

The Crack of the Other Side

7: A Ghost Adventure (Final Part)

Things Get a Little Serious...

Shawlong yawned and let himself relax into the cushions of the large sofa where he had rigged his favorite reading light. It was off now, of course. The copy of Hemingway was stashed safely under his arm where no wandering hoodlums (D-Roy, or some of his younger friends) could bother it. In the dimly lit room, Grimmjow's strong right hand prepared to grab a quick nap. He had been assigned to a watch in a few hours, the dead of night, and he wanted to be wakeful enough to complete it with none of the difficulties that Ilfort had encountered.

Though he seriously doubted that anyone attractive enough to distract him for more than a millisecond would show up.

As often happens when people who desperately want to fall asleep try to do so on a timeline, Shawlong suddenly had everything that had happened that day pop into his head.

Damn, Grimmjow wanted me to check on Ilfort again and I forgot, he thought. Then again, I don't remember seeing him today at all. Was he on a mission..? No, I don't think so. That was Yorick... Where was he all day?

Shawlong sat up, rubbing his eyes with one hand. Well, the eye he could easily reach. The other one flicked around, stopping on various objects but not taking note of them; he was too deep in thought for that.

I saw Ilfort last yesterday afternoon. Yes, he was in here. That was when he let slip about the Soul Reaper.

Shawlong stood and set off at a swift clip down the hall, knowing exactly where he was going. He did not have far to go by Las Noches terms. Along a narrower way, one with hardly anyone coming and going along it, he stopped at a door. Not one of the gigantic ones leading into the massive spaces, or the Espadas' quarters. No, this was only slightly large, and it was the door to Ilfort's room.

"Ilfort?" Shawlong rapped his knuckles hard on the marble-like surface. There was no response. He tried again, holding himself back just enough to avoid generating cracks in the material, "Ilfort!"

Silence.

With a sigh Shawlong took a step toward the door and drew his blade. Were it Edorad or

even his Master Grimmjow trying to gain admittance then the door would likely be powder by now. No need to overreact. Ilfort could simply be sound asleep, about to be rudely awakened by his door being destroyed unnecessarily. Shawlong had a better idea. Carefully he took the razor-sharp weapon in both hands, one on the hilt and the other steadying the back of the edge. The tip of the sword wedged into the crack between door and jamb, on the side of the lock. With a little effort and some quiet grunting Shawlong managed to weasel the lock open and open the door.

He entered, sheathing Tijereta, a confused look on his face. Looking to the left he could see the bed, and there was no one in it. It didn't even look slept in. Sucking in a sharp breath he navigated the demi-rooms, always scanning the floor for any of the tell-tale signs of the worst having happened. He ended his search in the bathroom, more puzzled than when he started. No blood, no signs of struggle, nothing. There was certainly no note indicating where he was going. At the very least he knew that Ilfort had not done himself in, and that was some comfort. He glanced towards the side of the bed, just visible from where he was. No zanpakuto.

Ilfort must have taken it with him. Shawlong exited the room, seeing no need to invade his comrade's privacy any further, *At the very least he has some protection, wherever he is.*

Wordless Shawlong paced down the hallway further. He tried sensing to see if Ilfort was perhaps nearby, but he couldn't feel any of his comrades' presences.

Shawlong's eyes widened and he stopped abruptly in the center of the hallway. He checked again. It was true! There was not a recent trace of Ilfort, Edorad, Nakim or D-Roy! Some of the others he could faintly distinguish through the sturdy walls, but none of the original five who had first pledged to serve the Sexta. Except for him.

Shawlong frowned, grasping that perhaps this disappearance was not the fault of an outside force.

Damn those infantile—! Shawlong did not waste any time, clearing kilometers of hallway space in his swift Sonído. He did not know where the four had gone to, but he could guess well enough. And he knew just how to track them.

Zak had decided to enter the apartment above the old theater alone, as was his typical style. Besides, he fully expected a lady spirit to get intimate with him. The only thing to watch would be the cameras. Which somewhat contradicted his desire to be alone.

Of course, he wasn't devoid of audience at all. Invisible to the so-called “spirit sensitive”, Edorad and Ilfort followed him up the staircase, both eager to see the hilarity of what Zak could

not. D-Roy had been asked kindly if he would prep the next stage of Operation Best Broadcast Ever, which of course was more of the infamous "demonic voices" spewing profane and ridiculous phrases into the various mics wired all around the location. With a salute, the scrawny Arrancar was off to do his sacred duty.

"So, Nakim's not going to *do* anything, is he...?" Ilfort winced, not sure how much humor he would actually find in the situation upstairs.

"Heh, no." Edorad nearly trod on Zak's heels, slowing down a bit to let the winded human reach the top of the staircase, "But Zak don't know that. Heheh..! You just sit back and watch, Nakim's done this before. Same guy even."

"Ehhh."

"So don't worry, there'll be no ghost porn tonight," Edorad gave a barking laugh and squashed Ilfort's discomfort. "Well, maybe in Zaky Tightjeans' mind, but nowhere else."

"Heh."

Zak ascended the stairs, gazing in awe at the ancient apartment preserved in its original state since nearly a century before. The bed was lacy under the thick film of dust it had accumulated--pink and frilly. Obviously, a girl's bed. Above it, a Victorian-style painting of just the kind of spirit he expected to find there: Young. Pretty. Slender. Golden-haired.

Female.

Ilfort felt his sides ache as he buckled over. The bed had an occupant that was sagging the springs down considerably. Nakim, in his best pin-up pose, winked at the investigator as the bulky man wandered further in.

"Oh—God—!" Ilfort could barely speak for laughter, "That's just...! Nakim—you're killing me..!"

"Hello," Zak was clueless to the raucous concert of giggles happening just behind him, "Are you the woman who called me in here from outside?"

"C'mere, baby," Nakim managed to make his voice even more of a hoarse grunt, concentrating on making it heard to the small handheld that Zak was limply cradling.

"I just want you to know, like, I *heard* you," Zak got dangerously close to the bed. Nakim suppressed a snicker, "And I'm here now... I brought you something."

"Ahhhhh...my sides...!" Edorad fell against the wall, making a slight thump. Zak jerked upright and stared all around, then muttered into his camera's mic.

"I'm gonna tag that right now. I think I got a response, like a thump."

He turned back to the bed, disregarding the fact that the "response" had come from the opposite direction.

"Do you like it?" He held out the object he had been concealing in his jeans pocket (somehow), a tiny crucifix obviously made for a young woman. It was afflicted with frilliness and flowery curves just like the room was.

Nakim scrunched up his face and pulled back away from the reaching hand.

"Man, aren't you *married*?"

"Hello? Are you there?" Zak seemed shocked that nothing was groping his magnificent (-ly gross-looking) pecks yet, and put his hand even closer to Nakim's fat rolls, "What are you gonna do to me..?"

"Nothin' if you don't put a ring on it," Nakim scooted off the bed and slapped Zak's hand away simultaneously.

The ghost hunter scrambled for safety like he'd just been shot at, clutching his hand and staring down at it in amazement as if he'd never realized that the dead could touch the living before.

And apparently, any spirit that dissed his molester-y advances was by default an evil one.

"Are you really that woman who was killed in here..?!" Zak stood to his full ghost-demeaning height, tromping around in a circle in front of the bed and scouring the darkness for fleeting shapes (that weren't there), "Or are you something *else*?! Something that just wanted to *lure me in here*?!"

"For one, I'm a *guy*," Nakim said hopefully, leaning on one of the bed posts. "So, no. I'm not a girl."

"Well, I'm gonna get to the bottom of this!" Zak pulled a device from off one of the stands where an X camera was mounted. Nakim stared at it oddly. It looked something like a cellphone from the eighties, a brick filled with wires and equipped with tiny screen and fat antennae, "This box here is called the Ovilus. It won't hurt you, but if you use your energy it'll speak..."

"Ummm... Advice, guys?" Nakim had never been faced with this particular squat machine before. Edorad bared his fangs devilishly and stopped chuckling long enough to gasp out a few words:

"Just mess with it all you want. Can't go wrong...!"

"C'mon, you... you demon!" Zak goaded them, jabbing the air with the Ovilus almost as if

he forgot what he was holding was not a weapon, "Make this machine talk! What do you want to do to me?"

Nakim shrugged and released some of his energies, aiming them at the antennae. The first attempt missed, the bluish-green reiatsu dispersing in random directions. He tried again, this time scoring two direct hits.

"RAT SPOON."

"Bwahahahahahahahahaaaaaaa...!" Edorad was now on his back, pounding the floor with one of his beefy fists, "Haaaa..! 'Rat spoon'! How random is *that*?!"

"Let me try one!" Ilfort lifted a hand and a sliver of golden-hued energy lanced off, glancing off one side of the device. The machine whirred as if stumped by the input it was receiving and then gave its response:

"FUCK."

"*Whoa*," Nakim said, scratching his head. "I thought they removed the cuss words from all their things last season..?"

"AHAHA...Apparently they—h-haahaaha—forgot one..!" Edorad pulled himself upright on one of the walls, trying not to let tears spill out of his eyes from the laughing stint. Ilfort shook his head, smirking.

"I wasn't even going for that..."

A different kind of otherworldly portal was creaking open atop the stone bluffs above the largely deserted town. Instead of the sky opening as if it had a zipper sewn into it, a door in the old Japanese style, backlit with a strange whitish light, materialized atop the giant rock and slid apart.

Two figures came out initially. Little could be seen of them for the glow emitting from the open Senkaimon gate except that neither looked exceptional, and one was clearly larger. The two were followed by a small troop of others, who dashed out and surrounded the two protectively.

The glow from the gate dimmed, and the crowd was revealed to be near to thirty Soul Reapers. Most were unexceptional; "grunts" was an accurate description of their powers. But the two in the center and a ring of four others closest to them were different.

The grunts were crouched and tense, strange spiritual pressures in the distance putting

them on edge. But the six that stood out were standing tall and undisturbed by the unusual presences. The taller of the two leaders, a dark-skinned and long-haired man wearing a pair of glasses much too small for his face, adjusted how his zanpakuto rested in its sheath and turned to his left, addressing his side of the troop.

"Presence of Arrancar in the World of the Living confirmed." He stared directly at one of the six stronger members of the team. The much burlier man began to sweat but kept a straight face, "Hisao, stay with the Senkaimon. Make sure no one or no *thing* sabotages our way home."

"Yes, sir." Hisao straightened up and took up a position directly in front of the portal, one hand already on his katana's hilt as if expecting trouble.

The dark-skinned Soul Reaper next turned to the passel of rank-and file Soul Reapers mutely awaiting his orders.

"The rest of you, spread out and keep alert. Do not engage the enemy until I, Ayako, or your ranking officers have arrived." He took a short glance in the direction of the second Soul Reaper in the center of the circle, a woman with extremely long blue hair that was so pale that the night had no effect on its hue. She turned away, her face frowning slightly and one hand brushing her bangs out of her eyes, "If you see one of the Arrancar report it immediately with your Soul phone. One of us will be there within a minute."

The Soul Reapers bowed curtly at the waist at their leader's orders in unison. He drew his zanpakuto, a dangerous-looking implement with a more silvery blade than normal.

"Now. Move out."

A curtain of dead leaves swirled about, disturbed from where they had lain, by each of the killing squad simultaneously taking off in a flash.