

Masaru's ring of blades, hurtling outward, centered on the white-armored form as a crosshairs. Shawlong tensed. The whistling of the wind being sliced across his foe's weapon reached its zenith.

Now! His tail whipped up, arcing over his head as a scorpion's would. *Now!*

Masaru's immovable brow raised in restrained surprise at the curved cerci clacking open. Straining like the arms of a ballista.

The "ballista" was armed—a sleek, bladed harpoon white as bone rocketed out. The sky was forced aside as it zoomed to the center of the crosshairs provided by its target.

"More than a clawed monstrosity, eh?" Masaru said, giving his grip on Kuro Girochin a quick flex.

TZINGT!

A hand's length from the bridge of the Soul Reaper's nose, the tip of the bone harpoon quivered from suddenly expending all of its force. Shawlong huffed sharply as Masaru grinned up at him; three of seven blades had rubber-banded back to their source, clamping down on the projectile.

The other four—

"Dammit," his claws and tail splayed wide to counter the shearing forces of the razors bearing down on him. The fourth he was made to twist into a flip to avoid, kicking it bitterly as it ripped by him. The blades wobbled and reached the end of their range, then shot back into a whirling circle about their master. Ready to be used again.

Shawlong slicked two of his claws past the others to clear obstructions. With each of this Shikai's components able to move independently with so little warning from the controller no amount of distant attacks would succeed. He growled, brows furrowing behind the shadows of his helm; at least, none he was capable of sending his way. The harpoon was singular and now that he'd revealed it he'd never have another good chance to put it to good use.

Masaru took the opportunity to advance; light glinted from his glasses as he whipped out Kuro Girochin's hilt once again. The lines twisted together, pulling the blades tighter together, before the force of their unfurling sent them on the attack once again.

There was nothing for them to strike where the Primos once stood. The Soul Reaper's

gaze shot about, following the path of the Arrancar lunging for him. One claw splayed before him, the other wound back, as he appeared above the 3rd Seat's head.

The outstretched claw was knocked aside as one, then two of the razors hurried back to their master. Shawlong whipped around completely and let the blades whiff by, bringing up his other claw and raking it down.

The broad flat of another two blades halted his slashing blow. A whistle announced another speeding toward him—his tail whipped up, cerci open to catch the weapon.

Tzchang!

Nothing seemed unusual about the block or the blade. The pinchers closed as planned and the whistling weapon screeched to a halt. Nothing seemed different until a dull fizzle sounded through the lines controlling the Shikai:

“Gyaa—” Thousands of volts knocked the breath from Primos before he could finish his shout. He buckled, catching himself in midair but releasing the blade from his tail's grip.

“You see, Arrancar, I can keep some things to myself.” Masaru stepped back, expression passive but tone smug as he called back his Shikai's pieces into order behind him. Shawlong half-stood, panting from the effort to shake off the electric pain. His one visible eye was narrowed into a raging, desperate slit. His claws raised into a low guard.

“No more talking? Come on now, can we not keep this civil?” Masaru laughed, twirling Kuro Gurochin's hilt and causing the bright lines to rustle with charge.

“*Civil*,” Shawlong almost scoffed. “Hmmp, I think this has gone beyond that for a while now.”

“It's like that, is it.” The Soul Reaper *did* scoff, shifting one foot back as he prepared to go on the offensive again. “It's all the same with you Hollows, I suppose.”

“Keep right on believing that. It changes nothing,” Shawlong flitted forward, uninterested in the dross he knew such a shinigami might say. Masaru sucked in a breath and threw himself aside, glaring as the sword-like claws shredded through the air a few hairs from him.

“True,” Masaru spat, flicking his Shikai forth in response and grinning as the lines and razors shot by him. Shawlong couldn't afford to touch the thing again—he darted away, using his slash's momentum, pursued by the ring of death. “No matter what we say here, sooner or later Hollows submit to providence.”

One claw whipped around and caught onto the corner of a building. As three of the razor-blades crashed into the brickwork Shawlong gasped and sprang upwards. His speed still outstripped the weapon's... But his suspicions were growing. The next two blades peeled past, a

burst of Sonido the only thing keeping him from losing limbs. Yes—they were getting faster. A Shikai with a slow warm-up; not unheard of but an especially unwelcome discovery now.

“No response?” The 3rd Seat’s laugh was accompanied by the telltale sound of the last two blades veering sharply for him. “No surprise, really. Your guise of swordsman’s elegance falls away about as quickly as you became *this*...”

“This”, Shawlong presumed, was Tijereta’s true form. With two deft swings he cut through the base and cords of a telephone pole, shooting it into the path of the screeching blades with a kick.

“It’s a front—I know. Your bestial nature is easy to see, once you’ve been cornered,” Masaru called back his ring of blades, showering the destroyed ground below with wooden shrapnel and tangled wire.

This can’t go on much longer, Shawlong realized as he landed atop another building. His wounds stung and his chest heaved. *If not for the electrocution this Shikai can give on contact I could overpower him. It keeps getting faster and I won’t have any openings left.* His guarded stance returned as Masaru laughed again, hand beginning to squeeze around the hilt of the weapon. *And no matter what I can’t afford to touch that thing again.*

Unless I can manage to block each component... With one blade to spare, in close enough quarters.

The electrified lines no longer fizzled but snapped and hummed, untwisting as they were once again ready to be commanded.

“Dammit!”

The light footfalls of Ayako landing on a rooftop behind him caused D-Roy’s head to twist about, teeth bared in aggravation. He had more strength, more firepower, and a way to sense her without leaving himself vulnerable—but none of this was quite overcoming the 5th Seat’s sheer determination to not be hit.

Another cero bloomed outward, ripping a hole in the side of the abandoned building’s roof, just barely singing the bottoms of Ayako’s sandals as she bolted out of the way. Her ire had died down as had her fear of immediate defeat; though she had little offensive choices she at least knew this delay and lapse in aim on the Arrancar’s part gave her some chance.

“Honeshtly,” D-Roy hissed under his breath, craning his neck and trying to follow the Soul Reaper’s zigzagging path across the sky. “How’m I shuch a great shot and a *bad* shot at the

same time?!”

“Dunno, how *are* you?” Her voice sounded behind him. His tail flicked and he rounded on the bright light of her aura with a snarl. Two ceros burst through another building in quick succession, missing their mark even worse than the earlier ones had.

“Pipe down—I was just taunting you—” A foot planted itself in the small of his back, and he whipped one arm around just in time to stop the sharp katana against it. Ayako frowned at the shallowness of the wound and pushed off, slipping behind a half-destroyed wall. It didn’t pay to be in arm’s length long enough for the Arrancar to realize it.

“Owww—owowow!” D-Roy’s other hand squeezed around the small cut. He grimaced; even in his release form, that dinky excuse for a cheating Shikai could still cut! At this rate he’d be an annoyed mess of dings and scratches and simply run out of energy to fight. His damn aim and his damn crappy reaction time were to blame.

And it made him *pissed*.

“Okay, you gonna jusht jump around ‘til I’m worn out?” He rasped, sounding well on his way to the state already. “Thish is so *shupid*! I’m shtronger—I should be winning!”

“Should you? Your strategy sucks, little Hollow!”

“Shtop callin’ me that!” D-Roy’s head swiveled to face the evasive voice and its maddening taunts. He began charging a retaliatory cero, the hornet-like buzzing picking up as the orb of power materialized in front of his eye. But he paused.

“My shstrategy sucks, huh?” He growled. The orb grew larger, more energy pouring into it. “What about yours, huh? Waiting ain’t a shstrategy!”

“It is when I’m facing a clueless little idiot!” Ayako’s voice was now behind him. Sing-song and purposefully irritating. “You can’t even do ‘brute force’ right!”

“I’ll show ya ‘brute force’...” D-Roy growled, snagged teeth bared. The orb grew, and grew, and grew—straining from the spiritual energy forced into it.

Ayako’s blue presence glowed just above him, obvious and obnoxious. D-Roy glared through the bloodied bandage straight at her, the orb of burgeoning cero bursting. The 5th Seat flipped forward, dodging the blast of power as she had all the others. Her eyes were centered on the Arrancar’s back, leveling her blade for a stealthy hit—

As a searing red light rushed to her face, blinding her eyes a moment, she turned too little and too late to realize it was not a simple cero. Nor a *single* cero. The shadow of her form was blown outward as another struck her point-blank, and the place where she landed was soon obscured by the fiery light of dozens more cones of cero billowing outward.

Twenty, thirty, forty, and then an uncountably larger amount of them burned the sky, the ground, the remaining telephone poles. Many bored into the walls of nearby buildings, drilling holes into and through. Rubble clattered from above, from the sides. A deep rumble sounded around all things.

“It’s about time I went ahead and finished with you...”

Shawlong gritted his teeth and prepared to track the flight of the blades once more. But as the silhouette of his enemy grew darker against a red glow his eyes widened. He dropped—let the 3rd Seat figure out the oncoming danger himself, or better yet *not* figure it out—using the remnants of a brick building as a buffer.

“Erk—!” Masaru felt the heat on his back and made the connection before he bothered to look. Flicking his Shikai, he braced himself as every blade was called back into a shield arrangement between him and the loose-flying ceros. One struck head-on, two more petered out into the sky beyond them, and another few pulped the partly-smashed walls and roads around them.

“Well,” From behind the walls the Primos found himself smirking. “Impressive of the youngster...”

As the smoke cleared, Masaru coughed and stood upright again. The blades forming his last-minute barrier eased apart and back into attack positions. One eye glared out with dagger-like rage as he noted the large chip in one of his glasses’ lenses.

“Stupid wretch.” He snarled, a searing look leveling out across the ghost-town at where D-Roy was now slumped in exhaustion. “Couldn’t kill the worm, and now has to die in such a destructive and inconvenient manner.”

Shawlong let his eyes stray to his claws, concentrating fiercely on them. A thin layer of reishi buzzed about them, lending them extra strength and sharpness. His ferocity focused back on the shinigami.

A spark of energy, the beginnings of a buzz, and the sense that perhaps he should keep his eyes on the strongest of the Soldados, gave Masaru a fragment of warning—not quite enough to avoid the claws closing in. He whirled and gasped at the slit starting on his chest. The Arrancar’s claws sheared through the air as his foe wormed backwards and flashed back into view some meters away. He was breathing heavily; Shawlong resisted the urge to smile, since there was little he found more just than having an arrogant fighter reminded of his vulnerability. Masaru tensed his fist around Kuro Gurochin and with the other hand pawed at the thin trickle of

blood.

“Sneaky,” he sneered, the blades behind him rattling as if channeling his displeasure.
“Very sneaky.”

D-Roy, despite his earlier promise of having a victory laugh, found only the capacity to hack and cough against the billowing smoke. Burnt tarmac—inspired gags for all souls, living or dead. As he hitched over from his firing posture he reached to uncover his eyes. Faintness struck him, and he wobbled before a burst of spiritual pressure announced his Resurreccion state suddenly disarming.

“Wh—oof!” As he lost automatic flight along with his fighting strength gravity grabbed him hard and helped him to the ground. Face-first, of course. With a whine and a grunt he pushed himself up onto his elbows.

“Hey.”

“Gee-zus!” As the heavy hand clapped onto his shoulder the young Arrancar jumped. He was relieved to see Nakim behind him, helping him to a sitting position. “Not so shudden! Ya freaked me out!”

“Shh.” Nakim urged, eyes flicking about to the surrounding rubble. D-Roy’s last stand had created a shallow crater, bits and pieces of what was left of the historic theater littering the borders. The reason for his caution became apparent; perched here and there on the rubble and refuse were the figures of rank-and-file Soul Reapers looking on. “Don’t celebrate yet. I dunno what they want, but it can’t be good.”

“Bleh,” D-Roy pulled a face, glaring at the grouping of shinigami waiting on the side Nakim was not watching. “They’re gruntsh. They try anything, we punt ‘em—” On trying to stand his vision blurred and he sat abruptly back down, “—Eheh... Or... Or maybe we don’t.”

“Don’t look freaked. I think I can knock them off,” Nakim’s expression grew unbothered, eyes wandering but Pesquisa still trained on the surrounding enemy. The distant echoes of Shawlong’s struggle with the 3rd Seat rattled the shards of broken glass by his feet, and the even more faint sensations of Ilfort and Edorad’s battles let him know that none but themselves could be counted on for defense. “If it comes to that. Act normal.”

Behind a slab of twisted-up concrete and steel one Soul Reaper whispered to another—nervous and uncertain, looking on the more solid and composed one for orders.

“Akashingo and Muretori are both down...”

“Yes,” the calm shinigami gave the nervous one a look. “And these two responsible are weakened from fighting them.”

“Er... yes, shouldn’t we do something?”

“Not so hasty,” The impromptu leader crouched down, hiding his presence somewhat better from Nakim’s keen eyes. “Our strength is better saved for when those Arrancar make a move. Until we get new orders from the other officers, stay put.”

“S-Sure...” The nervous one crouched down as well and let out a relieved sigh, “Not *super* eager to fight those things anyways... It’d take all of us together even though they’re worn down—”

“Don’t talk like that.” He growled, “You talk like a loser. Now wait and don’t let your guard down.”

Del Toro had been on-target, and his strength behind it ferocious. His speed—lightning.

But as much speed as he’d summoned, Tsutomu could muster up just as much. Knocked off-center with the glint of sharpness shooting towards him, he closed a fist around his sword’s hilt and hurried through the release command:

“Decipher the four forms—Midorihiro no Tsubasa!”

Light flooded his vision out, stunning him. Something stopped Del Toro in its tracks at the same time several sharp pinpricks met his clenched fist. Ilfort began to dodge back but was encouraged outward with a massive wave of reiatsu before he could get away.

“Ack—” His back struck the brick walls of the closest building and a spiderweb of cracks shot out as he caught himself. He blinked, taking in the form of the newly-summoned Shikai as the haze of reishi died down. Tsutomu’s arms were no longer clad in the loose sleeves of a black shihakusho—replacing them were hard, coiling plates of organic armor. To him it looked like each plate was grooved with the grain of live wood; this seemed confirmed on following the progression of tough plates up the Soul Reaper’s arms and onto his shoulders where a thick growth of thorny vines splayed outward. Woven together and constantly branching and shifting, the vines split into two distinct wings, each casting a dappled shadow to each side the 7th Seat many times the size of the man himself.

He sucked in a sharp growl of breath and readied himself as Tsutomu glared icy daggers his way.

“Hold still and this won’t hurt so much,” he said, raising both arms into an unfamiliar martial artist’s stance.

Adjusting his grip on his sword, Ilfort scoffed and narrowed his eyes. The twisted wings of unpleasant-looking foliage began to crinkle in warning.

He jabbed one hand into the weakened brickwork and hauled himself up into a flip—the wind slashing by his feet as they just evaded spear-tipped ivy giving him the distinct idea his speed was about to be outclassed.

“Ah, fu—” Vines erupting from the roof underneath him interrupted his curse. A slice crossways trimmed them, allowing him to shoot upwards and gain some ground; but, moments later, the piercing tips grew again, regenerating smoothly from the severed ends.

The rustle beside him turned his head. The remainder of the sharpened ivy had crawled upwards, forming a thorn-coated cage in the sky, Tsutomu at its center. With a blur his sword arm leveled out and fired two balas. His eyes were wide in alarm—but also curiosity. He needed to watch, to learn how the Soul Reaper fought in this form. He had some suspicion that he knew what to expect—

WHUUUUM!

The two of them were staggered by the shockwave of energy, Tsutomu withdrawing his vine-wings and Ilfort skidding in the air, cheated out of seeing the balas he’d just unleashed sailing off into the open air. The Soldado felt both impressed and shocked; that had undoubtedly all been D-Roy’s doing. As he stood back up he could tell the Soul Reaper sensed it too.

“Ayako..!” The wings flared, the air around him beginning to crackle with his uncontrolled energies. Tempted to lunge in while the man was distracted, Ilfort paused with worry crossing his features. Déjà vu, or something like it, sprung up in him on seeing the shinigami’s horror in his eyes, hearing it rasp in his voice.

“You all shouldn’t have *attacked* us,” Ilfort said, revealing only what he thought. As Tsutomu’s gaze returned to him clouded with rage he knew it had been unkind to say. No less true, but unkind. “Unfortunately, we don’t stand still and wait for slaughter.”

“You won’t need to.”

That growl was overwhelmed partway through by the tearing of fabric. Ilfort half-swallowed a yell of pain as several thorny branches raking past him. He landed on the top of a telephone pole, a palm on his bleeding chest and breath ragged.

“Agh, thorns or not those aren’t *wood*,” he muttered.

Tsutomu lighted on the building nearby, wings swishing forward before the rending ivy

shot outward in a phalanx. Ilfort scowled, leapt forward to meet the barrage with a backswing that leveled off a large section in a shower of thorny chunks. As Tsutomu came into range he brought his sword back around, aiming a thrust at the Soul Reaper's chest.

He was stopped short; the shinigami's hands had shot up into a block, but it was clear from the rapidly-winding vines taking shape around Del Toro's blade that the man's block had done nothing on its own. Ilfort ripped his sword back out of the tangle with a curse before it could be torn out of his hands.

He twisted and sent a flurry of balas behind him, cutting off the ominous rustle as it rushed towards him. He flitted through the jagged hole, pausing at a fair distance to watch the vines growing back within seconds. A frown crossed his face and he kept his eyes trained to the Soul Reaper in the center of it all.

"Damn," As the concrete cracked below him he jumped in shock. With a hand shrouded in sharpened reishi he struck the vine exploding from the ground away. At another crack he realized he was right to keep his blade free; from below and behind a whole legion of ivy spears jutted, curving in to form a solid mass going right at his heart.

A low sweep destroyed them in a swash. Some sense brought his gaze up—and there he met with the sight of four more vines speeding in, Tsutomu behind them with an arm outstretched in command.

After contorting to avoid the first two the Soldado bared his teeth—this batch were not aimed to kill him, but to *trap* him. A raking pain wrapped around his knee and lurched him down to the ground as the ivy spear buried its head underground. Four more followed suit and pinned him by the ankle and wrists; the spare tangled around his chest and shoulders and resisted all of his attempts to stand.

"Now hold still," Tsutomu's voice from just above him seemed to grate in his ears almost as much as the harsh rustling of the remainder of the vines gathering behind him.

"I refuse!" The Arrancar's eyes strayed to Del Toro, still clutched in his hand even with the vine trapping his bloodied wrist crushing in tighter. There it was again—that weird *déjà vu*. Reddish wisps of spiritual energy began to emanate from the blade as his grip tightened. Well, it wasn't the most effective stance to release from, but it worked.

"*Impale.*" Tsutomu's brow raised as he noted the zanpakuto glowing in his opponent's grip, hurrying his ivy's strike but much too late to stop Ilfort. "Del Toro!"