

7 – WHAT IS AURA?

"I'm running, Penn. Hold tight. Keep her pulse straight," the fifty-something man spoke into a microphone as his feet lunged him between Cherize's shadow-filled alleys. He had slung his black shirt under his bordeaux vest and started running as soon as he got the medic's call.

'You're so bothersome, Sennin. I'm unsure whether you even deserve another chance. Even in the state we're in.'

Alberc's troubled mind wandered toward his least favorite member of the Sentinels. Yesterday had given him more than enough material to worry about.

'But I'd very much appreciate it if you at least showed up again.'

The last he felt of the 28-year old was a struggle. It wasn't perfectly clear to him what exactly had occurred, but Sennin's aura dwindled within a couple of minutes, likely as he faced off against the troublemaker he was assigned to. And then, in a flash, it disappeared entirely.

Over twenty-four hours had passed. Not a single trace of him remained. Coupled with stressful witness-handling beforehand, the olden man felt himself nearing cardiac arrest - and despite that, a new, boiling pot of stress was close by. His worries wouldn't cease so quickly, and in a way, they would force him to show what he was made of.

His destination was a lively, well-known bar known as Corner Link.

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Shimon spent a solid six minutes fiddling around his blocky phone, recalling Zeke's very specific instructions to call him. If there was a problem with texting and driving for normal Humans, this problem extended to texting and running for the marine blur. In just six minutes, his head was struck by impending walls thrice. But soon enough, the amount of buildings decreased. He realized he couldn't return to his spot under the bridge - he needed to get out of Cherize entirely for now.

"Shimon? You figured out the phone! How— how are you?" the 14-year old yapped when he received the call from his bigger brother.

"Hey!" Shimon replied in glee. The first happy news since Corner Link. "... Good!" he then added wobbly.

"That's great! Seriously! Are you safe and everything?"

"Yeah," he deflected quickly. Shimon needed to get to his point. "I need... go out Cherize."

Zeke waited a little while, in order to confirm that his ears worked correctly. "What? Why? What do you— what does that mean?"

'Great,' shot into the 17-year old's mind. Lengthy explanations he couldn't articulate weren't his favorite activity.

"Uhm... Made bad thing... But is okay! Can ex-plain la-ter?"

"O-okay," Zeke said as his heart slipped to his guts again. "I'm— I'm just— what are you gonna do now, then?"

"Leave," Shimon hushed as his right leg lunged from a rooftop's brick chimney. A word he handled with great disdain. "I leave... now. But return! Very, very soon! No worry, ok? I'm fine!"

The younger brother gulped down his worries. "Okay..." was the best answer he could muster. "Can you call me tomorrow?"

'Call me to-mo-rrow. Tom-orr-ow...'

"Yeah!" Shimon said. He truly planned to reach out to Zeke again when he was less exhausted. "Call you to-mor-row!"

"Alright... alright. Thanks. Whatever's happening, just stay safe, okay Shimon? Stay safe! I'm serious!"

"M-hm!" he replied with a nod Zeke could obviously not hear. Still, his genuine demeanor wasn't lost.

"I love you, Shimon. As always. See you."

"Love-you-too!"

This cast a smile on the younger one's face.

'I can't see anyone right now... Mum or dad, Zeke, especially not Charna...'

A little into 10PM, Shimon officially left Cherize City's boundaries, marked by large tourist billboards displaying its skyline and a flashy 'hope to see you again soon'. Boards like these were plastered on practically every exit of the city. But Shimon couldn't care enough to read them in the first place.

'I can't think of anything better than hiding for a bit... I've caused non-stop chaos since I arrived... I'm sorry, I didn't want any of this...'

He began noticing the change of scenery when he stepped into the lush fields of grass right outside the city. Even despite nighttime, it seemed like a parallel world to Cherize. A much purer part of the world. Almost reflexively, Shimon took a deep breath that extended to every atom of his lungs. The air was already different, as if it cleaned him from the inside. Then, he noticed that his innocent breather was actually a huge yawn.

'Wow, I'm tired...'

The occasional grove plastered the night-tinted fields of green divided by a lone street, filled with a few hundred trees in small circles. Shimon could spot five of those tiny forests just from his view, sprinting toward the farthest one he could see. Safety first; it's what he promised Zeke.

Running felt great. Being alone felt great. The feeling of caring just for himself and no one else in the moment was liberating; a direly needed change for the adolescent wanderer. He even took off his limiting boots, since he was now on his own, and left them laying on the roadway. This was certainly his element.

Another ten minutes later, he stepped into the grove he targeted. There wasn't much to see anymore - the tree's shadows, coupled with nightfall, prevented even the moon's light to shine through - but Shimon stopped when he felt something soft, almost comfortable on his bare feet. It felt deeply familiar.

'—Moss? Is that moss?'

A couple of strokes with his fingers would confirm his suspicions and lighten his chest.

'There's moss here! There's moss in this realm! I completely forgot!'

His smile shone through the total dark, though it couldn't hope to truly illuminate anything.

'That's awesome! That's really good...'

Shimon's thoughts slowed down, becoming more abstract by the moment. He deeply desired sleep.

His final idea of the month was to open up the scarf his brother knotted tight and realize his cloak's full potential as a blanket. In the same motion, he fell onto the mushy ground he chose as his new bed.

'... nice...' was his last direct thought. The gentle wind immediately sent him to sleep, and he was grateful for it.

As January ended, Shimon didn't dream of anything he could remember. That, too, he was grateful for. Rest was all he desired.

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The early February morning Shimon Astrai arose to was a particularly fresh one. A light, grey layer of clouds settled over the sky, causing humid winds to sweep over deep green patches of field and forest. Not rain, more of a damp breeze. Weather that all plants jointly celebrated; the kind often seen in the faraway Scandinavian parts of the continent. It felt welcome to the involuntary fugitive, who perceived it with the wildlife that also woke around 6:30. For a while, he simply laid in moss and admired the landscape.

'Beautiful. I missed something like this... Something that reminds me so much of the Demon Realm... Feels like everything's just fine...'

Shimon spent nearly five minutes just laying and gazing. He found great pleasure in watching the lush pine trees wiggle with each stroke of the wind, as if they were being caressed in a cradle rocking back and forth. He noticed all other green moving the same, but the pines captivated his eyes in particular. He, too, wanted to dance with the wind.

But as he raised up from his makeshift bed, a rock fell from his chest. Or rather, a piece of paper.

'—what?'

Caught in nature's hypnosis, he neglected to take a look down his body. A rectangular, surprisingly weighty envelope tucked in his cloth - apparently. When he stood, it fell onto the ground, its stiff edge piercing through the soft moss.

'What? How did...'

Following first instinct, he picked it up and spectated it intently. There was something inscribed on the front. But larger worries manifested.

'How did that get on me? I should've— I definitely should've noticed, even while sleeping! There's... there's no way! Have my senses gotten worse?'

These days, Shimon's life seemed to consist of nothing but confusion and violence. While it wouldn't take much longer for him to start understanding, the unease of being out of the picture followed him everywhere. With no other option to consider, he began analyzing the words on the front. They were in elegant cursive, emanating a sense of personality and style. However, this also made it the hardest phrase for him to decode yet, even with his progress in Pangaeon.

'Re-g... Rega... Regard... Oh, there's that -ing thing. That makes it easier... Reg-ard-ing? Regarding? That's when something is... meant? Was that it? And there's two dots behind it...'

Only two words graced the envelope. While the first one was considerably longer, the latter would prove to be worse.

'A... That's a U? A-U. And there's the letter from that other word again. So A-U-R. And another A. A-U-R-A.'

Au-Ra? Au-ra? ... Aura? Is that right? I've never heard of this word before...'

Shimon lied to himself, but he didn't realize this just yet.

'Regarding: Aura. Meaning: Aura... About: Aura... Is that it?'

After correctly deducing what the inscription told him, his eyes reminded him that he could open the envelope. He blinked a couple of times before he did and noticed that his left eye wasn't doing any better, still slightly struggling with crispness. A small, disappointed exhale.

Another few seconds later, he'd ripped the insides out of its protective sheet of paper. Unfolding the contents, there was another small sheet, folded once in the middle. Shimon expected some sort of large item with the weight it possessed, but the sheet was all there was. Opening it revealed inscriptions on each side of the folded paper: above, a drawing of what looked like a tree branch with two berries attached to it, and below, an incoherent mess of letters and numbers. Shimon let out a chuckle as he glanced over the heavy letter. One that spoke volumes about his never-ending confusion.

'So. Uh. What can I make out of this? It's a cute branch I guess? It's probably supposed to tell me something but...'

Even a layman could tell that the string of signs made up some sort of code, but Shimon wasn't feeling enthusiastic about puzzling.

'... this is all jumbled. There's no word in there, and I have no idea what the numbers are supposed to mean. I should tell Zeke...'

Before grabbing the electronic block out his cloak's hood though, he hesitated.

'... sometime later.'

Shimon was fed up with cryptic hints and unforeseen trials for the moment. Also, it was barely 6:30.

'I need to move around a little. The wind feels really great.'

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At first glance over Cherize's surrounding field, its small thickets seemed insignificant and rather random. Apart from the large patch of pines filling the city's most prominent hill - appropriately named Pine Hill, the same that Shimon entered through - no other spot seemed to add anything noteworthy. Of course, this is only what city folk would assume. Entire ecosystems lay within each thicket, and each patch marked another place for wildlife to spend their lives and deaths in serenity.

And death was what the primal boy was unfortunately after on this morning. His stomach grumbled remarkably similar to a jet engine, starved already for nearly two days.

'I'm not gonna kill one of these big things...'

Shimon had already decided that deer wasn't a hunting option for him. Despite their frequency, their antlers reminded him too much of the horns that the other realm's inhabitants possessed.

'... I'll just get a couple of these!'

Instead, birds had been put on the menu.

Natural law prescribed that death followed life. There was no other option. As such, Shimon felt little remorse when he skipped through treetops to snatch two handfuls of small birds out of their nests. He'd been conditioned that something similar could happen to him anytime as well, and he was accepting of this law. But when he stopped on a sturdy pine trunk, gazing at the four panicky blackbirds in his clutches, he couldn't help but apologize.

'Sorry, little guys...'

Apologize for what would happen next.

In what he considered the most humane way possible for such an act, he swung them toward the ground. Too much force to retaliate and fly away - just a second later, all hit the dirt. It was the norm for Shimon. Kill or be killed. When he jumped down to collect their remains, he didn't ponder the loss of life.

'... What does 'defenders' even mean?'

He pondered Charna's fate.

Making fire was no problem for the marine-haired hunter either. In fact, small pulses incited the sparks even quicker, and less than a minute after his landing, he was already ridding the birds of their feathers for a less obstructed cooking session.

'Maybe they got hold of her and won't release her again. Because she's a threat. Argh... did I really have no choice but to trust Sennin, of all people?'

Before ripping the last few feathers out of his prey, his left palm happened to slap him square across the forehead.

'No! I had to! There was no other way! If I took her with me, who knows if we could've even escaped?'

Shimon cracked an optimistic smile, with notable difficulty.

'And the medic felt trustworthy... They're not just going to kill someone like that...'

He did his best to repress thinking about his battle with Sennin, but always failed to fully cancel it. Shimon would sometimes lock himself into imagining Zeke being the victim of that night instead; a thought he particularly despised. Charna's fate only added to the guilt. With a clearing breath, he tried to concentrate on the goal ahead.

'... but I should go search for her soon... Really soon...'

Before he knew it, his mind carried him all the way to the finely roasted bird meat he desired. Time flies when one ponders death. Shimon nearly forgot about his hunger. Fortunately, when he took a bite out of his impromptu breakfast, his mood lightened up quite a bit.

'Oh! That tastes amazing!'

His favorite flavor permeated his senses: unseasoned, raw umami. Truly a feast.

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With time, a vicious cycle introduced itself to Shimon: he couldn't follow his craving to see his abandoned friend, as the threat of the Sentinels still remained; yet also had to trust them to keep Charna safe until he could. He had to both avoid and rely on the same people, lacking any arguments to base his faith on. Most Humans would break under the pressure.

"—so you had to leave her behind?"

"M-hm..." Shimon replied, notably downcast.

After consuming all four once-winged creatures, he wandered for quite some time, familiarizing himself with the briskness of February. While he adored watching his cloak sway, accompanied by the fog-like wind, he couldn't empty his mind as much as he wanted. Charna, Zeke, Sennin and even his parents lingered on.

So in the early noon, he finally exploded and called his brother again. For half an hour, he did nothing but steadily describe the order of events that plagued his conscience. A gargantuan task in itself.

"That's heavy... I mean— I know that you didn't have any other choice, and it's good that

you stayed safe... but, man... oh, and no, I didn't see anything about Corner Link in the news. That's a good omen, I guess?"

Understanding Zeke, even over the phone, proved to be of no difficulty anymore.

"I think you should definitely talk to her, as soon as you can. You said you remember how her... her *energy* felt, right?"

"Yeah, e-ner-gy felt... Caaalm."

Replying, however, still took up all of his mental capacity.

"Maybe you can track her like... like that adult? Night falls around 6 tonight, so if you're careful—I mean, *really* careful, you might find her after it's dark? And stay hidden! Don't go visit anything without telling me first!"

'*Sounds like a good idea,*' Shimon immediately thought. No wonder this boy used to be his big brother. "Okay!" he yelled optimistically. "How are you, Zeke?"

"Oh, me?"

For some reason, the younger brother didn't anticipate concern for his own sake.

"Uhm, I'm fine! Nobody noticed I was gone, or that the car was gone, luckily... well, since they're still in the hospital. I visited them. Mum's still shaky. She has to stay some more," Zeke sighed. Shimon, too, sighed. He couldn't have anticipated the impact his visit had.

"—But don't worry, she'll get better! And then again, this means I might be able to see you tomorrow evening again?"

Under normal circumstances, this would have bothered both teenagers' minds to no end. Under their reality-breaking circumstances however, they were alright with their mother being out of the picture for now. It occurred to both as a little morbid.

"Okay! Good! I seek Charna to-night, search for her au-ra... Tell you to-mor-row then, yea?"

"Sure! Sure!" Zeke replied. He was astounded how quickly his brother adapted to Pangaeon. "Alright. Take care. Love you, Shimon. And I mean it, *please* stay safe."

"Love-you-too!" Shimon cheered. He found that he liked saying these words to a person as close as his brother.

Then, as he pressed the blocky red button on his device, an epiphany rolled over him.

'... *Did I just say 'aura'?*'

The image of the envelope immediately sprung to his mind. He had stowed the weighty paper within his hood, but he realized that he needed a better way of transportation soon.

'*That's right. That's what Sennin said. "My wasteful... something usage". I didn't really understand it back then, but now that I think about it... yeah. It was definitely "aura".*'

For a bit, he glanced over his hand as he emanated a little of his power. A translucent mass built around his palm after concentrating hard enough. His 'aura'.

'*Sennin's power was also a lot more refined than mine... I have no idea how I'd use it to teleport... Aura...*

What even is aura?'