

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

Section 5: The First Step of Goober and Psycho-Hunting!

Renji's skin crawled under a thin layer of bandages the Octava's medics had placed on his arms, shins, and chest. Apparently the two non-Arrancar, and especially the Soul Reaper, had almost forgotten that they had not long before getting themselves in their odd situation been fighting. And they had been losing, earning a number of injuries which they had somehow managed to not keel over with before this moment.

The stuff they'd used to treat the burns he'd received felt weird. And it smelled funny too. The Soul Reaper decided he didn't want to think about it too much.

Uryu too had received some medical attention on short notice, though the Quincy didn't need nearly as much as the crispy Lieutenant had. A bandage stood out on his forehead, and another was hidden under his right sleeve. And both of them had been given... some kind of blue stuff in a syringe, which Szayel had told them would "reverse the muscle damage sustained in your fighting". They would, according to the expert, be "good as new!" in the space of an hour.

It had taken a few patient attempts from the eccentric Espada to explain to Renji that the goop was beneficial before he allowed the shot to be given. And even then he didn't let Szayel come within five feet of him. The Octava had to delegate it to one of his medics.

Once their wounds were taken care of, Szayel Aporro wasted no time in helping them in understanding his theory on the mysterious fog's nature and its bizarre displacement effects.

"I can't be one hundred percent sure yet," he forewarned them, "But it seems like the most logical explanation. You come from an alternate reality to this one... Or, from your perspective, you've accidentally traveled into an alternate reality. It's why everything and everyone you see here is both the same and different to what you know. That fog you witnessed most likely was some kind of *ludicrously* intense energy field... I would have to be, if it broke down the barriers between different histories themselves!"

They had to bluntly remind the Octava that there was still the immediate issue of a second Szayel, a thoroughly evil one that was probably not above eating babies, possibly running loose in his domain.

The strange doctor Arrancar sobered up rapidly and summoned his two assistants to him before hastily leading his uninvited guests off through the elaborate street-like passages of his huge palace.

"So, uh... Where are we going again..?" Renji asked, uneasily scratching at one of his bandages. He was forced to stop abruptly as one of the odd little Fracciones in front of him whirled about to walk backwards as he answered.

"Going to Monitoring HQ!" Verona grinned, still walking backwards abnormally close to the red-haired Soul Reaper, "We go. Look at screens. Find friends of Uryu and Renji."

"Also find Bad Lord Szayel Aporro!" Lumina added.

"Yes, exactly," the Octava smiled affectionately at the two. He stopped just ahead, in front of a very large and well-fortified door, "And here we are. One second, please..."

There was a raised, rectangular area about chest-high on the door, which was obviously some sort of discreet security feature. Szayel placed his right hand carefully upon it. To the two non-Arrancar's amazement, the square turned suddenly black and rapid glowing blue calculations popped up and disappeared around the Espada's hand. The screen then went back to white, and the doors swung open on their own.

"Enter!" he chirped, flamboyantly waving them in. Lumina and Verona skittered past him and claimed two smaller seats on either side of a noticeably larger one. Uryu followed, more interested in the dozens of tiny screens on either side of the room, framing a single massive one dominating the opposite wall from the door. There were also some rather elaborate looking controls below the screen, in front of the swiveling chairs. Szayel indicated the main screen as he seated himself.

"There are cameras installed in nearly every space within this palace. It should be relatively easy to find both your friends and... me..." Szayel reached for the controls, "Oh... This is exciting! If someone had told me yesterday that there were alternate universes I would have thought they'd been watching too much Star Trek..!"

"Uh... Right..." Renji had no idea what Star Trek was but went along anyhow, "So... how does this dohickey work?"

"Here, look," the Espada clicked away at a small pad of shiny black buttons near his right hand. Each time he pressed one of the tiny numerous buttons the image on the massive screen changed, revealing a different portion of the Palace of the Octava's miles of corridors and chambers. He stayed on each perspective for about three seconds, allowing the two visitors the opportunity to examine the figures milling about, medics, servants, Soldado Fracciones and occasionally an Arrancar civilian in plain clothes. "I've set up angles nearly everywhere in my domain... we can switch the views here..."

"How many of these *are* there?!" Renji eyed the controls, disturbed by the fact that he could be watched practically anywhere within the Octava's enormous dwelling, "And what exactly is '*nearly* everywhere'?!"

"Ah... Everywhere within *reason*," Szayel frowned slightly, "Everywhere but the, er...private areas. It's about eight hundred angles total." Noticing the dismayed look on the spiky-headed man's face he raised a finger and smiled, "Oh, but they're all in order, and very good picture quality. We should be able to spot our three targets in under ten minutes."

"Unless they all hide in a 'private area'," Uryu pointed out. Lumina couldn't help herself and began giggling uncontrollably, spinning around and around in her swiveling chair.

"Hmmm..."Szayel gazed towards the ceiling, reaching out without needing to look as he grabbed the arm of Lumina's chair so that it stopped spinning, "Could be an issue if this alternate version of me realizes he is being searched for..."

The Octava continued flicking rapidly through the many camera angles in the order in which they linked up throughout the palace. After no more than ten views passed the Arrancar scientist suddenly stopped. He frowned deeply, leaning forward in his seat to scrutinize the huge screen.

"Why are you stopping?" Uryu looked to the screen also and tried to figure out what it was Szayel Aporro was so concerned about. The Quincy couldn't help but suspect it was something petty or cosmetic... a lot like the other one would fuss about.

The screen showed an empty, high-ceilinged hallway with doors all along its length, one every sixty or so feet, all leading to stunningly spacious quarters for the relatively low-ranking servant-class Fracciones. A small blob of an object was visible on the far end, looking most similar to a wheeled medicine or supply cart. It was a bit difficult to tell with any precision what it was exactly. The Octava brushed some hair out of his eyes and with the same hand gestured sharply to Verona.

"Magnify that for me," he ordered. The stubby little Arrancar did so with a speed that shocked the two displaced guests. The mutants' behavior didn't suggest that they were capable of such a technical feat.

"I magnify fifty time, Master," he mumbled, gingerly rotating a dial, "Okay, it done!" He squinted at the screen, tilting his head sideways in a puppy-like manner, "Err... Why you want look at cart, Master?"

"Agh. Well, it's probably nothing," Szayel sighed, tapping his fingers incessantly on the armrest of his chair, "Still...What's it doing there? I don't want to think that any of my Fracciones would shirk away from their duties..."

"So it is suspicious," Uryu pushed up his glasses, making the screen's artificial light reflect off them in a brief flash of coolness, "There'd have to be a reason for one of your men to abandon that there."

"A good reason," the Espada nodded, disturbed by all the possibilities that may have occurred, "A *threat* to be more precise...Ugh..!"

"Probably a threat with stupid pink hair and a sick sense of humor!" the Soul Reaper growled. Szayel Aporro gave him a slightly unhappy look and snorted, self-consciously adjusting more of his hair. "Er... I didn't mean you. I meant the other one, I swear."

"I think I'll let it slide," the eccentric Arrancar concealed a smirk as he carried on with his remote search, "for now, anyways. Hmm...perhaps the Renji that *belongs* in this universe will have to make up for it..."

"That's... not really fair," Renji grumbled, "We're not really even the same person..."

"I know!" Szayel grinned slyly, "So does that mean you would be willing to do me a little favor to apologize yourself? You know, the Renji I know has never let me study his Bankai before...Maybe you could—"

"No."

Szayel hung his head, muttering under his breath.

"Hmph, always the same answer... Why? It's just a little test. It isn't fair at all, I do all the scientific tasks of great magnitude, and they won't even let me so much as touch it... Always the same response! Barbarians..."

Lumina crossed her arms, wrinkling her nose at her Master slightly.

"You expect large much, sir."

"Ahahah!" he chuckled, patting her on the shoulder fondly, "Yes, I guess I do. I expect large much." He tittered for a bit longer than was considered normal and trailed off with a sigh, still somehow managing to work on the surveillance angles with impunity, "Anyhow...What were we talking about?"

"W-wait!" Uryu started, eyes fixed on the lower part of the screen, "Stop there!"

"Hmm? See something?" Szayel perked up, pausing his hand a hair above the next button. He looked up and froze, his mouth hanging open slightly.

"Wha..? Where?" Renji narrowed his eyes at the viewing device and leaned in closer to it. Uryu pointed him lower, towards where a part of a small figure could be seen poking up from where the covered area cut off.

"There. It's Pesche," Uryu stated bluntly before noticing the strange look frozen on the Espada's face.

"Eee!" Both Lumina and Verona squeaked. They were staring, also seeming greatly alarmed, right at the beetle-like false mask on the corner of the view.

"Pesche Guatiche?" Szayel asked incredulously, standing up abruptly, "*This* is your friend?"

"Umm... not exactly a 'friend', but he and another guy named Dondochakka were helping us," Uryu pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose a bit, "Or... they were trying to, anyway. What's wrong?"

"Both of them, huh?" the mad doctor seemed to loosen up suddenly, giving a great sigh of relief that was mixed in with a dark chuckle, "Forgive me for alarming you... I almost forgot about the whole 'people from another reality are here' thing." Sitting back down, he pressed the button for an adjoining view, which showed the comedic duo strolling along aimlessly, walking in the direction of the hidden camera. "Haha, you scared me there for a minute; I thought you meant that you saw the Pesche and Dondochakka from *this* reality. I should've known."

"So... *They're* evil... and *you're* good here?" Renji's face was priceless. Szayel looked as if he were about to launch into a more detailed deconstruction for the Lieutenant, but instead thought better of it and nodded. "So... there are two of each here--and half are our enemies, but we've gotta find the not evil two. And do all that without getting killed by *our* version of you, while trying not to kill *you* you by mistake...Damn! This is gonna be annoying."

"Nonono—" Lumina raised her hand and hopped about like a young child, then pointed at the image of Pesche, "Easy, yousee, lookie—He wear loincloth."

"...He *is* wearing a loincloth..." Szayel Aporro let an amused grin slowly spread over his face, "That--h-heh--certainly makes it easier."

"Where is that hallway in relation to here?" Uryu pressed, wanting to convene with as many allies as possible as soon as he could in preparation for facing the evil Octava again.

"Lumina will show you the way, won't you Lumina?" Szayel gestured for the odd-shaped female Arrancar to rise, which she did with a frog-like hop.

"Okie-dokie, Lord Szayel Aporro," she grinned, waddling over to the Quincy and lightly tugged his sleeve for him to follow, "C'mon, c'mon—we go. Collect Mister Nice Pesche and Mister Nice Moa Head!"

"O...kay," Uryu let himself be dragged a bit until he could stand no more and discreetly disentangled his sleeve cuff. He looked back over his shoulder to Renji as he started heading off, "I guess I'll be back, uh... You're staying here?"

"Yeah," the Lieutenant growled, eyeing the seat Lumina had vacated as if considering taking it in her absence, "If we happen to see that creep," he bared his teeth, "I wanna be there to

cut him to pieces..!"

"Eheheh..hahaa..." Szayel giggled again. He loosened his collar slightly and tried to continue with the surveillance without looking a bit nervous. "It... may be a good idea for me to, oh, I don't know, mark myself as the Szayel Aporro that belongs here? Let's see, I could simply roll one sleeve up or...ah! I could come up with a code word... Hmm... How's 'Pineapple'? Or maybe something more obscure, like 'Cheesem--"

"Uhh, you don't need to bother," Renji quickly interrupted with a slight wince at the Octava's unusual rant, "When the, um, bad you ended up here I'm pretty sure he was wearing different clothes...some cape or something."

Szayel's back stiffened suddenly, and he turned his head slowly and somewhat unnervingly... like a killer in a horror movie about to reveal his gruesome face to a victim.

"You're kidding me," he sounded none-too-pleased about Renji's little packet of information, "A...*cape*?!?"

"Y-Yeah..." Renji reconsidered his seating arrangement at the sudden escalation in volume.

"Eww!" the Espada scowled, his sneer revealing a lot of his rather scary teeth, "A *cape*?! *Really*?! Ugh, who does he think he is? Draping such a ridiculous thing on *ME*—er, or at least on himself, which is basically a copy of me... Ahh! Capes weren't even in style back when I was *alive*!!!"

"Eh... You paying attention to those screens..?" Renji stood back as far away as looked natural but not wussy.

"Of course, of course..." Szayel grumbled and hunched more than usual as he returned to a semblance of paying attention. There was a silence, save for the electrical hum.

Verona broke it with a giggle.