

6 - CORNER LINK

"Stay safe. That's all you need to do. Just— just stay safe."

Zeke's aid was out of reach - but luckily, the 14-year old had predicted this.

"Take it, don't hesitate— *don't hesitate* to call me, okay? I have to visit mum and dad for now, alright, so we'll talk in the evening— but still, *don't hesitate*. Please, Shimon, please, *please, stay safe.*"

Equipped with a phone that Zeke bought from a gas station - a fat block originating from a decade prior - the 17-year old was dropped off under his bridge; on his own once more. Shimon had no clue whether his former big brother would be punished for the car ride that had saved him, whether he'd ever be able to leave the Astrai household again - but the scariest question was whether Zeke wanted to see him again in the first place. So far, his presence had only brought him pain.

Of course, this is only what went through Shimon's troubled mind. At the time, he didn't realize just how important his presence was to his brother. But the idea of being a nuisance kept disturbing him throughout the rest of the night, even far into the next day. His actual wounds healed faster than his internal ones; rendering him able to walk again when the sun glimmered in orange dusk once more. Eighteen hours had passed since the brothers' decision to head back home. Time that Shimon didn't waste.

'If I find allies... people that understand me like Sennin, just less brutal... Zeke wouldn't be forced to suffer like this.'

In the end, this was the answer Shimon found to his problem. However, as with most answers, subsequent questions arose.

'But this is stupid hard... I have to appear cool while fumbling with words like an moron! Argh! How would I even do that!'

For a moment, Shimon craved for the simple, strength-oriented interactions with the beings from the other realm. Then, he noticed a different craving.

'I could really go for a coffee right now... Or something to eat, at least... But I don't think going anywhere in the city is gonna go well...'

So many problems, so little options. Shimon couldn't help but pout in discontent, still leaned against the metal sheets of the bridge. Without another person, it was down to himself to figure out how to proceed. The boy's bruises and blemishes faded surprisingly quickly, but the brunt force of Sennin's assault remained fresh in memory. It served as a reminder of caution.

'I guess the most important thing is staying secret.'

Moving through the uncrowded alleyways of Cherize, Shimon held his breath as often and as long as he could - a makeshift technique to suppress the power within from appearing too strongly. After his encounter with the irritable adult, it was uncertain whether he was being watched. He rarely had to resort to a coward's technique, as he considered it - but more so, Shimon was aware he couldn't afford any slip-ups.

The thought of Sennin attacked the boy's head more than once. He'd immediately counter it by thinking of Zeke's bright face, but considering the events of last night, even that felt tainted and fake.

'How did Zeke make friends? ... He probably met them at school, but I'm not a student anymore...'

There was nothing that he needed more than an ally. Someone who could point him in the right direction, through that cluttered mess called fate. A genuine friend.

'... then again, a friend would have to understand me, right? And have powers like me... they probably couldn't understand me without them...'

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The ochre wall of bricks that made up Corner Link extended around, as the name implied, a corner of sidewalk. From outside it seemed plain, hiding away any kind of vibe that the bar held in secret; like a hidden room for only those that knew the city well enough. And yet, a few ten people could always be found inside, its reputation extending beyond the facade of its long brick wall. There was never a real absence of customers - one of which was still outside, leaning against its facade as she followed her irregular rhythm of breaths.

'Relax. Relax, relax, relax. Remember the practice... No nervousness. Strut your chest, check your smile. No one will care how you act. No one will even notice you.'

Her monologue was less inspiring than she hoped it to be - but nonetheless, it calmed her nerves; one word at a time.

'No one will notice, no one will care. No one will notice, no one will care.'

Repeating the same phrases like a mantra, the 18-year old Charna Chierke shakily followed the chunks of red clay to Corner Link's entrance.

Entering an unfamiliar place for the first time can be a gargantuan task. More often than not, what the mind presents is far worse and embarrassing than reality. If one does not take the step, they will forever remain in belief that this is the truth. Charna wasn't strong enough to repress these invasive thoughts yet, but she progressed; fronting what was more a wooden gate than a door.

Undeniably the hardest part of conquering fears is taking the last step - and as she grasped the massive copper handle, the long-haired blonde froze for a second. Terror occupied heart, mind and soul.

'Nnngh! No one will care, dammit!' she desperately repeated. This finally gave her the strength - or rather, the momentum - to push down the handle and enter the bright atmosphere of Cherize's third-most popular bar.

Despite the successful entrance, Charna's mind wouldn't leave her alone just yet, imagining looks of 'you don't belong here', 'why are *you* here', 'get out' and the like directed toward her. Of course, these were meaningless exaggerations. Still, sweats of fear and anxiety didn't let up as she traversed to the bar's counter, eyes fixated on the rustic floor planks. Alcohol was notorious for being a social drug, and social drugs were just what Charna needed.

"Evenin' young lady," a hulking, yet gentle-looking bartender started. "Don't think I've seen you here before. What's on your mind?"

This wasn't quite the question that the girl clad in an elegant, white blouse and artichoke blazer expected. Her periwinkle eyes glistened up.

'On— on my mind? I don't have anything— I just need—'

"... N-noth-ka?" she stammered.

The bartender threw her a look of slight disarray, though with a bit of amusement. "Nothka. I'm sorry young lady, I don't think we serve a drink like that."

Charna's head reddened like a sundown, accelerated by three hundred times. She wanted to reply 'nothing' to the smalltalk, but also order a shot of vodka; an easy gateway drink recommended by her hometown friends.

"V-vodka! Vodka! I meant vodka! I'd like to have a vodka! A shot!" she fired off like a machine gun.

Before she even finished her nervous tangent, the man slid a clear, filled glass in front of her.

"I figured. You look rather young though," he mentioned before topping the glass off with a burst of whipped cream. "I don't know if you'd stomach a raw shot. Just turned 18? First time out?" he added without expecting an answer. "On the house. No worries."

The deep red of Charna's face didn't fade, but it at least stopped deepening. "Thank you," she lipped, immediately grasping the shot and dunking it into her throat.

That was the first time she'd tasted alcohol since her 18th birthday, just seven months ago. With no tolerance to speak of, it wasn't surprising that she started to vibrate, almost regurgitating from the bitter attack on her taste buds. The cream softened the blow remarkably little. But eventually, she triumphed.

Luckily, alcohol's effects tended to show immediately, and Charna was glad that she noticed the room becoming more comfortable by the second. The online practice with her hometown friends showed its worth after all.

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The one eye-catcher that made Corner Link stand out was its inviting gate; massive wood occupied by a mosaic of colored glass, reflecting the yellow light inside to the outside. Especially at night it was a beauty to glance at, capturing the feeling of homeliness perfectly.

'Wow! That's pretty!'

And it would also serve as the reason for Shimon Astrai to enter the bar. But it wasn't merely due to its aesthetic that the marine-haired minor's path lead him there. He crafted strategies for his endeavor until late in the evening - 9:43PM to be exact, which is when he laid eyes on the ochre bar. Through all his thinking, one idea stuck the most.

Marcos and Chirin were all too happy to display their authentic furniture to their friends - which they had a lot of, often ending in nights where they'd stay up to the early AMs, enjoying wine and board games. But these displays never started in the house itself. Instead, they'd meet up outside beforehand, and it'd already be late when they arrived back with their friends.

A name they threw around almost as often as "real cherry tree wood" was "Corner Link". And when Shimon's eyes caught glimmers of the lemon light inside, his head automatically turned to the large sign above the ochre wall. The next minute was spent deciphering.

'That's a C, I know that. And O is the easiest letter. Coo... Cooo... What's the one after the O?' It took ceaseless trial-and-error until Shimon could finally make a connection.

'The first one is Co-na... The second one is Lin... and another letter afterward... Oh man... Coh-nar Lin... k. That sounds familiar, actually...'

When the puzzle pieces clicked together, they revealed a picture that the boy didn't intend to see. His parents. His merrily celebrating parents. Shimon writhed in pain for a little.

Too many memories hung with them at the moment, and reliving the nights that he saw them at their happiest contributed to another stab in his lung area. Zeke alleviated his sorrows, but they were impossible to fully erase right now. In his eyes, it was his fault they couldn't return

to these happy days again.

'Still... still. It's the best idea so far.'

With a powerful pout, Shimon strut his chest, ridding himself of the bothersome cloud within to the best of his ability.

'Okay. Okay. Okay! Let's go! Okay! Let's head in! Okay!'

Five seconds later, he too pushed down the copper handle - slowly, keeping track of the power he used. He already improved in control.

The traveler had no problems scouring the bar at all, save for orientation. As he entered the atmosphere of a secluded, sunny night, he was overwhelmed with the amount of people inside - about forty, all talking over each other, fixated on their own little circles. In contrast to his first time entering Cherize, he didn't care much about the populace at all. He just genuinely didn't know where to begin.

'Maybe ask someone working here,' Shimon concluded. The small circles looked too uninviting, and the man at the counter wore a sign with his name.

'Can't quite make out the name, but that's not so important, right?' was Shimon's final thought before occupying the remaining seat in front of the liquor-handling employee. The man himself, sporting a well-fitting buzz cut, was busy preparing however; ending his routine as he slid another small glass with white topping to the customer next to the boy. Said customer downed the glass almost instantly - the third one so far, going by the number of empty glasses. Not fast enough for Shimon to not catch its aroma though.

"Smell— smell good!" he spouted with genuine enthusiasm toward the girl to his right, still vibrating from the shot. A little intimidated - but much less than she could have been, thanks to her social drug - she looked straight into her other's pupils.

'Oh, wow. Those are some pretty eyes... Almost like jades...'

A couple of seconds later, the girl realized that she was addressed. After that, that she lacked a reply.

"Oh! Oh! Th-thanks!"

Her drowsiness at least saved her head from boiling up in embarrassment again.

"But it's... not that good. Hahaha," she snickered nervously. Her laugh was quickly overshadowed though, as the boy next to her extended his palm in inviting manner. Far quicker than she anticipated.

"Shi-mon!" he declared with glee.

The blonde still lagged five steps behind, her brain resembling an egg scrambled onto the floor. It was up to her to piece it back together, bit by bit.

"—Charna! I mean! It's my name! Charna!" she assembled as fast as possible. One moment later, she also embraced her opposite's palm - weakly, indecisively, still embarrassed. But in that moment, she felt bliss. The acceptance of someone she didn't know a minute ago. The exact feeling she hoped to find when she entered Corner Link. Shimon, too, felt at ease as he grasped the female's soft, peach palm.

None of the two young adults could have predicted that this moment would intertwine their fates forever.