

The Crack of the Other Side

5: A Ghost Adventure

It was a normal evening in what could be anywhere in the modern world. Well, not anywhere, but a lot of places. A lot of places that were the outside of run-down theaters on the outskirts of a small American town long past its heyday. The sign was heavily warped and had most of its paint taken off: It read either "Gold ----- Theatre" or "Bird ----- Theatre", it was difficult to tell. Across the weather-stained glass of the main entrance was a heavy bar of steel, and a rusted chain together with a hefty lock secured it all.

The sun was setting, turning the blue sky into a purplish-orange hue that had no name. None of the living and only a handful of the dead spotted the Garganta open like a giant zipper peeling a bit of the heavens back and exposing a black twisting hole of spiritual energy. Four whitish blurs zipped out of the portal, hiding quickly behind various objects below. The Garganta melted back together as if it had never existed.

"No Soul Reapers in sight?" Edorad poked his head slightly over the top of an SUV parked in the lot by the abandoned theater. Ilfort took a glance around, probing with his Pesquisa at the same time. Nothing of interest; a soul here and there, some ungifted (or still alive, or both) humans inside one of the large moving vans nearby emblazoned with a macabre TV-show title.

Demon Journey... It proclaimed, surrounded by ominous skull figures, zombified versions of its small but popular cast, and an artist's depiction of what they thought spiritual energy looked like.

It looks like a bunch of blue farts. Ilfort tried not to giggle. *Maybe this will be fun.*

"None," he said with a smirk. D-Roy wandered out into the open and put his hands on his hips, scrutinizing the ghost-hunting van's graphics.

"Well *this* is cool."

"All clear." Edorad himself came out, the huge grin that had plastered his face since that morning never once weakening, "Heheheh, wonder where our new friends are? They better hurry, they'll be late for the show..."

Nakim shadowed Edorad as he approached the main door. The larger of them took the big lock in his meaty hand and examined it.

"Hunh, they ain't even opened the place up yet."

"They're slow today." Nakim nodded.

"Wait a sec, I see 'em," Edorad said as he released the lock and pointed towards a different SUV approaching. "Hahah! We're in business!"

The black vehicle pulled up to the curb, its brakes protesting a bit as the driver abused them. The passenger side door swung open and a leg thrust itself out, clad in purposely faded jeans that were just a hint too tight to be on a man this bulky.

The owner of the leg was indeed beefy. Not quite as beefy as Edorad, but nearing that point. He practically strutted out of the car, gravel crunching under a slightly expensive-looking pair of boots.

"Oh, shit, doesn't he look a bit like Grimmjow?" D-Roy noticed with a shake of his head. Ilfort squinted and saw it.

"Yeah, but with black hair." His gaze wandered down towards the tight jeans, "And worse taste in clothes."

The other two in the SUV quickly revealed themselves. The second out was a skinny guy with close-cropped hair, ordinary looking. The last was either slightly overweight or unfortunately proportioned, with a short squat torso and hair covering most of what was exposed. A largely unkept beard grew like a weed on his chin, but his head was otherwise devoid of covering. Tribal tattoos, not unlike the ones common on the crowd of "tough guy" Arrancar, crept up his baldness. D-Roy couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing at the awkward pair of figures.

Which only grew worse as the fat one more fell out of the door than stepped out. The strap from the chunky camera on his shoulder caught on part of the tangled seat belt, and when he yanked at it to get it loose it obeyed a bit too quickly. He staggered sideways, looking like a drunken turkey who managed to get a film degree.

"Alright, Aaron, where's the owner guy?" The Grimmjow look-alike strode right past where D-Roy leaned in stitches against the side of the van, "He's supposed to come unlock the door so we can put our X's down."

"Dude, I dunno where he went," the bowling ball-esque one, apparently Aaron, said. The skinny one opened the boot of the SUV and took out some more camera equipment, all of it packed in black crates stamped with copies of the zombie-flavored logo.

"He's coming back in, like, ten minutes," he decided to reveal the information to the other two. They seemed to ignore him, the black-haired skinny jeans-jow strutting up to the padlocked door and rattling the securing bar. He was inches away from Nakim, but it didn't seem to bother him.

"Dudes." His voice became grave and his face turned strangely uplifted, gazing around in

slow motion (or an imitation of it) at the walls, windows, and pavilion of the ancient theater, "I can totally feel, like, an energy just floating around this whole place..."

"Is it demonic, Zak?" the skinny one asked. His voice said "Yes, I am a believer", but his face said, "This is what I ask every time he says this".

"Nah, man, nah, it's more like a..." For one ironic moment he turned slightly in Nakim's direction. The large Arrancar scooted an armslength away, just in case the unpredictable human made any unexpected moves, "It's... it's a woman, like, a female energy. It's like, calling me in there."

Nakim took another step away to the quiet snickers of the other three Fracciones. Edorad nudged Ilfort in the ribs.

"See?" he said. "Told ya this'd be fun."

"Are you sure we even need to *do* anything?" Ilfort's eyebrows raised, "They seem to be getting all worked up on their own. Or at least Zak Tightjeans is."

"Oh, yeah, thish ish way better than messin' with those 'Tapsh' guysh...!" D-Roy could hardly contain the urge to "help" the ghost-hunting trio get "evidence". Edorad put a huge paw on his shoulder to get him to stop fidgeting.

"Easy, Toofuses." He grinned, "They haven't even started filming yet. Let's egress, find a nice bunch of spots inside that theater..."

"And then comes the fun part?" Ilfort could feel his mood lift.

"And then comes the fun part, yeah."

Night fell without a sound, and the moon rose. Ilfort noticed as he stared out one of the grand windows on the main auditorium's balcony that the moon's phase was the exact opposite of Hueco Mundo's. He wondered why that was. Perhaps his brother could explain it to him if he found time later to visit him.

His position was secure, one that was guaranteed results. His left foot rested right next to and slightly behind an "X" of black electrical tape on the floor right by a complex rack of camera and other sensing equipment. The cameras sure had gotten better; not as advanced as those of dead people, but still pretty good. He could at least tell which one was infrared and which one was wired for sound. He made a mental note of where it stood, making sure that he wouldn't knock it over in the darkness.

A clatter down below him drew his attention. He leaned out from the railing, gazing down on the partially moldered stage. That was bound to be a health hazard, if it wasn't already in danger of collapsing in. The blond Arrancar snickered as he watched Zak, followed by the skinny man and Aaron with camera mounted on shoulder, step right over some fluttering caution tape and onto the wooden plain.

"So this is where the guy died onstage, right Nick?" The voice of the leader had no trouble echoing up to where Ilfort was hidden.

"Yeah, Caroline told us he was in the middle of a performance of Hamlet, and then--"

"And he was playing Hamlet the guy, right?"

"Yeah." Nick was far away, but Ilfort could already see that his macho pal's attitude was beginning to chip away at his patience, "He was playing Hamlet in Hamlet, and he dropped dead right about...here."

"Yeah." Zak turned to the camera that Aaron was holding, lunging in uncomfortably close, "And that's why we've got one of our X's right there. Dude, Aaron, show the people watching where the others are."

"Up there...there... and there." Aaron panned the camera around, stopping with the lens centered directly on Ilfort. Should I start this off? he wondered. It was possible that if he released a bit more energy the camera might pick up something. It wouldn't be able to see him really, but it would get something. That was almost better.

Ilfort grinned. He opened the taps to just a trace amount more than a trickle, slightly more than what was allowed for Arrancar going within spitting distance of ordinary humans (dead or alive).

"Holy shit!"

The reaction was better than he would have hoped! Just as ants do when a dirt clod is dropped on their hill, the three so-called investigators made a brief mad scramble for safety that wasn't there. Zak (once he was done keeping control of his bowels) rushed the camera Aaron was holding and jerked it so that he could see the tiny viewing screen.

"What the *fuck* did you see?" he demanded. Aaron gave up on keeping a hold on the camera and passed it to him, his face paler than Ilfort's Soldado uniform.

"Dude! I was, like, just gonna pan over where the X camera was on the balcony, and this big sorta grayish thing was right there next to camera three!"

They huddled over the camera, replaying the footage. Ilfort craned his neck up high, then around the sides. He frowned, not able to see the fruits of his efforts for Zak's burly arm.

"Oh my God, guys," Zak said with a grin. "This is awesome. You know where we saw an apparition like this last..?"

Aaron got a squeamish look on his face. Nick opened his mouth to answer but never had a chance.

"This is just like the one we saw at Ricky Bobby's Music Cafe." Zak had a lustful glint in his eyes. *Uh-oh*, Ilfort thought. *I don't know if I like that*. "Where I was possessed for the first time, you remember that?"

"Uh, yeah." Nick looked at Zak warily, "I mean, yeah, you were seriously messed up in there."

Zak immediately turned on his heel, his eyes smoldering in Ilfort's direction. His chest was puffed like a teenage rooster about to go to war with a rival, though thankfully his black Grimmjow-like plumage did nothing to change. Ilfort felt the need to step back, raising an eyebrow at the investigator's sudden turn towards aggression.

"What's wrong, big guy? Can't show yourself to my face?"

Zak strutted more, his glare searching the blackness for something invisible to provoke.

"That all you can do? A little smudge on a camera?" He had turned in a full circle and was now directly below where Ilfort looked on at the balcony railing, "Do something else to me! Come on, you... you bully! You demon! I'm not afraid of you! Show yourself!"

Ilfort could not help but smirk; it was all he could do to brush off the desire to grab the bulky fratboy by the skin-tight collar and give him a reason to be afraid. But that wouldn't be fun, no point in getting worked up over some blind idiot. Ilfort hopped up slightly, balancing on the railing.

"Okay, *kind sir*," he chuckled. "You wanted something else, even if you're not asking nicely at all... So here you go!"

THUD!

Ilfort didn't put any effort into lightening his landing at all. The floor shook right under Zak's feet as the Arrancar dropped down a mere two feet beside him.

"HOLY F@#%#&*#@\$!"

Aaron and Nick both decided this would be a good time to scurry like roaches to the relative safety of the stage curtains. Zak stood his ground as best he could, but still looked uncertain as he twisted his head around wildly for the source of the noise.

"No, Aaron, Nick! We do not run!" he bellowed after them.

"*Fuck* that, man!" Aaron cowered behind the device he was sure was about to record his own demise. Nick took a few calming breaths and remembered that their show was supposedly to *investigate* these things, not scream and make occult-themed drama.

"Here, Zak, take the EVP recorder." He came out to the edge of the stage, as close as he would come, and handed off the small cylindrical object.

"Yeah, Nick, I need my EVP recorder for this." Zak's face was lit up with strange masochistic delight, "They're ready to come out..!"

"I've been out, Tightjeans, where've you been?" Ilfort stood by with his arms crossed. He tilted his head back uncomfortably as the muscled man thrust the mic end of the recorder all around, nearly shoving it in Ilfort's open mouth, "Erk. Watch where you're waving that thing."

Zak of course couldn't hear him. He proceeded to shout the laundry list of things living people think would be alright and appropriate to ask dead people:

"Tell me—who are you?" Seemed legitimate, at first. Ilfort was tempted to answer (falsely) but before he could concentrate on being audible to the device the second question cut him off, "When did you die?"

"Oh, *real classy*, Tightjeans," Ilfort forgot himself a bit, scowling at the clueless man wandering feet away. In his ambling around the seats looking for the ghost he had turned in completely the opposite direction of where the Soldado stood, "Hey... Tightjeans, over here. Helloooo?"

"Are you the evil bastard that killed all those people back... back when Ricky Bobby's was still a public gallows?" Again, the pause in between the sentences intended to give the spirits a chance to speak was rudely cut short so that Zak could rant some more, "Where you took innocent people and strung them up by their necks? And you watched them die?"

"Wait, what?" Ilfort took a step back, "You didn't even listen to see if I told you who I was—"

"Well, I don't like bullies, you know." Here comes the catchphrase, "Living or dead! Now come on you hateful bastard! Show yourself! And none of this stupid thumps and tapping games!"

Ilfort shrugged and sighed. There was just no talking to some people. He remembered why he was here in that moment, and a savage grin crossed his face as he honored the ghost hunter's request.

Reaching out carefully, he waited until Zak had strutted himself into place facing him. Then, as gingerly as he could while still achieving his mischievous goal, Ilfort flicked him on the nose.

"Whuuarghh!"

The cocky human flew backwards into the edge of the stage, busting one of the rotten wood panels into two crispy slats. Shaking he got up and stared all around with his mouth agape.

"I dunno, man. I dunno," he stammered. "Whatever this thing is just rocked me!"

"Alright, guys, we need to get out of this room." Nick grabbed a hold of Zak by the meaty wrist and led him towards one of the offstage exits, "Let's try regrouping in the dressing rooms. The entity in this room is dangerous, I think."

They staggered off, uttering more curse words than Ilfort had ever heard in any Soldado line-up as they waited on Grimmjow to arrive and give orders. Snickering very audibly (to dead people and mediums), he followed the three stooges at a leisurely stroll.

"The one in here is *dangerous*..!' Heh! I can walk too, you know..."