

2.5 - REJECTION, OR: REUNION

Had he the liberty to do so, Shimon Astrai would have possibly remained forever at the Astrai home's doorstep. Not out of bitter protest, rather because he didn't know where to go to in the first place. However, when the sirens of an emergency truck started blaring, he was forced to think of another place immediately. He'd never find out, but Marcos himself ordered the services for his wife; not ceasing her neurotic patting even after the lost son left their halls.

When Shimon rose from the cold stone step that sapped of his lifetime, he felt emptied. The very reason he sought out to the Human Realm had denied him and crippled his spirit. What place was left to carry his body to? He didn't have an answer yet. Regardless, *'somewhere else'* was the best idea his mind could come up with. With that, he took the first step from the grey house that toyed with his soul.

As the rejected boy left the house's vicinity with the most steady pace he could muster - a slight speedwalk - he did not notice that he was being tailed.

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Cherize City became more bright and bustling the further one drove downtown - as such, the outskirts were perfect to witness a calmer side to the metropolis. The outer harmony of green grass, ocher condos and blue ocean were inviting to tourists and inhabitants, while the lights of the night attracted them to the inner city's abundance of boutiques. Advantageous for the homeless, marine-haired boy, who found a tranquil spot under a highway bridge that connected the countryside to Cherize.

Years had passed since Shimon noticed a significant change in temperature. No matter what weather or time of day, his cloak kept his temperature stable and steady. However, at around 8:30PM of that fateful day, the boy felt cold. Freezing, even. He couldn't tell whether it was because the Human Realm's nights were more harsh or because there was a brick of ice inside him that he didn't know how to melt.

Listening to the cars above caress the asphalt, one after the other, Shimon wrapped himself in his dark cloak and shut his eyes. The sounds were hypnotic, just as otherworldly to him as he was to Cherize. And that worked out. All he desired was sleep. A little rest from his heartache. And as darkness enveloped him, he was finally granted a break.

A break of seven minutes. Someone approached him. Shimon noticed immediately. His instinct, as he called it, was honed enough to sense anything nearing him, even in his sleep. A skill that was essential where he came from. The boy's eyes shot open, sharp and alert. Just a day before, this meant immediate preparation to fight for his life. But now, another boy stood before him. Raven hair, smaller, a little younger than Shimon, clad in a plaid red hoodie and black denim, carrying a heavy stare that rivaled the traveler's own. And for a few seconds, the two simply observed each other. Uncertainty was the keyword.

"I heard you in our house," the approaching boy finally spoke. "You said "Shimon". I listened from upstairs and heard it loud and clear. Why did you say "Shimon"?"

A little over three hours ago, the dimensional pilgrim first encountered what would become the largest hindrance in his return: his language barrier. It would serve as an enormous spike of difficulty, climaxing in his eventual rejection.

However, there was another obstacle. One that the boy was yet unaware of. It would be the hardest one to conquer. And now, it would gradually introduce itself.

'*Shimon?*' the same-named boy contemplated. '*The way he just said Shimon... do I know—*'

"Hey," the opposing boy interjected. His words weren't as confident as he intended them to be. "Talk to me."

The more he spoke, the more something clicked. Like a key figuring out how to turn its lock.

'*Talk-to-me. Shi-mon. Heard-you... in-our-house.*'

As Shimon traced every individual syllable, he kept mustering the wavy-haired boy. His irises were filled with such dark green that they might as well have been black. Intimidatingly familiar.

'*In our house. In our house? Their house? The house he lives in? But there's no way...*'

Shimon's throat dried up. He chose the next word with utmost caution.

"Zeke?"

The dots connected, the pieces fit. They had to be trimmed a little, but they formed a picture. This must have been obvious to the approaching teenager as well, as his entire face shot up in shock as he heard his name.

"Whoa. Whoa, *whoa whoa whoa,*" he muttered as he stumbled backwards. A single word could wield unimaginable power, and he felt the brunt force of it carrying him away. "H-how the hell do you know my name," the boy said more to himself than to Shimon. But the marine one didn't reply. He kept mustering his opposite as he caught the words "my name". He felt like his face thinned down to a single point, somewhere in the middle of his brain; as if he crossed an epiphany that changed just about everything.

"Zeke?" Shimon asked once more, this time considerably more baffled.

"*HOW DO YOU KNOW ME?*" the raven-haired teenager shouted in aggression. But he, too, couldn't neglect that something was considerably off. His verbal power came from uncertainty, the creeping feeling that the other person knew more than he did. What multiplied this uncertainty was the fact that this person looked eerily similar to what his now 11-year old brother would look like - just a lot taller, older, more mature. Not eleven by any means.

"Sh... Shimon?"

Both petrified.

'*What? This can't be,*' crossed each mind simultaneously. No movement, no sound. Just thoughts, examinations about the illogical nature of the universe.

Almost ten seconds passed without a noise. In their joint disorientation, it was the one called Zeke that decided to deal with this phenomenon first. He took small steps toward his supposed brother, one inch at a time. Shimon didn't interrupt. Half the distance later, the dark-haired boy extended his arm. His jittering palm changed shape, spreading his fingers upward and his thumb downward - a simple motion that seemed to carry some hidden meaning. He came to a standstill, holding up his palm in front of Shimon's face. Zeke seemed to expect something in return; that's what the deep unease in his eyes told Shimon. And it would take only two seconds for Shimon to realize what that was.

'—*That's our sign! That's our brotherhood sign! That's— that is— Zeke!*' (-> SWITCH ACTIONS)

With absolutely no hesitation, Shimon replied by forming the same gesture, intertwining his fingers with his brother's and pressing his thumb against the other. Their unique sign, one developed back when they were still infants. Both teenagers, once more, stood still for a while. Words could explain, but a gesture provided irrefutable proof. Proof that surpassed logic and

chance.

'What... what is this? What is happening right now? It's impossible. It's-it's-it's simply not possible. It can't be right. That's not an 11-year old. That can't be an 11-year old,' puzzled the younger one as he pulled his palm away again. Still, the flesh he touched was that of his brother. That much he felt. *'Or am I just getting desperate? Am I starting to hallucinate?'*

'This is incredibly weird... he should have been taller than me... he shouldn't have lived at our house anymore anyway, right? He's an adult now, right? Was I that out of touch with Humans?' questioned the marine one. He couldn't believe that the big leader he always placed on a pedestal was now smaller than him. It made no sense.

"You... y-young," Shimon stuttered.

"Y-you're old! You're not— you're not supposed to be that old! Are you really *eleven?*" Zeke replied, unsure what emotion to feel.

'E-le-ven? Eleven?' Shimon's mind rummaged back and forth, set in motion by a harmless number. *'Didn't that lady also mention that number?'*

In a burst, his eyes stretched wide open. Cold sweat broke out upon the mere consideration.

'Am I... somehow supposed to be eleven? Is this why mum and dad...'

Shimon turned his troubled head back toward his brother's.

"Old... y-you?" he breathed.

"F-fourteen? Why are you talking so..."

Four and ten. Shimon's system for remembering digits, remainders of second-grade school. He had no problem understanding this one – but once he did, he felt a deeply disturbing shower run down his back.

"W-what's up? How old are *you?*"

His brain raced to come up with an explanation. However, he distinctly remembered marking each day, each year that he spent away. An undeniable truth, unless he terribly missed the mark. It all accumulated to...

"Se-ven... ten."

Then, silence. A unique kind of silence. None of the two children could comprehend, nor could they explain. Impossible circumstance, met by irrefutable evidence.

"H-how? How? *Literally, how?* How can you be seventeen? Be-because you can't be! That makes you older than me! That's not possible! That's illogical!"

"Counted..." the 17-year old added, still locked in pondering.

"No! No— *no! Shut up!* You can't have, dammit! It doesn't make sense! You don't make any sense! Stop—" Zeke yelled, his eyes gradually becoming glassier, "*—stop pretending to be my dead brother!*"

"... dead brother?" Shimon repeated. These two words felt like bullets. Zeke was 14 and he was supposed to be dead, or at least eleven years old. A weirdly nostalgic feeling of surrealism filled his heart; the same feeling he experienced when he first left the Human Realm and found himself in a world that he only ever dreamed to exist.

All of a sudden, that gave the near-adult an idea.

"Wait. Show you," he proposed as he raised from his slumped seat. Then, he expanded his arm, flexing open his palm. Shimon remained still for about two seconds, leaving Zeke still in anticipation - and then, a burst.

In the direction he aimed to, all was blown away by a sudden pulse. Leaves flew, the occasional tin can rolled. The younger brother wasn't hit, but he wasn't left unaffected by far.

"—wh-what? What? What just— what? What was that? What just happened?"

Zeke's eyes tore open. His brother's reappearance as a 17-year old wasn't the summit of this night's insanity just yet.

"Shimon— did you— was that *you*? Did *you* just do that?"

Undeterred nodding. "Learned."

The 14-year old sat down. Or rather, he fell - there was no willpower left in his legs. Reality seemed weak. Absurdity took over. Then, without warning, a lightning bolt of an epiphany.

"Wait. A lucid dream. A lucid dream. Of course. That's why you could—"

And then another.

'If this is a dream, Shimon definitely isn't real...'

... if this really is my dream, I should be able to pull that off as well... right?'

Shivering like his own earthquake, Zeke raised his arms in the same manner that Shimon did.

"Huh? You can too?" asked the now older brother.

"I don't know..."

'I pray so much that I don't... that this is somehow real...'

Just like Shimon, the now younger brother focused. Clenching his stomach as hard as he could, he concentrated, blocking all the terror in his heart. And then...

'... please...'

he released.

The wind blew gently. It was a welcome breeze to the citizen of Cherize - brisk, yet by far not as cold as a January night could be. It continued blowing the way it had before. There was no change in direction or pressure.

Upon realizing this, relief crept up on Zeke. Cautious relief - dreams had a mind of their own. It was possible that he simply did not give enough energy yet. So, next, he would repeat his attempt. Feeling a little more liberated, he now put visible effort into his action. His head turned red from exertion, his teeth grated against each other.

Then, nothing. Again. The idea of this situation was still far too otherworldly for Zeke to blissfully accept, though. A final time, he lifted his arms to the still air. Every synapse of his brain concentrated. Every molecule of his body constricted. All or nothing.

Nothing. Again.

'This is real?'

The raven-haired boy spectated his now-older brother intensely, as if he'd found the tail end of a rainbow.

'Maybe it's still a dream, somehow...'

Then, for the first time since he arrived, his face eased up. In fact, he started smiling.

'... but even if it is... it's a nice dream...'

Rain started dripping from his chin. Uncontrollably so. There was not a single cloud in the air. The younger's palm would amble its way to Shimon's shoulder, to whom the touch felt as natural as nine years ago. A second later and Zeke downright fell into his returned brother's arms. An encounter so chance, it broke the realm of possibilities.

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A couple of minutes passed. Both siblings cradled in each other's arms, like they'd done

many times as kids before. The shock of losing the person they loved most stuck with them ever since - but there seemed to be a distinct difference in the time both had to suffer. Shimon dedicated half of his life to the supernatural, while the wounds were merely a little under three years old for Zeke; still fresh enough to be ripped open again. Who suffered more? An irrelevant question to both.

In his heart of hearts, Shimon desired nothing more than a real talk with Zeke. One where he'd tell him about the moons he spent in the other realm, where he'd gush over Zeke's quick thinking to use their brotherhood sign as proof, one where he'd be able to express the emptiness that grated his stomach. He wondered whether it would ever turn normal again or if he was stuck with it, forever fused with the rejection that tainted him.

'Rejection...'

"Mum?" uttered Shimon as his fragile mother sprung to mind again. Involuntarily. She haunted his mind for what already seemed like years.

"She's-she's fine..." answered Zeke, still unsure which parts of reality were real and which were not. "I haven't visited her in the hospital yet... But she'll get better."

Zeke forced a hopeful laugh. Shimon's gloomy expression didn't change. "Mhm..."

Then, 8:40. As time flowed onward, it sounded a small beep from Zeke's wrist. As it did, slight panic befell him. He lost track of time, caught in the utopia of his formerly little brother's arms.

"I-I need to go, any longer and dad might come home..."

The younger brother reminded himself of the dream-like state of reality - but even in the world of the impossible, he didn't desire causing more heartbreak. Zeke was a good-natured, responsible kid that could empathize with their deep ache the most. On the other hand, there was nothing else he wanted more than spending time with this version of his sibling. As he distanced himself from their embrace, his expression turned gloomy. He wondered how he'd keep this moment intact, how he could return when he needed to. Sadly, these were wishes that simply couldn't be fulfilled.

But there was no way that he wasn't going to use all of his options.

"Hey! ... Shimon!" he called out, still unsteady. What he was about to do was his best bet at permanency. Zeke pulled out his phone, a touchscreen model still a few years behind the newer ones; almost like a part of the Astrai household where time stuck. The marine-haired sibling was confused when his brother from another time nestled himself back into his arm. He then proceeded to hold the phone over them and, like magic, a perfect reflection of the two appeared. Shimon looked into his own bewildered face, only now remembering the existence of cameras. The younger brother wanted to say something like 'say cheese', but no words came out, instead forming their sign with Shimon's hand once more and pressing the digital button.

The result was a picture displaying a 17-year old that couldn't look more disoriented and a 14-year old with a notably constricted face, not sure what to do with himself. But in the end, there it was. Proof.

As Shimon and his more father-resembling sibling glanced over the screen, they featured reactions that couldn't have been more different. While the formerly younger one was astounded by the technology he forgot existed, the formerly older one had difficulties just holding the device. He counted and measured every pixel that made up Shimon's outline. It was perfect. Could something so perfect be fake? He wouldn't find out tonight.

"Shimon, I-I— I have to leave..." Zeke said in pain, tearing his lost sibling's arm off his

shoulder. "Leave" was a word that the traveler knew by now. He didn't object.

"I'll be back tomorrow! Okay? Wait! Wait here! *Please* be here tomorrow!" the younger one yelped in desperation. He clenched his phone to gain the mental strength he needed. The more mother-resembling sibling dipped his head a few times.

"I love you, Shimon," Zeke added in tears. "I never stopped..."

Shimon understood. He nodded again, and as he did, he felt the block of ice within starting to melt, dripping from his eyelids.

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Shortly before 9, the little brother climbed through his room's window he purposefully left open, skittering to bed immediately. Completely astounded by the half-hour detour his parents would never know about, he spent the remaining minutes awake observing their photo.

'He's from the future. A time traveler. I mean, if he really exists... but he was so surprised too... but what else could he even be?'

Somehow – somehow – Zeke reclaimed a long lost part of himself. Even if only temporary, his heart mended a little. In this moment, that was all that mattered to him. Twenty minutes later, he fell asleep. A smile of relief burnt onto his face like branded cattle.

"I'm returning now."

"Go ahead. Did you retrieve him?"

No reply.