

"Good-bye, funny little Hollow..."

D-Roy felt screwed. The Soul Reaper had paralyzed him somehow, and he was rapidly losing ideas as to how to break free of this snare. He had only seconds, and those were counting down much too fast. The woman's zanpakuto was raised and ready to slice him. He crushed his eyes shut as he realized there was nothing he could do.

SSHUNK!

A sharp pain tore through him, then he felt a numbness in his head where the blade had penetrated. Dark blood soaked through the wrappings covering that old scar, the one place on his skull not protected by bone-hard mask fragment. Swiftly the Soul Reaper retracted the sword from the hidden wound and waited. D-Roy wobbled, fading in and out of consciousness, then fell. A faint crash announced that he'd landed on the remnants of the supply van, a somewhat uncomfortable cushion.

She watched. The still body didn't stir or dissipate like the Hollows did when she purified them. That was odd. Maybe they took a bit longer to fade away?

She didn't have the luxury of time to think about what this meant. Something else was heading her way, and it was not one of her comrades.

Hisao stepped back a bit in suppressed terror as the Garganta closed. Where had it come from? There was no warning that it was about to open. And the lone occupant that had come through it, who was he?

An Arrancar, obviously. There was nothing else explaining that skeletal skipe on the tall thin man's head. But Hisao hadn't expected one of them to feel so different up close. From afar he could manage, just a slightly unnerving aura. But now, right in front of him.

Shawlong's eyes went over the shivering seated officer with surgical precision, noting the drawn (shaking) blade and the determined (shaking) frown. He probed with his Pesquisa; nothing to worry about. As if dismissing the Soul Reaper he was unintentionally terrorizing he turned away, inspecting the Senkaimon with a sour look.

"You," he said without looking at Hisao. "Tell me. How many of your friends were sent

here?"

"I-I'm not telling *you* that!" Hisao stood his ground, though the temptation to leap back into the Senkaimon and run away screaming was certainly there. These Arrancar—they were rumored to be the most powerful of Hollows...or... Hollow-like things..? His superiors had been less than clear about whether his enemies were really Hollows or not. He wasn't taking any chances, though, "I am under orders to guard this Senkaimon with my life, so know that!"

"Hmmm." The Arrancar's cold stare penetrated Hisao. *The nerve of this...Never mind*, Shawlong brushed off the thought. *He is only doing his job. I ought to be glad his job is not "destroy me at all costs" at the moment.*

To Hisao's surprise, Shawlong came to within an arm's length of him, eyeing him curiously. He had to lean down slightly to look him directly in the face as he wanted to.

"I would advise you to give this up and tell me anyhow," he said with a slight growl. "Unless you wish to make me angry."

Okay, that was a threat, Hisao's thoughts raced but managed to stay coordinated. *Here goes nothing!*

Shawlong perceived the first impulses of the much weaker fighter's shoulder muscles before they even began to move. As the katana swooshed through the air toward him, he sidestepped it easily and then leaped. Hisao was left staring at the empty rock formation in front of him for the crucial quarter of a second before he heard the light tap of shoes on the ground behind him.

"Very slow."

"Sh-shut up!" Hisao's face turned into a beet, "I didn't ask you for a critique!"

"I know. I simply offered one." Shawlong smirked, "By all means, remain this slow if you like."

"Grr..." The Soul Reaper placed both hands on his zanpakuto, his face growing a small pulsating vein on the side of it, "You'll regret saying that!"

"Hmm..." The Fracción seriously doubted that, maintaining his stance of standing, fingers meshed behind his back, purely out of politeness and a piqued curiosity. *He's going to release his Shikai*. Shawlong waited with stunning patience, watching Hisao crouched and waves of transparent energy surge around him before he could let out his full power, *Maybe it will be able to scratch me....Maybe.*

"Here's hoping I don't die..." Hisao murmured so only he could hear. "Assemble—Okina Taiho!"

"Assemble" is exactly what it did. The transparent reiatsu floating all around the sixth seat seemed to glow brighter for a moment, temporarily forcing Shawlong to shade his eyes with one arm. When the Arrancar looked again, the light was gone, and in the place of the shining orbs of light were machine parts of every odd and twisted proportion, all locking together around the Soul Reaper's right shoulder. Already he could discern the barrel of some kind of gun or cannon; its girth was immense. Slowly other portions of the shoulder-mounted Shikai put themselves together, forming a skin of armor down Hisao's right arm and part of that side of his chest. On the chest plate was a conspicuous triangular blue button. Shawlong narrowed his eyes at it, mentally keeping watch for any sign that his opponent was going to press it.

With a gun that size, you never could tell how powerful it was going to be. The Soul Reaper didn't seem particularly dangerous to him, but that cannon might be. He would have to wait and see.

He didn't have to wait long, as he suspected. Hisao smirked grimly, baring a few teeth as his left hand wandered to the all-important button.

"Eat this!"

Shawlong's eyes widened as the projectile showed itself. It was a massive glowing blue sphere, straining as if resisting the urge to explode from the energy packed into it before it even struck something. Shifting his feet into a more combat-ready stance, Shawlong took no chances. One of his hands flew forward, centering on the rapidly-approaching missile and emitting a sharp golden light.

The cero was narrow, but it struck its mark. Blue and gold met midway between the fighters, turning the entire rocky landscape greenish for a few brief seconds before the whole thing went up with a sound like a jet engine roaring overhead.

Shawlong squinted against the torrent of dust that was whipped back his way. As he expected, the orb had blown itself to bits in all directions. All except his, thanks to the countering cero. As the smoke cleared the Arrancar's keen black eyes searched the rubble and found Hisao's form gasping on the ground, knocked several hundred meters from where he had been standing before.

The Soul Reaper heard a faint buzz in the distance, then looked up to see a silhouette of his opponent looming over him. Shutting his eyes, he expected at any moment to feel a blade plunging through his ribs, or neck, or head, or... anything really.

"That's quite a devastating ability your zanpakuto has." Shawlong stared down impassively, "But it's also very predictable. And slower than it could be. What seat are you?"

"Whaaa..?" Hisao did not expect an interview. Shawlong was waiting for an answer though, and the Soul Reaper did not want to further frustrate the Arrancar. Especially one in his

position, with a sword in easy distance, "S...Sixth... Of Tenth Company..."

"Hmmm, a Sixth seat?" He stood back, ruminating and giving the illusion that he was no longer paying Hisao much mind, "That's very impressive."

Hisao made his move, jumping upright and mashing the activating button on his chest again. But the Arrancar had disappeared, and someone had put a hand on his shoulder...

"But, as I said, it's slow, predictable," Shawlong said, gripping the startled Soul Reaper's arm harder and lifting him up off the ground. Hisao kicked and squirmed, but it was useless. With a flick of his wrist Shawlong sent him hurtling into a rock face, where he groaned and slid back down in a jumbled heap. The cannon on his back popped and fizzed, then reverted back to ordinary katana form.

Turning away, Shawlong noticed for the first time that something was amiss in the distance. Gasping sharply, he checked twice, then three times to make sure. But he was sure. D-Roy's presence had faded, almost to nothing. A few seconds later, Shawlong could sense nothing of his feisty comrade.

The sonic boom that echoed from his Sonído was the loudest and fastest yet.

Edorad went from laughing hysterically at Nakim's antics to standing straight up like a ramrod, eyes flicking about. Ilfort took a double take towards his larger friend and was about to ask what was the matter when Edorad bellowed it for him.

"What happened to D-Roy?!"

Ilfort would have shrugged, explained it away as D-Roy "doing his own thing, don't worry about him", were it not for the obvious. The pale-haired Soldado couldn't feel a trace of his weaker comrade anywhere.

But Ilfort was the first to notice something even more unsettling:

"Where the Hell did all those Soul Reapers come from?!" His hand immediately went to his belt, taking cautionary hold of Del Toro, "Those bastards got to D-Roy!"

Leaving the three hapless ghost hunters to whatever fate would befall them on their own, the three took off in a fanned out formation. Nakim took off in a much more literal sense; he took off a him-shaped hole in the roof, causing Zak, Nick and Aaron to squeal like girl scouts who had found a snake.

On the roof, the girthy Arrancar spotted a distant figure hovering in the sky. He was

about to leap up towards the tiny dot when a sword came out of nowhere at him.

CHANK!

Nakim surprised the Soul Reaper that had attacked him with his speed, blocking the blade with his wrist and slipping out of the lock easily.

"Ooh, Fattie's not so slow, huh?" He was himself emaciated-looking, covered in black line tattoos to the point where he looked like a roadmap. Nakim reappeared behind him and swung a heavy fist at him, but the Soul Reaper had enough warning and dodged nimbly to the side. He ran his hands lovingly over the shimmery blade of his zanpakuto, disturbing the Soldado somewhat as he licked a dry spot on his upper lip.

"Who are you?" Nakim glared at his offensive face tattoos, spelling out vulgar expressions in zig-zagging text. He didn't trust this one not to attack him long enough to glance behind and see if the Soul Reaper that had assaulted D-Roy was still there.

"Ooh, sorry about that, fat boy!" The Soul Reaper cackled, holding his frequently petted weapon out in a slashing stance, "Name's Takeshi Muratori..." He charged, fangs bared and eyes bloodshot, "And I'll be your *killer* this evening! Gyaahahahahah!"

Edorad, despite his growing anger that D-Roy had been struck down, found it in himself not to blow any new doors in any part of the building. He did rip one of the fire safety exit's doors completely off its hinges in busting out of it, but that was beyond his notice. Panting and growling alternately, he came out on the side of the building and scanned the landscape through a red-tinted gaze.

"Ah. Found one."

Edorad turned towards the low voice, holding up one arm and blocking a diagonal strike as he did so. He was face to face with a frowning Soul Reaper with slicked-back black hair and small eyes of the strangest shade of pale grey he'd ever seen.

With a feral snarl, the big Arrancar pushed back against the sword, tossing his enemy back to where he had come from—the roof of a nearby water tower. Edorad barely even noticed the four or five other rank and file Soul Reapers surrounding him.

"Yeah, you found one, alright..." He smirked with his teeth still showing ferociously. One of the grunts ran forward, swinging his sword expertly... but not nearly strong enough. The blade bounced off Edorad's side and the large man himself swatted him further away with the back of his hand, "Ugh, gnats."

"Please." The officer gestured to the remaining conscious grunts, "Stay out of this, will you? I apologize for that, Arrancar. They are as eager to battle as you, it seems..." He jumped down, landing without disturbing a single gravel a few paces from the Soldado, "My name is Atsushi Wamumoto, the eldest of the two seventh seats of Sixth Company. Though I have often been praised for being more powerful than my position implies..."

"You'd better be." Edorad sneered, "I hate being disappointed."

"As do I." Atsushi's bored expression turned hard at Edorad's comment, "Hopefully what they say about you Arrancar is true, that you are more than just...big *dumb* Hollows with extra powers."

"RRRAAAAH!"

Tipped over the edge, Edorad's fist slammed the asphalt where Atsushi had been standing a second before. Chunks of debris flew from him as he ripped his hand out of the hole it had punched in the ground and darted in pursuit after the Soul Reaper.

"You're gonna regret sayin' that..!" Edorad snarled as he caught up to the seventh seat, winding up a second time. Atsushi clicked his tongue and squatted under the blow, feeling the wind and shards of wood from where it had instead struck a telephone pole.

Much stronger than he is fast, Atsushi thought. But still fast. But he can't be all that bright...My Shikai will ruin him...

Ilfort felt the surges in spiritual pressure as both of his comrades found foes. He bit his lip and paused on top of one of the disused telephone poles, watching his periphery closer than he ever had before. There were still more of them, easily twenty more. But they were weak. He had thought he sensed another few that were significantly stronger, but now he was having trouble finding them.

Crrnch...

Ilfort whirled around at the sound of gravel shifting to his right. Standing alone in the open, a young-looking man in full Shihakusho stared up at him with critical eyes.

"Stop right there," the Soul Reaper said. He unsheathed his sword and held it to his side. "You won't escape."

"Don't want to run..!" Ilfort could not help but curl his lip up in a sneer as he leaped down to the ground, his weapon also out and ready, "One of your pals just murdered one of mine."

The Soul Reaper shifted his footing, having no response for that. There was a shuffling of cloth, and he appeared much closer to Ilfort. Their blades clashed and it was clear which of the two was physically more powerful; Ilfort was taller and found it easy to press the Soul Reaper down into a deeper crouch.

"Unh!" The Soul Reaper had no choice but to break away, slipping out from under Ilfort's steady crush with a scrape of their blades. Ilfort found himself smiling to himself at the thought of avenging D-Roy's death. The Arrancar advanced, a *Sonído* bringing him right into his opponent's face.

The Soul Reaper seemed to predict Ilfort's attack. Just before the Arrancar slashed at him he thrust out with one foot, landing a strong kick in Ilfort's gut. The Soldado staggered back a few steps and coughed slightly before gaining his breath back.

"Ouch!" The Soul Reaper clutched his ankle and winced, "What was that..?!"

"It's called *hierro*," Ilfort dove back towards him, "It means you shouldn't kick me, unless you want broken bones!"

"Hunhh..!" The sword had to be brought up again as Ilfort crashed his down towards his head, "Speaking of—unh!—what things are called, what do they call you?"

"Who's asking?" Ilfort grunted and pressed down harder, determined to make this one beg down on his knees before he killed him.

"Tsutomu Yokiyushi," he responded. Using a spurt of energy the Soul Reaper managed to push Ilfort back suddenly, stunning the Arrancar. "I'm a seventh seat of Squad Thirteen."

"Hunh, *seventh* seat." Ilfort took a brief pause to sweep some hair out of his eyes, "Ilfort Grantz, though I don't have a power rank like that. All you need to know is that I'm a *lot* stronger than you, and you're going to die."

"We'll just have to see about that..."

Simultaneously both Soul Reaper and Arrancar flitted out of view. In the skies above they came back together, sparks flying from their crossed blades.

Nearby, another voice could be heard scoffing from the shadows of an awning. Standing with his arms crossed, the dark-skinned leader of the killing squad of Soul Reapers adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose and turned to his left. There was Ayako, still watching that small Arrancar's body for signs of life or that he'd been purified. Elsewhere he could sense his subordinates starting to fight. The outcomes really didn't matter to him.

Even if his men and women all lost their battles, he was confident that he could hunt down and exterminate each Arrancar one by one.