To Be Lost and Found Once More

by WhiteBishop

Summary

They had all met him once before. Just once. Only once, and for a few minutes at most. But one brief encounter was enough for them to remember the strange young man who seemed to draw people to him like moths to a flame. And they were all drawn in toward the bright light just the same. Maybe that had something to do with his orange hair. BleachxAvengers AU. Occurs before New York.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the characters used in this fic.

General Warnings: Rated M for Violence and Suggestive Themes
An Unexpected Encounter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time any of them ever saw him was in Budapest. And oh what a memorable meeting it was.

"GET DOWN!" A voice shouted from behind her. Only the chaos of the moment and her iron-clad control from many, many years of experience over her instincts allowed Natasha to stop herself from twisting around violently and shooting the person currently hurtling towards her. Only a moment later, the figure impacted with her side and foreign arms wrapped around her and Natasha is a second away from slamming her elbow back into the sternum of whoever was crazy enough to be out during the middle of a bloody gunfight decided to tackle her, before a hand shifted from her back to cradle her head as the man (as she could now identify by their new...proximity) adjusted her in his firm hold so he would take the brunt of the fall. Natasha took a quarter of a second to be grudgingly impressed and grateful, and then another to be annoyed (she was the Black Widow for god's sake, she could take of herself thank you very much). She took one more to take in the bright orange color of the man's hair that suddenly assaulted her vision, before a barrage of bullets whizzed over their heads and ruffled their hair, barely missing them by a few centimeters, and they slammed into the ground.

Natasha winced at the sound of the rough impact, preparing for the pain she knew was coming, before she came to the not entirely unexpected but still pleasant conclusion that nothing hurt. She inwardly berated herself for forgetting they were in the middle of a war-zone as the popping of gunshots and the spray of bullets on the ground next to them snapped her out of the brief moment of distraction. Natasha instinctively whipped her legs around the man and rolled them out of the way of the incoming bullets, and was surprised once more when she found the man's calm eyes staring into hers as they both moved away from the danger and under the cover of the rubble of a fallen house.

Once (relatively) safe, Natasha immediately moved off of the young man and took cover behind a particularly large piece of rubble she absently recognized had formerly been a wall (judging by the pins still embedded in the slab where pictures had hung). Listening with bated breath, Natasha heard the sounds of gunshots slowly move away from their position. Hopefully toward Clint's distraction. According to Clint, it was totally not his fault that the assassin had tried to off him with a timely slice to the neck the exact moment he had been about to push the detonator. She glanced back at the man, intending to give the standard don't worry sir, you're in shock speech only to draw back at the sight of the relaxed and composed form beside her.

Her first thought was he looked as if he'd been here before. Not just here, in the city. Here in the blood and chaos of war, with the baying of hunting dogs lusting for blood and the clips of guns and the bodies strewn across the ground, looking almost peaceful if not for screams of terror frozen on their lips. Her second was that civilians, at least to her knowledge (of which she was fairly confident in its width and accuracy), were not supposed to look comfortable in a war zone. The only logical conclusion? This man was not a civilian. No way a regular civilian just wandered into a war zone haphazardly and tackled an armed and clearly dangerous person to the ground without there being some sort of explanation.

Then as she became aware of the quiet and strained atmosphere, she noticed the tensed muscles of the figure before her, coiled as if ready to spring into action at any given moment, and the intense laser-focus of the man's eyes on her hands and, most probably, their location proximity to her pistols. Natasha forced herself to relax, placing her hands up in front of her in a placating and calming gesture to soothe the tense man crouched in front of her.
"It's alright, I'm not a threat. You can trust me." She said slowly, making sure to keep eye contact. The shrinks back at S.H.I.E.L.D. liked to say the gesture "helped build a sense of trust and rapport between the initiator and subject." Natasha inwardly snorted. Whatever. She wasn't complaining at the inadequacy of the ability of most humans to realize they were being manipulated; it only helped her flawless record of successful interrogations. The man gradually softened, before he finally allowed himself to slouch down against the felled wall of concrete. He let out a heavy breath as he did so, hand coming up to run itself through his hair as the stress of the situation finally settled in.

Natasha watched quietly, instincts tingling. No matter how ordinary or innocuous he looked now, her senses told her, screamed that this man was dangerous.

"Thank you." She said grudgingly. At his confused look, she reluctantly clarified. "For saving me." Comprehension flickered in eyes and he nodded.

"Are you alright?" She asked him. His eyes flickered toward her, before he sighed once more.

"Yeah, I'm good. You?" She quickly gave her body a once over, noting the graze of a bullet on her left bicep, and a slight tear in her suit right below the knee that had probably occurred when she had vaulted through the window that morning. How the time flies. Her eyes made their way discretely over to the figure of the man and swept his broad frame as she sat down and leaned against the wall. Natasha figured if she was going to be stuck here for a while she might as well get comfortable. She couldn't see much, as his back was mostly flush against the rubble, but she saw the clear scrapes all along the man's forearms. It must've happened when we fell.

She continued her perusal until her eyes alighted onto his right hand, cradled gingerly against his chest. Bleeding profusely, some of the skin had scraped off the back of his hand and one of the fingers was bent at an awkward angle. Shit. Her eyes widened. That was the hand he used to-

Natasha moved swiftly to the man's side, who started at her sudden movement, before wrenching the man's arm toward her. He yelped, as grumbled under her breath at stupid men who refused to see common sense.

"Hey, what're you d-?" His mouth clicked shut as Natasha shot her deadliest glare at him before returning to her examination of his hand. Moving quickly and efficiently, she unzipped a pocket before drawing out some bandages and a small bottle.

"Don't overreact." She said, and the man barely had any time to respond before she poured the bottle over his hand.

"Bloody f-!" The man cut himself off, almost biting his tongue in the process of trying to smother his shout. Natasha wrapped the roll of bandages around his hand and ripped the end off with her teeth, she shoved the end under and tied off the bandage in a practiced motion. He jerked his arm out of her grasp, eyes mutinous as he hissed in pain.

"Oh please, stop whining." She scoffed, rolling up the rest of the bandages before placing them and the bottle back into her pocket.

All was silent. Then-

"You're a moron."

The man looked up from his injured hand, before staring incredulously back at her. Natasha clarified.

"Don't you know that when someone asks if you're alright, you're supposed to say 'I'm injured' if you are injured!" Natasha didn't know when she had become so, so...motherly. Ugh. It was probably
Clint's fault. The man rubbed the back of his head with his uninjured arm, a slight tinge of pink
dusting his cheeks. Blinking at the sudden turnabout, she started at the suddenly young appearance
the action had given the man. Looking closer, she realized he couldn't be more than 25 at the most.
Her eyes flicked back up to meet his as he began to speak.

"You're right," he said, sighing, a slightly embarrassed element in his voice. Alright, that was enough
weirdness and surprises Natasha had had for one day.

She stood, before saying curtly, "Come on, if we stay here much longer we'll be sitting ducks."
Natasha walked briskly off, making sure to sweep the road for any hostiles before moving onward,
aware of the man suddenly rushing to catch up with her. She made to tell him to stay quiet, who
knows when they'll be back, before she realized he wasn't making any noise. His footsteps stayed as
silent and swift as her own. This was more than being used to war. This was training, and much
more importantly, experience. Natasha felt her danger meter tick higher.

They walked on.

"So," she said casually, "what should I call you?" The man looked at her strangely, pensively, as if
deciding whether or not to answer her question, and something in his heavy gaze made Natasha felt
very young, despite their obvious age differences. Odd, she thought as she shook the strange, fleeting
feeling away.

"Ichigo." Natasha nodded, having already noted the young man's nationality.

He was silent. No surname was offered. That was alright, she supposed. Natasha could understand
unwillingness to dredge up the past that could be connected to a last name. But not for her purposes.

"No last name?" She asked, picking her away around the rubble strewn across the path.

He grunted. "Not anymore." Natasha raised an eyebrow. Whatever answer she had been expecting,
that was not it. 'Not anymore' implied he had once had a last name but didn't go by it anymore, not
simply an unwillingness to use or share it.

By the tightening of his shoulders and darkening of his eyes, Natasha wouldn't get anything more out
of that line of questioning.

"So," she continued, "what is a guy such as yourself doing here?" Ichigo looked at her, confused.

"I travel a lot." Natasha raised another eyebrow. "What?" He said defensively. "Is it such a surprise a
tourist is exploring the 'Pearl of Danube'?" He said, referring to the famous nickname for the capital
of Hungary.

Natasha almost rolled her eyes.

"What I meant," she retorted, giving the man a pointed look, "was, what are you doing in a bombed
part of the city?"

He shrugged. "So you just wandered toward a live battle zone where a bomb went off?" She asked
skeptically. "Looking for a good postcard photo?"

"Yup," he said, face straight and voice neutral. Natasha had the urge to punch him. His eyes glinted
in amusement and she realized he was laughing at her.

Natasha was having a bad day. Thus she felt completely justified in entertaining the brief thought of
maiming the man next to her. She was about to plant her fist in his smug, smirking face when
something pinged at the edge of her field of vision, and the two tensed.

"They're coming," she murmured, eyes flicking around wildly for some cover, anything at all, but the destruction to this street had been minimal and they were out in the open. Heavy footsteps thudded closet, and Natasha readied herself. A quick glance to her right told her that her companion was also sliding into a ready stance. Her sharp eyes identified the stance as one from the higher levels of karate.

The footsteps came closer. The two shifted until their back were almost touching. Natasha was once again stuck by the man's, Ichigo's, composure. She was sure now that this mysterious man was experienced in battle.

Another second and they were surrounded. There were six of them in all. No guns, Natasha nodded in satisfaction. That should make this much easier.

The men laughed at their apparent good fortune, lifting their metal bats and smacking them against their palms in an act of intimidation, smirks never leaving their faces.

"Look at what we've got here, men." One of them said cockily in the the local Hungarian slang. Too bad for them she could understand them quite clearly.

"The woman looks nice." One of the men growled, looking her up and down appreciatively. She made sure she looked harmless next to the intimidating figure beside her. It wasn't too difficult to accomplish, especially when Ichigo was scowling, dark and menacing and promising immense pain to anyone who even dared to step within the range of his fists.

Natasha watched him out of the corner of her eye. No matter how menacing he looked, Ichigo was severely limited in whatever fighting capability he had by his injured hand, as it was quite likely his dominant. She was on her own. She didn't mind all that much, she had faced worse. But it was certainly quite a mess; she would have to be extremely careful with containing the situation, since Ichigo was in the line of fire and under her protection. She didn't especially want to see the young man die and take the answer to this enigma with him.

Circling around them like a predator examining his prey, the leader hummed in agreement, hungry eyes sweeping her body.

"Yes," he agreed, walking closer and gripping her chin roughly, "I think she will make a fine addition to our- urgk?!" The man's voice cut off with a gurgled choke as Natasha delivered a ruthless chop to his throat, and he dropped like a stone.

Not waiting for the others to realize what had happened, she blurred toward the next closest target, leaping up to wrap her legs around his neck, ankles locked together and twisting sharply, yanked him to down to the ground. He was unconscious before he was even aware his leader had been taken out.

She ducked the bat swinging for her head and gave him a solid uppercut to the chin, before grabbing his arm and bringing down her elbow in that spot where, if hit a certain way, would break his arm in half. She hit her mark perfectly, and the man fell.

Natasha whipped around to take care of the others, heart beating quick and unceasing in her chest as her mind brought up dreaded images of Ichigo shot and lying on the ground and the barrel of a gun smoking, only to see Ichigo standing over the three bodies, grinning and stretching his neck leisurely.

She stared. Ichigo just shrugged at her. "I took karate when I was a kid," he said as way of explanation. That didn't explain how he took out three men with only a single hand! Bells rang in her
ears, warning of the danger that was this man.

"That's some dojo," she said holding back her disbelief and wariness, impressed at his skills. He shrugged again. "It seems like you have experience with real fights, not just the usual sparring that dojos run." She crossed her arms, waiting for his reply.

"Well," he said, crouching down to pick up his bag he had dropped at the beginning of the fight, "I got into a lot of street fights when I was young." Natasha hummed to herself as Ichigo pulled a black beanie out of the bag and tugged it over his head to cover up the vibrant color. Possible former criminal activity?

Her earpiece crackled to life, and Clint's harried voice rang through.

"Nat! Nat, can you hear me?!

"Nat, can you hear me?!

She stopped and pushed on her earpiece to respond.

"Yeah, you're coming through loud and clear." She told him. He let out a long sigh of relief.

"Good. That's good." Natasha explained what had happened.

"They had a jamming device that was blocked our comms. That's why I didn't respond. I was unable to reach you after the explosion until I tracked down and destroyed the device." There was silence over the line, then-

"I'm glad you're safe Nat." Clint swallowed audibly, voice raspy. "I was worried when you didn't pick up."

"I'm glad you're safe Nat." Clint swallowed audibly, voice raspy. "I was worried when you didn't pick up."

Her eyes softened almost unnoticeably. "Yeah. I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Ichigo shifted in discomfort in her peripheral, feeling out of place in what felt like a very intimate moment.

"What about you? Are you alright?" Natasha asked brusquely, moving away from the emotional moment.

"Um, ah, well you see…"

"Clint," she said waringly, her voice promising pain unimaginable should he even think about lying to her now. Ichigo snorted.

"Okay, I may or may not have gotten a nasty slice along my jaw from where that assassin tried to behead me, after chasing me down after the explosion."

Natasha could have facepalmed.

"Ты тупица." (1)

"Hey!" Clint replied indignantly.

"You are a trained agent, you should've been able to take her without any damage." Natasha rolled her eyes.

"But she took me by surprise!" He protested furiously. "Not fair, Nat!" She grinned.

A slight cough drew her attention back to the tall young man beside her, now much less noticeable without the bright orange of his hair to distinguish him from the background.
"Clint, I'll meet you at LZ for exfil. Widow out."

"Roger that. Hawkeye out."

She glanced at Ichigo, who raised an eyebrow.

"Well, it seems your ride is here." He said. She nodded.

"Seems so." There was a pause.

"Thanks again for the save back there." Natasha said. She wasn't someone who usually liked other people, as she was more of a loner at heart (not to mention her assigns tendencies and background tended to encourage other people to keep a wide berth) but her time with this strange man surprisingly hadn't been all that bad. Natasha couldn't remember a time when she had taken to someone so quickly save for Clint back when she had first joined up with S.H.I.E.L.D., and been so comfortable in their presence. He was just a stranger, and a civilian. So why was Natasha oddly reluctant to part company with him?

He paused for a moment, and then smiled. Natasha was struck by the genuine expression on his face. Now that she thought about it, the unusual man hadn't once smiled during this whole encounter. Not too surprising, considering the circumstances, but something told her this was a rare occurrence, this sincere and open emotion.

"It was no problem," he said easily. "Thanks for the first aid," he replied, gesturing to his bandaged hand. And with that he picked up his pack, turned and walked away.

"You're welcome," she murmured, taking one last look at the peculiar man that had popped up from the middle of nowhere to save her from taking a bullet to the head, before turning and briskly but carefully making her way toward her destination. She didn't look back. Something told her they would meet again, this master spy and enigma of a man.

Later, when asked by Fury for her full report, Natasha would gloss over the events that had occurred after the explosion and subsequent separation from her partner. Fury would give her a piercing stare but the only response he will receive is silence. Natasha didn't know what made her do all of this, but that same something, that feeling told her to stay quiet. Her instincts had never let her down before, and Natasha trusted they wouldn't this time. So she'll stay quiet, watching and waiting for the next time she would meet the strange man who had saved her that day.

Chapter End Notes

(1) You dumbass
The scorching sun bore down upon his back as he stumbled across the dry desert, trying desperately to just stay conscious, to just keep walking Tony. His mind kept whispering to him the little facts, the minute details he had picked up here and there about surviving in the desert without food, or even water. *A week without food, and only three days without water*, the voice warned. Tony thought hysterically that the voice sounded a lot like Pepper. Or Rhodey, he supposed. He blanched and did his best to block out that particular thought. He’d have Pepper in his head over the loud, whiny, boring, by-the-book Lieutenant Colonel any day of the week. Tony didn’t know how long he’d been trudging along all alone in the desert, but judging by the single night he remembered, the lightheaded feeling he’d for the past couple of hours or so, and the faltering of his steps as he struggled to the top of another dune, it had probably been more than 24 hours. Given that he wasn't dead, it was also probable that it hadn't been 3 days just yet either.

God he felt awful.

Tony blinked the sweat out of his eyes, and swiped his hand across his brow. He ignored the wavery hands reaching out to him, the faint cries of his name, the blurred images of his father. Some pleaded for forgiveness, while others were scalding in their criticism of everything Tony had ever done, from the decisions he had made for the company (*MY company!* The phantom screamed. *What have you done with it, you disgraceful excuse for a son!* ) to the spilled paint from his kindergarten homework on the new blueprints in his father’s workshop. *Illusions*, his mind supplied.

*Don’t listen*, Pepper murmured soothingly in his ear. *Don’t listen.*

As Tony lost his footing on the slippery loose sand for the fifth time in what he thought was an hour, he gave in to the aching weariness in his calves, stopped fighting to stay upright, and collapsed exhausted on the gritty ground.

And just as his eyes slipped shut, they alighted upon a figure cresting the dune above him. *It was just an illusion*, he thought tiredly, the last vestiges of his hope of being rescued slipping from his mind. *Just an illusion….*

The next time Tony awoke, he was surprised to feel something soft underneath his head, and a pleasant coolness on his forehead. Well, he was surprised he was even alive at this point. He struggled to open his eyes, crusted shut and so heavy he almost gave up, but let it never be said that Tony Stark ever relented when trying to figure out a puzzle.

Wresting his eyes open, Tony was startled to find another pair of honey ocher eyes blinking back at him. The Japanese man let a relieved smile tug at his lips.
“Good. You’re awake.” He said, and curiously without any trace of an accent, Tony noted. “I was beginning to think you would never wake up.”

Tony let out a groan as he tried to move his sore muscles.

“Well, I never was an early riser.” Tony joked, grunting at the tight pain shooting through his body. The man only turned to the side and, after rifling through something that was out of Tony’s line of sight, brought out a canteen. Tony would’ve drooled at the sight had he had any liquids left in his parched body.

“Can you sit up?” The man asked. Tony grunted in affirmative, and the stranger helped him sit up. Something fell from its place across his temple, and Tony blinked as he realized it was a cold compress. The marvelous coolness the had surrounded his head vanished with the compress, and Tony lamented its loss.

The man handed him the canteen, waiting patiently for Tony’s still-weak fingers to grasp the container. “Careful,” he cautioned, “your stomach won’t be used to fluids yet.” Tony was too busy gulping down the precious water to hear the man’s warning. Never before had water been so...wet. Okay, that was bad (really bad), but Tony thought he deserved some serious slack. He had almost died of dehydration for God’s sake! He couldn’t even sit up on his own, much less think coherently.

Predictably, he choked as his stomach churned, threatening to upheave its contents all over his lap. As he fought to keep from throwing up, a hand rested gently on his back, and suddenly it was much easier for him to breathe. Eyes filled with grim understanding, the man very gently took the canteen from Tony’s shaking hands, and handed him a clean cloth to wipe his face.

Tony swiped the cloth across his mouth, coughing slightly to clear his throat. His sight was briefly blocked by a pair of large hands, and before Tony could flinch back from the hands reaching toward his throat, choking him, threatening to brand him and oh God they were going to hurt Yensen, they retreated. Tony gasped slightly, wrenching himself back to the present and out of that god forsaken cave, and focused on the new weight on his head and the blessed cold above his eyes. He reached up to feel the rough fabric of the headscarf wrapped around his head, and the cold rag tied inside to rest perfectly against his forehead. Tony shot the man a look of gratitude for his thoughtfulness, and was shocked at the bright orange color that assaulted his eyes when he glanced over.

“Uhh,” he said intelligently, still dazed by the absolute luminescence of the man’s bright hair in the glaring sunlight, “thank you, uh, for saving me.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. Man, he really wasn’t cut out for these emotional heart-to-heart types of conversations. Or apologizing. Seriously, not his thing.

The man snorted, and Tony stared, befuddled at his reaction.

“Well, yeah, duh. It’s not like I was just going to leave you there lying on the ground.” You’d be surprised. Tony thought. He’d met too many cold-hearted and uncaring people to know that most of the world wasn’t sunshine and rainbows. Humans were selfish creatures most of the time, and God knows Tony has met enough of them to have this lesson engraved on his chest. Ironically, Tony could probably say this was in fact true, glancing down at the soft blue light emitting from the middle of his ragged shirt. Speaking of which, why hadn’t the man said anything about the glowing circle smack dab in his chest?

Tony squinted at the man suspiciously, and bluntly asked him why he hadn’t. Belatedly, he realized that drawing attention to his freak condition were the man to have somehow missed the glowing light coming from his threadbare shirt, and consequently making his savior and quite probably only way
to get back to the world alive, think he was some kind of aberration might not have been the best idea. Tony blamed his late reaction to his dehydration. Definitely not on his tendency to shoot his mouth off and damn the consequences, nope.

The man had simply shrugged and replied insouciantly, “I’ve seen weirder.”

The stranger turned away from his stunned face to ruffle around in what Tony could now see was a medium-sized rucksack, before pulling out another scarf, a couple shades darker in color than the khaki headpiece wrapped around Tony’s own head, and pulled it over his brightly-colored hair. For the first time, Tony took a moment to take in what the stranger was wearing. Loose, light clothing draped his broad frame, and hints sturdy hiking boots flashed from beneath the cuffs his pants. Tony noticed absently all of the man’s clothing was in desert camouflage.

“So, how did you find me? Facebook?” Tony experienced a brief moment of blinding panic as the thought occurred to him that this man might be a part of the group that had captured him and they had caught up to him and he was about to be dragged back to that godforsaken cave. He forced the panic to the back of his mind as he rationalized that if the stranger was his enemy he would not have taken the time and effort to take such care of him. Unless they still wanted him to make them weapons.

Right.

That.

“I mean, I was just hiking around and found you lying on the ground,” the young man shrugged. “I travel a lot on my own, so that’s why I was so far out here.” He explained. Tony nodded.

“So what were you doing all the way out here?” The man looked pointedly at Tony’s battered state and tattered clothing. “How come you were in such a bad shape when I found you?”

“Ah you know, Coyote needed some help catching Roadrunner.” Tony’s mouth shot off automatically to deflect the question. “I’m an a bit of a novice engineer, not to brag or anything, but we built this awesome trap with a hub cap from an old Corvair, a french horn, and a banana, you wouldn’t believe-” Tony rambled until he ran out of breath and kept on going, but then he peeked at the man sitting next to him. What he saw on the man’s face made something in his chest jerk, and Tony stopped cold.

Tony’s hesitated, his instinct to lie and ignore the darkness lurking in the back of his mind, ingrained since childhood, urging him to stay quiet. But something inexplicable tugging deep within his chest told him to be honest with this veritable stranger. “I…,” he pinched the bridge of his nose as he strained to get the words out, uncharacteristically stumbling over his sentences, “I was being held hostage for the past couple of months, by a, um, local terrorist group, and-.” Tony cut himself off abruptly. It wasn’t because of the choked feeling in his throat, or the tightness in his chest that was restricting his ability to breathe. It wasn’t even because of the awful images of his time in captivity flashing before his eyes. It was because of him.

Whatever reaction he had expected from the stranger who had rescued him, this was definitely not it. The man’s eyes turned cold as steel, something sharp and ragged flickering in the suddenly raw caramel orbs, jaw tight and teeth baring in snarl, his fists clenched so hard his knuckles turned white.

“I’m sorry,” Tony suddenly felt the need to apologize. The man took a slow breath, and in the next moment it was as if nothing had ever happened.

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing.” The man sighed, waving off his apology. The look in
his eyes turned to concern once more as the young man stared at him acutely, and Tony had the feeling that the piercing gaze had the ability to look into his very soul.

The man suddenly tensed, and looked over at the far horizon. Tony whipped his around to squint at the horizon, heart pounding. It was a long while before Tony could hear the telltale chopping of helicopter blades in the air, and a small black dot slowly appeared in his field of vision.

Tony could have cried in relief. He was finally going to get out of this hell! Tony staggered to his feet, raising his arm up high to wave at the copter, shouting at the top of his lungs and focused solely on his incoming salvation, when a hand gripped his shoulder and turned him around so fast Tony saw stars before he was shoved to the ground, a large mass settling itself above him.

“What the f-!” Tony exclaimed before a hand clamped onto his mouth and muffled his irate yell.

“Shh!” The man shushed him urgently. Tony glared at him. Squirming to get free of the close cage that was the man’s body, Tony jerked the hand off his mouth and retorted angrily.

“What the fuck are you doing! That could be our rescue!” The man just pressed closer, unrelenting in keeping Tony from moving from his position lying on the ground.

“Stay down!” He hissed into Tony’s ear when he struggled to try to budge the young man from his position over him (Tony likened it to trying to lift a truck off of his chest; the man’s muscled frame locked in place, trapping Tony underneath arms like solid iron).

“As much as I usually enjoy this position, right now I’m really not appreciating it!” Tony whispered furiously back.

“Did it ever occur to you that it might be hostile?!” The man replied fiercely.

Tony stopped. No, in fact, that particular thought had not occurred to him. The helicopter blades beat louder as they flew closer to their position. Anxiety slowly built up in Tony’s chest, climbing higher as the helicopters came ever closer. What if they are the Ten Rings?! What if they see us? What if, what if, what if-

Tony felt his heart stop (a colloquium which no longer seemed appropriate for him to use, considering his new circumstances, but Tony thought what the hell, all the more reason to use it) as he saw the American flag on the tail of the helicopters as they passed overhead. His head thudded onto the ground as his body collapsed in relief as the helicopters began to turn, apparently having seen the pair on the ground.

A few moments later Tony cracked open an eye to stare at the stranger.

“So, are you planning to move anytime soon, or is there any specific reason you’re still on top of me?” Tony snarked, finding it within him to waggle his eyebrows suggestively now that he knew he was getting rescued.

To his disappointment, the man only raised an eyebrow in return before rising to his feet.

Tony huffed as he struggled to sit up, before he smacked himself in the face almost colliding the hand that had suddenly appeared before him. Tony looked at the proffered hand before swallowing any pride he might have still had and took it, allowing himself to be pulled up.

Randomly, Tony was struck by the realization of the man’s height as he stood up next to him for the first time since their meeting. While Tony was considered short by American male standards at five foot eight inches, this man stood tall above him, easily reaching a height of six feet. As Tony studied
the tall man once more, he noticed the man had stilled, eyes narrowed at the incoming helicopters as a
look of faint concentration crossed his solemn face. Tony opened his mouth to ask what he was
doing, when his face relaxed minutely and he nodded slightly in approval.

Tony didn't have time to question what had just happened even as his curiosity itched to find out, as
seemingly out of nowhere Rhody was running up to him with a squadron of soldiers following
closely behind and this time Tony nearly did cry in relief at seeing his best friend.

His look of relief was mirrored by Rhody as the Lieutenant Colonel slowed to a stop in front of the
pair and put his hands on Tony’s shoulders. Neither of them noticed the stranger quietly move a
respectable distance away, though the other soldiers did and kept a wary eye on the unknown.

“How was the ‘fun-vee’?” Rhody asked, voice strained. “Next time,” he said sternly, almost
choking up, “you ride with me.”

Tony couldn't do anything but nod in acceptance, physically and emotionally exhausted.

Rhody glanced over to the stranger, hands still gripping tightly to Tony’s shoulders as if his old
friend would disappear should he let go.

“And who is this?” He asked Tony quietly, eyes sharpening at the sight of the tall man.

“Oh,” Tony said, realizing they might think the man was one of his captors. “He’s a hitchhiker who
found me out here.”

“Rhodey,” he said, formerly exhausted eyes suddenly blazing with conviction, fingers now gripping
at Rhody’s arm tightly. “He helped me.” Rhody was taken aback at the sudden turnabout, but he
only nodded, jaw tightening before making his way over to the stranger, finally releasing Tony’s
shoulders.

“My name is Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes of the United States Army,” Rhody said, holding out his
hand. “Thank you for taking care of my friend here.”

The man nodded, and shook the soldier’s hand.

“Kurosaki Ichigo. And it was no problem. I was happy to help.” he replied.

Rhody grinned. “What do you guys say we get you out of this place?”

As Rhody helped him to one of the helicopters, Tony glanced back at the man following the pair.
Noticed his gaze, the man, now named Kurosaki, looked back and smiled slightly.

“I wouldn’t be adverse to a ride if you’re willing,” he said to Rhody.

“It's least we could do after all you've done,” Rhody replied, grinning back.

They all piled into the helicopters, and Rhody eased Tony onto the chair next to the medical
examiner before he sat down across from him, while Kurosaki took the empty seat next to Rhody.
Rhody reached up to his comms unit as the helicopter started to rise slowly into the sky.

“Sir, the is Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes reporting in, we have found Stark,” Tony stared as Kurosaki
whipped his head around from where he had been looking out with a strange, nostalgic fondness at
the receding desert to gape at Rhody, and then at Tony, “and he is now under our protection.”
Rhody gave Kurosaki an odd look at the man’s strange reaction, but continued. “We’re heading
back to base now. Rhodes out.”
Rhodey lowered his hand and looked questioningly at the man beside him. By this point Kurosaki had composed himself, and the man hilariously no longer looked as if he had been struck by lightning.

“So,” Rhodey asked, amused, “what was that?”

Kurosaki raised his hand to scratch at the back of his head, a gesture that belied his embarrassment.

“Ah, well, while I was aware that Tony Stark had been kidnapped and was supposed to be held in this area of the country, I hadn't quite made the connection when I found you in the desert.” He said, a slight tinge of pink dusting his cheeks as he absolutely refused to look at Tony.

The corner of Tony’s mouth twitched before he burst out laughing. The medic groaned at being rendered unable to poke and prod at his patient, while Rhodey struggled to keep himself from smiling at this interesting young man.

“Aa,” Tony said, wiping the barest hint of tears from the corners of his eyes, “that is too good.”

The pink turned darker as Kurosaki glared at him, snapping back in embarrassment just what it was he had said that was so funny.

“It’s just that, most people would help just because he’s rich and the reward is good.” Rhodey explained, grinning conspiratorially at Tony.

The two weren't prepared for the outburst that followed his words.

“Well that's just stupid!” Kurosaki exclaimed indignantly, but whether it was on Tony's behalf or his own they didn't know. “I would've helped him whether I had known who who he was or not!” He puffed up in righteous anger. “What I did should be what anyone else would do!”

Kurosaki fell abruptly silent as he realized what he doing. He crossed his arms in a way that may have been defensive, but the man’s fiery glare dissuaded anyone from even considering the thought.

Tony chuckled, oddly satisfied with the man’s outburst on his behalf. It had been a while since he had last met someone who didn't care about his wealth or status, and saw him only as a person. The last two to do so were Pepper and Rhodey.

“Well, anyways, thank you.” Tony said, moving on from teasing the poor man (though he sorely wished he could continue). “I’d like to repay you somehow.”

At this Kurosaki turned silent and somber, before looking up at him. Tony was taken aback by the bitter, resigned look in the man’s eyes.

“If you really want to repay me,” Kurosaki said quietly after a long moment, “then please do me a favor. Do not mention my name when you tell the public about your escape. Do not even mention someone saved you.” Something broken and somehow tired flickered across his face. “Just say that you walked alone in the desert until the army found you.” Tony was stunned. Didn’t the man realize what he could get as the man who saved Tony Stark? Stane would've obviously put up a reward for his discovery. Was Kurosaki crazy?

“Don’t you want any recognition?” Rhodey asked. Kurosaki just shook his head, smiling wryly, a touch of resentment in the bitter quirk of his lips.

“I’d just rather be left alone, that’s all.” Somehow, Tony didn’t think he was lying. By the suspicious look on Rhodey’s face, however, the soldier clearly thought Kurosaki was hiding something.
“I’ll have to include in my report that a civilian found Mr. Stark,” he said seriously. “However, what I can do, is make sure that no one under the highest security level we have is going to hear your name in conjunction with this operation.” Rhodey was nothing if not trustworthy. Tony knew if he promised you something, you’d better damn well believe he’d make sure it happened.

Kurosaki looked at Tony for his confirmation, and when Tony thought of that broken, twisted expression that had surfaced on the man’s face, all he could do was nod silently in acquiescence.

Kurosaki smiled gratefully, the bitter expression slowly fading from his face as he looked once more out of the window to gaze at the barren desert, rushing past far below them.
The Soldier in the Civilian

Chapter Summary

Time for all of our favorite's Capsicle!

Chapter Notes

Okay, so here's the deal. I had this chapter all done and polished and was going over it two weeks after I originally posted the 2nd chapter, the night before I set the deadline to post, when I realized that in my original outline, Ichigo didn't act the way his character should have. And it was right before the middle part of the chapter and so naturally I saw that I had to rewrite 4 whole pages that I had slaved over the weeks before……and promptly said “fuck no.” The feeling of ruining my creation to that extreme degree after I had worked so hard on it was just really awful and I got so discouraged and uninspired to rewrite it that I haven't been able to return to it until now. It is my major failing as a writer that I am so unwilling to change my original design, but I couldn't just give such a half-assed chapter to you guys! Anyways, it's something that I'm trying my hardest to overcome. The only reason I was able to get back to this was because of you guys. Honestly, you made me feel so happy and inspired to bring this story to you guys again! I'm so grateful! Anyways, for your guys' amazing response to my story, here is the third chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His heart raced as he burst through the double doors at a dead sprint, leaving loud yells and shouts of pain behind him from the people he had barreled over in his haste to escape. Normally he'd apologize, but absolutely nothing was normal about the situation he was in now.

Loud noises instantly bombarded him as he leapt out into the street. His heart almost went from 60 to 0 as some sort of futuristic and sleek looking vehicle charged at him. He skidded as he abruptly changed direction to run between the two cars. And then Steve ran for all he was worth, desperately trying to drown out the honking and yelling, squeezing his eyes shut as closed and as tightly as he dared to without losing his ability to see where he was going, chest heaving with exertion and pumping his legs as fast as they could go, trying to block out everything that was different and unfamiliar and foreign and God, what was happening to him-?!

All of a sudden, the road opened up into a huge plaza and Steve couldn’t help his eyes from widening in astonishment at the staggering sight. Buildings towered above him, their tops reaching far into the clouds, shining and smooth with their long sides of glistening glass. Bright colors and flashing lights assaulted his vision as he gaped up at the tall sky, blazing shapes and designs into his retinas.

So absorbed with the astonishing and bewildering wonders before him, Steve didn’t notice he was on a crash collision course. Suddenly he slammed into a heavily layered form, eyes immediately wrenching themselves from the sky at the impact to find themselves locked with the eyes of the man.
he had just plowed into. To his extreme surprise Steve did not hit the asphalt, as hands like iron gripped his upper arms and held fast. Steve was a pretty big guy (nowadays), so going as fast as he was should have meant that crashing into someone meant both of them were going down. Instead, Steve felt the man move him slightly to the right in an effort to catch him as Steve careened into him, and prevent their fall. He felt himself slow to a rough stop, and put a hand to his chest as he fought to calm his racing heart.

The man steadied him before releasing his iron grip from Steve’s upper arms and peered at him concernedly.

“You alright there?” He asked, looking Steve up and down. “You look like you’ve just run the Tokyo Marathon!” Steve didn’t know what that was, so all he could do was stare back in confusion.

“I-I just, I don't know what, exactly, is going on…” Steve said haltingly, feeling as if he were on the verge of some cliff and just about two steps away from falling off the edge. He found that once he started talking he was unable to stop, barely holding back the rising panic inside his chest.

“I just woke up, and I don't know where I am, and I have no idea what's going on,” Steve rambled, looking around widely as if his strange surroundings would give him the answer. “And the last thing I remember is fighting in the war.” All of a sudden alarmed, Steve looked at the man, agitation thrumming through his body. “What happened?! Did we win?! What about the Germans?! And Hydra?! Do you know what's going on?” The man’s eyes widened, before softening ever so slightly in shocked realization and then sympathy (but not pity, Steve was surprised to see). Steve had only seen it once, but it was the shared sympathy and empathetic rapport that could only exist between those people who had shared the same pain.

“I am so sorry,” the man said quietly, understanding piercing through his eyes. “You’ve lost so much...I'm sorry. I know what it's like to lose everything you’ve ever known.”

“What?” Steve was floored, but unable to suppress his rising suspicions about where (and maybe even when, his traitorous mind whispered) he was from forming.

Before Steve could even begin to process what the young man had just said, the sinister sound of screeching wheels on the street arose. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw the multitude of cars closing in on the strange plaza, before his right arm was yanked forward and he had no choice but to follow unless he wanted to lose the limb (of which he was very much opposed to, thank you).

“C’mon!” The man shouted as he dragged Steve away from the incoming vehicles. “Do you want to be caught by black, shady-ass cars?” The man asked him hurriedly as Steve hesitated. “Because if you do then feel free!” He was still for a moment more before following the man down a side street. They raced through the heavy traffic, weaving in between the cars and roads to lose their pursuers, whoever they were. Steve held back his speed until he realized that if he didn’t increase his pace he would lose his strange guide.

Eyes narrowing in suspicion, Steve caught up with the man as they continued to run toward wherever they were headed.

“So how am I supposed to trust you?” He asked, suspicion and deadly threat curling through his voice (Steve hadn’t been through a war for nothing). The man turned and grinned in response. The downright feral smile was all teeth and full of threats as deadly as Steve’s yet Steve didn’t feel as if he was in any danger.
“I guess you’ll just have to find out.” The young man threw the words over his shoulder as he sped up.

“Hey! You there!” Steve’s eyes followed the angry shout to see two men dressed in the same all-black military uniform with heavy vests in front of them. “Stop!” One of the men yelled, reaching to his side where a dark shape rested.

“I am an officer of-!” Leaping forward, Steve’s guide reared back his fist and punched the man square in the face. Before either Steve or the officer’s companion could respond, he planted his foot in the stomach of the other and pushed off to back flip back to where Steve was standing. The entire conflict took only two seconds.

“Tch!” The strange man grit his teeth as he glared at the two men groaning in pain on the concrete sidewalk. “They’re more tenacious than I gave them credit for.” As quick as he had incapacitated the two men, his fingers wrapped around Steve’s wrist once more and pulled him into the near alley. A tall metal fence met the pair, but before Steve could stop the man from plowing into the fence he had already jumped. Too close to the fence to stop, Steve had no choice but to follow. Leaping high, Steve thought he would see only the man smashing into the tall metal links, but was surprised once more to see the man easily clear the high fence. Slamming into the ground just a second behind, Steve was stopped short at the soft clicks of the safeties going off on multiple guns. Five men stood at the exit of the alleyway, the muzzles of large guns trained on them. Heavy-duty black cars could be seen behind the men, as well as the reinforcements that were pouring out of their doors.

Whipping back around, Steve saw men with matching uniforms rushing up behind the fence, guns also up and at the ready. They were caught.

Shit.

Steve looked over to the young man tensed beside him. Whoever these people were, they were after Steve, and he couldn’t let anyone else get caught in the crossfire. Stepping forward, Steve shoved his arm in front of his companion, herding him back behind him as he raised his other arm in a gesture of surrender. Ignoring the quick intake of breath behind him, Steve spoke.

“If you want me, take me,” he said, voice steady. “Just let him go.” Steve appealed to the soldiers. “He’s just a civilian, he has no part in this.” Part of him thought cynically that if they were the bad guys they wouldn’t care about taking innocent lives, much less killing a single civilian. But what else could he do? They were trapped with no way out, and there was no way in hell Steve would let someone else get hurt trying to help him.

Not like Bucky had. No, Steve had sworn that day he would never let that happen again, and by God even if it took his life he was going to keep his promise.

“You dumbass!” The man hissed at him. Steve shot him a look to shush him. This wasn’t likely to work in the first place, Steve didn’t need the guy struggling and exacerbating the already deadly situation. “I don’t need protecting!”

An unknown voice spoke out from behind the men, interrupting them. “Hold!”

The pair looked over to see a man dressed all in black step out from behind the mass of lowering firearms to stare directly at them. The man’s hard gaze took the two in before coming to rest on Steve.
“At ease, soldier.” The man in black ordered him seriously, face never deviating from its stony expression. Steve fought the urge to listen to his instinct to immediately relax at the command. Strangely, the young man behind him tensed tightly, jaw clenching and legs twitching almost unnoticeably as if he were fighting the compulsion to run and never look back. Steve didn’t have time to think about anything more as the man in black strode forward purposely.

Steve’s eyebrows drew together in a dangerous glare as he stepped further in front of the young man behind him to shield him from the stranger’s sight. His glare deepened as the man drew closer. At this the man in black stopped, raising his hands in a placating gesture.

“Easy there, soldier.” He said impassively. “We are not the enemy.”

“Oh yeah?” Steve challenged the man’s statement, blood pumping through his veins, muscles tightening, fists clenching as he prepared to run, grab the young man beside him and get the hell out of there. “What about my enemy?” The newcomer inclined his head slightly, conceding the mistake. “What’s going on?” Steve demanded, edging closer to his companion. “Who are you?”

The man looked at him, a tinge of emotion crossing his previously cool, indifferent face. “I’m sorry about that little show back there,” he replied instead. Despite the man’s cool exterior and menacing aura, Steve could tell he was being genuine with him. “But we thought it best to break it to you slowly.” At this Steve’s wary gaze sharpened once more.

“Break what?” He said forcibly, feeling a little wrecked around the edges. Just what exactly was going on? Steve felt his heartbeat increase as his breathing began to speed up. Before he could go into the beginnings of what was probably going to be a panic attack, a firm hand gripped his shoulder from behind, grounding him. Oddly comforted by the older youth’s solid gesture, Steve relaxed, leaning back slightly in an effort to soak up all of the solace and support offered.

The man’s piercing gaze flickered over to the young man now standing next to him, now only slightly behind his right shoulder, before coming back to rest on Steve. He seemed disapproving of having to share sensitive information within earshot of a civilian, but at this point Steve really didn’t give a crap about anything the man thought. For all he knew, this man was his enemy. So no, Steve didn’t exactly care for what the man thought right then.

Of course, failing yet to have proven they meant no harm, when a man suddenly came up from behind them to grab his young companion’s arm Steve understandably reacted poorly. Whipping around he slammed his palm into the chest of the attacking soldier, before grabbing his companion and pulling him safely away from harm’s reach. Thrusting his arm in front of the young man once more, Steve stood protectively in front of his self-appointed charge as the men surrounding them raised their guns to point at the pair, the situation quickly escalating.

“Hold and cease immediately!” The man in black shouted thunderously, single eye blazing with terrible fury. The soldiers recoiled away and flinched in fear, the muzzles of their weapons dipping back down toward the ground. The man, who was clearly in charge, glared at the group of soldiers murderously.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said, eye still blazing as he turned back to Steve. “They just reacted to the situation. As a fellow soldier, I’m sure you can understand.” Steve hesitated before nodding slowly.

“Oh. Sure.” He said warily, closely eyeing the offending soldiers. So focused on the still imminent threat surrounding them, Steve failed to hear to quiet huff of annoyance from behind him. However,
one person did not, and shrewd, searching eyes watched the young man standing tall and unafraid behind the super soldier. Steve still did not relax his battle-ready stance.

“So,” he said quietly, with subtle hostility. “Were you ever going to answer my question?”

The man blinked as he paused a moment, debating how best to approach the situation. “You’ve been asleep, Cap.” He said bluntly, but perhaps not unkindly. “For almost 70 years.”

Steve stared back at him uncomprehendingly. His eyebrows scrunched together, Steve struggled to make sense of what he had just heard. He looked up and out of the mouth of the alleyway, once more trying to find an answer in the towering skyline and flashing billboard lights. He opened his mouth, not knowing what he was going to say, before swallowing it back down as his voice left him speechless in his turmoil.

He looked around him, all thoughts of a possible attack leaving him as the air whooshed out of his chest in shock of the incomprehensible and completely unfathomable, yet quite indisputable, truth.

“You going to be okay?” The man with the eye-patch asked from behind him.

“Yeah,” he replied weakly. “Yeah, I just...” He cleared his throat before repeating himself, not trusting himself to be able to continue. Steve’s face fell slightly in a new, sorrowful realization. If what this man says is true...

“I had a date.” Steve replied resignedly, soft voice muted with a quiet grief.

The young man teeth clicked together audibly behind him, but Steve was still lost in the past.

“I’m sorry about that,” the man said, stepping up to stand beside him. “Truly, I am.” Steve nodded numbly, sparing one more second to grieve, before raising his eyes to meet the man’s intense stare.

The man held out his hand.

“My name is Nick Fury, Director and head of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, or as we like to call it, S.H.I.E.L.D. We’d like to help you get settled back into regular life and adjusted to your new time, Captain.” He explained, perceptive gaze locked onto Steve. Steve paused before nodding determinedly, shaking Fury’s outstretched hand.

“Steve Rogers. It’s a, uh, pleasure to meet you.” He said, glancing around at the very-conspicuous scene they were making in the large square, and the soldiers surrounding them.

Fury smirked knowingly at Steve, before turning to face the young man who Steve discovered had stepped away in his momentary unawareness, the director’s coat whipping slightly behind him to make a very mysterious effect, Steve thought.

“Thank you, sir, for helping Captain Rogers here today.” Fury said professionally, staring intensely at the civilian man who Steve had knocked into, who nodded back with a removed sort of air to him, before looking hard at Steve as if to ask him if he would be okay. Steve nodded slightly to let his new friend know he would fine without him. The young man’s gaze lingered for a moment longer, before softening in acceptance.

“If that’s all, I should be going now? I’m already late to an appointment,” the young man said, glancing at his watch as if to further impress upon the man his delay. Fury’s eye narrowed slightly,
before nodding, releasing the man. Steve expected him to just walk away, but instead the young man surprised him by pausing in his departure.

“I hope everything turns out okay for you,” he said turning around to face him. Something flashed briefly across his face, before he smiled gently at him. Steve didn’t know what to say to this veritable stranger who he somehow felt like Steve had known his entire life, who he had met so completely and utterly by chance, and who, if Steve was being honest with himself, reminded him the man who had been his best friend in the whole world.

“Good luck.” The young man said, stepping swiftly away and toward the exit of the alley, before vanishing like a ghost into the crowd that had gathered behind the barrier of soldiers and military cars. Steve thought he might have imagined the tiny, smug smirk on the man’s face before he had disappeared as he evaded the rather strict-looking man in a neatly pressed suit running after him and yelling that they needed his statement of secrecy. As the man moaned in long-suffering frustration, and ordered two of the soldiers to go after the young man, another man, mousy-haired and wielding an impressive aura who had been directing the soldiers to disperse held up his hand to stop them, shaking his head to let them know to leave the man be.

“Well now, Captain,” Fury said, gesturing over to the open door of one of the huge vehicles encircling the area, “would you mind please getting in the car so we can debrief you back at our headquarters?” Steve shook his head to signal he would not, in fact, mind the ride, before making his way over to the car and climbing in the back seat. Despite the fact that the back seat had suddenly become much smaller after his change, Steve found the back seat of this vehicle to be quite spacious.

Sometime into the ride, Steve worked up the courage to ask a question that had been nagging at the back of his mind for several minutes now.

“Director Fury, sir?” He asked. Fury hummed to let the man know he was listening, but chose not to respond verbally. “This might be a strange question…” Steve trailed off, looking at Fury to see if he should stop but when no such response came he continued. “Were there any major wars recently, since I, well, left?” Steve held back at grimace at his utter lack of knowledge concerning the new world he had been dropped into without any warning.

Fury leveled a look at him, one that told Steve he knew exactly where the soldier was going with his questions.

“No Captain,” he said, now staring intently back. “While tensions have indeed risen among world powers, the world has been relatively peaceful since you fell asleep.” He leaned back into the seat, a quiet seriousness darkening his features.

Steve frowned, and looked out the window heavy in thought as the cityscape rolled by. If what Fury said was true……then how was it possible that he had the eyes Steve saw every time he looked in the mirror after Bucky died? That...didn't seem right to him.

It was never right, Steve reflected, when the young were turned old and weary by the horrors of the world.

Chapter End Notes
After all, where would Fury be without his Coulson? :D

On another, separate note, it seems that as a writer I am stuck at around 7-8 pages for my chapters. For some reason I feel a sense of failure.
Eyes of a Warrior

Chapter Summary

Two scientists, an intern, and an alien enter a diner. Need I say more?

(also, I liked this joke enough to use it in the summary AND the chapter, but hey NO SHAME!)

Chapter Notes

Uh, wow has it really been more than a year? Sorry guys, ouch y'all must hate me! Anyways, my feeble excuses will, as always, be at the bottom! For now, enjoy your long overdue chapter (it's a doozy ;D)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The diner’s bell rang as two scientists, an intern and an alien sat conversing around a table.

“How did you get inside that cloud?” Jane questioned the strange man that had, quite literally, fallen from the sky.

“Also, how could you eat an entire box of poptarts and still be this hungry?” Darcy asked, amazed at how many pancakes the man had already shoveled into his mouth. Selvig just stared with slightly disturbed awe. Thor ignored them, perhaps hadn’t even heard them as he continued to shove food into his mouth. He reached for the mug and downed the drink in one go, and as he lowered the mug his eyes lit up in surprised happiness.

“This drink, I like it.” He said, wonderingly. Darcy nodded in agreement, a coffee junkie herself. Staying up late nights with Jane had turned the intern into a coffee monster alongside the female scientist.

“I know, right?” She said, smiling at Jane. Yellow flashed in the corner of her eye as the waiter passed by, a laden tray in his hand. “It’s-”

“Another!” He demanded, flinging the cup at the ground. Jane jumped in her seat, closing her eyes and flinching back, waiting for the loud sound of the cup crashing against the ground. A moment passed, and when the crash never came Jane opened her eyes in confusion.
She blinked in surprise.

“Woah there,” the waiter warned tightly, his mouth a grim line slashed across his face as he straightened from his quick bend to the ground by the side of the table. “Here,” the server said as his right hand cleared the table’s edge and came into view, the upturned mug clasped firmly in his palm. He rotated his arm so that he could offer the mug back to the table, flipping it so that it was rightside once more, then set it down with a solid thud. The man looked up, the barely restrained anger in his eyes as he stared at Thor contrasting sharply with his tightly held grin.

“No one would want for an accident to happen.”

The man flicked a murky look toward Thor, his grin turning into something more sharp, more threatening. Almost feral.

Thor blinked, nearly rearing back in shock, but squashed the instinct and instead furrowed his brow as he leveled a glare back at the intruder.

“Ichigo, dude, that was like, the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” Darcy burst into fast-paced chatter, her hands flying in her vivacity. “Except, ya know, the first time I met you of course, but like definitely top ten of ‘awesomest’ life moments, but seriously, holy shit balls, we need to get you a traveling show my man-”

“Oh! Ichigo.” Jane sighed warmly in relief, hand coming up to rest on her chest to calm her sudden heart attack, courtesy of her newly discovered (and handsome beyond description as Darcy was so prone to point out) ‘guest’. “How are you?” She asked the young man, ignoring Darcy’s chatter and shooting Thor a harsh look.

“Just fine Miss Foster.” Ichigo said warmly, smile relaxing into something more natural, eyes flickering between Jane and the blond haired man. Jane winced at the suspicious scene her ‘guest’ had created.
Thor just stared at the lady incredulously as she began to make small talk with the unsettling mortal. Did she not realize the gauntlet the man had thrown? The Crown Prince of Asgard could not take such a mockery so lightly.

The chair’s legs screeched as Thor suddenly stood, towering over the other man.

“And who dares to challenge the Crown Prince of Asgard?” Thor thundered, outraged at the audacity of the Midgardian male.

“Thor?!” Jane hissed, leaning forward. “What are you doing?”

Thor ignored her, instead fixated wholly on the man beside her. Staring back, Ichigo cocked his head as he regarded the prince coolly.

“Ooh, hot man fight, gotta grab my phone for this shiz.” Darcy murmured to the old scientist, lunging toward her bag for the device and crawling under the table. Despite her conspicuous actions she remained unnoticed by the two men facing off.

“Challenge? Nah, I just wanted to make sure no one got hurt.” Ichigo said, relaxing his face into an easy smile.

But Thor knew better. People may say that he was the brawn to his brother’s brain, but his instincts as a warrior were never wrong. This man might fool those unaccustomed to the wages of battle, like the Ladys Jane and Darcy, but Thor had been in the throes of war since his earliest years. Though the man’s posture was nothing but unassuming, Thor could see the strength building in the muscles beneath his skin, teeth bared behind his lips, ready to pounce. And before, when he had issued his silent challenge….

He thought back, and compared the man’s eyes to the ones the warrior was leveling at him now. A sense of familiarity came to him, and Thor’s jaw clenched as he came to the grim conclusion. This was not a sheep, but a wolf beneath a sheep’s clothing. A fearsome warrior hiding behind the skin of a weak Midgardian.

Thor gnashed his teeth.

“You would mock your betters?” He growled, squaring his shoulders menacingly. Tilting his head
up, the warrior’s eyes set in an icy glare as his jaw clenched, smile abruptly gone as his whole body went taut with rage.

“I don’t like people who think they’re better than others. You’re not a god.” Ichigo snarled softly.

Thor bristled. *This mere mortal had no idea of his place!*

“Besides,” Ichigo continued, taking a subtle step toward him, the anger vanishing once more underneath stone cold demeanor. “Mrs. Alvarez would’ve been upset if one of her mugs had been broken,” he paused, taking a breath and eyes narrowing in a sharp but subtle accusation, “*accidentally.*” The man finished, eyes flashing dangerously as he lifted his chin in another soundless provocation.

The warrior’s eyes *burned*.

Thor growled deeply, bared his teeth at the insult to his pride, and was reaching for his hip when-

“Oh man, this is even better than that pancake photo.” Darcy squealed, phone rising.

The warrior blinked suddenly, looking faintly as if he had been struck for the barest of seconds, and retreated, tension flowing out of his stance. Thor faltered, thrown off balance by the abrupt absence of the threat.

“One sec,” Ichigo said absently, turning to pick up his tray from the empty table. “I gotta put these away, and then I’ll be back, kay?” He gave a little wave, and began walking back to the counter. Darcy groaned in disappointment while Thor stared incredulously after him, before Jane yanked him back down into his seat.

“What were you doing?” The female scientist whispered furiously. “Ichigo was just trying to help, after you almost destroyed their mug!” Thor recoiled a tad at Jane’s hushed reprimand, but his eyes continued to follow the strange warrior as he completed his business behind the counter.

A couple minutes later, the waiter rounded the counter and made his way toward their table. Thor eyed the man suspiciously as he stopped in front of their table, but before he could say anything the man dipped his head.
“I’m sorry,” he said, head still bowed. “It was wrong of me to be so rude to you.”

“Oh, no Ichigo,” Jane said embarrassed, “it was our fault, we were the ones who made such a scene. You don’t need to apologize!” She glared harshly at Thor from across the small table.

“No, I was at fault as well.” Ichigo said, straightening. He regarded Thor for a moment, before letting out a long sigh. Pulling up a chair, Ichigo plopped down to join the four at the table.

“You know,” Ichigo mused, eying Thor speculatively, “you remind me of a good friend of mine.”

“I do? Hmph, I doubt I am like anyone from this realm.” He claimed haughtily. Darcy just smacked her forehead, as Jane winced. So much for keeping a low profile.

But Ichigo just grinned, unperturbed.

“Yeah. He was a pretty big dude, foreign too. People assumed he was dangerous just because of how he looked.” His grin slid into a regretful frown as Ichigo looked back at Thor. “I was wrong to do the same to you. I should’ve known better, not jumped to conclusions the way I did, just because of….” The fierce man suddenly broke off his sentence, eyes darkening with emotion, but soldiered on as if nothing had happened. “I’m sorry.”

Thoth shuffled in his seat. Ichigo’s eyes bore into his; again, Thor was struck by them. Uncomfortably, he realized he was reminded of his beloved mother. A skilled combatant and master sorcerer, his mother was deceptively fierce when protecting that which she cared about. Though their eyes were different colors, Frigga’s a piercing free sky while the warrior’s a dark burnished bronze, the beast-like burning wills of fire flickering within them were the very same.

The comparison calmed his confusion concerning the strange mortal, and with gruff reluctance, Thor let go of his anger about the prior slight to his pride.

“I would offer my apologies as well.” Thor said gruffly. “Where I hail from, it is custom to shatter the glass in a request for more when a drink is well-received.” He explained sincerely. “I meant only to honor this house, not cause affront. It was my mistake as well. I meant no disrespect.” Ichigo nodded in acknowledgment.
“Well, at the very least, Mrs. Alvarez will be glad to hear you liked her coffee so much.” He joked, smiling at Thor.

Resting his chin on his hand, Ichigo continued. “I had another old friend who wasn’t from around here. She lived somewhere totally out of the way, completely cut off from life, you know?” He gave a knowing smile, tilting his head toward Thor. “Practically from a whole other world. She had a lot of trouble getting use to the way we did things, so I know how hard it is. To be dropped in a totally unfamiliar place. How disorienting it is, and how hard it is to adapt.” Ichigo laughed. The bell above the diner’s door dinged as two more customers walked in.

“She figured everything out eventually though, so don’t worry about it. You’ll get used to everything soon enough.” Ichigo reassured him. Thor was startled by the genuine look in his eye, a look not of pity but of shared experience and trials, and nodded his thanks. Suddenly the strange mortal felt not like a dangerous threat, but a fellow warrior on the battlefield. No longer an unknown enemy, but a comrade made by standing on common ground.

His companion’s eyes twinkled as he continued reminisce. “It’s funny though. When the time came, she almost didn’t want to leave….” Ichigo trailed off, deep in thought. The two customers settled at the bar as Thor returned to his pancakes.

“The usual please, Izzy.” One of the townsmen asked. His friend started a conversation with the older woman as she began to bustle around.

“You missed out on all the excitement with the crater.” He said. Jane perked up, and she and Dr. Selvig turned to look over at the bar. “They’re saying some kind of satellite crashed in the desert.” His companion joined the conversation.

“We were having a good time with it till the Feds showed up, chased us out.”

“Excuse me, did you say there was a satellite crash?” Jane interrupted, harried. The men looked over, bemused.

“Yeah,” he confirmed as Darcy snapped a photo of Thor in the background.

“What did it look like, the satellite?” Selvig asked the townsman, intent.
“Well, I don’t know anything about satellites, but it was heavy.” The man explained, looking perturbed. “I mean, nobody could lift it.”

Thor paused, attention suddenly focusing on the man’s words. Ah, so that’s where it’s been. Quickly he stood, pancakes forgotten (delicious though they had been, they took a second seat to reclaiming his weapon and his honor) and made his way over to the bar.

“They said it was radioactive, I had my hand all over it-”

“Which way?” Thor ordered him, clapping a hand firmly on the man’s shoulder.

The man looked startled, but replied, “Oh, 50 miles west of here?”

Thor nodded and turned to exit the building in search of his hammer, when Darcy suddenly spoke up, the alarm in her voice cutting through his fixation and halting his steps.

“Woah, Ichigo, are you okay dude?”

Thor’s head twisted back around, eyes widening slightly to see Ichigo leaning over the table on his forearm. Face suddenly pale, his fist was clenched tightly on top of the table, breath catching in his throat. And his eyes….

Thor had never seen a pair like it. An equal mix of rage and terror churned deep within, their stormy depths frothing madly like the waves of the ocean during a hurricane.

Ichigo took a deep, shuddering breath, and as the air stuttered out from behind his lips, his face wiped itself clean of the fear that only a moment before had dominated the man’s demeanor. He straightened in his chair, as Jane asked him if he was alright, worry evident on her features. Darcy fluttered around the still pale server, who seemed to regard her fussing with a fond smile.

“Dude you look like really pale, do we need to get you to a hospital, can you breath okay, oh my gosh should we call an ambulance?”

“Dar,” Ichigo interrupted, raising a hand to stop the girl’s nervous chatter. “I’m fine. Don’t worry
about it.” The chair legs squeaked on the diner floor as he stood, hands reaching back to untie his apron.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to run. Sorry to bounce.” Ichigo smiled, but Thor could see the strain it took. From the looks Lady Jane and Lady Darcy shot him, they weren’t convinced either, but before either could say something, Ichigo was already halfway to the counter.

“Sorry Mrs. Alvarez, but I need to run for the day,” he told the older woman behind the bar as he hurried back.

“Leave? Whatever for dear?” The woman asked back, bewildered.

“Sorry Mrs. Alvarez. I’ve just got to go check something out.” Ichigo said with a wry, bitter sort of smile, more of a grimace really, as he threw his apron over the counter, turning the corner of the bar to snatch his bag.

“Sorry for having to skip out on you out of nowhere,” Ichigo apologized as he pecked her on the cheek as he passed.

The woman’s confused frown gave way to an indulgent smile, and she pulled him back to give him a motherly pat on his cheek.

“That’s quite alright my dear. You already do too much work around here. You just stay safe, alright?”

Ichigo gave a short huff of laughter as he moved back around the bar.

“Sure Mrs. Alvarez.”

“How many times do I have to tell you Ichigo, call me Izzy!”

The bell above the door jingled, and the man was gone.
“Soooo…” Darcy said, aiming her pointer finger at door, “that was weird.”

Thor scoffed.

“The warrior’s own business matters not to me. I have my own business to attend to.” He strode across the cafe and out the door, bell dinging in his wake.

“Hey, wait!” Jane yelled after him, grabbing her coat and gesturing at the others to hurry up and follow him.

Jane, Darcy, and Dr. Selvig rushed to clean up and follow their big lead, but as Jane paused to throw some cash on the table she was stopped when one of the other waiters came out from the back kitchen.

“Was that Ichigo?” The young woman asked.

“Yes.” Izzy replied. “He had to take off early, had something to take care off.”

The girl paused in her work.

“…He’s not coming back, is he?” She asked sadly, staring dolefully at the door. Izzy sighed.

“No, I don’t think he is.” She whispered, so low Jane could barely catch the words. Mrs. Alvarez cleared her throat, swallowing the lump that had formed there. “But then again, we all knew he wasn’t going to stay forever.” She glanced over and gave the young woman a resigned smile.

“Men like that? Men who are running from something?” Izzy stared at the door, still seeing Ichigo’s ghost as he ran. “Men like him never stay for too very long.”

Jane shook her head, spurring herself into action as she rushed out after her self-appointed charge, but failed to shake off the sudden dread in her heart.

The bell dinged once more, then fell silent.
Haha, so I'm going to keep this short: I was originally going to post a different character's chapter rather than Thor's, but it ended up giving me a lot of trouble, and I had a definite ending character so I had to switch to Thor but I procrastinated because I didn't have a great idea about it, and a month ago this just randomly pooped up into my head and I lit up like a Christmas tree and immediately got to work! The rest of the delay is because I'm a perfectionist, as well as the fact I'll be overseas for the next 9 months and getting ready was CRAZY so I didn't have a lot of time, but it's here now! Sorry about the wait, but I hope it was worth it!

I'm still working on this story, don't worry, and I will do my best to update as quickly as possible, but as I said I'm working overseas for the next 9 months so it might take a while. Sorry! I love you guys!

Some Notes to Clarify:
- Steve didn't know Ichigo had bright orange hair because he was wearing a hat to cover it up, because in his many travels Ichigo has DEFINITELY realized orange hair is a BIT conspicuous. You can see him doing it in chapter 2 with TOny as well, but it served a dual purpose of practicality in a desert
- In regards to Ichigo saying he didn't have a last name in chptr 1 and then immediately giving it in chptr 2, he knew he'd be pegged as more suspicious if he didn't give a last name, so he gave his full one. He definitely has his reasons for claiming he doesn't have a last name though...

And that's it! Again sorry for the delay, sorry for future delays, I love y'all to bits and pieces and COMMENTS are a great way to motivate me to hurry up my writing! SO if y'all really want that next chapter quick despite my foreign country craziness, y'all better COMMENT ya hear?

Love y'all and best of wishes!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!