

Ilfort grunted and kicked off the ground at full speed; Tsutomu had taken the fight to the sky. He could see the meek silhouette of the plain-looking man against the moon, holding out his zanpakuto in kendo style, crossing his chest and ready for the Arrancar to charge.

Midway through pulling his sword back for a thrust towards his enemy's face, Ilfort stopped, his gaze snapping to his left. Where once he sensed nothing was now a significant presence—D-Roy! For a moment the pale-haired Soldado was taken aback at his small friend's seemingly sudden revival. He hovered in place several meters from the seventh seat, staring wide-eyed and trying to work out how it was possible.

Tsutomu paused, then restrained the urge to flinch. What was the Arrancar planning? Why had he stopped? Was this an optical illusion, with this Ilfort fellow's real location directly behind him, getting ready to sever his head? But no, none of these seemed to be the case after several seconds. Following the Soldado's gaze, Tsutomu was met with the sight of the back of the half-destroyed theater beyond several lightly damaged buildings. A brief flash of a crimson red cero being fired from the rubble caught his eye, and then his spiritual senses caught up. The weaker presence, one of the Arrancar that had invaded the Living World with Ilfort, was back.

"So D-Roy's okay..." Ilfort sighed, mixed relief and uncertainty. Yes, his friend was fine, but he was still locked in combat...

D-Roy was fairly tough for an average Soldado Fracción... But toughness clearly was not the issue here. He had already been knocked out of commission, how long until he made a mistake and was out forever?

Speaking of being locked in combat... Ilfort stared back up at Tsutomu, curling his lip as he noticed he too was looking on D-Roy's battle, *Bastard...!*

"Hey," Ilfort called up to the distracted Soul Reaper, bringing him back to a state of heightened alertness. "Are you going to stand there all day watching my buddy beat down your friend, or are we going to start fighting again?"

Before Tsutomu could answer, Ilfort's reaching hand was inches from his throat. Twisting away skillfully, the Soul Reaper felt a bead of sweat forming as he stepped away and zipped down to the ground searching for a safer battleground. Above, Ilfort was still coming, growing larger in the seventh seat's field of vision by the second. Tsutomu barely managed to jump back behind a dumpster, then roll out of the shadow of the metal bin as a pair of balas chased him. Panting heavily, he was forced to step back as a twisted hunk of the dumpster's lid crashed to the

ground in front of him.

Ilfort stepped out of the alley where he had fired the balas from. He furrowed his brow; Tsutomu didn't seem like he should be evading his attacks that easily, especially balas—the definition of a swift attack. He was only a seventh seat! Either this Tsutomu was lying, or he was desperately in need of a promotion from a slow bureaucracy.

"Damn..!" Tsutomu slouched in his stance, wiping sweat from his cheek with the back of one hand, "You're really tough... Are all you Arrancar this tough?"

"Doesn't really matter to you if we are or not. You won't be seeing any more of us!" A third bala nicked the bottom of Tsutomu's sleeve as he jumped away again. Ilfort didn't show it, but he was breathing nearly as hard as his Soul Reaper opponent.

Tsutomu glanced down at the smoking remnants of his left sleeve, then had to raise his sword quick to block the Soldado's incoming fist before it shattered his flesh along with his clothes. He stared in mounting anxiety as the Arrancar's bare skin grinding against the flat of the blade began to produce sparks. And push him backwards. Tsutomu's ankle bones ached as his feet began to crack the surface of the old concrete.

Ilfort ignored his knuckles beginning to grow raw, making one final push. Tsutomu's feet finally broke through the surface of the road and were embedded inches deep into the dry crust of soil underneath. Stepping back, Ilfort waited until the tell-tale "whoa!" of the Soul Reaper going off balance and then slashed diagonally with Del Toro directly at Tsutomu's throat.

For a second the sky above the theater front appeared to be empty.

Then Soul Reaper and Arrancar zoomed into view again, seeming to materialize from thin wisps of spiritual power meters from clashing together. Shawlong and Masaru's blades came together with a pronounced flash of sparks, and the much taller man searched for a weakness in the dark-skinned Reaper's grip. He found one, just barely.

Masaru felt as if a chunk of iron had been bashed into his side. Shawlong withdrew his foot and whirled, winding up the momentum behind Tijereta as he brought it up above where the Soul Reaper had lowered his own blade from the pain.

The third seat whipped his head back, preventing it from being severed, and the rest of his body followed in the short lull between the Arrancar's strikes. He landed back on his feet with a skid backwards and a cough into the back of his hand. Peering down, he squinted at the fine mist of blood droplets settling on his skin.

"Good form." He wiped the red specks onto his shihakusho.

"Thank you." Shawlong adjusted his assault, coming up from the left side and flicking Masaru's slashing sword aside as his target tried to block him. Before he could straighten back up, the Reaper was upon him, showing off his true speed in a series of well-aimed swipes and thrusts. The Fracción parried and countered as best he could, only retreating from the face-off at the sound of ripping fabric on his right. Lighting on the top of a telephone pole, he glanced down at the shoulder of his uniform and found that some of his skin had become mysteriously exposed, "Hmm... That was fast..."

"I'll be cutting your skin next," Masaru's voice sounded behind him. Stone-faced, Shawlong flipped his sword upside down in hand and struck out behind him. There was a harsh grinding of steel; Shawlong turned to face the ambushing Reaper with a shake of his head. "What? Not convinced?"

"I prefer to see something to believe it."

"Then be patient. Eventually you'll make a false step." Masaru's grin was smugger than a shark's on sight of a wounded herring, "And when you do, I'll be waiting."

ZZHANG!

Shawlong's afterimage was still partly visible as Masaru was forced to turn on his heel and block the surprise downward chop. The Soul Reaper buckled momentarily under the superhuman pressure the Soldado was putting on his sword, then he ducked out. Shawlong saw him go and pursued.

A shadow fell over Masaru mid-flash step. Out of the corner of his bespectacled eye he could see the blurred image of the Arrancar frowning down at him, Tìjereta's edge flashing down toward him.

Grimmjow's man had expected a lot of the twists and turns that Masaru had thrown him. But he did not expect his sword to slip right through his forehead with no resistance. The lack of blood immediately put him on alert; the third seat was not where he appeared to be. Sensing a change in the air behind him, he twisted around as quick as his full speed would allow.

SSHHKKK!

"Unh..!" Shawlong pulled away from where the Soul Reaper's zanpakuto had stung him in the lower flank, the side of his free hand practically back-handing the offending weapon away by the flat of it. As soon as he had Masaru squarely in his sights and was a comfortable distance away the same hand wandered down to the new injury. It was nearly one of his knuckles deep. Much too close.

"Hnnph!" Shawlong flicked his wrist to clear the blood from it, "You certainly know how

to keep your word." His tar-grey eyes wandered. How had he managed to lose track of his opponent's movements? This third seat was phenomenally fast for his rank, but he was not swifter than Grimmjow's Primos Soldado. He concluded it must have been some skillful use of Bakudo, an illusory one. It would have to be skillful; Shawlong had heard nothing of any sort of Kido chant, not even a murmured spell name.

Masaru held his zanpakuto up close to the shining lenses of his glasses, inspecting the thin smear of Arrancar blood tarnishing its surface. He reached one hand into the opposite sleeve and removed a pale green handkerchief. As he cleared the reddish stain away, he stared levelly at his target.

"I try my best." He smirked. The light from one of the nearby street lamps (that was not destroyed at present) glared off the squares of glass and obscured his true expression. Lowering the handkerchief and letting it flutter away in the light winds over the desert town, Masaru gave a short nod of approval towards his blade, "But honestly, all of this half-hearted back and forth has me a little bored. I believe I'm ready to release my full power. What say you?"

Bored of me? Shawlong's scoff was almost microscopic, but it was certainly there. *Well, there's the illusion of respect right out the window.*

"If you're bored already, then perhaps you are in the wrong line of work," Shawlong chuckled. "But if that's how you feel, I'll oblige you..."

Masaru's face became blank. Shawlong's followed suit, noting the build-up of reiatsu around his enemy. The Soul Reaper raised his sword once again, balancing the flat of the blade upon his closely-laid palms.

"Reave," he said, barely audible over the faint rumble emanating from the slightly vibrating blade. Two narrow streams of light like the whiskers of a catfish of pure white energy began to extend from the tsuba of the thrumming zanpakuto. "Kuro Girochin."

A vast outpouring of power rushed past Shawlong, whipping his single braid about until it rested upon his shoulder. With a shrug, he tossed it back into its normal position before preparing his own release.

He was settling the hilt of Tijereta on his palms, fingers extended carefully and pointed away from his body, when the jangle of many blades made him look up. Soaring towards him a hexagonal ring of what looked like razor blades closed in on him, catching him by surprise directly on the chest.

Masaru's grinning visage materialized from the white fog. His sword now bore a pair of glimmering rope-like strands. These strands trailed off, on and on—extended all the way to the pile of smashed rubble where the puppet-like ring of death had buried Shawlong. The Soul Reaper's grin grew wider upon seeing the tip of Tijereta's blade jutting from the shattered

fragments of bricks. Moments later, the tip of the sword slipped, falling into the space where Shawlong had fallen seconds before, gone from sight.

The third seat sunk to the cracked ground, calling his Shikai's six blades back to him. The street was quiet for a moment. Then it was broken by the Reaper's dry chuckles.

It was quiet also in Hueco Mundo. The late autumn night had not warmed since that fateful evening when the alarm was raised and the mystery Soul Reaper woman had been chased from the watchtowers. The moon shone slightly brighter, its phase turned to the waning side and casting a bit more reflected silver light down onto the White Desert sands.

Atop the great domed roof of Las Noches a different woman stood. She clearly belonged there. Clad in Soldado colors, her hakama swished as she paced back and forth on her rounds at the third tower, the tapering train of her overcoat fluttering slightly above the ground. Her great height dwarfed the average man, her flame-orange hair sticking up only slightly, its length shorter than that of most of the female Arrancar.

Also atypical was her spiritual weapon. No slender, versatile katana or saber for her—her zanpakuto was a massive broadsword of the Celtic style. It was strapped across her back by three black sashes. She carried it with no fuss.

Well...

She did have something to complain about this night, but it had little to do with the weight of her sword. Shawlong was supposed to be coming to the top of Las Noches to relieve her very soon, but there was no sign of the fellow Sexta Fracción yet. Odd behavior for him, especially considering his Primos Soldado status. He wasn't Grimmjow's right hand Fracción for nothing, and the ability to shove enjoyment and silliness aside in order to perform uncomfortable duties was optimal for a Primos position. Given the size of Grimmjow's following there ought to have been two Primos. But Grimmjow couldn't decide which of his other companions to promote. The woman had had a feeling she was up there, probably tied with Edorad. Maybe Ilfort hovering in the promotable range as well. Not as likely as her and Edorad tied, though.

"Damn..." She looked down at her watch with the frustration practically turning her lime green eyes blood red, "Shawlong, you're five minutes late, man... Where the hell'd you go ta?"

She spotted a loose bit of masonry, knocked free from the chinks in the colossal slabs that constructed the giant indoor city. Striding over in long steps, she kicked it fiercely, just held back enough to keep from powdering the rock. It zinged out over the precipice and sank out of sight. She listened.

She waited.

She began to tap her foot impatiently, then paused for a moment with her ear cocked towards the sheer edge of the walls.

...*Thunk!*

"Gah. That's six minutes now."

Shifting her broadsword across her back, she hissed through her teeth and headed for the interior of the monolithic fortress. Lateness be damned, if her watch was up it was up, and she was taking no crap for leaving it without a replacement. Were it D-Roy or Yorick or maybe even Ilfort late for one... well, that'd be a different matter. She could find the patience to wait for them there.

But Shawlong.... She supposed she held that one to a bit of a higher standard.

"Oi, Primos fella," she said in a coarse bark as she passed by Shawlong's quarters, pounding it twice with her calloused fingers. "Wakey-wakey, man. You'd better be dead or *really* enjoyin' yourself in there!"

There was no response. As swiftly as her sarcastic temper had flared it was replaced by deathly seriousness... kind of.

"Oh, Lady Irony, you *trick*," she muttered as she braced her shoulder for the impact. "Don't ya *dare* make me eat my words cuz they taste like *shit*..."

CRRSH!

The door hung haphazardly on one hinge after what she judged to be a firm mash of the shoulder on the door. Entering like a storm cloud, she went immediately to the immaculate bed and ripped off the covers.

"Tch..." She flopped the covers back on the empty mattress with a snort, "Shoulda guessed."

"What the hell're you doing, Jesmee?"

When she peered up her vision was assaulted by a violently bright red shock of hair atop a stocky man. His white and black uniform bulged outward slightly around his gut, but elsewhere hung somewhat loose. He hung by one arm on the door jamb, his large brown eyes shocked and confused.

"Lookin' for Shawlong."

"What'd he do to deserve this?" The man nudged the busted door with his foot, "He's

gonna be mighty pissed when he gets back..."

"Back from where?" Jesmee went immediately to the plump Arrancar's side, looming over him with a demanding glare, "C'mon, Rodolpho, talk ya lump."

"Take it easy, girl!" Rodolpho backed up into the wall, his wide mouth stretched in a placating grin from ear to ear, "He's on a watch or something. You can talk to him later."

"He ain't on a watch."

"Yeah he is."

"No, stupid, he was supposed to come an' relieve me. He didn't show."

"What? Well, then who's watching now?"

"Doesn't matter, this is weirdness going on now." She strode past him, leaving him in the whirlwind of her coat's train, "I'm gonna report this ta Lord Jeagarjaques."

"But... He's sleeping..."

"Don't care!" Jesmee growled. Rodolpho gave up on trying to stand up the broken door against the doorway and scurried to catch up with her down the central hall leading right to the great door emblazoned with a giant black "6". The closer they got, the more frantic he became.

"Er, doncha think you're overreacting?" Rodolpho let out a nervous laugh, "G-Grimmjow ain't too happy to be woken up in the middle of the night, you know... He might be a little less than accommodating... Or aware..."

"Again--don't care!" Jesmee halted only for the Espada's number-printed door. She raised her fist to pound on it, "When people go missin'... Espadas gotta wake the hell up!"

Tonk, tonk, tonk..!

"Zzznnn--*what..?*" Grimmjow's head bobbed up from where it had lain on a stack of no less than four pillows. "...Gggh... Whaddya want..?"

"My Lord, we have an urgent matter that needs to be looked into!"

There was no mistaking that voice. Jesmee Iontach, the lady firebrand of his first few followers. She'd even been with him when they were still Meno—ugh, that time didn't bear thinking about. Nightmares later wouldn't be great. If he even got back to sleep tonight...

"We..?!" Rodolpho mouthed the words. A look of pure shut-up from the towering woman did exactly what she wanted it to, and the fat man shuffled a few steps away.

"What's goin'... Hold on... Lemme put on some pants..."

The pair of Fracciones waited antsy as a few odd clunks and bangs sounded from within, along with a suspiciously curse-like muttering after one of the particularly loud crashes. After a substantial wait, the door creaked open several feet and a shirtless Sexta wobbled out into the doorway, tripping on the slightly lopsided hem of his hakama.

"So what's wrong?" Grimmjow said, yanking up the edge of his pants into a more normal position. Jesmee stood firmly directly in the Sexta's face and seemed to be quietly shouting the issue into his face, with Rodolpho cringing to the side.

"Sir, Shawlong hadn't shown up for his watch time after me. We searched his room and he wasn't there."

"...Shawlong's missing...?" Grimmjow stepped back with a blink clearing away the blariness from his face.

"Er... we also may've... broken his door a bit..." Rodolpho hoped his addition would go ignored.

It did. The Sexta opened the door further and stepped out, revealing that he was holding a crumpled shirt in his hands. He appeared to be staring into a space just to the left of Jesmee's shoulder, then he cast about to the right as well.

"Hunh...Huh..." The Espada ran a crooked hand through his spiky blue hair, clawing a bit of disobedient bangs out of his eyes, "Didn't you use Pesquisa to find him?"

"N... No sir..." She faltered for once, looking unsure, "I didn't think of that at the time..."

"You should've," Grimmjow said, his eyebrows creasing down into what looked like a fierce scowl. "Not even I can sense him... Actually..." Grimmjow's back straightened and his scowl dipped even further, "I don't sense Edorad or Ilfort or D-Roy or Nakim either..."

Jesmee was silent, tempted to check for herself but unsure of doing so in front of her Master. She trusted his Pesquisa, even while still fighting off sleep, far better than her own. Rodolpho grimaced as his shoe squeaked against the floor.

"...Wait..." Grimmjow paused, eyes half-closed, "Well... They ain't dead. I'm getting little snatches of Edorad every now and then... Unh, there was a bit of D-Roy too. They ain't dead..."

"I'm confused... How can you not sense them all the time?"

Grimmjow answered as he passed her, crooking a hand for them to come with.

"Easy. They're almost outta my range," he said. "Which means they aren't in Hueco Mundo anywhere... Damn."

Jesmee and Rodolpho looked at each other, then hastened to catch up with their Master as

he fast-walked and slung his shirt on (opened in the front as usual) at the same time.

"Well..." Rodolpho scratched his head, "'Damn' is right..."