

3 – PARALLELOGRAM

When Shimon Astrai returned to the Human Realm after nine years of absence, his first priority was to ensure none of his abilities were lost in the process. In a way, he imitated how his brother would act, searching proof for something impossible. Once he gained this proof though, he felt overjoyed. Anyone else would question whether reality had bent just for them, but Shimon was so used to this that he neglected any possible backlash.

However, this didn't mean that reality forgot.

"Did what you said. Found him with ease, talking to his little brother. Watched them from above the bridge they hid under. His aura's wild."

"Beautiful, Sennin. See, you *can* be of use if you put your back into it! You already dropped him off to custody then, yes?"

"No."

Two figures opposed each other. A male nearing his thirties with grace, sporting combed, jet-black hair and a bordeaux, sleeveless hoodie, and a man around his fifties who wore a vest in the same red. The burden of age was plastered across his face. All four eyes were brimming with more or less hidden enmity.

"May I know the reason why you haven't?"

"Do I owe you an explanation?"

An unexpected silence filled the sparsely decorated office. There were no windows, yet the light inside seemed warm, almost natural. A total contrast to the cold vibes between the men.

"Well, technically," the older one replied, "you don't. You're a free man. Who am I to take that from you? *That is*, if you don't care about your job, Sennin. I imagine that even you are under a bit of financial duress."

Temper was steadily rising. "He was talking to his brother. I didn't consider him a threat."

"Oho. An impressive call, young man. And with such vigor! Neglecting both public safety *and* protocol? Even though you yourself saw the chaos the boy caused at the coffee house? The witnesses I had to persuade? You surely remember the frightened receptionist? And still, you just discarded him. It'd have to come from a golden heart like yours, Sennin."

"You're starting to piss me off, Alberc," hissed the peeved adult. His ears started ringing.

"Oh, you wouldn't be alone in that, dear. When was the last time you've committed to anything— *anything* productive? I'm excluding combing your hair, since I don't see how we profit from that. You're not pretty enough to prevent disasters just yet."

No response. The tension was tangible. The ringing became clearer.

"A word, Sennin. Your slacking has to stop. I've got every right to evict you here and now, on grounds of work refusal," the man named Alberc lied, "but I won't. Because I'm *nice*. And very tired of persuading. Go get the Astrai kid. ASAP, if I may add. If he resists, just..."

The aging man waved his hand in dismissal.

"... do what you see fit, with that golden heart of yours. But please, do *something*. Or it all falls back on you."

There was clearly a retort that the addressed adult wanted to give. However, even through his hate, Sennin realized that this wasn't the brightest idea. So he simply swallowed his superior's words, storing them deep within.

'Once you have the money, you'll kick his teeth in and make a run for it. Someday, Sennin. Not much longer. It's gonna be cathartic as hell,' he pondered through the noise in his ears.

6:34AM. Dark Thursday morning.

In the Astrai household, Chirin and Marcos would rise from their beds in twenty-six minutes, at the very earliest. Zeke would do so another hour later. This morning, however, the house would be unnaturally quiet. Neither wife nor husband returned home. Instead, they spent the night in a hospital - Marcos couldn't let his spouse handle her trauma's force alone. Even back then, he promised to stay by her side. This, however, meant leaving Zeke on his own. The aging man himself didn't feel too steady either, lost in thought about the meaning of what had occurred.

But the Astrai household was at least prepared. It wasn't their first struggle with breakdowns. Shortly before stepping into the red truck, Marcos carried out their emergency protocol and told Zeke to remain indoors until he'd be back. Every two-to-three hours, either of them would call the other, reporting on their current status. He already informed Zeke's school about the absence that'd follow and left plenty of money for delivery services. All he needed was his remaining son to stay safe.

Marcos had no clue what endeavors his son would cross today.

The first thought that shot into Zeke's unusually lucid mind was his phone. He did not forget about the previous night. It was utterly impossible. With haste, he clicked it open, scrolling through his home screen until he reached the gallery; the most recent picture being—

'No way.'

One of Zeke and his brother.

'No way. No way. No way.'

He swiped back and forth, making sure that it didn't disappear. It remained. The deep blue of his hair, the perplexed expression, the rough state of his clothing - Shimon remained as he was in the hours of the bygone night. Zeke's heart pounded like never before, imitating the violent rhythm of a jackhammer. Almost just as violently, he jumped from his bed, nearly falling into blackness from the sudden entry into the world of the awake. *'No way,'* he kept repeating. And because he was unable to stop, he took an interest in his nightstand. Gazing intently along its edge, he lifted his hand. And then, with a chop, it crashed down.

Of course, the wooden stand remained entirely unaffected. Zeke's hand, however, did not. The clash between bone and furniture was hard enough to cause damage - his palm's side was now leaking red. And still, he felt nothing of the vibrating pain. Instead, each aching pulse only served to amplify his happiness.

'It's real.'

Even though Zeke stared down his leaking hand, his mind couldn't even acknowledge displeasure.

'It's real. This is real. This is real life. Shimon is real.'

His eyes welled up again. Even faster than his blood.

'Completely impossible. But it's real. He's here! It's real!'

Following his mental loop, Zeke's next conscious decision was to shoot up and speed down the staircase. He needed to return to the bridge urgently; so much so that he zoomed back up

seconds later after realizing he needed some actual clothing.

6:38AM, Zeke exited the family home's front door; his legs flying at a pace appropriate for someone off to see a long lost sibling. Shortly after, though, another important thought invaded Zeke's mind.

'—ah, of course!'

—

"I brought all sorts of stuff, b-but let's get you something for your feet first..." Zeke shivered, still in hesitant awe of his seemingly permanent brother.

Before the sun rose, in the fuzzy blue twilight of dawn, the two brothers found themselves under the bridge again. Zeke felt his heart drop to his knees when the silhouette of his once-younger brother became distinct. It took quite a while to even think again through all the dream-like confusion.

Packed in a red, polka-dotted blanket, the thoughtful brother had run back home to bring all the necessities he could gather - first, of course, food and drinks. Sourdough bread with a variety of toppings - spicy sausage, solid and cream cheese, even a cup of strawberry jam. To that, orange juice and a bit of water, since Shimon's throat must have been drywall at that point, he thought. Finally, a pair of his father's shoes, big boots made to go hiking with - the best ones Zeke could gather, as he had no idea what other shoe to bring his grown, barefoot brother.

"Dad's shoes! Sorry, these were the only ones I could think of..."

He unpacked all items using the polka blanket as a makeshift picnic table. Even then, he feared he didn't bring enough, that he lacked effort. Of course, these fears were unfounded. Shimon didn't quite know why he had to put on the dark brown leather boots, but he appreciated Zeke's efforts enough to use them anyway. That didn't help their obstructing, unnatural feel, though.

"L-let's dig in!"

Zeke slowly opened the jar of strawberry jam, which he recalled to be a favorite of Shimon, and handed it to his brother. Then, something curious occurred.

Instead of an influx of joy, Shimon began retching when his nose smelled the sweet condiment. He quickly handed it back to his brother with a smile of thankfulness and polite rejection, who sat in astonishment.

A lot of questions hung in the air. Too many to feasibly make sense of right now. Still, Zeke tried.

"Where *were* you?" he finally asked, breaking a long silence.

Shimon wasn't surprised. He spent most of the night attempting to read stray newspapers, hoping to regain a bit of Pangaeian knowledge - even though he quickly realized how much he despised reading. He did so knowing he'd have to come up with an explanation sometime, and it neared.

But this wasn't so easy. Not just because of the language barrier, but because of the sheer nature of where he went to. In the nine years that he was gone, he never saw another Human. He concluded that he was a first.

"O-ther... world," he revealed after a long string of thought.

How would one even begin to explain the existence of a parallel world to someone? Apparently, this wasn't the most promising approach. Zeke blinked multiple times, as if he'd just

witnessed a car explode. "Wha—" he muttered, unsure how to react.

Shimon exhaled a sigh. He didn't really know how else he could elaborate on it.

Suddenly though, a stroke of genius. *'If not with words, maybe with signs'*, he realized. Zeke's gesture served as the basis for the idea. Thus, he rose and grasped a broken stick from the concrete. He then moved to the next patch of soft dirt and started illustrating. The prowess that the stick pierced the dirt with was impressive - far beyond a normal Human - and thus the lines were easy to discern. Zeke waited in anticipation until his brother was finished.

After a solid minute, Shimon called him over to look. He'd drawn two circles into the ground, one larger than the other, with a very crude drawing of a Human head in the smaller and another head in the larger. The other was entirely filled out, possessing neither eyes nor a discernible mouth - instead, two jagged lines erupted from the top of the head.

"Hu-man," Shimon elaborated while pointing to the circle with the Human head. Then, his stick wandered to the second circle. The 17-year old turned more serious. He took another deep breath, as if to stall for a better explanation - when that seemed unlikely, he opened his mouth again.

"... De-mon."

—

Coming from the future was a lot easier to digest. Zeke was almost disappointed it wasn't as simple as that.

"... you can't talk much because you forgot how to? Because of the— the other world?"

"Ye-yes," Shimon replied. He was visibly sweating, each word taking tons of computing power to form - not to mention processing Zeke's words. "But... but, bet-ter!" he yapped, still sweating. "Get bet-ter!"

'I'm glad', Zeke wanted to say at first, but the words stuck far down his throat. Everything was still a riddle. Shimon roughly indicated that he wasn't used to Human language anymore, that much he understood, but the question *why* remained. And *why* there was a lot, indeed. Why was Shimon six years older than he was supposed to be? How did he do the supernatural things that he did? What the hell did he mean with the other world he described? Was this all real to begin with?

Of course, posing any of these questions would far outpace the 17-year old's lingual abilities.

"Can— can you do that thing again?" Zeke blurted out. "You know, with the..." he said as he flexed open his palm, like he tried to the night before.

Signs worked well with Shimon. It took away the obstacle of words entirely. The bigger brother nodded as he, too, spread his fingers as far as he could. But before he shot, an important question remained.

"Uhm... *where?*" he mouthed carefully to Zeke. As he did, the younger brother flinched a little upon the nonchalant way he acted. He drifted his head over his surroundings, until he found a large iron barrel - empty, likely used for a small bonfire.

"... There," he said as he pointed to the barrel. "Knock— knock it over!"

"Okay," Shimon lipped as he set his sight towards the target. *'Concentrate, and...'*

With a big *'THUMP'*, the hollow barrel spun through the air and bounced off the rough concrete a few times. Shimon didn't miss his shot. Like a marksman without the need for bullets.

The satisfaction was printed onto his face. More than the barrel itself however, Zeke was struck. Again, not physically, but perhaps even heavier than a handful hours ago. "Oh... Hmm..." he whispered, as his thoughts compressed somewhere behind his brain.

'It's still there. It's still impossible. Either I'm in some sort of coma, or...'

Zeke wanted to accept reality, but common sense refused. Suddenly, another pulse. And another, even more violently than before. The tiny patches of grass between the cracks of asphalt fluttered like a weather vane gone crazy. Witnessing these bursts of magic, Zeke, clad in the same plaid hoodie and denim, shook. Logic was thrown into the trash by Shimon, who seemed to have one hell of a time knocking over barrels from a distance. His concentration needed for each pulse decreased with each try.

Zeke was now finally on the verge of the red line. Either he kept relying on common sense, or he accepted this new reality as his own. Unknowingly mimicking his brother when he arrived, he began laughing to himself. A chuckle of disorientation and uncertainty, but also relief, hope and - gradually - acceptance.

He quieted to a halt. The corners of his mouth widened. It gradually formed the most shaky smile that the 14-year old ever gave in his life.

"Hey," he then continued, "it's a little after 6. I know where we can go to have some fun. Follow me... Shimon."

Still sweating bullets, confronted with the new world that he'd been thrown into, he trotted forward, taking his submitting brother by the wrist.

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Another advantage of life in the middle of Cherize, inhabited by its roughly 700,000 citizen, was the fact that stores followed the same sleep cycle of its inhabitants: nearly none. Shortly after 7, when the brothers arrived in the Cherize Cubic Plaza- a mall in the shape of a glass cube that extended into the ground - they found that they weren't even the first visitors. Despite the early Thursday morning, a couple dozen people were already zooming around the place.

On their way, Zeke realized that Shimon's style of clothing might be a little too extraordinary for the populace; thus he knit the humongous, black cloak into a sleek scarf. At least now, the marine-haired wanderer could be classified as a niche sort of hipster, the kind of trend that wasn't even set yet. Zeke kept any questions about the unusual cloak to himself, scared that he'd fry his brain for good if he asked.

And then, nine hours passed on a whim.

Zeke didn't intend to spend nearly as much time in the translucent halls of Cherize's biggest mall - but he didn't consider stopping either. The plaza was the last place that they would encounter their broken parents - a quick call with his father every two hours would ensure it'd stay like that, and Zeke's trickster lying helped immensely, even when Marcos texted him thrice per hour like a paranoid madman. Contrasting this normal skillset, Shimon's supernatural abilities were a source of fun in all conceivable situations. His pulses were used to cause small tsunamis to swoop over the pond-sitting customers, or in order to gain an unfair amount of snacks from the vending machines. With Zeke's aid in spotting cameras and possible witnesses, Shimon soon acclimated to this as well and caused chaos with his brother wherever he went. Without persecution, of course. Who could even prove the brothers' influence?

Surprisingly, though, it was also educative. Shimon slowly regained specifics of his former

native language, while Zeke felt that he, too, learned something. Maybe it was a slight grasp on the new reality, maybe it was an understanding on how to smile bright and honest again, maybe it was nothing at all and he merely imagined to. It felt like a giant convention to the reunited brothers, one that they couldn't stop attending. Zeke felt sorrowful, but also weirdly lucky that his parents were stuck in the hospital for so long, giving him all the time he needed with his brother.

But there weren't just rosy memories that blossomed up.

"Every day, for at least three months... I can't really remember for how long exactly... But at least three months. Every day."

At one particular occasion, while filling their faces with candy drops from the vending machines, Zeke turned deeply reflective.

"We kept waiting for you, y'know? At City Hall, in hopes that you'd come find us one day... And— and not just Cherize, the outer towns as well. Anywhere, just in hopes of—"

Zeke hit his limit. His eyes started pearling up.

"—of, of just seeing you again, y'know? It felt so hard, every day... waiting for someone to never come back..."

Again cradling in his brother's arms, he felt like his tears were allowed to flow freely. At last. A dam that had to persist for years was laid to rest.

"Everyone... everyone was so... *dead*... And I felt that I... I-I really think that until yesterday, I... I too had... died..."

Shimon couldn't grasp every individual word yet, but it wasn't necessary. He felt them. His brother's wounds laid open. He desired to close them, or at least relieve him of them. Shimon didn't realize how his mere presence had already accomplished just that.

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As the sun began shining golden around 5:30PM, the automatic glass gates opened wide as the boys exited the Cherize Cubic Plaza. Still sniffing his nose, head brimming with impressions and a little ache, Zeke lit up.

"Hey... uhm. Big bro," the 14-year old spoke with notable difficulty. Losing his role as the older one still felt unimaginably bizarre. "Can I learn that stuff too? The hand... *thing* that you do," he wondered while gesturing his open palm to Shimon.

Symbols helped immensely, but the marine-haired traveler felt like he understood even without the visual aid. The grander problem lied in the realm of possibilities. Shimon pondered a little before replying with a "don't know". He felt stoked that Zeke wanted to learn about his powers, but had no idea where he'd even begin. It was a force that was still mysterious to even himself, only barely touched upon by those that had taught him. Up until re-entering Cherize, he was under the impression that it came naturally with time. Now, he was the only person with those skills.

"But... maye-be!" he spouted in a hopeful tone. "Soon!"

Zeke's face brightened with a smile. The two brothers found themselves walking into the secluded alleyway that would lead them back to the bridge, just about a kilometer away.

'*Dammit. Here we go.*'

That was his signal. He massaged his temples and forehead before commencing. His job was neither easy to execute nor to stomach. Today, however, professionalism had to persevere.

"Hello, boys," a voice chimed from an unknown spot. At least it felt like a voice to the marine-haired boy.

"Uh... did you hear that noise, Shimon?" muttered the younger brother. "What was that?"
'Noise? That wasn't a noise, those were crystal clear words—'

Then, rumbling. Right in front of them, far louder than the noise just a moment ago. The cause of it, a tall adult cracking the asphalt in front of the two with a heavy landing.

"How are you holding up on this fine sundown?" Sennin asked in an all too monotone voice. Not a shred of enthusiasm, despite the upbeat phrasing. Both teenagers shook. But while Zeke's mind panicked,

"I'll have you know that I've been watching you for the past nine hours. You've become a bit of a pest."

Shimon's mind reverted to its most primal state. His eyes sharpened, fixating on Sennin's every vibration.

'He's been watching us? We're a pest? What is this? I can hear him perfectly. His words are clear, like mountain water. I've never felt this before... What in the world is this?'

There was neither the time, nor the freedom to ponder. Only a single desire prevailed.

'—I can't endanger Zeke.'

The fierce desire to protect, at all costs.