

The Crack of the Other Side

2: Common Conversation

There was a common space in each of the Espada's Fracciones' living areas of their palaces, but Shawlong really preferred the one within the Sexta's palace. There was an extra sofa, and it had a particularly good reading light arching up behind the far-left cushion. Good in that it was durable, and could be jury-rigged so that it was optimal for him.

Or rather, *had* been jury-rigged so that it was optimal for him. Short people were in the dark, and taller people got the glare right in the bottom of their field of vision. No one but him would claim it.

It was usually quiet. There was a broadcast garganta placed on the opposite side of the wall, with the other cluster of sofas, but it was seldom being used. Only in the evenings, especially on Saturdays, was there any trace of the general rowdiness displayed by the more uncouth Soldados.

But there were always odd days out. This day was, for example, a Tuesday.

"Wash wrong wit' ya, huh, Horny-Boy?" D-Roy's appearance in the usual refined setting of the commonroom was odd, much odder than Ilfort's. The pale-haired brother of the Octava was slumped on one end of the sofa in front of the broadcast garganta, pretending to pay painful attention to the reports flowing down the screen before the actual entertainment came on. And D-Roy was doing his best to disrupt everyone in the scene, despite not being aware he was doing so.

"Nothing's wrong," Ilfort said. "Now get the hell away from me."

"Whooooa! Temper, temper!" D-Roy's snickers were a gnashing mess. It was offensive to Shawlong's ears even across the room, "If nothing'sh wrong, then why you freakin' out, eh?"

"Because I'm restraining the urge to take your ear off with my horn."

"Aawww, c'mon, Ilfort..." D-Roy scooted back a bit nevertheless, "I'm your homey, man. I just wanna know what's eatin' ya."

Shawlong turned the page, trying not to grind his teeth. It was difficult to read at the regular pace with all the idiotic background noise. *Might as well give up on trying to finish this today*, he thought.

"Nothing's 'eating me'..." Ilfort reached across the couch and shoved D-Roy badtemperedly. The snaggle-toothed Soldado wobbled, overbalanced, and fell over the back of

the arm of the chair. "Now why don't you go and, I dunno, bother someone else, *somewhere* else..."

"Not cool," D-Roy growled and struggled upright, rubbing a sore spot on his posterior. "You broke my ass."

"You *are* an ass."

"Hey! I take offense t' that!"

"I take offense to you trying to get in my business."

"I wasn't—heeeey." D-Roy's face split open in a crafty grin, "You admit shomethin's goin' on, huh?" The jagged-toothed Arrancar leaned forward eagerly.

"I didn't say that."

"Eshesheh... Easy..." D-Roy backed up again, pressing himself up against the back of the chair away from Ilfort's venomous glare, "Don't gimme that look."

"What look is this?" Ilfort's brow furrowed even more. D-Roy launched into a fit of nervous giggles.

"Th-the shtrangling look..." D-Roy could not stop exposing his ruined teeth in a grin, "Eshesheh... Don't shtrangle me..."

"Don't worry, I won't," Ilfort let out a wry laugh. "Yet."

Shawlong rolled his eyes. This was the kind of tomfoolery one could expect from the less polished members of the Sexta Fracción, but it never ceased to give him a reason to groan. Only page four hundred and three. Pathetic. The distraction value of those two was legendary.

"Oh, yeah? You try shtrangling me an' I'll kick your ass sho hard it'll migrate to your nipples!"

Ilfort chuckled, putting his hand on his face. Once he brought himself under control he raised a finger, "First off, that's the *stupidest* threat I've ever heard." He put up one more finger, "Second, if I decide I want to strangle you, you couldn't do much to stop me. Wuss."

"I ain't a wussh!" D-Roy objected, throwing down his hands like a child.

"You don't train at all." Ilfort smirked, "Wuss."

"Shtop callin' me a wussh! You don't train either!"

"Yes I do. Every day."

"Oh? When?"

"Different times. But every day."

"Liar!"

"Am not."

"Are too."

Shawlong had finally had enough. Inserting a small bookmark in his place and checking to make sure it was snugly in its place, he took either side of the book in his palms and slammed them shut hard enough to create a resounding echo. The sound stopped the infantile spat rather quickly.

"Will you two please shut your word-holes?" He lifted one eyebrow, but his expression was still very much ticked, "Your sound pollution is disturbing my ability to read."

The two were silent, D-Roy sulking and Ilfort grateful. But it was bound to not last.

"Sho what ish buggin' ya?"

"Ughhh..." Ilfort hung his head, giving up on discouraging his comrade's annoying inquiries, "Why do you need to know?"

"I'm your homey!" D-Roy gasped, "Homies got your back!"

"You're not anyone's 'homey', D-Roy..."

"Well, then I jusht wanna know!" D-Roy stuck his face up close the Ilfort's, who leaned back over the bounds of the sofa's arm to avoid letting the smaller man come too close.

"Your breath's nasty, brother."

"Don't change the shubject!" D-Roy pulled away with an offended pout, "Jusht tell me what'sh goin' on and I'll shut up!"

"You will?" Ilfort perked up. D-Roy looked up from blowing his breath into a cupped hand to answer.

"Ew, that doesh shtink...Oh, er, yeah," he said. "You gotta tell me firsht though."

"Swear on your honor." Ilfort crossed his arms. Shawlong peered up over the pages of his book with the faintest of smirks.

"I wouldn't trust that."

"Hey!" D-Roy twisted around to glare at the tall man, but he was already immersed in the pages again, "Fine, I shwear. Now, tell me tell me tell me!"

Ilfort sighed, eyes flicking over D-Roy suspiciously. Once they went to Shawlong in the background, but he dismissed any fears that he would go blabbing it around everywhere. No, that would be D-Roy he'd have to worry about. And he had sworn not to. Even if it was a little quickly and off-handedly.

"Okay. And you won't go running around telling everybody with functioning ears?"

"Nope."

"No laughing?"

"I'll try."

"And in return you'll shut the hell up?"

"Yesh."

"Hunh." Ilfort rubbed his forehead and pushed some long golden hair out of his face, "Alright... It's a girl."

D-Roy's eyes went wide, then he smiled fiendishly from one side of his bulbous mask to the other.

"A girl, huh? Eshehshehshehsheh! What'sh her name, huh? Ish she hot?" His perverse giggles died down somewhat on seeing the evil look Ilfort was shooting him.

"You're not even trying not to laugh, you asshole."

"I am sho! I wash...I wash just laughing 'cuz I wash thinking of girls." His painful-lloking teeth stuck out from his curled lower lip, "But she ish hot, right?"

"Well, duh."

"And what'sh her name?" D-Roy's teeth poked out even more obviously, so much so that Ilfort wanted to punch them, "Or do ya not wanna tell me that, lover boy?"

"I don't know..." Ilfort slumped over. D-Roy blinked.

"Well, make up your mind then."

"No, I meant I don't know her name," Ilfort mumbled from under a curtain of hair.

"You don't know her name? How'd you get to likin' a girl without learning her name firsht?"

"I don't know! This isn't a 'liking' thing, either!" Ilfort groaned and leaned back on the sofa, "It's not as if I didn't ask. She just didn't tell me."

Shawlong looked up questioningly, both eyebrows raised up a fraction. He set the book part of the way down and stared at Ilfort hard enough that one might think he was trying to spontaneously combust him.

"Ilfort, exactly when did you meet this girl..?"

"Two...nights ago," Ilfort gritted his teeth as he said it. Of course, Shawlong would deduce which girl he was talking about from the tiny bits of information he'd chosen to reveal. And as expected he was justifiably alarmed by what he'd discovered. "It's only a stupid, senseless crush, you know. Not serious."

"I hope not." Shawlong's face was on the verge of a glare, "You know it'd be disastrous, or at least I hope you do..."

"I know, I know, it's really stupid," Ilfort admitted. D-Roy looked back and forth between the two, the sneaking feeling that he was missing something looming over his head.

"What's shtupid? What, you know who the girl ish?"

A simultaneous glare from both of them told him that he was no longer an accepted conversation partner. Shrinking back into the cushions of the sofa, D-Roy turned to the programme on the broadcast garganta and resisted listening in.

"Just know that if you allow yourself to pursue anything here, you are risking lives." Shawlong opened his book again but did not look down at it, "Including and especially your own. And it's very likely that you will never see her ever again. There are thousands of Soul Reapers, Ilfort, and thousands of miles of Hueco Mundo where they are sent. Hundreds are killed every year, replaced by more hundreds. The odds of this working..." Shawlong shifted in his seat and tapped his fingers on the pages, "...They're very, very, very low."

"I *know* that," Ilfort snarled, taking up a position not unlike D-Roy. Being scolded like this was starting to get on his nerves. It wasn't as if he didn't realize how incredibly illogical the crush was, and how ridiculously stupid it would be to think it would work. Hearing it repeated was poison to his already foul mood, "You don't need to tell me all that. I know. It's not gonna happen." He put his feet up on the small coffee table and let out a long sigh, "I'm just really confused about how this started."

"She's *hot* and you're not gonna—" One look from Ilfort and the feeling of Shawlong's laser eyes on the back of his head was enough to clamp D-Roy's mouth shut, "Never mind."

"Hormones. It's all to do with them," Shawlong murmured, turning a new page. "That's why I never trust the bastards."

"You have hormones..?!" D-Roy's mouth gaped. Shawlong looked at him as if garbage were fountaining from his head.

"Yes, D-Roy. I have hormones. Everyone does." The tall man picked a single eyelash from where it had fallen on his book and set it carefully on the end table next to a small collection of others, "I just don't listen to them."

"How do you do that..?" D-Roy was mystified. Shawlong suddenly wanted to not be there, having to explain a lofty concept like self-control to the little wannabe. There was, however, an easy way out.

"Look it up."

"Look where?"

"Anywhere. Try books." Shawlong smirked, "It would be an admirable start to your reading career."

"H-Hey..!" D-Roy growled. "I can read! I just don't like it!"

"Oh well, I guess you'll never learn how to tell you testosterone to shove it."

"Wha.. But..." D-Roy could not come up with a snarky reply, or any reply really. He grumbled and stood, "Dammit..." And stalked out of the commons.

Ilfort blew a snort out of his nostrils, relieved that the little squeaking rat wasn't going to be around to interfere with his serious problems. He didn't mind the guy too much when things were going well, but whenever anything was off... He was always in the way. And he didn't usually have the sense to get out of the way. He took some "looking after"—which was unfortunately in his nature to do, even when the kid himself should have been taking up this slack.

"Hmm..." Shawlong found the header to a new chapter and allowed himself a little grin. But Ilfort would probably begin spilling out everything else that was on his mind soon, so there was little point in starting this one.

Right on cue, "I just wish she were an Arrancar..."

"Mm-hmm."

"Or even a bland regular human would be better than, than *this*." Ilfort stared vapidly at the screen, not caring what was on, "At least the only issue there would be distance and being careful not to smush her by accident."

"Mm-hmm."

"At least then she wouldn't be a sworn enemy."

"Hmm."

"Yeah, you're right. This whole thing is dumb." Ilfort stretched and yawned, "I'm gonna take a nap here. Will you swat the little bug for me if he comes back?"

"Mm-hmm."

"...Are you just grunting affirmatively whenever I say anything?"

"Mn-nmm."

"Oh, okay." Ilfort snuggled into the couch cushions, making sure not to mangle his hair too much. Or impale any part of the furniture with his mask bit.

Just forget about it, brother, he thought to himself. It's like skinny says: Not gonna happen. Never even going to see her again. Hunh, good riddance...