

1 – WAY BACK HOME

Cherize City, recognized for its skyscrapers contrasting the viridian background and city-wide shoreline, laid at the foot of the traveler's hill. Like a long lost treasure, Shimon marveled in admiration above the skyline. He recognized Cherize for this view alone, but thousands of moons had passed since he'd last seen it.

'It's huge! Far bigger than I remember!' he immediately thought. And without hesitating for a second, he skipped over the hill's edge, sliding down the slope of dirt with nothing but his bare feet. A slope high enough to easily kill any Human daring to challenge it. And yet, the marine-haired boy barely considered this.

After a few seconds of careful skidding, something grumbled in his stomach area. It wasn't hunger - rather, a small terror settling in.

'I'm probably gonna face a lot of Humans if I enter just like that...'

In response, his sliding began to die down as his feet dug deeper into the earth. Stunningly, the boy faced no problems holding his poise, sticking out of the slope like a match - even as vulnerable to gravity as he stood. He started crouching downward, until his bottom almost touched the soil. Then, he shot out.

The boy's arc of flight was improvised, yet not uncontrolled. It wasn't a first-time experiment. And as he landed on the nearest skyscraper's rooftop - braking his immense momentum with only his bare feet - it became clear how.

"Woooo!" he shouted in his spike of adrenaline. *'Still works! Push, power, speed - it all still works! This is amazing!'*

—

Shimon's early childhood memories were hazy at best. Nearly a decade had passed, and he questioned whether some were even true to begin with. As he stared down the building's six-story roof, a sort of culture shock flashed into his head.

'That's so much! So many Humans! I don't remember them looking so... hard, but also kind of frail? What are they gonna do when they see me? Are they going to attack me? But I don't feel my powers from anyone else... Wait - what if they're just good at hiding it? What if I just couldn't see it as a kid?'

Never before in his life did Shimon harbor fear of the public. Where he came from, anyone beside the own social circle was a rare sight – and when there was someone new, this was usually a sign of danger. Now, with so many new impressions, Shimon's instincts sent all kinds of bad signals. His breaths became heavier by the second.

'I-I don't know... was this the right move?'

Still locked in his gaze over the urban scenery, his spell of anxiety was broken when he crossed something familiar to him.

'Wait, is that—'

His schooled nose picked up a smell. One of his favorite smells, in fact.

'—coffee?'

Surely enough, right where the whiff of bitter beans emanated from was a store; medium-sized, not too many people inside. This led Shimon to do what he struggled with just a moment

ago - and from top of the six-story complex, he leapt down.

The citizen of Cherize could, if they took close note, hear something sizzling. Something thin, cutting through the air. Then, a crash.

Shimon landed on his feet, right next to where the smell of broiled goodness emerged from. No injuries, no physical trauma whatsoever. This was what stuck with the couple of passersby that witnessed him falling from the sky. The broken pavement only intensified their swelling unease. Contrasting them, Shimon had already entered the coffee store. He didn't shed a moment to think about the effect his leap had - though he couldn't fully ignore the leap itself.

'My soles sting a little... my heart's racing... but man, am I glad that worked out!'

But still, there are those that seemingly strive to deny their own safety. Right as Shimon entered the store's front, where the smell was the most pungent, one of the passersby snatched the boy by his shoulder.

"Whoa! What was that stunt? Did you actually just jump down the damn building? How did you do that? Where's the rope?"

The question persisted far longer than intended. Partly reasoned by the man's brash manner, mostly reasoned by the fact that Shimon didn't understand him.

'What? What did he say? What should I say? Should I say something?'

Shimon didn't return to the Human Realm fully unprepared. He was aware of the language difference, and while it's been a near-decade since he last spoke it, he at least remembered that Pangaeian was Cherize's native tongue - and formerly, his own. Yet, just a couple of minutes after arriving, Shimon couldn't remember a hint of Pangaeian himself. The man's meaty, work-ridden hand still lingered on the boy's shoulder; so, to rid himself of it, Shimon decided to swipe it off. Not the worst response, had he anticipated the force behind it.

In the light swipe that the boy performed, a lot of unregulated power reigned. Too much for a standard Human - and thus, the man's arm twisted behind his back in a powerful arc, dislocating his shoulder cleanly. There was no scream of pain. But there was obvious agony coloring the man's face. Additionally, shock. What the hell just happened? Who the hell was this boy?

Then, a phenomenon widely spread among sentient life occurred. The man's pupils dilated, his heartbeat increased, his shock transformed to rage in record time - his fight-or-flight response kicked in. And it all fueled his instinct to run head-first into Shimon.

Faced with this wild beast, the boy felt perplexed. He hadn't intended to injure the man, unwilling to cause an actual fight. All he desired was a cup of coffee. Now, what he'd created sprinted right toward him - while not slow, the man appeared so to the otherworldly boy.

'Oh man... if that quick swipe was enough to hurt him... what do I do now? He's so fragile, I might break him... so I need to evade... Argh! I just wanted to get some coffee!'

Shimon had loads of time to think about his next move - but maybe even that wasn't enough. Like a bull charging ahead, the man aimed towards Shimon guts with his nonexistent horns. What else was to do but try and evade? Thus, he leapt above the adult in an effortless hop, like the matador tricking his bull.

But he made a crucial mistake. He touched the man's exposed back to gain momentum. And just that was enough to cleanly force him into the ground, breaking the brittle wooden floor with ease.

The man was now stuck between the shop's floor and basement, effectively shut down - and bleeding from his face. An unpleasant display.

Every other customer of the shop caught wind of what happened by now. Most reacted predictably hysterical, some trying to make themselves as small as possible in fear. This was rather welcome to Shimon. The attacker was down and out, nobody was bothering him anymore and he could finally enjoy the coffee he craved so much.

'Let's not waste too much time, though,' he thought after snatching a filled cup from the counter. A victory cup, he decided.

—
"Sshhiiii... maaahn."

"*She-man?*"

"No!" the young boy exclaimed, flapping his arms around. Even before returning, Shimon imagined his journey to be a rocky one - but not for the reasons he'd encounter. After wallowing in his favorite drink, leaving the terrified customers behind, he recalled the guidelines his parents gave him as a child.

'If we ever get separated, head to City Hall and we'll find you there.'

As an eight-year old, this phrase carried a more literal meaning. Shimon's parents didn't want to lose their child on accident - but destiny has a knack for irony. Now, this was the only plan that the boy figured to reconvene with his family. After bumping the hall's entrance for a while, a lady's inviting voice eventually called him to her counter.

"What do you mean?" questioned the lady as she tilted her head.

"Sheee... mooaan," the boy articulated, as clearly as he could.

A second of pure silence.

"I'm— I'm very sorry - you say it's 'She-moan'?"

Enthusiastic nodding. "Mhm! Shi-mon!"

The woman, presumably in her mid-twenties with glossy, brunette curls, couldn't help but giggle from sheer confusion.

"O-okay... *Shi-mon*, yes? You seem... lost?" she asked, pretending she wasn't the one completely lost. Half of this question blew past the boy, but he slowly started adjusting to his once native language again. The sentence at least sounded helpful. To that end, more nodding.

"Uhm... Can you *write* your name? It would *help* me," the receptionist emphasized, gesturing onto a blank sheet of paper. While overwhelmed to the point of nervous laughter, she genuinely did want to assist the late teenager. And Shimon understood the elementary task he was given - but lacked the skills to start. While he knew how to write once, it was such a distant, abstract memory that she could've given him a math problem expecting better results.

Twenty seconds passed. The boy stared onto the white piece of thin, processed wood.

'My name. My name. How do I write my name? I need letters! But which letters? How many were there, even? Like, fifty? I need to figure out the right sequence! But how am I supposed to do that?'

Shimon hit a dead end. This, of all places, was where he'd fail, coming short of even gaining the chance to see his former home.

His former home. A perfectly square bungalow, a place where he felt at peace, never disturbed. Where his parents lived, and his big brother held watch over him. Filled with vivid, joyous memories. Countless times, he'd enter the front yard just to sit on the swinging bench, eager to try and swing it to its breaking point. Next to the vegetable yard. Next to the pond.

Next to the wooden plaque, where his family's name—

Like a magnet latching onto a coin, something fundamental connected.

"*Astrai*? But didn't you say it was Shimon—"

The obvious answer clicked.

"—it's your last name, right?"

Shimon remembered. If it wasn't his own name, he at least remembered his family's name, etched forever into the wooden board proclaiming their home. It wasn't that Shimon remembered how to write, more that he remembered the exact shape of what was inscribed. That was sufficient, and he immediately put down the individual letters with care – if still very broken.

Since waiting for confirmation would just take time, the lady directly commenced her search. Tapping away at her keyboard, it was by no means difficult for her to make out who correlated to what the boy put down – in fact, only one family in the whole of Cherize and its neighboring towns popped up.

'Shimon Astrai. Male, child of Marcos and Chirin Astrai. Reported missing since: three years. Status: search discontinued. Last updated: eight months ago.'

The pieces asserted themselves. In one fell swoop, her confusion faded and was replaced by awe of the miracle that was seemingly occurring. Was she really about to guide a long-lost child back home? Wasn't such a dramatic act of kindness what she'd always secretly hoped for?

"... but you don't really look eleven."

Integrity was the most critical part of the receptionist's job. The boy had the name and the reason. He carried a beardless, stubble-free baby face, chin-length and unkempt marine hair, a notable lack of shoes, rags of cloth below an unusual cloak, the earthy smell of someone who'd showered only when it rained, the genuine honesty of a child – but was he *eleven*?

While Shimon heard the number, he saw it in no correlation. So he simply kept nodding, seeing that it brought something before. Yet, this wasn't enough for the worker to legally reveal the family's location to him. No matter how desperate and earnest he seemed, no matter how much she wanted to help the hapless boy – her professional side couldn't give out someone's info based on no evidence at all.

But another, much bigger side of her wanted to.

Going against all rules and potential consequences, the lady's lips drew a thin line, aware of what may follow regarding her job security. She printed out a map with a detailed route, alongside the address and names of whom the boy desperately wanted to see. Out of nothing but good will. Or at least intuition; the feeling that the boy in front of her wasn't faking, not even an inch. A feeling that was confirmed by something. The boy's ungiven, desperate look might've been that something.

'No way...' the adolescent thought as he marveled upon the names. *'It's... it's them! All of them! And at our old home, too!'*

Shimon began hyperventilating. There was anticipation and suspense – though pure joy outweighed them both. So much so that he sprung to the outside, right before quickly turning back to bow in front of the receptionist, as sincerely as he could. She was impressed by his speed – she didn't even realize him leaving before he was back.

After nine years, Shimon Astrai was on-track to see his family again.

'You did the right thing. You did the right thing. Don't worry, you did the right thing,' the City

Hall employee kept repeating to herself.