

## 4 - THE INTRUDER

Like a thunderbolt, Shimon stepped in front of his brother. As he spectated the person that appeared in front of them, he turned cautious. No Human but him had performed a feat like this since he arrived. His eyes grew knifelike, like a parent protecting their cubs down to their own flesh.

"Wha—"

"You're probably scared as hell. Don't be. I'm Sennin, part of Cherize's Sentinels," the adult interrupted Zeke, pointing toward the otherworldly boy, "and I need *you* to come with me for a little while."

No response from Shimon. An abundance of questions circled his mind already.

*'Sennin? Sentinels? How did he do that? Why does he need me? How did he find—'*

"Shimon and Zeke Astrai, right?" Sennin spoke, tilting his head to the side. And upon this drop of their names, something broke; like a vinyl record slipping on the ground and breaking into pieces. The moment it shattered, Shimon dashed to deliver a hefty jab to the intruder's side.

"Hey hey hey, *heeey*. Relax," the man named Sennin hushed, audibly annoyed. He caught the boy's fist with his own palm - though with quite some effort, as his vibrating arm indicated.

Much to Shimon's utter shock. "All I need is to get a picture of you and your wasteful aura usage."

Even before finishing his sentence, the agile boy skipped back in front of his brother. The most confused member of the scene, by far.

"—What, how... What? What just happened? Why did you attack—"

Zeke's words were too slow. Shimon's patience broke.

"What the hell is your problem? From where do you know our names? Why did you follow us? How did you block— who— who even *are you?*"

Another oddity. As Shimon, weirdly eloquently, shouted toward the intimidating man, no sound was to be heard. His face clearly mouthed irritation - and yet, only the light sizzling of his lips remained. As if he was put on mute. The same phenomenon applied to Sennin. Zeke wanted to speak up, but didn't know where to start.

"Can you stop being *so damn loud!*"

It was the adult that now tolled his voice. Again, soundlessly. He began taking large, imposing steps to the pair of brothers.

"What's *my* problem? *You* attacked *me*, dipshit. I'm already sick of you. Come along or I'll drag you by your *fucking fingernails*."

Shimon's drilling stare didn't let up. But he saw Sennin's point - and his curiosity about how the adult in red managed to deflect him kept him attentive.

"Where? Come along *where?*"

His inkling of cooperation seemed to calm Sennin a little. He stopped a meter apart from Shimon.

"The Sentinels. Cherize's defenders."

Zeke didn't receive an answer to his wordless plead. He was degraded to a completely helpless bystander.

"What's... going..."

The ninth-grader froze in fear. And without even looking at him, Shimon noticed. He turned to

his brother; much to the dismay of the adult, now being the neglected one. Still, he couldn't justify ignoring his sibling's breakdown.

"Hey, Zeke. We go a-way from here," he said softly, his gaze intentionally crossing Sennin's for the last part.

*'No way. He's not seriously just gonna...'*

As Shimon grasped his smaller brother's hand, in hopes of getting him out the danger zone, *'... ignore me?'*

Sennin got closer. He was now a bare ten centimeters away. Enough to feel his breath.

"So how about it," he whispered with enough pressure to cause both boys' hairs to raise up. But still, no response. Shimon kept his attention to Zeke, who panicked more and more by the second. Sennin felt a vein broil on his forehead, with the risk of popping in the same moment. However, before it could, the world traveler curved his face back to him.

"No. Sorry."

Pause. Time stood still.

When it continued, the adult's ears failed to register noise. Only a sharp, head-drilling sound remained. A chronic sound. His least favorite sound. He heard red. He saw red.

"Wrong answer," he breathed as he pressed his palms against each other, resembling a flat prayer. Then, an effortless flick of his leg. And with a bang, Shimon flew off, crashing through a nearby apartment's wall not a second later.

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It took a couple of seconds for the dazed boy to grasp what just happened.

*'—Did— did he just kick me through a wall—'*

Before he could finish the train of thought, someone picked him out of the concrete rubble by his hair. "What about now?" Sennin asserted. But even now, Shimon didn't even consider replying.

Gritting his teeth, he delivered his own kick to the opponent's chest, freeing himself of the hold. The adult wailed a little from the pain of the blow. The force slid him a couple of meters back, still inside the same abandoned apartment hallway as the kid.

*'Holy— that was a lot more powerful than before... I hate this boy already...'*

Sennin's most grave mistake would be that he treated his opponent like an uneducated child. While he observed Shimon's capabilities in the mall, he had no reference of his actual prowess. And in acting on that mistake, Sennin began a chain reaction that would lead him to witness it to its fullest.

Suddenly though, an interjection.

"Can we just talk?" the boy shouted, throwing his hands up in an attempt to defuse the situation. Blood leaked from his lower lip. The adult considered this proposal for a few seconds, calming himself to not whack his opponent to sleep right this instant.

"Sure. Whatever."

Once again, cooperation went a long way to cool his nerves. Tiptoeing with the utmost caution, Shimon neared his opponent. When he finally stopped - a careful meter away - he let out what's been on his mind since the beginning.

"How are you talking to me?"

Upon this curious request, Sennin stopped for a second. "You mean you don't know?"

Shimon shook his head.

"Well. This is going to be a little hard to explain then. In essence..."

Suddenly, his palm whacked the boy's throat.

*"Are you kidding me? You're talking perfectly. Couldn't you find a better distraction than that? Has your frontal lobe not developed or something?"*

In response to this violent ambush, Shimon wheezed and nearly hurled. His good-natured heart lead him to lower his guard - now he suffered the consequences, wrestling for air.

"I'm not taking any more chances with you. You're coming. We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

Next, a chop crashed onto the boy's shoulder, the magnitude of which felt like a truck hitting him full-force. Shimon was getting folded to pieces. This chop finally served to take him into unconsciousness.

Or at least it would have, if Sennin hadn't betrayed his trust. Fueled by the boiling sensation of payback and the unwavering duty to protect his brother, he withstood the torrents of pain that shook his body like a rollercoaster.

*'—wait a moment, is he still—'*

The next instant, Shimon's foot belted across his enemy's chin, following a perfect arc from the floor to the ceiling. A flawless blow, carrying maximum force. As a result, Sennin broke through the concrete ceiling, flipping right out of the apartment. Just a little later, he landed on a condo's rooftop across the alleyway, around twenty meters away. He couldn't even catch himself, his head still spinning from the power of the kick.

Both battlers were now incapacitated, struggling to keep their mind focused. But the most incapacitated was, without a doubt, Zeke. He was forced to watch his brother being assaulted out of nowhere; without explanation, without reason. In under two minutes, the whole situation had changed from the best day of his life to a horrid, violent mess. Crying wasn't even appropriate anymore. All he could do was spectate in horror as one of the two battlers flew through the sky. He prayed that it wasn't Shimon.

This prayer was broken when the second one jumped, following the arc of his enemy.

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Shimon's landing on Sennin's square roof was rough. Neon signs and towers of concrete surrounded them in the blue dusk. The pursuer's body regained balance, but the chop took an extreme toll nonetheless. Still, he couldn't let up. Apart from the animosity he harbored for Sennin, he carried an array of questions that required answers. He was willing to beat them out of his enemy if he received no other choice.

However, just a moment after landing, Sennin rolled back to a crouch. He still seemed out of it, his eyes looking vacant, off-kilter, yet dealing back the same animosity that he was dealt. As he clung back to the here and now, his thoughts collectivized in a deep vortex.

*'I'm getting whacked across the head by a kid...'*

His legs extended, putting him back to his stance. More blood dripped from his chin.

*'The same kid that I let go just a day before...'*

His dark brown pupils reclaimed focus, taking in the grand signs from every shop across the block.

*'Something that I got scolded for, almost making me lose my job...'*

His mind caught up, and the outline of the 17-year old in front of him became sharp again. The drilling sound in his ears was more obtrusive than ever.

*'... I'm done with this.'*

During this process, Shimon eyed Sennin intently. Letting up his guard wasn't going to happen again.

"Why can you talk to me like normal? How do you also have these powers? Are they the same?"

What— what the hell are 'Cherize's defenders'?"

Shimon was desperate for a response. He needed answers before he could carry on like normal again. After yelling with no sound, a more mental quiet filled the area.

And then, as carefully as a snake closing in on a mouse, the adult raised his hands. Together, they formed a hole, like one half of a binocular - Shimon right in its scope, Sennin's left eye fixated on him. Only his ring and little fingers didn't follow the circular form. Shimon was puzzled as to what this meant.

"Screw you," Sennin replied.

The scarf-wearing boy was certain that he did not miss a beat. Between now and a split second ago, the malevolent intruder vanished. His jade eyes were schooled to not let up on prey once locked. And still, he seemed to miss when his opponent faded into thin air. A mistake that he was relentlessly punished for. The sole of his enemy's foot plastered itself across his back and, with a hefty push, kicked Shimon face-first onto the opposite tower.

The 17-year old caught his train of thought again as he landed on the skyscraper's wall, the impact alone cracking an empty office's window. Specifically on the wall, as he retaliated vertically, toying with gravity once more. His hands were speckled with red scratches from the prickly concrete wall he flew on.

*'What the... what was that? I watched him perfectly— he just appeared behind me, out of nowhere—'*

Not much time to analyze remained, as Sennin, too, appeared on the wall, sticking to its side like a dart firmly fixed in its board.

"—You can do that too?" Shimon blurted out. The adrenaline enabled him to ignore the stinging pain. But his question only served to further irritate his enemy.

*"'You can do that too.'* What the hell. What in the goddamn—"

More shards cracked off the office's windows below them, as Sennin's anger spiked.

"—is this some kind of *joke*?"