

Crack, Science, Weird Events, and an Alternate Reality!

Section 2: What The HELL?

Uryu was awakened to the sound of someone humming an unknown tune somewhere distantly. As he called back the memories of where he had been before he lost consciousness he sat upright and looked about in alarm. Wherever he was it was dark, and carried a lingering chemical smell. He checked himself over for any nasty tubes or wires, suspecting the worst. Something slightly damp and... tentacley... was by his left side, and upon touching it with his groping hands he scrambled backwards in horror, flinging the offending thing away.

"Unh..?" There was a groan at the other end of the space, "What the hell is...AAAH!"

There was a great clatter, and the thing was tossed back, right into Uryu's lap. Ishida took a second and prodded it further.

"Renji..?" Uryu guessed.

"EUA AH! Yeah, it's me! Who did you think it was?! And what is that slimy thing?!?"

"Renji... It's a mop head."

A moment of silence passed.

"Grr... Well how was I supposed to know that?!" the Soul Reaper growled, sounding quite embarrassed, "It's dark as hell in here! And where is here?!"

"Shh..!" Uryu was on alert, listening hard, "Did you hear humming before..?"

"Uhh... I think so. Why?"

"I don't hear it anymore..."

The two were still, and all was black silence. Then came the light, but hard-soled footsteps and the shuffling of fabric. Their blood ran cold at what they heard next.

"Hello..?"

The voice was undoubtedly Szayel Aporro's!

Outside the Dark Somewhere

The Octava had been having a fairly ordinary day so far. The pink-haired scientist was just making his morning stroll to his laboratory, clipboard full of data in the crook of his arm, humming an old German anthem.

Then he thought he heard raised voices from within the lab complex. Coming to a halt, Szayel stood still and glanced around, checking down two adjacent corridors. Who would be hanging around here at this hour?

"Hello..?" he called out, stepping up to the door and slowly, cautiously, pushing it open. It creaked ominously to which the Espada grimaced.

I must remember to get that hinge oiled sometime soon...Sounds like it's from one of those ghastly horror films...

"Is someone there?" He poked his head inside. Seeing no one in the dimness of the room, he sent one hand in and flicked the lights on. Still no one could be seen among the samples, the databanks, the various testing equipment.

"Verona? Lumina? Is that you?"

But there was no sign of his two little assistants.

And still not a sound, but Szayel Aporro had a very odd feeling. Odd enough to stimulate the need for further investigation. There were still spaces with closed doors within the lab's confines: The cold-storage, several closets... Though he knew that that traitor Aizen was not due to begin his war on Las Noches for another month it was conceivable to him that the tyrant could have sent Soul Reapers allied with him into his palace for various reasons: Espionage, sabotage, and worst of all plain and simple assault! Machines could be repaired, defense measures could be adjusted, but though he was an Espada he was more doctor than fighter.

Even as he crept a few paces inside the huge room the very thought of being ambushed made his skin crawl.

Meanwhile...

Back in the lab's janitorial supply, Uryu and Renji sat pressed against the opposite sides of the room, utterly baffled by what they were hearing. The two could see a bit better in the dark room now due to the thin beam of light entering through the crack under the door. Renji pawed

at the hilt of his sword, grinding his teeth at the sound of the Octava's voice.

Uryu's puzzlement was visible even in the room's shadows.

"Lumina..?" he whispered, "Isn't that the one he... uh, killed..?"

"Huh?" Renji grunted, having not been paying much attention to the Quincy. Then he gave the statement some thought, "Hunh... Yeah, that is right..."

"Shh!" Shadows were moving in the light near the bottom of the door. "Keep it down. We don't want to speed up our discovery if possible..."

"Right..." The Soul Reaper settled down, but kept his hand still on the hilt of his weapon.

Szayel Aporro was just as puzzled as the two hiding in his closet. He was sure he had heard voices in here—how could he have been mistaken? Perhaps there was a leak in one of his psychoactive drugs. He strode over past the row of supply cabinets and checked the racks which held the bulbous containers carefully, particularly the one with gaseous contents.

Straightening, he half-crossed his arms and cradled his chin in hand. There was no sign of a leak. Now this was getting odd; maybe he had miscalculated the source of the noise? He gave a heavy sigh, for one of few times in his existence relieved to be wrong.

Now he could get some work done!

Moving to a communications panel etched into the wall by the door, Szayel plugged in a flurry of keys by habit and spoke towards the device in an amiable chirp.

"Oh, lab assistants for today—whenever you're ready!"

There was only two or three seconds' silence before a slightly static-filtered response came.

<"Yes, my Lord—we're coming now..!">

"Gooooo!~" The Espada cooed, smiling much more broadly than his face looked capable of handling. Flicking off the comms, he made a swift about face and strode over to the project where he had left off the day before.

Uryu and Renji stared at each other throughout, their faces drawn and frozen in a weird look of prolonged "what the hell". The snap of their unwary adversary pulling on latex gloves seemed to bring Uryu back to consciousness; the Quincy crept stealthily over to the door and peered through the tiny crack. Renji bit his lip as he observed his comrade's actions, not convinced that such a move was a good idea.

"Uryu..! What're you doing..?! Get away from there..!"

"Shh!"

The Quincy watched intently; Szayel Aporro entered his view, a surgeon's mask and gloves on, his back to their hiding place as he examined several small beakers with smoggy contents under the light of some strange apparatus. He began humming once again, this time something a few centuries more modern, a jazz-ish tune that Uryu was a bit too young to recognize. Uryu took a break and sat back, blinking in a stunned silence. Those machines had not been in plain sight the last time they had encountered the devious Octava. Were they in a different room then? He couldn't have captured them. There was no way the mad scientist would be stupid enough to leave captives tossed in a closet, unrestrained or undrugged. It was impossible to think he *knew* they were there.

And though he wasn't acting necessarily... stable, he also wasn't rambling to himself about being a perfect specimen of humanity and needing to crush all the other "insignificant worms". That was the biggest surprise.

"I know what I'm about to say sounds crazy," he looked over to Renji, who was pouting over sitting idle with an arch nemesis so close to slashing distance. "But doesn't Szayel Aporro seem less... *evil*...all of a sudden?"

"What..?!" Renji eagerly inched his zanpakuto out of its sheath, "Don't be dumb. He just doesn't know we're here yet."

"But what about that round Arrancar still being alive?" Uryu adjusted his glasses, somehow getting them to shine with reflected light in the closet's darkness, "That's pretty hard to explain away. I know Arrancars' powers are weird, but... We saw that one get... you know."

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"Hmm..?" Szayel looked up and peeked over each shoulder in turn. He could have sworn he heard a voice, and sensed the barest whiff of a presence. He straightened and set the beaker he was currently holding down, then pulled the surgeon's mask from its normal position so that it rested dormant on his neck, "Hmmm..."

The presence had decreased, but it still lingered. It was too faint to pick out above the spiritual noise—someone, or something, was hiding somewhere in his own laboratory out of sight, and was suppressing its spiritual presence to avoid detection. It couldn't be a Hollow then—or at least not a fully natural one. Who would allow a Hollow to enter Las Noches anyway? Such a reckless action was illegal—punishable by death if any person came to harm as a result.

No, he told himself, it's far more likely to be a trained sort, Soul Reaper or Arrancar, at least the strength of a fourth or fifth seat to be able to conceal themselves so easily... Szayel knew that was a level of power that wasn't too uncommon for either classification of

dead-guys-with-swords.

But he was still afraid—that was *the weakest* the intruder could be. Even then their strength told him nothing of that intruder's intentions! It could simply be some other Espada's Fracción who wandered in drunkenly and passed out hidden from sight. It could just as easily be an elite assassin from the notorious Squad Two, hiding in the shadows, poison smeared on his (her?) blade, waiting to leap out and—*Brr!*

The hairs were standing up on the back of his neck, and he wanted very much to call in some of his more war-like Fracciones. But he knew that to reveal his knowledge (and fear) of the trespasser would be foolish and a bit hasty. So he feigned a casual attitude and resisted the urge to keep his dominant hand near the hilt of his sword. He sidled over to some filing databanks and cast a wary eye about his periphery as he twiddled with some of the more benign controls, pretending to be occupied with some scientific task...

Renji and Uryu stopped breathing for a few moments. When the Octava seemed to go back to his business Renji frowned deeply.

"I think we both saw that. That guy's acting could use some improvement..."

"Yeah. Stilted." Uryu nodded, "I think the game is up. Whatever's happening, we're not going to get any answers by hiding from an enemy that knows we're here."

"Finally!" Renji smiled savagely.

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At the opposite end of the room from the tense Espada a pair of doors flew open.

"Yeeaagh!" Szayel yelped as he jumped about six inches in surprise. He whirled around, left hand clutching his chest, right hand twitching in mid-air halfway to his sword. Five Fracciones, two in the fighting-class white-and-black and the rest in the green-grey, unbelted uniform of the medic class, ground to a halt in the doorway at their Master's paranoid expression. The Espada did not stay that way for long, relaxing as he recognized the other Arrancar.

"Damn." Renji stopped himself just short of drawing his blade. Uryu stopped trying to summon his bow and slapped his palm to his face.

"Ahaha..Ah, just you—don't ever do that again," Szayel laughed, slumping with hands on knees, "I nearly had a heart attack..."

"Ee! Ee, Ah!"

The two eerily familiar-looking Arrancar in white skipped forward. They were odd, with

small plump bodies, thin limbs, and round faces—easily dwarfed by their master and obviously bearing more than the usual amount of physical misshaping from their time as Hollows. But they were not as deformed as Uryu and Renji remembered them. The two scurried up almost right at Szayel's feet and began bowing profusely.

"We sorry Lord Szayel Aporro! It never happen again, we swear!"

Szayel gave the two a dumb-founded but benign look then silenced them with a raised hand. Renji covered his eyes with his free hand and turned away from the door's crack.

"Arrgh, I keep seeing it in my head again... I'm scarred for life already from the first time..."

"Shh..!"

Renji's tattooed eyebrow twitched in mounting annoyance at being shushed so much.

"Now, now... I wasn't being serious. It's quite alright," The Octava reassured his two funny-looking charges with a pat on the nearest one's oval head, "I was just... preoccupied. It was my fault really."

Lumina and Verona looked at each other and hopped upright, spewing gratitude and excited noises.

"Ooj! Thankyouthankyouthankyou Lord Szayel Aporro! You're so gracious and humble and kind and caring and wonderful and nice and good-looking and—"

"Alright! Alright... That's enough of that," Szayel again had to shut them up prematurely with a swift gesture of his hand, "I'd rather we not waste too much time today. Shall we begin?"

The two Fracciones grinned from ear to ear, in a literal sense because of their deformed mouths. They scampered off to the rows of samples where Szayel had been earlier.

"Yaaay! Science time! Science time! Science time!"

Renji's sword hand shook as he clenched it harder. Uryu stood and began summoning his bow as he reached for the door's latch.

"Well, this complicates things," he said. "But I'm still going out there to see what's going on."

"About damn time! Move!" Renji growled, "I think I'll just break the door down."

"What—? Hold on, Renj—"

"Roar! Zabimaru!"

CRRRSH!

Szayel's heart either skipped a beat or added an unneeded one as he turned to see the janitorial supply door flying forward at high speed. A huge force had sent it straight at him, his samples, and one of his medic Fracciones in the unorthodox missile's path.

She's not fast enough to dodge that!, he realized. And my samples!

...This is going to hurt!

The Octava darted in front of both medic and precious scientific data using his Sónido.

WHUMPH!

The door crashed squarely against the whole of the Espada's frame, the white stone it was constructed of spiderwebbing and falling apart into chunks, large and small. As it fell away Szayel was revealed, feet spread and planted firmly against the impact, chin tucked and his arms crossed protectively over the rest of his face. The Octava straightened up, rubbing the stinging areas of his forearms. Aside from that he appeared unhurt.

Immediately his gaze searched out the enemy...

He appeared shocked when he saw who was responsible.

"R-Renji..?!"