

The Crack of the Other Side

15: Bushido or Savagery

One, two...

“What’s the matter?” Masaru’s disposition had soured up. Where once he was smug and calm he was now smug and cackling, aided by Shawlong’s ducks and dodges as he continued to avoid confronting the ring of razors altogether. “Fight, Hollow! Are you *scared*?”

That’s three. Four, As another blade buried itself where he’d been standing moments before, Shawlong adjusted his count. The fifth met a thin, gold-hued cero fired from the tips of the Primos’s claws and was pushed back into the path of the sixth; both crashed into the rooftop in a shower of powdered wood and slate. *One more.*

“Last chance to fight back,” The 3rd Seat’s grin could have turned the vapors in the air to ice. His grip on the hilt of the Shikai gave a telltale flex, and Shawlong vanished in a flicker of hornet sound.

Fast as he was Masaru’s seventh blade found him, swooping up like a falcon after a pigeon in midair. This much Shawlong expected, and with a snort he showed that perhaps the sadistic enemy was undereducated on the capabilities of a pigeon; with a sudden twist, he allowed the speeding blade to roll past. *I have three seconds before it can return to him.*

He wasn’t keen on wasting those seconds. His claws and cerci all hummed with energy as he pounced. Masaru had raised his hilt—the only thing he still had at his command for those few vulnerable seconds.

“Heh...”

Shawlong had expected a trick, some last resistance. Kido, perhaps. As such he had trained his eye on any small movements, any last aces. He did not expect the black, barbed hook that sprung from the base of the hilt and hissed with electricity just milliseconds from coming into range of the Soul Reaper.

“Gyaaak—”

He’d pulled out of the way, he was sure of it; he had not, however, counted on the barbed hook whirling around and wrapping itself around his armored wrist, the barbs catching on itself like a grappling line on a castle parapet. The voltage that burned through him right after cast aside all ability to contemplate what wrong move he’d made.

“There are *eight* parts to Kuro Girochin I control.” Masaru’s tone was falsely

sweet—degrading. The indignity woke up the willpower in the Arrancar to settle his glare on the barbed hook's control line. "Kuro Girochin is a rather cunning Shikai, you see. It appears at first to be simplistic and combat-focused while hiding its handicapping shock. And best of all," Masaru tugged on the seven lines, summoning the swarm of razors back and training their edges on the kneeling, twitching Soldado, "The combination is one of the most inescapable traps I know of. It makes even relatively intelligent foes into faltering weak ones."

"D—Does it..!" The Arrancar snarled, raising a claw, yellow-golden spiritual pressure wrapped about it. For a second the Soul Reaper's visible eye widened.

SNIKK!

The black hook dropped to the ground, useless and detached. It clanged against a twisted and ruined road sign just moments before the seven ring blades slammed into the space above it, grinding against each other as their target skittered back, skipping against footholds in the sky.

"Do you... always *torture*... your enemies?" Shawlong steadied himself, panting and reduced to a low crouch. The shock on Masaru's face faded fast; indeed, the Primos Soldado did not look like he had come out of the exchange well off. The cold grin returned as he called back the razors into a rotating halo about him.

"That's very childish of you. Torture, really?" He laughed, adjusting his busted glasses. Shawlong's eye was fixed on the hilt and the fingers tightly encircling it. A fast twitch of his index finger and his cautious assumption was confirmed—the severed line from the hook returned to its source and a dull snap of electricity loaded a replenished version, ready to snag him once again. The other fingers began to flex, "I bring unruly Souls back into the dominion of Soul Society. What happens before that hardly counts."

As someone who has already passed through death once...

"...believe me, it all counts." He murmured. His tar-grey eyes flashed with a sudden idea, and he smirked. "I was talking about your *preaching*, Soul Reaper." His tone had become heated, jagged. "If you are capable of using that over-complicated fish-trap without spouting off I'd like to see it."

"Don't be so impatient, Shawlong." Masaru growled, a strained quality possessing his grin. "I'll kill you on my own time."

"Then *do it*." Shawlong's clawed arms spread wide, his expression unimpressed. "Or at least *try*." His tail swished behind him, cerci clacking together, "Come on, give me your best! If I die, at least I'll be spared your mouthing..."

Whether by whim or Shawlong's words finally stinging him somewhere tender, Masaru obeyed. His fist clenched about the hilt of the Shikai and the seven blades whirled out at top

speed—edges homing on the Arrancar.

The Soul Reaper neither expected nor was that bothered by the sudden shift; Shawlong's form blurred as he lunged straight at the ring, uttering a rare roar of anger.

Masaru made a small noise of derision and tugged the hilt of the sword—the Arrancar warrior was still a bit faster than his weapon, slipping just through the ring of death before it closed on him and now plowing ahead with claws splayed. Unconcerned, the 3rd Seat sneered and sent out the harpoon, figuring it would be deflected away only to cripple the foe's advance with a quick shock.

The barb hit its mark. A thin spurt of blood streaked behind the oncoming Arrancar. Masaru held firm, but could have been shaking. Yes—the barb was stuck there in the armor substance of his chest, stopped short of hitting anything vital, but with brows furrowed and teeth bared he seemed to be unfazed by the intense pain. If anything, he looked to be getting stronger, more threatening. In fact—

“*Wings?*” He realized the change—wings! From two armor panels on the Arrancar's back a pair of sharp-edged wings had emerged and were being held flat behind him. Excepting their sword-like edges they were filamentous, light; there was some sort of speed-enhancing quality to them, he bet. He squeezed the hilt harder, calling louder and louder for his blades to return before Shawlong's got to him first.

STHHUNK!

“H-heheh...” Masaru waited a moment to breathe, swiftly clearing the bead of sweat that had formed on his forehead away, disguising the motion and the fact he'd been truly afraid by pretending to adjust his broken glasses, “Didn't quite pan out, did it, Shawlong?”

Muscle, armor, and blades creaked and ground just feet from Masaru's face. By each claw, each wing, and digging into the hierro on the man's shins were the seven blades. Shawlong's head was bowed as he fought to keep the weapon's many parts from crushing in and cutting him down. He glared up at his enemy, and at the smug look of pre-ordained victory stamped across his face.

“What did I tell you? Eventually, they all submit. Every Hollow, even ones as deceptively human-like as your kind, has a zanpakuto with their name on it out there. It's simply the way the world works.” Shawlong seemed to mutter something, too quietly for Masaru to hear it. However, his tone was audible, and it was a brand of resilient that the gloating 3rd Seat did not at all like in his moment of victory.

“Oh, give it up, you worthless insect,” he laughed. “There's nothing you could do that will s—gl-aah...”

Curving over the ring of deadly blades and its captive, Shawlong's pincer-tipped tail took a moment to dislodge itself from square in the center of Masaru's back. The Soul Reaper's mouth reddened with a cough full of blood as his gaze wandered down to the gaping hole in his chest.

Shawlong said nothing, gasping with relief as Kuro Girochin disintegrated and he was released from the excruciating voltage it carried. His enemy's eyes rolled up into his head, glasses slipping as he was sloughed off and to the destroyed ground. The Arrancar continued to kneel, silently recuperating from the stinging wounds all over him. His wings crept back into hiding, his tail flicking to clear the ruddy filth from it.

It was over, but it would be a moment before he could stand again.

“What... on *earth*?!”

Midorihiro no Tsubasa's thorny vines strained and frayed around the armored back of their target as the faint reddish light faded. Ilfort took a deep breath and focused—before rearing sharply up to his feet and snapping the ivy holding his chest and wrists. Seemingly out of shock and a desire to have his resources pooled, Tsutomu pulled his vines back through the ground, relinquishing their hold on the Arrancar's ankles. Ilfort turned his head to the Soul Reaper, studying the alarm crossing his face through the eye sockets of his horned mask. He settled on his knuckles, his stance forced into something crouched and feral out of necessity and weight.

“What?” he said, flexing his white-plated fists and confirming his smaller wounds had been rejuvenated somewhat in his transformation. “Haven't you ever seen an Arrancar's Resurreccion form before?” *He probably hasn't*, he reminded himself. *It's surprising a 7th Seat was even told we exist...*

“You're a *monster*.” Tsutomu took a step back, shifting into a defensive stance. Ilfort's head tilted slightly and bobbed backwards.

“You're not so harmless and pleasant-looking yourself,” he chided, lowering his head again to protect his vitals. “So now that you've seen this, you can either *back the hell off* or keep fighting.”

The shinigami's Shikai rustled, layers of vines weaving over and under themselves. The thin forms of them glowed green and vivid as every three fused together. The result was fewer, but stronger spears coated in vicious-looking thorns. The glow faded, but did not darken completely. His glare was determined. His left hand shifted forward, looking for all the world like a palm strike against the empty air before him.

The first spike burrowed itself into the ground before Ilfort's huge shadow had completely left it. The next two sought the minotaur-esque Arrancar out on the top of a brick building (the walls splitting already from his bulk) and shattered the roof in a shower of brittle rock and mortar. Tsutomu grunted, seeking out his enemy and wondering why the Soldado had suddenly become so non-aggressive—the Arrancar's newly animalistic appearance hadn't slowed him at all, and seemed instead to have sped him up.

A thud behind him had him spinning around with both fists outstretched. Ilfort crouched on the overhang of a first-floor, standing his ground as another bundle of vines veered towards him. Armored knuckles crunched into the roofing for leverage.

His opponent gasped—With a few inches to go Ilfort had swung his head aside, one massive horn catching the vines by their hook-like thorns and flinging them wildly off-course. Tsutomu had been stunned by the sheer strength but found the force of his Shikai being deflected had staggered him forward. He glanced up and caught sight of Ilfort's fist raising with energy crackling about it—balas again, seemed to be a favorite. Three vines whipped around from the reserve, lacing together into a spiny shield that smoked and dented in from the balas striking. Before the twisted wooden substance sealed back together the Soldado's trained eye found what he was looking for: Tsutomu's armored arms—or more specifically the hands—pulled up and to the side in that block-like pose. The minotaur blinked.

“Is that it?” He lurched back down onto his knuckles again. Tsutomu backed up, keeping his arms up and ready to signal a “block” once again. “Is that as strong as they get?”

The Soul Reaper was silent a moment, glaring up at the intimidating figure—most especially at the curving horns that hadn't been brought into play just yet. The nerves were obvious, and were it not for the heavy mask and transformed body it would have been plain on Ilfort's face and posture too.

The 7th Seat's eyes widened, attention suddenly diverted back towards the old theater (or what was left of it). Ilfort hesitated; he didn't need to look to know what had happened, and while Shawlong's energies had weakened to less than half the shinigami who had menaced him had all but vanished.

“So, what was that about earlier?” Tsutomu whipped back around, hands raising with palms outwards. A new form. “Something about our friends murdering yours?”

The thick vines seemed to split in halves, the scene filled with a deep viridian glow. The top halves elongated, flattened, and became flexible and sharp like oversized blades of grass. All except for the ends which remained gnarled and thorn-covered—each thorn that remained had become the size of a sword, budding off dagger-like prongs on the sides. The bottom halves, however, lost their thorns and instead began to gnarl further into armor plating. It reminded the Arrancar of tree roots.

Ilfort raised both hands as the root-like vines exploded towards him, still as sharp as their former versions. His grip clasped around them, and while his feet were planted squarely the attack had summoned enough force to send him bursting through the second floor of the building. Obscured in a rain of bricks, the minotaur sidestepped and tossed the roots off course, head twisting to his right as Tsutomu's presence apparated there.

A thorn-covered vine slammed into the top of his head, dizzying the Arrancar a moment but leaving his tough armor unharmed. Tsutomu appeared from the dust throwing out another air-jab, and as expected another of the sharp-edged plants whirled towards him. Ilfort's forearm took this one, the armor and a little extra reishi shrouding it letting him slap it away without harm.

"Ugh!"

Finally, he showed the Soul Reaper the purpose of the horns—jerking his head downward the projection suddenly corkscrewed outward. Tsutomu flashed upwards to avoid the drill but found himself jarred to a halt as one of the root-like pieces of Midorihiro no Tsubasa was skewered in a spray of greenish sap.

Through the mask the Arrancar focused on the shinigami, beginning to charge his other horn.

Tsutomu's stance shifted, sweeping one arm to the side and keeping the other in a block. Midorihiro no Tsubasa obeyed—the speared root split and uncaught itself from the Arrancar's horn. As Ilfort's other horn drew near the whippier appendages crisscrossed before it and gave out a glow.

He staggered back with one hand raised to shield his eyes. The point of his horn had been blocked for a moment before the plants had shredded, but there was no point in pressing further. The Soul Reaper had already flash stepped through the sky and came back to earth behind him.

"Hyaa—!"

The Arrancar's knuckles buried into the ground a moment before he sprung upwards, the gravels he'd loosened being pinged across town by the charge of thorny flails that rushed after him. A glance down confirmed the shinigami's Shikai was still in dogged pursuit. But it was too slow now. He blinked; surely he was holding back a bit still? No, that couldn't be it—this Tsutomu was rushing to subdue him so that he could go to his fallen comrades. In midair he halted his bound, charging double balas on the points of his horns and waiting on the vines to come into close range. The Soul Reaper wasn't thinking anymore, and due to that had seemingly forgotten his opponent still could.

The tips of the thorn-flails exploded into dust from the balas' impacts. The cloud of reishi that resulted hid his next Sonido burst.

Tsutomu growled and brought his arm around like a whip, calling on the flail-like strands just as their tips regrew. Ilfort stared him down and launched bala after bala at the Soul Reaper, not caring that the armored root-strands were blocking each one on command. As the screech of the vines grew near he darted away—landing again on another side, and then even closer to his left, and then far to the right by a half-ruined wall. With each change of trajectory Tsutomu adjusted the path of his vines, sweat beads flying from his forehead as his frustration grew.

“Stop running from me!” He shouted, bringing his roots back up to deflect a low-powered cero blast. The minotaur-esque man landed with a dull shockwave in front of him, facing him down from the opposite end of a lonely, cracked street. His horns glowed once again with the red light of ceros forming—an exact counter to the green luminance of the vast and crisscrossing network of Tsutomu’s ivy now strung across every building and lightpole he’d dodged around. “Stand and fight me, Arrancar!”

Since he didn’t need to Ilfort did not bother to respond with anything but a cero. A wall of intertwined roots burst up from the ground right before the cone of destruction reached him. With a grunt the shinigami sent forth his vines, retaliating.

Ilfort’s horns released two more ceros—each of these blew through the walls and posts the Shikai had been tangled around. He jumped back, encouraging the thorn-flails to speed up after him.

And to exhaust their slack—slack that had been laid like a net all around its commander. Tsutomu’s anxious rush to help the other shinigami had him noticing the incoming danger much too late for him to get his arms out of the way.

Sharp branching thorns were inches from the snout-end of Ilfort’s mask when they quivered and fell limp to the ground. He heard Tsutomu curse and be knocked down to his knees from the force of his own Shikai entangling him.

“The fight’s over,” The Soul Reaper jolted at the sound of Ilfort’s voice and the Sonido buzz so close to him. He struggled a moment before a sharp pain forced the breath from him. Looking down he saw that the sensation had been literal—the extended horn arching down had pierced right through his chest, lifting him almost to his feet again. “Now get down and *stay* down...”

Still paralyzed by the pain and the trap he’d wrapped himself in, Tsutomu coughed and gagged as he was slid off the impaling horn to a heap on the ground. He said something as his Shikai exploded into energy, reverting to a katana he could barely hold onto—it had sounded like a curse before it became another wheezing cough.

“Sorry.” The minotaur backed up a step, distracted by the shinigami’s struggles to continue even as he began turning his attention to his fellow Fracciones in the distance. The

bleeding man seemed to pay him no mind. It was questionable if he was fully conscious still—the only proof was the agonized grunts and continued attempts to clutch at the fallen sword.

He was heaved to his knuckles again. The fight had drained much from him—not as much as Nakim or D-Roy, but enough to force him to lean wearily on his own enlarged frame. He turned his head towards where Edorad and Atsushi's energies were still clashing, the violent power ricocheting off the encounter not showing any signs of letting up. Edorad was struggling. He had become un-cautious, throwing all his strength at his enemy despite normally being a cool-headed strategist. He was desperate not to release—but was clearing in want of its explosive power. Ilfort growled in his throat and wondered what kind of ability had put the one-to-one master on the ropes like this.

Every trick in the Soldado's playbook, every scrap of a clue Atsushi missed covering, every tiny thing Edorad had was being forced into use now. The Soul Reaper appeared briefly in his vision, summoning a plume of blue flame, before whisking away and being replaced by the illusion of walls and masonry. There was a bright flash of reishi as the Arrancar batted the *Sokatsui* away, eyes straining after the faintest trail of smoke and cinder following the spell's caster.

WHUMMPH—

A knee plowed into his side, opposite the side he'd been tracking Atsushi towards. With a snarl Edorad flipped backwards, skidding across the sky. He grabbed up the distance, flinging a half dozen balas to cover his flight. A pile of wall-rubble broke apart across his back as he landed in a shallow crater.

A sharp yelp had him twisting around. Behind him D-Roy and Nakim were braced for the oncoming foe, staring upwards into what Edorad knew as a technicolor sky.

“Whoa—”

The fat man had almost managed to give his friend forewarning, but there was no need. With furrowed brows Edorad sensed the heat of another powerful spell speeding towards him, and with a sharp movement the blue flames burst upon his sword. He turned back around even though he knew he would never see exactly where his attacker lurked.

“Two more, huh—” Edorad's head snapped upwards to the voice, seeing only reddened sky spotted with pools of darkness. Hallucinations, all of it. The colors shifted and slithered over to green and blue, the ground so bright it nearly blinded him. “Not a problem.”

“Leave them two alone,” the Arrancar bared his teeth. Nakim’s eyes widened, suspecting the same thing Edorad had, one fist tightening in preparation for a sucker punch from the piercer-wielding shinigami. “Weren’t you fighting me, Atsushi?”

“I was.”

Unknown to his opponent the shinigami thrust one arm out, pointing squarely at the pair of Soldados behind Edorad.

“Men!” he barked, immediately catching the attention of the surrounding rank-and-file. “I will deal with this one. Move in on the two who are weakened!”

“Aw, shit,” D-Roy shivered, squinting as he staggered upright. He pawed the congealed bloody mark over his bandaged eye. “That’s *ush*, isn’t it?”

“Damn right,” Nakim’s normally level voice had dipped into a low rumble, glaring at a pair of shinigami who had stepped down into the crater already. Atsushi drew back his hands into a wide stance—muttering under his breath the incantation of his next Hado.

“Guys,” Edorad’s hand gripped his sword, his deep rasp catching Nakim and D-Roy’s attention despite its low volume, “Help me. Tell me where he is.”

“Sure thing.” Nakim asked no questions. His glare tightened on the shinigami crouched closest drawing his zanpakuto, daring him. Questions weren’t something they could wait to have answered now.

The sky seared open. The tearing sound was obvious, but that was not what startled the squad of shinigami closing in on their targets. No, what startled them was the shock of a new presence entering the world.

The world thundered with this new, threatening reiatsu. One of Atsushi’s men stared at the ground, watching chunks of bricks rattling in place, incredulous. Nakim, D-Roy and Edorad relaxed their combat postures and cast their attention to the sky, relieved by the newcomer.

“**Hey**,” Grimmjow stepped through the Garganta portal. Atsushi’s expression was stoic, but his grim eyes growing wider without his control let on that this Arrancar was well out of his league. “What the *hell* do you all think you’re doing?”

There was no comparing the Espada to his Soldados Fracciones. D-Roy swallowed nervously, starting to look as freaked as the Soul Reapers that had been advancing on him for the past minute.

Grimmjow was here. And Grimmjow was *mad*.