

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

Section 3: Oh Crap!

"R-Renji..?!"

Renji's attack came to a staggered halt; he reflected the Espada's stunned expression.

"Wha...What is the meaning of this?!" The Octava's eye was drawn to Uryu, who was exiting the closet in a less violent manner, "And... Uryu?! What in *hell* do you two think you're *doing*?!"

"Err..." Renji kept his Shikai half-poised to attack, "Weren't you... just trying to kill us..?"

"NO!" Szayel roared, one amber-glowing eye twitching, "That was *you*, Renji! *You* just attacked ME—" Then he stopped, partially crossing his arms and glancing between Renji, Uryu, and the janitorial closet with narrowed eyes.

"Why... were you two hiding in a closet..? Did you inhale chemical fumes or something? Is that why you're trying to *murder* me?!"

Uryu stepped forward, causing the Octava's outraged act to drop instantly as he flinched away. But then, much to Renji's surprise, the Quincy disarmed his spirit bow.

"Hmm...Weird," he began gazing around at the environment. He had noticed some similarities in the architecture, but also huge differences in everything else. The two quivering little mutant Fracciones were like those the Quincy knew as Lumina and Verona, but somehow they had drastically changed in appearance. They weren't blobs of meat anymore, somehow. Not to mention that the one he'd witnessed being half-eaten alive didn't look particularly eaten at the moment.

And there was Szayel's sudden turn towards sanity. Well—

Well, maybe not sanity, but he did seem utterly horrified at the idea that the two former enemies would attack him.

"Maybe I was right...Something is definitely off here. You, Espada, are not as I remember you."

"*What!?*" Renji turned and gave his comrade a funny look.

"I... beg your pardon?" Szayel Aporro joined the Lieutenant in his funny look, "Explain

yourself! What do you mean by this?"

"Now that I think about it, you're almost an exact opposite of how I remember you," Uryu pondered, appearing to ignore them both, "You're not trying to kill us or turn us into specimens at least... And your Fracciones all look normal...er." He eyed Lumina as she peeked out from behind a table, "And you don't even seem to remember fighting us at all. It's almost like you aren't even the same person."

"I should hope not!" Szayel blinked, sticking his nose up a bit higher and giving a disgusted sniff in response to this description, "It wouldn't be very bright of me to attack my allies, especially in our situation with the impending war thing and all. And here I'm assuming what you're describing even happened."

"Could that weird fog have done something to us?!" Renji suddenly burst out in a flash of insight. Uryu's eyes widened as he remembered the phenomena.

"Maybe... We didn't even know what it was or what caused it. It could have done anything..."

Szayel cocked an eyebrow and leaned in.

"Fog?"

Renji turned back around and yelped in alarm upon seeing that the Octava had crept up to within a foot or two of him. Equally spooked by the Soul Reaper's reaction, Szayel Aporro threw up both hands in a gesture of peace and scrambled to get away from the risk of being clobbered with Zabimaru.

"Eheh... Easy, Renji..." He wore a strained grin, "Let's just... put the sword down, at least until we *all* know what's going on."

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you, creep?" Renji sneered, "Yeah! Kindly put down your only real defense so I can hook you up to some machine that sucks your guts out! So I can experiment on them! Or maybe just EAT them! Oh, yeah, I'll go right ahead and do *that*!"

Szayel Aporro's expression traded back and forth between utter "huh?", hurt feelings, and stunned revulsion. He reached up and rubbed his eyes like one who feels a headache coming on. His left eye glimmered slightly as it swiveled towards Uryu.

"This is very strange..." he murmured, "Very strange! Would you say that Renji is always like this?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Renji glared daggers at the Quincy.

"Are you saying you also remember us differently?"

"Yes," Szayel paced a semi-circle around the Quincy, "And you seem different as well. Much more to my liking!"

"Um... Thanks?" Uryu blinked, "Well, at least you're not trying to kill us."

"Yes, I heard about those rumors of me doing that..." the Espada chuckled, closing his eyes. "Ah, you mentioned a fog-like phenomenon?" He probed, opening his eyes again.

"You absolutely sure you trust this guy..?" Renji watched the pacing Arrancar with a tight grip on his weapon, "How do you know this isn't just a ruse to get us to lower our guard?"

"Renji, my friend, please—" the Octava began in an earnest tone, but he was cut off rudely by the paranoid Soul Reaper.

"I didn't wanna hear it from *you*, nutcase!"

He was about to say more when the two little Fracciones Lumina and Verona could take no more character assassination of their Master. They scurried up together, bobbing and shuffling aggressively, to confront him.

"That IT! Stop being mean to Lord Szayel Aporro!" Lumina demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Renji's tattooed eyebrows.

"Lord Szayel Aporro not crazy hurt people eating people man!" Verona stamped an oversized foot.

"He not creep neither!"

"Not even a little creep. Master is very nice, lotsa peoples likey!" Verona growled like a small dog, "You is the nutcase... Meanie, bad, rude, mean, red, pineapple-head, bad-man..!"

"That's quite enough! I mean, that's enough," Szayel roared out, completely putting a halt to all Fracciones and confused intruders alike. Lumina and Verona cringed and groveled, whimpering apologies whilst pawing at and petting the hems of their Espada's clothing, "No, it's alright, it's alright. I'm not angry." The Octava sighed, taking a step back and extricating the end of his shirt from Verona's long fingers, "I appreciate you two trying to defend me, but it's really not necessary. Now go and finish recording those results."

In the shadow of their Master's command the two seemed able to forget the quarrel instantaneously. They skipped off back to their stations, chirping and giggling the whole way.

Renji blinked and shook his head vigorously. He reluctantly disarmed his Shikai and sheathed the ordinary katana it had reverted to.

"Alright... I *guess* I believe you now Uryu."

To this Szayel Aporro brightened, smiling one of his less creepy smiles as he began taking a step towards the pair. His moment of gladness was killed as Renji put a hand on the sword's hilt again.

"But the second he tries anything funny I'm cutting him into little pieces!"

With an exasperated sigh the Espada ceased his approach.

"Fine, point taken," he scrutinized the two familiar, yet unfamiliar, allies.

In his world they would ordinarily be his allies. Their personalities were so... What was it? Reversed between the two? Yes, that was it. As his gaze rested on Renji the scientific genius recalled how calm and collected he knew him to be. Very cautious, strategical, never taking a risky step unless the situation called for it. Yet *this* Renji was aggressive, easy to set off, reckless. He turned his attention to the Quincy, whom he had always thought a bit... dangerous to be around. The Uryu he remembered was the antithesis of mindfulness, tact and calm. Yet *this* Uryu was behaving so reasonably.

Hell, he was behaving *at all*.

And for a reason unknown to him they both feared him like some kind of assailant, even though he had never fought with or even had a bad argument with either of them for as long as his memory stretched. All of this, plus the brief but tantalizing mentions of a mysterious fog, piqued his interest.

"Now, if you'll excuse me for being a nag, about this fog? Tell me everything you remember! It may help us all understand what has happened here."

The Quincy, sure now that this different form of the Octava was on their side, proceeded to tell him all about their encounter with him in as much detail as possible. Though he still felt compelled to abbreviate the grossest bits, Szayel paid an almost inhuman level of attention with his eager amber eyes lit up with a slight glow. Only a few times did he seem to be repulsed in the form of a distressed grunt and a disgusted click of his tongue, which evolved into more of a disturbed groan when the part about Lumina came around...

"...And after you came back these two Arrancar who had followed us in were messing around in the back. I'm guessing something they did caused this mess," Uryu explained, "We heard something break, and then this fog came over at us. We couldn't move once it touched us. Then we woke up in that closet and heard you coming in here."

"Hmmm..." the scientist ruminated, now seated on a small swivel chair that he had summoned from a compartment beneath the floor. The two displaced guests were too uneasy to sit, so they stood, but Uryu allowed himself to lean against a nearby table. The medic-class lab

assistants would sidle by unperturbed every now and then as they went about their errands, leaving their Master and the two non-Arrancar well enough alone.

"So... the fog paralyzed you, did it?" Szayel finally inquired, his eerie amber eyes flicking about thoughtfully but not actually looking at anything in particular.

"Yes...Wait, no, not really. We could move our eyes and mouths, but nothing else." Uryu frowned, "I'm not sure if you could even call it a fog. It was like lights and shadows were moving on their own... but in a big... cloud."

"Hmm!" Szayel chirped, intrigued. He rubbed his chin as if he had a beard as he processed the information. It was like watching a computer undergoing calculations, trying to come up with the little receipt laden with answers that usually comes out of one of those types of machines. "...Hmm, very strange!"

Renji shifted uneasily. The creepy orange-ish eyes were accidentally centered right on him.

"Brr...!" He shivered to himself. A passing Fracción gave him an odd look.

"So you weren't immediately unconscious then?" the Espada drilled. Uryu blinked.

"No... We were frozen in place for quite a while, at least a minute or so." He answered, "Why is that important?"

"Pieces of the puzzle, friend," Szayel smiled knowingly, a broad, creepy one this time, "Though I wish I had more pieces. Those two Arrancar you mentioned—were they caught up in this fog along with you?"

"Yeah," Renji groaned, remembering the comedic duo hanging ridiculously in midair, "Those idiots...They probably caused all this..!"

"Yes, it was us, them, and you too, actually."

The Octava's gaze snapped up, suddenly very serious.

"Me?" The hint of unease in his voice was nearly as palpable as a stress ball, a great rubbery discomfort that his spiritual power imposed over every individual in the room, "The me that you *know*? That tried to... and then... th-the one that did all the *unspeakably* nasty stuff?"

"Yeah... Have you not been listening or something?" Renji snorted bad-temperedly under the chiding glare of his Quincy cohort, "That's... probably bad, right?"

"Er, well," Szayel was visibly sweating as he swallowed nervously, "If he, er, I—he... is as reprehensible as you've described, then it's very bad!"

"...Why?" Uryu pressed him, beginning to feel the anxiety that their unlikely ally was exuding. The Arrancar loosened his collar as if looking for something to do with his fidgety hands.

"Because, if my guess is correct, then *everyone* that was caught up in that fog ought to be here, somewhere."

Renji's blunt response perfectly summed up the group's feeling:

"Oh *crap*..."