

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

Section 8: Release the Crack!

"Oh dear..."

Szayel Aporro stared at the screen with concern and a hint of embarrassment crossing his face. Renji spotted what was giving him grief on the viewer and resisted the urge to scoff. He should have known, really—if the evil Szayel Aporro didn't give even two-thirds of a shit about it, then by default the one he now shared the room with was all about it.

Though it was pretty funny to see Ilfort flopping around, legs not quite steady enough to hold him up but too stubborn to stop trying. Once again the Espada's brother shown in the image heaved himself up, trying to use the side of the wall as a crutch, but his hand slipped and he fell in slow motion, hands clawing at the smooth surface in vain.

"Oh dear," the Octava repeated. He cradled his forehead in one hand and sat back, "I was hoping Uryu would find them before something like this happened... And of course, my brother would be the one to jump in and get himself wrung out. And with that shoulder too! I'm going to have to align it again. No doubt it's out of place after all that banging around..."

"I take it he gets beat up a lot."

"Not a lot, but often enough to become a nuisance..." Szayel suddenly shivered, shaking his head, "Wait, no, what am I saying? Calling my *brother* a nuisance, ugh, I sound like the other me. Ugh."

"Uh, no...It's okay," Renji faltered. He wasn't good at consoling anybody, especially not highly eccentric Arrancar doctor-warriors, but the Octava looked quite bent out of shape. "It's okay to find someone annoying even if they're your brother. Lots of my friends are annoying."

"Ahahah! Yes, true," Szayel smiled with his eyes fixed on the screen. Several views flashed by, including one with a lone medic-class Fracción belting down a broad hallway and darting into a narrower one. "Hmm, what's Brian doing that needs such a hurry? No matter. Let's see... I've covered every hall and all of the plazas...All that's left is the rooms. He must be in one of those..."

Renji leaned forward, eager to see where the wicked Octava was hiding (so he could personally smash him). Images of dozens of areas flicked by, most of them showing the better part (but not the bedchambers or bathrooms) of living spaces but with a healthy dose of medical wards and storage areas.

The view stopped on one such ward.

"Well, well, that's a very familiar-looking fellow in that corner..." Szayel seethed. Renji followed where the Octava was pointing and grinned.

"Found him!" He straightened up and gave his zanpakuto a flick, turning it into Shikai form. Szayel started and stood up, raising his hands in a cautionary gesture.

"Hold on just a second," his voice was a bit sterner now, "From what I heard about the other side you didn't do so well fighting this madman on your own. You may want to reconsider rushing off like this—"

"Yeah, well," Renji snorted, "Last time I couldn't use my Bankai. I'm willing to bet he won't do so well now that I've got it back..!"

"Still," The Octava was clearly not fooling about, standing to his full height and crossing his arms. "It wouldn't be wise. How do you know he isn't out of tricks? I certainly know that he isn't," he smirked, but gravely, "And you're still not one hundred percent recovered yet. I warn you, if you mean to walk out that door and go get yourself killed or worse by that fiend before Uryu and Lumina return with your companions, then I shall be forced to stop you."

Renji growled, not particularly willing to have to fend off a non-evil Szayel just to get his hands on an evil one. As anger cleared from his head he had to admit that the Octava was being the smart one, and that he was very close to doing something very stupid. Lowering Zabimaru, the Soul Reaper huffed.

"Fine," He sat down, Zabimaru returning to its ordinary katana form again. The poor zanpakuto had to be dreadfully confused by all the bipolar transformations by now. "I'll wait. But you better keep that screen fixed on that guy from now on!"

"Already there, friend," The Octava unleashed a huge grin as he plugged away at a second, more mysterious set of controls to the side of the main ones. Renji did not see any observable effect that the Espada's fiddling had done.

"What do you mean?"

"As of three and a half seconds ago, I directed the camera system to track that version of me," Szayel leaned back in his chair and stretched luxuriously, "So now he'll never be out of our sight! The angles will keep following him, even if he goes out of frame into a place with no cameras. They'll jump right back to him the second he comes back into view."

"That's... Pretty sweet..." Renji blinked.

"Oh, really, it's not. Just simple tracking technology," The Octava practically wriggled with glee like a child at the praise. Verona looked like he was about to say something, but

reconsidered it at the sight of his Master beaming. Shrugging, the odd little Arrancar reached into a pocket on the side of his uniform and pulled out a little gadget of a type Renji had never laid eyes on before.

It had buttons, and a little screen, and a colorful border. Verona was effortlessly punching away at the buttons, directing the actions of a tiny ninja on the screen, ordering it to jump, flip, and swing its pixelated sword at what looked like vicious scowling blobs of green slime. The Lieutenant stared at the game for longer than he thought anything this foolish could hold his attention.

Grudgingly he admitted that watching Verona's ninja kill zombies and blob monsters was a heck of a lot better than watching Szayel Aporro look bored and creepy in a corner.

And Then, In the Men's Room!

"Pesche, I see you!"

The beetle-masked man looked up guiltily, coming to an abrupt halt.

"What?"

"Ya need ta wash your hands, Pesche! Yecch! You was 'bout ta just walk outta here!" Dondochakka looked disgusted even through his mask. Pesche, caught in the act, was forced to march back and run his hands under the faucet.

"Y-yeeeow! But the hand-washing water's always so hot!"

"It ain't dat hot. I drank tea dat was hotter."

"Look at that! There's steam comin' off of it!" Pesche pointed out the thin wisps that were less legitimate steam than they were the beginnings of the baby cousins of steam. "Steam equals hot, so don't judge me!"

"Yeah, yeah. I betcha you just forgot how ta wash 'em from all dat time we was out in the desert." Dondo turned to leave, "But when you's in Las Noches ya gotta be a little more civilized!"

"I am civilized, you chunky-butted monkey!" Pesche muttered under his breath, his arms crossed like a disgruntled toddlers, "And you just killed about a million trees, drying your big fat hands with about two thousand towels..."

"Ughhh..." Dondochakka's palm smacked against his mask in frustration, "Pesche... You know stuff in Hueco Mundo don't come from trees or spirty guys or anythin', right?"

"I was joking, geez! What, can't take a joke with a silly premise or something? That's not in accordance with our comedy playbook!" Pesche wagged a finger as he caught up to the larger Arrancar, "That's the whole reason Nel could laugh at our 'Cannibal Restaurant' sketch! Cuz it was ridiculous!"

Fists planted triumphantly on his hips, Pesche sauntered out the door, right into Lumina.

The little Arrancar squeaked aloud with surprise, jumping back and saving herself from falling on her back by bouncing on one long-fingered hand. As she landed, she set her slightly disfigured face into a pouting frown.

"You guys need to learn to stop doing that," Uryu stood just a few steps behind where the Fracción del Octava had landed. "It could have gotten you hacked to pieces back there."

"URYUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!"

The Quincy may not have predicted that the loin-clothed man would run at him with arms open for a dreaded man-hug, but he was easily able to sidestep it now that the comedic duo had reverted to pretending they were lousy fighters. Pesche pinwheeled his arms and staggered, accidentally hugging air and being thrown off-balance by his wild rush.

"Actually, I'd like it better if you just said 'hi'," Uryu quickly added, seeing Pesche turn and prepare for another rush. He gave a nervous look towards Dondochakka, checking to make sure he wasn't also going to enthusiastically (See "painfully") embrace him. "You guys, come with me, and whatever you do, don't freak out or run off. There's something we need to explain to you..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, hey, hey--who's 'we'?" Pesche threw his hands up in the air. He was looking down his nose a bit at Lumina, keeping his eye on her suspiciously, "And why, Uryu, are you consorting with the enemy?! That's one of those two little round guys, doncha know! The one that didn't get murdered!"

"Actually, she's the one that did get murdered," Ishida corrected. Lumina squirmed at the banter about her getting murdered, and snuggled up to the Quincy's leg for comfort. Uryu twitched but allowed it for the moment.

And the Great Desert Bros were mortified. They stood in a shock, the very picture of "HUUUNH?!?!" itself.

"HUUUNH?!?!" Dondochakka's mouth could have fit two watermelons instead of just one. Pesche stomped the ground dramatically.

"Now wait a sec!" he screeched, "How the hell is that..?! There's no such thing as zombies, and ya can't just go around reanimating dead guys willy-nilly! It's not right! It's not possible! Are you losing your mind, Ichigo!?!?"

"I'm *Uryu*," the Quincy ground his teeth.

"Uryu, right, uhh..." Pesche's volume decreased dramatically and he seemed to physically deflate. Before he could rant on Uryu raised one hand.

"Let's just... Go back to where Renji's waiting and sort this out. It'll all make sense when we get it from the expert."

"The expert?!" The two were in chorus.

"That's what I said," Uryu turned and beckoned them, shaking off the adoring Fracción clinging to his leg, "It's really easier if you just shut up and follow me. And remember, don't freak out when we get there!"

The Life of Brian

Careful to keep himself inconspicuous as always, Brian poked his head around the corner into the nearby hallway. He could see the faint blue light glowing softly underneath the doors, no doubt given off by the monitors. Steeling himself for the confrontation, the medic strode out to the door.

He stared at the blank white rectangle. He'd seen his Master open this chamber before, but he wasn't sure that a lowly medic would have been given such permission to enter. After all, it was a bit important to be sure that only a few qualified people were allowed to spy on nearly a hundred Fracciones.

He decided that any attempt to open the portal himself might not be smart. Who knew, there may be alarms or even traps set up should an unauthorized hand light on the panel. Brian shuddered. His Master had a thing for traps, often very odd and embarrassing traps. The only good news is that they were always non-lethal.

But sometimes those caught in them wished they were dead from the shame of it. The medic remembered the last time a servant accidentally set one off—the poor man left dangling by hundreds of criss-crossed needley poles, upside-down, his clothes torn to shreds from the trap

shooting out and pinning him. Only a bare scrap of underpants had saved the poor guy from complete helpless nudity.

Pursing his lips, Brian knocked timidly on the door. Renji was in here, with another who seemed nearly as strong and what felt like either Verona or Lumina. There was no sound from within.

I suppose I've got to knock louder... Brian thought to himself. Three knocks came again, this time with quite a lot more force. He heard shuffling from inside, and a muffled voice.

The left door, the one directly in front of Brian the medic's face, opened about a foot. Brian's breath caught in his throat. Had he not been informed that there was an imposter about he wouldn't have thought anything of seeing his Master standing there.

"Oh, Brian! I was just watching you!" The Espada smiled brightly, leaning on the doorframe. The misled medic barely remembered to keep the expression of horror off of his face. Funny, the presence of this fake hadn't felt quite as powerful as he knew his Espada to be. He concluded that he must have been suppressing his strength, but to hide or build it up for later he could not tell.

"So, what brings you by? Don't tell me there was another accident with the newbies and the security measures..."

Brian blinked. This fake seemed to have done its research. Or his research. Now that he thought about it, had his Master even explained exactly what the fake Szayel was supposed to be? Was it a shape-shifting entity? Or a clone? Or a very elaborate disguise that someone was wearing?

"Ummm..." He recalled the instructions not to speak to the false Octava, but now it seemed more telling of his awareness of the imposter to not speak. Maybe Lord Szayel Aporro had meant it to avoid his charge being coerced by the fake? Yes, that was probably it. Well, Brian wasn't having any of that.

But what to say? If the fake had even a drop of the intellect of the true one it would be very tricky indeed to bluff his way into anything with it about.

Watching his Fracción sweating and stalling in his presence, Szayel Aporro narrowed one eye ever so slightly.

"Umm, er, sir," the words did not so much come out but fell out, "There's been... an incident that desperately needs attending to. You're not...busy, are you?"

"Well, at the moment, no." The Octava admitted, "But I will be in a short while. Is it that urgent?"

"Yes, sir, it is that urgent." Brian felt his confidence coming back. So far the fake did not act like it at all suspected that he was in the know.

"Alright, well, I suppose I should go..." The Espada brushed some hair out of his face and huffed noisily, "Though I'd really prefer to wait until Uryu and Lumina are back with--Oh! And here they come!"

Brian peered around. Was this false Espada mad? No one was coming. Close to thirty seconds passed before the medic could begin to sense what had been plain to Szayel earlier.

The silvery muted orb of spiritual pressure was approaching, accompanied by three other that seemed to have all the qualities of Arrancar. Ten seconds later and their distant forms, like miniatures, appeared around the corner Brian had earlier been peeking around.

"Welcome back," Szayel smiled, holding his arms out wide at chest level in a welcoming gesture, "I see you found our two trouble-makers just fine."

Pesche and Dondochakka froze with strangled squeaks. Lumina giggled as if expecting that response. Uryu gave the pair a stern glare.

"You said you wouldn't freak out," The two stared at him, gaping in disbelief.

"You didn't say nuttin' 'bout dis!"

"Ohmigosh, it's mind control! It's gotta be mind-control!"

"There's no mind control, you dumbasses!" Renji had heard the commotion and leaned out of the doorway. "Do I look mind-controlled to you?!"

"Uhh, no, you look pretty scary actually..." Pesche cowered. Renji rolled his eyes at the display.

"Right, I'm so scary." The two comedic bros flinched, "So what happened to your ability to fight before this?"

"Uhh..! We don't know what you're talkin' 'bout..!"

"Sure you don't. So it was just a hallucination that I just watched you beat the tar out of someone it took my Bankai to fight?"

"Uhhh..."

"Where was that when we were fighting him?!" Renji's tattooed eyebrows creased into furious slants. "We wouldn't be in this position if you had just cut the crap and helped us!"

"Now, let's not fight, friends," Szayel stepped in between them with hands still upraised.

"There's a lot to be explained here, and it simply won't get done if we just stand about arguing what would have been the best way to kill me." He glanced over towards the Soul Reaper, his visage taking on a slightly nervous appearance, "Also, it's best not to start encouraging these two superb fighters to start attacking Szayel Aporro if they aren't familiar with the situation yet."

"Oh," Renji cringed inwardly at his mistake, "Sorry..."

"Seriously, I was right here," Szayel continued, shaking his head, "Not a good idea to start mouthing off the benefits of strangling the Octava to those two before bothering to explain that there's two Octavas." He put his face in his hands, "God, I wish the Renji from this world was here..."

"Gee, thanks..." Renji stopped feeling apologetic pretty quick.

"Wait, whut?!"

"Two Octavas?"

"That's right," Szayel made his face calm and benign again, looking down fondly as Lumina returned to her preferred position of hugging his leg. Spotting Verona in the door, she loped off and started watching him play his ninja game over his shoulder.

"So, let's get everyone up to speed." Szayel moved fluidly to Brian's side, "We can talk as we go. Now, Brian, about this incident—you can tell me about it right after I'm finished explaining to these two what's going on."

"Y-yes, sir," Brian's mind raced. What was the fake going on about? So it knew that the others knew there were two Octavas, or that they would find out sooner or later? Was it indoctrinating Renji, Uryu and anyone else it could find that it was the real one and the actual Octava sitting in Ward 2 was a fake?

He concluded he hadn't heard enough to know for sure what the imposter was up to yet. He would have to continue breaking with his Master's orders and stay with the false Octava to learn more.

"Whoof..." Brian muttered under his breath, where no one else could hear him, "I need a drink..."