

5 – SURVIVOR'S COMPLEX

The first problem that Shimon Astrai perceived was the lack of air. Never before screamed his lungs for oxygen as hellishly as now; as if someone set off fireworks in his chest. An unstoppable inferno.

Then, Shimon noticed a paradox. While his chest both imploded and combusted at the same time in sweltering heat, strange cold was settling in as well. A fierce freeze, crafted from the sharpest and deadliest fabric of the planet and beyond.

The boy caught a bare glimpse of the lights surrounding him. An innumerable amount of the most perfect sparkles. Then, he found that he couldn't see anymore. His eyes froze shut the next instant. Neither could he hear, nor feel. He was trapped in absolute numbness.

'I don't wanna die.'

In his final moments, Shimon Astrai remembered love.

'I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die.'

His heart found Zeke. The beautiful love and care he received from his then-older brother Zeke. He distinctly remembered them laying on their house's couch, watching cartoons in the blue morning while feasting on strawberry jam filled croissants. They weren't allowed to eat on the couch, and yet they sneakily did so anyway. A shared secret.

'!...'

This intimate feeling of security never faded from memory. Every detail was as vivid as ever.

'Don't...'

It's what kept him going all these years.

'Wanna...'

It's what would keep him alive.

'Die...'

His soul erupted.

—

Night colored the sky, lighting it with sparkling stars. It never stopped doing so since the confrontation with the intruder.

It took eight hours until Shimon was awake again. His eyes had melted by then and opened to the sight that he'd previously been denied.

'Space...'

A perfect view over the brilliance of creation. One worth being envious of. The boy laid on his back, unable to do much more than watch and think.

'Space... Beautiful... Sort of familiar...'

'Cold... Freezing cold... Wait.'

'How... How do I know that?'

Suddenly, the pieces clicked together. Like a gust blowing puzzle pieces into place, Shimon reclaimed the memory he was missing.

'I was there... I was in space... And I think... Sennin got me there... Because he could teleport...'

'I... I was so cold. So incredibly, incredibly cold... I couldn't breathe.'

'My skin felt like it was cracking open... My heart gave in immediately...'

Never... Never, never ever in my life... Could I have imagined such a horrifying cold to exist... where's Sennin?

But even more haunting than his recovered memories was the next revelation to be had.
'Is Sennin still in space?'

Right then, the adolescent regained enough physical awareness to notice that he was constantly shaking. That wasn't all, however. As he looked past the olive-varnished barriers he was encased in, he saw that he was moving as well. At high speeds, moreover.

'What?'

It was Shimon's first encounter with the workings of an automobile since he arrived back. Upon further inspection, he realized that it was the same pickup truck that his father possessed and cherished. He remembered how his brother would often help him tinker around the engine. Both had a knack for cars - Shimon and his mother simply left them to their workings. And surely enough, glancing into the tempered rear window, he'd encounter his brother, focused behind the wheel.

"—Oh, hey Zeke—"

In this moment, a sharp squeak pierced Shimon's ears. The sound of tires coming to a sudden halt. A gross noise. This went on for three more seconds in which the truck went off-track, finally stopping after the dirt had braked its speed. Zeke didn't say anything. He sat as motionless as before, his eyes firmly focused on the road.

A creeping sense of worry overcame the 17-year old.

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Indigo patches of grass surrounded the pair of brothers. It had turned night about six hours ago, and the young driver's eye bags reflected this. He drove as long as he could, panicking to get away with his wounded sibling, not taking a moment's break. It visibly scarred him; a look of misery filled his eyes, dried tearstains covered his cheeks. His face didn't move. Only his limbs did.

When he moved to the car's back to pull Shimon out, he didn't give off a noise. The bigger brother wondered whether Zeke even blinked. Then, after putting the mangled survivor's back against the car, he fell into the dirt. His hand clung onto his chest like an inmate clawing at his cell's wall. Zeke started heaving, getting more intense with each breath. After a couple of seconds, he outright repulsed and swallowed air; each breath a sharp noise of struggle. Shimon observed in horror.

Then, he stopped. The raven-haired boy could hear his heart reverberating through his skeleton. Every watery cell of his body intensified its echo. His teeth ground against each other. His eyes squinted with the pressure of a wrench. His nose leaked uncontrollably. His heart bawled.

And finally, he let it out. Zeke cried out.

He cried in what could've only been described as screams. More miserable with each one. In this moment, it was likely that his cry was the most heartbreaking on Pangaea. The most uncomfortable scene of the world.

Imitating his now-younger brother, Shimon fell to the dirt below. It was hard to tell whether he did so intentionally. Zeke didn't even look up from his fetal position. He was completely caught in his breakdown.

Seldom before had Shimon been confronted with a situation like that. Not that he could remember either way. He chose to do the most natural thing that he could think of; and carefully, his palm clicked into his younger brother's. Together, they formed a sign. Fingers spread like triumphant flags, thumbs united to a crest of brotherhood. One that signified themselves and their bond, transcending time, space, reality itself.

As the two brothers laid on the ground, several dozen kilometers out of Cherize, Zeke's cries finally began dimming to tear-filled whimpers of sorrow. Shimon slowly caressed Zeke's sweat-filled hair with his fractured left arm. He must have endured a hell even greater than his own, he figured.

"How did you get home?"

It had been one eternal moment since Zeke started calming down. Since then, the two brothers simply laid under the stars, gazing up to the calamity known as the night sky. None of the two thought of anything in particular. Some ten minutes later, the boy with black hair began.

"I've been meaning to ask you... How you got back home in the first place. Can you tell me?"

A tough question. Shimon knew the answer, of course, but where would he even start, let alone put into words?

"Phew... Uhm... From... from o-ther world... through hole... space hole?"

An incoherent scatter of terms. The dimensional traveler himself realized how stupid it must've sounded.

"Okay..."

Light shock spread Shimon's eyes open.

"You believe?"

"I'm... just..."

There was an overwhelming sense of defeat in the way Zeke spoke.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know about anything anymore... Like, what... what the hell was that battle back there, even? It was real... just as real as the pain... But I can't, I just can't... fathom it..."

Medium silence. It felt natural and safe in some way, as if agreed upon. He didn't mention it, but Shimon already felt like Zeke's phrases became easier to decipher. Not quite as easy as Sennin's though.

"But I actually meant... how did you get back in the house?" the younger brother began asking again.

'Back in the house?'

"Uhm, I do... knock door?"

"No. The second time. When I found and picked you up."

This was the moment Shimon's next source of confusion appeared.

"What do you mean? You were on the couch."

The disconnection started crystallizing.

"I'm glad nobody was there when I arrived, but the door was still locked when I got back... Did you break anything to get in? I need to know, because that could get us into trouble..."

Shimon was convinced that he understood his brother correctly. He was on the couch. In their parents' home. For the second time since he came back. Zeke continued without an answer.

"I didn't know where else to go, where you could even be... I was so desperate, I returned home

to take the car, maybe that could help me find you... And then I found you laying there..."
Finally, he noticed something off when he gazed into Zeke's face.

"I was confused and, and really scared... Hell, I still am..."

Shimon's vision was slightly less sharp. A bit more fuzzy. He blinked with both eyes and found that it was his left eye specifically that had problems with the 14-year old's silhouette. The marine-haired survivor tried his utmost to focus, but the clarity wouldn't increase.

"... then I just took you and ran. I placed you in the back so you could lie down... I stopped so many times to check on you, I-I was really afraid that we might be found again... but... but I was more afraid that you'd— in the back..."

Nothing made sense. It was a running theme since he returned. Shimon tried rubbing his eye. That, too, didn't help - but when he spectated his hand afterwards, he discovered something even more odd.

"Shimon... I just... I just wanna go back with you..."

Dried remains of blood stuck.

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The truck's engine was strong and loud. Even so, it seemed to be imperceptible to both brothers as they made their way back to Cherize.

They decided quickly on it. Zeke wanted to return - he had to, since their parents could return from the hospital at any given moment - and Shimon desired to see something else than a destroyed version of his brother. He would've given anything to brighten his face.

When they agreed to drive back, sitting down in the passenger's seat, Shimon noticed relief faintly making way into Zeke's heart. The situation finally resolved, bit by bit.

"Shimon... I don't want the powers anymore..."

Back on the highway, the young driver spoke up.

"It's just insane... and I don't want this to happen even one more time..."

Shimon wasn't surprised. He realized this before Zeke even mentioned it.

"Okay," was the sole reply. Full acceptance for his brother's decision.

"... do you know what happened to that adult? He held you and you both disappeared..."

Shimon pondered for a little while, then shook his head. He saw nothing of him. Though, considering that he had to get to space some way...

He stopped himself from hypothesizing any deeper. He feared that something inside him might break otherwise. But it kept lingering. It wouldn't fade anytime soon. Just like the other questions that had arisen.

'How did Sennin know about my powers? How is Zeke fourteen? Why am I supposed to be eleven? What about my eye? Is it just damage from the cold of space? Then why only the left one? How— how did I even get back? Did Sennin bring me back? If so, why on the couch?'

"Close your eyes a little, Shimon. It's still gonna take some time until we're back."

"... Okay," the puzzled adolescent replied, his gates of vision shutting gently. But one last curiosity had to be answered.

"So... you drive car, Zeke?"

Zeke's feet managed to reach the pedals with ease after adjusting the seat enough. Plus, he was taller than most 14-year olds - people would have had to at least double take to discern him as one. Shimon didn't see it anymore, but for the first time since their fateful encounter with

Sennin, his brother cracked a smile.
"Not my first time."