**Foreign Recruit**

by **SSAerial**

**Summary**

Ichigo doesn't know where to start. He has no friends, no family, no personal attachments to the world he got dumped into. The Soul King never specified what he was supposed to do in a world where technology is ahead of its time and aliens and secret governments exist. As for the people he has to deal with… Well, it isn't like he hasn’t dealt with colorful personalities before.

**Notes**

This is my first update in a long time. I’ve been busy with getting ready for my first year of college and moving out since it’s out of state.

I've noticed not many people go into this crossover, so I decided to give it a shot. This is my first crossover attempt, so please tell me if it sounds okay and if my characterization seems off. Also, the timeline is based off of wiki, so anyone who wants to know the details, check it
out. I made sure to be very specific.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Ichigo wondered once again what the hell he had been thinking when he chose South America as a place to travel in. The weather was hot, the land was vast and full of damn nothing from the dirt to the sun as far as the eye can see. It was blander than what he had expected when he had first arrived at the airport weeks ago.

At the back of his mind, he was tempted to blame Ulquiorra for somehow convincing him a Spanish-language based country would be a good as any place to start the last time he had called the Arrancars. Next to his English, he was pretty decent in the language due to the teachings of a very patient Halibel and surprisingly Grimmjow, who taught him quite a bit of swear words in the process. He had stumbled over the unfamiliar words like an idiot at the beginning before getting the hang of it, prompting Grimmjow to laugh his ass off in the background along with a giggling Nel at the time.

So far, he had started from a bit north to Ecuador before finally gave up. Coming here had been stupid of him. Groaning, he squinted under the heat waves that were bearing down on him and was met with not a hint of civilization.

Just like an hour ago.

Sullen, he mentally swatted Shiro upside the head when he heard him snickering, Zangetsu watching with silent amusement at his predicament. Ichigo swore to himself that he would kick the Hollow’s ass later the next time they sparred.

Wiping off the sweat that was pouring down his face, he adjusted the cap he had bought at the convenience store. It was white and had 'Hola!' stitched in bright red at the front. The two prime reasons why he was wearing it was to one, to protect his head from the heat and two, to bring less attention to his bright orange hair.

It was bad enough that he was a foreigner. He would like to go where he liked without getting pointed or stared at, thank you very much. He would’ve preferred black though but he wasn't so crazy to cook his cranium like an egg.

Hiking next to the road, he reflected on his life choices that led him to this point.

Let’s see, he could always say it was the Spirit King’s fault who had dumped him into this world a couple months after he had defeated Aizen without using Final Getsuga Tenshou. The price, however, had been getting kicked out of his own universe and leaving all his clueless friends behind who doesn’t even know that he had left. Well, except Urahara.

Feeling the old scar start to itch, he shook off his bitterness and kept walking.

After checking his watch and seeing that half an hour has passed, he halted in his steps when he spotted something in the distance.

Right there in his line of vision were actual buildings, a semblance of people figures mulling around from where he could see. Inwardly cheering, Ichigo didn’t even have to think to start sprinting toward what he could tell was a small town. Months of training his human body paid off as he kept his breathing even, closing the distance steadily. The place was miles away, and he didn't want to
waste all his energy.

After about an hour or so, he finally reached the sweet sanctuary, panting a little and more energized than he felt in days. Barely any sweat trickled down his forehead, but his shoulders vaguely ached from carrying the weight of his heavy backpack for hours, straining his neck.

He ignored the odd looks people threw his way, probably wondering where he had so abruptly came from, and dug through his bag until he found his water bottle that was little to worse for wear from running so fast. Hunggrily taking a gulp, he barely noticed the water was lukewarm and chugged on. After months of residing in the barren Hueco Mundo, he had gotten used to warm water very quickly. He was just glad he had any in the first place.

After he was done, he glanced around casually, sharp eyes taking in the small buildings and stores. People bustled to their destinations, few briefly faltering when they saw the Japanese before he scowled fiercely at them, prompting them to scamper off.

Scoffing at their reactions, he didn't bother to check the reiatsu level in the area. He had found out very quickly after visiting Japan that reiatsu apparently didn't exist in this world. After his failed attempt at finding Karakura town – which apparently didn't exist either – he had travelled all around Japan in search of anything familiar or different. It didn't take long for him to start panicking when he realized he couldn't feel anything. Not one whiff of anything spiritual brushed his senses, sending him off on a spree to find something, anything strange in his old country in the new realm.

He visited temples on the highest mountains, conversed with shamans, hell, went to more friggin fortune telling booths than he liked to think about.


After the startling revelation, it had at first been extremely disconcerting, him struggling to accept this sudden change. Even before he even knew about shinigamis and Hollows, he had always been surrounded by the supernatural world. Seeing ghosts float around the streets or even his house was the norm, a constant disturbance in his short life since his mother's death. It rubbed him the wrong way that he couldn't detect any otherworldly manifestations normal people couldn't sense anywhere.

A year ago, he probably would've celebrated at the very idea of being like everyone else. After all, having ghosts follow your trail every time you go home and having weird looks thrown at your way when you seemingly talked to yourself was pretty damn tiring.

But that was before a certain Kuchiki barged in to his life and opened up a whole new world to him. Now, he missed the disorder of his old life and almost craved for a sign of anything unnatural. He felt so out of place, literally an intruder from another dimension.

He briefly snorted to himself as he vividly imagined people's reactions if he ever explained where he came from. *Oh, yeah. I'm a dimension hopper and a death god who fights monsters as an occupation. Don't worry, they don't seem to exist here, though I half wish they do. I'm not crazy at all!*

Yeah, that would go down so well.

He admits that he had been tempted by the idea to just go with it. To live a normal life, finish high school, and even go to college, but banished the notion immediately from his mind. He had changed far too much to ever live a dull, ordinary life after literally going through hell and back for his loved ones.
He could only imagine what the school psychologist would make of him since he was technically a
war veteran, despite it being only one massive bloody battle. He would've pitied the poor bastard
who would have that job if he ever really did grace the academic hallways with his ever sunny
personality.

Walking down the street vendors, he paused at one of the newspaper stands and saw that the date
was March, 2010. He didn't know why, but apparently, this world was eight years ahead of his own.
There was no logical reason to it so he had immediately dismissed the detail without much care.

He had also found out quite quickly that the technology here was well ahead of its time, developing
at a pace that was almost frightening. Other than that, the differences were subtle but not unbearable
to him. He had never been materialistic or current about the news to begin with so it wasn't like it
was a humongous change for him.

Though none of the changes affected him too much, he had to admit to himself there was something
strange about this place that quite frankly perturbed him. It felt too clean, too normal, enough for it to
be unsettling. When he had researched a bit more into this world's history, there had been
questionable miniscule changes that had left him mystified.

Some unheard of battles in World War II, an intriguing super soldier in a ridiculous spandex called
Captain America – he had chortled for a few minutes at the originality of the title when he had been
researching at a library at the time and was still unsure if the 'super soldier' part was simply for
propaganda – and a billionaire weapon's dealer whose name escaped him but was evidently pretty
damn famous. And a few notable scientific advancements that have been made here that didn't occur
in his world.

Apparently at the moment, quite a few countries were at war, some diplomatic crap has hit the fan,
and politicians were still douchebags – he took some weird small comfort from this, since he couldn't
imagine any universe where that wasn't the case. North Korea had also made some notable
advancements over the years, though they were nowhere close to the forgettable American
billionaire. The man was impressively pretty much the reason why America was number one in the
weapon's industry for the last few decades.

Though his attendance record had slipped during the second half of his first year of high school,
making it pretty difficult to be on top of things, he wasn't an idiot. His top marks despite shinigami
business getting in the way proved that. Besides, even if that wasn't the case, only a complete
imbecile wouldn't notice the obvious holes of information that were missing in between some of this
world's historic events.

If he didn't know any better, it was like someone messed with the history records themselves just to
match people's perceptions and to ward off any suspicion. Considering Soul Society's past, the first
captain's many mistakes and bad decisions along with Aizen's deception, adding to a certain
manipulative shopkeeper who Ichigo wanted to punch half the times, he had learned through
experience that not everything was what is seemed.

If Shinji was here, he probably would've snarked in displeasure about there probably being another
Central 46 in the midst of all this. While Ichigo did not like the sound of such an organization, he
couldn't deny this was a high possibility unfortunately.

Shaking off his darkening thoughts, he wandered around a bit more and began to search for a motel.
He had been given basic provisions and a few thousand dollars from the Soul King – he thought it
was a bit of an overkill but didn't complain – when he first arrived here. He didn't use the money
much since he did as many odd jobs he could find every time he stopped by a town to save it up as
much as possible. Unlike most stupid teenagers, he was sensible enough not to splurge like an idiot.
After fifteen minutes, he found a satisfactory place.

It was a bit shady, but it was cheap and it wasn't like he couldn't take care of himself. Nodding to the guy at the counter after paying, he trudged up the creaky stairs and went down the hall until he found his room on the third floor.

Clicking the key and twisting it, he entered in a fairly small, dingy room that had his eyes watering when the dust hit. Wiping away the film of liquid over his vision, he took note of the single bed and wooden chair and table, a bathroom next to him. Shutting the door behind him, he immediately flopped his whole body onto the bed and closed his eyes, sighing with a bit of contentment as he rested. The mattress was a bit hard but not unbearable. After sleeping on desert sand for months, he has become pretty quick to adapting to his surroundings, among other things.

Without his permission, his mind started to drift as the sound of bustling crowds outside his window lulled him to sleep. Tired from the run and the minimum sleep he got from the constant travelling of the past few days, everything went black.

~A~

Staring and beckoning, looking to the stars for answers in his house for the first time in months since training with the Vaizards, feeling dejected and frustrated. His head was pounding with a headache and he felt like brooding after dishing it out with that damn blue haired bastard.

Soon, he's going off to war. He's going to fight for his friends, his family, his home. Failure is unacceptable. Failure means death to thousands if you count Soul Society and his home town put together.

He can't beat Aizen. Not like this. He's not strong enough, and he doesn't have time. There's never enough damn time. Shit, he had to save everyone. He doesn't care what it takes. Nothing can be worse than all of them dead. Absolutely nothing-

"Then let me give you an opportunity, Kurosaki Ichigo."

A voice. Soft yet powerful, commanding respect and is serene as a pool of untouched water. Then the words register.

Hope flares like the burning sun.

'Tell me.'

"Careful now. Don't be hasty. You will regret this if you agree so rashly."

Don't care don't care. Everyone depends on him. Everyone is trying their best to get stronger. He had to get stronger, to protect them, before it's too late-

"So, do we have an agreement?"

'Heh. Do you even have to ask that?'

"Remember the price. Remember, this is your choice."

'You talk too much. Are you gonna help me or not?'

-he doesn't regret his choice. He can't. He won't. Aizen lost. They won. Everyone is alive. That's all that mattered to him.
But damn it, they're gone to him now. They're alive but they might as well be dead to him. He didn't exist. He was replaced. Forgotten. A savior a mystery a relic-

Ichigo's brown eyes snapped open in alarm, body bolting up as his hand flew to cover his face, heart wildly thumping. Shutting his eyes, he shook his head to stave off the nightmare, panic residing as old frustration took place instead, causing him to scowl.

Damn, this was getting old really fast. It's been months for fuck sake. He lost enough already; he didn't need his sanity to go along with it. Sighing heavily, he rubbed his hair out of his face to wipe off the cold sweat that trickled down his forehead. Glancing outside, he cursed mentally when he saw that it was pitch black. He didn't even have to look at his watch to know that it was late in the night.

This was what he got for falling asleep in the middle of the day. Though, to be fair, he never sleeps for long because of the nightmares. He brushes it off easily enough, berating himself every time that he has to get it over with and deal with the fact that this was his reality now.

Yeah, easier said than done.

Suddenly, he realized that there was something odd in the air. Hand freezing, he felt a niggling, small pull that he hadn't felt since he had arrived to this world. He automatically seized the dagger he had in his pants side pocket, tuning in on the feeling he hadn't felt in painful months. He realized wryly to himself that he had unconsciously started to search for threats the moment he woke up.

Tilting his head, his eyes narrowed as he concentrated.

It was reiatsu.

But there was something… odd about it. Now that he was making a conscious effort, he felt uneasy by the threatening, raging emotion he could feel just from here. It was powerful and uncontrollable, but thankfully, it didn't feel malicious.

Some of his wariness let up a notch from this observation, but none of his trepidation. He berated himself for ignoring something that could be potentially dangerous simply because he had just a bit underestimated this world.

And, much to his surprise, the presence was quite close.

Leaping off the bed lithely like a cat, he quickly threw the door open and stealthily shut it before he went down the stairs with a certain grace that would make Yoruichi proud. Tracing the disturbing reiatsu, he found himself in front of a door on the second floor, the piece of wood nondescript and hiding a possible threat.

Narrowing his eyes, he steeled himself before promptly kicking down the door with his foot, not really caring at all what the possibly dangerous occupant would think of it. He'll handle that scenario later after he knew what he was dealing with.

Besides, he had a gut feeling that if he knocked, the person would run away from him the moment he or she heard the sound.

The first thing that caught his attention when he entered was how utterly dark the room was. He wrinkled his nose when the strong stench of something chemical and herblike lingering in the air hit his senses. Squinting, he deduced that the place was the same size of his own room and had the same accommodations too. He internally thanked his lucky stars that his eyes were able to adjust to the dark easily due to being used to Hueco Mundo's constant darkness with the moon as the realm's only
source of light.

Brown intent eyes swept over the meticulously clean room, as if the person staying here was ready to leave at any moment. There wasn't a hint or hair of the renter and that instantly made Ichigo suspicious. Every part of his body was screaming at him in warning, keeping him on his guard. The presence had spiked when he had barged in, signifying that it was still in the room.

Suddenly, he noticed that the bathroom door was closed shut. Without hesitation, he banged his fists to the door.

He paused for a second.

His jaw clenching a bit now in annoyance, he kicked down the door again.

He thought idly to himself for a brief second over how much the owner was probably going to demand payment for all the damage he was making. Seeing how he was young, the guy would probably try to rip him off – not like he'll let him anyways.

The moment he did this action, what met his sights were… unexpected to say the least.

Instead of a spirit or some supernatural creature he had half anticipated, it was a middle aged man with curly black hair who sat on the dirty bathroom floor, brown eyes wide with dread and weariness that made him look older than he already seemed. The small washroom was bare, a single shaver and a lonely toothbrush resting on the sink while a towel was hazardously tossed on top of it.

What caught Ichigo's attention the most though was the small, gleaming handgun that the man was clenching onto with white knuckles.

And it was pointed. At Ichigo.

Ichigo resisted the urge to sigh. Sometimes, he really hated the type of situations he got himself into. Especially if he stumbled in those situations on his own free will or stupidity.

Deciding to start on a friendly note since it looked like things were going to end on a bad one, he gave a short, somewhat sarcastic wave at the armed man with a neutral expression.

"Yo. What the hell are you doing?"

Okay, maybe not that friendly. He was used to being brisk since it cut down the bullshit faster. He also used his heavily accented English since it was more commonly understood.

The man blinked stupidly in shock.

"You-Wha-They sent a kid?" the man spluttered out back in the same language with something close to hysterical laughter choking his throat, seconds away from breaking down.

Ichigo scowled at the incredulous tone and straightened his back. Geez, he thought he had at least gotten away from that type of reaction. Everyone in Soul Society had treated him with awe for his power or disbelief when they find out he's human and only a teenager. He fought in a damn war and age didn't matter then!

His eyes narrowed slightly when he caught the comment. Who were they? Judging from how unsettlingly empty the motel room was, it was quite obvious that the man was used to constantly moving places. Ichigo did the same thing due to his own paranoia.
They… Judging from his rather hostile response, he must be some kind of fugitive. There was no doubt that it was because of his rather strange reiatsu.

A rather twitchy, trigger happy fugitive.

And the guy thinks Ichigo works for his chaser.

He bit back a scalding remark at the man's response and forced his shoulders to relax until he looked less intimidating. "I don't know who 'they' are, but I sure as hell ain't whoever you're thinking of."

Uncertainty practically vibrated off the man, his hand wavering but still locked on to Ichigo. Slightly eyeballing the grey bathroom ceiling in exasperation, the orange headed teen raised his hands in a universal peace gesture and took a large step back away from the entrance of the bathroom. The action seemed to put the man more at ease as he slowly but surely lowered the gun until it clacked onto the floor, much to Ichigo's relief. Things could've gone messy if he hadn't done this right.

Cautiously, the man jerked his head in a nod and vaguely gestured in his direction. Now that the immediate danger has passed, Ichigo couldn't help but notice how shabby the guy looked. His navy collar shirt looked years old and the state of his pants and shoes looked worn out and faded. If there were any doubts about the guy being a fugitive, it was all but erased by now.

"Who are you then kid?" the rumpled looking man demanded.

Ichigo noted the bone-tiring exhaustion that colored his tone and felt some of his irritation fall down from it, despite being called a kid. It's hard to stay mad at someone who looked ready to collapse at any moment.

"Kurosaki Ichigo. Or Ichigo Kurosaki to be more precise." He corrected offhandedly, remembering how Americans put their first names before their family names. Without moving from his spot, Ichigo jerked his head with an inquiring raised eyebrow. "You?"

The curly haired man's eyes sparked briefly at the Japanese name before quickly darting to the floor. For a long moment, he just fidgeted shiftily before slowly getting up, stumbling a bit as if his legs had fallen asleep, and hesitantly regarded him with a wary countenance.

"Bruce." He said shortly. Ichigo bypassed the fact he didn't give his last name and simply nodded sharply. The man squirmed under Ichigo's intense gaze and glanced around the room and stopped at the open door.

"How did you get in here?" Bruce questioned with rigid tension. Ichigo couldn't help but uncomfortably rub the back of his head.

"I kicked the door open."

"Why?"

The distrustful look was back. Shit. Maybe breaking the door hadn't been a good idea.

Ichigo coughed into his fist. "I had a bad feeling and I followed it." He said truthfully.

The unconvinced expression he received made him mentally wince. Yeah, even to him that sounded farfetched.

"A bad feeling." Bruce repeated with deadpan skepticism.
"Yeah. I heard something in here, got suspicious, and investigated." Ichigo waved at him vaguely. "Don't worry, I'll pay for the damages."

Bruce looked ready to argue. Ichigo cut in before he could, saying the first question that popped in his mind.

"So, mind telling me why the hell you were in a bathroom with a gun?"

Bruce paled at the abrupt question, instantly sending a sense of wrongness in Ichigo's gut. There was fear and something close to panicked guilt and shame on his face. This puzzled Ichigo for a moment before it clicked.

The gun. The dark room. The privacy of the bathroom and the melancholy vibe and guilt that had been spiking the man's reiatsu at being caught-

"Were you going to commit suicide? Are you an idiot?!" he blurted out, unable to keep the incredulity from layering his tone.

Bruce gawked at his atypical reaction. Ichigo didn't honestly care.

He wasn't trying to be insensitive, but such a choice has never even been thought of as a possibility to Ichigo. Even at his lowest point in life, he had never contemplated ending his own life. He had seen what that could do to a soul when they passed on. It twisted a person, made them lose sight of themselves and the hope for tomorrow. Giving up has never been an option to him before, and it never will be for as long as he lived. Maybe he didn't know what to do with himself now, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to keep trying until he found something to do. Life was precious and to throw it away was both cowardly and just plain insulting to the likes of him who fought so hard for other people's lives and his own.

Shaking his head, he couldn't help but feel relieved that he had diverted someone from such a path. Putting away his whirling thoughts, he outright glowered now that he knew at least part of the situation. Sympathy has fled and his temper has returned.

"Seriously, what shit hit your fan to get you to this point? Your answer to it seems pretty stupid if you ask me." He growled. Bruce looked completely floored by this point and stared at him like he was the one with suicidal tendencies.

"Do you always tend to be this-this forward?" Bruce stuttered. Ichigo grunted.

"It cuts to the chase, doesn't it?" he shot back. A startled snort escaped out of the other man before he gave him an assessing stare, like he didn't know what to make of him.

"Well, most people wouldn't react the way you do." He said wryly.

The orange haired teen shrugged.

"I'm not most people." he said dismissively. Since the tension has disappeared at this point, Ichigo felt himself relax more in the man's presence. Other than the rather unusual reiatsu the man had, he didn't seem like a bad person. Suicidal, yes, but whatever. It's not like he hasn't seen that trait before.

Not wanting to stand up the whole time for this depressing conversation, Ichigo pulled up the wooden chair next to the bed and casually slumped into it. Might as well get comfortable.

Bruce looked dubious at his actions before quietly going to the door and closing it, lock broken and room dark before he flipped on the lights. With the dim shadows playing from the faulty lighting, the
illumination only seemed to deepen the shadows of Bruce's stress lines, causing him to look more bone-weary. Ichigo couldn't help but feel a pang of empathy. He must really have a rough life to have almost fallen off the cliff.

Ichigo gave him an almost expectant stare. Bruce's eyebrows furrowed at the look, obviously not knowing what he was waiting for. Rolling his eyes at this, Ichigo threw a hand in the air in impatience.

"So? You never answered the question you know." He said bluntly. Bruce shook his head, bemused, before he sighed.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Ichigo snorted.

"You'd be surprised." He retorted back. "Does it have anything to do with your little freak out when I interrupted you almost kicking the bucket?"

Bruce went rimrod straight, instantly guarded.

"You don't need to know."

Ichigo didn't even blink at being stonewalled and rolled his eyes. "Fine. But I have to say, suicide is a crappy way to go so don't try it again."

Bruce lifted one shoulder lopsidedly. "I'll keep that in mind." He said loftily with an edge of sarcasm.

Ichigo couldn't help but slightly smirk at the sound of it.

So the man did have a backbone. That was good to know.

Bruce looked curiously at him long and hard. Ichigo noticed the intelligent gleam in his eyes, calculative but not manipulative as some people he knew, thank the gods.

"So," Ichigo straightened at Bruce's voluntary start of conversation. "what is a teenager doing in the middle of South America and not in school?"

There was a challenge in his voice that pleasantly surprised Ichigo. A hard question for a question, his tone seemed to say. It almost made the teenager want to smirk.

"Exploring." Ichigo answered shortly. Bruce did not for a second look like he believed him. Seeing this, Ichigo sighed.

"My parents aren't… here anymore," his voice traitorously hitched a bit at the thought of his goofy, clueless old man and his mother who was buried ten feet underground. Her death only instigated a tiny pang in his chest though, so that was an improvement. "I took the liberty to quit school. A lot of events happened too fast and the next thing you know, my whole life's been flipped upside down."

He humorously quirked up the end of his mouth at the half-truths that were spouting out of his mouth. Urahara would be proud.

Bruce looked less ready to interrogate him and just a bit guilty, falling immediately for the deliberate misinterpretation. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Ichigo snorted. "Hey, it's fine. I'll get over it eventually." He said, talking about an entirely different matter altogether.
The man nodded understandingly. Ichigo shrewdly narrowed his eyes but didn't push. There was a story there.

"So I guess you're soul-searching then." He sounded far more comfortable than before from Ichigo's voluntary reveal of his past.

Ichigo barked out a laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But things'll turn out fine."

Bruce gave him a sideways look of surprise. "Sounds oddly positive of you. Not that I would know seeing how we’ve only just met and all." He added drolly with a sardonic twist to the mouth.

That startled out a bark of laughter from Ichigo at this ironic statement, the sound making the other man jolt as if he wasn’t used to the sound. At the back of his mind, the Japanese wondered just how long it's been since Bruce has conversed with anyone. It was a depressing thought.

"I'm not being positive but practical. Because no matter how bad it looks now, it can only get better or worse. If you choose to believe there's no point in hoping... Well, then I can guess why you would want to take your own life so easily. Simple."

"Simple." Bruce huffed out a humorless chuckle. "Yes, I suppose it is."

“And you?” Ichigo swept his arm around the room, showcasing the man’s current lifestyle. “Why are you here?”

Bruce quieted at this question, none of the previous humor present as if seriously contemplating how to answer. When he spoke, there was an edge of bitterness and regret to his words that was far too familiar for Ichigo’s liking.

“Guess I’m trying to find myself too. I... There’s not much left for me from where I came from.” He wrung his hands as he said this and wasn’t quite looking at Ichigo in the eye.

Both fell silent, not really wanting to talk. Ichigo thought over how their situations paralleled one another.

Both were running away from something.

Ichigo rolled his shoulders, thoughtful. The American – he assumed he was American from his accent, but he could be wrong – was pretty interesting. And though his good deed was done, he was reluctant to make his exit, especially when the man could be potentially dangerous with his ever-fluctuating reiatsu. His gut told him to stick around while his head steadfastly told him that getting involved was a bad idea.

'But isn't this what you wanted?' Some part of him whispered. 'To find something to do with yourself?'

He grinded his teeth. But getting involved meant probably getting unwanted attention. From the looks of it, somebody was searching for Bruce and to stick close to such a person will inevitably have Ichigo found out. And if that happened, he'll probably be looked up, only for people to find absolutely nothing about him.

Which'll bring curiosity, and prodding, and maybe even getting experimented on. He had quite enough from Kurosaki's previous dogged attempts to do so.

After a long internal debate, he finally sighed in resignation.
Screw this. There's no way he could leave. The very notion of the action rubbed him the wrong way, especially since it meant abandoning someone who clearly was in trouble. His natural need to protect people wouldn't allow him to do so.

He deftly ignored how Shiro whooped and pumped a fist in the air at finally doing something other than sightseeing while Zangetsu was a lot more subdued, though his hum of approval still rang true, his pleasure evident.

Blast himself and those idiots.

Arching off the chair he had been leaning on, he rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, you wanna grab some grub? I'm starving."

The man looked taken aback by his rather abrupt invitation.

"You do realize we've just met, right?" Bruce managed out, expression flummoxed. Ichigo scoffed and crossed his arms.

"Isn't it always like that when you meet new people?" he retorted back.

The end of Bruce's lip quirked up into a harsh line, eyes dark with something close to sinking despair. "Trust me, it's smarter to just pretend you never met me. Seriously."

That made Ichigo's metaphorical hackles rise, his resolve steeling itself at the self-deprecating words.

"Shut up." Bruce startled, eyes wide at the immediate response. “I've never taken the smart course before and I'm not going to start now. I'm hungry and you're not bad company. So suck it up because I am not gonna leave, whether you like it or not. Besides, I have to pay for the doors I broke down so it's not like you're going to be able to get rid of me so easily."

The curly haired man stared at him for a long while before snorting out a laugh. To Ichigo's pleasure, Bruce stood up and slowly began to shake his head.

"You may be the strangest person I've ever met." He stated with bemusement. Ichigo smirked in victory.

"Or I'm just stubborn."

"That too."

Ichigo's smirk widened into a crooked smile that hadn't made an appearance in ages as they walked out of the room.

Maybe this wasn't entirely such a bad idea.

~A~

Unbeknownst to the shinigami's knowledge, a man of middle build and height who was holding a large satellite dish along with some equipment heard every word of the exchange. Hiding in another building that was a long distance away from the motel, the agent immediately took out his phone and called up his employer. One beep barely went through on the line before it was immediately picked up.

"Director."

"What happened?" The man's deep, commanding voice demanded without preamble.
"An unknown has initiated contact to the target."

"... Who is he?"

"I don't know sir. He said his name was Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Is he a threat?"

"I don't know sir. But he does seem suspicious."

"... Trail them. Report to me when you find out anything more."

"Yes sir."

Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out.
Ichigo glared at the misshapen, strange fruit and gave the patiently amused Bruce a look.

“Really?” Ichigo deadpanned. “What the hell is that thing?”

“Cherimoya; It’s a native fruit. People consider it a custard apple.” The older man promptly answered, never losing the small smile that Ichigo had worked hard to break into for the past three weeks of their acquaintance.

The orange haired teen sneered at the green, scaly… *monstrosity* with disgust.

“Well whatever the hell it is, there’s no way I’m gonna eat that.” He declared. Bruce chuckled and raised an eyebrow, holding up the whatever-its-name-was item carefully.

“I never would’ve pegged you as a picky eater.” The man jabbed mildly, causing Ichigo to bristle.

“I’m not.” Ichigo stressed. “But there’s a limit to what you should put into your mouth. Only idiots willfully eat things that clearly have a high chance of being poisoned.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Like hell I am.” Ichigo growled. At the back of his mind, he noted how people around the market stall they were browsing at kept on glancing towards their way, probably because they were foreigners speaking nonsensical words and more because of his uncommon hair color that practically screamed ‘NOTICE ME!’ in big bold letters.

He had forgotten his hat unfortunately at the motel and he was truly regretting it now. Along with the prodding stares and constant crowding that made him edgy with the sun beating mercilessly down on his head as well, it’s a wonder how he hasn’t committed homicide by now.

Bruce shook his head, black ringlets bouncing at the action as he finally set the so called ‘fruit’ down.

“Come on. We still have some time to buy the supplies for whatever you say you’re going to make.”

His skeptical tone made the teenager snort.

“I’m so touched by your confidence in my skills.” Ichigo’s tone was dry as the desert.

“Only because I can’t imagine you having the patience in actually making something.” Bruce quipped out, causing Ichigo to smirk.
After their awkward, somewhat slow dinner – Ichigo can never brag at being the best conversationalist – progressing Ichigo’s invitation, the owner of the motel had thrown a fit at the damage Ichigo had onslaught, spewing out curses in Spanish at rapid speed the moment they had walked through the door. He had no idea that Ichigo understood every word due to a certain electric blue haired Arrancar and had been flat out shocked when Ichigo spat out vehemently some creative insults of his own in barely halting Spanish right back at him. The man had been so stunned, that all he could do was numbly take the money Ichigo roughly shoved into his limp arms before he had stormed off with a stunned Bruce right behind his heels.

The only plus side of the situation had been the hilarious, dumbfounded look on the dick’s face that made him look stupider than he probably already was.

And right after that, he and Bruce got into a fight.

Seeing how every friendship he has ever started began this way, he really should’ve expected this to be honest. Fortunately, the issue itself this time had been less life-endangering than what Ichigo was used to.

The man had been adamant over the fact that Ichigo was only a teenager and shouldn’t be paying for the damages. Ichigo had snorted and dismissed that unimportant fact easily, much to the older man’s frustration. They had squabbled and tried to one up each other in their reasoning, his new acquaintance surprisingly quite obstinate in the debate, able to fire back instantly on the get go.

Ichigo couldn’t help but be impressed by the man’s quick intelligence, adding a point to the man’s character for being able to stick up for himself while having the spine to back it up.

Getting tired of the conversation, Ichigo had sighed with irritation before he ticked off in a clipped tone how one, he had been the one to break down the doors in the first place and two, could afford to pay or else he wouldn’t have offered, and three, was doing this out of his own violation so stop arguing about this damn it.

Ichigo very much had to stop himself from giving a smug grin when Bruce finally threw his hands up in the air with baffled resignation before sulking towards his room, muttering under his breath along the lines of “What sane teenager turns down avoiding charges?”

The next morning, his expression held something close to resembling bewilderment and cautiousness when Ichigo had knocked on his broken door, offering him breakfast in a bag along with a cup of still steaming coffee. He had considered Ichigo as if he hadn’t believed he was real until he saw him.

The look had ticked him off to no ends, only bolstering his determination to stay. And after a couple weeks of periodically meeting each other every day, the walls were starting to crack and Ichigo was satisfied with the results.

Bruce rolled his eyes and nudged his shoulder, another accomplishment in itself. Barely a couple of weeks ago, Bruce had shied away from any sort of contact with a certain high-strung restraint that had mystified Ichigo. It wasn’t until Ichigo flat out pointed this tendency out did the carefulness start to wear away until he no longer flinched every time Ichigo ribbed him in the side and started retaliating back.

“Come on. Dinner isn’t going to make itself.” Bruce reminded him with an upward quirk at the end of his mouth. Ichigo figured out quickly that it was the closest to a genuine smile the man was capable of.

Ichigo grunted but obliged, walking side by side with Bruce through the busy marketplace.
During the few weeks of their acquaintance, Ichigo learned quite a bit about the mysterious no-last-name wanderer. He discovered that Bruce had been a scientist and hadn’t been surprised by the revelation. The man’s intelligence reminded him of Urahara, although thankfully Bruce wasn’t nearly as annoying as the bastard. Also, he confirmed that he was indeed American and that he’s been travelling around the last couple of years for unknown reasons he still refused to explain. Ichigo never pushed the issue and always tried to steer the conversation elsewhere, getting quick grateful looks from the older man whenever he did.

Other than that, they skirted off their personal lives and stuck with light hearted, impersonal subjects like books, current events, and stories of their time travelling.

Their conversations would entail Ichigo intently listening and giving candid comments here and there, making his opinions quite clear without reservation. He had initially worried for only a millisecond over how Bruce would take his crude candor and dismissed the issue away when he saw how Bruce seemed more disconcerted than anything by his behavior. He still didn’t know whether he should take offense to that or not.

Bruce seemed fascinated by the Japanese culture and religion while Ichigo subtly learned more about the going-ons of the world he got landed in. He casually asked from time to time about the advancements of technology and tried not to look clueless when Bruce spoke of something called iPhones or Twitter or other social media groups Ichigo has never heard of. Bruce had looked incredulous over the fact Ichigo has never used Facebook in his life.

Ichigo inwardly rolled his eyes. All of it sounded like a hassle to him.

And as time passed, Ichigo felt less like the world was shattering under his feet. The hole in his chest didn’t feel so heavy and he knew right then and there that no matter what, he was going to protect Bruce. Bruce was his friend and nobody messed with Ichigo’s friends.

This sent a sense of disconcertion rolling in his stomach.

It’s not that he had a problem with being friends with Bruce (the guy and him seriously needed some) but the dynamics between them wasn’t something he was used to. While Bruce did treat him like an adult and never looked down on him, there were many times where he would falter in surprise between conversations, as if he just realized he was discussing with a seventeen year old teenager about the war in Iraq.

Apparently, normal teenagers usually aren’t interested in these kind of issues. The thought irked him to no ends.

Back home, all his friends and allies had looked to him for answers, following him in whatever direction he chose and stuck to. Hell, centuries year old captains and lieutenants let him take the lead when it called for it. Even Shinji, leader of the Vaizards and a cocky son of a bitch on a good day, treated him like an equal with clear respect between them.

As for his relationship with Urahara, to say it was complicated was undermining it drastically. It’s like saying Toushiro didn’t have a short temper or Byakuya not having a stick shoved up his ass. Half the times he was the genius scientist, sharp and scarily intelligent. Other times, he was a carefree, shady bastard who Ichigo wanted to stab a hundred times over with Zangetsu. Nevertheless, Ichigo had to grudgingly admit that he was the closest thing he had to a mentor, someone who he could go to for answers and ask for advice. Other than that, nobody treated him like a child and he liked it that way.

Even before the whole Shinigami business, he had always been an independent person, his father
never interfering in his decisions or his life. The very thought is almost laughable. Along with the fact he was the older brother of two sisters, he was accustomed to shouldering responsibility that was cast onto him.

So while it was understandable to get these kind of reactions from Bruce, Ichigo couldn’t help the flash of frustration he felt whenever Bruce gave him a speculative look, assessing him in a way that was all too familiar for Ichigo’s liking.

Not to mention how he always tries to pay for the groceries and such. It’s an uphill battle in itself convincing Bruce to let him pay for at least half the food.

Other than that, his prime worry was being discovered. Sooner or later – he preferred later – people were going to find out about his presence and when that time came, his time of peace would be over.

Mentally groaning at the thought, he could only pray that shit wasn’t going to hit the fan if-when it did.

~A~

Nick Fury was pissed.

And anyone who knows his reputation would know that his temperament was not something to be messed with, especially when he was the director of a secret organization that could kill you in your sleep, erase you from history, and make it so no one would ever find your body.

So to say that the S.H.I.E.L.D operatives were jumpy whenever he was around now would be a vast understatement in various proportions.

Rubbing his furrowed forehead for what felt like the millionth time, Fury scowled hard and deep as Maria Hill looked at him with a carefully neutral expression that didn’t show any fear whatsoever. At the back of his mind, Fury applauded the woman for her self-control. She should win a goddamn medal for this job.

“Is there any update on Operation Orange?”

Operation Orange. Seeing how it was the only definite fact they had on the kid – and wasn’t that just fucking sad – Fury just went with it. Besides, hardly anyone in the room except for the linguistics team ever got the target’s name right, butchering over the foreignness of it. They could have used a translation or something, but one of the linguistics team members had said with some dry humor that it would translate to ‘Operation Strawberry.’

Hell would freeze over before he agreed to use that.

Much to his aggravation, Coulson still silently laughed himself silly over the name. You could tell by his damn twinkling eyes.

Hill adjusted her stance so she stood straighter, her appearance immaculate and sharp.

“Unfortunately, no sir. Kurosaki is currently shopping in the marketplace with Dr. Banner and doesn’t seem to be making a move any time soon.” She answered curtly.

Fury frowned. Three weeks ago, he had been alerted about someone making contact with Banner and apparently befriending him in the process. He still didn’t know how the hell that happened. Banner was a paranoid man – with all rights to – and for someone to get past the man’s defenses so quickly was disturbing and went against the basic psych they had of Banner. When the agent
recounted what exactly happened during their encounter, warning bells rang like the tower of Big Ben in his head. The kid’s story practically screamed suspicious.

He had a bad feeling? Seriously? Who the hell did the kid think he’s fooling? Either he was charismatic as Ghandi – which he won’t count on, considering how caustically blunt he appeared to be – or he really doesn’t know how to lie, a paradoxical trait that didn’t match up to anything he suspected.

Not only that, they still haven’t found a scrap of information on the kid. No records, no birth certificates, hell, there wasn’t even a parking ticket to the guy’s name. He even had the technical team hack into the Japanese government’s records but so far, no luck. It’s like the kid was a fucking ghost.

He hated it when that happens.

And speaking from experience, there were only few possibilities how this could be possible.

Either the kid was an incredible hacker who had managed to erase himself out of the system, or was working for someone who had the power and brains to do so. Seeing how the kid was only seventeen and, from what the agent monitoring him says, doesn’t even know how to use Facebook (unless that was an act too, anything was possible at this point), the first option was very unlikely.

Which meant a possible outside party and more meetings with the damn Council.

Fucking fantastic.

Fury heavily sighed.

“Is there anything else Agent Hill?”

“No sir.”

Fury felt the oncoming headache rising, resigned in what he had to do. Standing up from his seat, he briskly made his way out of his office, intent on going to his destination. Hill promptly followed behind him, looking vaguely confused.

“Sir?” she questioned. Fury didn’t stop his pace and merely waved a hand behind him.

“Call up Romanoff. We’re taking the initiative.”

As for him, he was late for a council meeting. Sometimes – scratch that, all the time – he really hated being the Director.

~A~

“So, what will we be making?

Ichigo drilled a glare at Bruce and pointed to the couch in a commanding manner.

“Nuh uh. There’s no way I’m going to let you cook. Sit and wait. This won’t take long.”

Bruce had the grace to rub the back of his head sheepishly as both remembered what happened the first and last time Ichigo let him near the kitchen. In all his experiences of cooking, Ichigo has never seen such black curry before, the sauce popping bubbles ominously and looking like some concoction Orihime would make. Honestly, it’s amazing how the man was able to survive this long.
He wondered if being a bad cook was a requirement for a scientist. He remembered one time how Geta-boushi had sent stew of all things to flames, the inferno only rising higher and higher the more the idiot panicked and tried to fix it. It had taken a fire extinguisher to stop the blaze from burning down the whole goddamn shop, soapy bubbles soaking a displeased Ichigo along with a nervously laughing Urahara.

Needless to say, the beat-down hadn’t been pretty.

And Spirit King only knows what the twelve captain would make if the nutcase ever lands himself in the kitchen.

Shuddering at the horrifying thought, he quickly pushed the scenario out of mind.

“You never answered the question.” Bruce reminded him, shoulders loose and looking more relaxed than Ichigo has ever seen from him. Ichigo spread out the vegetables on the table counter, inspecting them carefully. Shop vendors usually try to cheat people off.

“Fried rice.” He gathered all the good ingredients in the bowl for washing. “You can wait at the couch if you want. This is going to take some time.”

“Pass. Maybe I can learn something from watching you.”

Ichigo snorted inelegantly.

“Doubt it.”

Bruce shrugged lopsidedly. “One can hope.”

The two settled into comfortable silence as Ichigo washed and cut the vegetables, the rice cooking as he did. Bruce observed the process with interest as he prepared the dish, admiring Ichigo’s skill with the knife as he efficiently chopped the ingredients.

“Where did you even learn to cook?” Bruce asked wonderingly.

“I taught myself mostly.” Ichigo revealed, brushing off the miniscule pieces of carrots off his hands. A flicker of old sorrow cloaked his expression for only a moment. “When my mom passed away, someone had to cook. My dad’s cooking probably would’ve given us all food poisoning, so I read off of mom’s old cook books so I could feed my sisters when dad works late. A few years later, I taught one of my sisters how to cook and she started to take care of the house.” A fond smile curled his lips as he remembered kind but stubborn Yuzu insist on helping with the chores, including cooking. Karin took up some of the load too, nagging him that he shouldn’t do it alone.

Bruce blinked in surprise. “You have sisters?”

Ichigo nodded, ducking his head down so Bruce wouldn’t see his expression as he arranged the frying pan. Out of all the people he truly missed in his world, the loss of his sisters hit him the hardest. While they were thankfully alive and happy with their lives, the fact he could never see or talk to them was heartwrenching, making him go into depressive moods when he dwelled over his losses. The only comfort he had was Urahara’s solemn promise to look after them when Ichigo was gone. The knowledge reassured him that he made the right choice in leaving, no matter how much it hurt him in the end. Urahara may be a lot of things, but the man would cheat, lie, and die first before breaking an oath.

“Yeah.” He was relieved that his voice was steady. “I did.”
The past tense made Bruce turn pensive before he smiled lightly at him.

“Was she a better cook than you?”

Ichigo snorted at the question.

“Definitely. Her cooking’s to die for.” He confirmed with a bit of pride mixed in his tone. Bruce chuckled, the atmosphere lifting at the sound.

“What were they like?” by this point, the man was folding his arms and leaning against the counter, attention riveted towards the conversation at hand.

Ichigo gave a sideways glance towards Bruce and only saw open curiosity on his face. Swallowing, he made sure to keep his hands busy as he talked about his family for the first time in months.

“Both of them are—were fraternal twins and a few years younger than me. Yuzu was really sweet and basically mothered all of us. She always worried over me and Karin, seeing how our personalities were so similar. Karin was a lot like me. She was stubborn, headstrong, and got into fights more than I would’ve liked.”

“Sounds like you alright.” Bruce agreed with amusement. Ichigo scowled.

“There’s a difference damn it. I did it because so many idiots assume I’m a hooligan or something when they see my hair. It’s not my fault the color’s damn natural.” He grumbled. He lost count over how many times people made fun of his hair and how many teachers always nagged him to dye it since it’s “not appropriate” for school.

Bruce frowned, looking displeased. “That’s no reason to beat you up.”

“Yeah, well, idiots are idiots. You just got to learn to deal with them. Besides,” Ichigo shot a cocky smirk towards him. “They learned their lesson quickly, so it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Both groups learned to avoid him like the plague after he made it distinctly clear to not mess with him if they didn’t want their asses kicked sky high. His reputation scared away most thugs, though the occasional idiot did attack him whether out of stupidity or pride. It never ended well for them.

Bruce still looked like he disapproved, but didn’t comment any further on the issue, instead changing the subject.

“Did you manage to make friends despite this less than stellar reputation of yours?” Bruce said wryly. Ichigo smirk softened, eyes distant as memories of allies and friends alike came to mind, fighting side by side with him. Looking back to his current task, he sighed.

“The very best.” He responded quietly, unable to completely hide the wistfulness he felt for those lost bonds.

Bruce didn’t say anything after that, only the sound of sizzling rice and the wafting smell of mouthwatering food traveling through the air. Ichigo poured the rice in two bowls with spoons and slid the dish across the table to Bruce.

“Eat up before it gets cold.” Ichigo practically ordered. Ichigo watched as Bruce took a tentative bite before an expression of complete bliss took over his features. The look made Ichigo grin in triumph.

“Jesus, what the hell did you put in this?” Bruce managed to say as he practically inhaled the food. Ichigo could barely decipher his words as Bruce began to hovel the food in his mouth, making him
barely understandable. Ichigo went at a slower pace, savoring the tangy taste instead.

“What can I say, I’m a miracle worker.” Ichigo joked. Bruce shook his head, swallowing down the rice before giving him an almost reverent look.

“Keep cooking like this and I just might be convinced of that.”

“Well then,” Ichigo spooned his food, tone nonchalant as he kept his eyes on Bruce. “I guess I’ll have to stick around then.”

The deliberate sentence made Bruce pause, gaze turning sharp as he gulped down the food in his mouth. Though he didn’t tense, there was a contemplative look in his brown eyes, measuring the sincerity in his words. Gradually, he nodded, acceptance in his eyes that made Ichigo almost sag in relief.

“I suppose so.” He said slowly, a small smile enlacing his mouth. Ichigo quirked up the end of his lip in response, the acknowledgement lifting some unknown weight off his chest.

For the first time since coming to this world, he didn’t feel so alone anymore. And it was going to stay that way, damn everything else.

~A~

Ichigo strode down the path, having woken up again at an ungodly hour. The nightmares were becoming less frequent, but they still popped up from time to time. Hanging out with Bruce seemed to have helped, the occasional times he slept over at the man’s couch peaceful and dreamless. A small blessing since he didn’t want to worry the man for something he could handle on his own.

Glancing around nonchalantly, he nearly paused in his stride when something caught his eye. A prickle of awareness tensed the back of his neck, but other than that, he didn’t react. Without looking suspicious, his eyes swept over the scene to find someone that didn’t fit. Right at the back of an alley, a man was clearly focusing his complete attention on Ichigo, his eyes sharp and always watching. He was talking to someone he could tell, his hand held up to his ear. Ichigo remembered vaguely from some spy movies of ear pieces and walkie talkies and involuntarily tensed at the thought.

Looks like he’s finally been found. Inwardly cursing, he quickened his pace to where the coffee shop was and watched as the man discretely followed him at the corner of his eye. The spy, he assumed, didn’t look at all out of place, his clothes and even his looks native. Whoever had sent him, they definitely were serious enough with their efforts. The thought made Ichigo scowl with displeasure.

Trying to act as casual as possible, he went in the shop and bought a coffee and biscuit, his attention always sharply following his shadow. At a brisk pace, he went back to the motel to his room and shoved the food in his mouth and quickly ate it along with the hot beverage, ignoring how the drink scalded his tongue. Cautious over the idea that he was still being watched, Ichigo sat cross-legged on the floor against his bed, immediately setting himself up in a meditative pose.

This wasn’t the first time he’s been in this position. He sometimes goes to his inner world to spar with Zangetsu or Shiro – mostly Shiro though since the hollow got bored easily and is always eager for a fight – or to simply have some quiet time to himself if he got lost in his memories. Both spirits never bothered him during those periods of time, respecting his space or sometimes even joining him in his silent reverie, offering comfort in their own way.

This time though, he was planning something else entirely. Discreetly, he held the Shinigami badge from his pocket and pressed it to his chest, making sure the device was still in his pocket as he did.
Immediately, he felt his soul jolt out of his now slumping mortal body. He steadied his lifeless body and propped it against the bed with eyes closed, hands still resting on its knees.

When he had first came to this world, he had thanked whatever merciful entity that existed that allowed him to still be able to turn in his Shinigami form. He also discovered that while people couldn’t see him, they most certainly could touch him and hear him in this world unlike his own. Another thing he found out was how people seemed to be able to sense him, even though spiritual energy doesn’t exist in this world (except Bruce of course). He was literally a phantom, a ghost in every sense of the word. He has become more careful due to this, as it would bring troublesome attention towards himself if people accidently bumped into him. That would not be a pretty scenario.

At least it improved his stealth skills, he thought dryly. God knows he didn’t have any before.

Shaking his head, Ichigo leaped out of the open window and silently landed on the ground effortlessly, despite the fact it was two stories high. Stealthily, he stuck to the alleys as he searched for his target.

There. He saw the man go up to one of the markets, buying an apple from the vendor. Silently, he followed the man’s trail as he walked towards a building a couple blocks away. As he watched the man go in, Ichigo concentrated his energy on his feet and jumped into the air. With little effort, he managed to steadily stay in the air even without reishi supporting him.

When he at first arrived in this world, he had experimented over his abilities to see how the lack of spiritual energy would affect him. Somehow, though he still wasn’t exactly sure how, he was able to use his own reiatsu to sustain his own abilities. Due to the fact he has an overwhelming amount of energy within him, he was able to use his Shinigami powers, including the kido he has learned from Urahara, and hollow powers easily. However, his level of strength has depleted unfortunately, making his attacks weaker than before but nonetheless still powerful and destructive. Maybe it was due to the different laws of this world, but in the end, it didn’t quite honestly matter too much to Ichigo. As long as he still had the ability to protect people, he didn’t really worry about the hows and whys.

Getting closer to the window on the floor the man was in, he nearly snarled when he saw the impressive amount of equipment on the floor in the room. Just how long has he been watched without him noticing? At the back of his mind, he felt almost embarrassed from how long he hadn’t detected someone tagging him. He’ll never hear the end of it from Shiro now.

Shaking his head from his thoughts, he craned his ears to hear muffled words from inside the room. The spy seemed to be talking to someone, his voice stoic and professional.

“…bought coffee this morning. Nothing suspicious.” The man reported. There was a pause before Ichigo watched the man jolt, his movement shuffling some of the technical gear. There was some surprise on the man’s dark skinned face, his eyebrows raised. “You want me to pull out?”

Ichigo straightened immediately. What was that supposed to mean? He observed how the man’s brows furrowed as he listened to whatever it was his superior was saying to him.

“He might fight back. He doesn’t seem the type who’ll come quietly.”

Ichigo turned cold at these words. Fight back? Come quietly? His fists tightened as outrage raged in his chest. Like hell he’ll let that happen. Closing his eyes to calm himself down, the raging feeling almost quieted until the man spoke his next words.

“And Banner sir?” there was a pause before the spy nodded curtly to himself. “Understood sir. I’ll
Ichigo processed those words before a gleam of protective rage glittered in his honey brown eyes. It didn’t take a genius to guess that Banner was Bruce. Half tempted to just smash the window and demand answers from the man, he quickly landed on solid ground again before making his way towards the motel.

It was time to confront those bastards before it was too late. Nobody was going to even have the chance to touch Bruce. He’ll make sure of that.

Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the reviews and favorites and follows. I promise, this has a lost more action in it. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce, who was in the middle of reading a medical book, didn’t even turn his head when Ichigo barged into his room, his footsteps familiar and not sending off any alarms in his mind. He was long used to the young man’s uninvited entrances, having entrusted him with an extra room key about a couple of weeks ago.

He did, however, nearly have a heart attack when Ichigo promptly sat on the sofa across from him and bluntly stated in a deadly serious tone, “We need to leave. Now.”

Bruce couldn’t wrench his eyes fast enough away from his book that was suddenly on the floor instead of his very frozen hands.

Whirling thoughts like Well, there goes my freedom again to Shit, how did they find me? ran rampant in his mind like a pack of elephants. The most prominent question that kept returning however was What does Ichigo know?

“What happened?” Bruce managed to ask in the end. There was no point in feigning innocence or lack of understanding of the situation at hand. Though Ichigo had never implied he suspected something from Bruce, it didn’t take a genius to figure out from how they first met that the scientist was running from something. People don’t try to commit suicide for no reason. Besides, neither of them had bothered to deny the fact they both had secrets they didn’t want the other to know.

The knowledge comforted Bruce in a way. He didn’t like the necessary lying or avoidance of subject he had to do when talking about his past to strangers. Excluding the first time they had met, Ichigo never pushed him and kept silent, probably understanding the need to keep secrets more than other people ever could.

Ichigo grimaced, honey eyes sharp and focused in a way that no teenager’s should be.

“A guy – government from the looks of it – was trailing me. From the looks of it, he’s been following us for weeks. He’s been given the order to ‘deal with us’ as soon as possible. And before you ask, I found this out by following him.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Bruce said as calmly as he could, the tensing of his shoulders revealing his inner turmoil at the idea of Ichigo betraying him. Of actually being a planted spy all along. It was swept away, however, by the startling amount of trust he had for the brutally honest Japanese, who had never used sweet words to earn his trust or held back his opinions that Bruce sometimes disagreed with which had led them into heated debates that went on for hours into the night.

No. If there was one thing he was certain of, was Ichigo not being a spy. He wasn’t capable of it with his nearly disgraceful disability to lie. Avoid and misdirect yes, but outright lie? Yeah, the very idea was laughable.
Ichigo still sticking around after this, however, was an entirely different story.

“You should leave when you still can.” Bruce says, readily resigned and just a bit regretful. Ichigo had been good company for the past few weeks. He could even tentatively call Ichigo a friend, something he hasn’t had in a very long time.

Besides, he didn’t like the fact Ichigo had said ‘us.’ It implied Ichigo was being targeted because of him. He didn’t want to involve Ichigo in his problems, didn’t want the teen to get hurt or captured in the end. He didn’t think he could live with himself if anything happened to Ichigo, the first person he really got to talk to in, hell, years.

And no matter what Ichigo says, he was a kid. An admittedly pretty mature kid, but a kid nonetheless. He couldn’t, wouldn’t, get Ichigo pulled into his business. Not when there’s the chance he’ll get hurt or captured or worse, killed.

A small, selfish part of him wanted to protests against the idea of leaving the Japanese behind though. He couldn’t believe how easily he got attached to the young man. How reluctant he was over the idea of running on his own again with crippling loneliness dodging his every step.

Ichigo’s response was instant.

“Hell no.”

Bruce really shouldn’t be surprised by the teen’s answer. He couldn’t help but immediately flinch though as possible scenarios of Ichigo getting captured or tortured for information on Bruce ran through his mind.

“Ichigo, you can’t stay with me.”

“Like hell I can’t.” Ichigo’s face remained stubbornly resolute. Bruce wanted to tear his hair out at the response. “Do you really think I’ll ditch you at the first sight of trouble? What kind of person do you take me for?”

“Apparently an idiot with no common sense.” Bruce snapped back harshly with none of his typical dryness. Ichigo’s sheer bullheadedness was driving his usually unlimited patience up the wall.

At the back of his mind, he felt distantly shocked that the other guy didn’t seem at all tempted to make an appearance. He was definitely angry right now, yet there wasn’t the itch to rip apart the motel room like its paper or to chase after the spy who started this argument in the first place.

The one half of his scientific mind was fascinated by this. The other half was absolutely terrified by this abnormal behavior from the Hulk, a being who he thought he had a basic understanding of. Or at least, he thought he had.

“Look, I don’t know why they’re chasing you and honestly, I don’t care. You’re my friend, end of story. It’s my choice to stay and I always stick by my decisions no matter what.” Ichigo stated without the slightest hint of hesitation.

The expression on Ichigo’s face was a familiar one. It was the one that dared you to say no, piercing like a fine cut blade and immovable as a mountain. His arms were crossed, another sign that broadcasted his impatience over something that in his mind is already done and decided.

Bruce’s resolve faltered at the face of Ichigo’s crackling, burning brown eyes, message loud and clear.
I go where you go. Got me?

Bruce did.

So despite his better judgement, Bruce looked away first, throat constricted. Crouching down and picking up the medical book on the floor, Bruce glanced up and gave a humorless smile to Ichigo’s triumphal grin that had probably made many want to punch the teen’s lights out.

The ones that attempted had probably failed.

“So,” Bruce drawled out, warmth at the thought of someone having his back unconditionally and without question spreading to the tip of his toes and giving him some rare confidence. “what’s the plan?”

~A~

“This is a terrible plan!” Bruce found himself hissing, eyes darting around as they basically slipped out the back of the motel like a couple of teenagers sneaking out of their parents’ house. Honestly, the very idea of Ichigo ever doing something so like his age made him want to inappropriately snort at the mental image.

“Don’t need your opinion.” Ichigo hissed back, whole body tense and alert. His hand kept inching towards something in his pocket, but kept refraining from actually digging into it. It was a tick Ichigo had when he was nervous and needed reassurance of some sort.

Bruce had once dug into the pockets to see if it was a gun or weapon during the first few days of their acquaintance and had been surprised to find a gaudy, skull badge instead. A talisman, really. Though Ichigo never struck Bruce as the superstitious type, he had shrugged it off as an odd quirk the teen had. After all, the Japanese did lose his parents and his siblings. He probably needed all the support and comfort he could get.

Before they had left, Ichigo had paid off their rooms, something that irked Bruce to no ends, no matter how many times Ichigo told him it was fine.

It didn’t sit right with him that someone so much younger than him had to pay his bills.

The teen had told Bruce to stay put before disappearing for an agonizing half an hour before coming back with a vindictive and terrifying smile that boded nothing good to anyone. When Bruce had asked, Ichigo lightly responded that he bought them a bit more time and that nobody will be after them at the moment.

Bruce wanted to ask but refrained. Something told him he was better off not knowing.

So while barely biting back an exasperated sigh, Bruce followed the teen.

They found themselves near a tiny garage Bruce had no clue why they were here for. Ichigo had been suspiciously vague when Bruce prodded for more details on what their escape entailed, making alarm bells go off in his head.

Bruce watched with some trepidation and growing misgiving when Ichigo easily lifted the garage’s loose, metal door upward to hang, uncovering an old battered, black SUV Chevy in relatively okay condition.

“So, are you finally going to tell me why exactly we’re here?” Bruce muttered warily.
Ichigo flashed him an unrepentant smirk, eyes glimmering with something close to mischief in his eyes. The teen shoved one of his hands into his pockets and tossed some object towards Bruce with the sound of clinking interrupting the silent night. Bruce had barely managed to catch it before opening his hand to reveal a ring of keys, one of them being a car’s.

Bruce’s stomach sunk like the Titanic.

“We’re stealing someone’s car?!”

“Borrowing.” Ichigo said easily, slipping around him to go to passenger’s side of the car. “And you’re driving.”

“Are you insane?!” Bruce scarcely managed to not shout this out loud to the clearly crazy teenager in front of him. How he had managed to miss the fact now staring at him in the face was beyond him.

Maybe he was losing it too. Not a far off possibility considering he had an alter-violent ego in his head.

Bruce could clearly see even in the dark that Ichigo was rolling his eyes and had to refrain wringing the teen’s neck.

“Don’t worry. We’re not stealing. I have every intention of paying the owner off the next time we see him—”

“Which is impossibly unlikely.” Bruce interjected flatly. Ichigo ignored him.

“And things like these always work out in the end anyway. Besides, the guy’s a dick. And the service was terrible.”

Bruce shook his head.

“How the hell did you even get the keys?”

Ichigo’s smirk turned smug, satisfaction oozing out of him like a well pampered cat.

“Stole it right from underneath the bastard’s nose when he was trying to make us pay double for the rent.” Ichigo sounded much too pleased with himself.

Bruce resisted the urge to facepalm.

“Now come on, the spy I knocked out isn’t going to be unconscious for long.” Ichigo urged on.

“Knocked out? What do you mean knocked out—” Bruce spluttered. Ichigo stopped him from ranting on further.

“Bruce, we’re kind of on a time schedule here.”

Bruce stared at Ichigo’s expectant face for a few seconds before sighing and officially giving up on ever understanding the anomaly in front of him.

“Later, we’re going to have words.”

“Whatever you say Bruce.”

~A~
“What the fuck do you mean you don’t know where they are?!”

Fury was not happy. Scratch that, he was furious. Blake Valdez, the agent who was supposed to have called him hours ago was now phoning him to say that a seventeen year old brat had managed to get the best of him.

Not to mention the fact the kid had destroyed every piece of equipment to the point where it was simply unusable and undistinguishable anymore from each other. The only reason the agent’s phone had been untouched was apparently to send a message to not mess with the damn kid.

To say Fury was having a migraine was putting it mildly. The state of the art equipment had cost damn thousands out of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s paycheck and was going to earn a fucking council meeting that basically entailed a full on lecture from the asswipes sitting around doing fucking nothing on their seats.

Not to mention Banner was now on the run along with an unknown who may or may not be using Banner for his own purposes. And from the looks of it, skilled enough to apprehend a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent too.

Fury could practically hear Valdez wince on the other line, a demotion very near in the close future.

“They left the motel ninety two minutes ago at nine thirty seven. I am unable to trace where they are and have no equipment that can help me with my search.” Because they’re all destroyed like the Hulk did it himself, was the unspoken admittance.

Fury closed his eye, reigning in the shouting, verbal beat down he wanted to onslaught on the agent. When he opened his eye again, they were cool as a winter’s night, professionalism clipping his sentences as he spoke.

“Get out of there right now. You are dismissed from your duties and are ordered to go back to home base. Fury out.” And with that, Fury turned off the com, resting his hands on the digital table in front of him. It took him only a second to snap back into director mode again and to turn around to stalk to where the big monitor screen was. He didn’t have to look behind him to know Hill was right at his heels.

“Call Agent Romanoff right now. We’re going to catch ourselves a fugitive who’s a pain in my ass.” Fury ordered grimly.

“Yes sir.”

It only took a few minutes for Romanoff to arrive, Coulson and Barton tagging along behind her, bland and curious expressions respectively in place.

“So I’m guessing things didn’t go according to plan with Operation Orange?” Coulson said mildly, the insipid smile fixated on his face. Fury’s death glare answered any unanswered questions to Coulson’s inquiry. Barton snorted beside the suited man.

“When do plans ever work? And seriously, Operation Orange?”

Coulson hummed, still smiling.

“I personally like to call it double O myself. Much cooler that way.”

Fury had to take a moment to remind himself why he hired the two wisecrackers in the first place instead of shooting them in the head.
“So what’s the situation boss?” Romanoff’s cold voice cut to the heart of the matter in seconds, a trait Fury was indefinitely grateful for.

“Ichigo Kurosaki has apparently left the premises after apprehending Agent Blake in the man’s location. From the looks of it, Ichigo has known we’ve been watching for a while. How long, we don’t know.” Fury glanced to the screen, where it showed the lobby of the motel when Ichigo and Banner had been paying for their rooms.

Ichigo’s scowling face had been enlarged, showing the teen’s fierce demeanor and abnormally bright orange hair that was shockingly natural from Blake’s observations. Maybe a mutation? At this point, anything was possible.

“The two had left precisely nine thirty seven, leaving the motel after paying.” Fury revealed.

The video played for a bit, showing the two fugitives turning around and walking away from the owner at the counter. Barton frowned.

“Wait a minute, pause for a second.” Barton suddenly ordered. Fury raised an eyebrow but complied, freezing the frame. Barton’s eyes searched the screen for a second before pointing at one of Ichigo’s hand that was slipping into his pockets. “Get a better picture of that. He’s got something there.”

The picture grew bigger and clearer, showing the tiniest glimpse of a ring of keys quickly hidden by the teen’s thin wrist.

Romanoff raised an eyebrow at the image.

“Not bad.” The end of her mouth barely twitched upward when she said those two words. “A bit sloppy, but he’s got quick hands.”

“No need to admire the target’s skills.” Fury snapped.

“So where did he go?” Coulson interrupted. Fury grimaced and waved a hand to show another, much darker video on screen. On it, it showed Ichigo and Banner behind the motel, Ichigo shoving the metal door open to show a beat up car to the viewers.

Then, he threw the stolen keys to Banner.

“No.” Barton was grinning now, looking like Christmas has coming early. “He stole the owner’s car?”

“No need to sound so excited Clint. We’re the government after all.” The smirk on Romanoff’s face, however, completely contradicted her admonishment.

Barton cackled. Coulson was smiling indulgently.

Fury was *this close* to popping a vein.

They had to listen a bit closely to hear what the two were saying. Banner appeared to be rather flabbergasted and flustered by what his accomplice in crime was implying while the teen was taking all this with a flippant attitude.

“-always work out in the end anyway. Besides, the guy’s a dick. And the service was terrible.”

“How the hell did you even get the keys?”
Anyone from a mile away would be able to hear the vexation in the gamma scientist’s voice.

“Stole it right from underneath the bastard’s nose when he was trying to make us pay double for the rent.”

“I like this guy.” Barton said instantaneously, much to the surprise of no one.

“Don’t.” Fury immediately commanded. The migraine was coming back.

They watched as the two finally entered in the car, bickering all the while, and driving off. Though it was night time and therefor hard to see, the camera managed to catch the license plate number of the black SUV Chevy.

Fury switched the monitor back to its original setting and turned to look at the pair of spies sharply.

“We are tracking them down right now. They managed quite a few miles and seem to be heading in the direction of the rainforests. Probably to try and lose us. If we don’t hurry now, they’ll ditch the car early and we’ll lose them in the process. I’m counting on you Romanoff, Barton. Bring them home.”

All business now, both gave curt nods.

“You’ve got it director.”

~A~

“We’ve covered a lot of ground.” Ichigo said without preamble, shutting the car door behind him and glancing at Bruce. “We’re going to have to walk from here to the forests. We can lose them there. We’ll have to be quick and unnoticeable though, otherwise we’ll get caught anyway.”

“Kind of hard to do that with your hair.” Bruce shot back, dry humor coming back a bit now that they were away from the village. He still looked tense though, as if expecting an attack from the sky at any moment.

Ichigo wondered if this was even possible. He didn’t know if they could still be tracked down considering his rather limited knowledge on the advanced technology here. He knew there were such things as satellites and all that, but not really in detail.

Later, he decided then and there, he’s really going to have to brush up more on this world’s developments.

Trying not to show how troubled he was by his own pondering thoughts, Ichigo managed a smirk before covering his hair with the black hoodie he had made sure to buy before leaving, expecting this scenario to come up.

“How about now?” Ichigo quipped out, smiling a bit when he heard Bruce chuckle beside him as they both quickly got their rucksacks and other necessities from the trunk.

The two left the car behind along with the keys and started to jog. Ichigo, long used to arduous training sessions from sadistic teachers who didn’t know the meaning of restraint, had no trouble carrying his heavy pack as they ran. Bruce, however, was huffing and puffing like there was no tomorrow, shoulders sagging under the weight of his pack.

Ichigo halted before silently taking the pack off of Bruce’s back and carrying the added weight with ease.
Bruce raised an eyebrow at the stunning display of strength but didn’t say anything, probably too out of breathe to comment.

The two made to the forests quickly with Bruce no longer held back and didn’t hesitate to enter in the wilds. The thought of people still following them kept them going through the uneven grounds and the crackling leaves under their feet. The sounds of night animals surrounded them as they stuck close to the places with the most trees and away from the empty clearings. They went on this way for about an hour or so when Ichigo suddenly heard it.

The sound of footsteps scouring the land.

Ichigo swore under his breath and grabbed Bruce by the collar and pulled him down under a tree with a generous amount of leaves that would cover them. Concentrating on the noise, he could tell they were close.

Ichigo’s heart raced at the thought, mind going a mile a minute.

From what Ichigo could tell, there were at least ten men on the ground, though how spread out they were, he didn’t know. He also didn’t know whether they were here to capture or kill him or Bruce, the first option being more likely. While he didn’t know the reason why anyone wanted the older man, he could definitely take a guess and say it has something to do with the reiatsu he could sense from Bruce.

He didn’t really want to kill the men, otherwise they probably would label him immediately as a threat and take him down instead of just trying to capture him. He also shouldn’t show any of his abilities or powers openly, seeing how he didn’t want any more attention he was already warranting and didn’t want to get dissected as some science project either. So turning into a Shinigami and going covert isn’t going to work out, especially since he didn’t know the capabilities these people had and could potentially under or overestimate how much damage they could take from him. Besides, he doesn’t know where he could leave his soulless body and he doesn’t have time to explain to Bruce that his body going comatose didn’t mean he’s actually dead.

Which left only one option really.

Turning to Bruce, he shoved the bags into the bewildered man’s arms and directed a piercing stare at him.

“Take the bags and go. I’ll distract them and hold them off.”

Bruce looked equally shocked and furious. Ichigo took a moment to appreciate the gobsmacked look, used to the hilarious expressions many have directed at him times before.

“What? No! I’m not going to let you go out there and get yourself killed!” Bruce whispered heatedly.

“Way to put a guy down.” Ichigo retorted wryly. “And I’ll be fine. I’ve been in way tighter spots than these. Now hurry and remember to stick to the big trees. I’ll meet up with you later.”

And without stopping to hear Bruce’s protests, Ichigo darted out from under the tree as silently as he could hoping all the while Bruce won’t chase after him.

Thankfully, the older man had enough sense not to and from the corner of his eye, Ichigo saw Bruce start to carefully stalk under the trees as silently as the man could.

When he was sure he was at a far enough distance for Bruce not to see him, Ichigo lightly inserted some reiatsu to his feet, making him float just above the ground so he wouldn’t make any noise. At
the back of his mind, Ichigo marveled over how useful some of his spiritual abilities were that he had taken for granted before coming to this world.

Staying in the shadows, he tried to pinpoint the enemies’ location while trying not to be caught while doing so. He couldn’t help but be reminded of the tag games Yoruichi used to ‘play’ with him at the moment. While the game had also increased his skills, it also improved his ability to locate the slightest, unnatural bits of movement he would catch from the corner of his eyes that could mean his victory in the game. And boy, Yoruichi was one sadistic bitch once she inevitably caught him in the end – she was the Goddess of Flash after all for pete’s sake.

It took him less than a minute to find someone, the person clad in a black uniform with a gun ready at hand, a sight that boiled Ichigo’s blood. Without much effort, Ichigo snuck from behind and effectively clamped a hand over the man’s mouth before he could say anything and started to choke him, the sound of desperate wheezing muffled behind his hand before the man finally passed out, slumping like a puppet without strings. Ichigo quickly lifted the man into the air, since dragging the body on the ground will no doubt bring attention, and laid him against a tree with his head rolling at the movement.

For one pondering second, Ichigo contemplated taking the man’s gun with him and dismissed the thought instantly. He didn’t need the firearm and Bruce would probably shoot himself first before using any weapon against another human being.

Somberly, Ichigo wondered if Bruce had bought the small handgun that he had nearly killed himself with for the sole purpose of hurting himself and no one else. The very thought left a sour taste in Ichigo’s mouth.

Shaking his head, Ichigo snapped back into attention when he heard the audible snap of a twig to his left and quickly went to the source before effectively punching the man’s lights out just when the man turned around. Ichigo caught the now unconscious body before it could fall and did the same thing he did before to the other body.

He snapped his head around sharply when he heard two men coming up behind him. Ichigo cursed inwardly when he realized he was already in the men’s line of sight and quickly shunpoed toward them just when one of the men cried out when he spotted him in the darkness.

The man didn’t get to say another word once Ichigo knocked the two men’s heads together with a bang that made both men fall and groan on the ground in pain. Without hesitation, Ichigo kicked one of the men’s jaw to the side so it wouldn’t injure too badly but make him unable to talk, and then outright hit the other man in the face. He was pretty sure he broke the guy’s nose when he did considering there had been an audible crack when he made contact.

Suddenly, right before Ichigo sensed the attack coming, something nearly grazed him on the shoulder, his quick reflexes dodging the object before it could hit. Glancing to the side, Ichigo frowned when he made out what nearly hit him.

An arrow?

“Don’t move, the first one was a warning shot.”

Ichigo turned around to see a cropped, blonde haired man on top of one of the trees, bow ready to shoot.

Ichigo stared at the odd sight and couldn’t help but blurt out the first question that came to mind.
“How the hell did you get up so high so damn quietly?” Ichigo’s tone was incredulous.

Seriously, was he really that out of practice, or were these guys just the exception? First the guy who had spied on him and Bruce for nearly weeks, and now this? This was starting to get ridiculous.

The archer raised an eyebrow at the question, a glint of amusement evident in his eyes.

It pissed Ichigo off.

“Practice mostly.” The guy had the audacity to shrug. “And a lot of tight situations.”

“Must’ve been some situations.” Ichigo shot back sardonically, eyes flickering around to see if there was anyone else with the man. From what Ichigo could tell, the man was alone.

Either the man was overconfident, or very, very good.

“Not as bad as yours from where I’m standing.” The blonde man cocked his head, looking honestly curious. “What with you hanging out with Banner and all.”

Ichigo bristled, eyes narrowing dangerously now.

“Wait, you don’t know?” the man’s previously light attitude had all but disappeared, a calculating and assessing expression on his face as if searching for any lies on Ichigo’s face. Ichigo straightened defiantly, tall and stubborn till the end.

“No, I don’t. And to be blunt, I don’t fucking care. Look, I don’t know why you people are after Bruce, but I’ll only say this once; back off. Or you’re going to be dealing with me.”

“You don’t care that Banner is hiding things from you?” the man honestly looked interested with his answer, tone speculative.

Ichigo paused, taking in the question seriously. Did it bother him that Bruce wasn’t telling him everything?

A little bit, he could admit. But it would be hypocritical of him if he condemned the man for it. After all, he was hiding things from the man too. In the end, all that mattered to Ichigo was whether or not he trusted Bruce with his secrets. And the answer to that was obvious.

So he looked at the archer without a single ounce of doubt in his mind.

“Why should I? It’s not like I’m not hiding things either. What he’s dealing with is his business. But if he ever says he needs my help, I’ll be there. That’s that.”

The man stared at him for a long moment, face unreadable. He opened his mouth, looking ready to say something, before a loud cry that Ichigo immediately identified as Bruce’s rang into the air, shattering the standstill the two had been under. Without even the slightest attention to the man, Ichigo sprinted through the forest like his life depended on it, heart thumping with dread all the while.

He barely paid any mind to the fact the man was jumping from tree to tree above him, though it did remind him not to shunpo. It would raise too many unwanted questions at the moment. Even without
his supernatural speed though, Ichigo was still pretty damn fast.

When Ichigo burst into the clearing, Ichigo took in the disastrous scene in front of him.

There were at least four armed men pointing their guns at a crouching, huddling Bruce, his back hunched as he pressed his head to the ground with hands covering his head as if getting ready to duck and cover. A red headed woman excluded from the four men was pointing a pistol at Bruce at close range, calculative and wary. The whole area was high with tension one could cut with a knife, as if a nuclear bomb was going to go off at any moment.

Bruce looked up just in time for Ichigo to see the man’s normally warm brown eyes turn acid green, so much fear and the I’m sorry clear on his face.

Then, everything went green.

Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out!
Chapter Notes

Age of Ultron! Loved the movie so much! Watched it twice and cackled like a maniac at many parts. So many new ideas are just rattling in my head now. God, I just, you have no idea how obsessed I am now with Marvel and DC Comics. Please enjoy this chapter and watch the movie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the fuck.” Ichigo stared at the green eyesore. “Seriously, what the actual fuck.”

In place of Bruce was a raging, muscled humanoid... thing. In all his years of dealing with weird situations – and his experience was pretty damn impressive considering he dealt with ghosts since he was seven – this just made the top ten on his list.

Because it wasn’t just the appearance that was throwing Ichigo off. The reiatsu he had been feeling from Bruce for weeks obviously was from this, this... whatever the hell this is.

While Bruce had only carried traces of the raging emotions that Ichigo only had glimpses of when the man was especially stressed or emotional, the being in front of him was chaos personified. There was so much rage radiating off of the beast that it was overwhelming. Ichigo swallowed hard, sweat trickling down his forehead.

Just what the fuck did he get himself into?

At the back of his mind, Ichigo wondered if fate had some kind of vendetta against him to put him in such a typically unbelievable situation. Or maybe she just did it for kicks and giggles, a thought that spurred on the murderous urge to hunt down the bitch and slice and dice her himself.

Seriously though, what the hell were the chances of him running into a dangerous fugitive who had the apparent ability to shapeshift into some sort of green beast with a disturbing sense of spiritual energy?

Yeah, someone upstairs seriously hated him. The Spirit King was now officially on his shit list.

Bruce roared in response to his reaction, the forest vibrating at the earthshattering sound. The action spurred the agents back to life, all of them yelling out in panic and running for their lives.

The red headed woman was sprinting away at top speed while sharply barking out orders to the headless chickens/agents, clearly deeming shooting the bulking figure to be a useless endeavor. The blonde archer was right behind her, shooting arrow after arrow at the green being in rapid succession as he did so. The arrows seemed to be rigged because the moment they landed on Bruce – was it Bruce? Ichigo didn’t fucking know – they exploded. One of them even turned into some sort of net, trapping the hulking figure around the legs. It only held for a few seconds before the creature bellowed and easily teared through the material like it was tissue.

Ichigo probably would’ve stood there dumbstruck like an idiot even longer if the brute hadn’t stopped in his tracks and swiftly turned to look at him, snarling like a wild animal.
So Ichigo did what any sane person would do.

He turned on his heels and fled into the wilderness.

~A~

“Damn, this isn’t good.” Clint swore into the com. Natasha couldn’t agree more.

What started out as a simple retrieve mission for two fugitives was turning into a shit-hitting-the-fan mayhem she didn’t have any control of, a fact she loathed very much.

She and Clint had separated to gather up the unconscious bodies the teen had left in his wake and brought them to the quinjet that was waiting for them in an open clearing. The other agents followed their lead and had quickened the process before practically diving into the airborne vehicle with desperate fervor.

Natasha couldn’t blame them. Facing the monstrous Hulk would make anyone piss themselves in its wake.

And if her hand had been shaking just a bit when she had pointed her gun at the green monstrosity...

Well, nobody noticed. And that was what counted.

“Romanoff, what’s your status.” Fury rumbled into his ear, gruff worry coiled tightly in his tone.

“Hulk just showed up. All our men has managed to safely get on the jet. Four of them are injured into unconsciousness curtesy of Kurosaki but are otherwise fine.”

“And where is the carrot topped brat?”

She hesitated briefly before plunging on.

“The big guy is pursuing Kurosaki sir.”

“Of course he is.” Fury sighed into the com. Natasha sympathized. There was a high chance the teenager was probably dead by now. If not, he will be. “There’s a second jet coming to apprehend the Hulk in fifteen minutes. Get out of there while you still can.”

“Yes sir.” She answered curtly.

Glancing at the still knocked out bodies that were gathered carefully in the quinjet, her mind automatically took note of the broken nose and the bruised neck and ribs she could identify even from where she was standing outside the vehicle.

If the situation had been different, she would’ve been more than itching for a good fight from the teen. Clearly, he had some training when it came to detaining his enemies. The injuries the agents suffered would definitely heal without problem, though their prides probably wouldn’t. Getting their asses handed to them by a seventeen year old kid would bruise any trained professional’s ego.

What she found strange was how the kid incapacitated his pursuers. Though the wounds were carefully aimed at nonvital areas, they were merciless and efficient. The teen wasn’t hesitant about being brutal.

Whoever the kid was, he was a survivor and definitely not a novice. In other words, not to be underestimated.
“Nat, is everyone secure?” Clint crackled over the com.

“Yeah. Now get your ass over here before you get squashed into a human pancake. I don’t like paperwork.” She ordered flatly. Clint snorted over the whizzing of the jet. She narrowed her eyes when she sensed the tightness of her partner’s voice, evident even over the static.

“I’m following Banner and the brat.” He paused minutely. “What the... Huh. They just stopped. Kid’s saying something. Nat, I’m going in.”

“Clint, don’t be an idiot.” She snapped sharply.

“I’m not going to leave the kid behind.” She closed her eyes in frustration at his mulish tone. Damn him and his weakness for kids. “I’ll just get on the next ride.”

“Yeah, but not for another fifteen minutes. You’ll be dead by then.”

“I’m so touched by your concern. It’s giving me the warm and fuzzies.”

“Clint, you-”

“Agent Barton.” Coulson’s unflappable voice resonated into the com, shutting them both up immediately. “What is your status and position?”

“I’m hanging in a tree, teen feet from the scene. Kurosaki and Banner are in a clearing. Looks like they’re going to have a showdown or something. If I’m lucky, I can distract the big guy and get the kid to safety.” Clint’s voice went low and serious. “What’s it going to be?”

There was a moment of absolute silence before Coulson finally answered, tone admirably not changing in the least.

“Do what you need to do. Don’t screw it up.”

“I’m really feeling the confidence here.” Clint said dryly, though his tone was more relieved than anything. “Barton out.”

The static from Clint’s end went dead.

“I’m going with him.” Natasha said the moment Clint got off the coms.

“Not an option.” Coulson’s reply was firm and instant. “Somebody needs to be there to keep a level head. That’ll have to be your job.” His voice softened just a touch at his next words. “Clint’s got this covered. Now get out of there Natasha, that’s an order.”

Natasha’s hands clenched at the last three words she couldn’t refute. With one last backward glance, she hopped into the helicopter, inwardly cursing her partner in Russian and vowing to give him a piece of her mind later.

She refused to think of any other possible scenario.

~A~

“Shit shit shit shit shit.” He streamed out the curses in Japanese fervently as Bruce gave chase, using just a bit of shunpo to boost his speed. Much to his aggravation, despite the creature’s size, he was fucking fast with the way he leaped over the landscape while Ichigo was tripping over the multiple tree roots that seemed to manifest in front of him out of nowhere just to spite him.
Fucking rainforests.

‘Hey king!’ Ichigo very nearly groaned when he heard the eager note in his hollow’s voice. ‘Let me loose. I’m bored outa my fuckin’ mind here. Let me fight him!’

‘Hell no you idiot.’ Ichigo shot back. Shiro whined at his response, causing Ichigo to roll his eyes skyward.

Heaven save him now. Mentally shaking his head at this, he charged on.

As he ran for his life, Ichigo reviewed over his options.

Kido was a no go. He didn’t have time for the incantations that he only half remembered anyway, and he would probably blow himself up in the process if he attempted to do so. And he was pretty sure showcasing his abilities like that will destroy any possibility of him being viewed as a normal human and nothing else. After all, he still didn’t know if anyone was watching him at the moment.

He knew he could always just turn into his Shinigami form and defeat Bruce easily, but dismissed the idea the moment he thought of it. He didn’t particularly want to risk his human body from being crushed underneath the giant’s foot if things go the wrong way. To top it off, the agents were still a threat left loose in the forest whose motives he still didn’t know.

Damn. This was starting to get really inconvenient.

He thought back to Shinji and the Vaizards and how they had been able to use their Shinigami powers in their gigai bodies. He had once asked Shinji during a practice session if he could teach him how to do it.

Shinji had grinned that sly, Cheshire grin of his when he had responded.

“Eh. If we make it outa this war alive, sure I’ll teach ya. Gonna have ta with how often ya get inta trouble, baka.”

Only, Shinji never got the chance to fulfill that promise. And right about now, in a world where he had to spend an inordinate amount of time in his human body, such a skill would be really useful about now.

Later, he swore to himself as he dodged a falling tree curtesy of Bruce’s mighty swing, I’m definitely going to learn that skill even if it kills me.

That is, if he doesn’t get pulverized first.

Stomping down the morbid thought, his mind raced for more choices. Ichigo glanced behind him to see how far away he was from the rampaging beast and whiplashed his head when he did.

Ichigo blinked in disbelief because right at that moment, he saw a flicker of deep-rooted, unexpected emotion that rocked him off his feet.

Fear.

Whatever this green guy was, he was full on terrified.

Ichigo could’ve slapped himself when the implications of this hit him.

Well of course he would be scared. Who wouldn’t be? The people from before just tried to capture him, cage him. If it was Ichigo in his place, he would fight back too.
And there was something about the green guy that just prickled Ichigo’s senses. Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated the best he could on the being’s reiatsu, not just skimming it over like he did before.

What met his efforts was, to put it lightly, staggering.

When pushing past the overwhelming feeling of rage, there was a complexity he didn’t expect. Fear was definitely evident, along with something close to wariness that mimicked Bruce’s. Ichigo flinched when deep-sated loneliness hit him, so powerful that it was almost heartbreaking.

He felt Shiro at the back of his mind turn quiet, his jeers abruptly gone silent as he too reflected on the situation at hand. He could even feel Zangetsu’s mood plummet from stoic to grim, clearly just as troubled. This was hitting a little too close to home for all of them.

Because this, this was Shiro at the beginning. This was before Ichigo had the guts to confront the hollow and accept him as his zampakuto with a sword piercing him in the heart in the process, the beginning of mutual trust forming between them.

Ichigo thought back to all those times Bruce seemed to avoid physical contact, shoulders hunching as if carrying some great burden Ichigo wasn’t privy to. Fear had radiated off of the man in waves when he thought Ichigo wasn’t looking at times. Now he knew why.

Bruce was afraid of himself. Just like Ichigo had been.

Ichigo swore under his breathe at the comparison.

This, this changed everything.

With that thought, Ichigo abruptly came to a stop. Thankfully, he ended up at a clearing free of trees where he and the big guy could easily move around. Squaring his shoulders, he stood ground.

Bruce – not Bruce, Ichigo reminded himself, he had to keep them separate – burst out of the forest with a deafening roar, nostrils flaring and eyes fierce.

Ichigo hoped against hope that he wasn’t about to make a huge mistake.

Just when Ichigo was about to open his mouth, it was right at that moment when he caught sight of him.

Ichigo spotted the archer at the corner of the clearing ten feet back, bow ready and face serious with none of his earlier amusement present.

A flash of fury and panic spiked Ichigo’s heart.

What the flipping hell did the guy think he was doing?!

Though the guy was one of the people after him and Bruce, he didn’t seem like a bad guy from the impression he got when he talked to the blonde. And even if that wasn’t the case, it’s not like Ichigo wanted the guy to die. Besides, Ichigo knew he was more than capable of taking a hit – he’s been through a hell lot worse – but the man didn’t. Fuck, the agent better not have some kind of hero complex or so help him, he’s going to punch the man until he knocked some sense into him.

At the back of his mind, a voice that sounded a lot like Rukia accused him of being a hypocrite. He pointedly ignored the jab and nearly jumped when the green guy growled in impatience, the sound a rumbling earthquake to the ears.
Right, convincing the big guy he wasn’t an enemy.

Ichigo discreetly shot the archer a loaded glare, receiving a long look in return.

The message was clear. *Don’t intervene.*

He nearly sagged in relief when, even with the distance, he could see the archer hesitate for a second before giving a tiny nod of acquiesce. The look he sent back was one Ichigo understood.

*Mess this up and I’ll get involved.*

Ichigo’s attention went back to the green being. He stubbornly stood still, refusing to cower in front of the creature. Cautiously, he spread out his arms from his sides, showing clearly he wasn’t holding anything, and made a slow 360° turn.

To his relief, Bruce’s other half actually halted at this action, as if taken aback. When he slowly turned to face the green creature again, he noted that some of the fear and anger had abated from his eyes to something close to confusion.

Good. Better than getting angry or afraid.

“I’m not armed. I don’t want to hurt you.” He said neutrally, trying as much as possible to convey the sincerity in his words. “I don’t know what you are or really anything about you, but I have a feeling that you’re not the type to attack unless someone gives you shit first. Am I right?”

The being didn’t answer, his eyes surprisingly shrewd as if assessing the worth of his words. Ichigo had no idea if he understood him or not but didn’t ponder on it for too long before bulldozing on.

“I know you probably don’t believe me.” He stated bluntly. “Or trust me. But I will say this. You need to get out of here. Now. Before those people come and capture you.”

“You’re not Bruce.” He said confidently. This, he was certain of. The being in front of him was a completely different person altogether. Whether he was a part of Bruce or not, he was his own self. It was a differentiation he learned from Shiro, and he wasn’t about to forget it.

His voice steeled itself at his next words. “But you’re a part of him. If you get killed, so does Bruce.”

The being narrowed his eyes at him. Ichigo couldn’t help but notice that the being’s eyes were the exact shade of brown to Bruce’s.

Slowly, making sure the being was watching him closely, he reached into his jacket pocket.

The green beast immediately started to tense at the action, a wild growl escaping out of his mouth. At the corner of his eye, Ichigo could see the archer looking ready to free the arrow.

Holding his breathe, Ichigo took out a roll of green paper held by a thick rubberband.

Ichigo was tempted to smirk when he could literally feel both the archer’s and the green being’s surprise at the reveal.

Almost casually, Ichigo tossed the money towards the green being, who in response caught the object with something close to a lost expression. He stared at him with wariness as if expecting an attack any second.

The look made Ichigo want to hunt down the people who had onslaught so much crippling emotional damage to the green being. A being whose strength and abilities should’ve made the guy
feel unafraid of anything that could be thrown at him.

Not this figure who was scared of one measly human he could easily crush merely by grabbing him.

“Take the money and run. Stay away from the villages and stick towards the wilderness. Don’t turn back until you know for sure no one’s chasing you.” He said the last part pointedly to the agent who was practically burning holes at him. The archer was looking at him as if he was insane.

To Ichigo’s shock, the green guy spoke.

“Coming?” the voice was deep and echoed across the clearing. There was an intelligent gleam in his brown eyes, questioning and demanding at the same time. Ichigo got over his disbelief quickly and shook his head. The green being grunted with displeasure.

Ichigo, for some crazy reason, was tempted to grin at the nearly petulant response.

“I’ll catch up with you later.” He promised. “You go on ahead without me.”

The green being grunted, clearly not happy, but accepting anyway.

Ichigo really did smirk at this.

The green being turned away from Ichigo, a sign of trust that Ichigo couldn’t help but notice, and without a word leaped away like some sort of giant frog into the forest. Ichigo watched as the green figure went further and further away until he disappeared from his sight.

“Stay safe.” Ichigo said softly under his breathe at empty air, meaning every word.

Ichigo’s attention snapped back into focus when the archer jumped off of the tree while putting back his arrow in his case and strode towards him. He almost looked at ease if it weren’t for the way his hand twitched in readiness to grab an arrow at any moment and the tense lining of his shoulders.

“Well,” the archer drawled, gaze sharp and alert. “that was quite the show.”

“I’m here all week.” Ichigo deadpanned.

The man snorted, expression never changing.

“That was real risky kid.” Ichigo would’ve bristled if it hadn’t been for the lack of condemnation from the man. Ichigo shrugged, keeping his stance relaxed.

“It was worth it.” He defended without a hint of regret. “And I trust him.”

“Kid,” the archer’s expression shuttered down, tone careful. “That isn’t Bruce Banner.”

“I know.” Ichigo glared at him, daring him to argue. “I trust him anyway.”

A flicker of surprise flashed across the man’s feature before he narrowed his eyes at him and jerked his head in the green guy’s direction.

“Why did you stay behind?”

“To make a deal.” Ichigo answered point-blank. The archer’s eyebrows shot up to the hairline.

“A deal?” he repeated with something close to disbelief. Ichigo scowled at the tone but nonetheless nodded curtly.
“I’ll go with you willingly and answer as many questions as I’d like to offer, if you leave Bruce alone.” Ichigo laid out.

He knew this was the real risk. But he wanted to get answers himself, about Bruce and the organization chasing after him. And something in his gut told him this was the right call, no matter how bad of an idea this was.

The archer shifted his feet, eyes never leaving him.

“And if we don’t?” the man challenged. Ichigo had to hand it to him. The man had balls.

“Then we’re going to have a problem. I’ll disappear and you’ll never find me. Trust me, I can make it happen. And if you go anywhere near Bruce again, if you track him down, trust me, I will know and I will end you.” He snarled out with surety and vehemence, honey eyes burning like a thousand suns.

He said the last words like a promise, a threat he would uphold without problem or hesitation. Bruce was his first and only friend since coming to this world. If they touch him, destruction and death will be in his wake.

The man stared at him long and hard, face unreadable, before raising a hand to his ear.

“Stand down the chopper after Banner and come pick us up. I have Kurosaki.”

Ichigo nearly closed his eyes with barely held relief at the words.

The archer looked at him with furrowed brows and spoke.

“How did you know I’ll say yes?” he questioned. Ichigo managed a cocky smirk.

“Because you came after me.”

*Because you cared that I might die.*

The man laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out.
Hi! Yeah, this is an excerpt, not an actual chapter. I really feel like I didn’t show the development of Ichigo and Bruce’s friendship, so I decided to show it here. I would’ve rewrote the chapters if I could, but felt this was better and less headache-inducing than the other option. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Aftermath of Unexpected Meetings]

Bruce closed the door behind him and practically sagged against the piece of wood that separated him from the rest of the world, hand furiously rubbing the furrow between his eyes that had developed from the stressful evening he just had. His blood was still pumping from the ensuing argument regarding money he had just escaped from and he felt more mentally wrung out than he has in months, which was never a good sign for him or anyone else.

This was a bad idea. Ichigo Kurosaki was the damn personification of bad idea all wrapped up in a scowling, damaged package. Why the hell did he say yes to that dinner? Why didn’t he kick him out when he had the chance? Wasn’t like he didn’t have a good reason to.

Come on, I had a bad feeling and I followed it? Was the kid for real?

The worst part was, Bruce had the distinct feeling that Ichigo had seriously meant it. The fact the kid’s response to such a feeling was kicking down doors and afterwards inviting strangers to dinner for good company – Bruce knew himself, there was nothing about him that could ever portray such a characteristic – was only encouraging the instinct to run away as far as possible from the kid. The guy was trouble with a few screw loose.

He sighed and ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

He’ll just tell the kid to get lost as nicely as he could the next time he sees him. Yeah, he could do that. Besides, it was for both their sakes. Once the kid pays off the owner, Bruce could go back to his solitude and everything will go back to normal.

Besides, the kid probably invited him to be polite. Japanese were usually polite people after all. It’s not like Bruce was that interesting.

Right, because the kid seems to be the shining example of courtesy and manners. It’s not like he didn’t break down the doors like a crazy punk instead of knocking like a normal, sane person.

Bruce thunked the back of his head against the door with aggravation, internally telling the voice to shut up.

Ichigo will lose interest in him and he’ll never have to think about the orange haired landmine of a person ever again he thought determinedly.

Bruce ate those words back the next morning when Ichigo thumped his fist against the broken door like he should’ve done at the beginning with a bag of bagels and coffee in hand along with a gruff
greeting at nine in the morning.

Bruce had stared at him and internally mourned over his fortunes. He was screwed.

And because he was a scientist who followed logic, he knew better than to fight against the variable known as Ichigo Kurosaki when there was no point to it.

He took the food off of Ichigo’s hands with the resignation of a man heading towards his execution.

Well, at least he had coffee.

[Building Blocks]

Bruce squinted his eyes against the sun and thought for a second he was hallucinating before dismissing the notion. He had eaten plenty of food and water earlier and the sun wasn’t more scalding than usual.

“Ichigo?” he called out uncertainly, still not completely sure if it really was the teen. Though, statistically, who else would have bright, neon colored hair? “What are you doing up there?”

“Trying-Umph! To get this piece of-Shit! Metal to move! Fuck!”

“Language.” Bruce said automatically. “There are children here.”

And there were. For some reason, children up until the age of thirteen and below seemed riveted by the sight of Ichigo swearing up a storm as he moved the panel of metal across one of the roofs of the houses. Not that Bruce was entirely surprised by their presence.

A few days earlier, Bruce and Ichigo went on their first round of grocery shopping together, both still unfamiliar with each other’s presence and mostly walking in awkward silence as newly acquainted strangers would. The only reason why they were walking together in the first place was because of Ichigo’s stubborn insistence. The teen had given him the stink eye when he saw Bruce’s ruffled, sleepless state after holing up in his room for hours to experiment with some herbs that have some calming symptoms to them. The persistent Japanese had refused to budge from his door until Bruce finally gave in and agreed to go with him to get some fresh air.

It was only twenty minutes later after Ichigo bought a bag full of apples did they stumble across a rather eye-catching scene. There was a man yelling at a couple of boys who had accidentally knocked over a fruit stand while playing tag on the streets. The boys were scared yet defiant in their own defense, which only seemed to increase the man’s increasing spitting ire.

And that’s when things started to get interesting.

Before Bruce even knew what was happening, Ichigo was already shoving the bag into his arms before sprinting towards the scene just as the man raised his hand in a downward slapping motion. With lightning quickness and precision, Ichigo snatched the man’s arm before twisting it behind his back and holding it there which elicited a painful cry from the man.

Bruce winced when he saw the look of dagger like anger that flashed across Ichigo’s face. There was righteous fury burning in his gaze and a thunderous scowl that could make even the most hardened men wet their pants.
Ichigo jerked the shaking man’s head close and hissed in his ear not unlike a vengeful snake.

“Don’t you even think about it trash.”

Even the Spanish words felt sharply enunciated, as if every syllable was an acidic insult out of the orange haired teen’s mouth. Ichigo let go of the man abruptly and shoved him down the street, watching as the man stumbled clumsily before running away as if the devil was chasing his heels. Looking at the still fuming Ichigo, it wasn’t a far off comparison.

Meanwhile, the two kids stared at Ichigo completely starstruck, mouths gaping with wonder and awe. The crowd that gathered at the scene were pretty much the same, though a lot more understandably wary then admiring.

Ichigo merely brushed off the looks and instead sternly eyed the two boys and made them clean up the fallen stall before letting them go. It was only after they were done did Ichigo turn to look at Bruce, who was startled realize he had been standing in the same spot for nearly half an hour while watching Ichigo.

To his surprise, Ichigo apologized for keeping him waiting and promptly took the bag from Bruce’s now tired arms.

“So, that was quite something you pulled off there.” Bruce said carefully. After that display of rage, Bruce really didn’t want to test the teen’s temper now. He added it to his lengthening list of things he’s learning about his new companion.

Ichigo scowled, expression darkening at the reminder of the event that had just passed. His grip on the bag tightened noticeably.

“I don’t like bullies.” He merely growled out before stalking on ahead of him, clearly wanting to end the conversation right then and there. Bruce didn’t ask.

After that though, every time Ichigo went out, kids seem to pop up out of nowhere to follow behind Ichigo like waddling little ducks to their grumpy, begrudging mother. If the situation wasn’t so baffling, Bruce would’ve thought it was sort of cute.

Though none of this really explained why Ichigo was now up on the roof in the first place.

“Oh.” Ichigo halted in his tracks, sharp brown eyes assessing his audience with a rare, sheepish expression that almost made the teen look bashful. It was an alien look.

“Ah, sorry kids. Don’t tell your parents I said all that.” He pleaded in Spanish.

“Fuck you!” a boy of ten responded gleefully, causing a wave of giggles and laughs to escape out of the other children. The older kids tried to look unaffected by the happenings around them with an “I’m too cool for this” attitude but didn’t quite manage to hide their devious grins.

Ichigo looked horrified. Bruce was very, very tempted to laugh out loud but managed to only chortle in amusement instead. Feeling bad for the panicking younger man, Bruce ended up rounding up the kids and firmly shooing them away from the house. A chorus of “Fuck yous!” rebelled against him as they all reluctantly left.

When Bruce turned back to look at Ichigo, he saw that the Japanese had finally gotten the metal to cover a large portion of the house’s roof and was in the process of drilling it in. For a brief second, Bruce felt a pang of worry at the idea of the teen hurting himself while doing it but pushed it down. If there was one thing he noticed about the teen during the week they’ve known each other, was how independent and self-reliant Ichigo was, never asking for help if he alone could do it. Besides, Ichigo
didn’t seem to be having any problems and looked like he knew what he was doing.

“So, mind telling me why you’re fixing someone’s roof?” Bruce questioned idly during one of the pauses. Ichigo grunted and swept the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Earning some extra cash.” The unexpected answer made the curly haired man blink in surprise.

Seeing the look, Ichigo sighed. “I don’t exactly have an unlimited amount of money you know. So every time I have the chance, I always look for jobs I can do whenever I stop by somewhere.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “I don’t mind the work and I’m usually helping someone when I take the jobs. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

“Most people your age don’t think ahead like that.” He couldn’t help but blurt out.

Sue him, he was impressed. Sometimes, when Bruce wasn’t paying attention, Ichigo seemed mature beyond his years, the fact blindsiding him every time. A contradictory trait seeing how at first glance the teen looked like a punk who didn’t care for responsibility and other people.

Ichigo shot him a scowl.

“Then they’re stupid.” The teen stated bluntly.

“How harsh of you.” Bruce responded flatly. Ichigo again shrugged one-sidedly while positioning one of the nails in place.

“Just saying it like it is.” Ichigo stated blithely as he easily picked up the drill again.

Bruce crossed his arms and raised one greying eyebrow at the orange haired teen.

“Something you seem to be fond of doing.” Bruce frowned. “One day that’s going to get you into trouble.”

Ichigo woofed out a laugh at that, a ferocious grin that would better befit a lion taking over his features. Bruce couldn’t help but shiver at the predatory look that should have no place on a seventeen year old kid. It were times like these that Bruce would get the feeling the teen was a hell lot more dangerous than he appeared.

“Ha!” Ichigo’s honey-golden eyes burned madly as if he just said the funniest thing in the world. “You don’t know the half of it.”

And it were things like that that really made him wonder what trouble the Japanese got himself into.

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**[Nighttime Favors]**

Bruce blearily opened his eyes at the sound of someone pounding on his door. For a brief moment of blinding panic that made him immediately sit up in alarm, he thought for sure the government had finally found him and was going to take him away. It wasn’t until his mental facilities finally kicked in did he realize that they wouldn’t be knocking if that were the case (especially since the door still wasn’t fixed).

So with a heaving sigh that questioned life itself, he got up and stumbled towards the door with all the grace of a three-legged hippopotamus and swung the door open.
Bruce blinked with disconcertion at the sight of Ichigo standing in front of him at-

He checked his watch.

Three in the morning.

Closing his eyes briefly to get his bearings, he was just about to open his mouth to question why in God’s name the kid was here when Ichigo’s state of being registered in his mind.

The kid, to put it mildly, was a mess.

There were dark circles under his reddened eyes and his whole body seemed to sag from sheer exhaustion as if he just got out of a losing side of a battle. And much to Bruce’s alarm, there was a certain lifelessness that was so unlike the usually vibrant teen that Bruce instinctively widened the door without even having to think about it.

“Come on in,” he ended up saying. Ichigo gave a curt, tight nod and entered in with a murmured thanks under his breathe. Without even hesitating, Ichigo beelines toward the couch and practically collapsed on top of it, head tilting back with one hand furiously rubbing his eyes.

Bruce uselessly fretted for a few moments before closing the door. While one half wanted more than anything to ask what was wrong, the other half knew better than to pry. So instead, he quietly went to the kitchen and started to make some tea, because that’s what he did whenever he was stressed or tired. It was practically the only thing he could make, considering how bad his cooking skills were. You’d think someone who worked in a lab would be at home in a kitchen.

Minutes passed as Bruce patiently waited for the water to boil while he surreptitiously observed Ichigo from the corner of his eye. He took note how Ichigo’s tense shoulders seemed to relax bit by bit in Bruce’s company. It was relieving to see.

When the tea was ready, Bruce poured into the two chipped mugs and knocked one of them against Ichigo’s hand. The teen sat up and grasped the cup silently and took a deep gulp, even though the tea should still be scalding. Bruce decided not to comment on it.

“Thanks. Sorry for barging in like this.”

Ichigo’s voice was a bit gruffer than usual. Bruce tried to smile and probably failed at that front, making it look more like a grimace.

“It’s fine. I’m always up at three in the morning.” He jested, though it fell flat. Ichigo’s worn-out eyes sharpened, some of his old fire sparking back to life.

“Really?” Ichigo probed directly. Bruce smiled melancholy.

“Only on the bad days.” He answered truthfully. “You?”

A flicker of dogged fatigue collapsed the teen’s features.

“Same.” Ichigo uncharacteristically hesitated before saying his next words. “Have you ever regretted doing something that at the same time made you glad you did it?”

Bruce’s mind immediately flashed back to chocolate, pony tailed brown hair, sashaying teasingly with every moment as if begging to be tugged. Soft, forest green eyes shining with fear and compassion as she stared up at the monster with tentative determination. How her smiles kept him awake at night, making him second guess if leaving without saying good bye had been the right
choice.

It’s been years, yet he sometimes still thought of her and wondered at the possibilities, the what-ifs if everything hadn’t gone wrong.

“Yeah.” He finally responded after a long moment, voice embarrassingly hoarse. “You could say that.”

Ichigo’s eyes burned through him, something like understanding in his eyes. And though it’s impossible for the teenager to even know what he was talking about, something in Bruce uncoiled at the thought he wasn’t alone, that there was someone he could share his loss with without pity coloring in between the lines.

It did make Bruce ponder though what Ichigo lost before this soul-searching wandering of his. What happened to his sisters, his parents, to make him so world-weary and decades older than he should be?

But he didn’t examine it further than that. Because the basis of their whole relationship was not asking questions the other didn’t want to answer. To leave the past where it belonged and to have companionship without the strings attached to it.

They had enough complications in real life.

Ichigo shifted in his seat, dragging Bruce out if his musings. The Japanese looked uncomfortable, a rare expression on the usually unrepentant and caustic teenager. His fingers fidgeted with the mug, having finished the tea a long while ago.

“I should probably go back to my room.” Ichigo muttered, placing the mug on the table and starting to stand up. Without thinking, Bruce held up a hand, halting Ichigo in his tracks.

“It’s okay.” Bruce found himself saying, feeling drained yet lighter than he has in years. “You can sleep here for the night. I’ll take the couch.”

Bruce wasn’t surprised when Ichigo immediately straightened at that, a stubborn scowl painting his face. Bruce was relieved to see that some of the heaviness in the teen’s set shoulders were starting to lift, honey eyes no longer dead as a corpse.

“I’m the guest. You sleep on the bed.”

“Since when has common courtesy ever meant anything to you?”

“Since it’ll be hell for your back if you don’t do as I say old man. Now shut up and get to sleep.”

“Well common courtesy says you shouldn’t be ordering me around.”

“Whose fault is that? As an adult past his prime, shouldn’t you be taking better care of yourself?”

“Oh ha ha. Very funny. And I’m not that old kid.”

“Don’t call me a kid and I won’t call you old.”

“That’s kind of difficult seeing how you act like one.”

“Ditto.”

Sigh. “Good night Ichigo.”
“... Hey Bruce?”

“Hmm?”

“... Thank you.”

“Your welcome.”

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[Curry Incident]

Ichigo stared at the monstrosity as if it’ll gobble him up and spit him out if he got to close. Bruce tried not to feel offended at the blatantly horrified expression on the orange haired kid’s face.

“... Well, you’re back early?” Bruce winced when he received a dismayed, are-you-fucking-kidding-me look from Ichigo who was still backing away slowly as if dealing with some chemical mishap that has come to life.

Technically, that’s sort of what happened.

While Ichigo had been away on a job to organize the fruit stands that a group of old ladies had requested for him to set up with payment involved, Bruce attempted to cook dinner for the both of them as a surprise. After all, working for hours on end in the heat while categorizing which fruit should be up front or back basing on how bruised or fresh they were would make anyone hungry. Not to mention how disinclined the teenager was in taking breaks when completing tasks, throwing himself at it with focused fervor that was both inspiring yet terrifying.

In Bruce’s personal opinion, the only reason why the old ladies picked Ichigo to do the job was to get a good look at his ass. Though the teen was completely oblivious to it, he was quite good looking with his tall, well-muscled stature and angular jawline. Along with his unusual hair color and fierce honey-brown eyes, he was an exotic creature to the Hispanic population, especially the women.

It was quite hilarious to watch Ichigo throw wary looks at the appreciative gazes thrown at him, like he had no clue why people were staring at him so admiringly.

So while Ichigo had to deal with the gleaming eyed vultures, Bruce tried to make curry. It wasn’t a complicated dish and he thought he would manage just fine.

It was a spectacular fail.

By the time Ichigo walked through the door, the curry was burnt, watery, and stuck onto the pot’s surface, making the insides look like a black cauldron. The vegetables were thoroughly burnt, the smoke was still choking the air, and the concoction was bubbling ominously as if some dark spell has been put on it. Bruce half expected the wicked witch of the west to come bursting through the window with cackling mad laughter following her wake.

“So... It’s that bad huh?”

Ichigo was covering his nose for his dear life, shooting him a stare so flat that it defined the word horizontal.

“You think?” His whole face practically screamed, not speaking undoubtedly in fear of taking in the toxic fumes. Bruce wasn’t as affected since one, he was a scientist who was used to odd smells and
experiments gone wrong and two, because, well, it was his own work and he wasn’t going to lose any more pride than he probably already lost by clogging his nose like a five year old.

Bruce sighed and picked up the pot by the handles, counting this as an obvious bust. He was just about to put the pot in the sink in order to dump it when Ichigo’s appalled yelp rang through the air in a higher frequency than normal.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Ichigo’s nasal voice practically shrieked at the end, one hand still holding his nose as he dashed toward Bruce and snatched his wrist in a strangling grip, almost startling Bruce into dropping the container. In any other circumstance, Bruce would’ve been tempted to laugh at the scandalized expression on the Japanese’s face. At the moment though, he was just trying to lower his heartbeat that had spiked at the sudden action.

Ichigo kept going, not noticing. “Are you trying to poison the rest of the human population? Water it down first then pour. Otherwise you’ll clog the pipes! God, haven’t you ever cooked before?”

“Oh...” he remembered Betty scolding him repeatedly during the three years they were together to never cook without her supervision. Her exasperation at Bruce’s ability to burn water had always been tinted with fondness, something he definitely hadn’t deserved.

Considering his whole diet was founded on restaurant food or packs of fruit ever since he went on the run, he honestly couldn’t remember the last time he ate a home cooked meal.

Ichigo rolled his eyes to the heavens and finally let go of his nose in order to seize the pot from Bruce by the handles, gagging momentarily when the smell hit him full force. Bruce shook his head at the teen’s dramatic behavior.

In the end, Ichigo ended up cleaning up the mess while cursing up a storm, pots and pans banging as he vanquished the black curry with desperate vehemence. Bruce wisely stayed by the sidelines, not wanting to get in the way. Later, he and Bruce munched on the oranges and bananas the old ladies gave him for free for dinner, both unanimously deciding never to bring up this incident ever again.

All in all, it wasn’t a bad end to the day.

[Bad Habits]

“Bruce.”

Bruce looked up from inspecting the herbs and was startled to see Ichigo standing above him, his usual irritated scowl absent.

“Ichigo?” Bruce blinked and clicked his round glasses up his nose, the sensation of his legs straining from crouching hitting him like a freight train. He concentrated on the Japanese instead who, now that he was paying attention, looked vaguely concerned for some mystifying reason. “What are you doing here?”

He hadn’t even heard the orange haired teen come in, a dangerous habit seeing how he was a hunted fugitive.

He internally frowned. He’s been getting too comfortable for weeks now. It was probably time to get moving soon, before anyone got a whiff of where he was.
Though where Ichigo was in this plan of his, he still hasn’t figured out.

Ichigo’s brows furrowed, concern melting into worry. He looked troubled by Bruce’s response, making the scientist reflect over his words, trying to see what has the teen so upset.

“Bruce.” Ichigo said solemnly. “You haven’t come out of this room since yesterday.”

Bruce’s thought process faltered at this before he automatically checked his watch. Yup, right there in bright digital numbers was the date, a day ahead from when he last checked.

Running a hand down his face, he shook his head, causing his greased black curls to bounce.

“Ah, sorry about that. I’ll take a shower and we can eat out. It’s dinner time right? I’ll just-” Bruce started to get up, his legs groaning from the action, but was stopped by the blistering slits of Ichigo’s eyes that flashed in anger.

“Bruce.” Ichigo said in a deceptively calm voice. “You haven’t eaten, slept, or taken a shower in more than 24 hours. What is so important that you’re not taking care of yourself?”

Ichigo’s voice grew at the end, a snarl evident on his face. His hands were clenched as if he was tempted to shake Bruce by the neck. Bruce slightly bristled at the biting tone, defensiveness taking root.

“I got caught up. I do that sometimes, it isn’t a big deal.” He struggled to push down his growing temper. The lack of success in finding a cure was getting to him and he needed a way to vent it out. Ichigo, unfortunately, was slowly becoming that target because he’s being a stubborn, unreasonable teenager as usual.

Which was bad because he really didn’t want to chance the possibility of the other guy killing his only friend in the world.

The real, genuine anger that drastically differed from his usually more exasperated frustrated retorts seemed to have gotten through to Ichigo. The Japanese pulled back, face closing off and becoming indecipherable. It was unnerving, seeing how Ichigo was one of the most expressive people Bruce has ever met. There was a caution to the typically brash young man now, the shifting of the shoulders betraying just how tense he was, as if preparing himself for an attack.

The action made all of Bruce’s suspicions that Ichigo really was an agent to creep up again. It only served to make his heart leap into a faster tandem.

“Bruce,” there was a distinctly uncomfortable note in Ichigo’s voice. “you know I’m not the kind of guy to pry but... Are you dying?”

The point blank question was so far off the left field that all of Bruce’s rage inducing thoughts flew out the window, leaving him staring at Ichigo stupidly.

“What?” he blurted out, utterly blindsided. “No!”

His automatic, flabbergasted response immediately made Ichigo’s shoulders sag, as if some weight has been put off his shoulders. The kid sighed and ran a hand through his neon wild hair, the sound full of quiet relief.

“Ah, that’s good then.” and as abruptly as the momentary lapse of relief came, Ichigo whipped out a furious scowl with such rapidity that Bruce momentarily entertained the notion Ichigo was bipolar.
“If that’s the case, then why the hell are you stuck in your room all day like some kind of no-life hobo?” Ichigo demanded.

Bruce floundered at the question, unable to tell the entire truth.

“Well, why did you think I was dying?” he challenged back, stalling for time.

“Oh I don’t know, maybe because the first time we met, you tried to commit suicide. Maybe because you have a hoard of medical books all over your room like some kind of pack rat when you don’t even stock up your refrigerator. Maybe because you told me you’re a scientist and who the fuck knows what kind of accidents can happen in there? Maybe because you’re running around all over the world as if you’re on some quest as if your life depends on it. Take your pick Bruce. I got plenty more.” Ichigo snarled scathingly with biting sarcasm.

Bruce flushed in embarrassment. He had no idea Ichigo had picked up on so much. He knew Ichigo wasn’t an idiot, yet a part of him still had underestimated him due to the kid’s rashness and twisted sense of logic that baffled Bruce at times.

And from the way Ichigo had so bluntly phrased it, it did seem like the most logical conclusion to an outsider’s point of view.

A pang of guilt reverberated his chest. The fact Ichigo had kept these observations to himself must’ve stressed the hell out of the kid. No wonder the teen tries to drag him out of his room no matter how annoyed Bruce was towards him. All those fruits and vegetables Ichigo always forced Bruce to buy suddenly was taking a whole other meaning than just eating healthy.

Bruce sighed, feeling like he just aged a few decades. He moved to the couch under Ichigo’s watchful gaze and leaned against its arm heavily. Taking off his glasses, he fiddled with the item while trying to find the words to explain without revealing too much.

“I have a... condition.” Bruce ruefully smiled at the last word. “It’s not life-threatening to me, though it tends to be, well, problematic.”

Well, as far as he can tell. It certainly is life-threatening to other people though.

Ichigo’s scowl morphed into a troubled frown, concern bleeding into the little crease between his brows.

“But you hate it.” Ichigo pointed out astutely. “And you want it gone.”

Bruce gave out a sardonic chuckle. It was so like Ichigo to define the Hulk problem so simply while others have failed.

“You could say that.” He replied quietly. Ichigo cocked his head, a deep pondering expression on his face before he finally shrugged with such nonchalance as if the answer wasn’t difficult.

“Then take a step back from it.” Was Ichigo’s nonsensical response.

Bruce blinked with a lack of understanding.

“Huh?”

Ichigo rolled his eyes as if Bruce was the slow one. Which was rather galling, seeing how he was a certified genius.
“Maybe you’re tackling this the wrong way. What you’re doing is rather unhealthy and leaves you in a pretty crappy state. If you keep dragging yourself forward like this, you’re only going to stress yourself out and probably kill yourself.” Ichigo shot Bruce a knowing look at the last part. “So for the love of god, find something else to do. If you keep fixating yourself on a problem, you’ll miss the obvious and you’ll feel stupid right after and I’ll have to be the one to tell you ‘I told you so’.”

Bruce opened his mouth, about to argue over how there’s no possible way he could ever push aside finding a solution to the thing that essentially ruined his life, and couldn’t.

What did Betty and he used to do whenever they couldn’t immediately solve the gamma radiation equations that boggled their minds and left them snapping at people for days? They rented movies, went on romantic dates, took a bit of vacation time because pulling their hair out and fasting were not healthy ways in finding answers. They took breaks in between their work and tried not to get too sucked into the science they were building with their very fingertips, itching to be explored.

Betty had always been better at it than him. She was the one who made sure he got some sleep, even using – *ahem* – unconventional methods to convince him. Now though, there was no one to stop him from digging in the dirt and not coming back up for air.

That is, no one until Ichigo.

Bruce’s head swam from the epiphany and he was dazed from it.

Was it really that simple? Did he really just need to, what, take a break and hope to find a cure at a later date? With the military chasing his heels, all the little stops he’s been making in finding herbs and other possible medical routes have gotten more risky. Without the constant need to try to find a cure, his stress levels would surely go down too, which was a bonus everyone would be happy with.

“And what would you propose I do then? Fix roof houses and help old ladies cross the street?” he sniped out for the sake of fueling the argument. His resolve was dissolving and Ichigo’s solution was becoming more and more agreeable.

Ichigo snorted. “How the hell should I know? With your knowledge on medicine, you could be a doctor for all I care.”

The moment the teen said that, Bruce knew he was sold. The idea of helping other people instead of hurting them, like penance for all the damage he has done was more than enticing. In fact, he’s never heard of a better suited occupation for him.

Bruce couldn’t help but burst out laughing, causing Ichigo to look at him in alarm.

It really was all so straightforward. He couldn’t believe how clear-cut it suddenly all was. The urgent pressure that had driven him to nearly kill himself out of desperateness was now replaced by a tentative, growing hope that maybe he didn’t have to die. Maybe he could be something other than the monster everyone including himself thought him to be. For one mad second, the urge to weep from reprieve was nearly overwhelming before he pulled himself together.

He turned to Ichigo and grinned with a boyish eagerness that hadn’t made an appearance since his accident. He felt lighter, more full of purpose than he has in years, and it was all thanks to this punk of a kid who didn’t even know what he just gave him.

So Bruce grinned on, the bubbling urge to laugh rising out of his throat as Ichigo stared at him as if he’s insane.

“Then that’s exactly what I’ll do.”
Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out.
I'm alive! Yes! Though this chapter is shorter than usual, it has a lot of introspection on the characters and I'm quite happy how this turned out. Thank you for your patience, and I hope you enjoy!

Sorry, Fury doesn't faces off Ichigo. Also, some people have asked if Ichigo will be overpowered or not. I’m struggling to find a balance since the power ups are ridiculous and the shinigami abilities alone are too OP in my opinion. I’ll try to make it realistic as possible. And no, Ichigo does not have two swords. And no, I will not incorporate Quincy powers. He’s ridiculously powerful enough already.

It’s been two hours in since he was handcuffed and shoved into the high-tech plane that was well ahead of any model he has ever seen. It was sleek and silver, the most futuristic thing Ichigo has encountered since coming to this world, and a lot roomier than Ichigo expected. He was very careful in not letting anyone see just how awed he was.

By the time those two hours passed though, he was ready to snap.

The atmosphere was suffocating and made him want to rip his own hair out. Personally, all Ichigo wanted to do was break the frigid silence that seemed to loom over the plane. Nobody was talking, not even the mouthy man named Hawkeye – seriously, codenames. What the hell? – and it was starting to get really irritating.

Never one for patience, Ichigo bulldozed through the awkwardness with an enquiry.

“So, where are you taking me?” he asked the only one he personally knew on the plane.

Hawkeye turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow. There were six guards benching with Ichigo and Hawkeye, all armed and seemingly intimidating.

Ichigo wasn’t impressed.

He was pretty sure they were just there for precautionary measures. He had a feeling that if Bruce hadn’t run off though, they would’ve been the first to shoot first then ask questions later.

The thought left a bitter taste in Ichigo’s mouth and only increased his dislike for these people.

“Do you really think I’ll tell you?” Hawkeye sounded amused. It seemed to be his default setting.

“No.” Ichigo said shortly, causing the dirty haired blonde to blink. “But it was worth a shot.”

Hawkeye snorted, mouth quirking up at one end. Ichigo personally thought the action made him look more human.

“So what do I call you? Because I sure as hell am not going to keep calling you that stupid bird name.” Ichigo insisted, shifting his cuffed hands uncomfortably. Contrary to popular belief, he’s
never actually been arrested before, despite his many involvements with street gangs and thugs in his old world.

Hawkeye blinked, a flicker of surprise passing his face, like he didn’t expect Ichigo to want to know anything about him individually. Ichigo merely continued to give him an annoyed look.

Maybe Urahara or Shinji would’ve jumped at the chance to subtly interrogate and read between the lines of the enemies’ answers, but Ichigo sure as hell weren’t them. Besides, he’ll probably find out what they want to do with him when they arrive at their destination. He could vividly imagine Urahara sighing in exasperation by his nonchalant attitude to his own kidnapping.

If it really was experimentation or his powers they were after though... Well, Ichigo will just have to get the hell out of dodge and make sure they never find Bruce either. Or bury these people to the ground so they never hurt anyone ever again. Permanently.

The blonde didn’t reply for a long time, long enough for Ichigo to start getting aggravated with the man’s silence.

“It’s only fair, seeing how I’m the one tied up and going to be shipped off to god knows where. I’d like to at least know who I bargained my freedom with.” Ichigo grounded out with biting ire. The soldiers seemed to tense at his unpleasant tone while Hawkeye’s eyebrows shot to the hairline.

He stared at Ichigo for a moment before a small grin took over his features, bright with humor. His eyes crinkled at the edges. He looked remarkably boyish and young, even though he was close to middle aged.

“Fair enough.” he still sounded damn amused, as if he was humoring him. Ichigo bristled at the tone. “The name is Agent Barton. That’s all you’re going to get.”

“Ichigo Kurosaki.” The Japanese replied in kind, even though he was positive the other man already knew. Barton nodded all the same and the plane fell into silence.

Suddenly, Barton frowned before he reached for his ear where the earpiece was. The moment he did, he curiously winced as if in physical pain. Clearly whoever was on the line wasn’t happy.

“Hey Red.” Barton said weakly. One of the guards snorted but was stopped short when Barton shot him a menacing glare that dared him to mock further.

Ichigo startled when a quicksilver look of warmth stole the blonde’s stoutness only for a moment. Barton’s whole frame seemed to slump the more the other person talked judging from the static noises that Ichigo could hear even from across where he was sitting. The blonde at some points looked resigned, exasperatedly fond if the tiny, sheepish grin and the ducked head said anything.

Barton’s next teasing words, “Aww, I didn’t know you cared.” was the cincher. Seeing that everyone else looked unsurprised by the playful quip, apparently this was usual behavior from their resident archer. Or maybe the caller itself only elicited this part of Barton’s personality.

“We’ll talk more later. See you at base.” Barton finished off before hanging up, reverting right back to clipped and professional. It was a swift change and Ichigo was curious despite himself.

“Who was that?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Why do you want to know?” there was an unreadable quality to his voice, deceptively casual yet guarded in a way he hasn’t been in their entire interaction. It reminded the teenager of Urahara oddly enough, which was a bad sign. He’s been comparing people to his past too much lately.
Ichigo ignored the clear warning signs that told him not to push further and marched on toward probable disaster.

“I’m bored.” Ichigo flatly stated with all the bluntness of a sledgehammer. Barton blinked, clearly not expecting such a straightforward response. “And other than these goons, you’re the only interesting person in this damn plane.”

There was a collective bristle among the ranks of gun-wielding minions and Barton was staring at him as if he was recalibrating everything he was saying and coming up with unexpected results. Still, he shrugged with all the nonchalance of a man who was talking about the weather instead of handling a prisoner.

“My partner.” He surprisingly answered. “The red head you saw earlier.”

Ichigo had to think back a bit (he’s never been good at remembering faces and he had been busy at the time) and blinked with realization.

“The scary ass woman with the gun?” he blurted out. Someone in the background choked and Barton’s features danced with mirth.

“That’s the one.” Barton remarked lightly with a smirk. Ichigo shook his head, struggling to find a reason why he was so surprised by this tidbit of information. Maybe it was the age. From what he could see, Barton looked more than a decade older than the woman.

Then again, Kenpachi and Yachiru had somehow worked out, and Toushiro and Matsumoto had this weird, dysfunctional relationship that strangely fit too. Come to think of it, all the captains and lieutenants were whether abusive, violent, or plain disrespectful to each other that they could charge their own reality television show for pure entertainment or horror value alone.

Or maybe he just knew too many bizarre people to use as examples.

“She’s young.” Ichigo couldn’t help but voice out externally. “Compared to an old man like you that is.”

Barton snorted.

“Oh, she’d love to hear that.” Though Barton said this with a good deal of humor, there was a note of steel in his voice that warned him off. Barton cocked an eyebrow at him, eyes sharp as his namesake. “Though it’s kinda hypocritical of you to talk, considering your relationship with Banner.”

“He’s my friend.” Ichigo said sharply, straightening his back with challenge blazing in his honey-brown eyes. “There’s nothing complicated about it arrowhead.”

Barton stared at him long and hard at his response, face completely wiped clean of emotions and thoughts. He looked every part the stony agent of a secret organization anyone could be. A spark of something that Ichigo thought was understanding flit past his face before the man finally nodded and relaxed his shoulders.

“Fair enough.” The man offered, and said nothing more. Ichigo took that as the end of their little conversation and the plane once more fell into awkward silence.

Ichigo inwardly sighed and rested his back against the seat, grimacing.

This was going to be a long ride.
Clint observed the kid from the corner of his eye, taking in everything he’ve seen so far and unable to make head or tails of the mystery in front of him.

At least, not discernable information that made much sense without context.

Clint remembered with some fondness how he met Nat. Kill order ringing in his ear with an arrow ready to knock the Russian assassin’s head off, and halting in his tracks when he saw the wariness in her posture as she slithered invisible in the busy streets, looking tired to the bone with ghosts haunting her steps.

She’s still the same woman as back then, just less astray with a vendetta to right the bloody wrongs she’s committed, guilt deep set into her very identity. She was a million facets with a lot of cracks, a sign that she’s stronger than she thinks.

Ichigo, in comparison, was an open book in more ways than one.

In his line of business, it’s rare to meet someone who lays their heart on his sleeve so easily, displaying his weak spots and not afraid to tell the other person to go fuck themselves if they even tried to attack. Like an angry dog ready to bite anyone who dared to touch what was his. And that, in this case, was Banner.

The agent resisted the urge to sigh, because that was where the conundrum started.

He wasn’t stupid. In the few hours he spent on the Quinjet when riding towards their mission before shit had hit the fan, he had quickly read up the admittedly very thin folder on Ichigo Kurosaki along with Banner’s more comprehensive one on his tablet. There were videos, surveillance notes, personality observations (Clint barely read it, he trusted his own eyes more than others), and even eating habits down to the last scrawled note on Ichigo, yet nothing on his personal history other than what the kid had volunteered to reveal to Banner. And who knew whether or not anything he said had been true.

Judging from what little interaction he had with the kid though, Clint was almost hundred percent sure Ichigo wasn’t the type to lie. What that said about him being a possible spy made the prospect almost laughable to him. And he’s only had two conversations with the kid.

Maybe it was his soft spots for lost kids (because boy oh boy, Ichigo was almost as much of a wanderer as Banner in all indications from both his closed up nature and the carelessness of someone who had nothing left to lose, and that did not say good things about his past), but every gut feeling rebelling inside of Clint was insisting the kid was as dangerous as Nat. Definitely capable of raising hell yes, yet having the potential to be something more.

Maybe that more was what drew Banner to the kid in the first place because honestly, they were a mismatched pair.

Banner was a mess. Socially, mentally, physically if you count his condition, and his lifestyle wasn’t exactly the most stellar. Basically, everything about him screamed unstable, a chemical bomb just waiting to blow up in your face. You’d think a man who craved stability with how much he lacked it would pick someone dependable or, or at least not stressful and didn’t have a thousand closets hiding away.

But for some reason, he picked a seventeen year old kid who, when they first met, yelled at him for being stupid in his attempt at suicide (or at least contemplating the option, they still weren’t
completely sure) and was an uncontrollable element in every aspect.

In other words, according to crazies logic, they were apparently a match made in heaven.

They clicked, this jaded old man and stubborn brusque kid.

Clint hadn’t gotten it, mystified and baffled the longer he read the equally bewildered reports. Clint could literally see the doubting disbelief the agent in charge of watching the odd pair felt, from the multiple question marks (he’s never seen so many in an official SHIELD document before) to the more than needed details when describing the situation, like putting down more words would make whatever he was reporting more believable.

If Clint hadn’t been so confused himself, he probably would’ve laughed his ass off.

Right now though, he was slowly getting the niggling idea why Ichigo Kurosaki could be such an appealing person to someone like Banner.

The kid was blunt. Visibly irritated throughout their entire talk and not afraid to ask questions when curious, yet paradoxically respecting Clint’s relationship with Nat without fanfare when Clint became too defensive.

(He hadn’t meant to, it was habit after having so many people think he’s only partners with someone so young due to her beauty. Not that anyone knew about Laura and the kids, but still, it was insulting to both of them though more for Nat.)

Clint could imagine too well of the missteps and minefields Ichigo would’ve strode through without shame yet immediately backing off if he pushed Banner’s boundaries too much. And considering all the manipulations and betrayals the scientist had faced over the years (Harlem, Jesus Christ), Ichigo’s frankness must’ve been a breath of fresh air. Tempting, even when everything about Banner’s psych probably screamed at him that getting Ichigo involved was putting the kid in the line of fire. Loneliness made people do crazy things, desperate things.

And Ichigo, Clint had the sinking feeling, was the end of the line.

If anything bad happened to the kid, Clint knew without doubt that all hell was going to break loose.

Clint looked to Ichigo automatically. He blinked incredulously when he realized with a jolt that the kid was actually nodding off now. His head was resting the back of the seat and his arms were protectively crossed against his chest with soft breathing filtering over the buzzing noise of the Quinjet, earning not so surreptitious unbelieving glances from the other field agents.

With his face not constantly scowling, he looked incredibly young.

Whether the kid was arrogant enough to believe that no one would be able to overpower him, or he just honestly didn’t care. Both prospects made Clint want to laugh his head off a bit hysterically.

Here lies Bruce Banner’s weak point. Good god.

*What the hell were they getting into?*

-A-

Natasha was waiting for him at the base entrance, curvy hips and pinpoint sharp green eyes and all.

“You’re late.” Was all she said, and Clint had to stop himself from wincing. Ichigo hadn’t reacted
much other than narrowing his eyes when they had arrived at the Arizona base that was hundreds of miles away from human civilization. It was less secure than their more prominent bases, but it was one of the more conveniently closer ones that didn’t have as many secrets to hide.

Clint ended up not following them since the kid did make a deal with him to not run off without hearing SHIELD out first. He was headed towards the meeting room where Fury would undoubtedly be waiting, when he was confronted by a less than pleased Black Widow.

“You mean you’re early.” Clint argued for the sake of arguing. Nat’s face remained stony and Clint let go of all joking pretense and sighed.

“I had to Nat.” he muttered so only she could hear, aware of the many people bustling around them. “He’s just a kid.”

Nat didn’t sigh – she’s not the type to – but she did briefly flutter her eyes closed for only a second, as if trying to withhold all her emotions in a barely there gesture. It was a tell that she’s never been able to break out of, and only Clint and a select few knew her, was trusted by her, to be able to read that.

“You’re an idiot.” She finally stated, exasperation pouring out of her. Clint grinned and waggled his brows smugly.

“You know you love me.” He beseeched, and didn’t even cringe when she effectively jabbed him in the stomach with her elbow.

Out of nowhere, like the secret ninja he claimed he wasn’t, Phil slid right next to them with a beatific smile. By this point, Clint wasn’t even startled that Phil heard the entire exchange. And the man claimed Clint was the rude one.

“Would you mind flirting later? You’re blocking the door.” Phil snarked sassily and this was why he was Clint’s favorite.

Natasha subtly snorted under her breath and jaunted off, leaving the two men to follow behind her while sharing amused glances. The three entered into the private conference room with Fury waiting for them, his back impeccably straight and one eye gaze full of steel. In other words, he looked furious as usual.

Natasha sharply looked at him as if she could read the pun from his mind and he shrugged unrepentantly. It was right there, how could he not?

“Agent Barton, you disobeyed a direct order.” were predictably Fury’s first words. Clint didn’t flinch away and instead curtly nodded, unapologetic.

“So Clint did. He reported how the seventeen year old kid faced down the Hulk without batting an eye and talked him down. How Ichigo gave himself up without a second thought the moment Banner’s safety had been put at risk and was willing to listen to whatever SHIELD had to say to him. He revealed the one on one conversation he had with the prisoner and the fact the Japanese had slept through the entire ride like a rocked, newborn baby.
Fury listened to every word with impressive stoicism while Phil’s thin eyebrows crept higher and higher the more Clint talked. Natasha’s expression remained calculative, processing the information given to her and probably coming up with more conclusions than Clint already has.

“Hmm.” Was all Fury sounded. He whirled around with his leather coat flaring out like an improvised version of Batman, and marched towards one of the holographic tables. “Romanoff, you’ll be talking to our guest. Coulson, you’ll be backing up Romanoff in case things go to hell. Barton, remain here.”

Nat and Phil nodded and went to their designations, the redhead shooting Clint one more glance before the doors closed behind them.

Fury sighed and sat down on one of the chairs, looking so exasperated that Clint couldn’t help but smirk.

“Long day boss?” he quipped out. Fury glared at him sullenly.

“The Hulk’s still on the loose and we have a prisoner who is figuratively Doctor Banner’s nuclear trigger and is hiding more skeletons than my grandmother’s secret pie recipe. What do you think?”

Well, when he put it like that, Clint had to admit it sounded like a giant clusterfuck. Not that he didn’t already know it.

Fury sat up and folded his fingers together over his mouth, his gaze piercing as a knife.

“What’s your take on our guest? Is he a threat?”

Clint paused for a long moment, struggling to stop the instinctive response to say no. And hell, that was actually pretty terrifying. He would’ve tagged the emotion as him being a father, but then he would be lying to himself. The first question though, that was a lot easier to answer.

“I’d say the kid depends on Banner just as much as Banner depends on him.” He started because that was the safest and most reliable information he got from the kid. “He trusts him, probably more than deemed wise.” Because for fucks sake, Ichigo had trusted the Hulk without knowing anything about Banner’s history beforehand. Whether Ichigo was completely blind to the danger he could’ve been in, or he had no self-preservation skills whatsoever. Either options were bad. “The kid relies on honesty sir, so if you’re going to get anything from him, I advise to not sugarcoat anything.”

“He’s sounding less and less like a spy.” Fury perceived, sharp as ever. “You think so too.”

And this, well, this was where things got iffy. Clint couldn’t be too personal on this.

“I do sir.” He stated. “I also think he’s a damaged, closed off teenager who’s taken a lot of hits, which makes him dangerous.”

“But dangerous to who?” Fury pressed and that’s the big question wasn’t it? SHIELD didn’t hunt down threats and put them down for the sake of them being dangerous. They put them down if they were too much of a risk or if people were misusing their capabilities purposely.

Clint’s smile was grim and hard.

“Anyone who would wrong him or try to use him.”

And that’s when Fury’s attention immediately turned from serious to intense, because those were the same exact words Clint used on Natalia Romanov the first mission he had on observing her.
“I see.” Fury merely said shortly, getting the message loud and clear.

Clint hoped that things would work out. He would hate it if all his careful wording had gone to waste.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, please comment on the way out. And check out my tumblr page aerialflight, hope you enjoyed!
ICHIGO DIDN’T KNOW WHAT IT WAS, BUT SOMETHING WASN’T RIGHT WITH THIS PLACE.

CALL HIM PARANOID, CALL HIM AN IDIOT FOR FOLLOWING THE INSTINCT TO TRUST A MAN WITH A FREAKING BOW AND ARROW, BUT HE WAS SERIOUSLY STARTING TO REGRET HIS DECISION NOW WHEN HE WAS IN WAY TOO DEEP ALREADY.

TO BE HONEST, HE HAD ASSUMED SOMewhat THAT THE ORGANIZATION HE ESSENTIALLY AGREED TO COOPERATE WITH WAS IMPORTANT, BUT NOT TO THE DEGREE HE WAS FACING NOW. IT JUST ALL SEEMED SO, IRONICALLY ENOUGH, OPEN. A BUSTLING PLACE WITH AN ALARMING AMOUNT OF PEOPLE MARCHING TO AND FORTH AROUND THE BASE, NOT SCRAMBLED OR MESSY BUT EFFICIENTLY ORGANIZED AND HE SUSPECTED, VERY LARGE. AND, SURPRISINGLY ENOUGH, HUMAN.

IT WASN’T HEARTLESS IN HOW THEY OPERATED. BRISK AND MARCHING WITH MILITARISTIC EASE THAT MADE HIM A BIT UNEASY, BUT NOT COLD OR CRUEL. HE SAW THE CURIOUS PEAKS OF INTEREST DIRECTED AT HIM AS HE WAS DRAgGED INTO A WHITE, STERILE CELL. Glimpses of fumbling tech geeks scrambling to different rooms with universal frenzy he recognized immediately. People were even drinking coffee if the permeating smell was anything to go by.

POINT WAS, THIS FELT LIKE A WORKPLACE FULL OF PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY WANTED TO BE HERE. IF PEOPLE LIKE HAWKEYE EXISTED IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT THAT DEMANDED THINGS THEY WOULDN’T DO, HE HAD THE FEELING HAWKEYE AND MANY OTHERS WOULDN’T EVEN BE HERE. AND THAT, HAVING THE CHOICE TO REFUSE OR EVEN BE UNHAPPY WITH IT, WAS ALREADY A GOOD SIGN.

(“SOUL SOCIETY HAD TO LEARN TO DEFY ORDERS.” URAHARA WOULD SAY, FLAPPING HIS DAMN FAN AND SMILING WITH FAUX CHEER THAT HID THE BITTERNESS UNDERNEATH. “NOBODY WAS ABLE TO OUTRIGHT STAND UP AND COMPLETELY SAY NO, NOT IF THEY WANTED TO HAVE CENTRAL 46 AND THE GOTEI 13 BREATHING DOWN THEIR NECKS. AND IF SOMEONE WAS STUPID ENOUGH TO DO IT, THEY WERE... WELL, YOU’VE ALREADY SEEN WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM.”

‘THAT IS, UNTIL YOU CAME ALONG’ WAS URAHARA’S UNHEARD MESSAGE, EYEING HIM WITH A MORE GENUINE LOOK OF PURE WRYNESS.)

ICHIgO MAY NOT BE GOOD AT MANIPULATING OR GETTING ALONG WITH PEOPLE, BUT HE KNEW HOW TO READ THEM. WHEN HE FACED AN ENEMY OR A FRIEND, HE ALREADY COULD FORM IDEAS OR GRASP MOTIVES ON WHAT THEY WANTED, THEIR INTENTIONS OR REASONING. NOT THAT HE AGREED WITH IT, BUT HE COULD UNDERSTAND WHY. IN THE END, NO MATTER HOW MUCH PEOPLE DECLARE THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘THE GREATER GOOD’ OR ‘JUSTICE’, IT ALL COMES DOWN TO WHAT PEOPLE DEFINE AS IMPORTANT, NOT THE LARGE SCALE. EVERYTHING WAS PERSONAL.

TO ICHIGO, KNOWING THAT WAS IMPORTANT. IT WAS THAT DISTINCTION THAT HELPED HIM PERCEIVE WHO THE REAL MONSTERS WERE AMONG THE GOOD-INTENTIONED.

RUokia HAD ALWAYS CALLED HIM TOO COMPASSIONATE, ROLLING HER EYES WITH EXAGGERATED FONDNESS AT HIS
habit of humanizing foes and allies alike. She blamed it on his hero-complex, his need to understand why and help (or more likely, beat sense into them) if he could.

What could possibly push a person to make those choices that in the end hurt innocent bystanders or dig a deeper dagger into the people who they have now and care about them? To be stupid enough that they try to handle everything alone and end up hurting people in the process? To fight so hard for other people that clearly didn’t care? To be so bitter that they would hate their loved ones or ruin themselves even further when it doesn’t have to be like this? When hate becomes so prevalent that they destroy any chance of happiness they have?

He has to know, because he knew other people tended to ignore or just don’t care about the why. Hell, no one ever does as far as saw. Someone has to know, to remember. They deserve at least that, if nothing more than to not repeat creating such old hurts.

(Toushiro and his stupid martyr complex regarding the King’s Seal, Ishida’s hatred for the shinigamis before they properly met, Renji when they faced each other as enemies and then as friends. Hell, even Aizen who was so goddamn alone and cynical that he believed reaching godhood would erase that hollow loneliness Ichigo felt screaming at the end.

If people had only looked, or helped, or understand.

Why do people never try to understand?)

So while it probably was stupid to impulsively go with the archer who by all means could’ve been lying through his teeth in not chasing after Bruce while they had Ichigo, the need to understand his opponent and see whether they’re an evil threat or ‘we have different agendas from yours’ had him forming the deal.

The initial impression of this secret organization wasn’t as terrible as it could be, and yet.

And yet.

He didn’t know what it was. This foreign scent or aura in the air that had him stiffening and glancing around, like something was watching him and didn’t have the best intentions. It was faint but there, looming over the place like a haunting ghost ready to strike. A leaving aftertaste that was sour as hell and had him grimacing. Other than that, he couldn’t get a clear grasp on where the feeling was coming from.

The worst part was that it was old. It was like futilely grappling air while trying to find where it came from. The smell of rotten eggs that was literally everywhere and latching onto walls, people, clothes, things that it came into contact with.

It was driving Ichigo up the wall, along with an agitated Shiro.

So could anyone blame him for pacing back and forth in the white interrogation room and rifling his hair like he’s flicking off pockets full of dandruff in an attempt to calm the fuck down? No, no they couldn’t.

‘I can’t fucking concentrate on anything King, make it stop.’ Shiro was essentially whining at this point. Ichigo could practically picture Shiro sniffling and rubbing his nose, a yowling cat who was constantly pawing his nose off.

‘Fuck off,’ was Ichigo’s elaborate retort, though it was half-hearted at best. He couldn’t even blame the hollow for complaining. Zangetsu was in a much more reserved yet similar state. You can tell from the strangled silence on his end.
It didn’t feel evil, which was almost worse. Evil intentions tend to be easier to track down and pulverize, seeing how it’s usually obvious and wants to get attention. This felt more like a malicious spirit who was hiding in plain sight, a familiar irritating feeling that Ichigo usually got from the more mischievous, sneakier hollows.

When he said he wanted something that reminded him of home, he sure as hell didn’t mean this. Which was just his luck and he should’ve seen it coming miles away.

Just where the hell was it coming from? The need to break out and search was killing him. Only the reminder to keep his end of the bargain was holding him in place in not tearing the base apart.

He nearly sagged with relief when someone entered the room, snapping him out of his tempting ruminations that would’ve led him to do something he’d probably regret later.

Only to go rimrod straight when a familiar red headed woman swaggered in with confidence that could rival Yoruichi when she was in a playful mood. He can practically see her assessing him with her eyes, freezing him where he stood. She seemed to sense how uncomfortable he was, because the smirk she was shooting him screamed teasing.

Mortifying memories of Matsumoto laughing at his continuous discomfort was reeling in his mind like a broken record.

“Hi, I’m here to ask you some questions.” She said casually, nonchalantly. An introduction to an interrogation that showed very clearly who was in power at the moment, yet almost soothing in how little her tone changed. Fishing, as Urahara would cheerfully call it whenever Yoruichi managed to get answers he couldn’t through observing or annoying people into slipping. There’s a reason why she had been head of the assassin and interrogation squad.

He eyed her warily. For a guy like him who couldn’t lie to save his life, she could probably pick at his leftover morsels and perceive things even he didn’t know.

He didn’t move from his spot until she sat in one of the two seats that looked each other across the metal table in the middle of the room. A spy movie brought to real life. Slowly, he sat down too and nearly winced when his screeched across the floor awkwardly to get closer.

The fact a corner of her mouth twitched up at the sound really wasn’t helping things.

He was so f*cked.

“First, your name.” she said, tone professional much to his relief.

“Ichigo Kurosaki.” he responded impatiently, already regretting everything that has led him to this point. Damn dimensional travel, damn everything. He knocked his chin upward, struggling to regain some composure. “Yours? The old man didn’t say.”

Something like glee sparked in those impassive green eyes, which had Ichigo tensing despite himself. His self-preservation instincts were practically screeching at this point to bolt.

“Natasha.” She answered, as if he should know that’s she’s telling the truth. She leaned in, eyes half-lidded and smiling as if she knew something he didn’t. Everything about it had him recoiling away in an attempt to get away from how seriously uncomfortable it was making him.

It was leaving him imbalanced, unable to think from sheer awkwardness. She was, what, at least a decade older than him to be partners with a guy like Hawkeye? Unless the organization didn’t bother much with age restriction.
This somehow was even worse than Yoruichi and Matsumoto combined. At least he knew they were just doing it for laughs and basically being harmless. They thought it was cute. He was a kid in their centuries’ year old eyes. Hell, thousands in the Shihoin princess’s case.

This was intentional flirtation that made him want to sprint for the hills and never look back.

What broke the camel’s back was her huskily saying, “But you can call me Nat.”

Oh hell no.

Without much prompting or warning, he abruptly stood up and nearly knocked the metal chair back in the process. He fumbled out of his zip up black hoodie and held it out to her as if offering a ritual sacrifice to a goddess.

Even with his face turned away, he could feel the startled woman staring at him in what he was pretty sure was incredulity. Or confusion. Either would work right now.

“Look, just—” Ichigo made a strangling noise at the back of his throat and uselessly flailed his hands at her to encompass the full of her being. “Put it on. And stop whatever the fuck you’re doing?” he couldn’t help the questioning lilt, unsure of his approach and just desperate to get her to goddamn stop.

There was a long pause before he felt the red head finally say, “You don’t need to do that.”

It was the contriteness that had him risking a glance at her. She looked genuinely apologetic, which took him aback. She crossed her arms, looking him in the eye with none of the previous heaviness attached to her gaze.

“I didn’t think you would be more uncomfortable than I thought you would be.” She carefully said, not even bothering denying she was aiming to keep him off-balanced. He appreciated the blunt honesty at least.

Realizing he was still holding the hoodie towards her, he hastily pulled back and put it back on. It was cold in the room, damn it.

“Why?” he blurted out, not completely certain what he was exactly questioning. Natasha looked back at him, deadpan.

“You’re a teenager.” Her tone was clinical, flat. It was much more real than whatever the hell that was earlier. “They usually can’t think beyond hormonal urges.”

His face went flame red with mortification. Shit.

“Seriously?”

The look she shot him was nothing short of sardonic. “You’d be surprised how many times that works.”

Ichigo thought back to Keigo and his girl-crazy ways. And he thought the brunet was the abnormal one.

Suddenly, the implications of what she said left him cold.

“So you kidnap and interrogate teenagers often?” he shot out, his hands clenching and voice sharply accusing. He was half ready to punch her if she answered wrong. Sensing his shift in mood, the red
head looked at him with a level gaze, steady and simultaneously dry.

“No.” she gracefully leaned back on her chair, the action deceptively easygoing. “Sometimes, eye witnesses are more willing to talk to a pretty face.”

He stared at her, the atmosphere practically electric. Finally, he grunted and sat back down again with a thump, movements confident and no longer on edge. He stared at her with challenge, all sense of distress stripped away and leaving him in his element.

“Ask your questions.” He nearly demanded. That same amusement from earlier was making a comeback at his words.

“I can honestly say someone saying that to me during an interrogation is a first.” She smirked. To his relief, it didn’t sound at all coquettish.

“Like I told your partner,” Ichigo said flatly, wanting this talk to be over ages ago. “I’m here all week.”

Her face lit with bright humor dancing across her aristocratic features. Ichigo could suddenly see how her partnership worked with Barton. They both looked like they were always privately pointing and laughing at the world with all its shenanigans.

“Look,” Ichigo started, holding up a hand and looking intently at her. He watched her pause at the motion. “Could I start before you do? It’s only fair.”

Something like bemusement colored her face.

“That’s not how this works.” She responded.

“Get used to it.” Ichigo shot back. “I only came so that you wouldn’t hunt down Bruce and so I could get some answers. We have a deal.”

The redhead studied him, face unreadable. She’s like an inanimate painting whose eyes were always following him, as if she could see everything underneath his skin. It was incredibly unnerving.

“You... are ridiculously honest.” She said slowly, the words revolving off her tongue as if she’s tasting them. He rolled his eyes at the fact everyone in his life always seemed to have to point out this particular observation to him.

“I get that a lot.”

“I’m sure you do.” She stared at him a little longer before finally shrugging. “Go ahead then.”

He didn’t even need to think about his first question.

“What do you want from Bruce?”

“Oh...” She completely ignored his skeptical look and kept going. “We keep an eye out for him, clean up the messes when things go wrong. We even keep other parties off his scent. We’re the good guys.”

Ichigo was startled to hear the sincerity at her last words. He knew belief when he heard it, the raw emotion familiar and always screaming at him across battlefields or from friends with everything to lose. He didn’t know if it was true though. People’s definition of what was good or bad always differed from each other, no matter how sincere they were.
He wondered what SHIELD has done to earn that kind of fierce loyalty. He couldn’t tell if that was a bad thing.

“If your intentions are so good, why haven’t you tried talking to him?” It appeared straightforward, but the way Natasha’s face went a little blank made Ichigo narrow his eyes. Because of course they both knew it was never that simple.

Soul Society made him a Substitute Shinigami to monitor him, keep him in check. The difference between his and Bruce’s situation was that Ichigo chose to trust the organization that was made up of Renji, Hanataro, Ikkaku, and Byakuya with a change of heart who helped him rescue his best friend. He saw that there was something good about Soul Society, despite all its colossal mistakes. And the more he fought side by side with them, it began to honestly not matter.

When Urahara told him the truth, voice pensive and waiting as if expecting him to get angry, all Ichigo could think about was how much has changed. That even if that were the case, even if such a kind man like Ukitake created such a device, he didn’t blame him. He would still take that badge, still choose to trust the people he’s grown to care about among the Shinigami ranks. Because he knew, with every fiber of his being, that with so much that has happened, they would never try to control or use him like that.

But Bruce... That wasn’t the case for Bruce.

Bruce didn’t know or trust SHIELD. Ichigo tried to imagine if Soul Society had come to him and tried to control him from the start, faceless people telling him they were allies when they gave no reason for him to believe that. Things could’ve turned out much differently.

Ichigo took in the silence of the room, and finalized what they were both thinking.

“You’re afraid of him.” Ichigo didn’t bother to hide his disappointment in these people who wouldn’t even try. “You won’t even try to reach out to someone because you’re afraid of what might happen.”

“It’s not that simple. You saw what happened when things go wrong.” She argued, voice sharp.

“Then trust him.” Ichigo snarled. “Why is it always so hard for people to do that?”

The redhead went silent before quietly saying, “Not everyone can.”

“So then what?” Ichigo violently threw a hand up in the air in frustration. “You’re going to wait until one of you are desperate to ask for help? You’re going to make it so that when you do meet him, and don’t tell me that’s not gonna happen,” he bulldozed, not giving an inch for her to take back the conversation, “you guys will only interact with each other when one of you need something or trying to use the other? Do you seriously think that’ll work out well for you?”

He sighed, hand running through his hair and feeling oh so tired. “How do you expect him to ever trust you when it’s clear you don’t care about him and just treat him as something to be exploited like everyone else? That you’re only protecting him because you’re planning on using him later? It doesn’t matter if you think you’re the good guys. What matters is what he thinks.”

“And so far? You’re making a terrible effort at convincing me too.”

-A-

Coulson didn’t know whether to be worried at the moment.

At first, watching the orange head mystery full on panic at Natasha’s brand of testing the kid’s
boundaries was surprisingly entertaining. She whether lured her victims into her web, or metaphorically kicked them in the balls to see how much they’d squirm in pain. It’s been a long time since someone reacted in a way the Black Widow didn’t expect from them.

He nearly guffawed at how baffled Natasha was from the teenager’s almost gentlemanly behavior, though offering the jacket was probably more for his own sake than hers. Still, it only seemed to further highlight just how ridiculously young and green their current houseguest was. It was hard to connect the fierce fighter who brazenly faced the Hulk, to this kid who tripped over his own feet when someone hit on him.

And then this happened.

Eyes full of conviction and tiredness one saw in veteran soldiers looked back at him through the cleverly disguised glass that camouflaged with the rest of the room’s walls. All that youth aged right before his eyes, leaving an old soul in its wake. His chest clenched at the sight of it.

This was only going to make things harder in the long run Coulson thought with a sigh.

It didn’t help the fact that the kid wasn’t wrong about the Banner situation. Everything was a mess all around, and they couldn’t afford to be as absurdly trusting as the teen. A teen that they still couldn’t find anything about at all.

Everything about the enigma was clouded by inconclusive data and behavior that just didn’t match up with each other. He was naïve, yet was beyond his years and worn down by the world. He was reckless and blunt as a sledgehammer, yet they literally were unable to actually assume anything completely honest about the kid even through weeks of observation. He literally did not make sense.

He was a walking, talking nightmare for intelligence gathering spies everywhere. Fury had Coulson’s full sympathies in having to decide how they’re going to deal with the Japanese. Especially due to his age.

SHIELD (or more specifically Nick Fury) had strict policies when it came to dealing with underage people. The World Security Council themselves unfortunately held no compunctions at using whatever resources came their way.

The only reason why the Council didn’t try to snatch up Tony Stark was due to Howard’s vehement refusal and threat to topple the organization brick by brick if they tried. With Maria who ran fundraisers, social events, and was basically connected to everyone through sheer personality, the two combined made an impenetrable iron wall even beyond the grave. Ensuring Tony claimed Stark Industries after their death, thus making it impossible to bring him into the fold with a thousand eyes watching his every move, was Howard’s last ‘fuck you’ to the Council.

Coulson had to admit that when Starks deliver, they fucking delivered on a golden platter along with a bullshitting grin.

It helped that Fury spelled this out to the Council with the patience of an irritated kindergarten teacher to halt whatever stupid plans the Council were scheming. Not that Coulson would ever tell anyone this, because he was pretty sure Fury would point blank shoot him if he did.

(A masochistic attempt at best in Coulson’s opinion. It would be like shooting his own left eye if he tried.)

The worst part of all this was that Fury, despite all the Tylenol he’s been downing lately for headaches, didn’t hate Kurosaki Ichigo. He wasn’t dismissive.
He was intrigued.

Coulson had been there when Fury narrowed his eyes at the photos Valdez sent the moment Banner came within contact (or collided more accurately) into Ichigo. The wheels were practically turning in that one eye and Coulson had known instantly that they wouldn’t have to kill anyone anytime soon.

What people don’t seem to realize is that Fury liked playing with fire, taking risks. He was sly and a master at keeping secrets in organized categories, but he liked people who had guts. He liked the fact Ichigo didn’t hesitate to stop Banner from killing himself, brisk and unimpressed at self-hatred or pity as much as Hill. There’s a reason why she’s his other right hand man (or woman). And Coulson had the feeling that even if Ichigo had known about the Hulk right from the beginning, he still would’ve acted exactly the same, down to the challenging scowl.

And Fury knew it too.

Ichigo was a contradicting mess on every scale and a mystery that was driving Fury insane at the moment, but there was something about the kid you couldn’t help but pay attention to. It was even more obvious as he watched the kid respond to Natasha, a hundred times more vivid and alive in person than on camera.

He thinks of a young blond giving a jaunty salute that bordered on insolent, sharp and bright as the trilling of a canary bird. A too brittle girl pieced together by duty, belonging, and a drive that’ll wade through the tumult waters of unending war.

From the looks of how things were going, Ichigo’s case wasn’t going to end up like the other unorthodox two. It was going to be much, much harder.

Chapter End Notes

Please review on the way out. And check out my tumblr page, aerialflight.tumblr.com

End Notes

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