

The Crack of the Other Side

3: Behold, Grimmjow (180% Nicer, 50% Chiller)

Espada Quarters were massive, decadent even. Even compared to the ample space afforded to Fracciones and civilians. Grimmjow didn't like it.

For one, the rooms were hard to heat. The settings on the wall panel might say twenty-five, but it was probably more like twenty in reality. Not that it was a drain on energy or anything. Hueco Mundo was literally made of spirit energy; they would literally never run out. Though it was annoying when machines lied to you.

The bed was too big. He couldn't dangle his arm out as required for a decent night's sleep. He would sweat like crazy if he couldn't do this, but if he did he'd look strange--slid over to one side of a massive bed, one arm out, the rest of the bed sitting there useless and empty.

He did not like that. But it was too much trouble to ask for a different bed.

The bed sat in the center of one of the clover-leaf branches of the Sexta's main quarters. As expected, one toned arm dangled out from the edge of the ivory sheets, and that was it aside from a tuft of messy electric blue hair. A mound in the covers shifted and inflated outwards, and the man underneath rolled over, removing the sheets from his face with a clawing motion. Sitting up, he took a moment to pull the wrinkled edge of his undershirt down over the tattoo which marked his rank on his left side. With a grunt he stood and wandered over to one of the other branches of the room, yawning the entire way. His jaws came back together with a clack of his mask fragments.

He stood by the mirror in the lavatory, staring vaguely at his own face. The black marks that had adorned the skin beneath his eyes ever since he had ceased being a Menos looked a little saggy today. His hair was a shock, the usual short spikes half-flattened and half-fuzzed out to the side. Comb needed there. Maybe a drop of hair gel, straighten the points up. Not too much. He didn't want to look like a porcupine. Or some kind of manga character.

The hair gelling went smoothly. He brushed and flossed. *Are the teeth up here meant to be flossed too?* he wondered, running a hand on the partial jaw that was permanently attached to his right cheek. *Probably not. Not real teeth.*

The colder-than-the-heating-controls claimed draft from under the door struck him, reminding him that clothes were in order. Nothing too great. Shirt, pants, shoes, and... done. The shirt stays open, though. No need to shut it. He'd sweat all over it then, and what would be the point in wearing a shirt wrong just to cover it in Espada sweat?

Espada sweat, hmm. Sounds like a witch ingredient or something.

He returned to the mirror. Something wrong with his face. Ah. The red mark from sleeping on the wrong side of his face. His mask nibbled on him again. Good thing the teeth were a little blunt.

He remembered something. *Oh, right, of course they're blunt. I had to sand them down...*

A knock sounded on his door. Grimmjow turned. Can't do a thing about the marks now. Work time approached. The Sexta answered:

"Who is it?" he grunted.

"Shawlong, sir."

"Get in here." Grimmjow nodded to himself, stepping away from the mirror. He had expected Shawlong. The skinny man was always on time, "Door's not locked."

"Thank you, sir." Such a formal attitude. Why? The two of them went way back, a lot farther back than most Arrancar. They knew each other even a short time before regaining their freedom.

"What's up?" Grimmjow directed his subordinate and friend into the third wing of his gigantic chambers. There were chairs there. It looked like an office, despite the Sexta's best efforts to eliminate that effect. But it was unavoidable—chairs (ergonomic, not cushy), desk (too big, couldn't reach across the whole thing for something even if he was afflicted with those freakishly long arms a number of Arrancar got), filing spaces (reports had to go somewhere). *Ooh, how classy. How officious. Bleh.*

"Regular business and whatnot," Shawlong said. Grimmjow could tell he had something else to say though. Eyes were all flicky, "Also, a small issue with Ilfort's watch that he took three days ago."

"Oh, the exciting one? " Grimmjow plopped down in one of the larger seat on one side of the desk, one leg hanging over the arm. Shawlong nodded with a smirk threatening to creep onto his thin face, "What about it?"

"Something disturbing I've learned about that night, aside from the obvious," he said. Grimmjow blinked and gazed hard at his old friend.

"Disturbing?"

"Yes, to do with Ilfort." Shawlong took a seat as well, choosing one across from his Master, "I have doubts about his safety after this event."

"Hmm. Yeah. Finding out that Soul Reapers can get on your porch is a bit unsettling." He

scratched behind one of his ears, "But I doubt any of us are in danger yet. Those Expeditionary Force ones are tough, but Ilfort could take four of them easy."

"That's the thing, he could have defeated her easily." Shawlong criss-crossed his fingers. He would look anxious if not for his stone face, "Some of the Octava's tests revealed that the trespasser's reiatsu did not exceed concentrations expected from a fifth seat. He could have slain her in one strike, or captured her with no effort."

"That's what you get for sleeping on the job," Grimmjow chuckled, a canine tooth jutting out of his mouth. Shawlong nodded placatingly but went further.

"True, but there's another reason to believe Ilfort is under some threat from this Soul Reaper." He licked dry lips, "According to what he told me last night, he has developed feelings for this enemy."

Grimmjow blinked.

"As in...?"

Shawlong nodded.

"Damn." Grimmjow ran crooked fingers through his hair, squashing some of the spikes he'd fought to get standing right just moments before, "Hmm..."

To Shawlong's surprise, the Espada shrugged.

"Nothin' we can do about it, really."

Shawlong shifted in his chair, glancing from left to right.

"But, sir—"

"No 'sir', remember? I'm Grimmjow."

"Right," he remembered. "Grimmjow, don't you find this unsettling? Whether we like it or not, and whether we asked for it or not, war with Soul Society is coming. What happens if Ilfort must fight that specific woman?"

"Who knows?" Grimmjow shrugged again and leaned back in his chair, taking his leg off the arm of it and slinging it across his other one, "Hopefully he'll do his duty. But you never know."

"I don't like this not knowing thing." Shawlong crossed his arms, "I would rather it never happened."

"Well, it did." The Sexta grinned and bared his fangs, "Too late to go back. Anyway, it's

not as if something like this has never happened before, one-way, two-way, either. Arrancar to Soul Reaper, or vice versa." The grin receded into a knowing look, neither grin nor frown, "It's all over the place in those dusty old records downstairs. Wars or no wars. It never cost us too much before."

"Might cost us enough." Shawlong's eyes widened. Grimmjow narrowed one of his at his friend.

"Shawlong, remember, no coercing people without their permission." He grinned again, "But yeah, it is up to Ilfort here. So no deciding for him, understood?"

"Yes..."

"Now, are you hungry? I'm hungry." Grimmjow stood and stretched his arms high over his head, waiting until Shawlong rose before heading toward the door, "Let's get somethin' to eat before my insides start a mutiny."

"Yes, si—Grimmjow."