids lived without worries. That made him envy such carefree youth a bit, but he plucked away the thought, like one would do to a bad weed.

After running he'd take a quick shower and catch up with whoever was in the canteen. It would be mostly empty by the time he got there, so quite often he'd join up with the elementary school coordinator, a seemingly gloomy and unfriendly fellow called Byakuya, who'd always work longer
than everyone else.

The others were curious after seeing them together a few times. 'What do you talk about?' and 'Does he talk at all?' were some of the questions going around in the staff room. Quite truthfully, one could not simply engage Kuchiki Byakuya in small talk. He was serious and reserved and kept most people at bay. That, Jūshirō figured, was his way of protecting his position. He was supposed to coordinate a bunch of people, many of whom older and more experienced than him, so he could not (or at least so he thought) give away too much of his own flaws or insecurities. In time, he thought, the young coordinator might learn how to open up.

Indeed, in a matter of weeks, Byakuya had come to trust and respect Jūshirō in a way that was rarely seen. Byakuya had become a widow at a young age, having lost his wife to illness. So, it was natural for him to feel sympathy for Jūshirō's past ordeal. Perhaps that was the initial valve that allowed the older man into his living space, but then there was a sort of empathy that just sprouted spontaneously between them.

They would sit together and chat sparsely about teaching, literary preferences and other more or less elevated topics. Both had the habit of bringing their own packed lunches: Byakuya's was mostly traditional, prepared by his family's life-long cook, and Jūshirō's generally included a peculiar mix of leafy vegetables, grains and fruits, combined by himself each morning.

On one of those days, he noticed a change in the coordinator's expression when he opened the lid to his multi-colored meal. The same change happened on the following days. It was almost as if some childish curiosity was aroused with that simple act of removing a lid from a box. It took Jūshirō some time to make out how to act upon it without hindering the frail building of their budding trust. Then, one morning, he finally gathered the courage to prepare two boxed lunches and gift one to his superior.

Byakuya's eyes opened wide when he took the box in his hands.

"I sincerely thank you for your trouble, Ukitake-san, but I already have my own lunch. It will go to waste..."

"Well, my apologies for doing this without prior warning, but I believe you may still dislike my cooking, and in that case I will take no offence if you go back to your own lunch. Otherwise, I will be much in advantage to bring it home for dinner, should it remain uneaten."

Byakuya hesitated. He looked at the box on the table in front of him, neatly wrapped in a kitchen cloth, and he looked at the plastic box in his hands, then at his colleague's hopeful smile, and he made his choice.

"Very well, I will try. If there are so many studies swearing by the goodness of these ingredients, I should not remain in ignorance."

He gently pushed the wrapped lunch to the side and placed the gifted one in front of him.

"Well, then... Itadakimasu!" Jūshirō prompted, beaming and bringing his hands together.

"Ita-" Byakuya was about to echo the other's sing-song tone, but he realized he had almost raised his voice a notch too loud. He corrected himself. "Itadakimasu, Ukitake-san"

They ate in silence, except for some scattered comments on the richness of the millet, the freshness of the tangerine salad and the tenderness of the baby spinach. Like two toddlers gifting each other candy, on that day, Jūshirō and Byakuya became friends.
It is always in times like these that fate comes in and turns a story on its feet.

When he walked into the staff room on the next morning, Jūshirō was expecting some fierce questioning on his lunch exchange with the mini boss, as they called him. However, it so happened that the topic of the day was completely unrelated.

As usual, the center of it all was a blond maths teacher that went by the name of Matsumoto. All were gathered around her desk, flocked behind her computer screen. When all the giggling went silent as he walked in, he had the uncomfortable feeling that the joke was on him. She was the one to break the silence.

"Here's the man of the moment! How does it feel like to be famous Ukitake-san? Oh, I always wanted to be an idol!"

A smaller woman, named Momo, kept urging her to knock it off, but some others were already tugging him towards the screen.

"Don't you watch the Kon Show? It's like Tonight Show but the host is a stuffed lion."

He shrugged. A stuffed lion hosting a talk show? Never heard of such thing.

"Come on Rangiku-san, play it again before the priests start pouring in", urged a tall guy with spiky black hair.

They seemed to have been streaming the video from the internet, so when Jūshirō approached, Rangiku pulled the arrow back and the show began anew. After some childish animations and overly cheerful music, the stuffed animal appeared on screen and introduced its guests, all of whom Jūshirō knew nothing about. She forwarded a notch and he suddenly saw that familiar face on screen - the man from Yoyogi park, looking oddly less extravagant, but still managing to slip some brocade into his outfit.

"Tell us about your upcoming fashion book, Kyoraku-san!" the lion began.

"I have gathered the best of street style from all over the country and organized it according to the setting. There's a chapter called 'Hot and Steamy' with photos taken in onsen towns, and others set in business districts, shopping areas and parks. I want to showcase Japanese style beyond gothic Lolita and such things. So you will see a lot of normal people that for one reason or another, I found attractive."

"And have you chosen the cover photo? I'm sure it has to be a special one!"

"Yes, it is, Kon-san! It is a very special shot, because it's what I call a case of love at first sight. When I first laid eyes on the subject, I knew it was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. In fact, I got so nervous that I even forgot to ask his name!"

"Oh, that's quite sad Kyoraku-san, but maybe now that you've declared it to the whole country, that person will look for you. So, can we see that famous picture or do we need to wait until the book is out?"

"You were so kind to have me tonight, that it would cause trouble if I didn't give a sneak-peek to the audience. Ok, are you ready? I will flash it for just one second!"

"Ohhh that is very kind! Thank you very much! Shall we count down? 3-2-1..."
The handsome stranger on the screen then produced an A4 print out of his lap and flashed it to the camera. And there was Jūshirō on his blue suit and confident smirk, fresh out of the interview that had made his life meaningful once again. A moment of such condensed emotion that it could burn the piece of paper to ashes.

Yet, the stranger had managed to turn it into a trivial stunt, with that nauseating smile splattered on his face, the cheap sentimentalism of his speech. But it didn't matter, it shouldn't matter. He was just a stranger. Granted, the encounter had stirred something in him. He had fantasized about the stranger for a while that night. But nothing more, right? He would look up the name - Kyoraku it seemed - and ask him to remove the photo from the book. If it didn't work, he would get a lawyer. Simple, right? Then why? Why, after weeks of feeling well with himself, and knowing everything was working out just fine... Why did Jūshirō suddenly and uncontrollably feel the need to cry?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to golden week I managed to put out an early update - yay! This chapter had me full of feels all throughout. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did!
The Idiot

Chapter Summary

The day goes by and the inevitable clash draws near.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He felt tears welling up and saw the familiar scene playing out in front of his eyes: the pool of anger and sadness overflowing, his hand coming to his face to cover the shame, a quick excuse blurted between sobs and an embarrassed run to the bathroom. His weakness exposed, and a one-way ticket back to where he came from. An empty house, an empty life, an empty bank account.

No. NO!

He took a deep breath. 'Remember the yoga classes.' The breath came ragged and his heart galloped, but he didn't waver. He felt his will holding him in place, like an iron hand. He felt the comfort of his own strength and that very thought grounded him. He took a few more breaths, deep slow breaths, just like in the yoga classes. With effort, over the course of seconds that felt like hours, the surge finally subsided and he felt confident enough to use his voice again. It came surprisingly firm, even a bit dry.

"I have no idea who this person is, but I will settle the issue after work. Thank you for making me aware. I will go to my class now. See you all later."

Mouths slacked and eyes widened as he patted Rangiku's shoulder reassuringly, turned on his heels and left the room after retrieving the attendance book from the shelf.

An autopilot of sorts drove him to his classroom and greeted the class on his behalf. The same surrogate Jūshirō also decided it would be a good day for free hand drawing and gathered a bunch of random objects from around the room and tossed them around for the kids to draw, then proceeded to walk around, offering tips and doing demonstrations. Then, he told the small artists to draw something else out of their original drawing - turn a pen into a street light, a lunch box into a factory building, a potted plant into a monster...

By 11:30, when they were supposed to break for lunch, no one seemed to want to leave the room, and as the hallway outside went ablaze with voices and the roar of feet, those who were curious enough to take a peek could have sworn that all the people inside room 305 were having a hell of a time.

When the students finally left for lunch, he did not go for his usual run, and instead took his lunchbox and a book to a nearby public park. He found a nice shaded bench facing an artificial water stream and settled there. The weather was warming, it was a pleasant day.

He ate his set meal of brown rice and avocado salad with pecan nuts and wolf berries, then washed it down with freshly made hot tea from his tumbler. In the end he picked up the book, but his efforts to follow the narrative were fruitless, as his mind would always end up going back to the laundry list of insults he was preparing for the Yoyogi man.
Inconsiderate, vulgar, tasteless, irresponsible. No regard for people's privacy, an idle dilettante with no idea of what it's like to have a job and a reputation to maintain, no respect. But he would tell him, he would tell him everything. And so he seared in anger and early spring sun until it was time to go back to school.

He was intercepted by Byakuya while climbing the stairs to the third floor.

"Are you alright?"

It was an absolute certainty that Byakuya did not watch the Kon show, which made Jūshirō panic at the idea that the hideous show was now the talk of the school. As if on cue, Byakuya clarified -

"I didn't see you in the cafeteria, so I asked around, and heard of what happened in the morning. I want you to know that I can issue warning letters, and I will not hesitate to do so if..."

"No, no" Jūshirō cut him - "no one was disrespectful. If anyone is to be reprimanded is me for being naive. I let a stranger take a photo of me and thought it would be for an art project of some sort, but it ended up as a joke on a TV talk show. I have learned my lesson."

"You should not say it's your fault. It is the person who betrayed your trust that should suffer the consequences. If you need a lawyer, my family has some trusted ones that can write a letter to this person at any time."

"Thank you. I believe I can settle the issue by my own means, but I appreciate your concern, Kuchiki-San."

"Byakuya."

Jūshirō could not hide his surprise. First name basis?

"Please, you are my senior, it is only a matter of misfortune that our roles are not inverted. You owe me no formal treatment."

"Thank you. Jūshirō, then, if you will."

"See you later, Jūshirō."

Smiling for the first time in a hurtful day, he headed back to the classroom.

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Shunsui felt pretty happy with himself for the first hours after the show aired. He had left his number on the blog and was sure that if not on that same night, the morning after he would get a message from the mystery beauty he had now wooed before the whole country. As the morning elapsed, though, he began to doubt his clever strategy. 'Maybe he doesn't watch telly. He did look like one of those "TV is for the populace" intellectual types.'

He didn't have much to do and didn't feel like going out to photograph, so he lounged the day away at home, like a satisfied cat sprawled naked on the couch.

'I wonder if he's good at sexting.' He pointed the phone at his own body and rehearsed. 'There, haha, I'm sure you'll like the view, pretty boy.'

He was in a blissful slumber when a messaging tone awoke him. 'Unknown number. There he is, there he is.'
"May I call you on this number? I need to have a word with you at your earliest convenience. UJ"

Obviously, Shunsui's plan had a major flaw - he could not be sure if the person on the other side was the man he'd met or a prankster. He would have to play it by ear and trust his wits. He had a distant recollection of the man's voice. Something low and mature, sort of matching the imposing figure. Yes, it should be easy to tell.

Determined to make a good impression, he jumped out of the couch and into the bathroom. He splashed water onto his eyes and put on a pair of shorts. He cleared his throat with a few coughs and sang "ahhhh". Only then did he reply: "Of course, my pleasure."

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Jūshirō sat at his desk, facing the window. Outside was the usual row of buildings, stretching all the way down to the train station, identical in their working-class monotony. A bit of greenery framed the left side of the landscape, where the glow of sunset was visible through the leaves.

'Alright, here it goes.' And he pressed the call icon.

The conversation began with the pleasantries he had anticipated. "So glad to hear your voice" and "you sure made me wait" and "I've been thinking of you" and such things. When he managed to put a stop to it, he calmly delivered his rant. There was silence on the other side. One, two seconds. He flicked his pen once more, gazed over the rooftops and the setting sun, then carried on to his second point.

"And so I regret that I will not be able to maintain my permission for you to use the photo. I beg you, destroy it and refrain from using it any further."

Again, silence. One, two... He considered dropping the final bomb and saying he was willing to take legal measures should the man go against his will. He hesitated. 'Maybe it's unnecessary and rude. But judging by what he already did, maybe it's not.'

"I am sorry" he finally heard, the once flowery voice re-emerging as no more than a thin whisper. The man further stated he'd abide by Jūshirō's request of not publishing the photo, but asked if he could keep it. Jūshirō pondered, and replied that he could keep a hard copy, but electronic files were hackable, so he wanted them deleted.

"That is more than I can ask for. Thank you, Jūshirō."

Why did he suddenly feel dismayed like the voice on the other side? No, there was no reason for that. His problem was settled, at least in theory. But if the promise was broken, there were always Byakuya's lawyers. 'Stop feeling sympathy, you dummy'.

"Very well, I thank you and wish you all the best in your future endeavors." And with that he pulled the phone away from his ear. He was about to touch the end button when a last sentence came through.

Once it was over he went into the kitchen. He cut a pear in wedges, laying them on a small plate. It was all his stomach could take in, so he called it supper. He ate standing by the counter, then washed the knife and the plate, and put them to dry. He moved to the bathroom, flossed and brushed his teeth, changed into a pair of cotton shorts and, although the sun had barely sunk behind the trees and the line of houses, he lied down to sleep.

Exhaustion and haziness weighed on him, and he spread his arms, hoping for that blank state where
thoughts are put to rest. But still the man's final words rang in his head. And doubts, doubts everywhere.

Was I too hard on him? What does he want from me? What do I want? Am I that desperate?

He rolled to the side, took his phone and pressed home. The light in the screen was harsh to the eyes. He flinched. Without realizing it he was saving the number. 'Kyoraku Shunsui', he tapped. Then he browsed some news sites and ended up in a certain fashion blog. He scrolled down for a while, not really looking at the assortment of faces that paraded through the screen. His photo was not there. 'Good'. He closed his eyes again.

For a moment, then, before his mind finally allowed him to sleep, he thought that, as unlikely as it may be, those words - that had sounded like the voice of a cartoon mouse - spoken perhaps without the intention of being heard, those few simple words... could be true...

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"I am sorry that I caused you trouble. All I wanted was to see you again."

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if the story is mowing too much or going too slow... but things will start developing soon, that is assured! Thanks for reading! Cheers!
Spring Funfair Rollercoaster Ride

Chapter Summary

In which there is food porn, drunken texting and a rollercoaster ride of the emotional variety

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the Kon show ordeal and the phone call that put an end to it, Jūshirō felt as though his life was finally mending itself.

On the very next day he was surprised by the other teachers, with a gluten-free, vegan carrot cake and a collective apology. He noticed Byakuya sneaking in at some point and suspected he had something to do with it, but still he was glad to be in friendly terms with everyone again.

The winter school term was coming to an end, and Jūshirō was working hard with the kids to prepare them for the tests. He ran a series of mock exams and made himself busy reading them and writing feedback. He would bring the papers home and work at his desk, before having his simple supper and going to sleep. It was lonely, but it paid off in other ways, he told himself.

The stranger had not disturbed him since the call, so he swept the memory under the rug and carried on.

On a certain Friday afternoon, he was surprised to find out he did not have to work on Monday. He had completely forgotten about the spring equinox holiday. Had he known earlier, he might have bought a flight to Okinawa and spent the long weekend with his grandma. Years had passed since he last visited his mother's grave. Saori-ba would certainly give him an earful.

On Saturday, he just followed through with his usual weekend routine: stocking up groceries for the week ahead, dusting, tidying up and doing laundry. The closest of his college mates, with whom he'd meet up on occasion, were most likely engaged in family activities, so he did not bother anyone. When his chores were done, he played a movie and called it a night.

Sunday began a bit chill and overcast. Jūshirō brewed a pot of houjicha and climbed back into bed. He sipped the warm drink while reading the news, then set it aside and snoozed for a little while more.

When he woke up again, the day had grown a tone brighter, sparkles of sun adorning the window. 'Might as well go for a walk.'

He strolled down the street absentmindedly. A group of archer girls walked past him throwing flirty looks over their shoulders. He followed them to the Meiji shrine gate. There, a few ladies in kimonos were fixing each other's obis, a sign that there were weddings going on.

He continued to the main pavilions, through the shrine grounds and into the adjacent Yoyogi park, where he came across the usual fauna of cosplayers and hobbyists.

Why did he end up in that place? Perhaps it was habit. Having lived nearby for years, the route
through the park was burned into his muscle memory. Perhaps he wanted to show himself that he was over the unpleasant episode. One way or the other, there he was again, facing the double murals, one red, one blue, with a concrete stairway in between.

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"Yare, yare... look what the cat dragged in..."

He froze. That voice. Could it be? He hadn't heard it in such a long time. He glanced back and there she was. Pretty, fiery eyes, nimble figure, and... purple hair?

"Oh hello, Yoru-chan! Lovely to se you!"

"Looking good, babe. I think my schoolgirl crush is coming back in full swing!"

"Please, please, don't say those things!" He said, while grinning and blushing like a kid, to which she replied with a mischievous giggle. At that moment a light haired man took her flank. He stopped and coughed to his fist, a bit theatrically.

"Oh, right! Meet Kisuke. Kisuke, this is Jūshirō."

The name seemed to ring no bells until she added - "the one I told you about, my first love."

"Nice to make your acquaintance Jūshirō-san." The man said, unfazed. "Shall we go for lunch?"

Given that none of his evasion strategies worked out, Jūshirō soon found himself in a crowded food fair, surrounded by a stunning mix of aromas, folkloric tunes and Sunday voices.

Yoruichi sent the men off to the beer and seafood stalls, and proceeded to hoard a mountain of barbecued goodies.

"You don't eat meat, do you?"

Jūshirō would have sworn Kisuke sneaked up on him, when the man just materialized behind his back, smiling under his green and white hat and holding a six pack of... blue beer?

"I am vegan... well, most of the time. I can make an exception here and there."

"Special occasion isn't it? I mean, how often do you get together with old acquaintances?" Jūshirō suspected this was a trick question, so he just smiled it away until Yoruichi came to the rescue.

They found a table under a tree and settled down with an impressive feast: barbecued steak and lamb rack, crab, king prawns, oysters, sea urchins, grilled sausages glazed with honey... and a plate of grilled vegetables and sweet potatoes that Kisuke brought in last.

After the third round of blue beer, though, the vegan diet had definitely been put on hold, as Jūshirō feasted on fresh juicy oysters from the waters of Hokkaido and ripped plush lamb meat from the bone that Yoruichi held to his mouth. The sun had made its appearance and he felt pleasantly giddy.

A few hours and some train lines later, probably thanks to Kisuke's drunken navigation skills, they reached a quiet alley in a suburban town. There stood an old, small house with a sign announcing sweets.

"You sell candy? I knew we'd get along, Kisuke-kun!" Jūshirō slurred as they entered the shop, arms slung around each other's waists. Yoruichi followed, wearing Kisuke's hat and stumbling at every step.
"Kisuke, bring out the sake!" She commanded, as she plopped down on the tatami floor.

"Sake on beer... oh dear!" He mocked, but the bottle came out anyway.

With the new inflow of alcohol the conversation dug further into the past.

"Truth or dare: how was your first time?" Kisuke enquired.

"Shitty, like everyone else's" Yoruichi replied without qualm. "But we eventually got quite good at it, didn't we?", she added, giving Jūshirō a pat in the thigh. The two men exchanged glances, Jūshirō flushing once again. Fair skin is such a bitch.

He then asked how the new pair had met, in an attempt to push the conversation out of the danger zone. Yoruichi and Kisuke happily obliged, and told their story in tandem, breaking in bouts of laughter at times, or pausing to steal kisses from one another.

"... and then she told her dad to rent out the Ginza apartment where she lived, and moved in with me, to this god forsaken place called Karakura town... isn't this the epitome of madness?"

"Or the epitome of love..." she added.

Jūshirō listened with pleasure, smiling and grinning and mimicking the funny faces the other two would make.

Later, when hunger kicked in, they ransacked the kitchen for snacks. Jūshirō hoarded a box of ohagi, a gift from the next door neighbour, and the others had cup noodles and pokki sticks. They kept drinking and talking well into the night. Surprisingly, Kisuke was the first to throw the towel. They left him snoring sprawled on the floor, and went out to the porch.

The shop had a minuscule backyard, enclosed by the surrounding properties. With some care it could be made into a nice little garden. As it was, it was no more than storage and bare earth. Still, they sat there, enjoying the night air, wrapped in blankets.

At some point Yoruichi laid her head on his chest. Realising the mistake, she suddenly straightened up again.

"It's ok" he said "if you want, of course..."

She eyed him intently.

"Why don't you lean on me this time? Then you can tell me everything."

"Everything what?"

"You can tell me why I found you alone, staring into the void in the middle of a park. You can tell me if it has anything to do with a certain picture than someone took of you on that same location... and you can tell me why you looked so forlorn and wistful, when something like that shouldn't make you feel that way..."

"Yoruichi, you..."

"I don't watch talk shows but I do have an internet connection... and I think I still know you a little bit, Jūshirō Ukitake. Now, tell me what happened."

Jūshirō chuckled. If he was going to do this, he might as well take the offer, so he leaned towards her slowly, and she guided his head to her lap. He hummed comfortably as she smoothed his hair.
"On the day that photo was taken..." - he began, the booze still making him bold and perhaps just a bit too honest - "I went home and pleased myself thinking of that photographer. I don't know what drove me to it, but I remember feeling high, and having this overwhelming desire burning in me. It was a purely selfish act. Whoever that man was, on that night he was just a dummy, a plaything of my imagination. Days later, I watched that dreadful TV show and heard his annoying sentimental slur. I got mad, called him, scolded him like a kid, and cut him off forever. After that, I started doubting my decision. And that's where I stood, when you saw me - between contempt and regret, and feeling lonely as fuck."

"Jūshirō... have you been with anyone after we broke up?"

"I..."

"How many years has it been? Why?"

"Most of the time I'm fine. I'm doing other things, working... I have a really nice job now, did I tell you? And sometimes, if the thought hits me and I'm feeling low, I end up thinking I just don't deserve any better."

"What? Why?"

"Because I was an ass. I let you go through hell with me when I was sick, and in the end I called it off without a second thought."

She took a deep breath.

"Yes, Jūshirō, it wasn't the nicest thing to do, or the nicest way of doing it... but do you really think I took that half baked explanation of yours at face value? Yes, I was angry then, but over time I put the pieces together."

"You mean, you..."

"There was something going on between you and that boy in the ward... the one that made you laugh when no one else couldn't. What was his name again?"

His face rolled away from her lap and faced the barren walled space. Tears began to roll silently from his eyes.

"Kaien."

"Kaien. The man who beat me to your heart, even though he never as much as held your hand..."

"Yoruichi, we were both bedridden. Of course we never touched each other... The truth is, I couldn't quite understand why those feelings kept haunting me. Maybe the drugs, the situation we were in, or maybe it was hope... The desperate need to hold on to something to stay at the surface. But in the end it made me realize that something about me had changed and could not go back..."

"That's what I figured. And that's why I hold no grudges, Jūshirō. But now you are here and he's no more. So I ask again... why?"

"I think he'd have done a better job at living than I'm doing."

"Oh give me a break! You know very well how it works. You didn't take his place. You were lucky to have a donor, he wasn't."
"I was lying by his side, our beds a meter apart, when he passed. I pressed that bell like a mad man all night. I just wanted someone to come and save him, because I was sick and powerless and couldn't do a single thing."

"When I arrived the next morning and saw the empty bed I knew you were shaken beyond return. But that was not important back then. I was by your side, and nothing would have made me leave."

"Thank you, Yoruichi."

"Na... Just seeing your sexy ass out of bed paid off all the trouble."

Her mocking tone at that moment felt odd, but somehow, it also brought a fresh wave of relief. He took a deep breath, then giggled softly.

"You never change, do you?"

His head rolled inward again and he found her signature feline smirk adorned by eyes bright as suns, gleaming through a veil of water.

'Oh.'

He sat up and threw his arms around her. The embrace lasted for a minute or so, until she gently pushed him away and brought a finger to her bottom lip, her demeanour suddenly thoughtful.

"So... that photographer guy, do you still have his number?"

"Huh? I guess so, why?"

"Text him."

"Uh?"

"He's clearly into you, and he's hot, and there's nothing to lose... is there?"

"Well, there's my job, and..."

"Text him. Something, just 'hello' will do, you don't have to give yourself away just yet..."

"Well, I guess I could..."

"Do it."

"Alright, alright, I think I know what to write."

He produced the phone from his pocket and tapped the message, amending the typos the best he could. Drunk texting was something new to him, and he found it quite challenging, even though they'd sobered up a bit. She was perked over his shoulder, and nodded when he looked at her seeking approval. As she giggled and he trembled, his index finger pressed "send".

---

Kyoraku Shunsui could only describe the last few weeks as the eye of a shit storm. He had fucked up big time with the whole TV thing. Abarai, his drinking buddy who directs the show, had thought it was a great idea, but when it became clear that the white-haired muse would not show up and the initial buzz died down, Kyoraku's chances of free promotion also went down the drain.
Then, he had to tell Ise-san, his publisher, that the book cover was a no-go. In fact, after days of browsing old material and a few more around town with his camera, he just decided to call off the whole thing.

To top up, he got a call from Starrk saying he'd be going for a job assignment in Syria.

"You fucking idiot" he growled "don't think I'll go running to the desert to save your ass when they have you kneeling with a bag on your moronic head."

This was the kind of combination of events that made him want to get wasted and have as much sex as he could get. So, on Sunday, after he woke up to a massive hangover, he took his credit card and booked a flight to Ibiza. He packed a medium sized bag with mostly beach wear, and went to a bar. He'd get a bit hammered, then get in a cab and catch the flight at 6am.

Of course, a bit hammered turned out to be an understatement. By 1am he had moved to a rooftop party somewhere, and was holding a cocktail on the dance floor while strangers swayed their bodies all around.

There was one particular guy tagging along that night. They'd met in the previous bar and moved to the party together. Dyed blond hair, a bit of a rockabilly thing going on, pretty lean, tall and fair, and clearly willing. He went out of the radar for a while, and when he re-emerged, he was gleefully holding his phone out and yelling "Booked! I'm going with you!"

"Oh, nice to know..." He crooned. "Would you be interested in making love in the airplane toilet?"

The blondie licked his lips. "That's a yes, I suppose..."

He was giving the guy's hips a nice grind when something vibrated in his pocket. 'Oh, sweet'. His vodka-soaked brain mixed up the stimuluses and didn't immediately register that the vibration came from his phone, so he carried on dancing.

The party went on under the chill night sky, torches illuminating and warming the area.

"What's the time? Should we get going?" The blondie asked, after a good half hour. Kyoraku didn't wear a watch, so he pulled out his phone.

"Oh? What have we got here?"

He swiped and tapped and the short message popped up. For a moment, he didn't know what to make of the words before his eyes:

Do you still want to see me again?

---

Jūshirō and Yoruichi were almost dozing off on each other's shoulders, when she went inside and got the sake bottle. She poured two cups and handed one to her ex.

"Let's wait half an hour more, then we go to bed and if that guy doesn't reply, he doesn't know what he's missing."

"At least this puts the issue to rest, for good."
She didn't like the tone of his voice. 'Is the idiot saying he'll be celibate for good?'

They had emptied the cups and silence had sunk in once again, when they heard a little beep and the phone's bright light appeared in the dark.

"Come on, read it!" She urged.

"No, you read it first."

She giggled and picked up the phone. Her face went immediately from sleepy to sly. She held the phone to him, and he read:

What about... Now?

"Look at that! We've got him!"

"Yoruichi, wait!"

He tried to grab the phone from her hands but she was faster. She pulled it away and jumped to her feet.

"We have to reply something witty, spike his interest."

"No, no, we're doing no such thing. Can I have my phone back?"

"Yes, you can... as soon as we pull your sex life out of the closet. Goodness, 7 years..."

"Don't mock me, and give it ba-"

She jumped from the porch and with a few wobbly steps she was out of his range and tapping furiously. He caught up with her, but she averted his attempt to seize the phone. He managed to grab her wrist, but the thumb was already landing on the screen.

"Sent!" She announced happily, showing him what she wrote.

If you can find me.

"What? Is he supposed to treasure hunt at this time of the night?"

"You just wait."

They sat again and looked at the black screen. One, two minutes... And the light was on again.

I'm gonna need some clues.
"I rest my case, he is crazier than you. Or maybe drunk. Yeah, probably drunk..."

"Come on, Jūshirō, roll with it!"

He looked at the phone, then at her, then paused for a second.

"Ahh..." he held his head between his palms in mock despair. "You... and this bottle, and that person... I blame you all! And I quit. Write whatever you want!"

"Hihi..." she took the phone and tapped, her grin going from roguish to outright dirty. Then she gave it a final tap and with a rocket sound there went the message.

*Go to Karakura and find the smallest shoten. Hint: your mouth will water and you'll want to suck all night.*

"YORUICHI!!! What the hell?"

"Well, this is a candy shop..." she said innocently.

"That's it, I'm going to sleep."

"Let's sleep outside... in case he comes over."

"He won't come over. Tomorrow I'll message him again and say we were drunk."

"But it's the first night of spring... come on, I'll get blankets."

There were no more messages from the photographer, and so they kept chatting, mostly about times past, good and bad. When they finally slumped sideways and closed their eyes, the first hues of dawn already dashed across the sky.

---

As the sun crossed the boundary of the roof tiles and shone on the two bodies lying on the porch, Jūshirō was startled awake by a sting of light in his eyes. Then, his throbbing head reminded him of why he never drank. His muscles felt a bit sore from lying on the floor, but his head was resting on a soft surface. It smelled of unfamiliar man's perfume and worn leather. His hand was resting on something nicely plush. He instinctively rubbed and almost squeezed, but then he finally managed to open his eyes, only to figure he'd been spooning Yoruichi and had a hand on her ass. 'Shit, shit, I'm a dead man.'

He pulled the hand back immediately and sat up in one movement, as if powered by a spring. And that's when he heard a soft rolling laughter behind him. Twisting his torso, he looked back. There he saw a figure leaning on the wooden pillar that supported the roof. The man's roguish smile, set in a canvas of grey eyes and brown curls, washed down on him.

"Ohayo" the man greeted.

"You came?"

"U-ha."
"How did you find this place?"

"A two hour taxi ride to Kamakura, an angry taxi driver, a second taxi ride to Karakura, some walking and asking around, a missed long haul flight..."

Jūshirō stared in silence, still incredulous. Shunsui got down on his knees, then sat next to Jūshirō. As if testing the waters, he raised a hand and touched Jūshirō's temple with his thumb, then tucked a few strands of messed up hair behind his ear. Jūshirō closed his eyes and parted his lips ever so slightly. The other man's breath drew closer.

"Ohayo my treasured guests! I hope you all had a pleasant evening!"

Their faces turned and drew apart. Kisuke was standing by the door, wearing his hat and old man clothes, looking as shady as ever.

"Morning babe..." Yoruichi propped herself on one elbow, comfortably disheveled. "Kisuke, drive us to the beach. I want to swim."

"Oh dear... does that make me the responsible adult in this party?"

---

Chapter End Notes

I have been dreading this chapter since I thought this story out. In canon Ukitake is ill, so that is an aspect of his character that I didn't want to brush over, but real world illness is a much more sensitive and relatable topic than mystical illness. So I ended up writing, re-thinking, revising and finally toning down some things. The topic ended up dealt with in a sort of flash back because I don't really want to go back to it. At the point in time where this story takes place, Ukitake is healthy and well. Finally, to all those that might read this and that have somehow experienced serious illness in themselves or in their loved ones, my deepest respect and encouragement. I hope all is well or soon will be. Lots of love from this little dust speck in the cyber universe!
Chapter Summary

An afternoon by the seaside, where the wind blows and the sirens sing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One may say that the sea is at its finest when the waves are restless and the wind is wild. And so it was on the day after spring equinox, along the eastern coast of Honshu.

At the edge of one of those almost empty beaches, there stood a man. His eyes were closed, as he sought the song of the sirens. But all there was to hear or feel in that clouded afternoon was the roar of the wind - loud and mighty and unkind to flesh and bone.

Then, breaking through the elements, an unfamiliar warmth grazed the tips of his fingers. They wriggled in reflex, and the other set of fingers found the gaps between them and filled the space.

With that touch, like the flick of a switch, all his senses were awaken. He felt the grains of sand grinding around his feet, the slashing of hair on his neck like a whip, the laughter of young sweethearts at the distance, the heat emanating from the body next to his. He heard the words-

"Walk with me."

Said in a voice like molten wax poured on skin.

Just a little longer. A few more seconds of safety, then he would be ready.

Gently, afraid to unsettle the fragile alignment of things, he pulled his hand free, bent down and started rolling up the hems of his pants. Leg by leg, fold by fold, he took to the task with disproportionate care, his work painstakingly slow.

When he was satisfied he looked up and found the hand held out to him. He took it and found himself pulled upright and urged to walk.

One step, then another. The sand and the wind made all movement more challenging. White and brown hair got tangled together as the gusts hit and changed direction on a whim. Their hands remained united. They were walking side by side.

---

After trailing on the wet sand for some ten minutes, Shunsui noticed that his companion was shivering. Just like the proper gentleman he never bothered to be, he took off his leather jacket and held it to the thin man by his side. The dark brows, that seemed to speak as much as the beautiful green eyes that they sheltered, furrowed, at once trying to keep the wind at bay, and expressing some undefined concern.

"I'm fine, take it."
"Thank you."

Funny, Shunsui thought, that the same man that angrily kicked him out of his life just a few days ago, should now be wearing his old brown jacket. He kind of swam inside it, so thin he was, but Shunsui found the way he wrapped it around his torso quite endearing. On impulse, he faced the shivering man and started rubbing his forearms.

"Feeling better?"

The other just nodded and gave him a small smile. What was it with being close to this man that felt so right? Had they met before? Were they somehow fated to meet? Why did he feel fuzzy all over and warm inside?

And so he grinned back, widely, wildly - forgetting how nonchalant smirks always worked better for his charms - and brazenly pressed the thin body to his own, wrapping his arms around ribs and shoulder blades, one hand going all the way up to the nape of the neck.

'There, there... This will keep you warm...'

And so it did. The shivering steadied and he felt heat building up between them. The small ember was turning into a fire.

"Jūshirō..." Shunsui whispered, caressing the name in his breath.

The embrace had lulled Jūshirō into his headspace, where he could forget all things and hear the voices of the deep. Murmurs, cries and melodies. The sirens, as he called them, the sounds of his inner world.

At that moment, the call of his name was like a flute in a sea of strings. It pulled him back to the moment. Gusts, spray and arms around him, a body pressed to his.

'Jūshirō'

Who is the person that answers by that name? How does he make his choices? Why does he now indulge in the warmth of an animal's skin, when he renounced such pleasures long ago? Why does he feel safe in this stranger's embrace and longs for so much more? Why does he part his lips so wantonly to the ones that lean in for permission?

Is it the call of the sirens, or is he just a walking contradiction?

Oblivious to all these questions, Shunsui leaned in and seized his lips in a kiss.

He started softly, tasting, probing. It was intoxicating how the man had molten in his arms and given himself to the embrace. His lips were mellow and subdued. Could he be the first man to venture them? The thought made his libido stir, his imagination go haywire. Soon his restraint was blown by the wind, his tongue was inside Jūshirō's mouth, his hands were moving along the expanse of his back, and dangerous thoughts were crossing his mind.

'Look at him... like putty in your hands... the things you could do, here and now...'

But in a last string of sanity, he pulled back. His eyes met the other man's eyes. They were wide
open and somewhat scared. He wanted to say something to mark that moment - their first kiss. Something romantic, sexy, witty... something to seal their unspoken pact.

But he could think of no such things. Instead he closed his eyes and once again sought those lips, pale like jasmine, and equally sweet. Scratch that - even sweeter. 'Stop it Shunsui, he doesn't like that kind of sappy talk.'

Suddenly, cold foam rolled all the way from the break of a wave, soaking their feet.

"We should get back", Jūshirō said.

"Sure."

Wordlessly they held each other's hands again and started walking back. The waves had dimmed the marks of their feet, but the trail could still be seen - the only proof of that first journey, unremarkable in all its facts, but unique in both their lives.

---

Kisuke was the proud owner of a 1995 Subaru Sambar. For those unacquainted with the model, it is a vehicle known as a microvan, in this case, a four seater with a small cargo area in the back.

Remembering the way from Karakura to the coast, Shunsui found himself dreading the way back.

When all were gathered, Kisuke took the driver's seat, with Yoruichi by his side. The moment she sat down, her shoes went flying all the way to the back of the van, nearly hitting Jūshirō's head as he ducked to get inside. She then proceeded to open the window and rest her feet on the side view mirror.

"Remember to come back in if you see the cops, will you love?"

"Chill, the cops are on holiday..." She said, and reclined lazily on the seat.

The gentlemen at the back were less at ease. The size of the seats allowed for no more than a slightly upright squat, and their elbows collided each time they tried to move. Nevertheless, they chatted merrily as the Sambar bent and screeched and cut curves, riding the dents of the rugged coast line. When they reached the highway, all sighed in relief, knowing that everyone's lunch remained where it should.

At times Yoruichi would glance stealthily over her shoulder or through the mirror, trying to catch some compromising act. No such luck. Aside from Shunsui's arm comfortably draped around the back of Jūshirō's seat, they acted like mere acquaintances.

"Yoruichi-chan", Shunsui called one time he caught her looking, "as much as I would like to entertain you, I would much prefer reaching Tokyo by car and with no broken limbs..."

Jūshirō chuckled and Shunsui gave the bony knee a light squeeze.

"Say, I've been curious, how did you two meet? I mean, obviously the sensei here is a man of many charms, but honestly, you are well beyond the league of everyone here..."

"I chased him" she answered bluntly.

"Oh?"

"I was Yoruichi's younger brother's teacher during my first job. I was quite gullible and thought she
was a very diligent sister, until she asked me out..."

Shunsui laughed with gusto.

"That, my friends, is solid gold. I hope your brother was not too upset."

"No, not until I forced him to chaperon our dates, and eventually started paying him movie tickets... you know, so I could stop by Jūshirō’s place here and there, without fatherly attention."

"Oh, it keeps getting better. Carry on, carry on."

"That’s about it. Then, Yūshirō was sent to Europe to study and become a doctor. He was still a brat, but that was the final goal. I finished college and got a job, moved to my own place and kept seeing the hot sensei here until we called it quits."

Shunsui suspected a good chunk of the story remain untold, but Jūshirō was already asking something about young Yūshirō and his talents with the bow and arrow. It seems the kid took up western archery, now that he lives there... and what else was it? Ah, rowing...

He remembered those idle days, when excelling in sports fueled parental vanity and enlarged his allowance. He was good at kendo but he preferred rugby... better mates, more action...

'Good times...' he remembered, as he let his eyes shut.

The small engine of the Sambar strained under their weight as it mowed its way towards the city. Electric lights were on and the day was done. Listening to the voice that crooned by his side, so gentle and trustworthy, he let himself fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter comes from a song by Above & Beyond. Check it out on YouTube if you'd fancy a soundtrack - https://youtu.be/aRhEoY3V_0c

Thanks again for reading and hope you've enjoyed so far!
Beneath the Cherry Trees

Chapter Summary

While waiting for the cherry blossoms, other things begin to bloom.

“Should we look at the spring blossoms only in full flower, or the moon only when cloudless and clear? To long for the moon with the rain before you, or to lie curtained in your room while the spring passes unseen, is yet more poignant and deeply moving.”


I

Clear Waters

‘It’s warm today. The buds have surely blossomed.’

Sakura. Small, pinkish flowers of the cherry tree. Japan has them every year. National craze and tourist magnet. There was no rational reason for Jūshirō to like them. And yet...

He loved them. He would always make time for a walk in the park when they bloomed. In Okinawa, it happened as early as February, in Tokyo a few months later. He would often go alone. Sometimes he’d bring a book under his arm, sometimes a girl in tow.

Was it the simple beauty? Or the idea of rebirth? … The infinite repetition of the seasons that later would remind him of his own restored health, his new chance in life.

He inhaled the spring air once more, then closed the window, finally deciding he wouldn’t need a jacket for the day. He took a last sip of tea and put his tablet into its black canvas case, together with his teaching notes. Then, he paused to appreciate, once again, the slip of thick matte paper, so nice to the touch, that he'd gotten by mail the day before. "Goryeo – Ceramic Gems from 10th Century Korea – opening reception". He slid it into the case, sighing happily. As an afterthought, he threw in one of his travelling perfume samples as well. For as much as he loved his job, on that sunny Friday, he couldn't wait till evening came.

Friday.

Almost three weeks had gone by since that afternoon by the sea.

The way back from the beach had begun merry but soon became tiring and punishing on the constricted limbs. Shunsui had fallen asleep, shortly followed by Yoruichi, leaving Jūshirō to chat with Kisuke and make sure he didn't doze off while driving.
Because of the intricacies of Tokyo traffic, they decided to drop Jūshirō off first. Kisuke stopped by his door and they all poured out of the microvan, stretching and yawning. He first hugged Yoruichi and shook hands with Kisuke. Then, he faced Shunsui. Without the least hesitation, the man tried to kiss him. He panicked that some of the neighbors might walk in on them, and pushed him away, bowing awkwardly. At that time, he thought he'd really messed it all up.

Moments later, though, barely had he entered the house and shed his clothes, his phone rang with a message.

*You know shyness adds to your allure?*

He was unsure what to reply to that when the phone rang a second time.

*I can't wait to be with you again.*

To that he could reply. He knew what he wanted to say. He wrote-

*Likewise*

And walked into the shower. There, he saw himself in a different light. He ran his hands through his own fair skin as he spread the soap on his body, untangled his hair as the water flowed through it, washing away the sand and salt of the day. He brought a finger to his lips and closed his eyes.

*Shyness adds to your allure*

’My allure...?’

The flow of water slightly impaired his breathing. It was hot and the cubicle heavy with steam. He ran his hands through his body once more. Lean muscle and soft skin.

’Can I be an object of desire?’

He turned the faucet and wrapped himself in a towel, then dried his hair and went to bed. He would sleep and, in the morning, he would carry on as usual. Pack his lunch, walk to the train station, teach, run around the playground, have his lunch and chat with his colleagues – because, for all the fire building up within, it was too soon. The sakura were still in bud.

’Likewise...

Does that mean he also wants me? Does that mean he felt it too?’

When Shunsui got back home, he was first greeted by the sight of his suitcase outside his door. He couldn't remember where he'd left it, really. Maybe at the club, maybe on the pavement, as he got rid of the blond guy and hailed a taxi the night before. Whatever drunken reasoning had taken him to that decision, it was, he now thought, a moment of genius.

Hanging from the handle was his usual tag, with name and address, but rolled up and tucked into the plastic sleeve was a note, written on the back of a 7/11 bill-

*I knew you were too good to be true. All the best. Izz*

‘Shit, I gotta say thank you... and sorry to this guy. Do I even have his number?’

Maybe he'd look it up in the morning. That night, though, there was only one word on his mind –
'Economic as hell… but who needs more?'

And he grinned, his white teeth making a bright half moon in the dark. He slumped back in bed as he was, and slept until noon.

The new day, ripe as it was, brought with it a fresh tide of ideas. Bathe, yes, that was a priority, given the funky smell coming his way. Go out, take photos, pester Nanao to go through with the book after all… He wanted to do everything all at once, but most of all, he wanted to see a certain someone. He took his phone and wrote a clumsy message asking Jūshirō out that night. But he immediately deleted it.

‘Not so smooth there, Shunsui. Take it easy.’

And so he went on with his other plans. Clean, perfumed and freshly shaven, he walked out of the house. Then he stopped and walked back inside.

‘No. Today I drive.’

He took his red Mazda MX-5 out of the garage and, although the day was overcast, drew back the top. He wanted to feel fresh wind on his face, and the width of the city sky all around. He put on his shades. It was going to be a good day.

-  

Jūshirō was having lunch when a message came in.

I'm out with my babies :)

His eyes almost popped out. 'What?!

"Is everything ok, Jūshirō-san?" Asked Byakuya, noticing the startle.

"Yes, yes, everything's alright."

Seconds later, a new message – this time a photo of a hand holding a vintage Leica while resting on a steering wheel.

'Oh goodness, he'd better not be driving…'

But he was, of course. He was a reckless idiot, and he knew it. He drove down the inner circular until he reached the Diet and then went around a few blocks looking for a place to park. He began his hunt for subjects around the National Theatre, before moving on to the Imperial Gardens. His search for beauty had changed now that he'd found beauty that he cared for. His gaze was more aware, yet more distanced.

At times he'd find a particularly pretty flower, notice the sun peeking through the leaves, or the clouds forming funny shapes. At those times, he would take out his phone and snap simple shots that he'd send to Jūshirō. All afternoon they exchanged sweet nothings, glimpses of each other's lives, when their activities so allowed. None raised the topic of a second encounter. Not yet.

It was, both realized, their way of stalling time. With time, everything disappears. That would also be the fate of the feeling that burned within them. A feeling that could not be named love, not yet, not this one. The seeds of love that might have been sowed, those were altogether a different thing. But it
was the very tingling of the senses, the sweet awakening of desire, that they so tried to prolong, if only for another fleeting moment.

II

Spring Buds

Surprisingly, the one calling their second meeting was Jūshirō. It was a few days later and completely impromptu. He'd taken the afternoon off to attend his regular check up, and was transiting at Shinjuku station on the way back, when an idea crossed his mind. He retreated to the end of the platform and called Shunsui’s number.

“Hey there handsome” he answered, a sing-song gaiety in his voice.

“Hi! How has your day been so far? … can you hear me? It's a bit noisy here…”

“Day’s been good, but I've missed you, as always…”

His cheeks flared. How could the guy always have these ready answers? ‘Ok, one more breath…’

“Right… that's good, because I was here wondering if you'd fancy to have some yakitori tonight…”

“Yakitori? I thought you were vegetarian.”

“Yes! Yes, I am… but there's a lot of vegetarian yakitori here too…

He heard low laughter on the other side.

“Long beans and mushroom…”

“Y-es, among other things.”

The laughter again. He was chewing his thumb nail. ‘Stop it.’ He ordered to himself.

“And where are you, Usagi-san?”

‘Did he just call me rabbit?’

“Shinjuku station. If you don't have other plans, I could just wait for you here…”

“No plans would ever make me leave you alone and hungry anywhere in this world. I'm on my way. Text me your location.”

‘That was not too bad.’ He giggled as he put his phone back in his pocket, and started heading out of the station, towards the narrow alleys of the golden gai.

The place he picked was not too hectic, but none in the area could be considered even remotely fancy, so he officially labeled himself a cheap date, which amused him greatly. The only seats available were by a low counter, facing the cooking area. He sat and reserved a stool by his side. The other few patrons were salary men and one or two shady fellows. The grill emitted the most mouth watering smells, but he had lied: the choices for him were not too great. 'But I can survive on eggplant and capsicum for a night', he told himself.
When Shunsui ducked through the curtained door his heart skipped a beat. To his sober, longing eyes, the man looked magnificent. He towered over everyone else, the strong build eliciting furtive glances from all around. He sported caramel corduroy pants that showed off the nice curves of the hips and the long legs. A striped red sweater added to the man’s warmth and approachability.

“Sorry to keep you waiting…” he said as he sat next to Jūshirō. “It's great to see you… I hope you have been well.” And a hand sneaked under the counter and squeezed his leg.

Jūshirō gaped. Stupidly, uncharacteristically, he just sat there staring at the grey eyes, the small wrinkles that framed them, the Roman nose, the chocolate colored curls…

“Have you picked your carrots?”

“That is slightly insulting, you know?” Was what his mind cared to offer.

“Sorry.” A glimpse of panic seemed to flicker across those grey eyes.

“No, no….its ok… I don't know why I said that. Never mind! Let's eat. Here's the menu.” He beamed the brightest he could, and got a chuckle in return.

Shunsui flipped quickly through the menu and called the waiter. He ordered a few different types of meat and seafood, and finalized with “plus all the plants you have there, and two beers”.

They tentatively began chatting while waiting for the food and drinks. They went through random topics, mostly prompted by the news that came from the TV set. Abenomics, nuclear power, China, America... Their views seemed to be not far apart, which both decided was a good sign.

They had already tucked in part of the skewers and half a pint of Suntory when Jūshirō asked about Shunsui’s photo book, perhaps trying to make peace on old quarrels. The answer, he noticed, was a bit evasive...

“Yeah, took some photos the last few days. Everyone seems inspired by the spring. People always look better when it's warm, isn't it?”

“It's almost ready, then?”

“Yes, yes. Just some details to sort out. I have to visit my publisher, but she's always so terribly busy...”

“Details?” Jūshirō was beginning to have the feeling that he'd raised the wrong topic, but his curiosity hadn't let him drop it. Perhaps, he should just change subject after all.

Shunsui took a big gulp of beer and then replied-

“Yeah, like the… er… possible cover…”

“Oh.” It finally hit him. “I thought you’d have an alternative… In fact, I thought the whole thing was a joke. Sorry.”

“No, don't apologize. I fucked it up. I should have just looked for you some other way and talked to you in private. I'm an idiot, and I'm... incredibly lucky that we're even here now…”

“It was a misunderstanding. I….” – grey eyes suddenly gave him their full attention. He couldn't walk away now, could he? – “I believe you now”. The eyes narrowed and the wrinkles curled - a smile. “...But I'm still not comfortable with being on a book cover… sorry.”
“It’s… fine, I'll come up with something.”

“Yes, that's the spirit!”

He sounded like an old P.E. teacher cheering his pupils. It was hilarious. The beer thought it was hilarious, and Shunsui thought so too. So they started laughing until their bellies hurt.

The bar was almost empty when they left. Somehow, they had managed to have only two beers and were feeling way too sober to take any heat of the moment kind of decisions. Jūshirō declined Shunsui's offer to take him home, but compromised by letting him walk him to the train.

They walked in silence, side by side. To the naked eye, they were two friends who'd met for snacks and would now head to their respective homes.

Shinjuku station was now slightly less crowded. The signboard announced the next train in ten minutes. ‘That will have to do’, thought Shunsui.

Tentatively, he took Jūshirō's hand and counted to ten. The other didn't pull it back, so he started walking away from the main access stairways. Jūshirō followed. They came to a halt near the end of the platform. If there were eyes on them, at least there wouldn't be ears close enough to hear what he had to say. 'Alright, here we go.'

"Jūshirō, there's something I'd like to get out of the way."

He examined the green eyes. They were curious and questioning. He released the hand and stood facing Jūshirō. Then, he began-

"I am attracted to you. Maybe that much is obvious by now... But just so that it's crystal clear, I'll say it in another way. We just met. In time, we may develop feelings for one another, or we might not. Right now what I know is that I desire you, that is, I feel an urge to touch you, kiss you, and, eventually, make love to you. I have identified as gay for most of my adult life, and I am pretty comfortable with who I am. I am not seeing anyone, but I've had my share of partners, mostly on the basis of free love. If that's something you do not wish for, I will be happy to simply become your friend. In any case, I thought you should know this, before we get any closer and risk hurting each other."

Jūshirō's throat seemed to have tied itself in a knot. He closed his eyes. Shunsui saw his chest inflate and deflate slowly, while his eye lashes fluttered, until they steadied and the green eyes caught his again.

"Sorry. I didn't expect this, but I thank you for your honesty. I will be honest too."

Another breath. He now seemed perfectly serene, except for a light contraction of the jaw.

"As you've probably figured, I thought of myself as heterosexual for quite some time. I had relationships with women that I was truly fond of and I was comfortable with how things were. It was only in my mid thirties, in a very difficult phase of my life, that I began to question that status quo. It was confusing and I ended up hurting people I cared for. Ever since, I haven't been involved with anyone, man or woman, and I am still trying to understand myself on that regard."

It seemed to Shunsui that the confession had stirred much more inside the man than his calm demeanour revealed. For an instant, he didn't know whether to hug him, hold his hand, kiss him or just leave him be. It surprised him, when he heard the soft voice again:

"But one thing I've realized. I am also attracted to you, in the same way. In normal circumstances this
would seal the deal, but because of what I just told you, I hope you understand that I need some time. Perhaps, we could just go step by step and try to figure it out... I don't know, I don't want to sound like a maiden, but..."

"Shhh..."

He couldn't take his eyes off of Jūshirō. He wanted to bathe in his beauty forever. But he wanted to do it the right way.

"It's ok. I like that. Step by step. We can do that."

The train hissed and stopped beside them. The voice in the loud speaker announced its arrival. He was again wondering what to do next, when Jūshirō's body came a step closer. The citric smell of his shampoo invaded his nostrils and a light peck landed on the corner of his mouth.

"Hmm, that was nice."

Jūshirō smiled, and Shunsui smiled back, and they let the train bring them apart for the night.

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III

A Cup of Sake

"It's warm today. The buds are in bloom", Jūshirō whispered, reclined on his seat, as the Mazda glided through the highway. He had his fingers interlaced with Shunsui's and his eyes closed.

"They are, they are..." the other man agreed, one eye on the road, one eye on the beauty sitting beside him. His foot pressed a bit harder on the pedal and the engine gave a satisfied roar.

The first notes of an aria emerged, only to be consumed by the sounds of engine and wind. It was the soprano's high pitch that managed to cut through the buzz.

*Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen...*

Jūshirō hummed along.

"You really like this stuff."

"Because it's good."

"Yare. I thought I'd found a pretty boy but I got myself a music snob..."

"Well, there's only so many Enka songs that one can take."

"I don't just listen to-"

"Should I let your playlist speak for itself?" – he suggested, as he picked up Shunsui's phone from the compartment it was in.

"Fine, fine... I might have a slightly old fashioned taste..."

Jūshirō offered a grin to the moon, put down the phone and reached for Shunsui's hand again. They
hummed in unison.

“Enjoyed yourself tonight?”

“The collection is fascinating. And the way they made the link to Sen no Rikyu and to our own tea culture was really well thought…”

"Hu-humm…"

"You are really lucky to always get invited to these things."

“Shinji's been my mate for years. I get a lot of invites from his gallery. I thought you'd like this one.”

"I did, I'm happy we went."

"But…?"

“Huh? I wasn't going to say anything.”

“Really…?"

“Well, I…"

"Yes…?"

“Well, I… at times I felt like one of the tea bowls…”

“Haha! That's one way to put it.”

“I'm not used to having eyes on me like that.”

“You're the new kid in town, and… looking like you do. It couldn't be helped.”

"I guess I'll get used to it, eventually…”

“Huh? Are you really ok with people seeing you that way?”

“I do work in a Catholic school… But I guess as long as it’s not too obvious, I also have the right to have friends…”

“Hmpf, friends…”

“Come on, Shunsui, you know what I mean.”

"I do. Just pulling your leg… Anyway, are you up for a pit stop?"

He didn't utter a word, but the squeeze he gave Shunsui's hand said it all. They left the ring road and drove into Jūshirō’s neighborhood. A few blocks away from his place there was a public swimming pool that, because it was open air, only opened during summer. The small shelter reserved for the school buses had become their hideaway.

Once they parked, Shunsui activated the mechanism that deploys the cover, and stopped the engine. He then pulled the seat back and waited until Jūshirō did the same. They faced each other. Need, desire, joy - a whole spectrum of emotions condensed in that mirrored gaze. They leaned towards each other and kissed. Shunsui pulled Jūshirō and draped him across his lap. That gave him access to the whole expanse of the back, from neck to hips. He ran his free hand up and down, feeling,
worshipping. Their kisses grew hot and wet.

He slid his fingers underneath the waist band of Jūshirō’s pants and was rewarded with warm skin and delicate curves. The thin man did not flinch and settled into the touch, as Shunsui’s hand came to rest over his tailbone. It had been a heavily negotiated compromise. Another approach, by the frontal side, had resulted in rapid disengagement and an awkward drive back home. So he stilled his hand. He could do this. He. Could. Do. This. But just then, in that moment of resolve, Jūshirō drew a path of kisses up his neck and unceremoniously bit his earlobe. His eyes popped open, he pulled his hand out abruptly.

“Fuck, Jūshirō, why do you do this to me? We could do this at home. At least I’d be steps away from a fucking cold shower.” His voice was husky. He’d blurted out more than he should. He took a second to shake away the mist in his head. “Look, sorry. But we could really do this at home. I get it, I get the thrill. I like it, at least I did at first. But now… can't you trust me already? We won't do any more than what you want to. Please.”

Jūshirō was pensive for a moment. He closed his eyes.

“It's warm. The buds have blossomed.”

“Yes, I know they bloody have, you alr-

“Would you like to go see them with me? Tomorrow’s Saturday. I can put together a few things – some sushi, mochi, maybe strawberries… and a bottle of sake, for us to share. We can go to Shinjuku park, or Yoyogi, or any place you fancy. And then, If you'd like to, you could invite me to your place. I believe, I would most likely say yes.”

Shunsui stared, then smiled.

“Sometimes I really wish I had your class.”

"You have your own."

Their lips came together again, but now softly, in control. They arranged the seats again and Shunsui started the car. Outside Jūshirō’s door they said goodbye with a quick peck and the lithe man got out and in through the gate, grinning and waving goodbye.

Shunsui drove back in autopilot. Street lights, signs, adverts, LEDs - all flashed by while he cruised in his own world. Hanami. Jūshirō wanted to do hanami, and then make love. It was silly, romantic and beautiful all at once. Like him. Yes. That was Jūshirō in a nutshell.

For three weeks they had done what they had promised each other – talk, go out, share experiences, explore the desire that bound them. He thought he now had a grasp of what the man was about, but there was still so much to learn. What did his house look like? On what side of the bed did he sleep? What was his morning face like? What would he reply when he told him he loved him? Because yes, he did. It had been so fast, but there was no doubt in his mind. He loved him. It was just a matter of time. He would tell him, soon enough.

The car passed by the glitzy parts of Roppongi, then went down the lane and turned to his garage. The hand went automatically to the small compartment under the radio to fetch the remote and-

"Fuck." He stepped on the break hard. "What the fuck? You want to die?"

The girl who'd just jumped in front of the car didn't move. Wedged as she was between the car and the garage gate, she calmly shifted to face the driver. Slim and long legs, skinny jeans, a backpack
and a hoodie.

"Step aside miss" he yelled out the window, but still she didn’t move. She brought her hand up and removed the hoodie. Mint colored hair and a familiar heart-shaped face, a few years older than what he remembered, but still clearly her.

'Shit. It can't be. Shit. Shit. SHIT!'

He stepped out of the car and ran to the girl.

"Lilynette, what are you doing here?"
November 1993

Sarajevo International Airport

The day dawned blue and clear, air dry as dust, with the outline of the mountains looming in the distance. Mountains that hosted hidden dangers, and, in the bright light of day, when for a moment the sound of shelling was not heard, mountains that looked so eerily quiet.

“Nice helmet you have there, legionnaire-san!”

The young photographer called out to the soldier perched on top of an armored vehicle, parked next to a tall lorry. With the city under siege, food supplies were brought in by air and distributed by the peacekeeping force. There was a hustle-bustle of different groups doing different things, but the photographer had been drawn to that particular scene.

The soldier raised a brow in a minimal sign of acknowledgement, then carried on with the job.

In between passing a crate and receiving a new one, he looked down on the young reporter. Even in English, he could spot a hint of Kyoto in the boy's tone.

“What are you doing here, kid? Fancy dying young?”

“Just wondering if you'd spare some cheese and wine for a hungry correspondent.”

“Sorry dude, only fruit.”

“Tsk. Come on, I know you guys have the good stuff somewhere.”

“Allez, vite!” – came a voice from within the lorry.

“Don’t they feed you in that fancy hotel you're staying in?”

The young photographer threw an exasperated look to the soldier. Fancy was not the right name to describe the city's Holiday Inn, where all the press had gathered during the siege. Wrecked would be more accurate.

Another crate was handed from the ground up, and the soldier transferred it to his buddy under the cover. All were rugged legionnaires, members of the elite 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment, but even in such company the eastern man stood out. He wouldn't be much older than the photographer,
maybe a couple of years, but whereas one was lean and boyish, the other was broad-shouldered and hirsute for a man of his origin. But what really stood out was how, even performing a mundane task like loading food supplies, the man still had a certain something about him, something dangerous, yet strangely relatable.

“In that case I’m taking a picture of you. Smile if you want.”

“Fuck off.” He snarled, but the wicked smile was already lurking beneath the surface. “Come back when I have a gun in hand, not a box of fruit.”

Shugo grinned and turned around. There was an Ilyushin approaching the runway. He studied the area and started walking away. A few steps and he stopped. He looked back and decided to photograph the man anyway. No one was listening but he still yelled, as he started to run in the opposite direction -

“See you around, legionnaire.”

---

7 years later

In the pictures Lily looked just like any other baby. White and fat, a halo of feathery blonde hair and a silly face.

"Doesn't take after you at all."

"Lucky her..."

Shugo Kobayashi and Shunsui Kyoraku would never make arrangements to meet, but somehow they would end up bumping into each other in different places. The Balkans, Congo, Afghanistan... They existed in two different worlds, but their paths would intersect every so often. Both had grown into men, in the years that had passed. Shunsui had raised in rank within the Legion and Shugo had made a name for himself as a freelance war photographer.

"Why the fuck are you here? Don't you miss the kid sometimes?"

Shugo was never what one might call a model father. He met Stella Gingerbuck in an overnight cruise in Hong Kong. Besides bachelor's nights (which was the case) and elderly outings, he could not fathom why one would go on an overnight cruise on such uninteresting waters. But there he was, on a steamy summer night, somewhere in the South China Sea, with a bunch of drunken men he'd barely had the time to call friends.

He spotted Stella during the varieties show – a long-legged beauty in a sort of catwoman outfit. What really caught his eye, though, were the bright irises that seemed to outshine everything else.

As the night went on, the performers joined the patrons in the bar. Some of the guys were too drunk to function and just dropped into vegetative stupor here or there, but others began to mingle. Stella just so happened to like what she saw, when the young journalist took his chances. On that same night, Lilynette was called to the world.

"Gotta put food in her mouth, don't I?"
Shunsui had his eyes fixed on Shugo as they sipped their vodkas. Another time, perhaps, he would have coaxed the photographer to his room, given his body a treat before heading out into the wild once again. But not that time, not with the chubby cheeks of the little girl in the picture haunting his mind, dulling his drive. He downed the liquid in the small glass and stood up.

"Good night and good luck. Don't get yourself killed out there."

"Same to you, sergent."

---

Years went by until they saw each other again.

By that time, there was not much left of Shugo and Stella to tell the world about. She had quit dancing, moved to London with the girl, gotten a backstage job in a musical. Shugo still lacked a proper place to call home and raise a family, and would visit them when he could. At those times, the little girl, usually grumpy and with a bit of an attitude, would smoothen up considerably. They would sit in the park, nibble on ice-cream and talk. She could listen to her daddy's stories for longer than ever anyone managed to catch her attention. He would listen, in return, to her rants about school and other kids. At the end of the visit, she would always ask him to take her along. But war zones are no place for little girls, he would think, and then all the images of little girls and little boys in war zones would come back to his head, and, as he left, he would pray for no such thing ever to cross his little girl's path.

It had become a tradition of the Gingerbucks to go down to their country house in the south and throw a party on the occasion of their only granddaughter's birthday. The girl's father was always invited but not really welcome. He would attend, anyway, sit in the garden and sip on sake that no one else would touch. On the fourth year, he stopped being welcome in the family house, and at night he was politely offered a room at the bed and breakfast across the street.

He kept with the arrangement for a few years more, but when the time came to celebrate the girl's seventh birthday, on a bit of a whim, he decided to invite a friend to join him. Perhaps that year, they would finally drink up the sake bottle.

There was an understandable uproar in the village when Shugo returned from the train station with a 6 foot something rugged asian in tow. They reached the house by sundown, when all the grown-ups were preparing for supper and the kids were running around in the backyard.

"Lilynette, meet your uncle Shunsui."

"Uncle? Why, is he your brother?"

Shunsui started laughing. Shugo wondered if the asian habit of making up family ties where none existed had been borne out of politeness, or the sheer need to cut the unbearable distance between people. On impromptu, he replied-

"Yes. My brother in arms!"

He was not sure his daughter could really understand the meaning of that phrase, but the girl decided to just shrug and take off in another run.

"Brother in arms, uh?"
"What did you want me to say? Kid's sharp as a knife."

"She is. You got a clever one there."

He smiled, but all the domesticity of the scene was bittersweet.

"Come here man, let's toast. I had something sent from back home."

"Oh yes? Now we're talking."

Shugo left Shunsui to enjoy the chill evening air and went inside to fetch the bottle of sake and a proof of his soon to be published photo book.

Shunsui took out his pack and lit a cigarette, making sure he was away from all the kids. He inhaled once, and released. That was when the sharp edge of an object poked his right buttock.

"Put it down. This is a smoke-free space."

"Uh?"

It was Shugo's girl, looking cross and flustered, and holding a stick firmly against his flesh.

"Ouch. Ok, ok." And with that he dropped the cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. "Happy?"

But the stick remained in place.

"Put it in the rubbish bin." She commanded, pointing down to the barely burnt cigarette.

"What do you think you're doing little girl?"

Shugo grabbed Lily by the collar and forcefully removed the stick from her hand, while she paddled and protested.

"But granny told me to..."

"Tell your granny that this is no way to treat your guests."

The girl quieted after a few moments, leaving the two men alone again. Shugo poured two cups of sake for them both, then handed the book to Shunsui.

“Oh la la, très beau!"

"Open it."

He saw as the legionnaire slowly turned the pages, angling the book to the outdoor lamp. He felt inexplicably nervous, but kept it to himself. The other laughed as the first photo was revealed.

"Me with a crate of fruit. Seriously?"

The book followed the Legion’s deployments in the last fifteen years. Shunsui appeared in another photo, some ten years older than in the first one, and this time holding a rifle in the desert.

Shunsui flipped through the pages slowly, as if immersed in his own thoughts. Then he closed it and turned to the cover once again, running his palm lightly over it. The title was printed in black against an image of mountains and clear sky with parachutes:

*Par le Sang Versé*
“Coyote Starrk?”

“Lily came up with it.”

“Your seven year old daughter chose your pseudonym…”

“Why not?”

“That's a whole new pinnacle of lazy.”

“Is that a compliment, coming from you?”

The warmth of laughter was brewing in both their stomachs. It finally came out in a languid roll. And they toasted, and drank again, then repeated it until the bottle was empty. They were the last to leave the Gingerbucks’ backyard and head to the bed and breakfast across the road. This time, despite all the family frenzy going on, they checked in to the same room. A scandal, should someone see them, but the sake had numbed their perception of reality and soon they were lost in a familiar heat.

Next morning, Shunsui got on the train back to London. From there he would fly to Nice and return to the base in Corsica. He didn't tell Shugo - Starrk... it had a nice ring to it – that he would be undergoing spinal surgery the following month. A slipped disk had left him on pain killers since the last deployment and it wasn't getting any better. The surgery might fix it, they had said, but in any case, this was the end of Shunsui the legionnaire.

He would go through recovery at the base, then perhaps a few months of desk work, but soon he would have to think of something else to do with his life. He was not a bureaucrat. He hadn't joined the Legion for money or to erase some stain in his past. He had sought the thrill of battle, the fulfillment of something hidden deep in his soul that cried for bloodshed. His father had tried to make a lawyer out of him, but he didn't last more than two years in that dreadful law school. He was a soldier and he knew no other life.

He had been detached from his family for decades. In his absence his mother had died of illness, his brother and sister in law had died in a car crash, even his father had died of a heart attack. There was no one left to go home to. No one but his little niece, who by now ought to be a grown up woman. Maybe he could return to Japan, take up some freelance job, or join the yakuza. Maybe he'd look for someone to share his life with. Without the old man’s sword upon his head, nothing prevented him from parading his idiosyncrasies around Tokyo. Maybe - who knows? - in a strike of luck, he might just find his other half.

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April 2016
Tokyo

“Take a seat, put down your bag. Do you want to eat something?”

"Look, you don't have to be nice or play daddy or anything. Just book the flight and take me there,
that's it. I have no plan B, I'm relying on you."

Shunsui took a deep breath. He went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water and a pack of crisps.

"Let's go through this again. Your father got in contact with this guy in Lebanon and they both made arrangements to go into Syria. He traveled to Beirut and met the guy. They got fake passports, grew their beards, then got in a bus to Aleppo. They somehow passed all the checkpoints and reached the city. Your father went around taking photos and the other guy did whatever he went there for, and they got on the way back. They were leaving the city when a cluster bomb went off somewhere near the vehicle they were in. The other guy escaped back to Beirut and called you from your father's phone. Your father is..."

His voice faltered. The girl clenched the packet of crisps until it burst, but still, with a voice too steady for her age, she completed-

"Unaccounted for."

"Eat."

He trailed back and forth, from one end of the lounge to the other. When he reached the wall again he kicked it hard.

"Told that bastard not to go. Told him I wasn't going there to get him. Reckless little shit."

"Please."

The girl approached him with the same stealth that she'd shown in her childhood. She clung to his sleeve. He could see she was holding back tears. She was strong, she was smart, but still so young.

"You are staying here, in any case."

"What? No, that is not an option. I am going too."

"Out of the question. You will get in the way."

"Shunsui, come on. What will I do here?"

"Visit your obasan, take care of this place, water the plants, whatever else you want, and wait. Wait, you understand? Wait until I come back here and return your stupid father to you."

"Fine, fine. Can you start packing now?"

"No. First, we are going to call this Jaegerjaquez guy and set a meeting in Beirut. Then, we sleep, and tomorrow night I fly."

"Tomorrow night? Why the fuck tomorrow night? There are morning flights, you know?"

"There's someone I need to see before I go."

---

Saturday began even brighter than the day before. Jūshirō popped out of bed like a spring. His mind went through the list of things he wanted to do that morning, his body simultaneously growing into
an invigorating stretch.

He brewed tea and stretched some more, but as the cup lay half empty by the window he was already sliding into his running shorts and going out for a jog. On the way back he passed by the supermarket and bought all the goodies for the picnic. He also bought some extra fruits and fresh bread, but he couldn't seem to force anything down his throat, so he skipped breakfast and eventually forgot about lunch too.

He took out an old straw basket and admired it. It opened like a suitcase, had a bunch of little straps to hang cutlery and plates, and was lined with red and white checkered fabric. 'It looks utterly silly. It's perfect.' And humming he dusted it and wiped it, before taking on the task of methodically placing all the food, drinks, napkins, cups and chopsticks in the compartments. When he was satisfied he removed the perishables again and returned them to the fridge. It was time to get dressed up.

Because of the diminutive size of Jūshirō's apartment, there was one section of his wardrobe that was usually blocked by his desk. That was where the blue three-piece suit resided, together with two kimonos and a few sets of hakamas. He considered for a moment, then decided to try a few. He first put on the kimono – black with white chrysanthemums on one side. It looked nice... but he felt self-conscious. He had grown his hair since the last time he wore it and he might look just a little too much like an obasan. So he put it away and tried the hakama set. That looked better. It was traditional, but still understated, with dark sober colors. He tied his hair in a sort of topknot, then looked himself in the mirror. He kind of looked like a samurai. He picked up a broomstick and rehearsed some poses, yelling and slashing until he almost broke his ceiling lamp. Then he broke down in giggles.

'No, no, no. This won't do.' He decided.

That was when he found an old long sleeved cheongsam folded in a paper box. His grandmother had given it to him when his grandfather died. Those roots were lost in time, but his grandfather had always been fond of Chinese things and he would swear his ancestors were from the continent. The garment was made of dark blue Thai silk, with a raised collar and small jade spheres for buttons at the neck and shoulder. He put it on, then paired it with simple blue jeans. He wondered if he was starting to resemble his late grandfather, because the fitting was perfect.

'This doesn't look too bad. Alright. Off we go.'

---

"Now, seriously, you delayed your departure one whole day so that you could see cherry blossoms?"

Lilynnette was fuming, and her irritation only grew worse as they entered the park, with the assortment of kids running around, sappy couples and large family gatherings under the trees.

Yoyogi, where else? Shunsui felt his chest tighten as they passed by the place where he first saw Jūshirō. What would he say? How would he react? Lilynnette was there to prove he wasn't just running off for no reason, but was that even the issue?

"I already told you I came here to see someone."

"Someone who?"
"My boyfriend."

"What?!?"

"What, what?"

"Aghhh... That's just so selfish! A person is missing in a warzone, maybe injured, maybe kidnapped... and instead of doing your best to save him, you do what? You go on a date. Ugh... I hate you, I hate you so much..."

"Listen, young lady..."

Since morning the girl had been on a continuous tantrum. He’d ignored it, he understood it, he could feel it too. The cold in the stomach, the knot that wouldn't untie, the uncertainty, the panic and the powerlessness. He too was attached to Starrk. In a way, he could say that he loved Starrk. As a friend? As a brother? Didn't sound quite right. A lover, then? That wasn't the case either. Then what? Did it matter?

"You are missing the point. I am not going to save anyone. I'm not one of those heroes from the movies. I am an old retired soldier with a busted back and no fucking clue of how to find your father. But I will go there and do it somehow, ok? So you wait, be patient, and have hope."

"My hopes would be a bit higher if you were in a plane right now, not in the park with some old fart, holding hands or whatever..."

It did not matter, he concluded. He had to do this - for Starrk, for Lilynette, to the sake of his past. But his daredevil days were long gone. He was not a mercenary, not a legionnaire anymore. During all those years, he thought of the base in Corsica as no more than a place to stay, not a home. Later, when he returned to Tokyo, the house he bought with his savings was a bit more homey, but it wasn't it yet. His home was still in the making, his home was a hopeful heart he had pledged to mend.

“Listen, young lady” he repeated. "You don't get to say such things. You don't get to mock, insult or in any way harm the person we are meeting. And that's not just because this person means the world to me. It's because when we meet today, I am going to break his heart. I chose to do it and I'm not blaming you or anyone. But that heart... I swore to take good care of it, nurture and heal it, and, instead... instead, I'm going to break it. So you don't dare make it worse. Do you understand?"

Her eyes rolled at first but then got locked in iron grey. She lowered her head and her voice.

"Ok. Go ahead, I'll keep quiet."

They walked in silence until they reached the meeting point. As they approached, the tightness in Shunsui's chest grew worse. The sight in front of him was all he’d ever dreamed of. A beautiful man with the widest smile in the world, waving at him from under the cherry blossoms. Sitting by an open hamper, with a towel and cushions laid down on the floor beside him, he was a vision of pure comfort. Home. He was home. He was the one he'd go back to. His mind was made up. He would return no matter what.

“Hey there gorgeous!”

“Lovely day isn't it?”

“Yes it is.”
Jūshirō had stood up and taken a few steps towards Shunsui. Despite everything, Shunsui smiled. Jūshirō came closer and tenderly embraced him. He embraced him back, locking the other man tighter in his arms, burying his face in a snow and silk-covered shoulder.

Jūshirō felt his cheeks heat up with the contact. The park was full of people. What would they say? But it was just an embrace, he told himself. It was still ok, so long as there was no public kissing. And it felt good, it felt intense and warm. Almost a bit too intense, almost as if his breath was going to stop in that tight squeeze. What was this about? Was there something wrong? Shunsui gave no sign of wanting to release him, instead, he buried his face further, lips grazing his skin, and...

‘What is this?’ There was a touch of mist on his neck.

“Shunsui, what's wrong?”

The arms finally loosened. There was indeed wetness in the grey eyes, the ever so strong and confident grey eyes.

He then noticed the girl that had been standing a few steps away, hiding her gaze in the safety of her shoes.

“Jūshirō this is Lilynette, daughter of a good friend of mine…”

“Oh! Nice to meet you, Lilynette-chan! Sit down, have some food with us!”

“Lily, stay here and take care of our stuff.”

The girl walked to the picnic spot and plumped down on the cushions immediately, without a word. Shunsui gave her a small nod and, in a gesture that was by now all too familiar, he held his hand out to his lover.

“Walk with me.”

Some notes:

This chapter draws heavily on real life events and organizations that I am not directly familiar with. Although I did research a bit, this is obviously still just a fanfic and does not reflect reality in degree of accuracy. I hope there are not many obvious mistakes, but if you spot something that totally doesn't work like that, please let me know and I'll try to fix it!

"Par le sang versé" means "through shed blood" and it's a well known way of acquiring French nationality that may be invoked by members of the French Foreign Legion who have been injured in combat. It is also the title of a book (irl), but let's ignore that in this fic, so that Starrk doesn't have to face a lawsuit for copyright infringement!

Below are some of the sources I used to put this together. Have a read if you are curious:

Chapter End Notes

Hi there! I hope the story is still enjoyable to you all! Ordeals are part of life, aren't they? Next, let's see how our protagonists deal with all this.

Tune in again and, as always, it would be awesome to know what you think!

Cheers!
Chapter Summary

After the inevitable separation, life goes on. Daily chores are taken care of, new bonds are forged, others reinforced. Will they be enough to weather the storms ahead?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day #1

Counting days is ridiculous. Life can be filled with meaningful or meaningless things, but it can never be quantified.

Sunday is a good day for simple tasks. Reading in a terrace while having breakfast. Looking for new pants in a department store. Planning meals for the week and buying supplies. Opening the windows and letting the house breathe. Doing the laundry. Watching the news. And waiting.

Thankfully tired and sprawled on the sheets, Jūshirō waited. His mind was slowly going blank – an ability practiced along the years.

Finally there was a ring. He picked up the tablet and pressed the green button.

“Hi!” His voice just a bit too restless. “Can you see me?”

“Yes I can. Can you see me?”

“Yes.”

And for a moment that was enough. One smiled, the other winked. Screens. Glass and minerals.

“How was the flight? Was the food alright?”

“Food was nice, the flight attendants took good care of me…”

“Oh, did they?”

Sheepish smile. Eyes with dark circles.

“You should get some rest.”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“I'm meeting Jaegerjaques tomorrow - getting Starrk’s phone back and squeezing the details out of that little shit... Things should get clearer then.”

“Have you contacted the embassy?”
"I will, once I get hold of all the facts. If they actually entered Syria illegally I'll have to get a lawyer."

"If you need any support from Japan say so. Don't try to do everything by yourself. And if you need me there I can take some days off."

Silence. The sleepy smile again.

"What are you thinking?"

"That there's something I need to tell you as soon as I get back."

"You can tell me now."

"Have you been in the sun? You have a little blush."

"Don't change subject!"

"Haha! Now you have a big blush!"

"You are terrible!"

"And you love it…"

"That's not the issue…"

"Haha! You didn't say no! Victory is mine!"

"Shunsui!"

Lag. The man on the other side said something but the sound came in cracks.

"Say again…"

Indistinct noises.

"What?"

"I was saying I'll call you again tomorrow."

"Oh. Sure. Have some rest."

"And you sleep well."

"See you tomorrow."

"I'll be counting the minutes."

The screen went black. Jūshirō stood up and took it to his desk. He placed it next to the other two objects that kept them connected – a Leica M3 inside a worn leather case and a set of keys. Both had come to his possession the day before, as they walked hand in hand under the cherry trees. During that long walk many things were revealed, things that had up until then remained unsaid.

"My mother called me spring water, my father called me second son. I wish I had been there for her when things got bad, but I wasn't. I chose to wear the colors of a foreign country and leave behind family and all other ties. I think the decision came to me after I rejected my first miai. My little prop..."
sounds like a bad TV drama, but that's the Kyoraku family. Sake merchants for the shogunate, reinvented as imperial opium smugglers, reinvented as industrialists. There was no place in that family for a clueless boy who just wanted to find another boy to love."

He clenched his fist remembering those words. Had he ever felt that way? Or did it happen by accident later in life? His memories were blurry. Even Kaien, his handsome, withering smile... it all seemed to have been tossed in the great cauldron of time.

He cradled the Leica in his hands. A precious object that had changed the course of a life. He traced the lines, the different parts, the places where the surface was worn by the pressing of fingers. He imagined it's original owner, this Shugo, or Starrk as they like to call him. He must be quite a man. He must mean a lot to Shunsui. A whole lifetime of companionship and understanding... Something that can never be matched by three weeks of carnival.

'What am I thinking?' He had decided he would not be petty... no, not about this. He would offer nothing but support, and he would hope, cling to those words that were spoken with that same object held between both their hands.

"It's yours for safekeeping. Use it if you want, otherwise dust it once in a while, and give it back to me when I return."

Day #2

"Jūshirō? Are you ok?"

“Oh, Byakuya… sorry. You were saying?”

“I was telling you about my meeting with the Principal… we had a chat about you.”

“About… me?”

“Yes. We believe that your skills and experience are severely underutilized.”

“Oh, indeed?”

“I am sorry, I should be more tactful. We should discuss this elsewhere. Would you be free for lunch on Saturday? I would like to invite you to my home. My sister is eager to meet you. She says I haven't talked so much about anyone since our visit to the imperial family…”

The handsome, usually glacial face relaxed in a timid smile. Jūshirō still had his brows furrowed in surprise.

“Well, it will be a pleasure, but I hope it doesn't mean bad news…”

“No, rather the opposite! Have a good day, Jūshirō. Send me your address, I will send someone to pick you up.”

“Thank you very much. Have a nice day!”

A nice day. What do you wish when you say those words? An easy day, a day without troubles, or a day when your soul is fulfilled? Jūshirō’s day was nice, according to the first two definitions. Well, at least his working day was.

After his class came to an end and he returned the materials to the staff room, he found himself
holding a key in his hand and completely at a loss on how to carry out the mission he had been
given.

"Stop by every now and then, will you? I don't trust the brat. She's the type that will be up to no good the
minute I walk out of the house. Sorry to trouble you, but it would be a great help."

The day had been filled with spring storms and the commuting system had descended into the state of
controlled hell that it's well known for. The walk from Roppongi station to the address was the only stage in which Jūshirō managed to breathe. The rain had stopped and there was a pleasant humidity in the air. He walked fast but with ease.

He stopped in front of the gate and checked again. That was the place. It was not luxurious, but it was a recent construction and still way beyond what he could afford (and was still paying). He looked at the objects in his hand, all held together by a generic key ring. The gate had no key hole, so he assumed the little round token served that purpose. Tap. “Okaerinasai” a robotic voice greeted.

He stepped in, walked to the door and this time used the big key. Inside there was a staircase straight ahead and a door to the right. There was no key for this one. He knocked and then pushed.

It was the garage. Under the dim light coming from the hall, the metallic red of the Mazda glimmered faintly. He stepped back, a bit startled, and the door closed itself in front of him. It felt, somehow, that whatever personal items he might find upstairs, no other vision could invoke more intimacy than that red shimmer – their secret shelter.

“Lilynette-chan! Are you home?” He called out as he climbed the steps.

At the top there was another door that opened with the smaller key. It led to a western style living room. There was a glass desk with a large computer screen on one corner, a set of brown leather sofas, a dining table and white wooden shelves occupying the whole of two walls. There was a contemporary sculpture on a side table and a collection of ukyo-e behind the larger sofa.

“Lilynette-chan… Are you there?”

There were three more doors. He knocked on each of them, before carefully opening them. First was the kitchen, modern and utilitarian, but no traces of cooking or any smell of food. ‘Maybe she did leave after all.’

Second was the toilet. Again, no signs of use. All dry and clean. He was to alert the police should he lose track of the girl, but he had no idea how he would explain the situation.

He opened the third door. At first it seemed like a kind of closet, with wardrobes on both sides of a corridor, but then it opened into a simple bedroom, with a double bed, an armchair and a chest of drawers. On the chest there was a stand with a set of swords – katana and wakizashi – both with ornamented guards and dark blue silk-wrapped hilts. ‘Who would say?’ On the wall over the bed a floral kimono hung. It reminded him of that silly skirt… There was another door, probably to an ensuite bathroom. But the bedding was plush and immaculate. He couldn't help but taking a seat, running his hand through the smooth cotton, closing his eyes.

“What are you doing here, jiji?”

“Lily-chan? Where were you? I’ve been calling you since I got here.”

“In the balcony, catching some air.”

But his nose caught something around her. He sniffed.
“Catching air my foot. You've been smoking.”

“So what?”

“So what? Do you not know what it does to your lungs? You are far too young to go looking for trouble like that.”

Lilynette visibly restrained herself. She took a deep breath.

“Ok, I’ll stop.”

"Well, there is a fine decision."

He crossed his arms and she pouted.

'You already know what it is to suffer alone, don't you?'

His frown softened.

"Have you eaten?"

"Why, do I need to finish my soup now?"

Jūshirō sighed. This girl was tough to handle.

"No, I thought of cooking you dinner, but I won't pester you if you don't want me around."

She kept silent and went outside to recover her laptop. It had started raining again.

"Can you actually cook?"

He smiled. Baby steps.

"Well, if you don't mind veggies... Shunsui calls me a rabbit, but some of my friends say they like my cooking..."

"There's nothing in the kitchen. We'd have to go to the supermarket and it's pissing down..."

"Well I took the liberty." He said as he opened his bag. In it was a bag of rice, some strange packets with nuts or whatnot, and a paper bag with leafy things peaking out. He perked an eyebrow, enquiring.

"Knock yourself out..." She said.

And so Jūshirō got himself to it. There was chopping and stirring and steaming, and in the end of it, two previously unrelated individuals shared a silent meal.

"Do you want to video-call Shunsui?" He asked while washing the plates.

"Whatever." She replied.

They set up the call in the living room, after the kitchen was clean.

Shunsui, who was expecting a certain green-eyed man alone, answered with a massive smooch straight to the camera.

"Yuck!" the girl jumped and hung out her tongue, as Jūshirō quickly snatched the tablet from the top
of the dining table.

"Shunsui! What are you doing? Put a shirt on, goodness! I'm here with Lily-chan..."

"Aye... and here I thought I could have some sexy times with you..."

"Shhhh! Quiet, or I turn you off!"

"Ugh... why, of all possible gay uncles in the world I had to get stuck with the two of you..."

"What? Mind your language young lady!"

"Hahaha! Jūshirō, we got promoted to gay uncles. Aren't you proud?"

"Why, what?"

"Shunsui, enough of the comedy. Have you found my father?"

"Sorry, Lily, I'm still looking. But don't worry, it will be faster than you think."

Day #7

"Welcome, Ukitake-san, very happy to meet you."

The petite lady of the house greeted Jūshirō with a wide grin and guided him through the corridors and gardens. A mansion lost in the city, walled and quiet.

'Her eyes are so alive, so unlike her brother.'

"Jūshirō-san, Rukia, I trust you already introduced yourselves. Lunch is being prepared, so let me show you around the house while we wait."

Besides the very discreet staff and the two siblings, the house seemed to be deserted. It had been rainy all week, and a few odd drops still poured from the roof at times. The stones in the garden were damp and the leaves were sparkling with tiny drops of glass. They went from room to room, porch to porch. Jūshirō was impressed. He liked the spartan simplicity of Japanese homes, though at times it made him melancholic.

“Ukitake-san, come here, I want to show you something.”

“Oh! Sugoi! Those are the biggest koi I've ever seen!”

“The staff feeds them too much.” Byakuya’s voice emerged, as he caught up with the other two, who were now crouched by the pond, pointing at fish and turtles.

“Rukia, can I bother you to check on the preparations.

“Hai, Nii-sama.” She said before she left.

Byakuya must have noticed Jūshirō’s dumbfounded expression and anticipated the incoming question.

“I have told her countless times to use my given name. But the Kuchiki family is what you may call a remnant from a mouldy past, filled with titles and privileges. It fell upon me to be the head of
“Why a black sheep?”

“I am a teacher. That is far too pedestrian... I married outside the circle I was supposed to... and I even took up the barbaric western faith.”

“Byakuya, you are a Christian convert?”

“Yes. I converted after Hisana’s death. You can say that churches prey on people like me. Maybe I was no different from everyone else, seeking solace in beliefs... or fantasies, depending on your perspective. But... Jesuits have a kind of initiation training they call spiritual exercises. I attended it for one month straight, and I can say that those days in seclusion and silence saved me. Maybe that’s just the kind of person I am... After that I’ve been practicing quietly, almost to myself. That is why I never mentioned it to you. In fact, I thought you knew, since it’s – how to say it... - an unwritten requirement, if you want to work for this kind of institution.”

“What! You mean everyone else is...?”

Byakuya gave a slight nod.

“Alas. That brings us to the reason why I wanted to talk to you in private. It is, indeed, clear at the eyes of the school management that you are an asset to be kept and nurtured. However, some are not entirely comfortable with the way things are. Being very blunt, if you want to progress, you will have to show at least a minimal interest in the religious side of things.”

“I see. I... thank you for the insight. I understand what you are saying, but rest assured, I am fine with how things are. I love teaching. I don't need to go any further, climb any higher. You can call it lack of ambition, but... well, I'm forty... The best years of my life, those when you pursue dreams, ambitions, goals... those were taken away from me. But I don't intend to catch up. If I may harbour one hope, that hope is to be able to live... a simple life.”

“I see. I won't bother you, then.”

Jūshirō read disappointment in Byakuya’s downcast gaze. Risking making things worse, he laid a hand on the other’s shoulder. No pressure, just a presence. Byakuya glanced back, he seemed to have changed his mind.

“Regardless of what you may decide as regards the faith, I am instructed to offer you my current position. After this school year is over I am to join the school's general council. The new elementary school coordinator will maintain a reduced teaching schedule and take up administrative work for the remaining time. Take your time to think about it. And now, let’s eat.”

Still a bit dazed by the offer, Jūshirō followed the host into a large room, opened to the garden. The table was set for three, and so they sat and enjoyed the several courses served one after the other. In the end, sweets were served in the garden, and mild chat ensued between the three. When it was time to go, the two Kuchiki siblings walked Jūshirō to the gate, as he bowed profusely and insisted on not bothering the household driver once again.

Day #15

Sunday. On top of his usual domestic tasks, that he still carried out dutifully, Jūshirō had set aside the
whole afternoon to visit Lilynette. Since that first time cooking and sharing a meal, almost two weeks ago, he had kept his promise of watching over her, but he had also kept his distance. It would be counterproductive to overwhelm her with control. Still, he decided he would use on her the same remedy he had always used on his own anxiety - an occupied mind.

He eventually managed to extract some information out of her. She was interested in digital drawing and coding, but her ultimate dream was to be a journalist like her father. 'Is that so...?' He considered, with a touch of mischief. A few days later, he popped up with a pile of books - much to the girl's chagrin. “If you want to be a journalist like your father, you have to understand the world, the sooner the better.”

To his surprise, the next time he came around she had read two chapters of Kissinger’s Diplomacy and even made some notes on her laptop. However, the following time, all that motivation seemed to have waned, and she was reading manga. But he didn't get on her case, not then, not on the other time he found her sunk in the sofa with the laptop perched on her knees and scrolling absentmindedly.

“Don't worry, you are doing a good job.” Shunsui reassured him. They had remained faithful to their daily conversations. Due to time difference, Jūshirō would wait until the latest he could, so that they could chat when Shunsui came back to the hotel in the early evening. Day by day, he saw as Shunsui’s skin got darker and his beard grew thicker. He listened to the updates on his search efforts, always with a renewed hope that one of those days the news would come that the missing photographer had been found and that they would be going back soon.

As he got home that Sunday, he prepared for the call as usual, placing the tablet on the bed side table and angling it so that he could chat while sitting in bed. The evening travelled into dark night. It was around 11:30 that he heard the familiar ring. He sat and accepted the video call.

On the screen was the usual setting. A small hotel room, curtains closed, a bed-side lamp as only illumination. But there was something different about the man lounging in bed. The attractive smile was all too similar, but the canvas it was painted on had changed. The skin was darker than ever, the broad chest was uncovered and at the waist hung a pair of white loose cotton pants. An then, there was one other major difference...

“Sh-Shunsui… your hair…”

The man that now looked so much like a stranger, goofily rubbed the back of his neck.

“Aye… sorry about that… I got into a chat with a street barber and in the end walked away like this. Persuasive as hell… I hope you're not sad. I'll grow it back for you!”

“No, no, it's fine. You just look different, but that's alright…”

“Uff… good to know. Thought I was in trouble.”

Jūshirō’s muffled laughter reached the other side of the screen. For a moment, Shunsui seemed immovable. Was it a lag?

"Shunsui?" he tested.

The face on the other side rolled into a grin. Had he been drinking? When he spoke again there was a slight slur in his voice.

“Nah, Jūshirō, won't you bring the camera away from you just a bit? I'd like to see more of you.”
Jūshirō wiggled back towards the middle of the bed, making his torso visible on the other side.

“Hmm… you really are a sight to behold…”

Once again, Shunsui just observed the screen, but his eyes had come half lidded. No, it wasn't a drunken slur, it was something else...

“Do you always walk around at home so covered up? Suppose I asked you to bare a shoulder for me… would you be cross?”

“Why, I…” Jūshirō's answer got hijacked by a lewd wetting of the other man’s lips.

'I see. So that's where this is going…'

“So, my pudent lover, what will it be?”

'Do I want to do this?'

Jūshirō was suddenly drawn into the half-lit ambience of that room, miles away.

'I want to do this…?'

Tentatively, he brought his fingers to the first button. He fumbled. Shunsui licked his lips once again. It stirred his desire. A wave of arousal washed upon him and his fingers became dextrous, all of a sudden. He revelled in the look of delight that was set on him. He took it slow. This side of him was still unchartered territory, but he was becoming comfortable enough to brave it. When he realised it, he had gone much further than just baring the shoulder. His hair was draped over his neck, falling to the left, and his right side was entirely uncovered, down to the navel.

“That was… rather nice.” Shunsui purred. “But I see an early spring bud, still covered in frost. Would you pluck it for me… pl-ease…” he pleaded, as his hand shamelessly untied the cord of his pants.

With an innocent smile on his face, still unsure but yet so confident, Jūshirō parted his lips and brought his index finger to that gap. He slid down his chin and neck and lightly pinched his exposed nipple, which immediately stiffened by the touch.

“You learn fast.”

Both stared into the screen. Shunsui slid his hand inside his loosened pants, but Jūshirō's gaze seized his wrist, his cheeks going bright red.

“I'm not sure I can do this…”

“I see. Let's try something else, then. Plug in your headphones, close your eyes. You don't have to think about it. Just follow my voice…”

Jūshirō was once again compliant. With headphones on, Shunsui's voice was a whisper in his ear. A feeling of closeness overtook him. He closed his eyes and, away from the range of the camera, his hand started working on the fly of his pants.

“Winter…” the soft voice announced.

“The trees are barren and the air is cool. A samurai walks amid the naked trees. His hair flows white in the wind. From a dark corner there comes a man in a flower patterned yukata, disheveled brown hair and a fading touch of red at the corner of his eyes. The yukata is loosely tied, and
he holds a bottle in one hand, a fan in the other. He says ‘Oh fair master, how fortunate that my eyes have come upon you.’ And he drops to his knees. He is far too ungracious to done such feminine attire, for his skin is dark and covered with hair. He thinks his eyes are captivating, but no more charms can he count in his favor. ‘Begone.’ The samurai commands. ‘What business does a grown man in such attire have with one like me?’ The man is quick to answer. ‘I wish to dedicate my life to serving your desires.’ The samurai replies ‘nonsense, you are no woman.’ But the other man replies ‘let me show you that I can please you more than any woman ever will.’ The samurai is finally enticed. They walk hand in hand under the trees. Magically the weather changes within minutes. It is now warm and the sakura have fully blossomed. They reach a patch of green moss surrounded by old trees. They sit side by side, but the odd dark man throws himself on the samurai, in a mock loss of balance. He is caught in the samurai’s alert arms. Oh! What comfort those thin limbs can offer! How sweet to be lost in their embrace! But the man in the yukata likes to think he is well versed in the art of delight, so he puts his mouth to good use, as he removes layer on layer of rich silks, and finally reaches the treasure of warmth and soft white skin. The swordsman shuts his eyes and parts his lips. His pure body is debased in all possible manners. Fingers in his mouth, a tongue around his stiffening buds, a palm massaging his sex. And all at the same time, the seasons keep changing around them. Branches, buds, flowers, fruits. No leaves, green leaves, red leaves, fallen leaves. One moment it’s cold and windy, the next it’s warm and steamy. The samurai has surrendered himself to this kaleidoscope of sensations. He trembles, he moans… Jūshirō are you close?”

“Hmm.”

“And so the man in yukata begs him ‘open yourself to me’ and, forceful as he is, his fingers are already on the scene. The samuraiwrithes and groans. ‘More’ he says, and the man enters him like a gust of wind. Back and forth he sways like a tree in a storm. Back. Forth. In. Out. The pace quickens. The swordsman goes—“

“Ah…”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Shunsui, that was…”

“It’s not over yet. The man wants to see the warrior come undone. He intensifies his ministrations. He, himself, is losing his mind to the heat. He says ‘bloom, bloom my exquisite flower, bloom and come…”

“Hmm… ah…”

“Yes!”

“Oh God…”

“Co-ome with- m-me-oh…”

“S-shun…”

“Jū…”

Panting.

Silence intercepted by ragged breath.

“You are the worst storyteller…”
"You are so beautiful like this."

Jūshirō opened his eyes at last. On the screen was a smiling man. He was turning around to fetch something. Tissues. ‘Of course.’ He reached for his box too. He wiped his hand, the action mirrored on the other side.

"Thank you.” The bearded man said.

"Thank you.” He replied.

They both reclined their backs on the pillows and stayed like that, idly glancing at the screens. An afterglow of sorts.

Only a few minutes had passed when Shunsui spoke again.

"Tomorrow morning, before the first light, me and Jaegerjacques will set off to Aleppo. Everything is arranged so you need not worry. It will soon be over.”

A shock and a stab of horror pierced his chest.

"Why? And why this... now?"

"You once told me that, in the very beginning, you felt selfish for doing this alone, thinking of me. Well, consider this payback. My turn to be selfish... because from tomorrow onwards and until the day we meet again, this is the one memory I wish to keep in my head – your breathtaking beauty, flushed and afflicted, as you come saying my name.

"I understand. Still, it was a bit heartless.”

"I am truly sorry.”

"Don't worry. Just keep your promise.”

"I will. Don't you worry about that. Now, you go rest. It's late. Sleep well, my dear... Sayo-”

"No, don't say it. Stay with me just a little longer...”

"Alright. Do you want to hear another story?"

"No. Just stay there, do whatever you want to do. You can turn it off when I'm sleeping." 

"Ok."

Jūshirō left the range of the camera and came back cleaned up and wearing his pajamas. He crawled into bed and tucked himself in. For a while Shunsui was busy going through paperwork and packing, but then he just settled down and looked at the screen. Although the eyes were closed, he didn't think Jūshirō was asleep as yet. 'What if he wakes up during the night? Should I just leave it on?' Outside it was close to twilight, but in Tokyo it was the middle of the night. 'He needs to sleep or he'll be in trouble tomorrow.' But he didn't even know how to put the other man to sleep. 'Does he like to hear someone's voice, or just silence?' Probably the latter... it was better not to risk it, so he just kept observing, focusing on the rise and fall of the chest, the depth of breath.

It finally came to a point where he was fairly certain the other was asleep. He probed, very lightly, a tiny whisper-

"Jū..."
No reply.

"Jū-chan..."

Nothing. His finger moved towards the red circle on the screen, but it stopped mid air. 'Who would've said something like this could be so hard...' Again, his voice, thin as a thread-

"That's it for now. Sleep in peace, sweet love of mine."

Chapter End Notes

Hi all!

So here's a bit of an angstier part of the story. Hope you are still enjoying it. Personally I would like to make them all happy all the time, but I guess we'll have to wait a bit more ;)

As always, it would be great to known what you all think. Even the shortest comment can help a lot!

Over the last few nights I binged on an anime about rakugo story-telling called Shouwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjuu. It's a must-watch (and - spoiler - a big time tear-jerker) and I guess the last part of this chapter drew a bit from that universe.

Thank you for reading and look forward to hearing from you!
Chapter Summary

With no news and the passage of time, hope seems to dwindle. When despair takes control, who will be there to stop the fall?

Day #17

The thing with counting days is: you don't always know when the counting will end. One may count the days to pay day, or the days to go before an important life event. Sometimes, though, the counting is but a hopeless pleading for the day to come when no more days need to be counted.

On the night after his last video call with Shunsui, naturally, Jūshirō didn't sleep right. He was vividly aware that, for the first time in the past two weeks, he would go to sleep without hearing Shunsui's voice, without knowing his whereabouts. A myriad of scenarios played in his mind through the night, and, all the while, a sort of discomfort ground its way down his insides, feeding on an anxiety he could not quench.

Also naturally, he was giddy and cranky the day after. Usually unable to cope with the punch of coffee, he resorted to the more subdued stimulus of tea and mowed through his classes as if nothing was the matter.

At the end of the day, as usual, he walked from his classroom to the staff room, noticing that the corridor windows had been opened to let the pleasant afternoon breeze flow in. In the common room, the other teachers tried to pull him into a chat. There was speculation about the turn of chairs to come after the announced retirement of one of the members of the council.

He excused himself and walked down the stairs, crossed the outdoor playground and walked out the gate. His backpack carried the now usual load of fresh vegetables and other ingredients for the dinner he intended to share with Lilynette.

'She probably knows by now...' He mused. If not, he would have to be the one to carry the news.

After the usual commute, he arrived at the house, and found it empty. He checked the balcony, but the only thing to be found there was a lonely cigarette butt. He sighed. Not that he had expected her to quit so easily...

While hoping that the girl would eventually return, he walked around, needlessly tidying up here and there. He spotted a scarf hanging on the door knob. 'I wonder where he keeps them...' His hand was already pulling the wardrobe door open when he realized it was a bit of an invasion of privacy. He felt a tinge of heat in his cheeks.

The inside of the wardrobe was neat and organized, probably the result of years in the military. He ran a hand through the garments filed away in hangers, his eyes drinking the profusion of rich colors and patterns. Stripes, checkered, polka dot, floral, leafy, brocade...

His hands then happened upon the kimono-skirt he'd seen Shunsui wearing the on the day of their chance meeting. He pulled it out to better examine it. The background was a dark mature red,
interrupted by lush white peonies and the outline of hand fans filled with cherry blossoms on backgrounds of varying colors. The shape resembled that of a Scottish kilt, but as a whole, it was a truly unique piece. Something only Shunsui could pull off, he thought. He pictured the man wearing the same ensemble as he was now: dark skin, short hair and a beard - and found himself trapped between arousal and melancholy.

As he held the skirt and sat back on the bed, he replayed that last video-call in his mind, trying to glance back at the transitions: how tenderness had shifted into lust and how it all had washed into a bitter pit of despair.

He had revisited Shunsui's words several times, trying to decide what to make of them. A lame excuse or a valid reasoning? Speaking of selfishness did not seem adequate in that case, much less coming from a man who conducted himself as a prototypical hedonist. At times, he thought that it might have been quite the opposite - some sort of strategy to dull his pain - ‘Numbing me with sex and delivering the blow’, he considered. Still, an unwelcome stir visited him every time he thought how he'd debased himself in a video-call. A small grudge? Or the realization of how little he knew that man... how much of a stranger he still was...

Patches of personal history had been revealed through their conversations, before and after the abrupt departure, but even his best efforts to piece them together failed to form a coherent whole. Instead, all the fragments led back to the same enigma. Who was Kyoraku Shunsui?

Even sitting in his most personal space – his bedroom – doubts still remained: were those artifacts – swords, kimono, clothes... - authentic reflexes of his true self, or planted evidence for a persona he's been trying to cultivate?

Shaking off these thoughts once again, he rearranged the skirt in the hanger and put it back, closing the wardrobe, and finally leaving the scarf where it was.

Back in the living room, he found Lily's laptop under a cushion, together with a bunch of volumes of some sort of manga. At least she didn't seem to be gone for long. He sat on the other edge of the sofa and opened one of the volumes. As he flipped through the pages, though, a hot rage began to crawl over him, flaring heat around his ears. At that moment, the key turned and Lilynette walked in.

“Hey Jiji, heard the news yet?”

Peeling his eyes from the book he faced the girl, as her demeanor abruptly changed into combat mode.

“Why are you reading my stuff?”

“Well, it's not exactly under lock and key. But the question is – why are you reading this kind of stuff?”

“Because I feel like…”

“Lilynette…”

“What? Mr. sensei is gearing up for another lecture? A girl shouldn't read indecent things like these? Corrupts your brain? Oh, you might end up queer… ops!”

He sighed. Straight to the heart - why waste time?

“Not all grown ups are hypocrites, you know?”
“Then what?”

“Lilynetette, I didn't need to go further than the first chapter to see the main character being drugged and raped… by his kohai… and we're supposed to believe that they'll end up falling in love?”

“You're reading too much into it. It's just porn.”

“Just porn, is it? So it's safe to say you'd never accept something like this if it were done to you?”

“Of course not… what the hell jiji? What's this all about?”

“It's about young people consuming the bullshit they are fed without giving it a second thought... it's about... as an educator, having a duty to tell young people to open their eyes...”

He had risen to his feet and walked towards her, standing a mere arm’s length away, volume held up in the air. But at that moment, a string of self awareness must have been struck, and he calmed down, lowered the book and handed it to her.

"Just be careful, will you?"

“Jiji...”

She accepted the volume, still looking incredulous.

“...you’re like a totally different person…”

“Sorry if I scared you.”

“No, I like this better. You finally seem to have real blood in your veins…”

"I always had blood in my veins..."

Lilynetette cocked her head.

"Anyway, the kouhai didn't drug his love interest, the Senpai did it himself because he went snooping into other people's stuff…” She accompanied the statement with an intent, dirty look, and added, “And you shouldn't accuse someone without properly knowing the facts."

“That is beside the point!” he retorted, unconvinced.

“No, it's not. What kind of judge decides without properly evaluating all the circumstances?”

“One that has seen a bit more of life than you have, young lady…”

And so they engaged in yet another lengthy discussion about many things tossed into one big bowl of arguments. None mentioned the silence that afflicted then. Instead, they did the best thing they could to deal with it – spending each other's time.

Day #30

May settled in like a secret. The school year at St. Ignatius, which followed a typical European school calendar, was coming to an end, and all the teachers were working hard preparing their students for exams and evaluations. It was only natural that fatigue and pressure took over the overworked employees.
One day, while walking together to the respective work posts, Byakuya decided to probe Jūshirō about an almost forgotten topic.

“Jūshirō, I don't mean to put pressure, but we should give an answer some time soon, as concerns the position…”

“True, true…” the eyes did not leave the marble floor flowing beneath their feet.

‘Why doesn't he smile anymore?’

Byakuya could not make out the reasons for such a sudden change. It could not be simple fatigue. He was worried. Could this be none other than his own fault?

“You don't need to take it up if you prefer to remain in your current position. It's not an up or out situation. The school needs you either way.” He said, placing a hand on the other's shoulder.

“Oh… it's good to know…”

“Perhaps, if you have the chance to think about it, you can let me know in two weeks time? After that things will get busier with grading and transfers…”

“Sure, I will...”

But still the jade green eyes remained unlit.

May was also the month of pleasant days and surprise showers. Jūshirō was caught in one of those on his way home. He immediately got rid of the drenched clothes and took a warm shower, but, as he was preparing supper, he was shaken by a sudden sneeze.

“Wah! Didn't see that one coming!”

But he carried on with his tasks. Later that night, he woke up thirsty, with an odd raspiness in his throat. He drank some water and went back to sleep.

Over the following days, the rough throat evolved into a sore throat, his sinuses got clogged, his head started aching, as did his muscles, body temperature rose, a cough started visiting more and more often. By the third day he had to call in sick and tell Lilynette he couldn't visit for a few days. He treated himself with tea and soups and, to every phone call, he replied that he was getting better. In truth, however...

Day #40

In truth, he didn't know if he wanted to get better.

Thoughts like these had always been anathema to him. Yet, they had somehow seeped into his mind against his will. They were there, nagging, when he looked at the Leica lying on his desk, when he stared at the black screen that wouldn't lit, when he checked over and over again if the wi-fi was on, if the modem needed resetting, if the app was working... Everything worked, everything was on, except Shunsui. That small dot that had implanted itself in the sonar of his life had gone silent.

Too weak to go out and buy food, too sick to eat snacks or take away, he had resorted to feeding himself instant porridge and honey dissolved in hot water, until even those simple preparations were too strenuous and he fed himself less and less of anything.
Desire is a hazardous poison, he concluded. It is like a torrent that grows thicker by the day, like lava flowing down a slope, clinging to the earth and reducing everything to ash.

He should never have taken that hand... the hand held out to him amid wind and ocean spray, a promise of warmth and care.

Yes, that simple gesture had given him a taste of what it’s like – that blissful state where two beings come together and hold each other through high and low... But it had also planted upon him he seeds of doubt and weakness.

How could he walk again on his own?

To live a life without longing... such is the teaching of Lord Buddha. Why did he stray? It is not innocently that the word flesh is used both for the actual matter of which animals are made, and the act of pursuing one’s desires. Refraining from eating meat and from desiring the touch of another human are not entirely a different things, he concluded. Saying no to both strengthens the character and prevents one from falling into the state of despair he now was in. It all began with his breach of both restraints... so it was, he thought, only fitting that he should meet his end this way -- sick, starved and alone.

A coughing fit rocked his chest. He propped himself slightly from the mattress and brought a tissue to his mouth.

"It won't stop. I should try and cough the phlegm but I'm too tired, I can't do it anymore. Maybe I'll just let it be..."

He closed his eyes and let himself fall.

Drowning.

Lungs no longer fulfilling their purpose.

Falling, sinking into a liquid underworld.

Blank.

The sirens.

The deep ocean and the sounds that inhabit the abyss. How had they become so clear? Darkness without end, movement without shape. He could stay there, that place seemed right for him. Was he a fish, then? A squid? Or one of those oddball creatures you see in museums? Perhaps he should look for plankton, so that he could go on living in that world...


Sound. Light.

The sirens were gone, replaced by the hiss of cold air and the buzz of machinery. For what seemed like a lifetime he remained immobile, those sounds dominating his existence. Then, everything would be reduced to nothing, until some force pulled him back to the surface, where the ever present machinery buzzed without end.

Finally, two voices emerged out of the blur.

"Isane, can I see the CT scan?"
"Hai, Sensei!"

"You can remove the oxygen. Maintain drip, erythromycin same dosage. Light meal later on."

Those were not just any voices, those were familiar voices, voices that unearthed memories from another painful past. But how had he ended up there? Was it night or day? How long had it been?

As if pushing apart a pair of rusted gates, he opened his eyes. A nurse was working on pulling tubes out of his nose, Dr. Kotetsu was typing something on the mobile working station and the glacial smile of Dr. Unohana Retsu was hovering right above him.

"Ukitake-san..." Her pious voice chanted. "What a surprise to have you here today."

She proceeded to make sure he was conscious, through a series of simple tests, before lecturing him, as serenely as always:

"It seems you are in luck and it is just pneumonia. It seems, however, rather odd that someone who fought so hard to maintain good health for many years should let a simple respiratory tract infection come to this. You will stay the night here and if everything goes well you will go home tomorrow. Have a good rest now, Ukitake-san."

"Unohana-sensei..." He probed. His voice was coarse and thin. He had the urge to bow and utter apologies to the physician until terrifying smile shifted its attention elsewhere. Being sick is almost like being a child again.

"How- I-here?" He asked.

In the same priestly tone, she replied-

"A young girl happened upon your house and called the ambulance. It seems among your many strikes of luck was the fact that you forgot to lock your door."

A young girl? Lily? Of course, he'd neglected her for over a week... but the girl had always acted so independent. Who would have thought that she'd ever seek him?

His mind was still hazy and, just then, another wave of sleepiness was taking over. He offered no resistance.

When he opened his eyes again, the lights in the ward were on and there was movement of people and things. All of a sudden, his bed started tilting upwards. He leaned his head to the side, and there he saw two women, one slouching on an armchair and the other standing upright and holding the wand that controlled the inclination of his bed.

"Yoru-chan? Lily-chan?"

The younger girl briefly looked up before going back to whatever game she was playing in her smartphone. His ex-girlfriend seemed ready to punch him back to sleep.

"H-howcome...?"

"How come I'm here? It seems they still have my contact in your file, under next-of-kin".

"Oh...sorr-"

"But the question is –", she cut in - "how come are you here? Complications following respiratory tract infection... A bloody flu! Jūshirō... what the hell?"
"I-"

"Anyway, the little geek here is underaged, so I've been appointed your caretaker."

"No-need..." His voice faint and pained, his words clearly insincere.

"No need to bother myself? Like hell I don't need to bother myself! Now shut up and open your mouth, I'm supposed to feed you."

If he weren't in a bit of a hassle, he would have been baffled, let alone mortified, by what ensued. Yoruichi climbed onto the mattress and started feeding him spoonfuls of soup like one would feed a toddler, complete with sounds of "ahhh" and commands to "open wide"... and Lilynette was now entertained taking photos of the scene.

"Lily-chan, what are those for?"

"Ransom... in case you decide to nail me to either Shunsui or my father..."

His heart jumped.

"What? Does that mean...?"

"No, Jiji, not yet." She replied, her eyes sinking to the floor.

Day #41

It was the upstairs neighbor, who was passing by when the ambulance pulled over, that helped Yoruichi hoist the wheelchair, Jūshirō on it, up the stairs.

Inside the diminutive apartment the air was still stale with sickness. She wrapped the patient in a blanket and opened all the windows, threw away all the dirty towels and paper tissues, peeled all the bedding and turned the washing machine on. Then, she proceeded to boil water for tea. She finally settled by the patient and put the warm cup between his hands.

'What a hopeless man...'

The house was no different from what she remembered. It felt a bit nostalgic, a thought that both of them seemed to share, in that fleeting moment of quiet. She ruffled his hair. Perhaps she could ask Kisuke to drop by, once he returned from his trip to China. They seemed to have liked each other.

"Maybe I'll tell Kisuke to come over some day..."

"Sure, that would be nice..."

She looked at him, so frail, so sad. What could have happened? She held his hand and felt the tips of his fingers curl lightly around hers, just as a threat of fog started growing in her eyes. Maybe first loves never die after all, she thought, for as much as one might bury them and move on.

"Anyway," she shook it off, "what do you want to eat? You're the one who can cook, but I can go out and buy something..."

"There's a small eatery by the corner, going towards the park... you can buy me a cup of miso there. Take my wallet and buy something you like too..."
"Yes, grandpa! Jeez, Jūshirō, I'm not even gonna comment on that..."

And she dashed to the door, obviously ignoring the instruction to take his wallet. She had taken no more than one step out of the apartment when two cries erupted in unison.

"What are you doing here?" Asked a deep, composed voice.

"Helping a friend. What are you doing here... Byakuya-bo?"

"Can that friend be Ukitake-san? How do you know him? What happened for him to need your help?"

"Oh, sorry if I'm breaching your rights of friendship over Jūshirō..."

"First-name basis. How rude."

"Darling, we are way beyond first-name basis..."

"And why is that? Also bullied him in school?"

From inside the apartment, Jūshirō cleared his throat as loudly as he managed without giving himself a fit.

"Byakuya, please come in. I am sorry, I'm afraid I was a bit under the weather and couldn't call you about yesterday's classes."

"A bit under the weather?" Byakuya found himself in awe when he saw the man's condition. "Have you seen a doctor? I can bring you to a good clinic immediately."

"It's taken care of, relax..." Yoruichi interrupted as she came back in. "Anyway, I'm going out to buy food. Want anything, Byakuya-bo?"

"What? You are certainly not thinking of feeding an ill person some shabby take-away..."

"And what do you suggest? Know any Michelin star with home delivery?"

Byakuya chuckled nonchalantly as he took his phone from his pocket.

"Honda-san, please go home and ask Rina-san to prepare dinner for three and bring it back here. We will need at least a good serving of a hearty soup, but please let Rina-san know that there can be no meat in the broth. Thank you very much... Yes, as soon as possible."

He looked at Yoruichi with a little smile of triumph - "Settled."

"Humpf!" She sulked.

Jūshirō was hardly picking up on whatever was going on there, but he finally stated the obvious...

"So, you two know each other..."

Byakuya replied candidly -

"She was my school bully, and also a trickster and thief."

"What he means is that I was his senpai. By the way, what's with the informal treatment, Byakuya-bo?"
"I would rather call Jūshirō senpai than to call you senpai."

"But you already use his first name, you can't go back now."

"Respect is not wasted when it's due. Senpai it is. How are you feeling senpai?"

The honest answer was 'confused', but he just replied 'better'...

Honda-san arrived a while later with the food. There was a large pot wrapped in cloth that contained a thick vegetable broth with tofu and egg and a strong ginger smell, and two other smaller boxes, one containing rice and the other a row of neatly arranged slices of seared cod, garnished with mixed greens.

Looking at the improvised table set for three, Yoruichi broke the respectful silence.

"Can we just acknowledge the fact that you have a driver called Honda?"

"So what?"

"It's funny."

"No it's not. It's disrespectful."

But their bickering was cut off by the light rustle of a giggle.

"Oh... You two..."

And the giggle turned into tears, but there, beneath them, was the one thing they'd both been hoping to see that day – a smile.

However, the evening was by no means a pleasant soirée. It was a struggle to make Jūshirō down just a few spoons of soup. He complained of nausea and lack of appetite, broke down in coughing fits, shivered of cold and sweated with fever. Through it all Byakuya and Yoruichi hung around, adding and removing layers of blankets, hand-feeding, sorting out tablets, rubbing medicinal oil on his chest and generally fussing over the older man, in their own peculiar ways.

Despite Byakuya's opposition, backed by his own proposal of bringing Jūshirō to the Kuchiki mansion, Yoruichi ended up staying the night, having declared that she would only leave when Jūshirō was strong enough to take care of himself.

On the next day, in his gruff voice and ragged breath, Jūshirō managed to tell her all about the events that had left him in such low spirits. She did not seem surprised with the whole middle-eastern ordeal, but she listened to it all, all the while offering reassuring arm rubs and hair ruffles.

For a few more nights she stayed by his side. In the beginning, it all had been hazy and he could remember no more than fever and coughing, but on the third night, his senses seemed to be returning to him. After a slightly longer and more articulate after-dinner chat, when Jūshirō began to feel drowsy, she helped him lower himself onto a fluffy pile of pillows and went on to get herself ready for sleep.

He watched as she casually shed all her clothes right in front of him and slipped into one of his loose t-shirts. She was all tout legs and thin ankles, the kind that, in times gone by, could make a man go insane just by seeing them tease into view beneath long robes. He gave her a small smile as she climbed into bed and protectively wrapped her shorter frame around his.
She turned off the lamp and his eyes readjusted to the darkness, interrupted only by the faint glimmer of street lights through the sheer curtains. The tactile impressions of hands, arms and legs became vivid, seemingly dancing around him with each sway of the mattress, each shuffling of the springs. When her weight shifted upward, a soft stream of breath blew on his neck, and fingers began threading through his scalp, massaging all the way to temples, thumbs rubbing the line of his eyebrows. Had she done this on the nights before? How was it possible that, even in the stupor of fever, he had not felt those touches?

On that night, though, they were starting to revive cues from the past, producing a very unexpected effect on him... He turned his head towards her and his eyes met the dark contours of her beautiful figure. Nothing short of a princess.

"I'm sorry Yoruichi, but I'm not made of stone..." He whispered.

Her brow cocked up. Then, like the feline that she was, in just one supple movement, she flipped them both and straddled him.

“I don’t mind, you know… I’ve been wanting to rip that sadness out of you once and for all…”

The fever and the heartbreak still burned in his eyes. Like a wind-swept cliff by the sea she towered high above him. Could he ever do such thing? To indulge in an old familiar feeling, let it erase all the hurt and uncertainty...

He slowly raised an arm between them and closed his eyes. The hand easily navigated the few inches still to travel, and coupled itself to a perfectly shaped breast. He basked in the suppleness and warmth, and the stiffening effect of his touch.

But with the next intake of breath, he withdrew his hand back to its resting place, over his chest.

“One last grain of dignity… I beg you, please let me keep it…”

Dignity... Jūshirō Ukitake and his old man ethics. She wanted to mock it. She could even act the part of the rejected woman and make him feel like an asshole…but she could only feel fondness for the man that lay beneath her - his scrunched up brows and eyes pressed closed in supplication. She lowered herself and laid a kiss on his forehead, then, she moved away and pulled her pillow back a few inches, lying down with an arm’s distance between them.

“Sleep.” She ordered.

“Thank you.” He replied.

Day #55

Yoruichi stayed a few more days, enough to fully restore their friendship after that awkward night. Jūshirō recovered at a good pace and soon was cleared to work by Unohana. Byakuya, however, managed to convince him to rest some more and, in secret, worked with Yoruichi to organize a small "get well" party.

Lilynette, who would blush beet red every time Yoruichi addressed her, and followed the older woman’s instructions with a solicitude that she offered no one else, was also helping. So was Rukia, who brought a bowl with two pretty goldfishes as a present, and Kisuke, who had finally returned from his China trip. Dr. Kotetsu came by with her sister, who turned out to be a bit of a groupie, and then came all the teachers from St. Ignatius, including some of the priests, bringing cakes, presents
and other goodies, and filling the house with voices.

When he was finally allowed to return to work, Jūshirō rebuilt his morning routine to what it used to be before the downfall. Stretching, tea, breakfast, organising paperwork, getting ready, going out. Only, instead of his usual walk to the train station, on that day, he had Honda-san waiting for him outside.

He slid his bag over his shoulder and turned off the lights. He had decided to tell Byakuya that he would accept the promotion and the responsibilities attached to it.

He ran a wistful hand through the contours of the Leica. There was a slim hope still living in his heart, but, for now, Jūshirō would stop counting.
St. Ignatius College lacked nothing in the way of amenities. There was a large multi-use arena, outdoor sports facilities, two buildings hosting classrooms, labs, art studios, cafeteria, library, and even an educational garden.

As a religious school, it also featured a small chapel. It was a rather modest space, nestled between the library and the principal's office. Inside, it was covered with wooden panels, with a few rows of long benches and the usual features - altar, pulpit and aumbry. There, once a day, some students and teachers attended mass.

On one of those days, the gathering was joined by the soon to be appointed elementary school coordinator. Naturally, heads turned at the unexpected sight, but all went back to normal as the whispering died down and the small student choir kicked off their performance.

Their repertoire was made up of youthful hymns that spoke of universally worthy things, like love and forgiveness - in plain language, and to the sound of a few simple chords played on a duet of guitars.

Then, of course, there was all the sitting and standing up, and the formulas one was supposed to memorize. Jūshirō was at a loss as to all of that, so he copied Byakuya, who sat next to him.

In the end, he found himself no more inclined towards the faith, but definitely in a blissful mood. Thus, when he made his way from the chapel to the Principal’s office for his formal appointment, all nervousness had been erased.

Father Miguel, the Principal, was a short, thin man in his sixties. Frugal without being austere, he smiled easily and had very lively brown eyes. He seemed to have taken a liking to the oriental ways of tea, as he even had a side table with a Chinese draining board, kettle and porcelain vessels for gong fu cha.

But the occasion did not call for such refreshments. Jūshirō and Byakuya signed their new contracts and the Principal signed on behalf of the school, bestowing blessings upon them both.

At the end of the day there was another small party in the teachers' room. This time, though, Jūshirō was the one buying the cake.

The reactions to the promotion were mixed. Some whispered that mingling with the boss had its perks, while others agreed that there was no better choice for the job. For one reason or the other, from that day onwards, a nickname began to circulate among the teaching staff.
At first, Jūshirō was not aware of it. With the new post came the right to a private office, which kept him detached from everyone else. That made him feel somewhat lonely, so he ended up stopping by the staff room whenever he had an excuse to do so. And that was how he came to be aware that he was now known to the whole school by the title of Taichō.

Over the next few weeks, he settled in to his new responsibilities and did the best he could not to mess up any of the planning and scheduling tasks that he was supposed to take care of.

It was the beginning of summer. With the warm weather, Jūshirō had started to go for his runs early in the morning rather than around mid day. However, even at that time and with his hair tied up, he would end up with white strands plastered to his sweat-covered skin. Perhaps he should consider the possibility of a haircut. He was standing in front of the mirror in the dressing room one day, measuring the wet locks that went all the way down to his sacrum, when he saw a tall figure looming behind him. He recognized the man as Iba, the PE coordinator and coach of several sports teams.

“Morning, Ukitake!” Naturally, being of the same rank, the mustached sportsman didn't see any need for honorifics.

“Good morning, Iba-san!”

They then engaged in a sort of manly chat about sports, that culminated with Iba inviting Jūshirō for the teachers’ football team. He was a light runner and, according to Iba, could make a pretty good midfielder. Jūshirō replied that he hadn't played football in almost a decade, but promised the insisting colleague that he would think about it.

And the subject did, indeed, come to his mind later in the day, together with the still hypothetical concept of a haircut. It was an emotional subject for him, so he had avoided it for a long time. Maybe he'd just decide about the football thing first. That seemed like an easier choice to make.

Coincidentally or not, as he was walking out at the end of the day, it was Iba that fell by his side and started babbling about some sort of adult tournaments and how it all invariably ended up in collective intoxication and hot springs.

The sun was setting with a gaudy show of light and color. The leaves shone translucent overhead, and embroidered shadows adorned the path towards the gate. The street outside was quiet, without the usual traffic of students and the vehicles waiting for them.

Then, by the gate, the sleek lines of a sports car slid into view. The fading sun swept through it and a glimmer of red shone past the eyes of the teacher. His body froze and his mind went blank.

II

According to Lilynetette, the old man had been working too much. He would come around closer to eight, sometimes nine, and less often than before.

"Eight... less one hour commute... Hmm, that means he's done no later than seven..." One man estimated.

"Not much time there mate... but do yourself a favor and take a shower... and do something about that awful beard." The other reasoned.
"Yeah, move it, you bummer!" The sassy teenager urged.

Somehow, Shunsui managed to rush through the basic grooming routine and get in the car within little more than half an hour. If the traffic was not too crazy, he would make it on time.

It felt good to drive again, although a stabbing headache was steadily aiming at his temples. He knew where Jūshirō worked, but he had never been so bold as to pick him up. During their short dating period, he had always waited for the other man to go home and get changed, and he would meet him there. As he now made his way through the streets that led to St. Ignatius, he couldn't help but feel a little nervous, a little guilty. He didn't want to embarrass Jūshirō, but he truly couldn't wait to see him, to hold him and, hopefully, to pick up where they had left off.

He stopped the car at the end of the road and stood watch. The minutes passed and the sun began to set. He wondered, if he'd stay there, he might not see Jūshirō going out. He began to panic. He started the car and let it slowly glide to the front gate. Then, on impulse, he opened the door and stepped out. His reflection on the glass showed a tall, dark man, finger length hair in a halo of disorderly curls. After all this time, would Jūshirō still find him attractive?

Beyond the gate, two rows of ginkgo trees led to an austere rectangular building. Along that avenue two tall figures approached. They stopped. Long white hair lightly swaying in the afternoon breeze. Svelte legs, sculpted torso, broad shoulders. Bright green eyes that stared directly at him.

Shunsui tried to smile, but it must have turned into a contorted frown. Jūshirō swayed as if caught by a gust of wind.

‘Oh shit! He's gonna faint!’

He rushed a few meters forward, willing to catch him even if by throwing himself on the floor beneath him. But Jūshirō steadied himself. There was no need for flashy moves.

‘Good... good boy.’

He stepped forward, closing the distance, now at a normal pace. All the way, Shunsui never strayed from the light of those jade irises. He could tell there was effort and control in that serene look, but beneath the surface ran the same wild intensity he had seen on their first encounter. Was that a flame only he could see?

When they were face to face, Jūshirō gave him a nonchalant nod of the head and said-

“Kyoraku-san, good to see you again.”

And Shunsui replied-

“Good to see you too Ukitake. Business trips are such a pain. Wouldn't you fancy a beer and a bite with this old chap?”

“Iba-san” - Jūshirō turned to his companion, who seemed to suffer from some form of acute testosterone overload - “I'll see you on Wednesday for practice. If you think I'm too clumsy to play I can help to collect the balls and vests!”

“You're too modest, Ukitake! See you on Wednesday! Enjoy your dinner!”

And they all walked out the gate, Iba waving briskly as he walked away.
Guiding him to the passenger side, Shunsui opened the door and ushered Jūshirō inside the car. They drove for one, two blocks. The school was out of sight when the first traffic light fell red.

As the car rolled to a halt, like magnets they moved upon each other, hands seeking contact and lips seeking lips. It was a bit like a first kiss - clumsy, rushed, bodies re-adjusting to the feeling of being close - but there was not a trace of hesitation. Their lips moved freely and their tongues intertwined. It was beautiful and exhilarating all at once. All surroundings disappeared and they found themselves in a familiar space. The wind blew, the sand whirled, and the sound of waves lulled them deeper into the fragments of shared memories.

How long was it before the symphony of horns around them broke through their bubble?

‘Red lights are fast these days…’

Shunsui regretfully disengaged and saw the green light turning yellow in front of him. Some cars were scrambling to overtake the Mazda, while others just honked furiously from behind. His foot stepped on the clutch and his hand went to the gear stick, but at that moment, when his senses finally returned, he felt his cheek smudged by wetness and, was he glanced at Jūshirō, he saw tears flowing in a quiet torrent from his eyes.

‘All the world be damned!’

He stormed out of the car, circled around the front, opened the passenger’s door, pulled Jūshirō out. There was an awkward crossing of legs and a slight stumble on the edge of the pavement.

“Bakayaro!” – a voice rushed by in a hiss of tires. But it did not matter, because Jūshirō was in his arms, locked tightly, and he was busy mumbling little nothings in between kisses pressed to his beloved’s forehead.

“Jū… Jū-chan… baby… look at me… I'm here now… it's ok… it's ok…”

Reddened green eyes took shelter on his shoulder and disappeared beneath a soft curtain of white. Tears flew into the fabric of his shirt and seeped through to his skin.

There was a part of him saying that those tears were necessary, that they might even be liberating, but still they cut across his whole being like a scalpel. In his own judgment, he was a worthless man. His talents were scarce and prone to misuse, but to make Jūshirō cry, that made him feel like the most wretched of vermin… and all he could do was pat his back and whisper words of comfort. Utterly useless… Nevertheless, for as long as those tears kept flowing, he would do just that.

As the evening set in, the traffic eased and the protest from other drivers died down. Even on a sidewalk by the road there was a sense of quiet. There were houses and a small park opposite, a convenience store further ahead and some undistinguished lights on the other side. Unconsciously he started humming an old tune. The sobs had subsided, but now a different kind of vibration began. Laughter?

Gently, he lifted the face buried in his shoulder. There was still redness around the eyes, but they were drying, and a trace of liquid snot dripped from the reddened nose.

‘What a crybaby…’

“You and your love for romantic songs…”

Like the sun emerging through black clouds after a storm, the crying grimace slowly turned into a
playful smile.

“My grandmother and that singer have the same name, you know?”

'So beautiful.'

“Saori…”

“Uh?”

“Saori, that's my grandma’s name… you should meet her some time.”

Shunsui was still a bit dazed, but it was just so easy to be infected by that smile.

“Yes… I would love to…”

III

The remaining of the drive to Jūshirō's place was rather uneventful. They kept their fingers interlaced, separated only when gears had to be changed. There was finally time for a report on the events of the past two months.

Starrk was alive and well, currently resting at Shunsui's with Lilynette. They had taken an overnight flight from Beirut, with a stopover in Dubai. What had happened before was tangled in the sheer emotion with which Shunsui told the tale. The destruction and mayhem had shocked even a seasoned soldier like him. The network of arrangements that had enabled their travels, crossings and smugglings were confusing and peppered with mentions of outlandish locations. However, the part of the story that was told with more vivid detail was the moment when, arriving at a hospital that was depleted of everything but some of its walls, Shunsui saw his friend, braces on neck, arm and legs, surrounded by a cheerful group of locals who, he would later learn, were the very same men who had rescued him from under a collapsed stone building. Those "white helmets" would later help them plan their way back to Beirut, across borders and checkpoints, avoiding kidnapping by rebels or arrest by the authorities of three different countries.

By the time they reached the street where Jūshirō lived, most of the story had been told. Shunsui slowed down and parked right by the front door. They fell silent, simply holding hands as the engine idled quietly.

Jūshirō closed his eyes. He had hoped for this reunion for a long time, but he truly did not expect to break down so spectacularly. Where had those tears come from?

Passion, desire, longing. He had blamed them for his weakness. Did he fear losing control again? He searched his soul, but he found none of the desperate longing from before. It's as if all of it had vanished with the last traces of pneumonia, replaced by something quieter, steadier. Maybe his emotions ran deeper than he'd thought.

"Shunsui,” he called softly, breaking the silence. “Do you want to come upstairs?"

He opened his eyes to meet placid grey irises.

"No."

The refusal caught him off guard. His eyes widened and his breath hitched. Shunsui pulled his hand
up to his lips and gave it a soft peck.

“Spend the weekend with me, Jūshirō. Let’s go away, just the two of us.”

"The weekend...?"

"Yes. I didn't have time to plan much, but I arranged for a place to sleep. The rest... we can figure it out together... what do you think?"

“Where are we going?”

“Surprise.”

Jūshirō's brow cocked up.

“Well, it’s by the sea, that much I can tell you, so bring something to swim in…”

Shunsui had changed into seductive mode, and had the whole roguish smile and half lidded eyes thing going on. That look, Jūshirō thought, that look would be the death of him.

“Jūshirō, I want to make up for all this time we were apart... and no matter what happens from now on, I don't want to be away from you ever again.... I need you so much. Please, be with me…”

Who doesn't want to hear words like these? But for him, they were really not that necessary. He ran his fingers by Shunsui's sun-tanned face, feeling the smooth, freshly shaven surface.

“I want to be with you too... And, yes, If there’s sea involved, I'm in!”

“You are?”

“Of course... I love the sea... I'm an island boy!”

Shunsui shook his head, unsure if he’d landed in the right version of reality.

“So why don't you go upstairs and pack? I'll wait here.”

Jūshirō nodded and turned to the door. His hand was shaking as he reached for the handle. His cheeks had flared red and he kept smiling like an idiot while running up the stairs.

He barged into his place, tossed a backpack on the bed and opened the wardrobe. A few pairs of boxers went in first, then his pack of toiletries. He was glad he was a fairly organized person. Swimming shorts... He would have to figure that one out wherever they were going, because he only had speedos and we was most definitely not going to wear that in front of Shunsui. He threw in a few t-shirts and a pair of normal shorts. Finally, he wrapped a pair of rubber slippers in a plastic bag and wedged it in as well. Before going out he checked the gas switch and fed the fishes an extra-generous meal, apologising for his going away.

He went out and ran downstairs. The red Mazda was still parked at the same spot. He stepped in, bending himself to settle in the low seat, typical of small sports cars of that type. He only noticed something odd about the driver when he closed the door. With the sharp sound the until then relaxed body curled and ducked briskly towards the steering wheel.

"Shunsui, a-are you ok?"

Shunsui looked around startled before he could school himself back to normal.
"Y-yes. Sorry about that. Ready to go?"

But the teacher was growing suspicious after the strange reaction. He inspected the other's eyes and found them bloodshot, inspected the corner of the mouth and found it soiled with something pasty.

"Shunsui... were you sleeping?"

"Hmm? What? No, of course not..."

"Where are we going?"

"Cannot tell you."

The dark eyebrows knitted in disapproval.

"Well, you're not driving in this state, so you either tell me where we're going or we stay here."

"What do you mean in this state? I'm perfectly fine."

"You're barely awake. Tell me where it is and I'll drive."

That last bit almost passed him by.

"Wait, wait, wait... You can drive?"

"Of course I can drive."

"Really? You never do..."

"Why would I drive in Tokyo?"

Shunsui considered. He obviously did not want to concede defeat, but at the same time the idea of Jūshirō driving was poking his curiosity. He wondered, could this gentle creature be a speed demon?

"What's so funny?"

"Nah..."

"Nah, what?"

"I bet you're one of those safety first kind of guys..."

"Well, isn't that a good thing?"

He smiled. It was not a good thing, it was the best thing that could have happened in his life...

"Alright then... you drive. Do you know how to get to Kamakura? Wait, I'll set the GPS for you..."

They swapped seats and, while Shunsui fumbled with the GPS, Jūshirō adjusted the seat and mirrors. Soon they were ready to go.

"My life is in your hands." Shunsui teased, but Jūshirō was already releasing the hand brake and steering the car back to the road.

And so they drove out of the neighborhood, through the ring road and into the highway. Kamakura is not far from Tokyo, but for a safe driver it is a solid one and a half-hour trip. Jūshirō was well
aware that he hadn't touched a wheel in a while, so he proceeded with caution, building up confidence throughout the journey.

At first, Shunsui had gathered what little energy he had left to engage in random chat, but it had soon turned into an incomprehensible slur and, for a while he had just been sprawled on the seat, admiring Jūshirō through heavy lids.

“Shun, you can go to sleep, you know…”

“Don't wanna… leave you alone…” he whispered.

“I'm not alone. You're right here.”

“You'll be bored…”

“Play some music then. You can plug in my phone.”

“Ok…” he agreed, with a little pout.

Fumbling even more with the phone than he had with the GPS, fingers like non sentient carrots, Shunsui finally managed to connect the cable and set Jūshirō's playlist to shuffle mode. He settled back into the seat as the first notes of a random track began to play. It was a piano song, slow, quiet and nocturnal.

“I think I've heard this before.”

“It's one of my favorites. It's called “Clair de Lune”… It means-”

“Moonlight.”

Of course. All legionnaires learn French. Jūshirō smiled fondly without taking his eyes off the road.

"And it's a pretty moon tonight, isn't it?"

“Yes, it is.”

“Hmm.”

They both admired the moon, a glowing disk laced with shadows, following them along as they drove down to the coast. The car now rolled at a comfortable cruising speed, the driver serene and awake, basking in the all too familiar notes of the old tune. By his side, a tired man finally gave in to the embrace of the night.

Chapter End Notes

And here it is my dear readers! The boys are back together and I'm super happy for them, hehe!

Next chapter we open a sort of "part II", with different topics but the same amount of love for these two old fools :)

I leave you with two songs that you can find mentioned in this chapter. They are also part of a sort of character study I've been doing for them along the way:

For Shun:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9wYPirEcko
For Ju:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cR2KCMpq2o
Thank you for reading, hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.
All the best!
xx
Silence. The cozy feeling of a fluffy mattress and soft covers. A fresh current of air. The mellow light of the morning sun. Jūshirō reading a book by the window, illuminated and beautiful. Further beyond the glass, the glinting blue of the ocean and the green contours of Enoshima.

"Ohayo..."

His voice came out rough, but loud enough to rouse the attention of the man by the window. The curve of a smile crept through his perfect skin and his hand reached for the bookmark on the coffee table. He stood from the armchair and climbed onto the bed. Only then did Shunsui notice, with disappointment, that he was fully dressed – blue shorts and dark green t-shirt.

"Ohayo!" He said, beaming, while he plopped down on the bouncy mattress. Brazenly, he bent and pressed a kiss to Shunsui's lips.

"Am I awake?"

In response came a giggle and another kiss. He shifted to lie face up and pulled Jūshiro over his legs, making the lithe man straddle him. He laid a hand on the thin waist.

The first sign of another impending kiss was the coiling of white hair around his field of vision. Wet, teasing lips, sweet nibbles, and the unbearable lightness of that being... A rush of blood and a shiver ran through him making him compromisingly stiff against Jūshirō's thigh, earning him a not so surprised but still clueless little blush.

"Sorry... morning wood..." He shrugged.

Jūshirō's legs were long and well defined, almost hairless, safe for a layer of thin short strands, barely visible to the naked eye. A bit disappointed, he saw as they moved away from his body and the man came to lie stretched by his side. ’

Such a tease... it's not fair.' A pinch of morning wickedness flashed through his mind and he found himself pinning the other man to the mattress, planking over him, supported by elbows and knees. Oh, the temptation to teach him a lesson...

"What should I do to you...?" He purred in his ear, before biting the cartilage.
There was a sharp intake of air, the thin body bucked against his, and the green eyes closed. Could it be that he didn’t mind this at all?

For a few moments Shunsui just breathed in the perfumes that lingered on skin and hair, his nose sifting through layers of fragrances in search of the one scent that was Jūshirō and nothing else.

To his surprise, a pair of arms wrapped around his torso, pulling him closer. On that moment he knew he could never act rough on Jūshirō, not even for the sake of roleplaying.

'Damn, he knows how to make a puppy out of me.'

He rolled their tangled bodies a quarter turn and they landed on their sides, face to face. He caressed the lovely hair, the gentle cheeks and kissed his lips softly.

Then, unwelcome and strident, Shunsui’s ringtone erupted in the quiet room. He thought he’d just ignore it, but the green eyes cracked open and the docile lips disengaged. Whoever the cockblock was, he would be sorry for the interruption. He looked at the screen.

"Lilynnette?"

"Better take it... something might have happened."

He sighed, then took the call.

"Yes, Lils, what’s up? Uh? Jūshirō? He’s here, why? Uh? You want to talk to him? Why...? Ok, ok, hang on... She wants to talk to you..." He said off the phone. Jūshirō opened his hand to receive the small machine.

"Moshi, moshi? Hi Lily-chan! Yes, everything's ok..." A light giggle. "Yes, he's behaving... The place is very nice! We're going to the beach later..."

Shunsui’s eyes grew wide, he jumped up and started waving his hands and shaking his head. Jūshirō replied with a shrug. It was too late, he was already telling Lily to come over. There went the prospect of a whole day cooped up in their love nest, exploring every nook and crevice of that beautiful body...

He let himself fall backwards in dismay, debating whether his bladder could still wait some more time until it became an absolute need to stand up. Only then did he realize that he was wearing a nightgown... and nothing underneath.

"Gahhh! How did I get in this state of undress?" He yelled, while sitting up again. Jūshirō laughed.

"Jū-chan... what did you do to me while I was sleeping?"

"Nothing you wouldn’t want me to..."

"I knew it... it's always the quiet ones."

In truth, Shunsui had found himself in more compromising situations in the past... with less clothes and more audience. Modesty had never been among his concerns, so his whining was more of an act - and how he loved to tease his adorably shy school teacher...

But something was noticeably different since his return, as though his absence had worked some sort of transformation. What with that delicious ‘do you want to come upstairs?’ the night before...
Perhaps, Jūshirō’s stronghold of a heart was finally giving in.

They were sitting on the same bed, relaxed and comfortable with their proximity, and now he knew that Jūshirō had undressed him and put him to sleep. That meant he had somehow removed all clothes from his body and slipped him into the silly hotel gown. That also meant that they had slept together, side by side, or maybe even interlaced. The idea alone made his skin burn. And he didn’t remember a single thing. Damn jetlag. Of all those moments that would have otherwise made up a memorable night, he could only remember the road and the moon, and falling asleep to the sound of piano.

To Shunsui’s chagrin, Jūshirō decided to pull him out of bed and push him to the bathroom. They had not eaten anything last night, and Jūshirō was under strict orders from Unohana to eat properly and regularly.

"Come on, get ready. I'm starving!"

And it was no lie. They went down to the buffet and, while Shunsui sipped on bitter black coffee, trying to keep jet lag at bay, Jūshirō proceeded to fill his plate and chomp everything down with a joy that made one happy just to watch.

“There's so much choice for vegetarians! It's really great!” And off he went again, coming back with a pile of fresh fruit and cake.

“Aren't you going to eat?”

“I'm not a breakfast person…”

Jūshirō looked at him with a slightly exasperated frown.

"You should try something, it's really good."

Shunsui was still consulting his stomach when a cube of watermelon hovered in front of him.

"Open up."

The sugary juices defused in his mouth, light and refreshing. They seemed to ease the fuzz in his brain and the throbbing in his temples. Then, a half strawberry came the same way, but this time the sensation that lingered was the warmth of the fingers that pushed the fruit past his lips.

They were in public, in plain sight, and he could not believe this was happening. Still, standing up with a flag pole would probably not be the best of moves, so, as the same fingers were picking up a grape, he bypassed them and smudged a pinch of cream from the cake on Jūshirō’s nose.

“Hey!” He protested, quickly wiping it with a napkin.

“Thanks for the fruits.” He said fondly. “I think I've changed my mind, I'll grab a bite.”

The hotel was on a hillside, overlooking the ocean. Shunsui seemed familiar with the area and, after breakfast, guided the way downhill to the beach. Just a few months before, the sandy stretch had been deserted, the uncontested realm of lord wind. Now, in mid-June, it was bustling with life. There were lines of parasols, vendors and holiday makers. They sat on the sand, unguarded from the bright
“Wanna jump in the pond?” asked Shunsui.

“I kind of need to get swim shorts…”

“Uh? Island boy doesn't own any swimwear?”

“Been in the city far too long, I guess…”

The sun licked the ocean and the blitz of light hit his bare eyes. He covered his face with his palms and felt a hand landing on his shoulder, caring and concerned.

Sometimes he couldn’t understand what had drawn Shunsui to him. They were such an unlikely match, but there was honest affection in all that the other man did. He had started off cautious, only to realize that caution is no match for spontaneous attraction. Now, he wondered, where would this relationship lead him next...

“What are you thinking, babe?” Shunsui's voice probed gently, as the hand squeezed his shoulder. Jūshirō tried to look up but the glare of the sun made him squint.

“We need to get you shades. Come on, let's go to town.”

“I was thinking about us…”

Shunsui stopped in his tracks.

“… how it makes me happy to be with you, and how it would never have happened if it weren't for a completely random set of events.”

The first words filled Shunsui's chest with life. ‘Happy to be with me…”

“Isn't it always that way? Isn't life an endless line of coincidences?”

“Why do I have the feeling that you don't really mean what you just said…”

Shunsui's throat vibrated with a silent laugh.

“Yes, you are quite right. It's my honest belief that we are soul mates, fated to be together 'till the end of time… but you'd call me a fool if I said that, wouldn't you?”

Jūshirō bit his lip, then smiled.

“Who knows, Shunsui, who knows…”

After the quick walk on the sand, they headed downtown for shopping. Jūshirō bought simple grey shorts and wayfarer shades, and Shunsui got two straw hats and forced Jūshirō to wear one.

Along the way they passed by a seafood restaurant that was emitting a mouthwatering smell of something grilled.
“You can eat if you want…” Jūshirō said, seeing the other man's drooling face, but Shunsui stoically walked past, declaring that he was on a plant-based diet for the weekend.

Back at the hotel they ordered a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc to the poolside. They were sipping away in parallel chaise longues, feet dipped in the shallow waters around the pool, when Starrk and Lily arrived.

The guests were welcomed with warmth by both men. Surprisingly, Lily bypassed an open-armed Shunsui to head straight to where Jūshirō was and poke a finger at his stomach.

"Hey Jiji! Where the hell have you been? I read all the books you left me, but looks like you don't give a shit about that anymore..."

She had her usual grumpy look going on, but she seemed to genuinely miss Jūshirō, which made the other two men puzzled.

“Confess, the kid was kidnapped by aliens and this one is a copy!”

While Jūshirō embarassedly tried to wave off the accusation, Lily proceeded to wack Shunsui violently on the flank.

“Ouch! I take it back! It's the real one!”

It did not take too long for Lily to pull Shunsui to the water and start a splashing battle. Starrk sat down beside Jūshirō on the other sunbed.

The man was quite a sight, even with his injured arm resting on a sling. Tall and strong, but lighter than Shunsui. His grey eyes had a similar intensity, but he could not find in them any of the bonhomie that made Shunsui so approachable and warm.

They remained in a sort of awkward silence, until Starrk broke it.

“Ukitake-san, I want to thank you for taking care of my brat. I never thought she'd come to Japan. We caused you both a lot of trouble. I am truly sorry."

"Please... Kobayashi-san” – after hearing the name Starrk all the time, the man's actual name sounded out of place – “it was no trouble for me. She did more for me than I did for her..."

"Well, about that... saying I'm sorry doesn't really cut it. I am happy the worst didn't happen. I would never forgive myself."

“Does Shunsui know?” Jūshirō startled.

"No, Lily told only me. She looks like an airhead, and she has a terrible temper, but you definitely won her over. She talked about you all the way here!"

They shared a smile - the first - as the uneasiness began to scatter.

"She is extremely strong and clever. You have much to be proud of. Even with such a burden on her shoulders, she never lost her wits... unlike a grown man like me..."

"Look, don't beat yourself up over it...” Starrk paused to glance at some faraway point, perhaps the curve of the ocean that lay beyond the pool and hillside. There seemed to be a stream of words locked in his throat.

Shunsui and Lily were busy bickering and splashing water at each other. There were other guests
around the pool – some couples and a group of girls that seemed more interested in taking selfies than getting wet. He felt as though he wanted to hear more from the man beside him, as though he could be the window to Shunsui's past that he'd found so hard to unlock. But he found himself lacking a proper question to ask.

"How much did he tell you about his past?"

Did Starrk hear his inner chatter?

"I know a bit about his childhood and his time in the Legion..."

"I see..."

And he stared at the sea again, as though debating internally on whether to open the book or not.

"I never thought of Kyōraku as a best friend.” He started. “It’s more like we always bumped into each other by accident and had a good time... That's also how I found out that he'd retired - saw him by chance in bar in Shibuya. It didn't make sense to see him there, until he told me he'd just returned to Tokyo and was buming around without a plan. We obviously ended up shitfaced, back in his place. I'm not talking about that jolly house he has now, that was much later. I'm talking - what? - eight, nine years ago... He was living in a serviced apartment... all dark furniture, mirrors, leather couches... and filth. Every-fuckin-where. Booze bottles, rubbish, even found a damn cockroach... and random guys. On that night alone he brought back two jocks... college students or something. Heard them well into the night. The whole thing got me angry... and it wasn't even for the guys... Couldn't care less who he slept with... t'was knowing that the damn moron was wasting all the money he earned in battle... and the risks he was taking. Gave him an earful back then, but I'm not sure he even registered... When I saw him again, he'd cleaned up, stopped getting drunk so often, but still had no fucking clue what he wanted to do with his life."

Jūshirō had joined his hands in a knot and was staring at the ankle high water around them.

"What happened next? How did he come out of it?"

Starrk gave a chuckle.

"A third-hand Leica and tough love."

"You mean, you brought him out of it..."

"Not exactly. I gave him the Leica, yes. That inspired him to do something, get out of the funk... but the tough love was courtesy of his little general of a niece... Nanao Ise."

"She must be quite a woman..."

"She is."

"So the whole photo blogging thing started there?"

"Kind of. He started off with pride parades and stuff like that, like he wanted to make a statement or something. He only started with the fashion thing later. He told me he wanted to capture the beauty in people, the glamour of everyday life... and he wanted to fall in love, but I think he just got that ticked out of the bucket list..."

Starrk couldn't hold a chuckle when he saw his friend's new boyfriend blushing like a kid. He shook his head.
"Anyway, don't be put off by this story. If it serves any purpose, it's to show that everyone breaks sometimes. If you care for someone, be their savior, be strong for them..."

"Starr-k! What the hell are you two talking about? Jump in!"

All of a sudden, a spray of water came their way. Lilynette propped herself out of the pool in her black and white top and shorts. Just as Jūshirō saw her approaching, his hand got yanked and, even with less strength, Lily managed to make him lose balance and fall in a bundle into the pool.

He reemerged coughing and spitting water. Lily was doubled over and holding her belly, laughing, and Starrk was calmly lowering himself to sit with his feet inside the water, since he could not wet his arm yet. A familiar protective hand landed gently on Jūshirō's shoulder.

"Are you ok? That brat..."

He looked back into the stormy eyes. A man with a build and demeanor like Shunsui's would never appear weak. Maybe he wasn't weak at all, but just fragile at times, like all humans are. He was still unsure why Starrk had decided to tell him all those things. Wasn't he betraying his friend's trust? In any case, he had been given a mission, and Jūshirō Ukitake does not shy away from his responsibilities. 'Be his savior'. He smiled fondly and nodded, before swimming away.

He let his body glide blissfully underwater. He was in his element, surrounded by the supple matter that supported his weight and wrapped him in a cool embrace. His mind was racing, but his thoughts were clear.

"For someone who didn't own swimwear, you certainly enjoyed yourself in the pool... you actually have gills, don't you?"

Shunsui tapped the card over the lock and pushed the door open, letting the other man in. Just as it clicked back into place, they knew exactly what they wanted.

They fell in each other's arms with the ferocity of warriors. One by one, the clothes were peeled off their bodies and thrown on the floor.

Shunsui took a step back to admire. For a skinny guy, Jū definitely had a good ab game going on, and the toned little cushions on the back... running certainly had its benefits. But the other man didn't let him dwell too long on observation. He felt his now short curls being gripped, his neck tilted and a hot trail of kisses coming down from his ear lobe down to the collar bone.

“Someone's frisky today...”

A mischievous peak of green, and those jasmine lips stormed to his mouth and ravished it without further ado.

“It's been too long.”

“Does that mean you want more than kisses?”

“I do.”

That whispered answer hit Shunsui spot on.
“And what can I do to please you?”

The jade eyes again on his, bright as ever.

“Everything.”

And that was it, the game was on. Slowly, he started his descent. By the time his knees touched the floor, he had thoroughly surveyed the front with his lips and the back with his open palms.

Legs shoulder width apart, head thrown back and hands on the coarse brown locks, Jūshirō was now deep into the pleasures that the skilled brunette could offer. He closed his eyes and the ludicrous tale of the samurai and the man in drag came to his mind. Had it really been a mere caricature? Why did Shunsui seem so comfortable kneeling like this and pleasing another man? He appeared to be enjoying it more even than the one receiving the care... Jūshirō scrunched his eyes and relished in the flamboyant strokes of the tongue, the languid kneading of his glutes, the cupping and probing that worked so precisely that they almost seemed rehearsed.

"Sh-shunsui..."

At the call of his name, the man drew back a few inches and looked up. It was the most enticing look that he'd seen in those eyes. He could not look away. Lips made their approach once again, but instead of resuming their labor, they just landed softly on the tip, and gave it a kiss.

"Jūshirō... make love to me."

The needy eyes again. Maybe this was all an act, played for many others before him. Yet, somehow, he did not mind. His hands gripped and tugged the brown locks.

"What do you want, Shunsui?"

"I want you to show me how you do it, bi boy..."

Jūshirō was caught off guard by the cocky answer, but, at the same time, a warm feeling flowed through him. He imagined his whole body glowing with power. He pulled Shunsui up by the wrists and began to gently push him back towards the bed until his knees buckled and he ended up lying on his back.

"Hmm... Face to face. That's nice..."

Those words were said dreamily, a brand new look of vulnerability making the sturdy body go mellow. Everything was lax, but for one thing. The arms were abandoned by the sides, the legs parted, knees slightly raised and idle, half lidded eyes and supple lips. The living image of one who waits.

Jūshirō ran a hand through the exposed chest, letting his fingers carve through the soft coating of dark hair. He cupped Shunsui's pecs as he would a pair of breasts. It was a bit tantalizing that a man would let him do these things. He felt so high. He bent down all the way to the waiting lips and kissed them. Trembling hands rose up to cup his jaw and keep the curtain of loose white hair from sneaking into their mouths. They broke apart for breath.

"Inside the pocket, in my pants..."

Jūshirō retrieved the small packet from the pants that hung on a suit stand. He held it a bit ceremoniously between them, then placed it by the side. Shunsui lifted his hips to grind the other man. Both their voices joined in a moan. Then, Shunsui offered his hand to the other man's lips.
"I need a little something wet down there..."

"Is this enough?"

"Hmm..."

With what ensued, Jūshirō was suddenly thankful for the experience imprinted in the other man's body. He wondered if, even so, he was causing him pain. He felt a slight resistance being purposefully eased with a loud inhale. They exhaled together and their bodies came a little closer. They kept with the slow approach, Shunsui steering him by the hip bones, angling, nudging, moving his own body, pulling them closer.

Jūshirō was lost in the intensity of it all. When he was fully sheathed he felt as though all his life energy had descended into that one point. He withdrew and repeated the motion, slowly, gradually learning the point that made the other man's eyelids flutter, that elicited the most afflicted sounds... He loved how vocal Shunsui was, like there was nothing to fear, nothing to hide.

“Shun, am I doing this right?”

“You are… fuck… hell yeah…”

“How can I do it better?”

Hands dug into his buttocks.

“Harder, do it h-harder.”

He obeyed. He still managed somehow to be graceful, his body undulating to their agreed rhythm, but he was now focusing that last ounce of energy into the thrust and giving it a final push. Oh, the result was sublime. Not only the sounds intensified, but the whole body beneath him seemed about to dissipate in a cloud of shivers. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep it up without bringing himself over the edge. He offered his hand to the other man.

“No” the other groaned, and slapped it away. “No-need…”

“Show off…” he teased.

But he was near, he knew it. The conundrum of sensations was about to overflow... And soon enough, it did. He had the faint impression of hearing himself cry out. He bucked into Shunsui one more time and stayed there, lowering himself to unite their skins. That was when Shunsui writhed and spilled his seed between them.

He laughed a little muffled laugh as he pressed his face to the tanned skin of Shunsui's neck. Then, he felt his jaw being lifted and he found himself looking into grey eyes. Without a word, they kissed. They came apart to breathe, a hasty shallow breath, and then kissed again.

Finally, Jūshirō slid out and disposed of the soiled protection. He pulled a tissue and cleaned Shunsui's and his own belly. A proper wash-up would have to wait, because he didn't have it in him to stand up and walk just yet.

They came to lie side by side, Jūshirō eventually curling up against the bigger man. It was Shunsui's turn to laugh, while staring at the white ceiling and pulling Jūshirō closer to his tired body.

“Now I know why your exes keep running after you…”
“No one's running after me...”

The protest earned him another kiss.

“What I mean, Jūshirō Ukitake, is that you fuck like a work of art. I already wanted you, but now... I want you till the end of time...”

“A work of art? Where did that come from?” He laughed.

“And you, starry night? What do you want from me?”

Jūshirō took a deep breath. Decisions like these didn't come easy to him. It had taken him time to properly classify his feelings. It was not after the first encounter, nor after three weeks worth of dates and kisses and confidences. It had taken him much longer. It had been painful, he could say, it had been excruciating at times, and it had almost tossed him into the abyss... but at least now he knew. And the answer came out in a firm stream of his low voice.

“The same... I want it to be forever.”

Shunsui beamed. He propped himself up and came to a sitting position, a stance of displaced solemnity.

“Let's do this then?”

He was not sure what Shunsui wanted to do, but he just nodded and forced himself to sit up. Shunsui took his hand and kissed it. Then, looking into his eyes, he said-

“Jūshirō, I love you.”

He understood what he was to do. He felt a bit silly to do it so formally considering they were both naked in bed, but it didn't feel forced. He took Shunsui’s hand and mimicked the gesture. Then, he uttered those same words, and they filled him with joy. What they were embarking on was not simple, nor easy, but it had the ability of making him feel as though nothing in the world could make him lose himself again.

“I love you too, Shunsui.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello mina-san... and sorry for taking a bit longer to update this time. Besides work and other real life stuff going on, I felt I had to revise this quite a few times and ended up trimming around 200 words from v1! I hope you enjoyed it and please leave a comment, good or bad! Thank you for passing by!
Storm and Shelter

Chapter Summary

Storms, trials and the many faces of love.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I

Much changed in the life of Jūshirō Ukitake after that night, but, to the world at large, all remained pretty much the same.

Without classes to teach during the summer months, he turned to his administrative tasks in earnest. Byakuya would drop by to offer help and, sometimes, to seek advice on his own new duties. Whereas Jūshirō had to worry about four grades worth of schedules, room assignments, transfers and evaluations, Byakuya was now getting privy with the functioning of the whole school. Nevertheless, ever since that fateful encounter with Yoruichi, he never stopped addressing Jūshirō as “Sempai”.

Despite his increased work load, there was still time in Jūshirō's life for his sacred morning run, for his lunch breaks with friends and coworkers, and for the occasional escape to the nearby park, where Shunsui would be waiting in the shade, with a special treat for them to share.

Another addition to his routine was his training with the football team. All soon realized that the peak of the coordinator's talents did not reside in the sport of Pélé and Ronaldo, but Iba was cunning enough to make a one-trick pony out of him.

Whenever the team recovered the ball around the goal area, one of the defenders would pass the ball to Jūshirō. He would then sprint by the flank, where there were less obstacles and more terrain to cover, and, with his speed, deliver the ball to one of the wingers or strikers before the other team had had the chance to regroup. For this to work in an actual game, he was paired with Hisagi, the best striker of the team, to run drills of dribble, pass and finish, until their communication became intuitive.

They found, in the first face-off with another school, that the strategy worked wonders, but it could not be used too often, as the element of surprise would be lost and the more experienced midfielders of the other team could easily turn the game around in a counterattack. Therefore, it was decided that a secret sign would be given for the move. The rest of the time, Jūshirō would linger in the midfield and spoil the other team's game the best he could. All in all, it worked, and it was fun as hell!

On those days of training and games, Shunsui knew that he was to spend the evening alone. It’s not that they were living together, but he always missed the other man when he was not around.

On that Sunday, after the trip to Kamakura, Shunsui had returned Jūshirō to his place and gone back to his own house. The next day, though, they sought each other through messages, photos, short calls just to say hello and finally, after a day or two, Jūshirō came to Shunsui’s place for dinner and stealthily left a tooth brush in the bathroom. Shunsui thought this was a great idea and they soon had brought a sort of survival kit to each other's place, which allowed them to stay overnight without
having to go home in the morning.

Most of the times they stayed in Shunsui’s house, which had more space and a garage for the car, but Shunsui enjoyed secretly going to Jūshirō’s studio during the day and leave him little surprises: flowers, sweets, a poem under the pillow...

Jūshirō did not mind the intrusion. Feeling the perfume of lilies when he opened the door after a day at work, or spotting a folded notebook page between the sheets always made him smile. He would lie down, address a short message to his “dear burglar”, and go to sleep. That is, of course, whenever the burglar himself was not sprawled on his bed, face crushed into one of his books or photo albums, or clenching one of his garments. On those days, he would gently shake the other man and they would share a simple supper or watch a film snuggled under the covers. Sometimes, on those nights, they would make love.

After some experimenting, they found that they could go either way, but their chemistry was at its best when Jūshirō was on top. It’s not that the other way around was a disaster but, for one, it never lasted as long… Jūshirō was the runner, after all. Then, there was the matter of variety. Whereas Shunsui was happy with any position, Jūshirō could only really relax when they were face to face and he could melt in the warmth of those sensuous grey eyes.

Like a brush stroke on a scroll, time swiftly passed. One month went by in the blink of an eye and another rushed ahead. It was mid-August and Tokyo braised in summer heat.

On a Sunday morning, they found themselves at Jūshirō’s place, with the windows wide open and a fan at full speed. It was still early and, while Shunsui lay blissfully in bed, Jūshirō had taken a shower and put on the cotton shorts he liked to wear around the house. His hair was still wet but he did not intend to dry it. It would dry anyway. He took the fish food container and dropped a pinch inside the round bowl. The two companions, their large, blood-orange tails whirling with their movement, swam to the surface to fight over the small pellets. He observed them, smiling idly.

"Jū..."

Jūshirō had grown used to the other man watching him. He would catch glimpses of his adoring glances, of the way he liked to undress him with his eyes when they were in public… and the way he liked to see him undressed when they were in private... He was embarrassed at first, but he soon realized it made him feel good, it made him feel high and wanted. He began to glance back openly, in the same way.

But that was not what he saw that morning, when he turned to face his lover.

"Jū, do you think I should get HIV tested?"

The man had dragged himself to the edge of the bed and dropped one foot to the floor, while the other remained tangled in the sheets that pooled around his waist. His hair was growing nicely, a few hints of salt and pepper appearing by the temples, but in the morning it looked really tangled and messy.

"Are you feeling anything strange? Or did you have a nightmare?” he worried.

But that was not the point, was it? The realization came as soon as the words left his mouth. Starrk’s story... He felt a pang of fear.
"No. I feel fine, it's just..."

"Your past affairs..."

They both lowered their eyes.

"I understand."

"Look, it's not like that either... this is not the 70's. I used protection... most of the time... But I've been grinding my mind about it, and..."

He held his head between his open palms, then scrunched his eyebrows.

"... I just can't be sure that I always did."

Jūshirō walked a few steps and sat by his lover's side. What should he say? Years ago, an early diagnosis had saved his life. Although he knew what was the right thing to do, he still dreaded going through it again... But to remain in blissful ignorance and carry on with the honeymoon once this elephant had entered the room... that was simply not possible. He raised a wavering hand and laid it on Shunsui's shoulder.

"Let's do it, then... together."

"You don't have to..."

"I have check-ups every three months. I just need to add one item more to the list." He said, resolve building up from his core, "And you should do the whole thing too... make sure the machine's working... We're not young, you know... Heart, blood, lungs, prostate... all that stuff..."

"Prostate?" Shunsui whined. "N-not that one."

"Why? You, of all people..."

Shunsui put up an offended frown.

"Of all people I shouldn't be afraid to have a finger up my arse, is that what you're saying?"

"No... I didn't mean... Sorry."

But his wicked smile was there to replace the mock grimace.

"Kidding..."

"Don't you take anything seriously? " He delivered a small punch to his boyfriend’s shoulder, and Shunsui rubbed the spot feigning injury.

"I do." He replied, his grey eyes suddenly bare of artifice. "I take us seriously, Jūshirō. And if this is what you think we should do, let's do it then."

Weeks later, they found themselves sitting side by side, hands openly interlaced, facing the tidy desk of Retsu Unohana, and the woman behind it.

“Ukitake-san, let's start with you.”
Their hands squeezed, their eyes met briefly.

“Congratulations. Your results are all back to normal. Blood pressure is on the low limit, but that corresponds to your readings in the past years, so I see no reason for concern. Hemoglobin is on the low side too, but that is also consistent with your previous results. Keep taking care of your health… it's a friendly warning.” She informed with a smile.

Jūshirō smiled back, still a bit intimidated.

“Now, as for Kyōraku-san…” she started. “Your LDL is above the high limit, your ultrasound shows early signs of fatty liver, your ECG is fine but could be better for your age. I am not putting you on medication but I am prescribing you a low sugar, low fat diet, no alcohol and no tobacco, exercise for half an hour, three days a week. I will see you both here in three months and expect these readings to have improved. Of course, if any of Ukitake-san’s results deteriorate, it will be a different issue… but I trust that, knowing you both care for each other, that outcome will not come to be.”

“Hai!” They both pledged, and bowed repeatedly until the doctor stood up to leave the room.

“Very well.” She smiled her comely smile and produced two envelopes that she had been keeping in the pocket of her white gown. “I leave you to open this in private. Call me if you have any questions. Have a good day.”

And she left, placing the envelopes on the table.

“Oh my… that was scary.”

“You better be scared, Shun… high cholesterol? Fatty liver?”

“Cholesterol? Oh, that's what it means?”

Jūshirō sighed.

“Yes, and it probably means that you're eating junk food when I’m not around…”

“Guilty as charged…”

He sighed again, then glanced at the envelopes lying side by side on the table top. He grabbed both and looked into Shunsui’s eyes.

“You open mine, I open yours?”

“Yes.”

Shunsui’s hand seemed to have trembled a bit receiving the wrapper, but he proceeded to tear it, as if keeping in motion prevented anything bad from happening.

Jūshirō looked down at the envelope in his hands. Kyōraku Shunsui. He read the characters one by one, thinking of the stream of ice-cold water that they invoked. For a moment he imagined his lover’s statuesque figure dissolving into water and merrily flowing down a mountain slope, all the way through brooks and rivers, until it met the deep waters of the ocean.

He shook his head. For a moment his thoughts had wandered.

‘It's alright. No matter what, we will be alright.’ he told himself.
Shunsui eyed him nervously as he pulled out the paper slip.

“You first.” The white haired man said.

“Clean.” Shunsui replied.

It was Jūshirō’s turn to make a small incision between the paper folds, neatly cut the envelope and take out the second slip.

“Clean.” He announced.

Jūshirō had gotten so familiar with Shunsui’s playful grins that he almost found the other man transfigured when he unveiled his smile of relief. It was open, raw and a bit vulnerable. Out of sheer instinct, his hand flew to touch those parted lips. The grey eyes closed and the face rested peacefully in his palm, as he cupped the coarse jaw and caressed the stubble growing on the surface.

The room was quiet, only the two of them inside, but the hustle-bustle of the hospital seeped through the thin walls. Perhaps the stigma of the disease they had feared was not as pungent in this age as it had been decades before, perhaps even if the results had been different, they might have still lived many good years in each other’s company. But for Jūshirō, the words on those two slips – one crumpled, one neatly folded – meant so much more.

The first time he realized he was attracted to Kaien, it had made him feel strange – as if something like that could only happen on the state he was in at the time – between life and death. But now, blessed with health and a loving partner, the doubts and fears seemed to have lost their meaning. To love is to love, why the constraints? For the first time in years, Jūshirō felt truly comfortable with his feelings and attractions.

“You never doubted, did you?”

Shunsui’s voice startled him out of his reverie.

“Oh… No, I guess I didn’t.”

“Thank you.”

Holding hands, they left the consultation room, walked down the corridor and back to the waiting room, then into another aisle, past the registration counter and the lobby. Suddenly, they were out in the street, with the punch of hot, humid air landing harshly in their lungs. They walked down a wide tree-lined boulevard towards the train station.

“We need to visit a potter.” Shunsui mused.

“Huh? What for?”

“We need to buy an urn.” He clarified, voice back to the rich, theatrical baritone, his persona.

“Today we bury the condom! The condom is dead! Long live the cock!”

“What…?! Shhhhh…”

That had been quite loud, but not many people were passing by. He couldn’t lie, the crudity of the remark hurt him a little. Here he was thinking about great decisions and deep feelings, while his partner was worried about the feel of rubber around his cock. But there was always more to Shunsui than what floated on the surface, he realized. ‘Yes, he always means much more than what he says.’
Giving in to impulse once again, his hands returned to the stubble and his lips sought a kiss.

"Jū..." Shunsui muttered, surprised with the soft peck.

"I love you."

"I love you too, my angel."

They kept walking for a while and chatting about their relationship – a topic that was not always easy to pick up. Somehow, though, for the duration of that short walk, their hearts were open and laid bare. They reasoned that, if they had met years before, when they were both young, things would have probably not worked out. Jūshirō would have found it hard to cope with the other man's escapades, and Shunsui would have felt locked and suffocated in a monogamous relationship. At present, though, they wanted no more than what they had found in one another... and that made them both happy beyond words.

"You know what?" The thin man asked, a quirky smile shining across his face... "You're right. We really should celebrate."

"So we bury the condom after all?"

"Don't be silly... Are you busy next week?"

"I'm never busy... What do you want to do?"

"The school year is almost upon us and I haven't taken any leave... I think I need a short break and I've been wanting to see my family in Okinawa... Saori oba-san, my cousins, my little nephews and nieces... Shunsui, would you come with me?"

II

On the day of the trip they took the monorail to Haneda in an atmosphere of shared excitement. The ‘leave’ had been reduced to two days, plus the weekend. The school’s popularity was on the rise and the end of the deadline for applications saw an abnormal intake of transfer requests, which made him cut his trip short.

They checked-in and got two boarding passes with adjacent seats, one middle, one window, and pulled their trolleys through immigration, up to the boarding gate.

The flight was but a short three-hour hop, but it was their first time flying together, so they behaved like youngsters, taking a bunch of selfies the moment they settled in their seats.

After take-off, Jūshirō started talking excitedly about his family. He was closer to his maternal grandparents, but there were a bunch of relatives that he would like to follow up on. Strangely, there was no mention of closer family members, but Shunsui knew all too well what it was to have family issues, and made no move to extract any information not voluntarily offered.

The second half of the trip was quite bumpy with turbulence. The island boy grew restless and kept mostly quiet, chewing on his cuticles. Shunsui found it cute that the brave and strong Jūshirō would be afraid of flying. He just smiled and held the pale hand for the rest of the journey.
On arrival, the air was warm and the sky overcast. The trees were beginning to sway. Jūshirō looked at the horizon with a knowing frown, then checked his phone.

"As I thought." He announced. "A typhoon is coming. Just our luck..."

"How did you know that?"

"There's a certain something in the air when it's about to make landfall. Like a heaviness… Probably from the low pressure. But you have to feel it to know..."

"It happens a lot here, doesn't it?"

"Yes. A few times a year, usually. When I was young we would wait for updates from the local radio stations. Sometimes, we were preparing everything, bringing in the potted plants and stuff... and then they would say that it changed course… sometimes it really hit and the next day we would have to clean up the mess."

Then, his face changed. Reminiscence gave way to worry.

"I wonder if Saori-ba already knows. I should go help her..."

"You were planning to go see her tomorrow..."

"Oh, but please Shunsui... let's go today. I feel like I'm a bad grandson if I'm here and I don't help."

"Alright, you drive?"

"Unless you want to..."

"Na... You look sexy behind the wheel."

A little blush.

"Caught ya... So cute..." He laughed and made Jūshirō blush more.

They rented a small utility vehicle and left Naha behind, headed to the hills. The sky was grey but the valleys and bays that cut through the island could still be seen.

“Shun, if you only look at me you’ll miss the landscape.”

“How do you know…?”

“Peripheral vision.”

He unrolled a throaty laugh, but didn't move an inch. He was satisfied with watching the scenery glide by, behind Jūshirō's graceful profile. Every time they sighted houses, mostly clustered by the coast, he thought of all the names and stories that he didn’t really memorize. He tried to picture what the Ukitakes would be like. Did they all have green eyes? Was it a blood line that endured secretly in the hills of Okinawa? Were they all gentle and kind like Jūshirō? Were they all this handsome? And so, lost in his thoughts, in his curiosity, he let the question slip…

“Jūshirō, what are your parents like?”

The pale jaw clenched. A deep breath.

“My mother was 18 when I was born. Saori-ba told me that she wanted to become a teacher too. She
nursed me and cared for me for almost a year. Then, one night, she vanished. Her body was found on a sand patch, some days later.

“Jūshirō, I'm so sorry…”

“I never met my father.” He cut through the apology, as if reciting a scripture. “Because of my height and my eye color, people assumed it was someone from the air base, but my mother never gave away a single thing, and the secret died with her.”

He drew another deep breath and the cloud seemed to have passed.

“Anyway, don’t worry and don't feel sorry. All in all, I was lucky to have Saori-ba and my grandfather. I was never hungry, I learned a lot from them, and they sacrificed their rest so that I could pursue my dreams.”

“I am glad.”

“You will like Saori-ba… and I have a feeling that she will like you too.”

A good 45 minutes and many curves later, Jūshirō turned into a narrow path. The car swayed and hopped over holes and stones until the point where the path opened to a rounded space framed by forest and a single-story house. The design was simple, with brick walls interrupted by a door and windows. It wouldn’t have more than two or three bedrooms. The only element of fancy was a knee-high stone lion by the front door. There were potted plants lining the walls and on one of the window sills hung an umbrella.

Jūshirō popped out of the car and stretched, then signaled Shunsui to follow him.

“Soba!” He called out once. He knocked, then pushed the handle down and opened the door. He called again to the inside of the house.

“Her boots are not here. She's probably in the backyard. Come on!” He urged.

To Shunsui, Jūshirō seemed to have turned into a young boy, all wide eyes and impatience. He thought he liked that a lot.

They circled around the house, then entered a narrow strip of land going down a gentle slope. The space was neatly divided in patches, each one with different plants growing. Shunsui was city grown, but he could spot tomatoes, okra, bitter gourd. The other plants were probably growing underground, as he could only see stalks and leaves. To the left was a small shed that might have once housed pigs or other animals.

He was still admiring the small farm when Jūshirō started running downhill. By the time he caught up, his boyfriend had reached a small family shrine and was hugging a thin old lady who barely managed to keep the tips of her feet on the ground.

“Shunsui, this is Saori obasan.” He beamed, letting the old lady straighten her clothes. She was small and had her white hair cut short, framing her tanned, wrinkled face, her high cheek bones and friendly brown eyes.

“Soba, this is Kyōraku Shunsui…my boyfriend.”

It took Shunsui a second to process what had just happened. Not counting the doctor, Jūshirō had decided to come out to his grandmother first. That was unexpected… but – hey – he knows his people, Shunsui thought. And, indeed, the lady didn't seem to object in any way to the
announcement. If anything, she seemed curious. After the due courtesies, she took to inspecting Shunsui.

“He’s very tall” she told Jūshirō in a hushed voice that all could perfectly hear. He just nodded and grinned. But the inspection continued, intervaled with other “secret” observations, like “lovely eyes” and “good manners”.

In the house, they quickly went through the preparations for the typhoon – collecting loose objects from outside, closing shutters, checking the fridge for supplies.

“The goya were going so well this year” she lamented.

The wind was picking up and the rain had started to fall. They found a cover and secured it with ropes around the car, that they had parked closer to the house, away from the trees. It was time to settle and think about dinner.

“The two of you can take the second room. There's more space there.”

Jūshirō explained that his grandmother always referred to the rooms by numbers. The first room was the largest and where she used to sleep when grandfather was still alive. The third room was the smallest, where Jūshirō spent his childhood until he moved to Naha and then Tokyo. The second room was his mother’s and, throughout those years, remained unused. Now, apparently, grandma was sleeping in the smallest room and the second room was the guest room.

Although the house was not a traditional Japanese home, as seen in the mainland, the inside of the room was reminiscent of that typical minimalism. There were no visible items except for a Chinese chest of drawers, and the doors of the inbuilt wardrobes. They started opening them one by one in search of bedding. That was when the treasure trove began.

“Jū-chan… what's this?” Shunsui called, holding an oblong canvas pouch. Jūshirō blushed.

“Nothing.” He replied, as Shunsui was already untying the cords and revealing a polished wooden pole with a rectangular plank, like an oar.

“Oh, come on… you know karate and you never told me…”

“Not karate, kobudo. That is an eiki, it's used for kobudo. I did karate too, a long time ago, as a kid.”

“Demonstration!”

“No.”

“Why?” He whined.

“I can't remember anything. It was too long ago. Now help me with the futon, if you don't mind…”

“Oh come on, you must remember something.”

He paused and looked at Shunsui holding the weapon almost ceremoniously, the pleading in those warm grey eyes.

“I'll see if I can remember a bit of kata and I'll show you tomorrow.”

After they set the bed they went through old books and notebooks, they put on Jūshirō's old t-shirts and laughed at each other. They found that one wardrobe also contained some of Jūshirō’s mother’s belongings, but they left it alone.
Then, Saori-ba called them to have tea. The night was falling and storm was upon them. The rain intensified and the wind howled loudly. They sat in the living room, sipping jasmine tea. Jūshirō and his grandmother had begun a conversation about relatives, weddings and funerals. Their resemblances were uncanny. They did not share any obvious physical traits. Perhaps the shape of the nose or ears, but they smiled exactly the same way. It was clear that they were very comfortable with one another and that transpired to Shunsui’s own mood, although he did not have the slightest idea of what they were talking about.

After a while, the old lady insisted on cooking for them. Jūshirō tried to follow her to the kitchen but she sent him away, saying she would call if she needed help.

“How old is she?”

“Eighty-one”

“Wow. She's in shape for her age.”

“Hay. I wish I could reach her age like that.”

“Of course you will, you're from Okinawa… people here live more than a hundred years…”

Jūshirō smiled fondly.

“You must be wondering why I told her…”

“I am… but I'm glad you didn't friend-zoned me again…”

The bright smile withered and the green eyes met the bottom of the tea cup.

"Hey, Jū, don't get all gloomy... I'm just joking.”

"No. You are right. I shouldn't lie anymore. It's not fair for you, and it shames me to be so cowardly..."

"Nonsense.” He shook his head dismissively. “I don't need you to tell the world we're together. I don't need you to tell anyone at all. Do it to whomever you feel you should, whenever you feel you're ready.”

"It was so easy to tell Saori-ba. It just came out of my mouth, really. I think she knows me so well that she probably knew before I did. In Tokyo, though... at school... I'm still wondering how to go about it..."

"Woah, woah! Hold your horses! You want to come out to your boss? You realize you work for the Catholic church, don’t you?”

"I...” He was about to continue when something roused his attention. "What's this?”

His spine unrolled all the way to the neck, and he seemed to focus on some sound, like an alert cat. As the house fell silent, they could hear the wind, but also a sort of clattering. Jūshirō stood up and went to the kitchen. He came back a second later, with a look of horror in his face.

"She's gone.”

The kitchen had a door that opened directly to the backyard. They went out into the darkness and turmoil. Shunsui followed the other man as he navigated the paths between crops and fences. Their clothes were quickly drenched, their feet smothered in mud. They walked almost all the way down to
the family shrine and then, mingled with the roar of the wind, they heard a desperate wail. Jūshirō started running against the wind and water, Shunsui following as fast as he could, until they found the small body of the elderly woman doubled over the vines of the bitter gourd, sobbing.

"I think she fell and hurt her ankle."

"I'll carry her; you lead the way."

The woman covered her face with her hands and wept all the way back home.

While Jūshirō went looking for towels, Shunsui inspected the injured ankle. It could get swollen but it didn't seem broken. They would better bring her to the doctor the day after, though. When the weeping calmed down, a string of apologies ensued.

"I am so sorry... I can't get anything right, I trouble everyone... but the gourds were so green... I thought I'd get one to make champuru... you know how my Misato loves champuru... she's such a good girl... please take care of her... I know you're a good man... she has so many dreams... please be good to her...” and a cold bony hand gripped his wrist, brown eyes bore into his... “please don't hurt my Misato”, she cried.

Shunsui forgot how to breathe. Had Jūshirō heard this? An urgency to shield him from his grandmother's words took over. Delusions... or the hidden truth? He looked around, making sure he could still hear the rustle of drawers from inside the bedroom.

"Please don't worry, I will do my best."

Jūshirō finally arrived with towels and tiger balm. They dabbed her arms and thin hair and rubbed her ankle with the ointment, then helped her to her bedroom.

As they stood by the closed door, Shunsui wrapped his arms around his soaked lover and kissed his forehead.

"Come on, let's get changed."

Chapter End Notes

There have been more "shunuki" goodies here lately, so it really feels like Christmas! Thank you to all who've written, posted and given feedback. Also, I recently noticed that this fic has passed 700 views and 50 kudos. it's not much, compared to others, but I still feel happy and grateful to know that I'm not just writing for my own entertainment and that someone is enjoying it too. Hope to hear from you all soon! Wishing a lovely holiday season to those celebrating it, and much joy and peace to everyone!
Hairpins and Secrets

Chapter Summary

Clear skies expose secrets. The tail of the storm brings disturbance to the waters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The storm rode across the island like a thousand Valkyries. Raindrops crashed against the windows, the wind whistled, trees bent and swayed, things were thrown around in the dark. Inside a small room, in a modest house in the hills of Okinawa, two men lay together, their futons side by side, limbs overflowing to the tatami floor.

To one, the sounds of the storm were as familiar as childhood lullabies. He had his body draped protectively against the broad shouldered figure that tossed and turned. At times, when a strong leg jerked in reflex to some unknown threat, he would place his hand on the muscled thigh and give it a pat or a rub.

Inside the other man's head the storm had come upon them like a shower of bombs. In vain he tried to pull his thoughts to the present, away from the deserts, the cities under siege, the jungles, the enemies... but with every wave of sleep came a more violent awakening, and on and on, until his tired mind gave in.

Hours later, he woke up in a quiet room, dim light shining through the gaps of the shutters. There was the pleasant weight of an arm around his waist, a thin body guarding his back.

The lithe man slept. It was past ten in the morning. He must have disturbed his rest, for it was all too unusual for Jūshirō to be asleep this late. He remained immobile but no more did he slumber.

Finally, there was movement behind him, followed by a yawn. He rolled around to find sleepy green eyes squinting at him. For a moment they just exchanged smiles. Then, the silent gaze turned into featherlight caresses and sloppy kisses.

“I think your granny is up and about…” He whispered, acknowledging the faraway sound of clattering pots and plates.

“I better check on her.” Jūshirō reasoned, as he unwound into his morning cat stretch.

They forcibly got up, got dressed and went into the lounge, where they found the old lady hopping around on her good leg, and looking generally in good spirits, much to Shunsui's relief.

“Come on boys, have your breakfast.”

Another sigh of relief.

“I want to see your ankle. We should bring you to the doctor.”

“Oh, don't be such a worry wart Jūshirō, it’s nothing…”

“I'd be more at ease if someone saw it.”
“What for? I don't feel a thing.”

It seemed that grandma Ukitake could beat her grandson at stubbornness any day, but help was literally at their doorstep.

Someone came knocking on the door and calling for ‘Saori-dono’. Probably familiar with the woman's habit of leaving the door unlocked, the visitor did not wait for an answer and entered, bowing politely and greeting.

It was a sun-tanned man in his thirties, curly hair bound by a white strap around the head. He paused for a moment trying to take in the scene, then jumped in front of Jūshirō and wrapped him in a bear hug.

“Jūshirō-san! It's been years!”

Well, no wonder it had been a long time, because Jūshirō seemed to have no clue who that was. Then, he apparently remembered and returned the embrace with even more vigor.

“Sentarō-kun! It's been too long, I couldn't recognize you at first! How's life?”

“All the same. What about you? How's Tokyo treating you?”

The man’s eyes scanned the room and found Shunsui in the corner, as if in hiding.

“Oh! Sorry, I haven't introduced you two: this is Kyōraku Shunsui…”

Jūshirō bit his lower lip and sent a guilty glance Shunsui's way. The visitor did not wait for further introductions.

“And I'm Kotsukabī Sentarō. Very pleased to meet you, Kyōraku-san!”

“Our grandmothers are best friends since young. They always ended up arranging us play dates for their own convenience.” Jūshirō laughed. The younger man joined in loudly.

It seemed clear that Jūshirō had the ascendent in this relationship. Being older and brighter, the other boy would have naturally looked up to him back in the days. In truth, the man still behaved a bit like a groupie.

“Why is Saori-dono hopping?” He asked.

“She sprained an ankle yesterday and is refusing to see a doctor.”

“Oh, old story! She never wants to see a doctor, but we can go see Yamada-kun, can't we?”

Jūshirō eyed him inquisitively.

“The local nurse. Comes by to visit all the old folks once a week, works down at the clinic, otherwise.”

“That sounds acceptable. Soba, what do you say, we visit Yamada-Kun?”

She was pleased with the idea and agreed to the trip. They all got in the small silver car and followed Sentarō’s directions. Jūshirō went in, walking his grandmother slowly by the arm, and the other two stayed outside the building, by the door, sheltered from the drizzle that still fell.

"First time here?" The local man asked.
"In many years, yes. First time with a typhoon..."

"Wasn't so bad this one. The tail is still passing by. Tomorrow should be clear."

"Hope so... Would be nice to check out the beach... If Saori-san gets better we could bring her along."

Sentarō leaned back and rested a foot on the wall, while mechanically pulling a cigarette pack out of his back pocket. He offered one to Kyōraku, who took it. They pulled the first puff in silence. The rowdy looking man seemed to be measuring him. For the second time since their arrival, he was under scrutiny.

Knowing they might bump into several Ukitakes during the day he had put on simple clothes – white linen slacks, birkenstocks and a khaki t-shirt. He still wondered, though, if everyone could see right through him.

"What happened, anyway?" The man asked.

Shunsui glanced back, lost for a moment.

"The sprained ankle."

"Oh, Saori-san went out during the storm and fell in the backyard."

The islander sighed.

"Again..."

Shunsui had a bad feeling about that comment.

"Has this happened before?"

"You mean the sprained ankle?"

"The wandering off..."

"Yeah..." The man admitted. "She's been seen a few times walking around at night, in the rain, or on foggy days. Sometimes she goes as far as the coast."

"Does anyone keep an eye on her?"

"A few relatives live nearby. I, myself pass by every now and then. This morning I was going to check if anything got damaged in the storm. That's how things work in small places... we help one another."

"Thank you." He said, but he wasn't sure for what. Maybe he already felt a bit related to the Ukitakes, especially to that quirky old lady who had raised Jūshirō to become the wonderful man he was today.

"Some say it's Misato-chan..."

"What?" That name, he had heard it on the night before.

"You know about Misato-chan, don't you? Jūshirō-san's..."

"Mother?" He guessed.
The other man nodded.

"Yes, I do." He lowered his voice.

"Some say the wandering around is her doing... that she's calling her mother to follow her..."

"Why? Has Saori-san said anything about seeing her daughter, or something like that?"

"One time, after a storm, we found her sitting in a bus stop, half way to the village. Satoshi-san, the butcher, was driving by and recognized her. He stopped and tried to bring her home, but she insisted that the bus was coming and that her Misato was in it."

Shunsui pulled once more and filled his lungs with smoke, then released. Shit.

"Did anyone tell Jūshirō?"

"Few people here have his number and..." He seemed embarrassed for a moment. "With what he's been through, no one really wants to worry him."

"I see."

Family. Thinking of it, the Ukitakes and the Kyōrakus were worlds apart in all respects. Yet, Shunsui found himself thinking of how he'd lost his own kin. Mother, brother, father, one by one. Did he regret not being by their side in their final moments? Would it come back to haunt him someday? He had to find a way to tell Jūshirō about this, but how?

"Kotsubaki-kun, can I ask you to write down my number? Please call me if anything happens."

The man was startled by the request, and eyed Shunsui with suspicion, but brought out his phone and saved the contact.

It did not take long for Jūshirō to come out of the clinic with his granny. She was walking better now and had her foot wrapped in a sort of sports bandage.

"Yamada-kun is a really helpful person! So happy that he takes care of the elderly around here. Couldn’t be in better hands. He's even a chiropractor! Look at obasan – like new!"

So much for finding an easy way to break the news.

The rest of the day was spent from house to house. An uncle here, a few cousins there. Cousins with kids, cousins with babies, cousins with dogs. Everyone had their own brand of cool around here. It was official, Shunsui liked the Ukitakes... he would have liked them better, though, had they been a bit lesser in numbers. By the end of the day, there was a jumble of names and faces in his head, and he couldn’t wait to go back to the small room in granny's house, close the door and have Jūshirō all to himself.

Next morning, the sun was back in the sky in all its glory. They headed to the beach. Saori-ba did not want to join, so they left her to her chores and went by themselves.

It was nice to spend some time alone. They stripped down to their boardshorts and ran to the sea. For as much as Jūshirō seemed to love the water, he tended to get light-headed under the hot sun, so they decided to bring a parasol and take frequent rests in the shade, which was also to Shunsui's liking.
When they were not lying around, watching the ocean and the passers-by, they were strolling in the sand, swimming or splashing water at each other.

Shunsui found himself immersed in idle thoughts. Should Jūshirō leave him one day, this was exactly how he wanted to remember him: wet, happy and sunkissed. A beautiful, magical merman... What nonsense... Maybe the sun was making him giddy.

"Shunsui!" The voice came from the back, together with the cool touch of a body next to his. "What's on your mind?"

"Oh..." He basked in that liquid closeness. "I was wondering if Okinawans live forever..."

"You're crazy..."

"Would you?"

"Would I...?"

"Live forever, if you had the chance..."

The question made the man laugh, but still he gave it a shard of serious thought.

"Maybe", he replied, "...if you were around... I mean, guess I'd be bored all alone..."

The evening sun shone between them. What else did he need to be complete? Nothing, really.

He plunged himself in the shallow waters and started pulling Jūshirō's shorts. In retaliation he got a foot plant on his face. Many gulps of salt water and a long session of teenage horseplay later, they emerged on shore laughing and shoving each other, until they both collapsed on their towels, under the parasol.

"Ahh... too old for this, dammit." He complained.

"You started..."

The half moon-shaped shadow on the sand had been bent out of proportion and the pole had grown long like a giant's thin leg.

"Let's head back? It's gonna be dark soon."

When they got home, the old woman was busy in the kitchen. There was a feast in the making. It included copious amounts of pork and seafood, besides vegetables from the backyard, among which the ill-fated bitter gourd.

Shunsui eyed Jūshirō, as they set the table together.

"Are you ok with the food?"

"Of course, why?"

"Well, everything has meat in it..."

"Oh! There are few exceptions to my diet. Saori-ba is one of them. When I'm here I eat whatever she
He smiled at that. It was endearing to see the relationship between those two. A stab of guilt struck him. There was still something Jūshirō needed to know, and with all the sea and sun, he had not stopped for even a moment to consider it.

"Jūshirō" the lady called from the kitchen. "Can you bring me the tokkuri and cups?"

"Hai!" The grandson replied promptly, and turned to a red lacquered sideboard set against the wall. Squatting, he opened the small wooden doors and brought out a dusty sake set. The granny was going all out.

As Jūshirō trotted to the kitchen, Shunsui's eyes remained on the old piece of furniture. The top was shiny, not a speck of dust, and adorned by a single statuette of a graceful lady with long robes and a curtain of beads concealing her face. Some kind of deity?

"That's Mazu, protector of seafarers. My grandfather was a fisherman, so her favors were always in high demand around here."

"It's a beautiful piece."

They shared one more smile as Jūshirō passed him the three cups, one by one, so that he could wipe them and place them next to the bowls, plates and other utensils that they had been carefully arranging.

Grandma finally emerged with the first serving plates, and they followed her back into the kitchen to fetch the rest. Finally, they were ready to share the meal. It was the first time that they were gathered like this, the storm and the visits to relatives having postponed the event.

They all sat on the horseshoe chairs, around the old round table, and gave their thanks for the meal. A family dinner. To Sunshui, it felt strangely official, but heartwarming, nevertheless.

There was the famed champuru, with pork and bitter gourd, tofu with baby fish, squid wrapped in spring onion, pork belly fried rice and stir fried greens with garlic. Knowing how much of a sweet tooth her grandson was, Saori-ba had also bought some daifuku earlier in the day. They all downed the food with voracious glee, and watered it with the saké that Sentarō-kun had bought at her request.

It was funny to see the granny slightly buzzed. In truth, both Ukitakes in the room seemed to need little to get all fuzzy and giggly. What a treat. At one point, the conversation came dangerously close to focusing on the two of them. It seemed as though the granny was trying to understand the idea of "boyfriends". In a few words, though, Jūshirō deftly steered them away from the topic. Clothes, yes, that was an easier one. The granny liked the red hibiscus print shirt her boy was wearing. It belonged to Shunsui, but that fact was not really worth mentioning.

And then they came to the topic of hair. Saori-ba didn't object her grandson's choices. Much to the contrary, she seemed quite fascinated with how long and white it had become. Her eyes washed through it and her hand smoothed the long platinum curtain.

"Such a beautiful hair, isn't it..." She admired with melancholy, that was quickly replaced with a glint of mischief. Her luminous brown eyes twinkled. She left the room. Both shrugged and had one more round while waiting.

And in she came in her small sliding steps, carrying a tin box cradled in her arms. She placed it on the table and stood behind Jūshirō's chair. The first thing to come out was a comb. Shunsui couldn’t
help grinning at his lover's puzzled face, and then at the little scowls everytime the comb pressed through some knot in the strands.

Happy with her handiwork, she then proceeded to part the mane in five sections, one at the front, two at the sides and another two at the back and center. She tied each one up, and moved on to a gracious and elaborate process of rolling and shaping, until the top front section was raised up, the sides were rolled and pulled up and the back was bunched in a heavy topknot that fell to the back in a loop.

Jūshirō was keeping his cool, but it had become apparent that by now, it was hanging by a thin thread... especially with the contorted expression of mirth in Shunsui's face.

To add insult to injury, grandma took out two hairpins, shaped like pinwheels, and poked them on the topknot. She admired her work with satisfaction.

"If only my hands were not so shaky..." She excused herself. False modesty.

"It looks beautiful, obasan," Shunsui asserted. "It fits the personality of the model."

This, of course, earned him a kick under the table. He protested, but began giggling, as did Saori-ba and, surprisingly, Jūshirō.

It was clearly not the expensive type, but Sentarō-kun's sake certainly did the job.

"Ahhh! My body's heavy!" Said Jūshirō while stretching and yawning.

They had finally retreated to the bedroom and, despite the complaint, there was a smile on his face. Shunsui wrapped his arms around his waist, encasing him from the back.

"Let's get rid of this stuff and snuggle."

And his fingers started working on the buttons of the flowery shirt. Jūshirō, in turn, raised his hands to his head and pulled a hairpin, but his wrist was caught.

"Leave it on a bit longer. It looks so pretty..."

"I thought you didn't fancy women..."

"Don't see any woman here... just you with your hair done up."

The man with the sculpted hairdo looked back with a little smirk curling his lips.

"Do you have anything in mind?" He spoke softly.

"I might have... a thing or two..."

Jūshirō let himself be turned around and slowly kissed. Clothes fell to floor, one by one – not that there was much to shed, in a hot summer night.

Shunsui paused for a moment. A thing or two... He knew exactly what he wanted. He helped Jūshirō down to the futon and crawled between his legs. There it was. No need to ask if the other man was pleased with the turn of events.
As he was about to bend down, he noticed he had ended up in seiza... That would make it seem like a ceremonial bow. So be it. His head moved forward and his hands held the velvety thighs for support. Two sets of fingers immediately raked through his hair. Once he found himself in this position, he knew he could make a man go mad. And it was so because the act of giving made him just as high.

There was subtle movement beneath him. Small leg jerks, muscle contortions, panting. He paused to take a peek. Yes, perfect. He carried on, and on, until the movements and sounds picked up pace and the familiar hot stream took form. His mouth invaded, the hands on his hair easing their grip, shifting to a gentle caress. Must feel like this, he thought, to be a dog. You do something nice, you get a nice rubbing of the fur, or even a breathless praise...

“Whoever taught you, did a hell of a job...”

“I'm a natural.” He replied.

Yanked up by the hair he crawled over the sprawled pale body, and shared the taste in his mouth with the mouth of the man who'd soiled him.

“What about you?” Jūshirō asked.

“I'm done for the day. You're tired.”

A small frown, but then a quiet acceptance of the gift. A smile so warm, so pure. With a small effort the thin man sat upright and his hands went back to the white topknot.

“Wait.” Shunsui interrupted.

He cocked an eyebrow, hands frozen in place.

“Just one more thing.”

And his eyes followed Shunsui as he stood and opened his bag, then came back with the Leica in hand.

“You found it.”

“Sorry, I was going to leave it there, but then thought I might see something pretty…”

“It's ok, it's yours... Don't show this one on TV.”

“Silly...”

“How do you want me?”

“Raw, with a drop of lemon.”

Leaving the model exactly where he was, Shunsui moved the floor lamp, so that the shadows came out the way he wanted them. He pressed the shutter one time, moved slightly backwards, pressed again, then one more time.

“I guess Saori-ba will never know she inspired a work of art.”

“You're the only work of art here.”

“What got into her anyway…? To do my hair up like a geisha girl…”
Shunsui placed the camera on the tatami and kissed his model. He drew in a deep breath.

“There's something you need to know.”

Jūshirō listened to the revelations about his grandmother's wanderings and strange conversations and, despite the preparatory apology, his reaction was far from lenient -

“And why the hell would you keep this from me?”

“I'm sorry, I didn't know how to…”

“I could have arranged for her to see a specialist, have her do a brain scan or something…”

"It should be ok... maybe it's just her age."

"Maybe. But what if it's not? What if I'm not the only one in the family with bad genes? What if something happens when she's wandering around? I couldn't forgive myself..."

“You can still…”

“Rely on relatives, burden everyone? Yes, of course I can... You don't get it, do you? She raised me, without her I'd be nothing... I might not even be alive anymore.”

“Please, Jūshirō…” he reached his hand to a white stray lock but got it slapped away.

“I'm sorry. I need to be alone for a while.”

Helplessly he saw as the other man pulled a yukata from the wardrobe and left the room. He heard another door click. He'd gone outside.

Perfect. Fuck up number two, and this time involving the granny.

Going after Jūshirō right away didn't seem wise. At least he'd give him some time. He took the Leica and kept it neatly in its case and back in the bag. He made the bed, then fished inside the wardrobe for a yukata for himself. His eyes lingered on the objects kept inside it. There was the oar-shaped weapon, but also a collection of puzzles with foreign monuments – the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Colosseum – and a box with random toys. One of them was an old stuffed dog. The fur had turned into darkened clumps, the eyes were bitten off, one arm was detached from the shoulder, hanging limp and empty by a clumsy stitch.

He sat cross-legged facing the open wardrobe. He gave some more time, then went out.

He walked down the dark backyard, using the light in his phone to find his way. At the very end of the enclosure, near the small family shrine, he found Jūshirō curled up in a ball, sitting on a stone.

He walked slowly and, when he came close enough, turned off the light, relying only on moonlight and the shimmer of white hair to guide him. The hairdo was now completely ruined and the remains of what was probably a fit of anger lay on the floor – ribbons, pins and white strands.

He knelt down facing the curled up figure.

“Jū-chan…” he called in a muppet voice, holding the half dismembered stuffed dog in front of the man's hidden face.

“Yes, you, Jūshirō Ukitake. I bring a message from Baka-Shunsui.”
A small crack in the shell and one green eye peaked from the bundle of knees, arms and hair.

“He says…” he continued in the cartoonesque falsetto. “He says he's deeply sorry…”

An open-palmed slap landed on Shunsui's face. He didn't flinch. The toy was snatched from his hand, and held firmly to the man's stomach.

“Scooby-chan says you're an idiot.”

“I am.”

“But he's willing to overlook it this time…”

“Thank you.”

“It's the second time you do this… you give me an orgasm and then tell me something bad… I don't like it. What am I supposed to think every time I'm about to come? That my fishes died? That the bathroom is flooded?”

“Thank Kami for your sense of humor…”

“It's not a joke, Shunsui… If there's anything I need to know, next time, don't wait, just tell me, I can take it.”

“I'm sorry, Jūshirō.”

“I'm sorry too. I've unloaded my own guilt on you.”

Shunsui finally thought it safe to smooth the tangled white hair.

“Look, if you're worried about her, why don't you take some time off and live here for a while?”

“I have a job back in Tokyo, remember…”

He wanted to tell him to quit the damn job, let go of the priests and the long working hours... tell him how he longed to see him and how he missed him when he worked till late. But that was another discussion, for another time.

He ran his fingers through the white mane once more and a few remaining pins fell off. The moon shone on two bright spots on the floor - the two pinwheels. He picked them up.

“Should we bring these to your grandma?”

“Keep them.”

“Really?”

“You want them, don't you?”

Grinning he dropped them inside his sleeve. Who knows... one day...

Chapter End Notes
And here's the last update of the year! Happy 2017 everyone!
The Heir

Chapter Summary

Shunsui has an unwanted gig to attend. Unbeknownst to him, a series of intrigues are brewing in his turf. Meanwhile, Jūshirō comes across some troubling thoughts. Will they break under pressure, or will a hearty serving of food porn come to the rescue?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Stop fidgeting, or the knot won't be straight…”

“Do I really need to meet the KKK?”

“Stop calling it that, goodness…”

Jūshirō was getting late for work. It was the first day of classes and he was secretly excited to take a break from paperwork and meet his new students. Shunsui, however, was not making his life easy. Ever since the letter of summons had arrived, Shunsui had been dreading that day: the annual shareholders meeting of Kyōraku Kabushiki Kaisha, or KKK, as he thought befitting to call it. The company, the existence of which could be traced back to the Edo period, had absorbed his father’s entire life, as it had absorbed the lives of several other heads of the Kyōraku family before him. The same was bound to have happened with his older brother, had he lived to see old age. It was, naturally, one of his pet hates.

Jūshirō made one more attempt to fix Shunsui’s tie, then he adjusted the collar and fastened the silver cufflinks. He was proud of his handiwork. For once he got Shunsui to look like a refined gentleman, in a dark grey suit and sakura colored tie. That much was inevitable – his partner would need his favorite color to cheer him up through the day.

“Old man could have set up the trust for life, or pass it on to my heirs... I was happy enough to get the dividends and let the banks do the work.”

Jūshirō shook his head, white hair flitting with the movement. Shunsui could act blasé as much as he wanted, but it was crystal clear that the whole thing irked him. In truth, even Jūshirō was lightly angered by the clause in Shunsui’s father’s will, which created a trust in favor of Shunsui, and determined that all of the old man's property be administered by a trustee bank on his behalf until the heir turned forty-five.

Unlike his brother, who had served as representative director – the highest office in the company – since as early as his twenties, Shunsui had been deemed unfit until his forty-fifth birthday. It was the ultimate humiliation. But he would have to help the man shake it off, somehow.

“You have to attend a meeting once a year... it's not that inhuman, is it?” He reasoned.

“It makes me sick.”

And it was no hyperbole.
Shunsui had woken up with a sort of stagnant nausea, one that does not resolve nor gets any worse. He grunted as Jūshirō went into the bathroom, and returned with his hands doused in hair gel. Understanding the cue, Shunsui lowered his head, so that the sticky fingers could rake along his growing locks, turning his out-of-bed look into a smart hairdo. He smirked at his partner’s satisfied look.

“You are enjoying this, aren't you?”

Jūshirō couldn’t quite conceal it. He was delighted to dress Shunsui up like an executive. He pitied him a bit, but not so much. After all, he knew the man could handle himself much better than what he liked to act out. As for the underlying wounds, they would have to heal some day.

“Don't you think it's about time you forgave your father?”

Shunsui looked up, a bit startled by the question.

“Can I at least get drunk afterwards?”

Jūshirō chucked, pulling the stubbled jaw down to him. Shunsui expected one of those soft, chaste, Jūshirō kisses, that he had grown to love. Instead, he got drawn into an open-mouthed, wet assault that left them both panting.

“Come home. I can offer you better than sake.”

“You better keep your promise, pretty boy.”

Shunsui was grateful for the kiss and the teasing. It had definitely changed his mood for the better.

“Gotta go...”

Shunsui’s hand was still holding on to Jūshirō’s, as he tried to walk away.

“I love you.” The heir declared.

“I love you too.” The school teacher replied.

Jūshirō pulled his hand free, immediately missing the touch, and walked out, with his bag hanging from his shoulder.

Shunsui was left alone in his room. No, it was their room now. As if he needed to prove it to himself, his eyes sought the dresser where his inherited blades used to rest. Jūshirō didn't like to have weapons around while asleep, so they had moved them to the living room. In their place was a round glass bowl with two gold fishes.

“Well, good morning you two.”

They swam up and down, drawing patterns with their pretty tails. Jūshirō had an inordinate affection for the them to Shunsui's place had been an odd formalization of their union. Thinking about it made him smile. To live with the one he loved, to share joys and troubles, to know him so well and to feel exposed in the same way... If all his life choices had led to this, there was nothing to regret after all.

And so, when his phone rang with an expected call, his resolve was built. He answered with a firm, yet mellow voice.

“My dear Nanao-chan! Have you come for me?”
When he opened the front gate and stepped outside, the grim black sedan was already there. A short, thin man left the driver's seat and went around the car to open the door for him. He instantly recognised the old family driver. It was incredible that the man was still working at that age.

"Sato-san! When will they let you retire?"

The man glanced back at him from his deep bow. There was a small smile carved on the aged skin. As always, his manners were as impeccable as his cropped white hair and his black uniform.

"It's nice to see you, Kyōraku-kun."

The man held the door and he settled himself in the backseat, next to his niece, whose beauty he never failed to notice.

"Nanao-chan, you look so lovely today! Have you done something to your hair? It looks glossier than usual."

She looked away. It was one of their rituals. The little girl he met when he returned to Japan had grown into a woman, the spitting image of her mother. Perhaps he should stop addressing her so casually.

"Here, uncle, please put on your seat belt."

As the car began to move she passed her arm in front of him and pulled the buckle over his chest, fastening it to the piece attached to the seat.

Oh heck, just a little teasing won't hurt... He took advantage of having her looming before him and pressed his lips together in a duck face, pointed at her cheek.

"You take such good care of me, Nanao-chan..."

She bounced away, wrinkling her nose.

"The seat belt is required by law. Now please behave, we must not distract Sato-san."

He could swear he heard a muffled laugh from the front. He would let her off the hook for now.

"Do you think you can give me a heads-up on what's gonna happen today? I'm at a loss..."

She was pleased with the question.

Nanao had inherited her family's publishing business, which occupied most of her time, but she was also fairly acquainted with the inner workings of the KKK.

"We will have the annual shareholders meeting. This means that the auditors will present their reports and the shareholders will decide how to apply the profits. Normally, a portion goes to investments, another is kept in reserve and, if it is sufficient, there will be distribution of dividends. Then we appoint or reinstate the members of the Board and address any other issues at hand."

"I see." He dwelled a moment on all the tasks ahead. Holding 49% of the share capital, he couldn't exactly sleep through the whole thing and raise his arm whenever everyone else did.

"Are these auditors any good?"
"The auditors are renowned professionals. As for the directors..."

He glanced sideways, sensing concern in the young woman's voice.

"Anyone you don't trust?"

"We are currently looking for a replacement for the representative director – basically the person who runs the business and makes most decisions. Yamato-san was the last board member from grandfather's time, but he is severely ill and needs to retire. Whoever takes the position will determine the direction of the business in the future."

"Wouldn't you take it?"

"I am absolutely under qualified for the job." She dismissed. "And I have Ise Books to deal with... it puts enough on my plate. Speaking of which, we need to talk about your project."

"Whenever you want, my lovely publisher..."

This time, she smiled.

"Anyway, according to the bylaws, the representative director is nominated by the major shareholder and approved by a majority of shareholders, excluding the nominating shareholder."

"Nanao-chan, are you saying that the one who needs to choose this person is..."

"You, uncle Kyōraku."

"Oh, snap..."

"The current board has already interviewed several candidates and short-listed two. Now, as we understand, one candidate has been sourced through a headhunter, but the other one was... suggested by the three squads."

"The three squads?"


"Great, one more KKK..."

She didn't acknowledge the pun, just carried on.

"After the war, with the crackdown on zaibatsu, some members were scared they would lose their status in the group. I don't know if you're familiar with the structure of a zaibatsu...

Shunsui looked at her quizzically.

"Big conglomerates of interconnected companies, generally with family relations involved. Kyōraku was one of the biggest, just below the Kuchiki, the Shiba and the Shihoin..."

Those names rang familiar, but he couldn't really pinpoint from where.

"There were a number of smaller businesses that were vital to the survival of the Kyōraku company, but if the group were to be broken they would surely collapse... so they stroke-up a deal with great-grandfather to own a part of the main company. They were mostly run by relatives, that grouped up in three "squads", that ended up with 8% each. Back then everything went smoothly because the Kyōraku were still the leading branch, and no one dared to make ripples, but they
were eventually bought-up, one by one... and now they behave a bit like wild cards."

"So, if I own 49%, you own 11% and the squads own 24% together, who owns the remaining 16%?"

"K Mining... uncle Arata."

"How lovely... two second sons running the place. Our ancestors would be pleased..."

Nanao's face remained expressionless. The Ise had received their share in KKK as a dowry, but Shunsui's brother had represented their interests until both him and his wife passed away. It was no surprise that Nanao saw the task passed on to her as a burden.

"And you, Nanao-chan, have you decided on who to vote for?"

"I am inclined to support whatever choice you make, but I would prefer not to have the squads effectively taking control of the business."

"I see."

So if Shunsui were to side with Nanao it would depend on uncle Arata to pass or block the resolution. This was going to be a tiring day. He thought of Jūshirō as he let his head rest back, and watched the city go by. He wondered if the day was going well for him. Were the new kids naughty or nice... was he happy? That man loved his job so much. Sometimes Shunsui wished he had something that could extract at least half that motivation from himself.

His thumb reflexively touched his phone and the image of one of their airplane selfies was alit. He idly caressed the screen and tucked it back in his pocket.

The car turned left after the Seiko clock tower, in the heart of Ginza, rolled slowly for a little more and pulled over to the lobby of the Kyōraku building. There were no "KKK" signs, only the old star logo with the characters of his surname in blood red.

"Nice seeing you, Sato-san. Thank you for the ride." He tapped the man's shoulder before stepping out of the car.

"At your service as always, Shunsui-kun."

With Nanao was by his side, he made his way in.

First years. The whole world at their tiny feet, their whole lives ahead of them. Jūshirō always felt a bit nostalgic whenever he taught a new class of first years. This time around, he had assigned it to himself, intending to see them through the whole four-year cycle. It was a small but diverse group of children, all new to the school. They were mostly quiet, maybe a bit scared, but there was a cluster of possible troublemakers in the back of the room.

While the class worked on embellishing their work folders with drawings and stickers, he rested on the window sill and let his eyes roam, his mind wander. Outside, the tree-lined paths had come to live with students. From the outdoor sports grounds came scattered shouts, whistles and thumps.

A school is such a common-place thing that it's hard to believe that some have to fight for it with their lives on the line. Teaching made him feel relevant, more than any posts or titles, certainly more
than the piles of paperwork that awaited in his office downstairs. He would go back to that in the afternoon, but he would not think about it now. Now, he was enjoying the quiet scratching of markers on paper, a class full of clumsy little artists.

Just then, a slight movement of the door drew his attention. It opened just a few inches and a pair of blue eyes took a peep, as though looking for someone. He pretended not to see it for a minute, but as the boy didn't make any move to leave, he walked across the room and approached the door.

"Hello, good morning." He greeted.

Flushed cheeks and light brown hair, uniform neatly buttoned up, almost as tall as him, perhaps a palm or two shorter.

"Sensei, I-I..." the boy stuttered.

"Can I help you?"

"I... Sensei, I want to ask which language you teach in... I'm sorry for asking!"

And he tucked his head down to his chest.

"I teach in Japanese, supplemented with English whenever I find the need for it. Next year I will start teaching them how to read and write in English and by the end of the fourth year the school expects them all to be bilingual. Anyone you are concerned about, in particular?"

The boy seemed only slightly relieved.

"My sister Anja, she doesn't speak Japanese, or much English for that matter..."

"I see. May I know your name, Anja's brother?"

"Markus..."

"Nice to meet you, Markus. And what language does Anja-chan speak at home?"

"German... She does speak a bit of English that she picked up with the nannie... but, seriously, I don't know what mom and dad were thinking... Sorry for the trouble."

"It's ok. I will look out for your sister and make sure she doesn't lag behind. I can speak a little German too, so hopefully we'll get along!"

The boy's face lit up in a huge grin.

"Really? Sugoi! And, er... thank you very much, sensei!"

He bowed again and was about to leave, when Jūshirō noticed something familiar in the way he swayed his arms.

"Markus, have I seen you somewhere?"

"Yes, sir. I'm in the high-school football team."

"Ah!" Jūshirō finally remembered where he had seen those clear blue eyes, like two glistening blocks of ice. He smiled.

"Well, thank you for bringing this to my attention."
What was it with those eyes? They carried the shyness of the age, but the way they looked at him seemed strangely intrusive and magnetic at the same time.

"Well, see you tomorrow, Markus. You will be playing in the Four-schools tournament, I assume..."

"Yes, sensei!" The boy replied proudly, but then his voice softened. "I can't wait to see you play." He blurted out, before running off.

Closing the door behind him, he went back to his spot by the window. He tried to shake it off, but something deeply disturbing had crawled into his mind.

Many a head turned when Nanao Ise got off the lift and made her way to the boardroom with her uncle in tow. Most of the staff, who sat by their desks in the open space, had no idea who he was. There were a few giggles here and there, followed by blushing and awe when the information spread: the tall, svelte man that had all hearts going ablaze in a matter of minutes, was no less than the heir of Kyōraku Juntoku. This would probably be the most exciting piece of news since the HR boss hooked up with the marketing chief...

And on they marched, oblivious of the ongoing gossip. The building remained mostly unchanged in style from its original form. It had been built in the late 1920's, but several repairs and revamps had added comfort and modern amenities. The boardroom was a reflection of this approach, with high ceilings, slender windows and modern furniture, cutting edge technological apparatus and a few works of art.

Already sitting by the long table were uncle Arata and another man who, by his demeanor, could be a lawyer or an advisor of some sort.

Maybe it was a common trait of second sons in the family, but his father's younger brother had none of the pompous attitude of his late old man, Shunsui thought. Uncle Arata carried a certain laid-back dignity, with his thin white locks falling over his forehead and the trademark look of the Kyōraku - high cheekbones, angular jaw, Roman nose.

He approached the man and bowed. Was it deep enough? He would need the man's allegiance, should push come to shove.

"My nephew, I am glad to finally see you here. It was about time those bloody banks stopped meddling in our affairs."

"I will do my best." He lied, or so he thought.

In a few minutes, all the remaining participants took their seats and the staff started bringing in coffee, tea and biscuits.

The meeting was led by a man named Okikiba, apparently the company secretary. He had a bundle of papers that Shunsui would soon conclude were his script. He recited the sentences ceremoniously, lending dignity to the whole ordeal.

The first item of the agenda was the welcoming of the new shareholder-

"By succession in the estate of Kyōraku Juntoku, as per his last will, the participation corresponding to 49% of the company's share capital shall, henceforth, be owned by Kyōraku no Jirō Sōzōsuke Shunsui, here present, with full voting and other statutory rights."
Present were also the two existing directors, who turned out to be the man next to uncle Arata and a smiley fellow named Ichimaru, who seemed to be affiliated with the squads.

The meeting carried on with the endless droning of the auditor. Shunsui sought Nanao's eyes for help. Had she reviewed this? What would happen if there was some problem with the numbers? She nodded.

He had no problem trusting his niece, but it still shocked him how completely meaningless it all sounded... as if great sums had a power of hypnosis, a power that dulled the mind of those with power to decide how to use them. And so it happened that silently all rose their hands and approved the proposed allocation of results.

"As for the last point of our agenda for today," Okikiba continued, "the shareholders are invited to make their remarks on the two short-listed candidates for the position of representative director."

Only then did Shunsui notice the two resumées lying in front of him, bundled with the pages and pages of numbers supplied by the auditors. He placed them side by side and compared: one man, one woman, one educated abroad, the other home grown. The guy certainly had a stellar CV, all honors and awards and Fortune 500 stuff... The woman's track record looked more like the life of a normal person making it up the ladder step by step. He felt inclined to go with her, but who would that Ichimaru fella propose? Judging by what Nanao had said, whoever he would chose was the one to avoid.

"When all are ready" Okikiba suggested, "we will hear the shareholders by decreasing order of participation. Please also state your vote once you have given your reasons."

Wait, what? He was the first one to speak? That meant that the foxy guy would be next, then uncle Arata, then Nanao. Not good. He did not know a thing about the man who was there representing the squads' combined 24%. What were his and their goals? He had to somehow anticipate the man's thinking. Put in another way, if he were to try to take over a company, who would he chose as a pawn? A star manager who could get a job anywhere in the world, or a more malleable average person in search of a stable job? Would he chose a man or a woman? Younger or older? That didn't help, the candidates were roughly the same age. He looked at the first pages again. "Schiffer". "Yadomaru." He pressed his index fingers to his temples. What would Jūshirō do if he were here?

"Kyōraku-san, have you reached a decision?"

"I have."

Nanao had her gaze focused on the pen balanced between her fingers. Uncle Arata was eyeing him with a curious grin. Perhaps he didn’t care too much about all this.

"There are too many men in this room. I choose Lisa Yadomaru." He finally stated.

"Ichimaru-san?"

He was beginning to loathe the everlasting grin on the man's face.

"I will let the facts speak for themselves. Ulquiorra Schiffer."

Nanao's breath hitched, audibly. The uncle turned his face towards her, and smirked. This was all starting to look like a trap. The old man conferenced with the director beside him, but it was an undistinguished whisper.
"Kyōraku Arata-san?"

"My nephew is a man after my own heart. I vote for Yadomaru-san."

"Ise-san?"

"I concur. Yadomaru-san." She said without a second thought.

"By majority of votes, excluding that of the nominating shareholder, Ms. Yadomaru Lisa is appointed representative director of this company, subject to her formal acceptance of office. We have reached the end of this meeting. Thank you all very much and have a good day."

He stood and bowed and all followed. As they started to scatter, a hissing voice snaked its way to his ear.

"What an interesting collaboration we are bound to have... I can't wait to give the good news to my partners."

The little bastard. Was that a threat?

"See you around, Kyōraku-dono..."

And the man walked away.

A sense of urgency. Why did he suddenly care about this wretched business?

"Nanao, who can I ask for a room and a phone line? I want to settle things with this Ms. Yadomaru today... right now."

"Come with me." She said.

Nanao brought him to a room on the same floor, only slightly smaller than the meeting room they had been in. There was a large wooden desk with an unplugged computer. Judging by the model it was more than a decade old. There was a painting of Mount Fuji on the wall, and behind the desk, a shelf full of books. Mechanical Engineering, most of them.

"Nanao-chan, are you sure I can use this room?"

"Of course, uncle... I mean, of course, Kaichō."

"Kaichō? What's that now?"

She graced him with a small giggle.

"I figure calling you uncle is not appropriate anymore, is it?"

"I guess not." He smiled dearly.

Lisa Yadomaru was an impressive sight to behold. Long legs and tied down black hair, intense eyes beneath oval spectacles. Her attire was that of a business woman – blue dress with a streak of white across the flank and a matching blazer. The fabric ended well above the knee. Perhaps that's what happens when you grow tall in a country where the standard is shorter, or perhaps the lady was just that confident.
Nanao came in too. The physical resemblance between them was striking, but where one was all quiet strength and modesty, the other was open, unapologetic fighting spirit. He grinned.

"Welcome, Ms. Yadomaru. I hope our sudden call didn't disrupt your affairs too much."

"Thank you. It's not an unwelcome disturbance. But may I know now, did I get the job or what?"

His grin turned into a satisfied chuckle.

"Nanao-chan, is all the paperwork ready?"

"Yes, here's the contract and your proxy letter."

"Perfect. Have a read, Yadomaru-san. If it's acceptable we can settle this now."

They sat in silence as the woman flipped through the pages of the employment contract. Then, she took a pen from her purse and imprinted her narrow signature on the last page. She passed the papers to Shunsui, who signed next to her. Just like that, the deal was done.

"Please excuse me, kaichō, I have to run to another meeting."

He nodded and Nanao took her leave.

And they were left alone. He let himself recline on the plush leather chair. Lisa adjusted her glasses and with a slow, measured motion, she crossed one leg over the other.

"Say, now that we are colleagues, would it be acceptable if I called you by your given name?"

"Do as you wish. I will certainly not call you kaichō."

"We have an understanding, then. Hunky dory! Shall we hit the bar? There's a few more things I'd like to discuss."

"Are you trying to intoxicate me?"

"Only if you want me to..."

"How do I know you don't just wanna bone me?"

His hearty laughter vibrated across the room.

"Do I really have to answer that, hun?"

Her brow perked over the rim of her glasses.

"Good. Let us get a drink, then."

When Jūshirō got home, a slight uneasiness still lingered in him. He was a bit disappointed that Shunsui was not in yet, no messages either. Had it been worse than he thought, or had his partner followed his plan of getting drunk, after all? He now felt guilty that he had talked him into attending the meeting. Perhaps he should have just let Shunsui appoint a proxy, as he had intended.

He let go of his bag and let himself fall on the sofa. They could go out, have a good meal, a glass of wine, or two... He was about to tap the proposal on his phone, but then he decided to call Saori-
His worries about his grandmother's mind had been eased but not erased. Cousin Chisato had brought her to see a specialist in Naha and they had found nothing abnormal. The episodes of apparent dementia could still relate to the trauma of her daughter's untimely death. The doctor recommended rest and regular follow-ups.

"Hello Soba, how are you?"

"Oh, my son... don't trouble yourself to call everyday! I'm doing well..."

"How was the autumn moon this year?"

His grandmother giggled on the other side.

"You have always paid attention to these things haven't you, my kind-hearted child?"

"Oh, you embarrass me... I was just curious. The night sky is so washed down here in the city."

"It was very bright, but not for long, the clouds came in too soon."

"That's a shame."

"Oh, there will be another one next year... So, how is your... er..." Saori-ba hesitated for a moment, "...your boyfriend?"

It brought a smile to his lips.

"He's well. A bit busy... work stuff."

"And you, son? You're not working too much, are you?"

"No, no, don't worry, my schedule is back to normal."

"Have you been eating properly? I wanted to send you some sweet potatoes but Sentarō-kun said you also have them in Tokyo... but what does he know? He never left Okinawa!"

Her disdainful tone was amusing, albeit unfair to the kind soul it referred to.

"Yes, Soba, they sell them here, don't worry. Keep some for the winter. I'll pay you a visit."

"Oh, yokata!"

He could hear the joy in her voice. They said their goodbyes and he decided he would stick to that promise no matter what.

Talking with his grandmother made him feel better. He tucked his wallet in his back pocket, keys and phone on the front ones, and went out again, headed to the supermarket. He got all the usual supplies and then passed by the meat counter, thinking that, for once, he could prepare a little treat for his beloved companion. He saw the daily special announced on a black board – center cut fillet mignon. Could he even pull that off?

"What can I get you?" Asked the attendant.

"The-er... daily special." He decided. "One piece."
"Six, eight or twelve ounces?"

He was going to reply eight, but then amended to "Twelve!", in a tone that sounded like a military command. The man nodded and proceeded to cut the meat and wrap it up carefully.

Back in the kitchen, it was time to undo the artful packaging. Once ridden of the printed papers and plastic wrap, the piece of meat was visible for what it was – the remains of a once living being. His nose winced at the thought and the acrid smell. He brought out his phone.

"YouTube, enlighten me." He pleaded out loud.

He watched as some guy with a British accent went on about texture and juices, and then finally gave a step by step rundown on how to cook a perfect fillet mignon.

As he carried out each memorized step, his mind went back to Markus and his incredible blue eyes.

'I can't wait to see you play.'

It wasn't for his skills for sure. He was well aware they were sufferable, and so much would be obvious to the captain of the high school team. Could the kid be developing a crush on him? No, he was making too much out of nothing. It was an innocent comment, mere politeness...

But where had he seen that expression before? Shyness tinged with intent. He froze. The heavy knife landed on the wooden board with a thump, pieces of onion falling off into the sink. Of course. He had seen it, many years ago, in another life...

'Yoruichi.'

He felt shame and guilt bubbling up.

'No! She was of age!' He reassured himself. 'I didn't touch her until then...' But was that really the issue? Boundaries. Maybe he was too approachable. He would have to keep his cool, and if the kid were to approach him again, he would have to be prepared.

Right now, though, he had a steak to cook.

It was not the first time that Shunsui walked into a bar before 4pm, but never had he done it with an employee... It still felt strange... in just a day, to go from useless dilettante to kaichō of a company.

Charlie's was a dim-lit, sleepy watering whole, covered in velvets and art-nouveau prints. Stepping out of the lift and into the bar, he laid a hand on the curve of Lisa's waist. When you're know as a playboy, act like one.

They were shown to a secluded table, framed by heavy drapes.

"I'd start by suggesting a riesling, but I trust you're more interesting than that..."

She chuckled and addressed the waiter.

"Hibiki, 30 years, no ice." She turned back to him. "You pay."

"Same as the lady." He crooned.
They measured each other. She had an even more striking figure under the warm lamp light. 

"A fitting choice" he offered "the best homegrown malt for the best homegrown executive."

"I didn't imagine you such a patriot, Kyōraku-san."

"I am not. As a matter of fact, I'm French."

"Is that a pick-up line?"

"It has worked so far."

She laughed.

"Why did you hire me? You can be honest, I know who I was up against."

"Because you deserved it?"

She rolled her eyes. The drinks arrived.

"Look, you probably know more about the backstage coups in course in my company than I do, but I hope you believe me when I say that they were not the only reason. For what it's worth, I didn't know who was their man."

"You took an educated guess..."

"No. I tried, but both options had a good rationale behind them, it could have gone both ways... So I just asked myself what a certain someone would do..."

"And what did you conclude?"

"The right thing. He would have told me to do the right thing."

Her deadpan face eased into an enigmatic smile.

"Did I pass the test?" He probed.

"Hardly. But I'm the subordinate here. You don't need to subject yourself to such unpleasant things. Let us drink." She raised her glass.

Their conversation went on for another two rounds of Hibiki. Shunsui had started to slur something about being married to the prince of Rivendell, and Lisa had admitted, after many prompts, to have found Nanao quite easy on the eye. It was time to call it a day.

They came down to the street still walking straight, but with the pleasant dizziness of mild intoxication. Shunsui stopped a taxi and held the door. Lisa dodged his attempt at a goodbye kiss, while lowering herself onto the seat. The door slammed and the taxi rolled away. Another came in its tow and his arm shot up again. He could probably go back to the KKK building and ask for a ride home, but this way was faster.

He couldn't wait to see his man again.

"Tadaima!"
He didn't have to make it all the way up the stairs to start smelling something strange. 'Am I at the right place? Didn't think I'd drank that much...'

"Okaeri!"

Jūshirō opened the kitchen door and the mouth-watering odor broke through the living room in all its might. The man was beaming, as usual, but he hadn't changed into his home attire and looked a bit flushed. He had an apron thrown over his going out clothes, and the white mane was tied up in a bun.

"What are you up to in there?"

He tried to peep into the kitchen while wrapping Jūshirō in his arms, but his view got hijacked by the lovely reddened cheeks and passionate jade green eyes. The kiss that ensued had a taste of carrots and a smell of smoke. Maybe he'd really made the man wait.

"It's finished actually. Ten minutes to settle down and we're ready to eat. I want to take a shower now. Care to join"

"I don't think we'd be back in ten minutes if I did... You go, I wait for you."

He tiptoed to the kitchen once he heard footsteps disappearing into the bedroom.

“Be a good sport and don’t cheat, Shunsui! It's a surprise.” He heard from behind his back.

There was a head sticking out from the bedroom door. He paddled back to the sofa and plopped down, like a good boy. He would have to muffle his curiosity with entertainment. He turned the TV on.

Jūshirō finally returned, fresh-looking in a crisp yukata and wet hair. Peach. He'd changed his shampoo again.

“Come on, take a seat, make yourself at home!”

“Very funny… come on, what is it that you're feeding me? I'm itching to know.”

A naughty smile.

“Get some wine then. Unless you're boozed up for the day...”

“White or red?”

“Red.”

And dinner finally materialized on the table.

“Did you hit your head or something?”

“Of course not. Come on, give it a try.”

The fork dug easily through the steak, breaching the brown crust. The knife sliced a big chunk as if sliding through foam. Salt, smoke, blood and juices invading his mouth. Crispy, tender flesh...

“For a vegetarian you make a pretty sick fillet mignon.”

“Thank YouTube.”
"What's yours?"

He pointed at the plate on the other side of the table, that looked almost the same as his.

"Portobello mushroom. Tastes like meat..."

"Can I try?"

Jūshirō cut a piece and brought it to Shunsui's mouth. It didn't taste anything like the fillet mignon, but it was alright. A compromise.

It was impressive that just two glasses of merlot had allowed Jūshirō to almost catch up to the three hibikis. He was getting chatty and flirty and his toes were on a full scale assault on Shunsui's calves.

With a swift motion he grabbed the sneaky ankle and settled it on his lap. He began massaging the plant of the foot, rubbing circles, stretching the toes. The half of the man above the table mellowed down to the state of a humming rag doll.

"Tired, aren't you?"

Letting the massage come to an end, he stood and started piling the plates and cutlery. Once the table was clean they moved to the bedroom, Jūshirō pulling Shunsui by their interlaced fingers.

The lamp over the fish bowl illuminated the space. The two little creatures swam merrily.

"Have you fed our sons?"

"Of course." Jūshirō answered proudly, taking, at the same time, one of Shunsui's wrists in his hand and undoing a cufflink. Then, he repeated on the other side. A mirrored image of their morning. They smiled. Next, the skillful fingers went to the tie knot, which was already partially loosened, and pulled the hoop over Shunsui's head.

"Did I tell you that I met the most incredible woman..."

"Should I be worried?"

"Only that she might fall for you... though she rather seemed to have the hots for my niece."

He laughed and smacked Shunsui's butt.

"Ouch! It's not my fault that I'm so perceptive..."

"Or nosy."

Midway down the row of buttons, the shirt opened to reveal Shunsui's chest and its coating of dark hair. A caress and a kiss. A hum in response.

"Will I ever see you in that navy suit again?"

At Jūshirō's expression of surprise, Shunsui explained.

"I will never forget that day, you know... no matter how many memorable days... and nights we might live."

"Me neither" he admitted, remembering the park, and the strange man with the camera approaching him as he walked down the stairs. "I might put it on if you bring me somewhere fancy..."
“I can do that.”

“And you must wear that funny skirt of yours…”

“It's not a funny skirt” he replied, feigning outrage. “It's a Japanese kilt.”

Jūshirō laughed heartily.

“Oh, Shunsui… There is no such thing as a Japanese kilt…”

“But there is… I invented it.”

With a series of deft movements, belt, button and zipper were undone and the grey fluid fabric of the pants piled up at Shunsui’s feet.

“Of course you did…”

Shunsui stepped out of the double heap and kissed Jūshirō chastely on the lips.

“Thank you. You are the best squire…”

And Jūshirō returned the kiss, but this time with an intensity that stole all words away.

The yukata came down in just one stroke.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys!

So I guess I got a little carried away here, hehe! 6800 words... uff! Congrats if you made it this far!

This is a new arch of sorts and probably the final one. I hope you like it!

Disclaimer: I know nothing about Japanese corporate law, zaibatsu, trusts and successions. I went through a few websites to try to get an idea, but please bear in mind that what I wrote is probably all wrong!

If anyone out there is a Japanese lawyer or knowledgeable in any of this and would like to contribute, please leave a comment - in fact, you are all invited to do so, as always!

Cheers and thanks for reading!
Ordeal by Roses

Chapter Summary

Memories and big decisions on a sunny autumn day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tokyo, 1982

"Sato-san, can you play this, please?"

An eleven year-old hand reached forward to deliver the battered cassette to the driver, but a larger teenager's hand intercepted the exchange. The gloved hand returned to the wheel.

"Seiko Matsuda?! Seriously?"

"Nii-san!" The younger brother protested, as he tried to snatch back the cassette.

"Let's throw this out the window. You can listen to my Loudness records when I don't need them."

"I don't want your noisy music, I want my cassette. Give it back!"

"Junichi, give it to your brother." A serene voice intervened.

And so he did, but by the time the cassette reached young Shunsui's hands again, the tape was all pulled out and tangled in loops. At least it wasn't broken. He quickly wiped a tear with his sleeve and hoped no one saw it. He stuck his pinky in the hole and started winding the tape back into place. A tedious job, more so with the curves and turns of the road, that made his stomach feel funny.

"It's his fault, for being so girly..."

"Junichi, don't say bad things about your brother!"

"But it's true, mom! He listens to girly music, he dresses all colorful, he dances around like a ballerina when he thinks no one's watching..."

Shunsui remained quiet, his fingers stoically spinning the cassette and straightening the tape.

"Enough, Junichi, or I'll tell your father."

The older boy folded his arms, sulking. The lady's tender hand smoothed the brown curls in the smaller boy's head.

"Sato-san, you can leave me and the boys at the usual place and wait for Kyōraku-san at the office."

"Certainly, madam."
They alighted a few blocks away from the said office. The two boys raced each other to the café, and their mother followed at a slower pace. Kyōraku Satoko would always wear a kimono on Sundays. Shunsui thought that she looked pretty in it. She was the owner of a classical Japanese beauty, her features all smooth and rounded, eyes and hair like brush strokes of the blackest ink.

Her two sons inherited the rugged looks of the paternal lineage, but in temperament, her youngest was a different species altogether. He lacked the drive of the Kyōraku. He had little interest in business or worldly matters. In truth, he had little interest in anything at all - other than, perhaps, a fluid enthusiasm for beauty and grace, that he pursued inconsistently, be it by collecting leaves inside a book, or by bleaching his forelocks (and having his hair shaved as a consequence).

"Satoko-dono, ohayo gozaimasu!" Greeted the owner. "Please take a seat! What will it be today?"

"Croissant." The older boy said.

"Butter toast! With strawberry jam!" The other one ordered, excitedly.

Tokyo, 2016

The doors to the old café were still dressed in the same animal stickers from decades ago, but the attendant was a different person – a middle aged woman with a kind, motherly voice. She showed the man to a table near the counter. To think that, in the old days, one of those benches could fit two. Now he barely managed to squeeze his legs under the low table, and his bum was awkwardly squared by the sharp angle of the bench.

"What will it be, sir?"

"Butter toast with strawberry jam." He answered without the least hesitation. "… and a coffee, please."

He picked up the paper and flipped through the first pages. Moments later, the waiter brought the coffee – it was a bit too light and milky, but he would have to make do. It was rare for him to be up so early and, although he didn't feel sleepy, he might, later in the day.

It was too early for his meeting with Nanao, but right after Jūshirō left for work, he had felt the urge to get up too. Perhaps the night before had energized him – and what a memorable night it had been...

He might just slowly walk to the KKK after breakfast... do a little clean up of his room, ask for a functioning computer... Not that he really intended to use the room often – shareholders only had to attend an annual meeting – but seeing his brother's old books in that sort of time capsule had stirred something... Did he suddenly miss Junichi? Why the hell would he miss that prick?

Again, his thoughts drifted to his family. It was easy to miss his mother, his only protector, but his brother and father... There was too much bitterness.

'Don't you think it's about time you forgave your father?'
If only there was something to hold on to – a hint of reconciliation, a last sign of regret, a last goodbye... But no... the only message that came out of his father's deathbed was that wretched will, the one that said 'you are not good enough'. He sighed deeply, and closed his eyes. If he was going to make peace with his past, he would have to do it on his own.

The waiter placed the toast on the table and backtracked to the counter. The white fluffy bread with a crispy brown crust tasted the same, but the jam looked more natural, like there were actual strawberries in it. No one cared about food additives back in the eighties...

After breakfast, he walked down the road, in the general direction of the KKK building, but making no haste whatsoever. Ginza was still one of the most charming places in the city. People were well dressed and the buildings were tasteful, the streets wide and the shops sophisticated. With a nice sunny day beginning, it was a pleasure to be out and about.

When he reached the company headquarters, he decided to tour around and chat people up. That was something he was good at. He discovered who did what around there, and got to know the go-to woman for logistical stuff. The computer would be replaced as soon as they were done with Lisa's workstation.

After convincing someone to get him another coffee, he went to his room. What would Nanao want to do with all this? If she said she wanted to leave it all as it was, he would not oppose. Perhaps he'd just bring in a photo of Jūshirō to place on the desk. The thought made him smile.

He had been lounging around for a while, flipping through the newspaper, when he caught sight of two familiar women stepping out of the lift. They were wearing matching pant suits and holding coffee cups with the same label. His lecherous mind made an immediate, if uncalled-for, connection...

"My lovely cherry-blossoms... I see you are getting along..." He said, winking.

"Too familiar, aren't we?"

Nanao's eyes shifted from one to the other, expecting some retort, but none came.

"IT's setting up my station. I'll have a look at the books in the meantime. Are we doing lunch?" Lisa asked.

"Yeah, why not... Nanao-chan?"

"Sure." She nodded.

Lisa excused herself and walked towards the helpful logistics lady's desk. Nanao carefully closed the door.

"So, my dear publisher, what's the verdict?"

Nanao took a seat facing her uncle's desk. He was leaning back leisurely, but an expression of anticipation was perceivable behind the mask.

She produced a set of printed photos from her purse, and placed them on the table.

"With this we should have enough material to complete the book."

His face opened into a relaxed smile.
"What about my proposal for the cover?"

Nanao fished through the photos and found the one she'd marked with a post it. It was set in a suburban street – walled properties and a shop front. There were four subjects, probably high schoolers on a weekend outing – a blue-eyed, dark-haired boy, a ginger girl in a flowery skirt and a sweet smile, a punk with orange spiky hair, and a big brown dude with headphones around his neck.

"So, why this one?"

"They're all different, and yet they seemed like really good friends... loud, a bit of horse play among the boys... at least two of them were smitten about the girl... I felt comfortable looking at them... as though their group was open to everyone... Big, small, dark, fair, straight... or not..."

Nanao gave him a silent nod.

"I like the diversity theme. It's controversial, especially now. But we should give it a go. I'll submit it for approval. Congratulations. This book is going to print."

He mimicked lifting his top hat for his niece and smiled.

"Now, if I may ask, there's a photo in the batch that didn't seem part of the project..."

She started fishing again through the stash of printed photos. Shunsui was wondering what his beautiful editor had found that she hadn't thought appropriate.

She pulled out the image.

Shit.

He tried to snatch it but she was faster.

"I'm sorry, Nanao-chan, that's not for the book... that's not for anything really"... 'that's for my eyes only..." He wanted to say.

"It's a good photo... I mean, I'm no art expert, but it reminds me of Eikoh Hosoe's work... It's sensual and edgy..."

"Good or no good, I'm not allowed to share it... I already messed up sending it by mistake. Please, Nanao-chan, forget you ever saw it..."

She handed back the photo, regretfully. Shunsui picked it up and let his eyes brush through Jūshirō's naked skin - pure white on textured greys – and the graceful lightness of his hairdo. Was this really art, or was Nanao being nice? Even now, her eyes seemed to follow the piece of photographic paper as he held it firmly.

"It's the same man, isn't it?" She asked. "The photo we had to delete..."

"Yes, it is."

She seemed unable to make sense of the turn of events.

"So, he doesn't let you use a photo of him in a suit, but lets you photograph him like this?"

Shunsui laughed, despite himself.
"Nanao... A lot has happened since then..."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up. "Does that mean we could..."

He shook his head.

"I don’t know what that clever head is thinking, but..."

Nanao looked on, expectant. Should he tell her?

"He's a very private person, and he means a lot to me... so no, we can't use any of the photos. I'm sorry."

"I understand." She said. "I'm happy for you... kaichō."

"There you go again... you embarrass me..."

She smiled shyly, then rose to her feet.

"Well, we're settled then. See you for lunch with Yadomaru-san?"

"Yes, see you for lunch, Nanao-chan."

He tucked the photo in the pocket of his light sports jacket and started wondering what to do with the rest of his day.

"Hi there gorgeous." Said the text message.

Jūshirō was sitting in his classroom, biting on an apple. His students had gone out for a mid-morning break. It made him smile that Shunsui had finally learned his schedule. He finished the apple in two large bites and began a video call.

"Sensei-san..." Shunsui’s face greeted on the other side.

"Hello, kaichō!"

"You too, Brutus?"

Jūshirō laughed.

"Who else has been calling you that?"

"My niece..."

They both laughed.

"What are you up to?"

"Not much... Looking for some paper supplies... thought of making an album for our photos..."

"That's nice..."

"But now I'm half way through Itoya and I feel like I'm forever trapped in a world of paper... it's all so pretty, I don't know what to choose."
That made Jūshirō laugh in earnest.

"Do they already have diaries? Can you grab me one?"

"Are you sure you want me to choose your diary? It might take me another day or two..."

"Give yourself some credit, Shunsui Kyōraku."

"Love you so much..."

"Love you too..." He said in a hushed voice, suddenly weary of his surroundings. "My kids are coming back in. See you later..."

"What time will you be home?"

"Eight or nine... there's a match today."

"Bummer..."

"Enjoy your shopping..."

"Alright... Bye..." The face on the other side said with a pout.

Can a big, bearded man be adorable? Jūshirō found his face muscles still shaped as a grin.

'What a love-struck fool you've become, Jūshirō.'

He sighed and put his phone back in the drawer. This time, Shunsui was not the only one wishing for the football tournament to be over quick. Jūshirō couldn’t wait to be home, in his pajamas, sitting on his boyfriend's lap. He would definitely ask for a foot massage. Good lord, the man had magical hands...

He wondered if their relationship would always be like this... private, hidden... It worked fine by him, but Shunsui seemed to crave more. Perhaps he could invite him to watch the match next time... bringing a friend wouldn't do any harm. The tournaments were open to parents and friends. He would just have to be prepared for heavy teasing once they got home...

"Sensei, can I sit with Lollie-chan?" A girl's voice shook him from his musings. One of his students stood in front of his desk, small hands balled into fists.

"And who does Lollie-chan sit with?" he asked.

"Jin-kun."

"And who do you sit with, Asuka-chan?"

"Claire-chan."

"You and Lollie-Chan can sit together, under two conditions. First, I don't want to hear any talking during class. Secondly, you need to ask Jin-Kun and Claire-Chan if they don't mind."

The girl’s brows furrowed, but in a second her face was bright as the shining sun.

"Hai, sensei!"

Only then he saw a fluff of blonde curls hiding behind the girl. As they ran off, hand in hand, he saw
the smaller girl – probably Lollie - almost stumbling, as she got dragged back to the playground. Friendship. This is where it all begins. For a moment, he felt helplessly nostalgic.

Shunsui grunted as he put his phone back in his pocket. Again, that bloody football team. And he was looking forward to being with Jūshirō so much. Maybe he’d been growing possessive. He would have to control himself. He decided to turn his attention to the task at hand.

'So, a diary…'

He went down one floor and found a large array of options. They all looked incredibly pretty, all in good textured paper, with many colors and formats to choose from. He had never really looked at what diary Jūshirō had, but he was pretty sure he had never seen something colorful lying around his stuff.

With his photo album project almost forgotten, he dove into the section of 2016-2017 diaries, comparing layouts and browsing color tones. He could lose track of time with this kind of thing. Only with Nanao's call, saying that they were already waiting for him at the restaurant, did he realize just how long he'd been there. He quickly decided for his initial choice – a daily planner in a deep emerald shade. He slipped in a little stash of patterned origami paper and the photo Nanao had printed by mistake, then asked for gift wrapping.

"What do you have there?" Lisa asked, peering at the fancy-looking present.

"New diary... for someone special..." He sing-sang.

"Is he always like this?"

"N-not really..." Nanao replied, dipping her bespectacled gaze in the menu.

Shunsui laughed heartily. "You don't need to be shy my little Nanao… my life is an open book! Now, what will my ladies have?"

“I'll get the steak sandwich.”

“Nanao-Chan?”

“The chicken Caesar.”

“On a diet? But you don’t need to…”

“Stop embarrassing her!”

And so his suspicions were set aflame. It was probably wrong to try to play matchmaker for his niece, but it was kind of fun…

They dug in as soon as the food arrived. The café was not high end, but the food was decent and the ambience informal. They talked about their interests and hobbies, and asked about Lisa’s first impressions of the job.

“It’s an old company, some things are to be expected.”

“What do you mean?” Shunsui asked.
"I had a look at the paper records while my computer was being set up… and I couldn't find some things."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters, the accounting of one subsidiary, and some bank extracts."

"Which subsidiary?" Asked Nanao.

"The... booze company."

The shortcut was understandable, but it made them laugh.

"Spring Water Spirits. That one is based in Yokohama, so they keep the books there." Nanao offered.

"I see. I'll have to schedule a site visit then."

A woman cleaning up on the Kyōraku mess. Shunsui liked the sound of that.

They parted ways after lunch. Lisa went back to the office, Nanao went to Ise Publishers to push for her uncle’s photo book, and Shunsui... Shunsui stood in the street, a wrapped diary in hand and an open schedule for the afternoon. With the book finished and the company taken care of, there was a slight emptiness lurking in.

He walked around for a while, scanning shop fronts in the absent-minded daze of one who isn't looking for anything in particular. He stopped in front of a jewelry, fantasizing about diamond rings and proposals... but he shook the thought away. Too early. He would be turned down... Or maybe... maybe he should run a little test... just to have an idea. Yes, it was not likely to turn out so bad. With renewed excitement, he flagged a taxi and headed home.

It was around 4 pm when Jūshirō brought his duffel bag to the changing room and put on his football shorts and jersey, both with the school crest and "Ukitake" written on the back, above the number 13. It was a mild September afternoon, with a cool breeze cutting through the sun's heat.

He shouldered into his tracksuit jacket, then tied his hair up as tight as he could and pulled back any stray locks with a black hair strap. Finally, he walked out to the sports grounds.

He saw Iba and Hisagi on the running tracks that circled around the football pitches. They were with full tracksuits and discussing some players of the other teams.

"Ah, Ukitake! Glad ya here early!"

"Iba-san, Hisagi-san, how are you both doing?"

"Pissing ourselves!" Replied the coach. "The guys from the French College are bloody strong!"

"But they're no match for us, don't you think?"

"Who's playing?"

"This is the teacher's semi-final and on the furthest pitch is the high school final. Our kids are up against one of the best teams, but they're holding on."
"Good."

He let his eyes scan the two adjacent pitches. Suddenly, there was an uproar on the furthest one, where the junior game was on. One kid was making a beeline to the goal, with all of the other team's defenders chasing him like flies.

"Goal" Hisagi shouted, and at the same time, cries erupted all through the grounds.

It was hard to see past the movement of players. Jūshirō tried to squint through the mess of hugs and people running. He could barely focus the image of the boy at the front – running with an arm raised up in a fist, and a bunch of team mates clinging to his arms and torso, but the thin figure and light movements were unmistakable. Markus.

"2-0... our kids are doing well, aren't they, Ukitake?"

"Should we warm up?" Asked the team captain, seeing that all other players were present.

They ran a few laps around the tracks and did some stretches. When the two other games came to an end, it was their turn to play.

Overall, the team did a good job. They did not unleash the special counter-attack tactic until the last five minutes, and with that they managed to win 1-0, with a goal by Hisagi from a pass by Jūshirō. The move came out exactly as they had practiced and the team was ablaze with celebrations.

Rangiku and Momo were cheering nearby, as were several other teachers and students. He saw Markus, still flushed from his game, wearing a jacket over his uniform. He was surrounded by several other kids. Just a normal student watching his teachers' match. Maybe he had really over thought the incident of the day before. He felt relieved and smiled to those who came onto the grass to great the team.

At that moment, a familiar set of hands landed on his shoulders.

"Well played, gorgeous..." Came the low voice.

"Shunsui? What are you doing here?"

"Watching my best buddy play ball."

"Uh? Are you ok with being friendzoned?"

"Sometimes... I don't mind."

They shared a smile, a private smile that was concealed by the evening shades and the excitement around them.

"I need to get changed. Will you wait for me?"

"Of course. I'll be in the car."

"Oh, business-trip-san! How are you doing? Will you two join for drinks?" Iba landed a mean blow on Shunsui's back, that almost caused a rebound on his slipped disk.

"Very well, coach-san! I'm afraid I'll have an early morning tomorrow. I thought I'd bring this guy out for food, though."
"Suit yourself. We'll be in Shibuya, if you want to drop by."

When all conversations ended, Jūshirō finally managed to make his way to the changing room. Most other players were already coming out. As he took off his sweaty clothes and untied his hair, there were only a few guys already tucking their shirts in and tying their shoelaces.

He pulled his towel from the duffel bag and headed to the shower. The space was divided in cubicles but none had doors or curtains. Inside each partition there was only the shower head, the soap and shampoo dispensers and a hook for the towel.

He turned on the tab and regulated the water. When it came to a nice warm temperature, he walked under the stream and closed his eyes. He let his hair get thoroughly soaked and then dabbed it with shampoo. He massaged his scalp, shook the foam away, then started rubbing his sore muscles with the liquid soap. It felt like a cocoon, so cozy and warm, a sea of steam. All was silent except for the stream of water and its collision with his body and the walls around him.

As much as he liked warm showers, he knew it was time to turn off the tap when he started feeling lightheaded. With eyes still closed, he padded around for the faucet and managed to stop the stream. He twisted his hair in a knot and squeezed as much water as he could.

Only as he turned around to fetch his towel did he open his eyes. Through the curtain of fog, frozen and haunted, he saw a boy. He was still wearing his shorts, but his chest was bare and his hands gripped a white towel.

All of a sudden, Jūshirō felt exposed - naked, inside and out - under the boy's gaze. Blue eyes like blocks of ice. The instinct of covering himself came only seconds later. He took the towel from the hook and rolled it around his waist.

"Markus, do you need anything?"

"I-I'm so sorry..." The boy stuttered.

"You should have a shower and go home. It's getting late." He said, and turned his back to leave.

At that moment, soft fingers touched his shoulder blade.

"You're so beautiful, sensei..."

Something akin to nausea stirred in his stomach. The boy's eyes and his daring touch. Should he ignore it, or somehow try to face it? A teenager's infatuation for a teacher is something normal, but this kid was brave enough to approach him... in a Catholic school. Perhaps he was not trying to seduce him, as much as he was crying for help. He would have to take his chances.

"Come to my office tomorrow at two. This is not the time or place for us to talk."

The boy swallowed but didn't avert his gaze, not until the last inch of Jūshirō disappeared behind the blue tiled wall.

"Shunsui, how was it to grow up gay?"

They were driving home in the red Mazda. The driver's head turned briskly at the question.

"Why?"
"I think I have a young stalker..." Jūshirō confessed.

Shunsui's head jerked again.

"How so? Are you alright?"

"Yeah, don't worry... A high school student. Sister's in my class... I think he's just confused."

"And you want to help?"

"Yes."

Shunsui's tongue clicked, he shook his head with a smile.

"Only you, Jū-chan..."

The other man shrugged.

"It's part of my job, you know... but I'm unsure how to go about it..."

Changing lanes and heading down a different road occupied the driver's attention for a few moments, gave him some time to gather his thoughts.

"First and foremost, you have to keep yourself out of trouble. This can be tricky. What if someone's using the kid to set you up?"

"Goodness, who would do such a thing?"

"Anyone ogling your job?"

"I don't know... Not everyone was happy that I got it, but to the point of doing something like this... It's monstrous... to use an innocent child..."

"How innocent Jūshirō? What did the kid do?"

Jūshirō hesitated for a second, but if he wanted to demand honesty from the other man, he couldn't hide something like this.

"He watched me when I was in the shower... then told me I was beautiful."

"What?!" The car slumped with a knee-jerk hit to the break. Luckily the road was not crowded. "You're the innocent one here, Jūshirō... seriously..."

"Shunsui, you're not helping!"

The man behind the wheel gave a deep sigh.

"What can I do then?"

"I told him to see me in my office tomorrow. I want to help... support him if he needs some sort of validation... but if he tells this to anyone..."

"Cat will be out of the bag." Shunsui completed.

"Yeah. Besides, I don't really know what to say... go for boys but not for me?"

"Yes. Please, tell him that. Tell him you are not available, and, if he tries any other stunt, your big,
scary boyfriend will make him regret it!"

"I-I think I'll leave that out. Don’t need to be accused of threats on top of deviating young men to the dark side."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I guess I should be ready to lose my job in either case."

"Well, not necessarily..." Shunsui considered. "Is there anyone that can have your back on this?"

"An ally?"

"Yup."

The car slowed down and finally stopped by the gate. Shunsui fished for the remote control.

"I suppose Byakuya could understand."

"But you're not sure..."

"No. He's very reserved... But he's a good friend."

"Maybe it's time to test that friendship."

With the car tucked into the narrow garage, Shunsui finally stopped the engine and wrapped his arms around Jūshirō. His face nuzzled the damp hair that smelled of cheap school shampoo.

"I don't want to do it in school. Do you think I could invite him for dinner... here?"

The effect that suggestion had on Shunsui's chiseled facial features was nothing short of spectacular. His eyes grew impossibly wide, a red tint appeared over his cheekbones, a grin the size of his face took shape.

"You would... introduce me?"

"No. I would lock you up in the pantry." Jūshirō deadpanned.

"Oh..."

"Of course I'll introduce you, silly. You're the reason for all this!"

"Oh..."

"Shunsui?"

The grin turned into something constrained. Teeth bit into lower lip.

"Are you ok? Come on, there's no reason for this... I'm just..."

"... about tell someone very important to you that you love me."

And a twin set of tears escaped his eyes.
Hi there!
And here's another chapter of this... not anymore that little... fanfic!
I think I should give you guys an update on my plans for this. I have another 5-6 chapters in mind, so we might be done by chapter 20 or so. I'll keep you posted! Be prepared for action, intrigue and lots of feels! FYI, I almost cried just playing some of the scenes out in my mind (I know, lame... what can I do...)
Have a good weekend and stay safe!
Lots of love to y'all!
xx
P.S. The title of the chapter comes from a photo book by Eikoh Hosoe, featuring Yukio Mishima. If you don't know who he was, please google him - you'll learn about a fascinating (and very controversial) Japanese personality. And, btw, check out Seiko Matsuda too... she was super popular in the 80's :)
Chapter Summary

Jūshirō confronts his young stalker, but he ends up offering more than might be wise to give. Hosting a soirée for a friend might not be that much of a challenge for the vegetarian chef extraordinaire, but when all the truth is served, will it be too much to stomach?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"At school they taught me how to be so pure in thought and word and deed

They didn’t quite succeed

For everything I long to do no matter when or where or who
has one thing in common too (…)

It's a sin."

(Pet Shop Boys)

With a soft rap on the door, it began.

"Come in."

The boy entered the room.

"Take a seat." The teacher offered.

Jūshirō's office was on the ground floor, facing a path between buildings. The window was wide and offered ample view of the inside to passers by. Markus closed the door behind him and lifted a chair to move it quietly, then sat.

Hands resting idly along his body, back flat against his chair, Jūshirō waited.

How to break a boy in three easy steps:

Step one: silence.
Markus sat at the tip of the chair, looking up. He sought, perhaps, a smile, or the warmth the older man usually exuded. Where had they gone? Who was this person who sat there like he had no heart?

Jūshirō could perceive the internal debate going on beneath the cover. Several times, eyes went up and down, lips pursed, then relaxed just slightly. Each time, he could see a stronger resolve, until, finally, the boy spoke.

"Sensei, I want to apologize."

Step two: accountability.

"And what would you like to apologize for?"

The boy lowered his head.

"F-for spying on you... I'm sorry... It won't happen again."

"Apology accepted."

But still the boy did not look up. Under a cover of light brown hair, hands cupping eyes, elbows pierced through muscle and bone over the knees.

Step three: kindness.

"Markus." The call was perfectly pitched, not too harsh, not too soft.

It took a few moments for the boy to uncoil. When he did, all that was concealed came to view. Markus was crying.

"How can I help you?"

But the boy hid his face in his hands once again. Sobs erupted in the quiet room.

Jūshirō finally left his seat to pour water in the kettle. He had copied the principal's idea and set up a small tea corner on his side board, by the window. Green leaves were scooped into the pot and two small porcelain cups were laid side by side on the tray. The sound of boiling water muffled the sobs and a pair of blues eyes came out of hiding. They started following the gentle, meticulous movements of the teacher's hands, as he rinsed, poured, steeped.

"I hope you like sencha. Some say it tastes like spinach soup, but that's when the water is too hot and the leaves end up cooked."

As he handed the cup to wobbly hands, Jūshirō finally unfurled the warmth he had so painstakingly contained. He offered the boy an honest smile.

Blue eyes opened wide, hands steadied and brought the cup to thin lips. Together, they drank.

"I..." Markus tried to talk, but his voice came out ragged. He cleared his throat. "I don't think it tastes like soup. I like it."

"Good. You can drop by whenever you want and I'll make you some."

"R-really?"

"Of course." Jūshirō stood by the window, tea cup balanced on his palm, bathed in afternoon sun. "That's what friends are for."
"Oh..." A realization sunk in. "Friends..."

Impressive how after that treatment the boy could still harbor hope. Jūshirō put down his cup, and tuned his voice back to the stern tone of the beginning.

"That's all I have to offer. Take it, Markus. Accept my friendship, and come to me whenever you need."

"I..." Tears threatened to fall again, but they were pulled back. "Thank you. You're very kind... I was stupid to think..."

"That I could love you?" Jūshirō interrupted, looking into the boy’s eyes. “No, that's not stupid at all. Anyone can love anyone."

"But you don't..."

"No." For a second he let the answer engrave itself in the boy's mind. "Even if I did, I couldn't. I'm an adult, and a teacher. I am off limits to you, and you are off limits to me. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes..."

Jūshirō took no pleasure in breaking a heart, whomever it was, but he felt relieved.

"Good. Do you want some more tea?"

The boy handed him the cup and he refilled it, then poured another serving for himself. The conversation seemed to have come to an end, so he turned his attention to the report he was working on, but made no effort to tell the boy to leave. For a while, the sound of typing was the only noise in the room. From the corner of his eye he could catch a glimpse of the boy sipping from the cup and looking at him, adoringly.

Markus drank slowly, trying to make the moment stretch. The peace in that quiet room, the safety of the older man's company, all would be out of reach when the cup went dry. He felt that he could still cry a little more, but he would do so at home, away from prying eyes. He finally rose to his feet and tiptoed to place the empty cup on the sideboard, next to where Jūshirō was sitting. Then, he picked his bag from the floor and turned away.

"Markus..."

He looked back.

"Your sister is making good progress. Try talking to her in Japanese, you'll be surprised."

"I will, sensei... thank you." He bowed and opened the door.

"Take care."

The boy nodded and walked away.

That didn't go too bad, he thought, and went back to work. As the afternoon rolled by, though, doubts began to settle in his mind. What if, in the aftermath, the boy decided to seek revenge after all? What if he went to someone for comfort and ended up blurtling out the whole thing? What if this was, indeed, orchestrated by one of his co-workers?

For the rest of the afternoon Jūshirō felt uneasy. Every time footsteps approached, down the corridor, he would anticipate the consequences of his offer of friendship to the boy. Should Markus betray
him, he would certainly be in trouble. "Anyone can love anyone." What was the church's stance on this, anyway? He had the faint impression that the pope had said something recently... He turned to the internet for answers. There seemed to have been some opening, but then the tales of gay teachers getting fired from catholic schools dissolved his hopes.

'Well, plan A it is.'

Just before 6pm he saved his work, locked his computer and headed out of his room and up the stairs, to where Byakuya's room was. As expected, the man was still there, immersed in work.

"Senpai? Come in. Is everything alright?"

"Yes... Byakuya... I was wondering if you're busy this Sunday..."

Curious eyes looked up from the pile of paper. Far from inconvenienced, he looked happy with the prospect of an invitation. It was all Jūshirō needed to proceed.

"Could I bother you to have dinner at my place then?"

"Ginger?"

"Check."

"Cloves?"

"Check."

"Lemongrass?"

"Check. Jūshirō... what's all this stuff for?"

Shunsui rested his elbows on the trolley and looked up at the diligent – if slightly frantic - shopper.

"My take on Indonesian rendang... Byakuya likes spicy food."

"Is there meat involved?" He beamed.

"No... my take involves tempeh and a load of other nice stuff..." And with a wink, the man turned around and waltzed down the aisle, probably looking for some other exotic ingredients.

So the big day was upon them. Shunsui was still in awe about the turn of events. First the granny, and now this guy. Of course, in this case, it had been prompted by the stalker kid, but that didn't take away the fact that they were going public.

Over the last months, he had grown used to living a private romance. In truth, he was already feeling nostalgic about how special it made him feel... all the secret glances and hidden touches. Just the thought made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. But soon he would be able to tell everyone how madly in love he was. That was something to look forward to...

"Can you chose the drinks?"

"Hm?"
Jūshirō had materialized in front of him, with a bunch of green leafy things in his arms.

"We need drinks... wine or something..."

"Oh, don't worry, got that covered." He grinned.

When they got home the preparations began without delay. With Jūshirō cooped up in the kitchen, it fell on Shunsui to pimp up the lounge. He opened the balcony door and set the table outside. It was a pleasant afternoon, so they could eat al fresco. He placed a few lanterns on the table and amid the potted plants. While he was arranging them, the sight of a rather naked little tree caught his eye. Apparently Jūshirō's bonsai still lived... the poor thing. Perhaps he could buy him another one, and make him watch tutorials until it was safe to let him trim it...

"Can you help me here?" A very red-cheeked Jūshirō asked, peaking from behind the kitchen door.

"Right away!"

Shunsui strode towards the steamy, hot pit from where fragrances of all kinds had started to emerge.

“Can you take the cheese platter to the living room? I need to make space for plating.”

“Yes, chef!”

The "cheese platter" was a big wooden board with slices of cheese fancifully arranged, together with nuts and grapes. It was obviously not a difficult task, but when Shunsui picked it up, his eyes were still on the flushed, aproned, pony-tailed cook standing beside him. He got distracted there for a second, his wrist shook, the platter wobbled and tilted.

"Ahhh..."

His knee came up to prevent the thing from falling, but a few grapes were already rolling to the floor. Then, the platter lost all its weight, as expert hands lifted it from his, and placed it back on the counter. The next moment, Jūshirō was kneeling by his feet, catching the fallen grapes. A hand came up to his thigh for leverage, and green eyes looked up. He couldn't tell what it was with that expression, but it made his heart tingle. He bent slightly and helped the man to his feet.

"You ok, angel?"

There was a nod for an answer, their bodies came closer and arms were fastened around his neck. The unmistakable half-lidded gaze told him what the other man wanted. He obliged. They kissed while the oven ticked away and the cheese lay forgotten behind his back.

"We still have time..." A soft voice suggested.

"Are you sure?"

"Hmm..."

They walked to the bedroom hand in hand, and there they shed all their clothes. Standing naked face to face, he could see the tinge of heat that still radiated from his lover's cheeks. He reached around the neck and released the white mane from its ponytail, then held the warm face between his cool palms. Immediately Jūshirō mellowed into the touch. What a pleasure it was to see that abandon, so freely granted.

“Sh-hunsu...?”
“Hmm?”

"We can’t take long..."

He released the smooth cheeks and let himself be pushed backwards. Looking at Jūshirō, all long-limbed and thin, it was easy to take him for a weakling, but Shunsui knew better. And it wasn’t even the lean muscle hidden underneath the soft skin, or the athletic prowess conjured by those gentle curves... It was, or so thought Shunsui, the ability to be calm and collected – and horny, of all things... - just a meagre half hour away from the trial that lay ahead.

He raised a hand between them, not to block the approach, but trying to feel the heartbeat beneath the surface.

“How can you be so calm?”

“Calm?” the thin man chuckled. “Not really...”

Their fish sons swam merrily in their glass bowl. A tongue grazed the center of his chest, sending shivers down his spine. There was a friction of skin against skin as the light body shifted upwards, and settled over his hips. He allowed his hands to trace salient ribs, shoulders, clavicle, and to finally grip the supple flesh that straddled him.

“Mine...” he mumbled.

“I am...” the man replied, and the world was covered by white curtains.

They were still throwing each other lustful glances when the bell rang. They had managed to bring all the snacks to the coffee table, light up the lanterns and put on some music. Knowing that the guests had arrived, Shunsui tried to make up some sort of task in the kitchen, but Jūshirō was faster seizing his hand.

"Shun... together... please?"

It was a pleading look. No matter how calm he was, it was obvious that Jūshirō needed him, and it still jarred him how much of a coward he could be sometimes. He decided to man up, and so he nodded and laid a hand on his partner’s shoulder. Putting up his brightest smile, he opened the door.

Two figures stood outside. Both pale and dark-haired, but with a difference in stature that made them look oddly mismatched. Were they really brother and sister? If the outfits were any indication, clearly yes. Who the hell goes out in matching tones? – black, white and mauve, not a speck of warmth.

"Come in! Thank you for coming."

Jūshirō had shifted to host mode and was showing the two guest in. The man had brought a box of some expensive tea, and the girl a potted plant. Impeccable manners. He wondered how this knowledge of doing what you’re supposed to in every social occasion got passed down through generations. It was something that escaped him completely.

"Senpai, I am glad to see you so... healthy..."

He obviously meant "glowing". Was that the sister face-palming? Oh dear...

"Rukia-chan! It's lovely! Thank you so much!” Jūshirō said. "Let me put it in the balcony."
She followed behind and the two strangers were left face to face. Byakuya took to measuring the co-host. Jūshirō had omitted all details on why he'd moved and who he'd moved in with. Shunsui was not one to be tongue-tied in these occasions, but the stakes were on a completely different level here. He would have to fade into the background, or...

"Kuchicki-san, what can I get you for a drink?"

The option "water" was not in his plans, as he knelt down and opened the wine fridge.

"Oh, no, I don't usually..."

"Come on Byakuya..." Jūshirō had miraculously returned, with Rukia in tow. "Just a glass or two. Honda-san will fetch you, right?"

"We came by taxi... It's his day off." The guest replied, but the result was the same.

"White, red... or sake?" Shunsui pressed on.

"Kyōraku-san, red will do, thank you." The girl cut in, and Shunsui proceeded to open the bottle in full glee. He was starting to like this Rukia-chan.

With the appetizers served, Jūshirō and Byakuya engaged in a lively debate about some sort of literary award. The girl followed attentively, eyes shifting from one speaker to the other. Shunsui leant back on his chair. Sitting side by side on the couch the two teachers could almost be mistaken for brothers. What would become of their friendship after that night? While trying to guess the man's reaction to the revelations to come, Shunsui's mind slipped into another scenario. What if, on that afternoon in the park, it had been Byakuya, not Jūshirō, passing by? Would he have noticed him? Probably. They had the same kind of beauty, safe for the elvish white hair... But would he have fallen for him?

His musings were interrupted by the movement of the other three standing up. Jūshirō tapped his back.

"Can you help me with the plates?"

"Sure."

They were well into the main dish when Byakuya addressed Shunsui for the first time.

"Kyōraku-san, I believe my father was a friend of your late brother."

"Oh, you are Sojun-san's son... I'm sorry, I should have remembered."

Rukia and Jūshirō exchanged glances. So they knew each other, and yet there was no sign of friendliness between them.

"When did you return to Japan? I had the impression you were living overseas?"

"It's been almost ten years... I've been lying low..."

It was a lie, but it probably applied as far as Byakuya's social circle was concerned. Rukia seemed to squint, perhaps trying to remember something.

"The food is excellent, Ukitake-san!" She praised. "Have you considered a part-time business?"

"Not at all" he waved. "I only cook to feed myself and those in my care! Besides, I'm kept busy
enough in my day job..." And he threw a playful wink at Byakuya. Probably thanks to the wine, the atmosphere was gradually getting lighter.

After desert, Shunsui insisted that no one else followed him to the kitchen. Washing the dishes could perfectly wait overnight, but he turned on the tap, a bit absentmindedly, and started rinsing off the leftover sauce, following the red-brownish goo as it dissolved and disappeared through the drain.

"Can I help?"
"Rukia-chan? No, no, you're our guest, please..."
"We should leave them alone for now."

Perceptive young woman.

"Have they started with the talk?"
"Yes..."
"Good..."

"Kyōraku-san... Is Ukitake-san coming out to my brother?"

The plate almost fell from his hand, back into the foam. He put it to drain and washed his hands.

"Yes... well, that's the plan..."
"Congratulations... I guess?"
"Thank you."

The petite woman smiled and tapped his arm.

"Don't worry. It will be alright. My brother... is not what he seems."
"I hope you're right..."

That was when a wicked idea crossed his mind. She looked light enough... It could work.

"Rukia-chan, can I ask you something?"

Minutes later, they had pushed aside the blender and a bunch of cooking utensils, and Rukia was kneeling on the countertop, trying to peek through a narrow hopper window near the ceiling, from where one could hopefully see the balcony. In order to keep balance, Shunsui was holding her hips on both sides, his face almost compromisingly close to her rear.

"Can you see them?"
"Wait... help me move to the right..."
"There?"
"Yes... almost..."
"Yes?"
"Yes."
She remained in that unstable balance for a few seconds, then smiled and started climbing down. Shunsui waited patiently for her to lower herself to the floor, his arms still supporting her nimble movements. He felt his hands shaking as they left her waist. He sought clues in her satisfied grin. Finally, she announced:

"They're hugging!"

Byakuya's upper body felt oddly feeble in his arms. After having listened patiently to the whole story, Byakuya had apologized for not noticing anything earlier, for having been oblivious to all that Jūshirō had been through... Did that count as an acceptance? Perhaps, perhaps not, but, on the spur of the moment, Jūshirō had thrown his arms around his friend. Byakuya did not melt into the embrace like Jūshirō always did. He was still stiff, and his face looked straight over the other man's shoulder, but he didn't try to break the connection. Slowly, Jūshirō began to disengage.

"So...?" he tried.

Byakuya's cheeks had reddened slightly. He seemed thoughtful for a moment, then he replied-

"If that's what you want, there's nothing for me to say about it. As for the boy, I suppose it's his word against yours, but I would advise you to stay away from him. If you are seen together, it's a different thing."

"I promised I would help him if he needed me..."

"I know... but you mustn't, unless you want to risk your position... your job... If it transpires that you're encouraging homosexuality among students, there won't be anything for me to do. It's not even the principal... it's higher..."

"I understand..."

"Jūshirō... promise me you won't do anything you'll regret."

"I will try."

Byakuya pursed his lips. He was not sure he could trust his friend not to get himself in trouble for the sake of someone else.

"So... still friends?" A hopeful, emerald gleam rose up to meet his gaze.

"Are you seriously more worried about my friendship than your job?" The idea seemed baffling to the younger man.

"Of course. A job is important... but friends are precious."

Byakuya shook his head. This man was incorrigible. He winced at another incoming hug, but tried to ease into it the best he could. He thought that he might as well get used to them, now that he was the keeper of a secret of the utmost importance. The air he'd been holding in his lungs came out through his nostrils, and a few white strands fluttered with the small gust. Tentatively, his hand came up and smoothed the soft mane that fell down the man's back. Who knows, he might even come to like this...
"Done!" Jūshirō announced, closing the door behind him.

"How did it go?" Shunsui enquired, unwilling to reveal the little spying stunt he had performed with Rukia’s assistance.

They both plumped down on the couch, Jūshirō throwing his legs over Shunsui’s lap.

"Alright, I guess. I can still lose my job, if things go south… but I didn't lose Byakuya. That's a good thing."

His hand reached to Jūshirō’s cheek and guided it to his shoulder. As he kept stroking his hair, the man curled up around him. There was release in that embrace. Again, the absolute confidence and abandonment. Could he handle it? He felt as though a great responsibility had suddenly fallen upon his shoulders.

"For a moment there, I thought that guy was going to grill me..."

"He might still do it, now that he knows we're official..."

"Official, uh?" He poked between ribs, there was a small jerk.

They fell silent, simply sharing the comfort of that connection, their movements minimal and feather-light. They were nearly falling asleep when Shunsuï's ringtone roused them. Where had he left his phone? He contemplated letting it ring, but in a second Jūshirō was off his lap and looking around for the missing device. Eventually, Shunsui got up and followed the sound to the kitchen. He looked at the bright screen. Lisa?

"Moshi moshi?"

"Kyōraku, we need to talk."

"Now?"

"Yes, but not over the phone. I'm at the office."

"Lisa-chan, it's late... Are you luring me to your cot?"

"This isn't a joke. I went to Yokohama to see what's going on with the sake company, and something's not right."

"Can’t we talk tomorrow? I’m sorry, but I can’t leave right now… not today."

"Ok, ok. Tomorrow morning. Don't be late."

He put the phone down. What was Lisa so worked out about? If it was some corporate hocus-pocus he would have to tell her he couldn't care less... that's why he'd hired her in the first place.

When he returned to the living room, Jūshirō was not there. The inflow of cold air directed him to the balcony. Leaning on the frame, nursing a cup of tea, Jūshirō seemed lost in his inner world. He decided to sneak in on him.

"So..." He whispered, as his arms encircled the other man. "How does it feel to be out?"

"Pleasant, with a cool night breeze..."

He had to laugh at that.
"What?" puzzled green eyes turned towards his.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"Out as in… out of the closet..."

"Oh..." A silent chuckle. "It feels good so far..."

What his lover called a cool night breeze was turning into a serious chill.

“Let’s go to bed?”

He tried pulling Jūshirō by the pinky, as he usually did, but there was a small resistance.

“Shunsui…”

"Yes, love?"

"Arigatou."

Chapter End Notes

Heya!
Sorry for the longest wait so far. I've been super busy with work and school and had this shelved for a while. I hope you like it and will do my best to bring you the next chapter soon. Have a good week everyone. Cheers!
Spring water, Deep water

Chapter Summary

Shunsui meets Lisa and gets to know that his troubles are a bit more serious than anticipated. A risky plan is drawn up. Along the way, a man gets asked the question of a lifetime.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"You're late."

Lisa Yadomaru glared over the oval rim of her glasses at the man by the door.

One could not say that the new representative director of Kyōraku Kabukishi Kaisha had a lavish taste. The room she had chosen for herself was one of the smallest in the building. It had a large window, with plenty of sunlight, but nothing much in the way of luxury.

"I'm all yours." The new kaichō replied.

She glared once again, this time rolling her eyes to get her point across: Lisa Yadomaru was not in a good mood.

"What's all this about, Lisa? I'm not sure I can help you if it's some corporate problem..."

"Sit down and listen."

He obeyed and saw as she dashed behind him to close the door. Another mini-skirt, this time with two pleats on the side. In another life, he could have fallen for her. He looked away as she noticed his gaze on her.

"I went to Yokohama yesterday to check on Spring Water Spirits."

"And? The place is run by the port mafia or what?"

"I am not sure."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Here's what happened. I thought no one would be there on a Sunday and I could go through the paperwork in peace... but I was wrong. Word must have escaped that I asked for the key to the warehouse, and there they were waiting for me."

"Who?"

'Your friend Gin Ichimaru and a pink-haired weirdo called Szayel. I eventually got to see the books, but the two of them were always looming around, trying to intimidate me."

"What did you find?"
"That's where the real problem begins. The company imports and exports luxury spirits. Some of them cost a lot of money, I get that... but some inbound and outbound transfers of funds seem to come out of nowhere – coded with some weird gibberish. When I looked at the inventories... there was no purchase or sale of merchandise to back those transfers."

"How much are we talking about? For how long?"

"Over one year, a total of seven transactions. A lot of money."

"Any possible explanation?"

"Someone's laundering money under our noses."

"What? That's not possible. There were banks running this show after my old man died, and auditors. Nanao said they're reputable..."

"Well, they should be, but I called the accounting firm this morning and all the people they assigned to our company are nowhere to be found – some on unpaid leave, others just left. Which also makes me think... why seven transactions? Why just one year?"

He shrugged. "Any theory?"

"I could only come up with one explanation. You turned 45 in July. At that time the banks withdrew their people. Yamato-san had been ill since last winter and ended up asking for retirement in May. On the last shareholders meeting there was no representative director, so the shareholders had to rely on the auditors alone..."

"Who have vanished..."

"Right. I was appointed on that same day, but before I even had the chance to look at the accounts, you, Nanao and everyone else had already signed the 2016 accounts."

"We were framed?"

"You were framed."

"What? Why?"

"Look at the name of the company in Japanese. It's rarely used because it's an import-export business, so it's got to have an English name, but the official registered name is..."

"Shunsui Spirits. Fuck."

"There's more."

"Seriously, Lisa... if there's more coming, I think need a drink..."

"It's no time to drink! Listen. I don't know what they're up to, but yesterday, before I left, Gin came up to me, all smiley and helpful and said he was shocked that so many people wanted to see the records of that company. I asked him why and he said there was a visit from the police a few days back... We need to get the lawyers here... ASAP."

Shunsui's head fell heavily between his hands. This was the kind of shit he had tried to evade his whole life. Money, intrigues, stabs in the back... He would rather run through machine gun fire than deal with this.
Suddenly, there was a rap on the door.

"Kyōraku-dono, there is someone here to see you."

Lisa rose at the secretary's call and gave a reassuring pat at Shunsui's shoulder.

"I am sorry... The person is here for Kaichō..."

His eyes met Lisa's.

"Who is this?" She asked.

"Inspector Sui Feng, Organized Crime Department."

At that moment there was a flash of understanding between them. In a scenario like this, any new hire might already be considering resignation. Scandals weigh heavily on all those involved, and there is no bow deep enough that can wipe away the damage. But Lisa's demeanor did not show any trace of distrust. For that, he decided, he would trust her back.

"Lisa, get the lawyers."

"Hai."

The small woman had a vicious glint in her eyes. A full glass of water rested untouched in front of her on the table.

"I am captain Sui Feng and this is lieutenant Omaeda, of the Organized Crime Division of the Tokyo Criminal Police. We need to ask you some questions."

Both flashed their badges at him and tucked them back in their black blazers. The lieutenant was a fat simpleton with the props of a yakuza boss. He stayed quiet and sat a few seats away, by the long conference table. She acted like he repulsed her in some way, and perhaps the henchman had already learned his place.

"Certainly. I hope I can be of help." Shunsui answered, conjuring as much charm as he could.

"Do you confirm that you have been a member of a foreign military organization?"

"I do. I served the French Foreign Legion for 18 years."

"Why?"

"I felt inclined to serve in the army."

"Why not join the Japanese Self-Defense force?"

"I wanted to see the world."

"Any region in particular?"

"No."

"Not the Middle East?"
"Not in particular, no."

"Do you know a man named Shugo Kobayashi, who also goes by Coyote Starrk?"

"Yes, I do."

"In what capacity."

"He's a friend."

"What about Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez? Is the name familiar?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"Casual meeting."

"Was that meeting in Beirut?"

"Yes."

"With what purpose?"

"Tourism."

"Tourism?"

"Yes."

"Kyōraku-san, I would strongly advise you not to withhold any information you might have... in your own interest."

"I understand. Thank you."

"Omaeda, did you write down everything?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. That's all. Have a good day."

Jūshirō and Byakuya sat in silence, facing each other, throughout most of their lunch break. This quiet sharing of their midday meal had turned into a tradition, but now, with the revelations of the night before, it seemed as though their silences had gained new depth.

As chopsticks held by nimble fingers picked up a clump of rice, followed by a piece of cod, Jūshirō's eyes followed the movements, almost lulled by their gentleness. He felt warm in the thought that this young man carried his career - all that he'd worked so hard and suffered for - in his hands.

Then, just barely audible in the hum of the cafeteria, Jūshirō's phone rang.

"Byakuya... is it ok if I...?"

He held his phone out, to justify himself, but Byakuya just nodded in agreement. He took a few
strides and pressed the green button when he reached the hall.

"Moshi, mo-"

"Jūshirō..." Shunsui's voice came as a whisper.

"Yes?"

"Is it a bad time?"

"No, it's ok. I was in the cafeteria with Byakuya."

"Oh, sorry to disturb your lunch..."

"No worries. How was the meeting with Lisa-san? Any trouble?"

"Nah, just corporate stuff. Sounds like gibberish to me..."

"Ok..."

"Jūshirō..."

"Yes...?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"Can I pick you up later?"

"Of course... thanks for driving."

"Nice. Can't wait."

"See you later then."

Was that a tremor in Shunsui's voice? What was wrong with him? Although he felt he had come to know Shunsui quite deeply, getting facts out of him was like pulling teeth, sometimes. Could he be hiding stuff again? He shook off the thought. Their fight in Okinawa should have been enough to teach him a lesson.

"Is everything ok?" Asked Byakuya, who had seemingly waited for him to keep eating.

"Yes... it was just..."

Byakuya seemed to blush a bit, like it made him uncomfortable to talk about personal things.

"It's ok, you don't need to explain... I, huh... send my regards to Kyōraku-san."

This formal, yet somehow warm greeting made him smile widely.

"I'll let him know."

When Shunsui put the phone back in his pocket his hand seemed to lose all strength and go numb for
a moment. Hearing Jūshirō's voice had grounded him a bit, but the thought that he had to deal with this on his own still made him uneasy.

Through the opaque glass panel of Lisa's room he could see several standing shades. Maybe the lawyers had arrived. What the hell was that interrogation for, and what did Starrk and Grimmjow have to do with the KKK's finances?

He squared his shoulders and crossed the open working area, then knocked lightly and opened the door without awaiting reply. Lisa was standing, and next to her were three men. The oldest one seemed about his age, but his face was rugged and fierce. The other two were younger and a bit peculiar.

"Kyōraku, this is Zaraki-san, Madarame-san and Ayasegawa-san. I understand that the company has legal advisers, but I figured we'd need a heavy weight... And Zaraki-san is known for his effectiveness."

"Lisa, thank you. Zaraki-san, I hope you'll be willing to take this case. If so, I would like to tell you of a few recent developments..."

A sort of expectant silence reigned during Shunsui’s account of the meeting with Sui Fēng. It was the younger lawyer who broke the silence after he'd finished. Of the trio, he seemed the less belligerent, and Shunsui could have sworn he was less interested in listening to his story, than checking if his French manicure was holding up.

“If it weren't for the coincidence of dates, I would say that we were called here for two entirely different cases.”

“Except that they're obviously related.” The big man’s raspy voice cut in.

“You think so?” The first one retorted, unconvinced, or pridefully defiant.

“Yumichika, what do you think the facts Yadomaru told us about amount to?”

“Well…” he considered, bringing an index to the base of his chin. Shunsui gave him a second look. Could it be that they had already met in less dignified circumstances? It was a strong possibility. “I would say all points to money laundering.”

“Sure. And what's the reverse of money laundering?”

While the sleek, good looking fellow receded into a thoughtful pose, Zaraki explained.

“When you transfer large amounts of money to and from a business or a bank account, there are two things the cops will be looking at-the in and the out. When the problem is the "in", they charge ya for money laundering – meaning, you got the money from some dirty source – drug trafficking, guns, whatever, and you're passing it by a clean business to wash the dirt out of it. Now, What's the problem with the out?”

“Fin-…”

“Shut up Ikkaku.”

So the guy was using the case to educate his mentees. Shunsui sighed. The good looking guy finally replied.

“Well, if the problem is with the "out", then the money is being sent to where it shouldn't, like…”
and there was the epiphany. Too bad it was ten minutes later than everyone else’s. “… terrorism?”

“So, Kyōraku-san, the question I have for you is – what kind of tourism was it that you went to Lebanon for?”

His eyes went from Lisa’s unreadable expression, to the younger guy’s shocked expression, to the glint of challenge in the bald guy’s eyes.

“Are we paying by the hour?”

“I’m all ears.”

The tale of Starrk’s incursion into Syria and his makeshift rescue mission was told quickly but in detail, leaving out only the emotional part that he had shared with Jūshirō. Once again, Zaraki let him talk uninterrupted. In the end he took out a notebook and wrote down a page of incomprehensible scribble.

“These two guys, Kobayashi and Jaegerjaquez, can they be used as witnesses?”

“I got no clue where Grimmjow is and I’d rather not involve Starrk.”

“Anyone else? Someone you told this to at the time? A friend?”

“No.”

No way in hell was he going to involve Jūshirō in this.

“Plane tickets, hotel booking, tour tickets, sightseeing photos?”

“Yeah, can arrange some of that.”

He brought out his phone and showed the photos he'd kept. They were not many, just a few shots of the seaside and the city center, a selfie or two.

“When did’ya cut your hair?”

“Couldn't pass by a legitimate Syrian like that, could I?”

“Tche. Yumichika, you stay here and go through the paperwork with Yadomaru. Ikkaku, the two of us are going back to discuss this. We meet at the office after dark.”

Shunsui, Lisa and Yumichika were left in the room, as the other two lawyers made their way out.

“Since we’ll be doing the nasty part, should we at least get a drink first?”

“It's noon, Kyōraku.”

“Then we should have lunch, and a drink.”

Yumichika looked from one to the other, as Lisa seemed to concede defeat and follow the boss as he headed to the door.

“You too, lawyer-san, lets go eat.”

He held the door and, as the younger man passed by him, he gave his shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. God knows what struggles lay beneath the cocky, manicured shell. That boss man didn't
They followed Lisa down a few blocks, to a quiet restaurant on the third floor of a building. There were karaoke parlors and hostess clubs in the area – the less polished side of Ginza. The food was excellent. They ordered sushi and a few snacks. Each one ordered a small jug of warm sake.

None of them was on a talkative mode and, even though the place was quiet, no one could know what ears lurk behind screens and curtains, so they only and barely exchanged a few trivialities and impressions about the food. On the way back, though, Shunsui let out the question he’d been holding in:

“Lisa, Ayasegawa-san. What would you do if you were me?”

They were crossing Chuo street and other passers-by dashed by them, anonymous, invisible. Yumichika’s voice seemed lost in that conundrum:

“Run.”

Shunsui froze. The movement continued all around him until it came to an abrupt stop. The crossing was emptied and a car horn urged him to move. Lisa was on the other side waving frantically. The lawyer stood next to her, his face a perfect blank, as if he hadn't just dropped the one word that would throw a man’s soul into the dark pit of doubt.

He made himself run and finally fell in step with the two of them again.

“You wouldn't be actually escaping if you took your partner on holiday, say… to your other homeland…” Lisa considered.

“Do you have double nationality?” the lawyer asked.

“I'm French by blood shed.”

“Oh right…” he recalled.

“Kyōraku”, Lisa called, “we’ve got this. Go home and do whatever you need to do. You’ve got to get yourself and the person you love out of harm’s way. We don't know how this happened, but it's damn clear that someone set you up, and we’re not talking small fish. Get yourselves somewhere safe. We've got your back.”

Now that was just asking for a hug, but Lisa didn’t give him the chance. Instead, she jumped to the roadside and flagged a taxi.

“Thank you, Lisa.”

“Get outta here and get your shit together.” She said as she slammed the taxi door on him.

Inside the cab, he began to simmer on the idea of fleeing. France. It would be getting cold by now, just a bit ahead of Tokyo in the north. If this took long enough, they could see the Christmas markets. As pleasant a thought as it might be, it wouldn't be easy to drag Jūshirō on a vacation without further explanation. Well, there was a way, but… should he?

After that odd noon call, the second surprise of the day came with the visit of a delivery boy.
“Are you Mr. Jūshirō Ukitake? Please sign here.”

In return for signing the delivery slip, he was handed a soft paper package. It was artfully done, with folds and flaps, and it smelled of sweet floral perfume. He knew the scent, and the handiwork very well. What was his partner up to?

Still incredulous, once the boy left, he closed his door and started unwrapping the parcel. On top was another smaller package that contained a pair of slippers and black tabi. Beneath it was a set of neatly folded kimono, haori and obi. The silks were luscious and the colors earthy and rich, in several tones of green and brown. The obi had an embroidered tree of life at the side, where it would rest over the hip bone.

“For my prince of the valley. Please put it on tonight.” Said the small handwritten card.

Had he forgotten about their anniversary or something? The fact was, he was not sure what date to pick for an anniversary. He could still track back the date when they first met, because he had his interview for St. Ignatius marked on his diary, and the trip to Karakura had been after spring equinox, but were any of those dates the right ones? Or should they celebrate Shunsui’s return from the Middle East? All things considered, Jūshirō thought, anniversaries were not that important. However, if Shunsui wanted to see him in a full Japanese outfit, he felt more than inclined to indulge him. How he loved to have the full attention of those beautiful grey eyes...

How he was he going to sneak out of school in that attire, he was still not sure. He didn't need to avoid Byakuya anymore, but if he bumped into one of the rumor mongers, the school staff would have entertainment for the coming weeks.

He ended up changing quickly in his room and leaving his discarded clothes in a bag to bring home the next day. As if he had nothing to hide, he walked out of his room and made his way slowly to the exit.

“Japanese elegance is truly admirable.”

Crap. He knew there would be someone walking around, even after class hours, but did it really have to be the principal?

“Thank you, Father Miguel. How have you been?”

He gave a generous bow, as though to match the priest’s compliment.

“Very well, thank you. I can't get tired of seeing the autumn leaves in this country. Are you off to a celebration?”

“Honestly I'm not sure.” He replied.

The priest chuckled. “Well, whatever it is, I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you.”

And he bowed again, this time taking off as swiftly as the robes allowed. The principal didn't seem like the type to snoop around, but who knows...

The red Mazda was just a few meters off from the main gate. He opened the door and got in quickly, but the driver didn't seem to share his rush. He was wearing the same type of semi-modern kimono, his ensemble in greys and petrol blues.
The man’s steel grey eyes raked over him without shame or constraints. It was sensual to be looked at that way. It was like an act of love making, in and of itself.

“I just had to listen to the principal going on about Japanese elegance and autumn leaves. I hope you have something more spectacular to offer…”

“I might.” He heard, just moments before his lips were taken by a searing kiss.

Shunsui and challenges. With a dirty smile plastered on his face, still undressing him with half lidded eyes, the man started the engine and drove away. As usual, their hands met in the middle, close to the gear handle. Shunsui's fingers patted and played, but seemed specially keen on probing the width of his ring finger.

The drive led them to the city center and towards Tokyo tower, then to the foot of Mt. Atago, and, there, into a building with a car park, where they finally stopped.

“Shall we?”

“What is this place?”

“A little patience, my dearest.”

He frowned but followed Shunsui across the parking lot, into a lift lobby and up a few floors. From the lift they walked to the entrance of what seemed like a Japanese restaurant, all decorated in light tones of wood and tatami. A young lady in a kimono came to meet them.

“Welcome to Daigo.”

Only then did he notice the flower shaped plaque with two engraved stars. His eyes widened.

“Shunsui, seriously, what’s the occasion? I'm feeling bad for forgetting.” He whispered, as they followed the host to a separate room with sliding doors that opened to a small garden. Shunsui grinned back at him.

The restaurant served vegetarian kaiseki. Exclusively. After a welcome cup of plum wine, the small servings of delicate combinations of fresh ingredients started coming one by one, by the hand of the same young woman.

They ordered sake and drank slowly, while waiting for another round of degustations. They settled in their range of easy topics. Food, gardening, Shunsui teasing Jūshirō about his gardening, Jūshirō teasing Shunsui about his lead on the pourings of sake. For two people who knew the innards of each other's soul, their conversations did not very often tend to the philosophical or overly personal. There were other things that sealed their understanding. One of them had been a vegetarian cooking fillet mignon, the other, a hedonist bon vivant eating course after course of elevated monk food. Still, Jūshirō would not walk away without an explanation, even if he had to unsettle the pleasant flow of the night.

“Now that you have me dazzled, aroused and slightly tipsy, may I know what we’re celebrating?”

“Oh what a state you're in... Yokata…” he laughed heartily, but still he did not open the lid, not until the last desert was served and the attendant left them to enjoy the sake and the evening.

Then, Shunsui left his position on the opposite side of the low table and slid sidewards until he was kneeling in Jūshirō's diagonal and his knees almost touched the other man’s thigh. He took Jūshirō's hands and kissed them.
“You ask what the occasion is, but I must disappoint you. This is not about one occasion, but all of them. I simply brought you here to tell you that ever since I met you, there’s nowhere I’d rather be, than by your side, for all time.”

With his back still curved and eyes on the weaved pattern of the mat, Shunsui slid his hand inside a sleeve, and retrieved a small box. By this time, Jūshirō’s heart had taken off on a hot air balloon. Was this for real?

“Jūshirō Ukitake, will you marry me?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello! So... here we go, hope you're ready for a little bit of a ride!
Once again, please do not take this work as legal advice of any sort. My only source of knowledge on Japanese law is Google :-(
Thanks as ever for reading and commenting. It means a lot to me.
Have a nice weekend!
Cheers!
Chapter Summary

It's another rollercoaster my friends. Hop on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You can free the world you can free my mind
Just as long as my baby's safe from harm tonight

(Massive Attack)

I

Shunsui Kyoraku, male, Japanese and French, 45, former soldier. Engaged.

That's right... Jūshirō had said yes. Sliding platinum rings into each other's fingers and kissing until the restaurant closed was part of a hazy record his mind had kept of that night. With the momentum of the proposal, it was not difficult to convince his fiancée to take a few weeks off work and go with him to France to make arrangements for their wedding.

And so the fairy tale began. Except that the prince was going to marry a troll. A stinky, rotten, treacherous troll. What would the beautiful prince say when he found himself exiled, stolen away from his beloved school, his good friends, his family, his home…

“I can't believe you didn't tell him yet.”

There were few times when Nanao clashed with Lisa, but this was one of those rare cases. Both women were now privy to several details of his personal life, although none had actually met the famous fiancé in person.

“You must tell him at once.”

“I know, Nanao… but I don't think he'll come along after he knows... let alone marry me…”

“You don't know that.”

“True…” he granted, half heartedly, even as his finger ghosted over the Air France logo on his browser.

For two weeks since the engagement he had postponed booking the flight, and so they had reached the eve of their trip with nothing but a concept of a plan. Even at that moment, Jūshirō might be deciding what to pack for the trip, ignorant of all of this. In the morning, while getting dressed, Shunsui had spotted a new, glossy white trolley laying open on a chest. It had a few sweaters folded on one corner. Knowing his fiancée, that was probably a covert message, telling him he should start packing too.
“Kyōraku, Zaraki’s here.”

Once again, the decision about the flight was postponed. At this point, though, it had become inevitably tied to that other more difficult decision – on whether or not to break it to Jūshirō that he was very probably soon to be indicted for financial crime.

“Thing is, Kyōraku, until they catch Jaegerjacquez they got nothing on ya. Even if they have other witnesses or evidence of your trip to Syria, there's no link to the money transfers.”

“On that,” Lisa jumped in, “we found something.”

“All ears, Ma’am.”

“I did some digging into Spring Water Spirits and found that when Kyōraku Arata moved to Osaka he left the booze business in the hands of a protege of his. However, when I went to the warehouse in Yokoama there was no sign of this guy and it seemed that Gin and his thugs were running the show.”

“Who was this protegé?”

“A guy called Tousen. Half Japanese, half Jamaican, described to me as a peace and love kind of guy that liked to ramble about justice and revolution.”

"How scary..." Kyōraku ironized, and got a glimpse of Lisa's death glare.

"Now guess where the funds have been going to.

"Jamaica?"

“Bingo.”

"Then we got them, don't we?"

"No." Zaraki intervened. "Even if Yadomaru here can find out how to lift Jamaican bank secrecy – which the Tokyo police might be trying to do as we speak – it will only prove something if the guy has his own name in the account, which is unlikely. And then we still need to prove you ain't got anything to do with these people."

“There's one more thing”, Lisa added. "I had a chat with Yamato-san and he said he remembered this Tousen from somewhere else. After I picked his brain for a while he said it had something to do with the three companies we call squads - that used to belong to branch family members, but got bought up some years back. Apparently, besides Ichimaru, there were two other guys negotiating the purchase back then."

"Tousen?"

"He was one of them. But the thing is, they don't appear in any papers, they never signed anything, and no one knows where they are. It seems that it's always Gin to show face in their stead."

“Zaraki-san,” Yumichika cut in, "doesn't this remind you of something?"

"And what would that be?"

"How the Shiba went down.” He looked around to ensure he had everyone's attention, then carried on. "A minority shareholder was bought over by some unknown foreign group. There was a
financial scandal, the company lost all its business, went bankrupt, assets got bought up cheap by competitors. The Shiba were disgraced and disappeared from public view."

"If you put it like that, there's another similarity." Lisa considered, pensive. "The Shiba's financial scandal also came right after Isshin took over the business. He was young and inexperienced and never knew what hit him."

"Lisa, you know Isshin Shiba?"

For Shunsui, the young Shiba was part of a blurry set of memories where Soujun Kuchiki and other such figures also inhabited. It was strange to see them pop back into his life decades later.

"We went to business school together. He was two years my senior."

"Can we talk to this guy?" Asked the senior lawyer.

"Shiba Isshin disappeared after his family's downfall. His cousin, and direct heir to the business, Shiba Kaien, passed away around the same time. The younger siblings were too young, so the whole process was led by liquidators. At least that's what I remember..." The other lawyer informed.

"I'll see what I can do." Lisa said.

With that, the meeting was closed, and all participants went their separate ways.

II

The trip to Takashimaya had been his idea. "I'm not bringing my betrothed to Paris without a proper winter coat", he had said.

The chivalry had him now in a taxi, slowly moving towards the Nihonbashi department store. Jūshirō had texted him a few minutes back, telling him he was already waiting outside.

It unnerved him how suddenly his whole life had become tied up to that damned investigation. He should have told Jūshirō about it from the start. What was he thinking? But it hadn't seemed real at the time... Like it was some kind of mistake that would soon be dissipated... Who was he fooling? He had been a fucking coward once again.

The idea of proposing had come to him on a whim. At the time, it had seemed perfectly logical. Once married they could apply for French residency for Jūshirō, and stay there until things calmed down back home. Besides, he had always wanted a big fat wedding. He loved the idea. Their names engraved in thick fancy paper, side by side. Husband and husband. Which reminded him, he would have to ask Jūshirō permission to take his surname. Shunsui Ukitake. Now that sounded like a proper fairy tale.

As he savored the words in his thoughts the car reached the destination, by the red sun shades on the side of the building. Jūshirō was standing by the main entrance, hugging his torso, neck sunken in a scarf. He felt the urge to run towards him, rub his arms and make him warm.

“Sorry to make you wait... bad traffic.” He ventured a light peck on the lips. The crisp air between them shifted and tin lips moved ever so slightly to accommodate his approach, which left behind the gentle curve of a smile. That was when Shunsui really took in the bold, unbound joy that emanated from his partner. Green eyes illuminated like never before. He would cry a thousand elegies for the death of that light.
“Let's find you a coat.”

They entered the building and walked to the manually operated lift. Shunsui asked what was the floor for menswear. The operator hushed them in. It was the sixth floor. A few more shoppers dashed in.

“It's a pity they don't have the elephant anymore”, Shunsui remarked, looking up at the gold on black embellishments, and the list of departments next to the floor numbers.

“Shunsui— the man next to him called, a tinge of worry in his voice, as the mechanism hoisted them up through the guts of the old building—“we should really go somewhere cheaper… this is an extravagance.”

“Let me”, he pleaded. “You don't let me give you any other presents… at least let me keep you warm.”

“You let me live in your house”, Jūshirō argued, but the hurt frown on Shunsui’s face made him drop the point. “Just this time then.” And Shunsui felt his hand being held, very lightly, under the line of sight of the other passengers.

Jūshirō was visibly intimidated by the menswear floor, but Shunsui did not allow him to run down the fire exit. Instead, he towed him from stall to stall, pulling hangers and throwing him into the hands of the solicitous attendants. They finally stopped at the Zegna stall. Shunsui had completely fallen in love with a loose fitting camel coat he'd seen on a mannequin, but couldn't quite get over the way that the brand's classic black overcoat fit on Jūshirō's elongated figure.

"Put the black one on again."

The slender man threw him a murderous look, as he shouldered out of the camel coat and into the other one. One more time he pulled his hair out of the collar and adjusted the lapels. It was a perfect fit. The coat accentuated Jūshirō's broad shoulders and narrowed slightly around the waist, before flaring very subtly just above the knees.

"Stop ogling”, he admonished between teeth. Shunsui gave him a roguish side glance and pressed his lips comically.

"It's perfect, what else can I say? Do you like it?"

Did he like it? He had been too busy modeling and worrying about the price of those things that he hadn't really thought about it. Well, it was warm, and it felt soft on the inside. There was no undue tightness anywhere and... he glanced at the mirror... it looked kind of nice on him...

"Hmm... I do. Yes, I like it," he decided, suddenly blushing from the heat of the coat - perhaps.

"It's a cashmere blend. It is warmer than it looks and lighter than all the others," the shopkeeper supplemented.

"Thank you. We'll take it." Shunsui handed his credit card to the man, who bowed generously.

They were walking to the elevator, carrying the large paper bag, when Jūshirō stopped.

"Wait."

"What?"
"Shunsui, he have to go back to the shop."

How hadn't he thought about it? He still had some growing up to do, Ōgami thought, while dragging Shunsui back to the stall.

The attendant was talking to another couple and the camel overcoat was still draped over the counter. Ōgami picked it up and held it to Shunsui's chest.

"Try it."

Shunsui's face was all surprise. "But I already have a coat..."

"Just put it on. If you like it, I would like to gift it to you."

Shunsui clenched at the fabric, that somehow had transferred to his hands. He did not understand what Ōgami was up to. He was not the type to splurge, and he knew his salary was good but not princely.

"Babe, this is exp—but he's protest was lost when his body was swirled around, and soft sleeves ran up his arms, over his shoulders and around his chest. Suddenly his fiancé was facing him again and fastening the two rows of buttons with a satisfied face.

"There. How does it feel?"

It was exquisite. Fluid, soft, warm. It looked a bit like a bathrobe without the belt, but the contrast with his chiseled figure was nice on the eye. He looked negligent without looking unkempt. It was perfect.

"How did you know I wanted it?"

"Because it made me look like a grandpa but you still considered buying it for me." He giggled. "You look gorgeous."

Still smiling, Ōgami ran his hand through the soft cashmere, down the collar, resting over Shunsui's chest. Then, he kissed him. Not a peck like their greeting outside the building, but a languid, passionate kiss, that made heads turn in the vicinity and left Shunsui dumbfounded. Then he took out his wallet and walked to the attendant.

"We'll take this one as well. Onegaishimasu!"

The price tag was half his salary, but if he didn't splurge on something like this, he would end up like an old dragon sitting atop a pile of useless cash. And it was a present for his husband to be, after all.

---

Even with the two gigantic bags in their hands, they had managed to take the lift to the basement and jugglesome cooked food to the taxi and then home. There, they put on their new coats and modelled them back and forth in the living room until they were both doubled over laughing.

"Shun-chan, those hip moves... you're killing me!"

"Oh shut up, Mr. Hair Flip!"

They dropped on the sofa and tickled each other, and laughed some more, until they were beet red and panting. Then, they finally decided to open up the dinner boxes and eat. They washed
everything for future reuse and settled on the sofa, Jūshirō with a book, Shunsui with his tablet. After a short while, though, Jūshirō started yawning.

"Let's get cozy?"

"Your wish is my command."

After just a few nights sleeping with Shunsui, Jūshirō had completely given up on pajamas. The man was a furnace. He would wake up during the night, sweating, just to shed all his clothes in the dark, under the covers. To avoid the hassle, he had decided to do like his partner and sleep al fresco. It came with other perks too, like the delicious rubbing of skin on skin, and the feeling of being intimately connected, bare and free.

"You really caught me by surprise there", Shunsui said as he crawled in and wrapped himself around Jūshirō's back, one leg going over the other man's lean thigh and looping in between calves.

"There where?"

"At the mall... kissing me like that, in front of everyone..."

"Oh..." Shunsui felt the thorax pressed against his chest expand and collapse again. "I finally realized there's nothing to hide."

Shunsui lifted his neck, wedging an arm under the pillow, to peak at Jūshirō's face.

"You did?"

"Yes! Yes, Shunsui." Jūshirō easily rolled over and faced his man. He was beaming, with a light mist in his eyes. "I've been scared for much too long. I neglected your feelings, I neglected our life, our love. What's wrong about kissing you in public? Nothing! This is 2016. The problem was in my head. I was so... conditioned." He said the word like a curse. "... And you accepted my insecurities, you guided me through this process, with kindness, love and wisdom..."

"Me? Wisdom?"

That made Jūshirō chuckle, but the mist in his eyes grew thicker. "Silly man..."

The short speech had made hair raise in parts of Shunsui's body where he didn't know he even had any. He brought a hand to his lover's cheek and caressed it gently.

"It's fine to take time. You set your terms from the very beginning, remember? You never deceived me, you were always loving and accepting. I also learned a lot from you, you know? And besides, I never took it as if you were hiding, or shamed of me. You were concerned about your school, which is fine, because you're a kick-ass sensei and I want you to keep loving your job."

Jūshirō wrapped his hand around Shunsui's and pulled it to his lips.

"I do love my job, but I love you much, much more, Shunsui. And, you know... being a teacher isn't about any particular school. If the school decides they don't want me because of my personal life choices, then I will find another school. I will go wherever there's a place for me, where I don't have to hide who I am, who I love. I may have to travel hours by train, go to the dodgiest suburb, to the school with the poorest ratings and the worst delinquents, or to a cram school on a basement somewhere. Wherever I go, I will do my best to help my students. That's all I care for."

"I don't deserve you."
"You know you do."

Their lips came together softly, a good night kiss, a loving, tender kiss, before they retreated to their own pillows. Jūshirō sought Shunsui's hand again and covered it with his. Under the covers, their feet entangled.

"Besides", Jūshirō said, breaching the sleepy silence, "I don't want to be a workaholic anymore. I need to find work-life balance. It's good that we're going away for a while... I want to be with you more, travel more... goodness, it's my first time in Paris! How pathetic, next to a man like you... And I want to go out more, meet your friends, make new friends, see, hear, taste..."

His ramble got silenced by another kiss. Their bodies clung together once again, heat rising inside their nest.

"We will do all that, don't you worry. Now have some sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day."

Sure enough, in just a few minutes after they turned off the lamp, Jūshirō was fast asleep. Shunsui watched him for a while, just a contour in the almost complete darkness. For some reason, he was finding it hard to follow his own advice. He rolled over to lie on his back, but still sleep didn't come. There was an uncomfortable knot deep within him, something telling him he was betraying the purest trust someone would ever bestow upon him, he was putting a stain on the purest silk. It was despicable, it was unforgivable, but it was also inevitable. He didn't want to think about it anymore, he didn't want to doubt anymore. It was too late.

He tried to summon images of hills and rivers, gardens, the ocean. He remembered the moments he had lived with this man, treasured the gift of having met him, of having earned his trust. His mind acted out their first encounter, their first date, how thrilling it was to just hold hands, the crazy rush of their first make out sessions in the parking lot near the pool, their first time, the way Jūshirō had swept him off his feet... No good, he wanted to get sleepy, not horny. He forced himself to remember their visit to obasan, their fight, the reconciliation... He remembered the day they'd spent on the beach. A little summer peach looked really nice on Jūshirō's skin. He wondered what he'd looked like when he was a kid running around in the sun all day... Those green eyes and... black hair, yes, he was born with black hair, wasn't he? He scrunched his eyes trying to picture it...

Then, his mind made a flip and landed on his own past. His mother's silky long hair, the constant fighting with Junichi, his adventures, his discoveries, his first kiss. What was his name? Someone from the rugby team... Rick? Rob? Rob, from Melbourne, son of a banker, lovely blue eyes. Where is he now? The backlash – no more rugby, mandatory kendo, to man up. The miai. He couldn't remember what the girl had looked like. Was she hurt? Did she really want to marry him? Most probably it didn't matter to her, it was her father's decision, anyway. What antiquated nonsense. He didn't need a miai to find his soulmate. He was getting married. Yes, nothing would get in their way. Ukitake Shunsui. He drew the characters in a luscious rice paper scroll in his mind. Then, he grabbed his tablet from the night stand and hooded it with the covers to conceal the blue light. The screen marked 03:45. His browser was still open on the Airfrance website. He finally booked the flight.

Soon after he'd put his tablet away sleep finally came. When he woke up, roused by movement in the room, he saw Jūshirō all fresh and ready to go out. Seemingly unaware of his observer, he wedged a pouch inside his travelling trolley, then zipped it up. After wiggling into a grey pullover, he reached for the fish food container and started dropping small brownish pellets into the fish tank and making funny faces, probably trying to communicate with the fishes. Then, he finally looked back at him.

"You're awake", he smiled, and made his way onto the bed, to place a chaste kiss on Shunsui's forehead.
He loved these fleeting moments of stillness, when they just took in each other's close-up image, each other's smell, the feeling of their energies entwined. Their foreheads touched, then their lips joined.

"I never wished for a day to go as fast as today. I can't wait to be with you again."

Wool and hair tickled his bare skin as he pulled his fiancé to his chest.

"See you later, sensei." He winked, and Jūshirō winked back, then jumped off the bed, grabbed a light jacket and off he went, confident and pure. Shunsui buried his face in the pillow and tried to melt his agony into tears, but he only managed to make himself fall asleep again.

III

After introducing Momo to his class, Jūshirō settled back on his usual resting spot near the window. Young Hinamori-sensei went around checking homework and then asked for volunteers for the simple arithmetic drills Jūshirō had assigned the day before. The kids would have it tougher for the coming weeks, but given his tendency to overly pamper his students, it might be for the best.

Momo carried on with the lesson until the end and then they walked together to the cafeteria.

"Yes, Hinamori-san?" He couldn't resist the urge to prompt the woman, after a good three minutes of furtive glances at his left hand.

"I-I'm sorry!" She staggered and blushed.

"Not at all, Hinamori, just thought you might want to ask some-"

The end of the sentence was engulfed in a loud cheer as they pushed the door to the cafeteria, where a group of teachers and staff were gathered around a table set with boxes of onigiri, rolled omelet and other goodies. Byakuya was mixed in the lot. Had he helped to plot this up? How uncharacteristic.

"What's the occasion?", he asked innocently.

"There's no bad reason for a party and there's no good reason for not having one", Matsumoto singsonged. Then, she came closer and whispered- "Besides, everyone noticed a rather shiny addition to your gear..."

"Now, now", he appeased, "Agreed on your first point. Let's eat!" And he happily picked up an onigiri and dribbled a few teachers while trying to reach Byakuya.

"Et tu Brute?" He recited, as he grabbed the younger teacher's shoulder.

"Everyone thinks you deserve this holiday. We just wanted to bid you a good trip."

Jūshirō's frown softened. "Thank you."

Byakuya mirrored the gesture and laid his hand on his senpai's shoulder. "Have a good rest, my friend."

They ate and chatted and finally dispersed, each in their own direction. Jūshirō went to his room to sift through the remaining folders on his desk. He managed to leave as little as two outstanding issues for Byakuya's follow-up: a request for an inter-school maths tournament and an ad-hoc application for a teaching position. They hadn't opened the position when he got promoted, but having him
double as teacher and coordinator had put strain on the team, making everyone take extra duties. Hiring one more teacher was definitely a good idea. He scrolled down the CV and nodded in approval. Outstanding, for such a young candidate. He opened an email, entered Byakuya's address and started typing on the subject box: "Ad-hoc application for teaching position – Hitsugaya Tōshirō", and attached the scanned CV, with a supporting note.

It was half past seven when he finally left his office. He would have to run to the train station if he wanted to go home, help Shunsui pack – he was half certain his fiancé had forgotten to do so – and get on the Narita express on time to catch their midnight flight.

He walked out of the building, putting on his jacket and pressing his ipad between his chin and chest. The gingko trees had begun to shed their leaves. Some of them flew around him in the dim light. He hoped the flight wouldn't be too bumpy. How he hated turbulence. Shunsui had had a field day teasing him after their trip to Okinawa, but who's not scared of a typhoon when you're up in the air, locked inside a tube of tin? He hadn't flown Hercules C130 and doorless helicopters for a day job in his youth...

The gatekeeper, Ota-san, was boiling water for his instant ramen. He waved from inside his cabin. Jūshirō waved back and turned left outside the gate. From there it was a ten-minute walk to the train station. He hastened his steps. The school was in a residential area, without much foot traffic after class hours. He could hear his own steps on the pavement. He focused on that rhythm to keep himself from daydreaming.

That was when something small, like a pebble, hit his calf. He kept walking, no time to check, but a few seconds later he got hit again. He turned around. The first thing his eyes caught was the trunk of large tree, but suddenly a dark shadow was jumping on him. He tried to yell but a gloved hand pressed against his mouth. The assailant was small and slender but had enough power and skill to restrain his arms and lift him off the ground like a potato sack. In a matter of seconds he was moving through the air, weightless, until his body hit a hard surface and it all started moving. He assumed he had been thrown inside a van, but he was left unbound and the kidnapper had released his mouth.

"You can have all my money but I'll need my passport and a lift to the train station", he tried. He sounded astonishingly calm but his heart was galloping inside his chest. He tried to steady himself and get to a seating position. He finally saw the hooded, black-clad figure seating cross-legged in front of him. The back of the van was an exiguous space, barely enough for two.

"Sorry bud, can't let you go just yet."

A woman's voice and, though muffled, a familiar one at that. She wedged her thumbs under the stocking that covered her face and finally revealed herself. Yoruichi.

"Yoru, is this some kind of prank? Where are they? The party was lovely but I really have a flight to catch."

But there was no mirth or mischief in her expression. Yoruichi was dead serious. He frowned.

"What's going on?"

"Kisuke, drive us around a bit, will you?"

"Hai!" The driver lifted his hand and gave her a thumbs up. Jūshirō recognized the rusty blond mane behind the wheel. He also recognized the vehicle as the micro van that had taken them to and from the beach, months ago, but with the back seats removed.
"Ukitake-san", the driver called without looking back, his eyes visible only through the rearview mirror, "Nice to see you again."

Yoruichi used the diversion to lean in closer to Jūshirō and put one hand on his knee.

"Jūshirō, we're here to prevent you from leaving Japan tonight."

"What? Why?"

She took a deep breath, preparing herself.

"Yoruichi, what with the suspense? Tell me what you have to say!"

"Right. Sorry. First thing you need to know: Kisuke and I are cops. Interpol agents, based in Japan, to be more precise..."

She paused but he didn't interrupt her, so she just carried on.

"This morning we received a request for international intelligence on a certain individual, from the Tokyo Organized Crime Department. That person's name is Kyōraku Shunsui."

"W-why?"

"There's an ongoing investigation for transfer of funds from his company to a certain organization whose aims are to bring down the capitalist system and kill the emperor. They call themselves Hueco Mundo, but they are reportedly connected to the leftovers of the Japanese Red Army."

She checked again for signs of distress, then continued. "The request specifically targets a trip your partner made to the Middle East this Summer... and the nature of his relationship with Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez and Shugo Kobayashi."

Jūshirō covered his face with his palms. He felt his skin burning and the cold sting of the ring against his cheek. His heart fluttered, and one hand dropped instinctively to his sternum.

"If I asked you to tell me this is all a joke, would you indulge me?"

She gripped his kneecap harder, then shook her head.

"Kobayashi – Starrk – is mostly clear. Apparently the man's only been doing his job – following Jaegerjaquez around, taking photos... maybe some personal connection, can't be sure... but Jaegerjaquez is... more problematic. He creates havoc wherever he goes. If this Hueco Mundo organization has a berserker... that's him."

Jūshirō started crying softly. The ring burned in his finger. He felt a hole being drilled in his chest, turning flesh and organs into rubble.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"We believe the request was prompted by a flight booking during the wee hours this morning. If the two of you try to board a flight out of the country, you are very likely to be arrested, both of you. When our report is handed to the police, with Grimmjow's track record, they will have enough indicia to bring criminal charges against Shunsui. The report is ready. We cannot delay its delivery much more."

"So whatever the case, we'll be arrested anyway?"
"No. That's why we're here. If our report is filed before you try to fly, he will be arrested."

"I don't want to be away from him." Ōchirō's voice was now a thin, trembling thread.

"Let me bring you to safety. We don't think he's involved in this. You just need to let justice run its course... and the furthest you are from America the better."

"Furthest from America... I was born across the street from America. My mother was raped and thrown in the ocean by some goddamned Pinkerton that left me these eyes that I've wanted to gouge out my whole life. Why are we any further from America here than in France?" He cried.

"Calm down. This is Tokyo. We still have rule of law. Have a bit of faith."

"Stop the van. I'm gonna be sick."

"We're taking you somewhere safe... We can't attract any attention. We're not supposed to be doing this..."

"Let me out!" He cried again, and started yanking the door knob, the spasms of sobs and repressed vomit now audible as he spoke.

"Kisuke, find an alley, we need to stop."

"Not advisable, babe."

"Kisuke, find a fucking alley!"

The van entered a narrow street between buildings. It was unclear which part of town they were in. The ground smelled of beer and piss. Ōchirō stumbled out of the vehicle and squatted by the nearest gutter. He dipped his head and emptied his stomach. Yoruichi held his hair in a bunch with one hand and rubbed his shoulder with the other, squatting behind him.

Did he want that protection? Why did people care about him? Was it wrong that all he wanted at that moment was to run straight to the arms of the one man who'd deceived him? He shook her off and got on his feet, just to stumble on a trash can and fall on his knees and palms again. He pressed his forehead to the dirty tar and cried out.

The sound came out ragged and guttural. Heads came to the windows overhead. Yoruichi began to worry.

"Ōchirō, lets go now."

"Leave me! I want to ask him... want him to tell me... look me in the eyes and tell me..."

She looked up. A glass window slid opened and then closed. There were eyes and ears behind those windows. They couldn't remain there any longer.

"Kisuke..."

"Hai."

They marched in synchrony upon the fallen figure. Yoruichi seized both arms easily. Kisuke approached by the side. A needle pierced through fabric and skin, reached deep between layers of muscle and delivered its load. The man fell limp in their arms.
For all his professed love for Jūshirō, Shunsui had failed him once more. He sat in the living room while a pair of teenagers packed all of his beloved's belongings and erased his existence from that space. They had rang the bell some time after 8pm, a black haired girl with pigtails and a skinny, red-haired punk. Instead of explaining what they were up to, the girl had passed him a walkie talkie and let the ex girlfriend from hell do the talking.

So in the end they would have to be apart. The trip was off, Jūshirō was safe. Shunsui felt a strange relief radiating all through his body. Maybe one day he would be allowed to drop to his knees and beg for forgiveness. For now, he was content knowing that someone was doing a better job at protecting Jūshirō than he had done.

After the kids left with the trolley and a few cardboard boxes, he realized he might just sit the night through, enjoy his sofa, his house, his freedom, while he could. The cops would come first thing in the morning. Let them come. He'd rather welcome them red-eyed than naked. He turned on the telly and streamed "La Dolce Vita". An old lover had once told him he looked like an Asian Mastroianni. Things people say to please.

Two pinwheels danced in his fingers.

Chapter End Notes

Hey there again! This was another painful one to write, but one that had been on my mind for ages. Sorry for the cliffy!! if you're not too upset (!) tell me what you think. Does it work plot-wise? This was my attempt at suspense too. How did it go? Thanks as always for dropping by and reading. Cheers!
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of a tumultuous night, the plot unfolds. Meanwhile, some rest, some plead, some search.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To the depths of the ocean where all hopes sank, searching for you

Lisa Yadomaru rarely visited the place these days, but the rusty metal doors, more like the gates of a junkyard, were still vivid in her memory. The suburban art gallery was dimly lit for such an early hour, just a tongue of light spread across the polished concrete floor.

“Yo” she called to the empty space.

There were boxes lined around the naked walls, seemingly a set up in progress.

“Look what the cat dragged in!” The teasing voice echoed without a clear point of origin. Lisa looked around, peeked behind a curtain. Nothing.

“What brings you here Lisa-chan?” Again the same voice, this time with clear mirth.

“Hey, come out, idiot.”

“Pickaboo!” And she finally looked up.

Near the ceiling, hanging from a sort of tissue fastened to a metal hoop, was the origin of the voice. Hanging upside down. Typical.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Practicing”, the blond head inside the silk cocoon answered. “Step aside, will you?”

Lisa only had time to move back a meter before the bundle began to unravel, the body rotating and tumbling inside it, until it gracefully landed by her side.

“Joining the circus, Hirako?”

“Who knows”, he shrugged, a wide Cheshire Cat grin on his face, while tying the two long strips of tissue in a big knot, and bringing Lisa to the open pantry.

“Want a drink? I’ll have a mimosa.”

“It's 10 a.m.”
“It's a breakfast drink.”

She gave him a dirty look, but went on opening the cupboard and getting two flutes, as the gallery owner opened a bottle of champagne and pulled a carton of orange juice from the fridge.

“How’s your boss doing?’’

“In a bit of a bind.”

“And Sousuke-kun? Made his appearance yet?”

“No. If he's following the same pattern he'll turn up when the company's in tatters and ready to be sold.”

“Guess you'll have to stay put, then.”

“Yeah”, she agreed, but looked away.

“Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“Well, you can always jump ship if you want to, you know that, right?”

“No, I can’t.”

Hirako looked up from his task of pouring liquid from alternate vessels into the flutes.

“And why is that?” He frowned.

“Kyōraku…”

“What's with him?”

“He's not as much of a bum as I thought he'd be…”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we could at least try to catch Aizen without letting the man rot in jail…”

Shinji sighed.

“So you took a liking to him… How unfortunate. What do you propose?”

“I don't know… we could get someone to testify for him. Isshin…”

“Lisa, we always knew there'd be collateral damage, if we want to give that bastard what he deserves.”

“It's not fair.”

“Granted. But was it fair to put all of us in correctional, for a riot we didn't start? We were the lucky ones, don’t you think? You still managed to get into to business school, I got this place from my old man…”

“He's got someone waiting for him outside!” Lisa let out in a small outburst.
“Oh, right… that white hair fella, isn’t it?”

“You knew?” She looked back at the man, an expression of disbelief across her face.

“Kyôraku brought him here once, a while ago. Pretty thing he was. All shy and serious... Somehow very knowledgeable about teapots, or whatever the show was about…”

“Sometimes I doubt whether we’re really any better than Aizen.”

Shinji took a sip of the mimosa and Lisa followed, wincing at the intake of gas on an empty stomach. They drank in silence for a moment. Then, Lisa asked,

“Have you heard from the others?”

“Hiyori comes by once in a while on her work scooter, whenever she has time. Mostly bickers and curses... you know her. Rose had to quit music and take up some desk job, but he still plays here sometimes, for vernissages and stuff. Kensei... maybe in jail again? Either that or playing body guard to some big shot. Mashiro, probably with Kensei...Love, Hachi, they’re doing alright, I guess, under the circumstances…”

Lisa’s flute was now a little less than half full with the orange colored concoction. She decided to empty it in one go.

Memories of their high school club, and the peaceful anti-nuclear protest that turned into a riot, came to her mind. In all those memories, like an unwanted shadow, there he was - the bespectacled traitor, model student by day, anarchist by night. What was justice? Aizen behind bars at all cost? That had seemed like a much clearer goal a few months back.

She laid the cup on the counter and stood up, pulling her bag over her shoulder.

“I leave it up to you. Gotta go now.”

Shinji sighed again, put down the glass and started untying the silks.

“Let me oxygenate my thoughts some more. I’ll get back to you.”

At the same time, in a Japanese mansion in Meguro, a tired man opened his eyes.

Dim light through shoji screens. A dull pain on the right hip. A woman sitting by the corner, typing.

“Rukia? What am I doing here?”

The young woman looked up from her work and glanced at the figure stretched on the futon, then put her laptop away and took a few steps closer.

“How are you feeling? My brother went to work and Yoruichi-san couldn’t stay...”

He closed his eyes again.

“I will ask for breakfast. Is that ok, Ukitake-san?”

He couldn't answer, not yet. The air stopped in his airways and stubborn tears started flowing. He turned on his side, away from where the woman was, and covered his face with his palms.
Breakfast came and went untouched.


Voices in the corridor.

“Couldn't make him eat anything? I see.”

“Should we bring supper?”

“Not yet. Thank you Rukia.”

The wood of the door purred against the wood of the rim. Black socks inside brown slippers stepped inside the room. Byakuya.

“Rina-san made fried tofu with bitter gourd. You should have seen how my sister’s nose wrinkled just saying the word… Could you find it in you to save my sister from that predicament?”

A chuckle. Very weak, but Byakuya could pat himself in the back for it. Instead, he laid a hand gently on a heaving shoulder.

“Rina-san also said, if you're going to be ill like last time, she will make you wash the dishes.”

The lying man finally opened his eyes.

“Why did she bring me here? I still have my own flat.”

Byakuya sighed. “Yoruichi thinks that the people that orchestrated this hurdle might want to make you a part of it.”

And the man ran out of words. His eyes slid shut once more, soon covered by his palms. Byakuya left when heavier breathing signaled sleep. Yoruichi might have gone a bit overboard with the dosage. That reckless woman.

Honda-san had an extra serving of tofu and bitter gourd late at night, after his boxing practice.

Morning. Sound of rain and typing.

Rukia sat at the far corner of the room, her books and notes spread on a low table.

“School?” The man asked.

“Research”, she replied.

The light inside the room was dimmer than the day before – the approach of winter. Rukia worked under a warm lamplight.
“Is there, per chance, any leftover champuru? I believe I could have some now.”

She stood immediately and nodded with vigor, before walking out of the room, into the invisible mansion.

When she returned with a tray of miso soup and onigiri, the door to the garden was open, letting damp fresh air into the room. The man had composed the borrowed yukata and thrown a haori over his shoulders. He sat seiza, facing the outside.

“The view from here is particularly beautiful. It would make a good tea room.”

“Well, it is a tea room.” She pointed to a square mat to their left. A covered hearth, Jūshirō guessed.

“Oh!” He smiled faintly.

“Not that we use it. Nii-sama knows the basics, but doesn't have time... and I can't whisk to save my life.”

"Would you like to learn?"

“Ukitake-san, do you know how to...?”

“I have an old man’s tastes...”

She nudged the tray his way and he bowed, then put his hands together.

“Itadakimasu!”

"Someone ate the bitter gourd... this was all I could find in the kitchen."

He gulped down the soup and wolfed three rice cakes in the blink of an eye.

“Thank you. Delicious as always. Please thank Rina-san for me.”

Standing up, he took a deep breath, followed by a wince.

"Oh dear... I guess I shouldn’t go anywhere without a bath..."

"Sure, you can use Nii-sam-" Rukia stopped in her tracks. Just what had he said? "Ukitake-san, are you planning to go somewhere?"

“School, of course. I'm not going on vacation, so I might as well go to work. We’re understaffed as it is...”

“School? Oh...”

And so Rukia figured out the turn of events. It was understandable, that he might want to go look for Kyōraku, but Byakuya would never forgive her if she let him go.

“I'm sorry, I can't...”

Her panic became apparent, as she grabbed his sleeve on impulse, then dropped and pulled her hand away. The mood changed completely.

“Well, if you must, at least try injecting it on the other side. My right hip’s still sore.” The man ironized.
On even ground, her stature was almost half his. If she couldn't talk sense into the man, there was not much she could do to prevent him from walking out of the property. She considered Honda-san. That might be an even match. But was it really alright to do that? This whole situation already looked too much like an abduction.

“Please stay. At least until Nii-sama returns… then you two can talk things through.”

“Rukia…” He visibly calmed down, and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Do you understand what you’re doing to me? Everyone, Yoruichi, Byakuya… I know they only mean well, but this is something I absolutely have to deal with.”

She lowered her head. The fact was, Jūshirō was right. If someone were to take her away from someone dear by force, she would never be able to forgive them.

“Ukitake-san, I couldn't give you a sedative even if I wanted to.” She moved away, breaking the tension in the room.

“We've washed your clothes, you can put them on and leave if you want… Also, there's a trolley I believe you've packed for the trip... if you want to wear something else.”

"My luggage is here? How?"

She swallowed. This was bound to make him angry.

"Yoruichi-san sent for it. They also took your other belongings and..."

"And what, Rukia?" He lunged upon her, but managed to stop himself from shaking her.

"… And put them on a plane to Okinawa."

He took a deep breath.

"Also", she continued, "I was asked to give you this."

Under the pile of paperwork on her improvised desk there was a small wrapping, the size of a book. He recognized the logo of a famous stationary store in Ginza. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't tell what. The last months had been pregnant with events. Things began to escape him.

“Won't you open it? It’s… from him”, she said.

His legs lost strength, his head felt light. He found himself getting down on his knees. Rukia mimicked him and settled by his side.

Running a hand over the matte red paper made him suddenly aware of how much of an aesthete Shunsui was. Many of his decisions were made because something agreed with his sense of beauty. It was most definitely what happened on that afternoon, in the park.

At the time, the idea that his willowy figure and discolored hair could appeal to anyone seemed all too absurd to him, but with time, he came to believe the words of appreciation, the loving glances, the lustful touches... He had never been that aware of his own body. It's as if the mass of bone and flesh had somehow acquired a poetic quality. It was strange how used to it he had grown - to being watched and desired.

Sliding a finger between the sheets of paper, he tore the tape and pulled the sides apart, revealing a beautiful green diary. He had forgotten that he’d asked for it. He could picture Shunsui browsing
through the heaps of diaries, deciding on the perfect color and texture. The sigh came out ragged but his fingers kept working on the remaining folds and tapes.

The front cover was slightly lifted, as if someone had slid something inside it. His heart began to race, but for no reason. The lump consisted of a small stash of origami paper and a photo.

"Is that you?" Rukia asked, before she could take back the surprise in her tone.

"Yes", he answered weakly. "My grandmother tied my hair like this on a whim, and Shunsui took a bunch of photos of it... Silly, isn't it?"

And there it was, slim as it might be, an opening. Rukia would have to latch onto it if she wanted to stall the man. Too bad she had never been the greatest entertainer.

"Have you ever thought of modeling? I mean, not for fashion, but for art purposes..."

His head tilted curiously. "Not at all."

"I have friends who do it part-time", she lied. She was just freewheeling now... "For painters and sculptors... Did you ever do anything other than teaching?"

"Hmm... let's see. I used to help my grandparents with their farming, and I did some tomato picking for pocket money when I was a teenager..."

"Tomato picking? Ukitake-san?"

"Why?"

"Well, I would imagine you in a café or a bakery... but never in the fields."

"Not many options back then, where I lived... but I had fun, I learned about the land and how it gives us all we need if we treat it gently. And I think I toughened up a bit, which is useful when you have to ward off the school bullies."

"You had bullies?"

"I guess you always do, when you're a bit different..."

Did he mean the hair? Or maybe the eyes? Was he hinting at something else? 'Let's go with eyes', she decided.

"You could have claimed they were contacts. You'd be the most popular in class."

Bingo. He chuckled. Or was it a small laugh?

"What about you, Rukia-chan?"

"You mean bullies? Never gave them the chance! Kick them straight in the face, if they upset my friends."

Jūshirō wanted, but couldn't quite conceal his disbelief.

"I'm serious!"

"That's good to know."
Her efforts to extend the small talk as much as possible were losing steam and slowly, Jūshirō began to move, intent on getting on his feet again. She panicked. What would she do if he really left? She stood up too, and that's when both noticed it. It was a very subtle sound, of something small and light landing on the soft tatami floor.

Jūshirō bent down to see what it was, then picked it up and stood again. When he opened his palm, she saw a platinum ring with a strip of paper tied to it. It must have been slid into the wrapping at some point.

Jūshirō's hands started to tremble as he untied the paper and read the few words written on it:

"Only you can keep it safe."

Like a spell, those words immobilized him. Rukia glanced away from the man, feeling as though her eyes alone were an intrusion. It was not difficult to guess what that ring was, and how painful it must be to find it like this, hidden in the folds of a paper wrap.

The minutes passed and they stood still. Outside, the rain stopped, and the leaves resumed their parade of sorrows, in their fateful descent.

Then, from the corner of her eye, Rukia perceived movement. Jūshirō was holding the ring between his right index and thumb. His left hand was raised in the air, at the same level.

"This is how I put the ring on his finger... I never thought I'd ever put a ring on a man's finger..."

And he slid the ring into his ring finger, next to the other identical ring, that was already there.

"Oh... it's too big. I'm really just skin and bone", he mumbled, and tried the ring on every other finger until he settled for his thumb. He seemed satisfied with the alternative. Then, he folded the paper slip into a neat square and dropped it on his yukata's sleeve.

"Rukia, would you like to prepare a tea ceremony for Byakuya? It would be a nice surprise, and I still need to thank both of you properly..."

"Ukitake-san..."

"It's ok, Rukia. I finally know what I need to do."

That afternoon, Jūshirō and Rukia turned the Kuchiki mansion on its feet. First, they went looking for the mizusashi, the pot used to store cold water, and the kama, the vessel used for heating water in the hearth. With some insistence, Sayaka-san, the maid, managed to kick them out of the storage room and went looking for the pots herself.

They also had to send for ash and charcoal for the fire. They went through the shelves to chose adequate chawan for the ceremony. In order to keep with the wabi-sabi spirit, guests should use mismatched tea ware. They chose a dark bowl adorned with gold veins where there were once cracks for Byakuya, then each chose one for each other. They then decided that, if they were to have a tea ceremony, they should also invite the staff, so they picked bowls for Honda-san, Sayaka-san and Rina-san too. The Kuchiki had employed an army of servants in the past, but Byakuya and Rukia had downsized to just the three valuable employees.

With the fire growing in the hearth and the water beginning to bubble, they sat down appreciating the
"Definitely a lovely autumn room."

"Where should nii-sama seat?"

"There", Jūshirō pointed, "near the hearth so that he's not cold, but with the widest view to the outdoor area."

"Perfect."

"Should we do a test batch?"

"Yes! Oh wait... shit! I mean, sorry!"

Jūshirō looked at the young woman, puzzled.

"I forgot we don't have any tea."

An eyebrow twitched and lips pursed, but something was slowly bubbling within. It started with a chortle, then went on to a full laughter. Rukia joined in.

"I can't believe we forgot the tea!"

"Maybe we should run to the neighbor and ask for some..."

"Our neighbor is the Thai embassy, I'm not sure they drink matcha..." Rukia informed, wiping tears from the corner of her eyes.

And they kept laughing and making up scenarios, in which they went to the Thai embassy to borrow some tea, and ended up getting dragged into a boxing match, a curry cook-up, or a chilly endurance competition. It lasted until the door slid again, and they found themselves looking at the master of the house.

"I could hear the two of you by the front gate. What's all the fun about?"

Taking a deep breath, and tapping his reddened cheeks, Jūshirō stood up, only to bend in half, in a deep bow.

"I wanted to thank you for your hospitality by holding a tea ceremony, but we... er... forgot to buy tea."

Byakuya chuckled and shook his head, an amused smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Why don't we make hot chocolate?" He suggested.

Rukia and Jūshirō glanced at each other.

"Nii-sama, you mean a hot chocolate ceremony?"

"With the bowls and all..." Jūshirō supplemented.

'Why not? We just need a small amount of milk to add on.'

"I fear the ghost of Rikyu might attack us in our sleep..." Jūshirō reasoned.

"I'm catholic, we'll be fine."
The replacement worked surprisingly well. They skipped dinner and had frothy hot chocolate in tea bowls, with toast and chestnuts, together with Honda-san, Rina-san and Sayaka-san.

Eventually, the staff and then Rukia excused themselves and retired for the night. The two men fell, for a while, in one of their comfortable silences. Jūshirō put out the fire and covered the hearth, then started making his bed. He was a bit startled when Byakuya tapped his shoulder and, without further warning, wrapped his arms around him.

"I'm so glad to see you like this. I was so worried."

Jūshirō, naturally, hugged him back. They were roughly the same height and build, so their embrace was almost symmetrical. Perhaps the privacy of those familiar walls was finally bringing out the tender side of Byakuya. One hand came down the cascade of white hair.

Jūshirō couldn't quite explain it, but that embrace made him stronger. It was Byakuya's gift to him, a gift of deep friendship, of brotherhood. He pushed himself back, putting some distance between them. The face he saw was relieved, relaxed, and almost sleepy. He smiled, then laid a chaste kiss on Byakuya's cheek.

He could tell the move startled the man a little, but he stood there very still, receiving the intimate greeting, for the few seconds that it lasted. After that, they broke off casually. Jūshirō crawled into bed and Byakuya sat beside him.

"From the moment I came home today", Byakuya said, "I've been wondering, why are you not angry... at him, at us, at the world..."

Jūshirō's eyes were downcast, he joined his hands on his lap.

"To be angry at you would be awfully unfair, don't you think?"

Byakuya opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again.

"Yoruichi... we'll have to talk. That jab hurt..." He chuckled, "As for Shunsui, yes, I did get angry. I asked myself if all the time we were together, I was just some sort of doll... a toy to please his desires... Not a mate, not a partner, like I thought I was... it hurt so much. I wish he'd trusted me, I wish he'd trusted my strength and, ultimately, my love. Because as strange as this might seem, after all that happened, the strongest feeling that remains... perhaps the only certainty in my head right now, is that I love him."

Byakuya did not panic or shy away when he saw his senpai burst into tears. He moved his body closer and guided the man's head to his shoulder.

"... So all the while, even as I thought I was mad at him, even as I went on and on, mentally bashing him, listing all his flaws, accusing him of all possible sins... all I really wanted was a chance to see him again... because with all those flaws and wrongdoings, right now, my greatest worry is him. I try to convince myself that he'll be ok, but I'm so scared..."

The white around the beautiful green irises had become lined with blood. Byakuya felt a grip in his gut, like he hadn't in a while. His hand strayed to the back of Jūshirō's neck and pressed him closer. The man's breath was warm and wet as it grazed the skin at the base of his neck. He kept smoothing that long white hair through the waves of sobs that came and went.

Some time had passed when Jūshirō pulled away, his hands cupped around his nose.

"I'm in a mess, I need to go to the washroom. Excuse me for a second."
Sitting alone in the room, gazing at the futon, Byakuya contemplated sleeping there for the night. After the dinner at Kyōraku’s he had found himself wondering about the changes that night had entailed. Sure enough, he had come to know that Jūshirō was bissexual, and that made him his first non straight friend, but something more significant had happened – they had become truly close. It was that acquired intimacy that made it all possible, all that had just happened – the embraces, the caresses, a kiss.

He hadn't been this close to anyone since Hisana... but it was not at all the same feeling. It was more like... like the relationship he once had with his father. How many years had passed since he'd lost that? And what had led him to believe that this kind of intimacy was off limits between friends... between siblings? It suddenly felt like such an enormous waste of time.

Jūshirō returned with a box of tissues in hand, and his hair tied in a bun. His bangs and sideburns were still wet, and the redness had spread to his nose and cheeks. Without uttering a word, they returned to the embrace.

The man's breath slowly assumed a calmer cadence. Byakuya kept dutifully stroking his hair until he realized Jūshirō had become heavy. He lowered him slowly onto the pillow, covered him with the kilt, and then lied beside him. Perhaps it didn't count, because the other man was already asleep, but when Byakuya softly touched the pale forehead with his lips, he felt lighter on the inside.

The rain did not return, and the next morning foreshadowed a clear Autumn day. The chill in the air hinted at the incoming winter, but for now, the sun was shining.

In the flood of commuters that reach Tokyo Station every morning, there was a white haired man. He bought himself a ticket for the 7:00 a.m. Nozomi to Kyoto. There was a buttery smell in the air and he still had some time before departure, so he followed the scent to the doorstep of a small bakery. He bought a red bean bun and a croissant for the journey, and strolled off, nibbling on his breakfast.

Then, as he passed by the newspaper stand, it finally hit him: his personal predicament was also a matter of public concern. And there it was, on white fat characters written inside a black box, on the cover of the Asahi Shimbun - "Kyōraku heir under custody".

The photo that went along with the piece had Shunsui walking out of a building between a big cop and petite woman with a fiery look. Handcuffed. Was that really necessary? He resisted the urge to touch the 2D face, the 2D messy hair. Instead, he took out a few coins from his pocket and purchased the newspaper.

It had been a while since he'd taken a train for more than an hour. The flash-cleaning of the car was completed in a blink of an eye, and the passengers started taking their seats. He sat by the window on the right hand side, from where he would be able to observe Mt. Fuji. It bemused him that he should care about something so mundane, when his life was upside down. But perhaps those are the things that ground us when we lack footing.

They were well past Shinjuku station when he dared to open the paper again. The dotted image on the cover was not easy to decipher, so much so because Shunsui had his head tilted down, probably trying to avert the cameras. The closer he looked the blurrier it appeared, but from an arm's distance he could make out the dark shadows around the eyes, and the helpless face of a soldier. Wasn't that a rare sight?

He would read the lengthy piece some time during the journey, but not just yet. Beyond the plains
carpeted with houses, factories and high bridges that dashed by the window, the ancient mountain god stood, magnificent and bathed in pale blue light.

At around the same time, Byakuya Kuchiki came back from a restful sleep, feeling warm under the covers. In the few seconds that followed his awakening, he became aware of a few disturbing facts:

He was not in his room or bed;

he was still in his previous day clothes, but his cufflinks had been removed, and a few buttons had been unfastened on his shirt and pants;

a familiar scent lingered on the pillow;

but he was all alone.

He got up and walked to the hall, where he found Rukia in her yellow chappy pajamas, and rather agitated.

“Nii-sama, look:”

She handed him a piece of paper, where he recognized Jūshirō’s handwriting:

“Went out for tea. Have a nice day :)

“His luggage, wallet, phone?”

“He left everything behind, except for his wallet… Should we call Yoruichi-san?”

Byakuya read the note again. What was Jūshirō trying to say? He feared for his friend’s safety, but was it really alright to chase a grown man around like some kind of wild kid? Didn’t it all come down to their conversation on the past night? Trust, and the devastating effects of not having it. There and then, he made his decision.

“No, Rukia. We will let him do whatever he needs to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello Mina-san! Hope y’all still there! This story has been quite "musical" lately (if we're not careful it might turn into a songfic hehe), This time around, we had Joy Division (title and introductory line). Thanks as always for reading. We're almost wrapping up, but I still have some more chapters for you. Hope you enjoy them. Cheers!
Chapter Summary

Shunsui prepares for the worst, Jūshirō takes one last gamble, and clues emerge from the shadows

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ayasegawa Yumichika often wondered what had put him through law school. Perhaps even more often, he wondered how he managed to put up with the Kenpachi on a daily basis. It certainly wasn't with his best friend's support.

Madarame was usually on the receiving end of things – support, praise, affection. He was the star student, the star trainee, the star associate. He fit in perfectly. Yumi felt that, sometimes, he was no more than a punching bag. After a particularly bad bashing at the office, he would consider the many other things he'd rather be doing - art dealer, actor, geisha, clown. Lawyer was the least beautiful of professions. If only he could practice his own style of law.

But that was not an option, for as long as he remained under Zaraki - the pragmatic and straightforward practitioner - kill the case before any arguments can be exchanged. Yumi was all but straightforward, and so he was left with running errands.

On that morning, for instance, he was to babysit Kyōraku Shunsui. The man had been taken in on Saturday morning, spent Sunday simmering behind bars, and was to be brought before a judge later in the day. However, he was not there to prepare that hearing. That job was done, and he would be in trouble if he gave any contradicting advice.

As expected of a former soldier, the man had behaved with utmost dignity from the moment the cops arrived at his house. He now sat across the white table set in the windowless counsel room, arm draped around the back of his plastic chair, and a melancholic half smile on his face.

"My associate Madarame will represent you at the hearing this afternoon. The purpose is to decide if you are to remain in custody. We will, of course, plead for a lighter measure-"

"Don't worry, Lawyer-san. I've been worse."

How did he manage to keep the lazy tone in a situation like this? Like it was none of his business...

"It would be more convenient to prepare your defense if you were at least on house arrest, but for this type of offense..."

"I understand. As I said, no biggie."

"We expect that once the judge takes over the investigation, it won't take long until the final hearing. We need a list of witnesses..."

“I have none to offer.”
“That makes your defense extremely challenging”, the lawyer argued.

“So be it.”

“Kyōraku-san, your friend Kobayashi is not mentioned in the Interpol report. If you provide a contact we can...”

“No.”

It was a final answer. Yumichika maintained his poker face. “Did you ever fear being caught by the enemy, when you were in the military?” he asked.

“We have guidelines for that. But don't worry... not planning to go down that route, not as long as there's still a chance.”

He pursed his lips. The man was a strange mix of light and dark.

“Say, Ayasegawa-san, do they do that ice bucket thing here in Japan?”

There was a moment of confusion, followed by a startling realization.

“Wha-? You mean – water boarding?” he whispered. “God, no, I hope not!”

Shunsui chuckled. “Can't be sure now, can we?”

The local train was a pleasant variation from the solemn atmosphere of the Shinkansen. Having finished his croissant on the first leg, and not wanting to stop for lunch, Jūshirō grabbed a bag of mandarin oranges from a store and spent part of the short trip to Uji peeling and eating them. Leaving Kyoto, the scenery was rural and sleepy, a manor here, a house of darkened wood there, bringing back a distant past, invisible to those who live in the capital.

Uji itself was no more than a few rows of houses by the river, and a temple featured on 10000 yen note. The short walk from the station to the Riverside was peppered with signs of the town's main business – tea. He had all intention of honoring his promise to Rukia and Byakuya and buy them tea, but he had other business to attend to before that.

The riverside path was quiet as he strolled through it, looking for the tourism office. All would have been much easier had he been able to use technology, but he had left his phone at Byakuya's, fearing whatever shady stuff Yoruichi seemed so cautious about. Therefore, he was left to rely on vague hints given by a teenager months ago, and his sense of direction.

Soon enough, he found the place, bought a 500 Yen ticket for a tea ceremony experience and was told to await his turn. At the assigned time, he was ushered to a small courtyard with shrubs, potted plants and a water fountain. He sat at the edge of the porch and removed his shoes. Finally, he was invited into the tea room.

The tea mistress was a slender woman, hair as white as his, perhaps in her seventies, sporting a grey kimono with lavender colored foliage. Her skin was covered in a thick layer of powder and her eyes lined in black, behind rimless glasses.

Through the prescribed rites of chanoyu they moved to the interior and assumed their positions.
None was willing to give up on appearances just yet, but Jūshirō was certain that she knew exactly who he was.

She mumbled softly to herself as she prepared the utensils, but still she didn't acknowledge him. He would have to make a move, or their 20 minutes would soon elapse. That was when, in a soft, flowery voice, the woman said,

“I suppose I should thank you for taking care of my granddaughter. She spoke highly of you.” And she turned to face him and bowed deeply.

He returned the bow. "Lily is very fond of you. She told me to visit the tourism office in Uji and drink the tea her obasan makes, should I ever pass by Kyoto.”

"So you were passing by Kyoto..."

“No, I came here to see you”, he replied gravely.

“I can tell by the way you act that you are no novice to the way of tea. I am sorry to disappoint you, but my skills are poor.”

“I will not try to refute what is clearly modesty, but I will not lie either – I came here with ulterior motives.”

She had started whisking the tea, and did not interrupt that meticulous task. When finished, she placed the cup before the man, bowing. He drank in silence, then helped himself to the small candy placed on a sheet of paper before him. This was a patience game, and the host was playing it with absolute cool.

Finally, he pulled the rolled up newspaper from his jacket and placed it, face up, on the floor between them. She squinted and leant towards the paper, but did not touch it.

“Kyōraku Shunsui-san”, she pronounced, toneless, her face unreadable.

Jūshirō found himself unable to breathe. A heaviness weighed upon his sternum, and his heart slammed against the bone from the inside. Regardless, he would have to press forward. “If it's at all possible, would you be willing to make this known to your son?”

She faced him sternly, not startled. “My son was still a boy when he decided to leave me. He spent all his savings on a second hand camera and one day he left and didn't come back. Years passed until I saw him again. He had found a job taking pictures of the places no one wanted to go to. Wars, disasters, epidemics... He would never send word of his whereabouts. I worried myself sick.”

Jūshirō couldn't help but genuinely pity the woman. He thought of his own grandmother, and the pain that still torments her, of losing her daughter.

"That man", she continued. "I never met him, but I saw his face before, in a picture. He was much younger, and had the cold eyes of an assassin. It was one time, over dinner... Shugo said no one else had truly known him, like that man did. I told him to leave my house and never return."

"Do you regret it?" He felt tears welling up in his eyes, and he couldn't tell if it was still pity, anger, or all at once.

"A few years later, my granddaughter was born. Shugo came here with his foreign girlfriend, Lily's mother, and the baby... He completely ignored my orders, but he always did..."
She stood up and collected the chawan and the paper napkin, and started rinsing and storing all utensils again, a sign that the short demonstration was over.

"Will you help me?" he leant forward, pleading.

"What sort of mother would do such a thing?"

"One who's raised an honorable man."

"I raised no one. My son raised himself."

Jūshirō bit his bottom lip hard, lest tears really began to flow. He bowed deeply once more, and he did the unthinkable. He begged.

The woman listened to the feverish ramble and, when the voice went blank, she left the room, sliding the door behind her. A conversation approached on the other side of the thin wall. A foreign couple was next in line to experience an authentic Uji tea ceremony.

"Timothy, look at this! Wouldn't it be wonderful to have one of these in the garden?" An aged voice said.

"And where am I going to get a rock that big, Melinda?"

He was delaying the whole booking arrangement for the afternoon. He was being a nuisance. He still had his forehead plastered to the tatami and a sick sort of paralysis prevented him from moving.

Jūshirō Ukitake had always been a proud man. Loss of dignity was one of his greatest fears. And there he was, alone in the tea room, ignored by a stranger. He wanted to scream. Instead, he slammed his fists on the floor. With that, he finally mustered the strength to get up and leave.

He had almost walked the whole way to the train station when he remembered his intention to buy tea. He cursed to himself and turned on his heels. In the shop, he realized that adrenaline was making his brain work too quick, making him talk non stop and laugh awkwardly at everything. He bought more than he intended: a few tins of ceremonial grade matcha, packets of sencha, gyokuro and houjicha, a new chasen and some patterned cloths. It didn't matter, the Kuchiki siblings deserved all of it and more.

Still with a racing heart, he walked the street to the train station for the fourth time, and got on the train to Kyoto.

'Mrs. Kobayashi, what a bitter old witch,' he thought, but on a deeper layer of consciousness, he understood and even sympathized with the old woman. What did he expect? Desperate moves rarely work.

Was there still a thin hope? Perhaps, but it pained him that his only attempt to be of use had failed so miserably. He, who'd relied so much on Shunsui, felt utterly useless – a weak, irrelevant excuse of a man. One who burdens, one who needs protection, but cannot protect.

He transferred to the Shinkansen and tried to make himself sleep. Yoruichi had shipped his personal belongings to Okinawa. That probably meant that he should get out of the way and let things run their course. How presumptuous of him to think he could challenge that plan.

Jūshirō spent what was left of his supposed holiday with the Kuchikis. He would be lying if he said it was all pain and sorrow. He didn't share a bedroom with Byakuya again, but still their relationship grew closer. Rukia was visibly comfortable around him and she was even behaving more informally
towards her revered older brother.

One morning, after Byakuya left for work, her research project team came over and they had a lively discussion about technology markets. Another day, a red-haired fellow came for lunch. Jūshirō was unsure if they were friends or something else, but he had the clear impression that this Abarai knew him, although he'd never seen him before.

Finally, two weeks elapsed and Jūshirō went back to work. Despite the warm welcome the kids gave him, he could tell they had grown used to Momo. Things were peaceful, so he went to his office to go through paperwork.

He was pleasantly surprised to find that there was not much pending. Unlike Byakuya, Jūshirō though that delegating was trusting, and so many responsibilities had already been transferred to others. Perhaps his position was not something so relevant anymore. He could take up more teaching hours next school year. Or...

He shook away the thought, but it kept coming back in the following days. 'And so everything falls into place', he thought. That afternoon, while still in his office, Jūshirō made a call to Okinawa.

Saori-ba was doing well. She had no ailments and her will to wake up every day remained strong. They talked for close to half an hour, mostly about crops and other trivial matters. He was happy to hear her voice, and when they put down the phone, something deep in his chest told him that was the right thing to do. He typed frantically for what seemed like five minutes but actually took several hours. He then printed and signed his resignation letter, and marched to the principal’s office to deliver it by hand.

Father Miguel glanced from the letter to him, then down to the letter again.

"I am sorry", he heard himself say, while bending his spine to the priest.

"I was not aware you were going through family problems. I am sorry to have burdened you with so much work and responsibilities."

He shook his head, "I am thankful for your trust."

"Wouldn't you prefer to just take a break? You can go back to Okinawa for a few months. We will hold your position..."

"I am humbled, Father, honestly, but my decision is made."

The priest put down the letter and eyed him with the full intensity of those bright eyes. He suddenly felt an urge to tell the truth, but the truth was a long winded story that he didn't know how to start. He felt tongue-tied and confused, and all of a sudden he blurted out, in a firm voice that he barely recognized as his own - "I'm gay."

The priest took a moment to breathe in and out. "Has anyone caused you trouble?"

He looked dumbfounded. Where was the outrage, the censure, the shaming? Father Miguel left his seat and poured water in the kettle, then pressed the switch.
"I always knew. I daresay, from the first time you walked into this room to be interviewed... You had no expectations whatsoever, had you? You thought your differences were so obvious that you would never be accepted, but still you stood before me, with courage and hope... and my acceptance brought you so much joy. But what you might not know is that, besides your straight As, your distinctions and honors, it was that strong humanity that I saw in you that made me think you were the right person for the job. And I was absolutely right."

"Are you serious?" His voice came out weaker this time, and a blush rose up his cheeks.

"Absolutely." Floral scented steam emerged from the small Chinese tea cups as the liquid was poured from the delicate brown clay pot.

"From Formosa, one of my favorites. Dozo."

"Thank you." Jūshirō took the cup and sipped cautiously. It was hot but bearable.

"Tell me Ukitake-sensei, how likely do you think it is for a native of the island of Luzon to become the principal of a Jesuit college in Tokyo?"

Luzon? So that’s where he was from. Jūshirō had never made much of it, to be honest. A slightly darker complexion, Australasian features... those things had never really stood out. The principal was the principal, or maybe, being a priest, in Jūshirō’s mind he was already beyond earthly distinctions - like origin, race or sex. Nevertheless, the point was now clear as water.

"If you may forgive my presumption, I believe you are as fit for the job as anyone can be”, he said.

The principal smiled faintly and laid a hand on his shoulder. “So are you.”

“Thank you."

“But if you need time to rest and sort out your thoughts, I suppose I should not oppose it. I will accept your letter for now. Let us find a new member for the team, and if one day you wish to return, I believe something can always be arranged.”

He uttered another heartfelt thank you, and added, “about my replacement, an application came in recently – perhaps we can start there.”

And so Jūshirō’s last month at St. Ignatius began. He interviewed and hired Hitsugaya Toshiro, Momo got a promotion, and the football team performed its special move in one last tournament. This time, Jūshirō joined the celebrations and went soaking in a hot spring with a bunch of tipsy teachers.

The media fuzz about the Kyōraku investigation died down, and so keeping track of the situation as an outsider became nearly impossible, since Yoruichi never contacted him again.

The month went by in a whiff, and on a cold December morning, after saying his farewells to a small group of friends, Jūshirō boarded his usual flight to Okinawa.

A few days later, the panel of judges of the Tokyo district court finally set the date for the first hearing of trial. The public prosecutor issued summons for a list of witnesses that included all the
shareholders and directors of the KKK, Gin Ichimarlu, Lisa Yadomaru, representatives of the consulting firm that handled the accounts, the banks that acted as trustees for Kyōraku Shunsui during the period of his trust, and Grimmjaw Jaegerjacquez, in respect of whom an international arrest warrant was issued.

The news reignited the interest in the case, and a small funfair of tripods and microphones spawned in the vicinity of the police station and the court. The main targets were the judges, prosecutors and lawyers, that went in and out, going about their businesses.

For the man behind bars, time passed slowly. The liveliest part of his day was the visit from his team of lawyers. He had never seen such a collection of clashing personalities trying to work together. It would have amused him, if he didn't rely on them to get out of jail, eventually.

Nanao came by with a proof of his photo book. It was sweet of her to do so. The layout, color and paper were all gorgeous, but both of them knew that such a project was destined to be shelved. Who would buy photos taken by a criminal?

Meanwhile, in the back of a small shop in the suburban town of Karakura, a woman sat on a porch and nursed a cup of milk, loaded with apprehensive thoughts. Frustration and an unfulfilled promise to someone precious.

“Yoru”, a tired voice emerged from inside the house.

She hoisted herself, head a little heavy, and went inside. Kisuke was slouching in his nest of screens, cables and random machines, one leg pulled to his chest.

“Found anything?”

“Take a look.”

She knelt by his side on the tatami. He pointed to a line on a message board, written in yellow on a black pane.

“Buy Edo-period trade empire. We take Bitcoin. Posted by sOu1KiNg, 3 minutes ago”, she read. “Motherfucker's full of confidence”, she spat. “Think you can track him down?”

“It's nearly impossible, babe. You know, tor…”

“That's why I love you...you said nearly impossible.” She winked and got up, pulling a motorcycle helmet from the nearby shelf. “I'll leave you to it. I need to drop by Soi Fon's.”

“Take care”, he replied to her back, as she strode away.

Chapter End Notes

Heya! Hope all is well with you guys. A bit of a plot-ty part this time. Hope you liked it!
Trials and tribulations

Chapter Summary

The court hearing is finally upon them. At the same time, backstage efforts to uncover the mysterious 'Soulking'' continue. Surprise appearances turn the tables.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a special place in Yoruichi's heart for the small abode they called "Urahara Shoten". The place was crammed and old, but it was the home she had chosen. There, she always felt a sense of freedom. It helped that Kisuke was not the kind of lover that restricts and demands. He was protective in his own quirky way, and always brought out the best in her.

Seeing the anachronic building dead ahead, she slowed down, turned off the engine, and wedged her bike between the wall and the resident microvan, parking it neatly behind. She had, indeed, asked Kisuke to track Aizen, but what she saw inside the house made her jaw drop.

Kisuke was, as usual, working cross-legged by the low round table that doubled as their dining table, but around it were two more people, each with their own laptop – a boy and a girl, both young, both sort of red-haired. Kisuke noticed Yoruichi by the door and followed her outside.

"The hell, Kisuke? Child labor?"

"Yare, yare, hello to you too..." But her hands remained on her hips, her brow raised. He sighed. 
"Let's say they have their own motives."

"Meaning?"

"The kid's a Shiba. Mother was murdered mysteriously. He was the only witness but can't remember a thing..."

"And the girl?"

At that question, Kisuke grinned mischiviously and lent forward, whispering, "I think she likes him..."

Yoruichi rolled her eyes. That the boy wanted to figure out what had happened to his family seemed like a valid reason, but how exactly Kisuke had managed to recruit him was still unclear.

Later on, Kisuke would admit that he'd known the kid for a while. First, he had befriended him in an attempt to discover Isshin's whereabouts, but they soon realized that they had much in common. Kisuke had been tutoring him and a few of his friends, on and off, for a few months.

The days passed and the task force carried on with their work. The kids would come by after school and work until past dinner time. A small forest of plastic bottles containing varying quantities of soft drinks grew in their midst, and the basket of pastries on the table would be replenished every day.

"Check this out", Kisuke called, uncrossing his legs and picking up a pile of paper from the floor.
"What is this?"

"Everything. Business registration, financials, bank statements... All you need to know about Kyōraku Kabushiki Kaisha."

"Thoughtful."

"He's calling it a welcome package and sending it to anyone who puts in a bid to buy the company."

"And you put in a bid?"

"Kurosaki-san here did."

The orange-haired kid looked up from under his purple hoodie, a scowl maring his handsome chiseled features.

"How's your favorite mentee doing?" Kisuke changed subject.

It was the second time in a pair few days that Yoruichi had tried to persuade Soi Fon to back them up. Kisuke agreed that they would need the support, but was not too keen on having local cops snooping around their business.

"Short fuse as ever", Yoruichi sighed. "But not stubborn enough to waste a tip like this. If I know Soi-Fon, she's having Aizen hunted down as we speak. She asked a little something in return though..."

He gave a small nod that made the shade of his hat cover the light of his eyes. It meant he was all ears.

"While we mainly want to catch Aizen, the primary goal of their investigation is to find out where the Kyōraku money went. If they can trace a link between Kyōraku and whoever got the money, their case is solved. So that's where your expertise comes in handy..."

Kisuke sighed. Hacking banks... one more item in the to-do list.

"Urahara-san", the girl called from behind. They both turned to face her. "Can you have a look here?"

If Kisuke was the science and technology guy, Yoruichi was all raw cunning and physique. Her understanding of IT was just a little more than basic. For that reason, for most of the conversation that ensued, she kept quiet, sitting cross-legged by the door. It was easier to ask for the short version afterwards.

"And now in plain speech...?" she asked when the time came.

Kisuke quickly summarized their findings – something about nodes and correlations. They would need more manpower and time, but they might be able to track the poster of the offer, and find out if Soulking was Sousuke Aizen after all.

There were two days to go until the hearing.

And in a hurry, they went by.
Ignorant of all backstage movements, the accused woke up in his cell, and started getting ready for the day. It had become a habit of his to seek Jūshirō’s hypothetical advice whenever problems came his way. On that morning, those small pieces of imagined wisdom came to him at every step.

‘If Ukitake were here’, he thought, as he pulled the jacket over his shoulders, ‘he would tell me to keep my back straight and my chin high.’ And so he did. He combed his hair back, trying to tame coarse

Moments later, Yumichika and the bald guy came by to give him the rundown. The first day was likely to be taken up in full by the statements from KKK people and external consultants. Gin Ichimaru and uncle Arata were scheduled for the second day, along with his own examination and the counsel’s pleadings.

After the quick meeting, the lawyers went back the same way, through the media apparatus, and he took the smooth way, by armored van, straight to the back door of the court house.

Nanao and Lisa were among the morning batch. As expected, Lisa carried herself with confidence and delivered a fool proof account of the facts. With the next few more questions, however, the prosecutor took a different direction.

“Ms. Yadomaru, is it true that you have been subject to correctional measures as a result of an incident occurred in 1998?”

Her gaze dashed past Shunsui, to the defense lawyers sitting behind him. Ikkaku protested, but the panel of judges wanted to hear it.

“It was a peaceful protest”, she began, almost unfazed. “But whatever ill intent might have existed within our group, the extremely effective measures applied to us succeeded in completely eradicating it. We are now fully reformed members of society.”

Shunsui had to smirk at that. However, the witty reply was no more than that. The credibility of the witness had been hindered.

Next was Nanao. At the clerk’s call, there she came. In through the door, around the wooden barriers and straight towards the center, to the witnesses' chair. She spared her uncle a quick glance and from that dash of pretty almond eyes he could tell she was unsteady. Luckily witnesses don't get to hear each others' statements. Lisa's predicament would have made it 10x worse.

All her answers were articulate and clear, a full logic explanation on the company's recent history, from the shareholding situation to matters of inheritance and accounting. However, her voice trembled at the end of every other sentence, and her eyes drifted to the left side a few times. What could he do? Although their chairs were nearly adjacent, giving her a pat in the back was not an option, a calming word even less. So he used the only possible device at his disposal – his silly, sheepish, uncle smile. And it worked.

The afternoon session brought in a number of people Shunsui had never seen before. Unit managers, bookkeepers, secretaries... All had no more to say than praise for the late Kyōraku Juntoku and minor comments on the good management of the company until then. Then, a sequence of employees of the consulting firm responsible for the financial statements were called, but did not appear. All except one.

The man walked in, tall and lanky, bangs hovering over his right eye, sporting a typical salary man's black suit and tie.

"State your name and aliases", the clerk ordered.
"Mabashi", he replied.

Enquired on occupation the man stated he was a chartered accountant, and had worked directly in the KKK's financials.

"Are you aware of any irregularities in last year's financials of the company?" Asked the prosecutor.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you describe those irregularities?"

"Seven unjustified outward remittances."

"Are you aware of the risks associated with this kind of transaction?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why has your firm failed to report it, as it should?"

The young man lowered his head, a blatantly rehearsed show of repentance.

"Our team leader, along with all the senior staff, received payments in return for not reporting it, and leaving the country immediately."

There was an immediate rise in humming within the room. Shunsui could hear the lawyers behind him exchange comments and turn pages.

"Silence", urged the judge.

"Mr. Mabashi, and do you happen to know who made such arrangements with your superiors?"

"Yes, sir, I do." He lowered his head again, looking pained, then lifted it up theatrically. "It was Kyôraku Shunsui, sir."

Yachiru's bright pink hair was the first thing they saw when they returned to the office after the hearing. Zaraki was oddly permissive to everything his foster daughter wanted, including use of office premises for hide and seek and other recreational purposes.

As the lawyers laid down their briefcases, a sense of unease sank in. That witness had obviously been bought, but Zaraki's cross-examination had only partially succeeded in exposing the falsehood of the statements.

The girl dashed past the two underlings and jumped onto the big man's shoulder.

"Ken-chan!" she greeted, before running off again, on some treasure hunt.

Yumichika was used to the girl's antics, so he didn't pay her any mind. There were more pressing issues at hand, namely food. He turned on the light in his room, took off his jacket, laid back on his chair and pulled the phone receiver.

"Good evening, five house special bento sets and one order of fried gyoza, delivery at Zaraki and associates..."
Lisa arrived shortly after they had eaten their meals. The executive had changed from the formal outfit to a black and gold tracksuit and leant back on one of the bouncy meeting room chairs.

"It's the worst possible scenario", Ikkaku assessed. "If Ichimaru really was behind this, he will have the chance to talk to this accountant guy overnight, and prepare accordingly."

"But unless they somehow dig up Jaegerjaquez, there is still a missing link, isn't it?" Lisa asked.

"Can't really say that. Ichimaru is unpredictable and he's had access to the company for years... Any update on Shiba? That could help."

"No."

"Bank accounts?"

Lisa shook her head mournfully. They took a collective sigh, then fell silent. Zaraki towered over them, as the only one standing. He had a vicious look in his eyes, and a grimace his two associates had learned to recognize as his fighting face.

And then there was a blow. A loud stumpt that made the table shake and soda spill from the paper cups.

"The hell I'm gonna give up", Zaraki spat. "Yumichika, get the binders. We're going over everything again."

"The binders" was an euphemism for a load of paperwork that occupied the whole of Yumichika's desk. In content it ranged from corporate and financial documents, to random information on Shunsui's personal life and everything that could be found in the media about Japanese involvement in international crime. Bit by bit, all were moved to the conference room and they all sat around the pile. At 10:30 pm the night was about to begin.

On another part of town, another task force was formed. The "reinforcements" sent by Soi Fon consisted of a blue-haired wacky pseudo-policeman and his band of minions.

"Kisuke, this Kurotsuchi gives me the creeps. You sure you can work with him?" Yoruichi worried.

"He seems well versed in many subjects of our interest. Worry not, my dear, I'll sleep with one eye open." And he sank back into his work station.

Looking over the scene Yoruichi realized she was off her turf. She went out and sat on the porch. It was minimal space, locked between concrete walls, but through a narrow wedge, one could see the moon. The night was clear and cold. She glanced at the tail of her motorbike, hidden behind the house. What could she do?

She wondered why she was so invested in all this. It was her job, of course, and then there was her promise to Jūshirō. Maybe she should have just let them flee. They might have still made it, had she delayed the report a few hours. But no, she was sure this was the right way – to clear the man's name and keep them apart until everything was settled. Justice. Rule of law. It all sounded a bit naive now.

What were they dealing with? Sousuke Aizen was no ordinary crook. He had an agenda. If his "Soulking" deep web propaganda was to be believed, he would not stop short of overthrowing the
Emperor. Bringing down the pillars of the economy was just the start. And all the way, the seeds of hatred were sown everywhere: the Shiba, Shinji’s gang, Kisuke... How many more would enter the revenge wagon after this? After the next coup? Something had to be done to stop the spiral of vendetta. And so it dawned on her: perhaps Aizen could not be stopped, not yet, but there was still one way to weaken his blow, and that was to deprive him of victims. She smiled. Finally, she could think of something within her skill set. She grabbed her helmet and rode to the courthouse.

Sleeping in a cell was a serious downgrade from the fluffy bed back home - and the beautiful bundle of love he used to share it with - but still pretty decent compared to sand or stone. Moreover, Shunsui could say he had been born with a natural talent for sleeping. Long, short, daytime, nighttime, whatever the terrain, he could always make the best of any nap opportunities. And so, on the night after the first day of hearings, despite it all, he easily dropped into a slumber, as soon as he got to his cell, after his evening meal.

However, it didn't take long until his mind slipped out of deep sleep and the frantic movement of the eyes signaled the onset of a dream. It started off quiet and familiar. A slow walk home from school on a spring afternoon. The setting was not Shouwa era Ginza, though, but something more ingrained in memories he could not trace, something older... To make things odder, he was wearing hakama. He didn't remember ever going to school in hakama...

Young dream-world Shunsui glanced at his wrist and saw a torn up old blue ribbon tied around it. Looking at it brought him a strange disembodied nostalgia, like it had mattered a lot to him at some point. Then, he heard a voice calling his name. He turned back, and as he did the setting sun hit his eyes. All he could make out was a shock of white hair, someone running towards him...

Blackout. Old Shunsui, older than he was now, standing on a pile of rubble. Points of pain on several parts of his body flared at every shift of his weight. His vision was somehow one sided. He brought a hand to his temple and felt straps of fabric and an unhealed wound. As if materializing in his field of vision, Jūshirō appeared, standing atop another pile of rubble. He had bandages around his neck and chest and his hair had grown so long. He looked weaker, worn-out. It broke Shunsui's heart, but for some reason, he did not run to hold him, as he felt he should. The man smiled a small pained smile, a silent apology in his lovely green eyes.

And he woke up.

‘Something bad was about to happen’, he thought, and tears started flowing down his face.

“Yo.”

The whisper seemed to have come from above. It startled him but didn't chase away the despair that had set in after the dream. He looked up again, eyes adjusting to the dark, and saw something hanging outside the gridded door. ‘Hair?’

And in a silent catlike movement, Yoruichi landed in front of him.

“Ex-girlfriend from hell? What you doin’ here?”

She stuck her index to her lips, urging him to keep quiet, and then signaled him to come closer.

“Listen carefully. This is what we'll do if you don't get your ass out of jail the normal way…”
Morning brought sun and more glacial wind. At the office of the Zaraki law firm, Ayasegawa Yumichika came out of a shallow sleep, slumped forward on his desk.

“Yo, rise and shine…” Ikkaku shook the other man lightly.

“Hmm? Where am I?”

“You crashed after the boss left.”

“You pulled an all nighter?”

Ikkaku shrugged. “If only I could say there was any use in it…”

They sighed. The timer on the computer screen marked 6:30. Taking a taxi and going home for a quick shower was still an option. Maybe he could even bring Ikkaku along. The man needed to freshen up.

"Let's go ho-" but he was silenced by the doorbell.

As expected, Gin Ichimaru lied through his fangs for the whole duration of his testimony. He painted Shunsui as an erratic element that could not be trusted. He claimed to have heard Kyōraku Juntoku himself state, on his deathbed, that he feared his second son would bring the company to its downfall. On the hiring of Lisa Yadomaru, he asserted that Shunsui was aware of her past as a delinquent and forced her hiring, when there was a much more suitable candidate willing to take up office. His performance finished with a distorted account of Lisa's visit to the warehouse of Spring Water Spirits. According to him, she had tried to destroy the financial records of the company and only failed because they had already, diligently, called the police.

After this, uncle Arata's testimony had little impact. The man had no relevant opinion on Shunsui's life or character. On corporate matters, he claimed to have always trusted the managers' and accountants' judgment and to have little involvement in the business of the main company.

And so the scheduled testimonies came to an end. The prosecutors seemed confident that they would be able to walk away with a conviction, even though the search for the truth had led to a big pile of nothing.

The speaker for the panel of judges scanned the room over the rim of her thin reading glasses. The accused sat, slouching slightly, with an impenetrable grin. He had been like that for two days. The sign of a psychopath? The defense lawyers were strangely quiet. Zaraki was a troublesome fellow to work with – unpredictable and unorthodox. Maybe this was the day when he would finally be beaten. She pressed the button to activate her microphone and spoke,

"Having heard all witnesses, the session will now break for lunch. In the afternoon we will hear the accused, and then the public prosecutor and the defense attorneys' pleadings..."

"Your honor", Zaraki called. It was a perfectly timed interruption.

"Yes, counsel, do you wish to make any requests?"

"Yes, your honor."
"Proceed."

"The defense respectfully requests the hearing of one further witness. Until now, no adequate support to the involvement of my client in unlawful activities has been provided, and the hearing of this witness will put all doubts to rest."

"And why was this witness not enlisted at the proper time?"

"Your honor, the witness came to us this morning, on his own accord."

"Prosecutor, any objections?"

"A sufficient connection between the accused and the criminal deeds under investigation has been established. Unless the witness has credible information to the contrary, the hearing is not justified."

The same index finger, where a heavy golden ring rested, pressed the button once more. The rim of red light around the microphone went dark. For some time the only sound that could be heard inside the courtroom was the whispering among the three judges. Then, the red light was on again.

"The hearing of the witness proposed by the defense is accepted. If the testimony is deemed irrelevant or dilatory, the defence counsel will be fined. Please present the witness immediately."

It was with a certain air of triumph that Yumichika stood from the bench behind Kyōraku and walked to the door, went out, and then back in, followed by the witness - a tall slender man in his forties, shoulder-length dark hair and grey eyes. Maybe it was the build, the penetrating gaze, or something enticingly vagabond about him, but all heads turned to look at the newcomer. Some were curious, wondering what knowledge such a person could have of the facts, some were probably cursing inside, but one reaction was more noticeable than all others.

"Get outta here you moron!" the accused snarled.

"Silence!" ordered the judge.

The witness glared at the accused and silently mouthed the words 'shut up'.

The court clerk rose from his seat and signaled the witness to remain standing.

That morning, that same enigmatic figure had walked into the Zaraki law firm's office, to the surprise of two sleepy-eyes lawyers, leaving them utterly incredulous when he told them he was there upon his mother's request. Of course, he said, he would have come anyway, had he known. He lived overseas, travelled almost continuously and didn't keep up with Japanese news. More important, though, was the fact that he was prepared to take the blow, in his best friend's stead.

"State your name and aliases", the court clerk ordered.

"Shugo Kobayashi", the witness replied, "I also go by Coyote Starrk."

Chapter End Notes

Ops, a lot of stuff happening IRL... sorry for the wait. I hope the next won't take as long! About this chapter, writing a "Japanese" court hearing was definitely a first for yours truly, so any feedback, as always, is much appreciated!
The Soulking

Chapter Summary

Starrk stands before the judges, confident that he can make tables turn. In a suburb nearby, a secret operation is in progress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“State your name and aliases.”

“Shugo Kobayashi. I also go by Coyote Starrk.”

Just by revealing his identity, Starrk caused quite an uproar in the courtroom. Understandably, the prosecutor asked for a few minutes to review the records. It was a period of silence and page turning, otherwise nothing happening at all. To dispel the growing boredom, Shunsui took to examining the prosecutor.

There was nothing especially salient about the forty something male. Hair was still black and neatly cropped, but crow’s feet began to show from temples. What was most interesting, though, was the man’s expression while flicking pages. It was not embarrassment or annoyance, but rather a sort of panicked confusion, as if a logic string of events had lost its meaning.

Shunsui mused that this generic prosecutor of the Tokyo court was no villain, just a man doing a job. As such, it was only natural to prefer an easy job over a complicated one. At least that was what his laid back nature advised.

What could that report state about Starrk? Reckless idiot, Shunsui cursed, his anger lurking back. Who the hell plunges straight into the eye of a storm? With a daughter to raise, no less.

With composed hesitancy, the prosecutor rose to his feet and finally began the examination.

“Mr. Kobayashi, what is your relationship to the accused?”

“Friends,” Starrk replied without missing a beat.

“And what led your friend Kyoraku-san to illegally enter Aleppo last July?”

Starrk’s bright white teeth shone through his smile.

“He went there to save me.”

Next came multiple requests for details and explanations, that Starrk navigated with finesse. Where did all this eloquence come from? He seemed at ease, pleased even.

“For the past three years”, he explained, “I've been tailing a group of people that use the code name
of 'Hueco Mundo' to communicate among them. It's the name they give to threads on Reddit and 4chan, or other places in the dark web. They are an assortment of criminals and geniuses, and their goal seems to focus on overthrowing the Japanese imperial system. The idea intrigued me, because it seemed odd for a quest, all things considered. More so, because I came to know that their reasons were less practical than strictly philosophical. I then befriended Grimmjow Jeagerjaques and my access to their operations began in earnest."

"Are you a member of that organization?"

"No. I am just a journalist."

"Can you prove your claims?"

"I have over 100 hours of footage collected through the past years. I have photos, interviews and contacts. I am willing to disclose them to the authorities under confidentiality."

The room erupted in a buzz. The judges whispered to each other, then told the prosecutor to continue.

"I have no further questions."

And with that, the ball was handed to Zaraki, who seemed to bask in bloodlust at the turn of events. Shunsui wondered why Starrk had been so quick in namedropping Grimmjow. They had seemed to be in good enough terms for the time they were all together, returning to Lebanon. Had they fallen out? Or was Starrk confident enough that the blue-haired daredevil would not be caught?

"Everyone here looks hungry. I'll be brief," Zaraki started, earning a few scattered chuckles. The air was thick enough to be cut at knife point.

"Kobayashi-san, do you happen to know who leads this organization you talk about?"

"I do", he replied with the same toothy smirk, "a man named Sousuke Aizen", he paused, "and two henchmen named Kaname Tousen and Gin ichimaru."

And the buzz returned to the room.

"Silence", the judge ordered. "Kobayashi-san, do you have any documentary evidence to back this up? False accusation is as criminal offense."

"I have."

"Prosecutor, is Gin Ichimaru still in the building?"

"Your honor, the police does not restrain witnesses, unless they are accused..."

"Then the police should have brought us the right persons to be accused. An arrest warrant for Sousuke Aizen, Kaname Tousen and Gin ichimaru is hereby issued, enforceable immediately."

The clerk jotted down the warrant as fast as he could and the judges signed it. He then passed it to the prosecutor who ran to the door.

As he was placing his hand on the knob and the guard on duty was stepping aside, the heavy wooden door slammed open, missing the prosecutor's face by inches. Through it passed, seemingly all at once, captains Soi Fon and Kurotsuchi and lieutenants Omaeda and Nemu of the Tokyo police organized crime and information technology divisions.
"Permission to address the court", requested Soi Fon in her taut voice.

"Granted."

"We have the location of Sousuke Aizen and forensic evidence that the transfers from Spring Water Spirits Company Limited were directed to offshore bank accounts held by shell companies set up by Kaname Tousen."

"Prosecutor, please pass the warrant to captain Soi Fon. Captain, proceed immediately."

The Prosecutor did as instructed and returned to his seat, just as the police officers bowed and left at once, like flashes of light dashing away.

"Mr. Kobayashi," the judge continued, "the panel wishes to ask further questions and review any documentary evidence you can provide. Do you agree to a closed-door hearing beginning immediately?"

"I do."

"You are to be heard as a witness, but the court exceptionally authorizes you to be assisted by legal counsel, if you wish."

Starrk's gaze crossed Shunsui's en passant, but the destination was the column of lawyers behind him.

"Madarame", Zaraki mouthed.

"Hai," the lawyer answered and stood up like a spring, before following Starrk out by the main door. The three judges and the Prosecutor left separately by their reserved corridor. And just like that, the room fell silent.

Slowly, though, as it became clear that all present would have to stay there for a while, the warm humming of voices returned. The court clerks exchanged sighs and fell into a seemingly familiar chat. Those sitting in the audience – mostly law students and journalists – talked among themselves. Zaraki stood by the window, a caged beast growling at the bars.

"Kyoraku-san," Yumichika called, fingers lightly tapping at his shoulder, "are you ok?"

"I wanted that idiot out of trouble..."

"He's not in trouble..."

Shunsui glanced back to find the lawyer's smug grin pointed straight at him.

"He'd better not be."

At the Urahara shoten no one waited for news of the court order to start preparations. When they eventually arrived, via one of Soi Fon's police ninjas, everything was well under way. The boy named Ishida was arranging cables and all sorts of electronic paraphernalia into neatly labeled boxes, and Chad dutifully piled them up in the back of the micro van.

Yoruichi came out of the bedroom ready to give Urahara an earful.
"Kisuke, don't you think this will attract a bit of attention on the road?"

The man was a sort of all purpose rogue scientist. Besides the information technology gimmicks, he spent his time conducting experiments of all sorts. Therefore, it was no surprise, when they found out that Aizen was hiding somewhere within the Fukushima exclusion zone, that he should just happen to have a few prototype radiation-proof outfits lying around.

However, to Yoruichi's amazement, hers was nothing like the other one, assigned to the Kurosaki boy.

"And why am I the only one in a leotard, anyway?"

"Babe, who would want to see Kurosaki-san in a leotard?"

She rolled his eyes. The pervyness came with the package, she thought.

"Now, both of you, when you enter the exclusion zone, put on these cloaks. They will shield whatever the special microfiber can't block. If you need to remove them to fight, make it quick."

“Don't worry about it hat and clogs,” the boy boasted, “we’ll get that bastard before sundown.”

Six years after the disaster, the area around Fukushima remained deserted. Inhabitants were allowed occasional visits to tend to their belongings, but could not stay the night. The question of why Aizen would choose such a place to operate from loomed over them all. It was possible that he'd planted the clues to lure Japan's elite police force into a radioactive pit, but it was still their best bet.

In his online preaching, Aizen claimed to have reached a state of evolution that allowed him to resist even the most adverse environments, a privilege he was offering whoever willed to join his quest. To kill the emperor, a frail god that walks the earth against his will. To some extent, Yoruichi agreed that much was wrong with the current system. The post-war constitution had stripped the occupant of the chrysanthemum throne of temporal power, but still he was forced to serve a life-long pathos of symbolic irrelevance while politicians and foreign powers ripped the country to pieces. Aizen had posed as chrysanthemum himself, in his early days, but his true nature was revealed through a sequence of plots that left a trail of destruction in many a life. Ichigo Kurosaki was the embodiment of this collateral harm.

"Let's go Ichigo."

The two best fighters of the group, Ichigo and Yoruichi, would ride east and enter the exclusion zone by an unguarded route and head to the abandoned hospital of the town of Futaba, the apparent origin of Aizen's posts as "Soulking".

The rest of the team would follow in their tail, in the micro van, and keep tracking Aizen, in case he decided to flee. Both units should reach significantly ahead of Soi Fon’s team, who would have to seek clearance to enter the zone.

The plan was as clear as it could be. The motorbike engine roared and took off. At the same time, with all the load and passengers in, the more subdued humming of the micro van follow in tow.

It was well past close of business when the court finally dismissed the hearing. Both Starrk and Shunsui were released without restrictions. The investigation would proceed based on the new leads.
Outside the court, the media circus was all the rage. While the lawyers moved ahead, Starrk, Lisa, Nanao and Shunsui trailed behind, ducking the reporters’ attempts to get first hand reactions. As the KKK headquarters was equally surrounded, they made their way to Shunsui’s place for debriefing.

More than two months had passed since he’d last seen those walls. Everything was tidy and the heating system was on. In the bedroom, the two fishes swam oblivious to all the commotion, a last memento of the happy days that had been lived in that space.

“Sato-san has been coming here with his wife,” Lisa said, right outside the bedroom door, unwilling to cross the threshold of intimacy.

“Thank you.”

The small container that said ‘premium food for fancy goldfish’ lied right by the bowl. Sato-san had apparently added an oxygen stone that sent bubbles up to the surface. Absentmindedly, he opened the container and watched as the two animals swam up and fought over the foul smelling pellets that he dropped to the water.

Lisa seemed to have finally decided to move into the room. Baby steps, careful steps. When she was close enough she peeked into the bowl. For a few moments they just watched the bubbling and graceful movement of tails. Then, she said,

“I have to go.”

“You know,” he replied, “it’s a sadistic sort of comfort to know that this Aizen fellow, whoever he is, was already destroying lives well before he chose to destroy mine.”

She took a glimpse of the expression in the man’s face. It was bitter and dark, in a mix of guilt and self pity. She looked away, as she moved to take her leave.

“I'll see you soon, I guess.”

At that moment, Shunsui had yet another ‘what would Jūshirō have done’ episodes and, in the blink of an eye, wrapped his arms around the woman, tucking her in a glorious bear hug.

“Of course you’ll see me again, Lisa-chan. What would I ever do without you?”

“Tche. That goes without saying…”

The hug unwound into a mutual smile and they got back to the lounge.

"Nanao-chan," he called, letting Lisa make her way out unnoticed, "can I bother you to set up a press conference tomorrow. I want to issue an apology."

Her eyes widened.

"Uncle, isn't it a bit early?"

He considered, then concluded, "I'd rather do it soon."

"Hai. Will be arranged."

One by one, the visitors excused themselves, leaving only the host and an old friend. Wordlessly, Starrk put on his leather jacket and went out to the balcony. Shunsui followed. Seeing the man behind him, Starrk pulled his cigarette pack and offered it.
"Thanks, but I quit."

Starrk shot him an inquisitive look.

"Jūshirō had lung surgery a few years back..."

"How are things?"

"Don't know... probably over."

Starrk lit up his own stick and leant into the rail.

"That bad?"

"I kept him in the dark about this whole thing, tried to escape the country with him... Don't want to think what could have happened... if we were caught..."

In a change of mind, he dipped his hand in Starrk's pocket and pulled out the pack.

"It's understandable that he'd stay away... but total silence kind of-"

Starrk took the lighter from his other pocket and held it to the cigarette pressed between Shunsui's lips. "-kind of hurt."

They pulled and released the smoke in unison.

"You're a moron."

"I know."

Ever prone to drama, Shunsui dipped his forehead to the rail. A hand landed on his neck almost instantly, and moved in what almost resembled a caress. The touch was rough and cold, but it sent shivers down his spine. When he rolled his head to the side, Starrk's eyes were on his, grey, peaceful, familiar. Slowly, his torso came upright, their heights almost perfectly leveled, their lips inches apart.

"Spend the night with me," he whispered.

Starrk's eyelids fluttered for a moment, then settled, and he pulled himself back to a safe distance.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"Because you're even more of a moron than me?" he asked, but then an odd piece of information relayed during the trial crossed his mind, "What was that story with your mom anyway?"

Starrk grinned like he wanted to say 'thought you'd never ask', but instead he pulled another puff of smoke and turned around to lean back against the rail, facing the inside of the house.

"I was in England for Lily's high school graduation. That's when I got a call from my mother, telling me you'd been busted... something about money transfers and a trip to Aleppo..."

"Your mom interfering in something that could get me hanged... very uncanny."

Starrk's low laugh rolled between his teeth, past the cigarette.

"Well... According to her, she was quite moved by a white haired fellow that visited her tea room..."
and dragged his head on the floor begging her to talk me into this... of course at first she told him to fuck off, but then had a change of heart and actually called me..."

Led by instinct, Shunsui’s fist clenched around the collar of Starrk’s black shirt.

"Don't fuck with me Kobayashi!"

"Back off!" Starrk snapped the strong fists open and set himself free. Even that was familiar, them measuring strengths. It was not uncommon, back in the days, for them to physically fight, before, during or after engaging in other kinds of physical contact...

"Listen to me, temme. It's true. It's all true. It was him."

The words came with the effect of paralysis. The open fists remained tucked to the chest, the chin propped forward, back slightly hunched, eyes wide open.

"Go fix this mess." Starrk closed his hands over the statue-man's hands and kissed his forehead - for the first time in thirty years of sex-tinged friendship.

"See you around, capitaine."

And Shunsui was left alone with his thoughts once again.

Having spent most of his adult years abroad, to Shunsui Japanese corporate apologies inhabited a space that he would define as somewhere between circus and tragicomedy. Executives knocking their heads on the table about defective gear boxes or teeth in beef patty. It had never crossed his mind that he would one day be the one behind the conference table.

After Starrk left the night before, he had looked at his sake stash, then at his computer table, and had chosen the latter. The note he penned began with an apology to the workers of the Kyōraku group, especially those at Spring Water Spirits, who felt the impact of declining reputation more acutely. Then, it proceeded to apologize to business partners for possible disruption in their own transactions, to customers for having to change their consumer habits so as not to support illegal activities and, finally, to the whole country for the embarrassment. On a first revision he added 'deep and sincere apologies' at the end of each paragraph, and then re-read the whole thing once more for pace and fluidity. He finally attached it to an email to Nanao and wrote - 'for your review, my dear and wise Nanao-chan'.

The journalists came in orderly and took the seats arranged in rows facing the long table that had been set to the backdrop of an Edo period street scene. Microphones with different labels were placed on the table, and the cameras lined up at the back of the room. As Gin Ichimaru was still at large, the company was represented by Shunsui, Nanao and uncle Arata, the latter having agreed to show up and bow, but not to talk.

And so they came in, black suits and grey ties, and left after the message was delivered. No questions answered, because the investigation was now under utmost secrecy. By noon, their bowing image was splattered all over the country.

They retreated to another conference room. An attendant brought tea.

"You did well, boy," said uncle Arata, in his newly acquired Kansai accent.
"Thank you, uncle."

"Let me treat you lunch. Bet those cops didn't feed you anything decent. You look skinny."

The words made him smile.

"I'll definitely take you up on that offer some time... But I need to go somewhere now... My apologies..."

The old bearish man grinned.

"Enough apologies for one day. Get the hell out of here, boy."

And off he went, by the front door, in a beeline to the edge of the pavement, in search of a free taxi, and utterly uncaring of journalists still hanging around.

He was in luck, and one of the gorgeous, classic black toyotas that still do the rounds of the city stopped promptly at his wave.

“St Ignatius college, please.”

If his luck were to keep up, he would bump into Jūshirō doing rounds of the school in his cute jogging tracksuit. He would snatch him away to someplace where he could finally drop to his knees and apologize. A private apology, much unlike the one he'd just broadcasted to the nation, but one he absolutely needed to perform.

He paid the driver and stepped outside. A feeling of nostalgia enveloped him as soon as he stood by the gate, staring into the avenue of naked ginkgo trees. The benches scattered along the path were occupied by groups of students of varying ages, their maroon uniforms coloring the winter scene in understated tones.

“Can I help you sir?” asked the door man, who probably knew him by now, from the multiple times he's waited around the area.

“Oh, yes, please, I'm looking for Ukitake sensei.”

“I am sorry, he no longer works here.”

His eyes were still fixed on the landscape and his brain didn't seem to register at first, “he… what?”

“He left, sir. Sorry.”

And what now? His flat? Okinawa? Where would he go looking for the love of his life? But most importantly, why had Jūshirō quit a job that brought him so much joy? He began to worry.

He laid a hand on the gate to support the weight of his confusion. At the same time, a hand landed on his shoulder.

“Kyōraku-san? What are you doing here?”

Byakuya’s face seemed genuinely surprised. Maybe he was not aware of the falling out between him and Jūshirō, or maybe he did and was intent on twisting the blade a bit deeper into the wound.

“I made a mistake. Sorry. Have a good day, Kuchiki…”

He wasn't going to give it away to the stuck-up teacher, but as he turned to walk out, the hand
followed after him. When had this guy become so physical?

“Wait. Come to my office for a moment.”

Reluctantly, he agreed. It was the first time Shunsui had been inside the school proper, and the first time in a long time that he'd been this close to so many little humans. He was suddenly fascinated by the thought of his beloved standing in one of those classrooms that he could see through glinting glass, hammering stuff into those tiny brains, being his usual bubbly self. How he desperately missed that man…

“Here, take a seat.”

They had apparently reached Byakuya's office, a space no wider than the necessary to host a table, two chairs, and a set of shelves filled with color-coded binders.

“So I assume you haven't been in contact with Jūshirō at all since… your predicament.”

“You assume correctly,” he let go.

There was a torrent of information begging to leave the teacher's thin lips. If it meant he would walk out with clues on Jūshirō’s whereabouts, he was eager to hear it all, but he started to suspected there was more to it.

“You must be wondering what I want to tell you. What can I have to say that might interest you, besides where to find Jūshirō? You probably know that I care deeply for him, and so there's no way that I'm giving that away if I'm not satisfied that you won't put this man on death's door ever again…”

Those words hit him like a shot to the chest.

“What do you mean? Is… he alright?”

He waited for an answer, heart thumping, muting all other sounds.

“What did you think when you returned from your little heroic trip to the Middle East? How did you find Jūshirō?”

“He was…” Beautiful, passionate, sublime... Those memories were among the fondest he had. Seeing Jūshirō after so long, reconnecting with him, making love for the first time… but he simply answered, “alright?”

“Wrong. When you returned to Japan he was convalescing from bilateral pneumonia that almost killed him. He probably kept it from you because… because he's a foolish man… but now you know. Without you he lost the will to live. Do you understand what this means?”

Shunsui just lowered his head. What on earth was this man saying? Bilateral pneumonia? How did that happen?

“Your friend’s daughter found him lifeless on the floor of his own house and called an ambulance. He was hanging by strings. Yoruichi and I tended to him after he was discharged. Little by little he learned to live without you, and even began to smile again, but then you were back and his sun was back in full blaze…”

“Please stop the torture, I need to know he's ok…”
“He loves you more than you’ll ever deserve. Do it again and I'll make sure to kill you with my own hands.”

Shunsui looked up, only to find impassive glacial features idly glancing out the window.

“I trust you still know how to get to his grandmother’s place…”

The bow he offered Byakuya put his televised one to shame.

He ran down the stairs and through the corridor, a giant among the youngsters that made their way to classes. Some knowing glances seemed to have recognized him, but he pressed through.

He wanted to believe everything was alright, but Byakuya had refused to put his heart to rest. He deserved it, he admitted to himself, but it was still grueling not to know. And then flashes from that dream he’d had, Jūshirō in bandages standing on a pile of rubble... What could it mean?

And so his inner chatter made him miss a turn and he found himself in what seemed to be the high school aisles, considering the older students there. He stopped to look around.

"Are you Ukitake-sensei's boyfriend?"

The question startled him. He looked down, but not much. There was a rather tall, well-built youth staring right at him. His eyes were a clear blue, almost invisible, his hair light brown and going on shoulder length.

"And who can you be?" He asked back, but then realization dawned on him, "wait a minute, you're the shower boy..."

"Shhh" the boy urged, "don't say that..."

A bit clumsily, he reached for his backpack and dug for something that seemed to be right at the bottom.

"Pass this to sensei... I didn't have the chance to say goodbye."

There was a thick envelope pressed between the boy's hands, probably three or four sheets of paper folded in three.

"Why would I do that, you little stalker?"

The boy stayed firm, arms extended forward, holding the letter. Were he more mature, less shy, there were a thousand ways of disarming that answer, but he just stayed quiet, frowning, blood seeping through his pale skin.

"Give me that, kid." He took the letter and tucked it in his pocket. He was in too much of a hurry to waste time there. "And show me to the front gate."

Once again, as luck would have it, a taxi was driving down the quiet lane just as they emerged from the school gate.

The boy stood on the pavement until the taxi drove off. Starrk, Byakuya and now this kid. He felt that, in different ways, the three exchanges had taught him something important, but all he knew, at that very moment, was that he didn't want to waste a second.

“Sumimasen, take me to Haneda airport. Full steam ahead!”
Heya! And we are almost at the end... Hope you stick around for a few more weeks. Let's see this through together! Will be back soon. All the best in the meantime :)
Doodles and dorayaki

Chapter Summary

A reunion in a familiar place turns into a reflection on life and meaning... of sorts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finding his way to granny Ukitake’s turned out to be more of a hurdle than Shunsui had anticipated. The truth is, when he left Byakuya’s office with his heart in his mouth, the last thing that crossed his romantically stunned mind was the fact that, on his last time in Okinawa, he’d had a local to bring him around, and so he hadn’t memorized any directions or even the name of the nearest village.

"Ano.." he began, already seated inside a taxi outside Naha airport, "do you know any Ukitakes around here?"

The driver, a young, bleach haired islander, looked back in disbelief. "Address," he asked.

"So, you go north" - that much his militarily trained mind could recall, "take the highway, then uphill, that's where granny lives. I think."

"Oi, temme, you fucking kidding me?"

Thankfully, the ensuing discussion fell short of a fist fight when something suddenly useful came to Shunsui’s mind: "there's an aquarium, like a theme park thing, with a whale..."

That, at least, got the car moving.

By the time they hit the highway, the last signs of daylight had completely vanished, and the journey went on in the dark.

The trip hadn't seemed so long the last time, perhaps because he had spent most of it spacing out and staring at the driver. Two hours passed, and a third was almost exhausted when they reached the aquarium.

"And now what, o-san?"

Again, his military sense of orientation let them up a hill road, but nothing seemed familiar in the dark. That was when they came across a cyclist, slowly climbing on their direction. He told the driver to stop.

"Kombanwa... do you happen to know a lady by the name of Ukitake?"

A pair of reddened eyes scanned him, before wobbling and catching himself just barely. Great, the guy was drunk.

"Ukitake-san? Of course I know her..."

The driver was less than convinced by the intoxicate man's directions, and threatened to leave Shunsui wherever they led to, even if that was the middle of the forest.
Luckily, the clumsy explanation led them straight to a narrow path that he immediately recognized. At the end of it was the quaint landed house with the stone lions. Warm light emanated from the windows. In a strange way, Shunsui felt he had gotten home. When he got out of the car the sea wind bit him hard. Not as cold as Tokyo, but still chill, for his state of light dress.

Just as the taxi drove away, the front door opened, and granny Ukitake came out, wrapped in a shawl.

“What are you doing out there? Come in, come in, let me get you something warm…” Did she even remember who he was? Why did she seem to treat him like someone they were expecting? And where on earth was Jūshirō? He couldn't say he was entirely at ease with the reception, but it was heartwarming, nevertheless. He let himself be ushered in and dressed up in a kilted haori and bedroom sleepers.

“There you go… you can go sit on the porch now. I'll make supper…”

He concluded that granny was surely leading him to where Jūshirō was. His heart started thundering inside. He soon found his way to the back door, while the lady disappeared into the kitchen. He pushed the door open and his face was instantly met with a light bulb hanging from a wire just outside the door. He barely dodged it, and his eyes were momentarily invaded by luminescent twirling lines.

"A-are you ok?"

"Uh... yeah... shit, too tall..."

When his scrunched up eyes opened, Jūshirō was standing beside him. Green eyes shining through the shade.

“Y-you came?”

To him, at that moment, his beloved had never looked more charming. He had his hair loosely braided, with strands framing his lightly blushed cheeks and nose. He was wearing jeans and a loose knitted cardigan, and the air around him smelled of orange peel and firewood.

When his hand finally made contact, Shunsui could feel a subtle roughness to the usually clean-shaven face. His hands moved slowly, regaining the sense of touch.

The feeling of Jūshirō's body against his was heavenly. The man didn't move. Arms remained idle along his sides, but eyes slid closed. The visitor's hands trailed over to the soft braided hair, the bony shoulders, and came to a stop over the man's chest. Heartbeat, steady and strong. Clear, effortless breathing. Only then did he finally relax.

"I saw your apology on TV," Jūshirō said, his voice thin, with a hint of sweetness. "It was very dignified. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks..." he whispered, as hands kept caressing, and lips landed on a temple. They sighed in unison, Jūshirō relaxing a little more against his chest. That made him feel bolder and go for the lips, but Jūshirō pushed himself back.

"I'm sorry", they both uttered.

But the moment had just liquefied and slipped between their fingers. He took a deep breath and decided to go back to the script he'd thought up for the occasion. One more apology, the most
important of all. His knees dropped to the floor, his forehead touched the weathered wood, and he solely recited,

"I beg your forgiveness – for lying, for putting you in danger, for making you sad. There's no excuse I can offer, just my deepest, most sincere repentance. Jūshirō, please forgive me..."

As there was no answer, he slowly raised his head. Jūshirō was looking away, a hand covering his face... sobbing. Great, he'd made him cry again. His hands reached forward without a plan, balled into fists and unfurled again, before lightly touching a shoulder.

"Don't." The man tilted his body a bit further. "Don't apologize. I understand. I don't have the right... Just... thank you for coming all the way here to see me... it makes me happy."

"What? You lost me there..."

Jūshirō wiped his eyes with the back of his hands and finally looked back. "What use would there be in telling me the truth back then? I am... I was just a school teacher, there's nothing I could have done..."

What can you say to the man who saved your life, when he's so convinced of his utter uselessness? Would it be of any use to tell him of Mrs. Kobayashi's change of heart? Shunsui decided he'd go into that later. He glanced past Jūshirō to a brighter spot at the end of the porch, where a big bowl full of dry pods rested on a makeshift cushion of folded blankets.

"What are you working on?"

For a moment, Jūshirō seemed unable to connect the sound of words to their meaning, but when he got back from wherever he'd gone he replied, "We're making dorayaki for a party tomorrow. Saori-ba makes a killer red bean paste, but I have to peel and soak the beans tonight, or they'll be too hard to cook..."

Dorayaki. That sounded much more like his sweet tooth of a sweetheart.

"Well let me help, then. Tell me how to do it."

"Etto," he mused, before sitting down cross legged, and pulling the web of pods out of the bowl and laying it on the surface of the porch. Shunsui sat next to him.

"You just snap them like this – should be easy, they're mostly dried up – if not just wedge your nail into this line here and drag all the beans out, into the bowl – like this."

"Sounds like something I can do", he said, and he made sure he smiled straight into those still reddened eyes. It earned him a small smile in return. Baby steps.

They were at it for close to an hour, mostly in silence. Then, Saori-ba peeked through the door, before coming over and sticking her nose in the bowl.

"That's more than enough. We're not making pancakes for the whole town... Now you two boys come in before you catch a cold."

There were two bowls of soup on the table – granny's own version of miso, with bits of sweet potato and herbs. After they downed it, she ushered them to bed, no protests accepted.

She had laid an extra futon in her grandson's room, pushed them together and draped a large blanket over them both. Gotta love matchmaking granny.
"Are you ok with this? We can pull them apart..." Shunsui suggested, less than half-hearted.

"It's fine... it's cold."

Granny had, very thoughtfully, laid two sets of pajamas side by side on the sideboard. Perhaps that was her take on the concept of "boyfriends" - kind of like brothers, but she didn't want to know what happened when the clothes came out...

Jūshirō proceeded to very dutifully put his on, with just a very brief flashing of bare skin. Shunsui looked down at the two pieces of woven cotton. If there was an item of clothing he despised, it was PJs. The body should be free during its rest, he though, as he stripped and stepped into the pajama pants. He let the elastic band close around his waist rather painfully, making him flinch. Soft laughter.

“You don’t have to wear it… it’s not that I haven't seen what's underneath…”

"You sure you can resist this?"

Jūshirō just giggled and shook his head.

Gleefully he stripped the whole thing again and crawled under the covers. Jūshirō was still sitting and writing some notes on a diary.

“Hey, I remember that book…”

“Thank you for buying it for me. It's lovely."

It might be a mistake, but Shunsui felt the mood had changed a little bit.

“Can I kiss you goodnight?” he tried.

There was no explicit consent, but the diary went down to the floor and the clothed torso rotated slightly, offering itself. Shunsui went in hands free, just a light touch of lips that lingered a few milliseconds. Then, Jūshirō switched off the floor lamp and they both lied down.

“You must think I'm a fool for putting distance between us”.

Shunsui swallowed. All he could see in the dark was the outline of the silver braid. He let his hand touch it, an undemanding caress.

"No... I might not understand it, but I don't think you're a fool. You have your reasons, I'm sure..." He nuzzled the fragrant long hair and felt a slight shudder when his breath hit skin.

"But rest now. I'll be here tomorrow. Then we can talk."

"Hmm," the other replied, sleep gradually taking over them both.

When Jūshirō woke up alone, the morning after, he concluded it had all been a dream. The sun was up and his eyes ached with the bright light. The familiar smell of adzuki paste reminded him of his mission for the day. He propped himself up and did a cat stretch. Only then did he see the black suit, white shirt and grey tie hanging on the back of a chair. 'Oh.' So it hadn't a dream after all.

As if on cue, he heard his grandmother's voice, followed by Shunsui's. They seemed to be doing just fine without him. He let his back slip to the mattress again, and lay smiling at the ceiling. Shunsui
was such a hopeless romantic... and he loved that about him, gods he did...

A bit guiltily, he found himself rolling on his side to give the other pillow a sniff. That's when he found an envelope lying on top of it. There was no "to" or "from", but Shunsui had scribbled in pencil, "from a kid I bumped into". He tore it open and sat up to read it.

Dear Sensei,

It's been a while! I hope you are doing well. Sorry for my bad Japanese, but, like my little sister, I am still learning. Speaking of Anya, she was the one who told be you had left. I was in shock, and scared that was wrong. I hope it isn't, I really do.

You know, since we last met, I tried to avoid the elementary school and the canteen, I even skipped training a few times, because I didn't want to cause you trouble. But it doesn't mean I forgot you. No, no I didn't. I think of you and I miss you a lot - and even more now that I realize that I might never see you again.

But it's ok. Life goes on, isn't it? Our team is going to prefecturals soon, isn't it great? I heard the teachers' team is looking for players again. I'll be very honest with you, your skills in soccer could be improved. But you always looked so beautiful running across the pitch. I don't know, I just felt a strange thing in my tummy every time I saw you. Sorry to say it like that. You'll be mad at me, but – haha – now you're not here, so I can say it!

Sorry, that was silly. The truth is, I thought to myself a lot and came to understand what you said that day. Adults and kids shouldn't date, or at least kids should be suspicious of adults that want to date them... So, well, thank you... and don't worry, I will keep out of trouble :)

The other day mom and dad brought us to a really old restaurant and the tea tasted just like the one you made. It did taste a bit like spinach, but in a good way. Overall, it was nice that it reminded me of you. I guess I'll think of it as your taste... or maybe that doesn't sound so good... ops, sorry.

Anya is doing well. The new teacher, Hitsugaya-sensei, is stricter, she says, and never gives them free mornings for drawing and playing, like you used to. Her Japanese is better, though. I told her I was writing you a letter and she wants me to tell you that she misses you too.

Actually, I have no idea how to make this get to you. Someone said you were from Okinawa and would be going there... I've never been there, but I heard it's nice and warm. I wonder, if I use a bottle, will it get there? Probably not... it will just end up in a landfill... sighs. But it's ok, I will keep it in my bag, just in case.

And that's it. Sensei, maybe you don't know that, but you were really important to me. I hope you are ok and I really wish I can see you again someday.

Ich werde Sie immer lieben.

Yours,

Markus

He put down the letter. The boy's growth impressed him. Truth be told, he felt a bit overcome by it, given the circumstances. More deeply, though, he wished the boy well. Be happy, be loved. His eyes met the glow of the window, but the light didn't hurt them this time. Then, there was a rustle of wood and the door slid open.

"So, what does it say?" It was Shunsui, sporting a curious blush.
"That my soccer skills suck and that his sister is learning much better with the new teacher."

"And besides that?"

"Well, overall..." he tilted his head and looked at the bundled pages on his lap, "it's a love letter, I guess."

"Such a heartbreaker..."

Shunsui advanced into the bedroom, hands behind his back, looking mysterious. He had put on a brown yukata and the haori granny had given him the day before. His hair was long enough to tie, and he had it in a small ponytail, with curls sprouting on each side. Streaks of grey were now noticeable. Shunsui had aged since he'd last seen him, but his seductive look had lost none of the allure.

"Choose a hand," he prompted, kneeling beside Jūshirō.

"Hmm... left."

"Are you sure?"

"Why? Should I pick right?"

"Not saying that..."

"Ok, I stick with left."

Another playful grin, and he revealed the content of his palm, which was... empty.

"Haha, you lose!"

"Come on, don't be mean!"

"How can I ever deny you anything?"

And with that the other hand came forward and a dorayaki flew directly into Jūshirō's mouth.

"Mmm..." he protested, mouth full of warm, homemade sweetness. "Oishii..."

"Domo. All credit goes to your granny, of course. She did teach me how to mix the pancake batter, though, and I'm quite happy with the result."

"Thanks. I was supposed to do that, but somehow overslept..."

"Oh, that's because I turned off your alarm. 7am, that's harsh... it's always such a treat to watch you sleep..."

For a split second, Jūshirō wanted to be mad, but Shunsui didn't give him the time. He bounced back to a squat, and asked,

"Anyway, do you happen to have any spare pants and shirt I can borrow? I'd rather wear something other than my TV star clothes..."

Jūshirō considered. All his clothes were at least a size smaller than Shunsui's.

"Maybe some of my older stuff... I lost weight when I got sick..."
He got up and opened the wardrobe. "There, choose whatever you like. I'll go take a shower."
Shunsui's eyes glinted, a smiled cracked him open.

"You really like clothes..."

"It's part of my queerness," he shrugged.

"Have fun!"

The wardrobe was a time machine. There were colorful t-shirts, school uniforms, a few kimonos, and other items that spanned four decades of life. Shunsui dug in.
When Jūshirō came back, he found his partner dressed in a loose black sweatshirt and a pair of jeans that he immediately recognized.

"You had to pick that one..."

There was mirth in Shunsui's voice when he replied, "Never thought you'd have a grunge phase, Jū-chan..."

The pants fit narrowly around his waist and gave an almost obscene outline of his glutes, but if that wasn't distracting enough, right below the knee, on the left leg, was a wide rectangular tear, and on the other leg, somewhere mid-thigh, there was watered-down patch with a peace sign.

They settled on the outfit, nevertheless, and went to the kitchen to finish packing the pancakes in plastic boxes.

"So, where are we taking this, anyway?"

"Kunigami orphanage."

Shunsui raised an eyebrow. Jūshirō explained,

"Do you remember my doctor, in Tokyo, Dr. Kotetsu?"

"The scary one or the other one?"

Jūshirō shot him a disapproving look. "They did save my life, you know?"

"I do, and I'll be thankful for that for all eternity. Now what's with her?"

"The other day in the market, I came across Kiyone-chan, her younger sister, who's just moved here to manage an orphanage. I was with Sentarou-kun and couldn't help but noticing that she caught his eye, so..."

"You volunteered yourself and him to help out..."

"Yeah... kind of," he answered, arm mechanically finding its way to the back of his neck.

Soon enough, Sentarou arrived with his van, where he'd piled up a few boxes of fruit to give the kids. The three men got on the front of the van, the back being open for transport of produce and utensils. Grandma stayed home, claiming to be too busy for parties.

As soon as they arrived, though, it became clear who the girl was interested in. They were barely past the entrance when she spotted Jūshirō and almost tackled him to get the box full of pancakes from his hands.
“It's fine, Kiyone, I already know the way to the kitchen!”

As she followed him, happily blabbing, Shunsui contemplated giving her a heads up to stay off his turf. That, he soon realized, was utterly pointless, as neither the girl nor him, would stand any chance in monopolizing the sensei’s attention anytime soon. That afternoon, Jūshirō belonged exclusively to the twins.

They only had a short half hour before nap time was over. Then, the dorm’s doors opened and the dozen or so inhabitants came out. The show was mildly amusing for a short while. The older kids seemed ready to take on a small army. Others emerged sleepy eyed, still hugging their stuffed toys, and one or two bouts of wailing erupted from within the room.

“Juju, play tag… you catch…”

“Huh? Now?”

The boys seemed to be five or so and perfectly identical – sea green eyes and light hair, each sporting the same blue knitted beanies.

“It's like this every time we come here,” Sentarou, who'd just leant on the wall next to Shunsui, said. “They stick to him and don't let go. He's even slept here once, because they wouldn't stop crying.”

“They look alike,” he thought out loud.

“They're twins…” Sentarou deadpanned.

“No… I mean, they look like Jūshirō… Maybe that's why they feel closer to him…”

“Maybe… Well, they're, you know…” he seemed ashamed of saying the word, but couldn't find another, so he whispered, “hafu…”

With that Sentarou probably meant that the two kids were bullied and would never stand a chance of being adopted. He wondered if they also had a tragic story to tell. Jūshirō had managed to catch one of the brothers, who was now trying to catch him and his twin.

“What's the party about, anyway?” he asked Sentarou.

“Kyo-chan’s birthday,” he informed, pointing at a tall girl in her early teens, who seemed to be going through an emo phase.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, doodling on a notebook. That, right there, was a minefield, Shunsui thought, but his legs were already moving, and, as if by some strange force, they brought him straight to her.

“Hey,” he greeted, squatting beside her.

The look she threw him was somewhere between annoyance and curiosity.

“Do you like drawing?”

“Don't know,” she dismissed, her hand still adding ink to the realistic, scary-looking skull she'd been shading. Next to it, partially overlapping, she had sketched the outline of a tree twig. She glanced back at him, now clearly annoyed. “Look, you don't have to entertain me. Go play with the kids, that's what the others do.”

“Others?”, he asked, letting himself sit cross legged, in the diagonal from where she was.
“Yeah, aren't you a volunteer or something?”

He scratched his head. Was he? “Well, if you count trying to impress the handsome guy over there as volunteering… I guess.”

“You mean you're gay?” The question, uncushioned of all euphemism, made him smile.

“As gay as they come...”

“So you're not here trying to save your soul or something?”

“My intents are entirely non spiritual.”

“Men…” was the dismissive answer, but he thought he'd heard a little amused chuckle along with it.

He kept watching as she drew buds and flowers along the twig. The amount of shading applied was exaggerated and the paper reeked of cheap ballpoint ink, but he thought he could see the girl's soul splattered on the page. Even more oddly, he thought he could see glimpses of his own.

Their quiet hang out came to an end when Jūshirō came over with two plastic cups filled with something green and bubbly. One of the twins brought two more cups, and the other a plate full of sweets, including the famed dorayaki.

"Ahi-chan, Aji-chan, meet uncle Shunsui."

"Hello uncle Shunsui!” they said in choir.

"Uncle?” His brow twitched.

"Roll with it,” Jūshirō whispered, and passed him the radioactive-looking drink. "These two always make me sweat,” he complained.

He shot a curious look at Kyo’s notebook, but the girl noticed it and quickly turned the page.

"Kyo-chan, happy birthday! Here, take some. Shunsui made the pancakes.”

She picked one and looked at Shunsui with a sort of restrained amusement. ‘Trying too hard, o-san?’, she was probably thinking.

Some more kids came to sit around them, eating and drinking. The remaining two adults, who'd finally managed to agree on the best position to stick the candles on the birthday cake, turned off the lights and approached the group, singing loudly and out of tune. The rest of the group joined in, to Kyo's apparent annoyance. When she didn't bother to blow the candles, Ahi, Aji and a few other kids did it on her behalf.

After another good dose of running around, burning the sugar they'd ingested, and with the evening setting in, some pairs of eyes began to narrow. The party turned into a more quiet affair. Kyo went back to drawing, and the adults began a chat about random topics. Ahi and Aji unceremoniously laid their heads on Jūshirō's lap and fell asleep. Lulled by the breathing of the two boys, a monotonous gentle cadence, the sensei slowly trailed down the same path. When Shunsui offered him a shoulder, he gladly closed his eyes and leant in.

It was a strange sort of comfort, to be connected to that small bundle of souls. Jūshirō rested against his chest, just a rag-doll with no will or worry, abandoned to his protection, and the boys mirrored that same abandon. Shunsui felt that they were all suddenly in his care, as though he were the pillar
that supported the whole edifice. It was a kind of fulfilling thought. Perhaps he had never taken care of anything or anyone long enough, seriously enough, to experience this feeling. He wondered what it would be like, to feel like this for real... He realized his mind was drifting to quicksand. What lurked behind those thoughts was not possible. It was not even a question, at least for as long as his relationship with Jūshirō remained on unsteady ground.

His eyes roamed the room and found Kyo observing him. Without giving it much thought, he smiled at her. She lowered her eyes and drew a few lines on her notebook, but then surprisingly smiled back and gave him a thumbs-up.

Then, Sentarou and Kyione tiptoed across the room and came whisper in his ear, "it's almost dinner time... they won't sleep at night if we don't wake them up now..."

It was rather mournfully that he broke the connection between him and the three nappers, by lightly tapping on Jūshirō's shoulder.

"How long did I sleep?" he asked, still giddy.

"Not long... but I guess we should get going soon."

One of the twins – Ahi? Aji? Shunsui had no idea – seemed as though he'd heard that in his sleep and threw himself in Jūshirō's arms.

"Stay..." he pleaded, nuzzling white hair.

Kyo eyed Shunsui sternly. Perhaps she didn't approve of adults who feed expectations they wouldn't fulfill. Both glanced sideways, as if on cue. Jūshirō had the boy wrapped tightly in his arms.

"Don't worry Ahi-chan, I'll be back soon, and we will play together again..."

The other boy, who'd woken up seconds later, joined the hug, and soon three or four other kids of around the same age had come to join in too. That ended up helping, as they distracted each other, and Jūshirō managed to stand up and head to the door. They made their way out, saying their goodbyes. Shunsui shot a glance at Kyo, who didn't move from where she was. Maybe she was right, it was really a selfish thing to do these visits, to bring joy in small portions and leave with your mind soothed, ignoring the pain of those who stay.

She met his gaze and he gave her a small wave. He was going to turn away when he saw her tearing a page from her notebook and holding it forward in her hand. He pointed at himself, questioningly. She nodded. He took a step back into the room, then quickened his pace, until he managed to fetch the paper. It was a portrait in blue ballpoint ink, just like all her other works. His own eyes stared straight out of the picture and another man's face, partially covered with hair, rested, sleeping, on his shoulder.

"It's beautiful. You've got a talent there girl."

The smile and wave that she gave him were so minimal that almost no one noticed them. He waived again, and shot her a flirty wink, but the moment he turned away, there was a needle buried in his heart.

Kunigami town was a touristic spot, but it quieted down during winter. Jūshirō thought that there might be some ramen places around the pier where they could get an early dinner. They told Sentarou they would take a taxi back and started walking through the darkening streets. Casually, Shunsui passed Jūshirō the portrait drawn by Kyo.
“Sugoi… and no skulls, she must have liked you!”

“What's her story?”

“I don't know in detail, but she's one of the few that gets visits… once every few months, I heard. Her mother sends stuff, money for school fees. Maybe she could keep her… maybe not. People say she's an elite escort In Tokyo, but I think one shouldn't butt in that kind of thing…”

They both hummed, but Shunsui noticed a heavy cloud closing in on his beloved’s eyes.

“What is it, babe?”

“I think I made a mistake… shouldn't have gotten so close…”

“To your twins?”

“They're not mine, Shunsui.”

“Would you like them to be?”

The question made him snap. “Well, unfortunately it's easier for me to adopt you, than them.”

“Meanie,” Shunsui pouted.

“Oh, come on, you know what I mean…”

“Of course I do, but you know how I like to annoy you…”

Jūshirō sighed. “It’s all my fault. I was lonely and they were this endless outlet of love.”

For a speakeasy type, Shunsui rarely dealt with this kind of thing through words. Perhaps he despised their shallowness, when only a heart could reach out to another heart’s ache. So, he would express himself through body language, making him pass as overly physical. Hugs, kisses, even just standing behind someone’s back, protectively, those were his weapons. In this case, it was only natural for his hand to close around Jūshirō’s. At that moment, he didn't care about boundaries or the way things stood between them. He just did it, and, on the receiving end, there was acceptance. Their fingers interlocked tightly.

“It's not impossible, you know?”

Jūshirō just hummed in response, and they kept walking, hand in hand.

Their slow march finally brought them to the waterfront. Storm clouds were making their approach, concealing the setting sun, heavy mist already in the air. They sat facing the sea

“When do you plan to return to Tokyo?” Jūshirō asked.

“Maybe in a week or so… the company… I feel I shouldn't abandon it. Apologizing is not enough. We need to fix it, I need to fix it…”

There was a warm sort of respect in Jūshirō's expression, when he looked at Shunsui. He nodded.

“Yes, yes you should. Everyone will look for you for support and reassurance now. With that apology, you made yourself the face of the organization… and I… I believe you can live up to it.”

Shunsui smiled, but those words left him unsettled. They were too ambiguous. They sounded too much like goodbye.
“And you, Jūshirō,” he dared, “what do you plan to do?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t… I feel at peace here, but there are so many things I miss. I guess I haven't practiced detachment enough…”

“Why? You want to become a monk?” Shunsui asked, irritated.

Jūshirō shook his head. “I don't think I can do that. Even now, I keep thinking that we should just get a hotel room and spend the night together.”

The expression of surprise in Shunsui’s face was so comical that Jūshirō started laughing, in spite of himself. His long, mighty white mane was flowing behind him, as the wind hit him head on. His eyes slid closed to take in the fresh, damp gust. Then, he tilted his head to the side and asked,

“What do you think, Shunsui? Should we go get laid?”

Since he'd met this man, his life had gone 360 several times. He'd experienced highs and lows he'd thought reserved only to things other than love – life-changing things, tragic things… He'd found and lost a sense of meaning and direction, only to regain it and lose it again. What would his life be henceforth? What could he be to someone like Shunsui? Someone he so often felt he didn't know at all… Being together felt right, but was it right?

But those questions would have to wait, because just then, a hand was wedged between his thighs, the other clasped the back of his neck, and his mouth was seized by full lips and an imposing tongue he knew so well.

The rain started falling.

Chapter End Notes

Hello!
I realize that the more I want to wrap up, the more I think of questions and dilemmas to address, but I suppose that's just the way life is! No one ever asked Cinderella what her married life was like, haha!
On a different note, I must say that, to be fair, the taxi driver in this chapter is a device for comic relief and does not portray Japanese taxi drivers - the most polite and patient in the world (so far, in my experience - Singapore being a close second, just because they don’t wear gloves, haha!)
I'll be bringing you just a tiny bit more of this story. Hope you'll stick around. As always, would be great to hear your thoughts.
Cheers!
The rain falls and a conversation unfolds. Small steps towards great changes.

The rain fell on, fierce and thunderous. Inside the storm, they kissed. It was the perfect romantic scene. Gusts of wind turned long white hair into an angry whip. Clothes stuck to their bodies. Cold, wet lips connected the inside of their bodies, a realm of warm comfort and protection.

It would have been the perfect romantic scene, if it weren't for the chill that shook the passionate body in Shunsui's arms, if it weren't for the threat of a cough that briefly tore them apart.

“Let's get out of here.”

Thoroughly soaked and unbearably horny, they stumbled to the nearest hotel. It was a simple property, probably catering to middle class holiday makers. With the sudden onset of the storm, the state they were in didn't raise any questions. Instead, it prompted the staff to be extra diligent, and get them a key with exceptional speed.

“Please leave your clothes in the laundry bag, we will take care of it,” they heard faintly, as the elevator doors closed and they fell right into the same fever.

As soon as the door to the room closed behind them, they peeled each other's clothes, but didn't bother to look for laundry bags. Their minds were elsewhere. Tomorrow was tomorrow. Shunsui scooped Jūshirō in his arms. Jūshirō laughed and closed his eyes. He'd never been carried like that. It was funny and sexy all at once. He waited for his back to hit the soft surface of the bed, but as laughter gave way to a light cough, he found himself landing on a harder, narrower surface… a bathroom stool.

Shunsui turned on the heating and got the shower water running, adjusting it to a pleasant warm temperature, by testing it on the palm of his hand. Then, he knelt before Jūshirō and began to gently shower him.

“Water ok for you?” he asked. Jūshirō hummed in assent.

He began by the hair, thoroughly rinsing the long curtain and twisting it over the shoulder. He lingered at the nape of the neck, the part of the body that is said to determine one’s body temperature. He moved to the chest, the stomach, the legs, the genitals, the feet, one by one, giving the soles a small massage.

“Hold this,” he said, handing over the wand.

He squirted shampoo onto his palms and, now kneeling behind the other man’s back, dabbed it along the wet length of hair. The gentle massage to his scalp almost brought Jūshirō to sleep. The warm, foggy room wrapping him in a cocoon of comfort, and those hands… those loving hands moving from his scalp all the way down to the tips of his locks, massaging his whole back in the process. But
in that dormant haze, something began to change. It was just a tingling of doubt at first, but, as the treatment went on, it evolved to full fledged discomfort.

“Stop.”

Laborious hands came still.

“Something’s wrong?”

“Why are you doing this?”

A brief silence was followed by the resuming of the task.

“Because I care about you.”

It was Jūshirō's turn to keep quiet. A knot formed in his throat, tears welled up and began to flow on their own accord.

“But my weakness turns you off…”

“What?”

“Just now I thought you were going to fuck me… but you're giving me a bath… like an invalid…”

Shunsui finally crawled over to face the man. It was the same every damn time. Those tears sliced his gut open. As cathartic as they might be for the one shedding them, he couldn't stand the sight.

“I like you fresh and clean…” he tried, but the tears kept falling. Byakuya's words echoed in his head. Bilateral pneumonia, loss of will to live. Weakness.

“You don't always have to be strong…”

“Why do you care so much? Right now, your kindness is hurting me, can't you understand?”

The thin body curled up impossibly, a cloud of foam slipping from his hair to his face.

“Close your eyes.”

He took the wand and brought it over the crouching figure. One more time he resumed the task he'd begun, despite the passive aggressive volcano that bubbled under his touch.

And finally the torrent overflowed.

“I don't understand you, Shunsui. You say you love me, you do these things… but what's in it for you? How can I even attract you? You could have anyone. You could have found someone who was confident with his sexuality to begin with. Instead, you waited, you gave me time to sort out my doubts, you make love the way I like, you only top when I ask you to… you have me here, open and willing, and all you do is care for me. Why? Why me? Why am I so special to you? I really don't understand…”

Every word a nudge, all together pushing him towards the abyss of giving up, walking away. Going back to Tokyo and putting an end to this. Going back on the scene, finding someone, or a few someones, having a good time, going back to photography, maybe a new pseudonym, a new blog. You can always go back to the start. Can't you?

He pulled the wand over his own head and closed his eyes. He didn't bother with soap or shampoo,
but just let copious amounts of water flow over him.

Jūshirō was fair and righteous, Jūshiro was kind, intelligent, beautiful, Jūshirō was perfect. That's what he'd always thought. He put the man in such a high pedestal and thought that all he had to do was to bow before that deity that somehow had landed on his bed. He was wrong. Jūshirō could be full of shit sometimes. He could say horrible things and think that he's only hurting himself. On that moment, Shunsui finally saw a human being in front of him, and an answer began to pour from his mouth.

"I don't know. I love you because I love you. What else do you want me to say? Do you want sex? I can give you that, don't you worry, you can have it any time... but if you can't handle me caring for you, I don't know if I can make this work... because I want to see you doing well. It's not kindness, it's my own selfish interest. I feel good when you smile and I'm in peace when your heart beats steady, when your breathing's easy. I want these things for myself, I want you for myself, because you're the one I want to grow old with... But don't ask me why... I wouldn't know what to say."

To make a dramatic exit, Shunsui stood up, pulled a towel around his waist and threw the other one at the man who remained seated on the low stool. He opened the door and went into the cold room. Alone, he rubbed the towel on his hair, put on the ridiculous sleeping gown provided by the hotel and went back to the entranceway to pick up their clothes, toss them inside the laundry bag, and hang it outside the door. He sat by the window, watching the rain. From the bathroom came the sound of a hair dryer. He let the droning sound mash his mind into a shapeless nothing. Perhaps Jūshirō was pulling himself together. Perhaps not. For the moment, he forced himself not to care.

When he woke up, he was sprawled over the same armchair, facing the window, but a kilt had been draped over his shoulders, failing only to cover his protruding feet. From the shape that he could see in the faint moonlight, Jūshirō was lying in bed, covered only by the thin bed sheets.

He scratched the sleep from his eyes, cracked his back and stumbled to bed. The fragrance of industrial shampoo filled his nostrils when he lied down, pulling the soft cover over them both. A sleepy green eye opened, then a flash of a small smile, and the man fell asleep again. Shunsui soon followed. As his mind leap into sleep, his thoughts and worries travelled along, and he was back in a familiar place, a repeated dream, or maybe a memory. One he wished he could forget.

He woke up with the blabbering of a tv broadcast and the flush of a toilet. A few seconds later, Jūshirō was sitting by his side, with a plastic bag in his hand.

“The laundry’s done!” he announced. “Thanks for putting it outside.”

“Are you feeling better?”

As though to prove a point, he cleared his throat and confirmed, “I'm fine, all good, don't worry!”

Should he leave it at that? It pained him to break such a shiny mood. But wasn't that his mistake all along?

“Jūshirō… what I mean is…”

“I know,” he cut, “I know what you mean… I was in a sorry state last night and I said a bunch of bad things... You didn't deserve it...”

Shunsui wanted to say it's ok, he can rant and speak his mind whenever he wants… but before he
could do much more than stuttering, he was cut off again.

“… and, hmm… I did some thinking last night, and... hmm... if you're still willing… then go ahead and take care of me. Yes, I'm fine with that. It's… it's nice when you take care of me. But… I also want you to let me take care of you. I know I'm not much of a care taker, but I'll do my best. That's it... I guess what I'm asking is a chance to be strong… I...”

Ever the drama queen, Shunsui turned around and buried his face in the mattress, while pulling a pillow over it. Jūshirō stopped, curious, and waited for the other man to talk.

“You've been taking care of me all along, Jūshirō! You are always there for me... you make sure I eat right, that I don't swap nights for days, that I don't smoke, drink too much or take drugs… even that LDL thing went down… I copy you when I don't know how to deal with problem, how to handle people, how to make friends… I keep imagining what you would do, and that always gives me confidence to move on. You have a body I desire, I can't deny that, but you are so much more than that, you have always been...”

Their eyes were locked on each other. Jūshirō bit his lip. He leant forward and let their foreheads touch. His hands closed around the back of Shunsui’s head. There was a sharp intake of air. In the same reverent fashion, he pulled back and landed a kiss on a dark forehead, then let their lips come together and communicate all other things that they did not say.

They had parted for a moment, to look at each other, when Shunsui decided to add,

"And, by the way, Jūshirō Ukitake, I'm fully aware of your visit to Mrs. Kobayashi.”

Silence. A thoughtful look.

“You are? How… do you know?”

“Starrk told me, of course.”

“But I thought she didn't care…”

“Well, she probably changed her mind...“

But their conversation got cut short by a strident synth line coming from the TV set, that turned the volume a notch louder.

‘Breaking news: suspect head of organized crime gang captured in Fukushima exclusion zone.’

The image of an abandoned hospital came on the screen. Amid rubbish and overturned wheelchairs, a tall man in a white gown was shown being led by armed agents, heavily restrained. In the background, there were a number of cops whose figures Shunsui could recognize by now, even with the grotesque radiation masks, and…

“Yoruichi! Shunsui, that's Yoruichi! What's she doing there? She's not wearing protection!”

“Seems that your ex-girlfriend from hell saved the day…”

“I'll have to talk to her when I'm back in Tokyo. She can perfectly pursue a career in the force without risking her life like this...”

Slowly, Shunsui’s attention disconnected from the screen. His beautiful companion still sported a frown, but he was now commenting on the group of youngsters that seemed to have played a crucial
role in the arrest.

He threw his arms around the man, nuzzled his neck.

“Hmm… Back in Tokyo… When will that be?”

At the end of the week, they took a bus to Naha and, after a pleasant meal and a stopover for a few drinks, they spent the night at a hotel in town. In just a few days, they had recovered much of their past intimacy. Being together felt easy, like something that simply was supposed to be.

In the morning, they headed to the airport. Shunsui had no more on him than he’d arrived with, except for two new sets of clothes and a paper bag with souvenirs – a pair of painted lions for Nanao and a bottle of awamori for Lisa.

They queued together for check in, but in the end, only one boarding pass was printed.

“What did you get? Window or aisle?”

“Aisle, I suppose…” Shunsui replied, his positioning inside the plane, for the next few hours, being the least of his woes.

He squeezed Jūshirō’s hand like he wanted to break it. He didn't want to let go. Green eyes sought his. Green eyes that understood, that gave him a little concerned frown for comfort.

“It's not goodbye, Shunsui.”

“I… I know…”

“We still have some time. Come, I want to show you something.”

Jūshirō dragged a still sulking Shunsui by the escalators, all the way to the last floor, then through an emergency exit, up a flight of stairs and out to a terrace facing the runways and the open sea. It was beautiful, if a bit windy, on a nice sunny day.

“Are you sure it's ok to be here?”

“I have a cousin who works here, don't worry. If someone turns up we pretend we're staff… isn't it nice?”

Shunsui couldn't bring himself to look at any landscape except for the one reflected in the jade green eyes that smiled at him. He held Jūshirō tight, an almost crushing embrace.

“I love you so much…”

Jūshirō let himself linger in that hold, but soon he would be pushing himself away from the expansive chest, a look of determination on his face. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Shunsui released him, unsure of what was coming. The lithe man's cheeks became impossibly flushed. A hand came to his jacket’s pocket, bringing out a small matchbox. Looking at it made him seem even more embarrassed.

“Sorry, I should have bought a proper box…” he said, while pushing the little paper tray with the tip of his index, and with it exposing the contents of the box - two shiny hoops, one bigger, one smaller.
“Give me your hand?”

Shunsui just gapped – at the nimble fingers that collected the wider ring from the box, at the other hand that balanced the box, at the lips that opened and closed and formed the words, “Shunsui Kyōraku, would you still marry me?”

He held out his left hand and, with a strange tingling feeling under his eyes, he watched as the platinum slid easily down his ring finger and lodged itself in its rightful place.

“Allow me”, Shunsui asked, grabbing hold of the box and trying to pull out the other ring. His hands were shaky, he almost dropped the ring, but managed to balance it. He finally slid it into place and kissed his lover’s hand. Only then he noticed that nervous green eyes still awaited an answer. But it was so obvious.

“Yes, Jūshirō Ukitake, I will marry you.”

The next time Shunsui landed in Okinawa was around a month after these events. That time, though, he was expected.

Jūshirō stood alone in the busy arrivals hall, waiting. He felt a bit awkward, with his hands behind his back, hiding a small bunch of hibiscuses and lilies that he'd bought along the way. He had tried to dress up a little - put on a new pair of jeans and a black cotton sweater that fit snuggly around his torso. He had asked Saori-ba to braid his hair. Was it too much? Or, on the contrary, did he look as plain as ever? He felt like a teenager, with butterflies in his stomach.

The flow of passengers was almost continuous. People of all appearances came through the sliding glass doors, but none with his boyfriend's flair. Shunsui walked out the door with the sway of one who dances, hips and legs filling luscious green silken trousers with movement. A pattern of red horses dashed across his chest on the loose cotton sweater. A brown curl cut across his face, softening the strong lines. Jūshirō thought it had taken him much too long to fully embrace his attraction for the man, but now that he did, it was just as intoxicating as the smell of lilies in his hands.

They walked convergent paths until their bodies finally touched. They kissed languidly, as if the airport, the people around them, didn't exist, as if the whole city didn't exist.

"Hello boyfriend," said the husky voice.

“Welcome back,” he replied.

"Hmm, what is it you have there for me?" Shunsui teased, peeking over his shoulder.

"Hmm… this?"

Hidden hands came forth and offered the small bunch of flowers, while a flushed face sank behind the colorful arrangement.

"How did you know I love hibiscuses?"

"I... thought they suited you..."
Shunsui held the flowers to his chest, inhaling the aroma.

"Thank you. I love it."

They shared a long embrace, faces plunging in each other's shoulders. Only when the embrace unraveled did Jūshirō notice a good looking man, elegantly dressed, standing beside Shunsui. Was it a pinch of jealousy, what he felt just then? Why would Shunsui bring another man there, to partake in their long-awaited week together? 'Masaka!' His eyes widened, incredulous, at the idea that just crossed his mind.

“Jū… are you spacing out?”

“Oh? Sorry, say again…”

“This is Ayasegawa-san, our lawyer.”

“Pleased to meet you Ukitake-san. You are truly beautiful.”

Jūshirō looked back at the man, puzzled. Was he supposed to return the compliment?

“Thank you. Lovely meeting you too.”

From there it was a rather awkward journey, first to the carpark, where he'd left Sentarou's van that he'd borrowed for the day, then on the road, heading north.

They left the lawyer at a beach resort and continued to granny's place. Jūshirō was itching to know why he'd brought a lawyer, but he decided to wait for next morning, when they would get together again.

After a quiet night at home, as planned, they headed downhill for brunch with Yumichika. The weather was warming, so they ventured the pool. The lawyer appeared before them in Panama hat, a short kimono with a tropical print, designer thong and thematic jewelry. Jūshirō though he'd totally out-Shunsuied Shunsui, which greatly amused him.

They had swam a few laps and generally lounged around in the water for a while when Jūshirō emerged and found Yumichika sitting with an iPad on his lap, on the sun chair.

“Work?”

“A bit of research.”

“I want to thank you for your work on Shunsui’s case. We owe it to you that we can be together again.”

“But according to our main witness, we owe our success to none other than yourself, Ukitake-san…”

“Oh, right…”

“I admire you. I don't think I could have kowtowed to a stranger, even to save my own life.”

“I guess it was a bit like playing the wife in one of those historical dramas…” he laughed.

“Well… in this case the husband to be…” Yumi sing-songed, “Congratulations!”

Jūshirō flushed. He wished Shunsui had kept it to himself a little longer.
“The rings, I mean. I saw the rings,” the lawyer added on cue.

“And you, Ayasegawa-san? I mean, you… ah… oh nevermind…”

“I'm gay, single, looking for love… if that's what you're asking.”

“I suppose my question was even more inconvenient. Please forget about it.”

Yumichika gave him a mischievous look. “Do I get a second guess?”

Jūshirō smiled, lowered his head.

“Your fiancé is an entertaining person, but not my type at all, I'm afraid. Besides, I'm here as a lawyer. Kyōraku-san is paying my firm for the trip and my hourly rate. I was asked to handle a possible adoption.”

“You can't possibly mean…”

“… a pair of twins, I understand…”

Knowing his partner, this kind of thing was not unexpected. He would have obviously preferred to discuss this with time, without a lawyer between them, but he couldn't find any anger in his heart.

“Look, Ayasegawa-san, you know by now that Shunsui is too romantic for his own good… but I am 41, I have a medical history, and on top of that I am currently unemployed, so I'm afraid this will be a pointless exercise.”

“With all due respect, love isn't pointless. But it's not my job to be romantic. If you want to hear about the odds, here's how it goes. The first step is to apply for foster care. It is easier and you even get an allowance from the prefecture… after that, we may apply for adoption. I believe that once you have your name in Mr. Kyōraku’s family register, things will be faster.”

“Kyōraku’s family register?” Jūshirō repeated, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Since Japan is still lagging behind on marriage equality, many couples go for adult adoption.” You can also marry in your fiancé’s other country, but that won't be of much help in terms of adoption…”

“I see.”

His proposal to Shunsui had been more of a romantic moment than a serious plan to get married. He was aware of the adult adoption system, but the thought of giving up the Ukitake name made him a bit sorrowful.

“Do you need time to think? I'm sorry, I thought you had discussed this…”

They hadn't. And he did need time to think. While the idea of being a foster parent ignited something deep within his soul, that was quite a big decision to make. Bigger, much bigger, than marriage.

Shunsui chose that moment to emerge from the pool, splashing his companions with cool drops of water. Jūshirō suspected he'd been listening to the whole exchange.

“Where are we having lunch? Swimming made me rather hungry…”

Noon stretched and turned into evening. The interaction between the three lost the initial awkwardness, but none mentioned anything else about adoptions.
In the following days, Jūshirō and Shunsui spent most of their time alone, going on hikes, watching the waves, or at home with granny. Jūshirō worried that Shunsui was still paying for the lawyer to flaunt his faux gold on the pool side, but did not dare to ask.

Then, one day, with a call from Kiyone Kotetsu, everything changed. Ahi and Aji were in the hospital.

“It seemed like a common cold, so we just gave them panadol and soups… but last night they couldn't breathe. It was frightening so I brought them over, but I cannot stay, the other attendant is on leave… Sorry to trouble you…”

“It's ok Kiyone. Thanks for calling me.”

The woman left Jūshirō alone, while Shunsui went home to fetch a change of clothes. By the look of it, they would have to stay the night. The boys were lying in adjacent beds, in the pediatrics ward. They were either sedated or really tired, because neither open their eyes when he came by.

Unable to split himself in two, he sat on Ahi's bed, the shyer and clingier of the two. If they were to wake up, he would be where he was most needed. He touched the boy's forehead. It was hot and a bit humid. Tiny lips were parted, trying to suck in air through obstructed airways.

Seeing the medical report clipped to the headboard, he picked it up to take a look. He was shocked. Not with the diagnosis of severe influenza, but with the name on the card – Aji. Kyione had gotten the boys' names wrong. That made him inexplicably angry. He knew the woman had a lot on her plate, that the boys were identical... but then why was it that he had never had any problem telling them apart? A hidden voice inside him said 'only a mother can distinguish twins this similar', but that voice made him even angrier. Where could that mother be? Why was she not there?

“Good afternoon. Are you the father?” A young doctor, who was doing his round, asked.

It was normal for the doctor to assume such a thing, but for a moment, Jūshirō was confused, as if he'd entered an alternate reality.

“Sir?” the doctor insisted.

And perhaps without thinking, perhaps overcome by something that transcended reality itself, Jūshirō simply said “yes”.

The question was merely utilitarian. The boys were to be discharged in the morning, and the instructions on their treatment had to be passed onto an adult. Jūshirō wrote them down. Cough syrup, pills, steaming, plenty of rest and staying away from other children for a week.

Jūshirō called Kiyone and got her permission to bring them home. It would be a disaster if all the other kids were infected.

For the next few days, it was as if everything else had faded into the background. He remembered that Saori-ba had prepared food for them all, even when he kept her out of the kids’ room, for fear of infecting her. He remembered Sentarou coming over with supplies from the market. He remembered Shunsui keeping him company as he watched over the boys, and eventually falling asleep on his lap. Everything else was a blur.

Three days later, the boys were breathing easy and the fever had subsided. They coughed less and began to enjoy their time out of the orphanage. They had also taken a liking to Saori-ba, who'd finally been allowed to meet them.
One morning, after wrapping them up like spring rolls, Jūshirō brought the kids out to the porch. They were finally back to their lively selves, and began playing with one of the stray cats that lounged around waiting for leftovers. The two men sat on the wooden platform watching their antics.

“Sorry I didn't give you any attention these few days… I feel bad that you're leaving tomorrow and we didn't do much…”

Shunsui shook his head. “You know I'm not here for tourism. As long as I'm with you, my day is perfect.”

It was such a sweet answer that Jūshirō felt himself leaning towards the other man and caressing him. His lips soon followed, and they exchanged a few tender kisses. When their eyes opened, there were two curious spectators standing before them. Jūshirō covered his face. Now he'd screwed it all up.

“Come up here boys”, he heard Shunsui say.

When they came, obediently, Shunsui sat Aji on his lap and tossed Ahi onto Jūshirō's.

“Tell me boys, do you like Jūshirō?”

“Yes!” they answered in choir.

“How much? Like this?” – his hands measured a foot size of air.

“Noooo!”

“How big, then?”

They both opened their arms as wide as they could, with their cumbersome winter clothes.

“And what about me?”

They looked at each other, clearly hesitant. Then, Aji raised his arms and began to measure, first no more than the size of a basketball. Ahi joined, opening his arms just a bit wider. They seemed to be in a negotiation of sorts, but at the end of it, they had their arms open wide again, and both smiled brightly at the two adults. Jūshirō couldn't resist and squeezed both of the boys. Shunsui gently draped his arms around them all.

He glanced over the two small heads, seeking the eyes of his beloved. Soon enough, they rose to meet him. There was a question in those grey eyes, and Jūshirō finally knew the answer.

“Please call Ayasegawa-san.”

Chapter End Notes

Hiii! So... I really wanted to make this the ending chapter, but it got too long, so I had to split it. Part 2 will be the finale. Thanks everyone! It's been great to write this little crazy story and share it with you. See you soon! xxx
Soulmate - part 2

Chapter Summary

Life takes new courses and secrets are revealed in the eve of a long awaited celebration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

… “I refuse!” The boy said, loud and clear.

With just a wave of his fan, the wind howled, the rain stopped falling and split into ribbons of different colors: blue, green, purple.

The bandits were scared and started running, leaving all the stolen food and values behind. But the water ribbons followed them, wrapping around their legs. justice was finally upon them.

All were impressed by the power of the Twin Fishes, that only Sogyo-kun knew how to harness. With it, the village was finally safe.

When his smile marked the end of the reading, the room erupted in an unruly cheer.

“Thank you, minna-san!”

“Thank you, Ukitake-san, thank you everyone for coming,” the MC took over.

Jūshirō looked around, resisting the urge to check his phone. The space in the middle of the bookshop, where the presentation was held, had filled up gradually. His younger readers were sitting in front, with the adults standing at the back. He had seen Byakuya come in with Rukia, and later Yoruichi. Ise Publishers was the organizer, so it was natural that Nanao sat right next to him.

“And who is excited to get an autograph from the author?” the MC continued.

All hands came up at once.

“Let's form a queue here, one at a time…”

“Ise-san, do you think the meeting is still ongoing?” he asked the editor.

She glanced sideways, under the glint of her glasses, and replied, “He'll be here as soon as he can…”, in a soft, sympathetic voice.

That morning, while heading to the airport, he had videocalled Shunsui, and found out about the emergency meeting with the bankers. It was due to begin around the time of his arrival in Tokyo, so their reunion would have to be postponed. His momentarily dismayed expression was schooled back to a smile.

"Well, here we go, then..."

He picked up his pen and gestured the first in line to come closer. There seemed to be around fifty something kids waiting, holding copies of his book. It had been an unexpected turn of events, that
Jūshirō had always written, but he never thought of himself as a writer. In truth, Sogyo and his fish friends had been with him for a long time. He would imagine their adventures in idle days, and turned to them when he felt lonely. During those winter months in Okinawa, one day, after coming back from the orphanage, he found himself thinking about them again, and wrote the first few adventures with the intention of reading them to the kids. Then, one of the other volunteers asked him to do a reading at her daughter's school for Christmas, and that's where it all began.

"Good grief, kids really love you..." Yoruichi marched on, with her copy in hand, when the last of the waiting young readers left. "You can address it to your favorite kitty."

He gave her a knowing glance, then wrote, "To my dear and precious friend, with gratitude".

"So formal!" she complained.

He also signed one for Rukia and Byakuya, and two more for Momo and Toushiro, the young teacher he had hired before he left St. Ignatius. They seemed to really be getting along, the two of them.

"Should we have tea? We have a lot to catch up on..." Jūshirō suggested.

All agreed, Momo suggesting a new western high-tea place nearby.

As they started walking out, Yoruichi hooked her arm around Jūshirō's.

"So, where's your love bear?"

"My what?" He laughed. "You guys have pet names for each other now?"

"What do you mean each other? What does your boyfriend call me?"

Shit. He had thought out loud.

"Nothing..."

"Jūshirō Ukitake..."

Yoruichi could be scary when she made a certain look, but he just thought it would be fine to tell her...

"Ex-girlfriend from hell..."

And she immediately doubled over, laughing.

"No, I remember, he called me that once! Bastard..."

"I-I... think he means it as a compliment..."

"I'm sure he does. But where is he?"

"At work," he sighed. "Some big meeting about the company going public."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah... I just miss him, but it's no big deal. I'll see him later."
And just then, another arm closed around his shoulders, on the other side.

"Byakuya, so happy you could come..."

"Can I tell father Miguel where we are heading? He couldn't make it earlier, but he'd really like to see you."

The memory of the last time he'd seen the principal came to his mind. After coming out and quitting, they had enjoyed a closer relationship than ever before. Their parting had been friendly and warm, and it made him truly happy to know the priest wanted to see him.

"Yes. Please do. I would be honored."

The group sat down at the tea house, that was decorated with romantic wallpapers and flower arrangements. The tea came and then the elegant tower-trays, filled with bite-sized snacks and pastries.

The conversation flowed on. Nanao, who'd stayed behind to handle all admin issues, joined a little later.

"Ukitake-san, would you be willing to do a few more presentations? The brand manager told me they were interested in launching in their Yokohama and Shibuya stores too..."

The invitation caught the author by surprise, but around the table there were immediate cheers and raised tea cups.

"To hidden talent," they toasted.

And Jūshirō said yes.

The new signs, name cards and stationary were ready. The company had finally dropped the "Kabuchiki Kaisha" portion of its name, and was now registered as "Kyōraku Holdings, Company Limited". No more "KKK", at last! It was, Shunsui hoped, a new start for an organization with too much history on its shoulders. Lisa had been working around the clock to sift through all accounts of all shareholders and subsidiaries, to make sure that no more holes remained. Only then could the company go public. A group of banks were already engaged, and the paperwork was also underway. All very exciting. A living hell.

"Lisa, are we going to be done any time soon?" Shunsui whispered, during one more pause called by the banks' lawyers.

"You don't have to be here," she glared at him. "Go see your fiancé, for god's sake..."

"I'm not throwing you to the lions..."

"Shut up and get outta here!" Her whisper came out a bit loud, and one of the lawyers raised his head from his laptop.

Shunsui looked up at the window. It had gone dark. He checked his phone but there was nothing but a message from Nanao, a few hours ago, saying that they were having tea somewhere in Ebisu. He looked at his watch. If he left right away, he might still make it before the café closed. Lisa glared once more. He made up his mind.
"Excuse me ladies, gentlemen, I need to leave you. Lisa will take over from now."

Only two or three of the bankers raised their heads from their laptops, with a mix of disinterest and annoyance. Bosses leave early, there's nothing strange about that. The ones that don't are either psychopath micro-managers, or newbies.

Shunsui swallowed back the feeling of pointlessness. He should have listened to Lisa. But no use in dwelling on that. Off to Ebisu, to see the love of his life.

The taxi stopped him in front of the café. There was light inside, but a "closed" sign already hung on the door. Dammit, it was really late. He checked his phone again. Nothing. Well, he would just have to go in and check things out.

He pushed the door, tentatively. It was open. He took a step inside, then another, past the welcome counter. The place was silent, safe for a few voices. The first person to spot him was Nanao. He held his index in front of his lips, asking her to keep quiet. There were another four people around the table. Jūshirō sat with his back against the door, a loose white braid falling down his back.

As he approached, the faces of the companions came within his field of vision. No one said a word, but all of a sudden Jūshirō was standing up and walking straight to him, smiling. And just like that, all the triggers in his body and mind were pressed at once. He had missed many things since he’d last seen his beloved, but that smile was probably the number one.

“Hey there handsome,” he greeted.

“Hey there yourself.” Jūshirō came closer, laid one hand on his bicep and kissed him.

“I'm sorry…”

“Don't worry. We've been chatting, almost lost track of time.”

“Who's the old chap?”

“Principal at St. Ignatius.”

“Nanao texted me. Seems that you rocked that book launch…”

“Well, you know… middle schoolers… they either love you or hate you…” he giggled. “How did your meeting go?”

Shunsui grinned, “Bankers… they either hate you or hate you…”

This time, they laughed together, then kissed again.

“Shunsui, I thought, since they're all here, we could tell them… if you're… ready.”

“I am… but what about the priest?”

“That's the thing… I think I want to invite him too. I probably never mentioned it, but I came out to him before I quit, and he was most supportive…”

“If you want to, I have no objections… let's do it!”

And with their minds made up, they walked over to the table.

“Everyone else knows each other… so, Father Miguel, meet Shunsui, Shunsui…”
The two men shook hands and Shunsui took a seat between Jūshirō and Yoruichi.

“Ex-girlfriend from hell, uh?” she teased, while kicking his ankle under the table.

“Ouch! It’s a compliment!”

“That’s what I said!” Jūshirō intervened, trying to stop the scuffle. Byakuya sighed audibly, and Rukia began to giggle, followed by everyone else.

When the laughter finally faded, Jūshirō took Shunsui’s hand, laced their fingers, and coughed once to clear his throat.

“So, since we are all here, we want to invite you all to a small celebration, at the end of the month, in Shunsui’s house in Kamakura…”

Rukia was the first to put 2 and 2 together…

“So… are you, er… getting married?”

Jūshirō grinned and scratched his neck, nervously. “Yes and no… we are moving back together and we want it to be forever, so in that sense, yes… but we can’t really marry… yet… and I honestly don’t like the idea of one of us adopting the other… it’s a very patriarchal thing to do, I guess, and it makes me uncomfortable… so, in the legal sense, no…”

Byakuya stood up like a spring. His face was the usual blank, so no one was to know if he’d walk away or lunge forward and hug Jūshirō. It turned out to be the latter. And what a hug! Jūshirō almost choked when his friend’s arms closed around his thorax.

“Congratulations! I’ll be honored to attend and happy to help with anything you might need.”

All others followed suit, greeting the husbands to be.

Shunsui followed the priest with his eyes, when he approached Jūshirō to hug him, and whispered a few words in his ear. Jūshirō nodded and hugged the man again.

When they were finally alone, outside the closed café, Shunsui found himself itching to know what the answer had been, but Jūshirō had other plans.

“Do you want to walk down to Meguro River?”

“You're not tired?”

“A bit, I guess, but sakura season is almost over and I miss Tokyo’s cherry blossoms…”

“And what can I ever deny you…?”

Even after dark, the banks of Meguro River were populated by an assortment of locals taking romantic strolls, groups heading to the restaurants and bars in the area, and tourists trying to capture the spectacle of the tree-lined water course. The last days’ rain and wind had left some of the trees with barely a few clusters of flowers to tell the tale, but others had remarkably resisted, and still sported their proud pink cloaks.
Jūshirō and Shunsui walked hand in hand, Shunsui pulling the small trolley containing his fiancé's luggage. They had made a pledge to not hide their relationship anymore, no matter the looks or comments they might overhear.

They came to a stop on a bridge, taking in the scenery, listening to the flow of water under their feet. Jūshirō inhaled and closed his eyes, satisfied.

"Do you remember the last hanami?" he asked.

Shunsui did remember, "Very well... I messed it up..."

Jūshirō hooked an arm around his, and pulled him closer.

"It was a beautiful day, despite it all... I was happy and sad... and so giddy on you..."

Shunsui twisted his neck to gaze at the man's beautiful green eyes.

"I was giddy on you too... I still am..."

Jūshirō smiled, "Me too..."

Then, from the corner of his eye, the sensei seemed to have spotted something that caught his attention. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Shunsui watched him run and skip happily, recklessly dodging a kid on a kick scooter... then approaching a street stall and purchasing something. He came back balancing two glasses of... rosé champagne??

"Sakura bubbles!" he announced, beaming.

"Domo!" Shunsui nodded, taking one of the plastic flutes that looked like a real glass.

They giggled, kissed, giggled again, toasted to “being giddy on love”, kissed again, and finally drank.

Jūshirō was a considerably slower drinker, so he was still sipping on his ‘Sakura bubbles’ when they started walking again. The flowers overhead were like ethereal clouds, illuminated by lamp lights. A gentle chill danced in the evening air.

“This morning, on the plane,” Jūshirō started, a bit pensive, “I thought of having a hair cut.”

Shunsui winced. “Why?”

“You don't want me to, do you?” He glanced sideways, with a little guilty frown.

Shunsui felt an impending crisis in the air. He should be tactful.

“You don’t want me to, you?” He glanced sideways, with a little guilty frown.

Shunsui felt an impending crisis in the air. He should be tactful.

“Your hair is gorgeous... I mean, of course I love it, I love to touch it and run my hands through it and all... but I understand it can be troublesome to groom every day…”

That seemed to have hit the note he was aiming at.

“Yeah, right? It takes ages to dry, in the summer it kind of makes me feel hot and flushed all the time… I really should trim it, but…”

“Jūshirō... is there a story behind your hair?”
The man looked up, straight into Shunsui's eyes, then deflected and began to fidget with the plastic flute. There was a story, and it didn't seem like a particularly happy one.

"You don't have to share it... now or ever... only if you want to..."

"I want to... Can we find a bench or something?"

"Yeah."

They found a quiet spot, a little further down the river bank, and sat down side by side.

Jūshirō inhaled and exhaled, then fixed his eyes on the flowing water. It was but a short prelude to the words that started pouring, like a long withheld stream.

"Seven years ago, around this time, I had no hair. I was in a ward in the hospital, waiting for a bone marrow transplant. I was lucky, I had a lot of friends dropping by, and Yoruichi, of course, but I felt more and more alone. Life was fading from me and it's as though no one else could ever relate to that... Until one day they brought another patient to the slot next to mine. He was loud and funny and seemed so out of place in a place like that... No one seemed to visit, except for a cousin, but he was never down. I was drawn to him in a way I had never been drawn to anyone. We would lie there and joke about the weird words on our charts, about the nurses' shoes, about being bald... Suddenly, in those endless hours, I was not alone anymore."

He paused for a moment to breathe and wipe a stray tear. Shunsui just sat there, as quiet as he could. At that moment, he was nothing but the stream that flew before them, the sound that cradled Jūshirō's words.

"One day, news came that a donor had been found... for me. I had to go away to some isolated place... and wait. And then, after they did it, I had to wait some more. Weeks later, finally, I got back to the ward, and what I saw... I just... it cut me in pieces. I was probably looking like death but Kaien was... he had decayed a lot and it was clear that he didn't have much time... That night, when the ward was quiet, I slipped off my bed and sat on his. I held his hand through the night. I began to do that, night after night, for a few weeks maybe... I felt strength coming back to me, little by little. I could stand longer and my hair began to grow... white. It made him laugh that, in my mid thirties I would look like a grandfather. And then he had an idea... he said, why don't you grow it long? If you're going to look different, than do it in style, he joked. Then, his face turned serious and he added that one day, when we met on the other side, he would be happy to see me with long hair, because he would know that I had lived a long life. He died that night. I never cut my hair again."

They stayed in silence for a while. Shunsui knew bits and pieces of this story, but Jūshirō didn't like to talk about it, so he had never asked more than he was told. And now there it was, laid out before him like an open book, the moment that had changed everything in his lover's life.

"And you are ready now..." he ventured.

Jūshirō nodded, and silently sought his partner's hand, covering it very lightly with his own.

"You could visit his grave," Shunsui offered, mindful of the pain he might be stirring, "... tell him about your life, the things that happened in the last 7 years... that long hair makes you feel really hot in the summer... He'll understand..."

And Jūshirō nodded again, but his expression was opening, slowly.

"Yes, let's do that," he finally answered. "We can visit your family too..."
'We'. So Jūshirō wanted to do it together. The idea was a bit overwhelming, he usually shied away from this kind of thing... but what other purpose was there in uniting your life to someone else's, if not to be there for each other in times like these?

“Yes. We can do that.”

Shunsui smiled, and Jūshirō smiled back. Their fingers interlaced. Suddenly, they were back in Meguro, under the cherry trees, back from the past and its wounds, back to the life they were forging together. And it felt good.

“How do I look?”

Jūshirō had felt a pleasant sort of lightness when the barber cut the long ponytail and laid it on the counter in front of him. Then, he took a sealable bag and carefully placed the hair inside it.

“Thank you for your donation, we will send it to the wig maker immediately.”

He nodded and his side locks fell forward like some sort of silly-looking droopy dog’s ears. He flinched.

“Let’s do something about this now, shall we?”

Hours later, he stood facing his partner, who’d just arrived home from work.

“Hmm…” Shunsui had apparently decided it was completely appropriate to take a piss at his lover on the day he finally cut his hair after 7 long years. “Let’s see… definitely trendy, but don’t you think you’ll have cold ears?… they kind of stick out…”

The man blushed, then sighed.

“Do I look that bad?”

Maybe he shouldn’t have let the barber talk him into a this silly haircut. What was it called? A fade? What's so great about it anyway, besides all the k-pop singers in the magazines he'd shown him? He could have tried a Ryuichi Sakamoto bowl cut or something. But it was too late now. And Shunsui kept smirking, like he was having the time of his life.

“Come here silly man,” he finally said.

Shunsui’s hands descended gently on his naked nape. The area was so sensitive that he could feel his body reacting in all sorts of ways to that light caress.

“You look gorgeous.”

To Jūshirō those few words, purred to the exposed skin behind his ear, were the last straw. But then, there was more. There was a light nibble on his earlobe, the rubbing of stubble against his neck, the touch of lips on his.

He let his hands drift to the row of buttons on the other man’s shirt, slowly exposing tanned skin and dark hirsuteness.

“Lucky we’re getting married,” Shunsui tried to joke before losing his breath, “you keep making me live in sin…”
They eyed each other, lids heavy with lust.

“Let's go inside?”

It was Jūshirō who fell back first on the mattress, when their messy walk reached its end. Swiftly his pants and boxers got peeled from his legs. He rid himself of his t-shirt, then tugged on Shunsui's clothes.

Lying there, overpowered, the pleasurable attack continued. Hands trailed his arms, his chest. A wet tongue licked his stiffening nipples, while further south his legs were being lifted and pulled apart. Then, that tongue traveled down his body and found its prize.

Shunsui’s oral skill-set was no surprise to him, but that afternoon, with all the magnified sensations, it was nearly overkill. And all because of a haircut.

He heard himself moan, and his head jerked backwards as his back arched. And then that warmth and the stimulus was gone for instants, until it relocated further down. He shivered at the intensity of it all. Rimming was not something they would do often, so the pressure in that intimate, sensitive spot was almost making him climax.

He felt his hand grip around soft curls and yank them back. And their eyes met once more. There was a breathless crawling over his body, and when they kissed the taste in his mouth was a mix of musk and salt. Then, while their mouths were still united, a finger travelled down to that same place and pressed, ever so lightly. By reflex, he contracted himself.

“Will you let me in?” Shunsui’s voice whispered into his open mouth. He was panting hard now, his eyes shut. But he wanted to answer, he wanted to say yes, that he desired it with every ounce of flesh in his body. And he was so happy that Shunsui finally let himself ask for it.

“Yes,” he managed, “I want you to.”

The finger lingered there for a moment, Shunsui ravaging his mouth and grinding him relentlessly. But oh, practicalities... the next moment he was standing up and stumbling to the dresser, then climbing back on top and lubing his fingers.

It had been a while since they'd done this, and all the rush, the excitement and the hints of panic washed over him as those fingers entered his body. He clenched, then forced himself to relax, let his body open, and the pain and burn gave way to a swarming of sensations.

“You are doing so well baby, you're so warm inside...”

“Keep saying... things... gonna come...” he tried, not so successfully, to give a heads up.

But Shunsui got the idea. He pulled out his fingers and reached for the bottle again. He crawled up the bed and whispered in his ear, “Will you let me fuck you from behind?”

This time, Jūshirō couldn't manage more than humming in agreement and letting himself be lifted and turned and pinned to the mattress, his hips in the air. And so it started. Shunsui entered him slowly, hands clutching his hip bones for control. After the first few strokes he paused to check “you ok?” and then continued, once reassured, picking up the pace.

For the man on all fours, it was an uncommon set of sensations, one he was thoroughly enjoying. The pounding inside and against him was enough to beat any thoughts away, but something lingered in his head, perhaps a higher form of trust or belonging, or maybe just a sex induced high.
He barely noticed when a hand began pumping him, and then the electric shocks of orgasm were all over him, the pounding stopped and he felt a shot of warm liquid hit his sacrum. He was pulled upright, embraced and kissed, and finally, a last stroke in a picture that was so beautiful to his eyes, he was carefully wiped clean.

For a family like the Kyōraku, owning a seaside house in Kamakura was a social imperative, and so it had fallen on Shunsui's grandfather to purchase the property back in the early thirties. The then young master chose a western style villa, resembling a French chateau, close to the island of Enoshima. The villa was graceful with its high ceilings and ample windows, but its most notable feature was doubtlessly the terrace overlooking the sea and the silhouette of mountains to the west, among which, on clear days, one could see the revered Mt. Fuji.

Some of the original furniture still remained - French console tables, demilunes and bergère chairs, mainly on the upper floor, where the bedrooms were. Kyōraku Juntoku, however, had a love for the traditional, so he had tatami floor installed in some of the rooms of the ground floor, one of which with an hearth for tea brewing, and samurai memorabilia spread around the house. The next master, Shunsui's older brother, had little time to leave his mark, but a basket of Nanao’s dolls was still lying around in one of the rooms.

It was, perhaps, the weight of family's history, but when Jūshirō spent time alone at the summer house, he always felt a bit like an outsider. They had been staying there for the past weeks, cleaning, airing the rooms, setting up tables and chairs in the patio, painting those that had lost their colour. Sometimes, though, he would simply sit by the wall and watch the waves travelling to the shore, or go down the slope, to the beach and let his feet sink in the wet sand.

While on some days it felt perfectly normal to hold a party and call it a wedding, on others he couldn't stop wondering at the happiness it made him feel. Together with the lawyer, they had gone through the options. Getting married, it seemed, was all about property, something that didn't matter much to him. Shunsui, however, had insisted on writing a will in his favor, so he simply wrote one back to him, even if his worldly possessions paled when compared to the Kyōraku estate.

After that, they had focused on throwing a party for friends and family, a meaningful yet informal event, in which everyone could have a good time. From Okinawa, some cousins would come and Sentarou would bring Saori-ba, who had agreed to leave the island for the first time in her long life. Reservations were made with nearby guest-houses, so that all could easily access the site.

Naturally, the Kuchiki also owned a holiday house in Kamakura, although theirs was, like the home in Tokyo, fully built in traditional Japanese style.

Early in the morning of the event, as agreed, Byakuya passed by the Kyōraku villa to pick up one of the grooms. Ise-san, who was in the patio arranging flowers, was the first one to notice him. Shunsui was walking around in a bathrobe, hair still wet, placing markers on the tables. Finally, Jūshirō came out of the house, dressed casually, hair was cut short. He waived happily at Byakuya when he saw him.

"Good morning! Thanks for this, Byakuya."

"Are you alright?"
"A bit nervous I guess..."

"It's normal, I was nervous on my wedding too."

The one to come up with the idea that Jūshirō should go away to get ready and make a grand entrance was Shunsui, but when Byakuya knew the reason, he was immediately onboard. And so they got in the car, and Honda-san drove them both to the Kuchiki holiday house.

Rukia came out, beaming, as soon as she heard the car in the driveway.

"Good morning! How are you feeling today?"

"Great," he replied, but an embarrassing noise came from his lower abdomen. "A bit nervous, I guess…"

After a nice soak at the hot tub and a hearty breakfast, it was time to get dressed. The set of montsuki, hakama and haori, all in earth tones, was laid out in Byakuya's room. The colors were not common for a wedding, but Jūshirō had chosen them for the organic feel of the ensemble. He suspected that he would find his groom in rather more festive colors.

Byakuya waited for him to strip down to his underwear, then helped him into the first layer of kimono, of a delicate white silk. Next came the more lustful dark green montsuki, the dark brown hakama, and the black haori. Then, Byakuya made Jūshirō sit, and combed his hair, shaping it with some sort of hair product Jūshirō had brought. Finally, they shared a long, tight embrace.

When they emerged from the room, Rukia and the female staff unashamedly swooned over the groom. Abarai, who'd arrived in the meantime, didn't seem too comfortable with the spectacle. Byakuya tapped the man's back, reassuringly.

"Shall we, then? I have word from Ise-san that all is set on their side."

They ignored Jūshirō's look of mild panic, and ushered him inside the car. The car rolled out of the property, around a block of similar-looking houses, and then up the slope. It was a short trip, taking less than five minutes. From where the car stopped, they could see numerous heads up in the courtyard. The catering van was parked uphill, and people came in and out of the gate. The look of dread on the groom's eyes amplified.

"B-byakuya… can you walk with me?"

After his immediate family was reduced to the two of them, Byakuya knew that he'd do this for his sister one day. What he never imagined, was to do it for a stranger. A stranger? That wasn't quite right. Jūshirō had become more like a brother. A brother given by life.

"Of course. Let's go."

They didn't hold arms or hands, just walked side by side. There was shuffling and bustle as they climbed the steps up to the patio, and made their way in. A soft tune began to play. It came from a piano set on the other side of the area, played by a young woman. That wasn't there in the morning, Jūshirō remembered.

His eyes misted when he saw his grandmother, beautiful in her favorite kimono. He stepped forward to embrace her and barely noticed that Byakuya didn't follow. From the corner of the eye, he saw the younger man retreating into the audience, in his face a very rare, very precious smile.

But his grandmother was slowly pushing him back, forcing him to stand upright. In a flash he saw
Shunsui standing by the cherry tree, wearing a flower in his hair. And then, feather-light and barely noticeable, there was a touch on his hand, first the left, then the right. A touch of very soft skin, of small fingers wrapping around his own. He didn't need to look down. He knew who they were.

“Hi boys…”

“Hi daddy…”

“Let's go?”

“Hai!”

The party went on until well after sundown. Then, one by one, the guests started bidding their goodbyes. Some left with pieces of cake wrapped in cellophane paper, others took a lantern as souvenir.

The last to leave were, naturally, the closest friends and relatives. They had all gathered around a table, having champagne and chatting. Aji as still running around with one of his cousins, while Ahi had already parked himself on Jūshirō’s lap and fallen asleep.

"Excited?" A hand fell on his shoulder.

"Very. And a little scared."

"You'll do great. My daughter can vouch for your abilities."

"How is she?"

"In high school. She really wanted to come, but finals are in less than a month..."

"I understand, tell her I say hi!"

"Hang on..." Starrk looked at his watch and pulled his phone from his pocket. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

They stared at the screen, waiting for the girl to answer.

"Lily! Look who's here!"

On the other side, Lily seemed to be in her room, a large desert poster behind her.

"Old man! You look like a hipster!"

"Who's that?" Yoruichi jumped in front of the screen, almost spilling her wine glass on the phone. "Lily-chan! You're missing the party of the century!"

"Ex-GF from hell is drunk!" Shunsui sang behind her, which earned him an elbow in the gut.

Kisuke had no idea who they were talking to, but came over to say a sheepish ‘hi’. With all the commotion, Ahi raised his sleepy head, then nuzzled Jūshirō tighter.

"You guys should come and visit. All my friends want to meet my Japanese gay uncles!"
"She been bragging about us?" Shunsui asked Starrk, who nodded, in a sort of amused embarrassment.

They promised to visit in the summer and the small gathering scattered, when the video call ended.

The Kuchiki siblings said their farewells, followed by Yoruichi and Kisuke. Nanao left with Lisa, leaving Shunsui with a mischievous grin plastered on his face. Finally, Sentarou and Kiyione, who would bring Saori obasan to the guest house, came to say their goodbyes.

"Can you wait just a second?" said Shunsui, before running into the house. He came back with a large paper bag. "Can you give this to Kyo-chan?"

Kyione was puzzled. "What is this Kyōraku-san? It's heavy..."

"Just some pens, sketchbooks and stuff..."

"Should we call Ayasegawa-san again?" Jūshirō whispered in his ear, a cheeky smile on his face.

"Maybe..." he winked, but on the next day, they would write it off as drunken talk... two kids were enough of a handful for them to handle... for the time being.

With Ahi and Aji sound asleep, and the house finally empty, Jūshirō took one round, blowing candles and drawing curtains. When he came back to the courtyard, he found Shunsui gazing at the moon. A small hand movement signaled him to join his husband on the bench.

"It's a full moon... Can't believe I didn't notice it the whole night."

"Spring moons are always glorious..." Jūshirō mused.

"So we did it. We got hitched."

Jūshirō laughed softly. "Hmmm. I'm yours now. Do with me what you will..."

It was perhaps an innuendo, perhaps supposed to prompt them to move indoors, but it had a very unexpected effect on the other newly wed. Shunsui kept staring at the moon. The glow of the satellite reflected on his face, bringing to light a single path of water flowing down that surface.

"Jūshirō, can you promise me that, whatever happens, you'll never sacrifice yourself, for me, for anyone or anything ever?"

Jūshirō frowned. It was uncanny. What memory or parallel reality was this, that kept haunting them? Perhaps it was just a coincidence, nothing worth dwelling on, on such a lovely night. But the dreams he'd have came teasing him, and he knew he had to ask...

"Shunsui, have you been having strange dreams lately?"

Their eyes finally locked and, on that moment, Shunsui knew he was not alone. He paused and looked back at the moon.

"The last one was the night after I left Okinawa, after we made up and you re-proposed... I was alone drinking sake... there was a stone with your name."
Jūshirō let that sink in, like a punch. Then, he pulled Shunsui to his chest and cradled his head tenderly.

"Look, listen to me, whatever life that was, or is, or will be... you were not to blame. It had to happen, do you understand?"

"I don't know..." the man insisted. "I just... don't want it to happen. I don't want that reality. I want it to be gone from all dimensions and universes, forever."

"I don't agree." Jūshirō said, his voice calm and steady. "Were those last days the only ones you saw? Try dreaming a bit harder.... You'll regret throwing away so much of us..."

"Jūshirō..."

"And re-lax," he stressed, pulling Shunsui upright again, seeking his eyes. "I saw Unohana just a few days ago. I'm all good, no troubles in sight! We still have some time."

Shunsui finally smiled, and nodded. Their bodies came close, arms interwoven, facing the big moon in the sky.

As both pairs of eyes slid closed, a black butterfly flew by.

Chapter End Notes

And so it ends! It has been a pleasure. I hope to hear your thoughts - now, in a month or in a few years. I'll probably take a break from writing here to take care of RL stuff, but will surely be back sooner or later. All the best y'all. Cheers!

End Notes

Hello and thank you for making it this far!

Enjoy :)