

8 - FLASHED JUNK MIND

Charna Chierke's apartment was located at the top of a low-end skyscraper above Pristine Avenue, ironically known for its wealth of crimes due to the frequency of jewelry stores. Its low price reflected the bare 15 square meters of the condo - perfect for the young lady's small work budget.

Despite this, she didn't particularly like staying in her four walls. It wasn't claustrophobia, more of a general sense of dread she experienced whenever she stayed home for more than a couple of hours. Charna took long inner-city walks to combat this. Despite this, she never felt quite comfortable in her neighborhood, always equipped with some sort of crook-repellent. So when she stayed home until the late evening, something grave had to have occurred.

'Forget about what happened. Don't ever think back to it. In fact, erase it fully from memory. We'll keep an eye on you from now on. Forget about what happened,' voices kept repeating to no end.

Twenty-two hours had passed between the explosion in Corner Link and her submersion with the blanket of her bed. Sixteen of which she spent just sleeping. Charna took it onto herself to stop the smoking habit she picked up from her former group of high school friends, and until today, she managed. In the six hours she had been awake, she already consumed nearly an entire pack of stashed cigarettes; remainders of what her friends gifted her as a farewell. At the pace she was continuing, she wasn't only going to cover her blanket with gray ashes, but also destroy all remembrance of the days she felt truly happy. But her nerves wouldn't calm any other way.

'In fact, erase it fully from memory,' the old man drilled into her head when she woke up in her apartment. Her clothing was unchanged and she didn't feel any pain, just an incredible sense of exhaustion. The man possessed a crevice-covered, slightly tan face that contrasted the white remains of hair on his head, making him look both wrinkly and sympathetic in a weird way. There was another, much younger one as well, carrying even blonder hair than her own. She complied without hesitation. It felt organic, weirdly innate for her to do so.

'We'll keep an eye on you from now on.'

Charna failed to comprehend. She pondered and pondered but nothing came. All that remained of the memories she should forget were pain and panic. She entered the bar - nothing else after that.

Nothing disproved the idea that she just entered the door and had a heart attack. Nothing but the mental image of a marine-haired boy and his pretty jade eyes.

Of all the severed threads of memory in her head, this was the clearest. He was there, and he talked to her in the prettiest way that anyone ever had. Who was this boy? Did he exist at all or did heart attacks just tend to give you lucid dreams?

She lit another cigarette after finishing the previous one in under a minute. That and a consistent feeling of sickness was all that her thinking amounted to in these six hours.

—

Like Zeke had proposed, Shimon started his search at 6PM, keeping a consistent eye on his block phone's clock. The second that the hour turned, he lunged out of the thicket and sprinted

to the top of Pine Hill once more. With his sense for aura, he thought, he may just find hers immediately if he got a good look over the city.

Futile hopes, unfortunately. It took his refreshed body just five minutes to reach the top, but when he entered the same view he initially exited to, disappointment crushed his expectations. He couldn't find any signature - of anyone, at that. Scanning an entire city was utopian, but his desire to revisit Charna trumped all realistic predictions. So what next?

'I'll have to skim... everything,' Shimon deduced immediately. He was fine with this, but his worries centered around finding the girl in the first place. Determination carrying his legs, he performed last time's maneuver - now however, directly leaping off the hill instead of sliding down. After a few seconds of rocketing through the air, he halted with his bare feet on the exact same rooftop as before. This broke him away from his troubles for just a moment.

'... did I improve?'

Shimon noticed how pointedly accurate his leap was; much easier to perform as well, despite the hundreds of meters it covered. It seemed natural, almost ingrained to him. A slim grin cracked on his face. Then, he reminded himself of the problem at hand.

'Okay, concentration. Try to recall how she felt. That feeling I got when I reached out to her... That sense of deep, deep calmness, like some long abyss... Sort of soothing...'

To raise his chances, he closed his eyes and held his breath. For the next two hours, he'd only look and breathe when he absolutely needed to. Finding Charna was top priority.

Lighting her 17th cigarette of the evening, it was a lack of lighter fluid that finally served an end to Charna's uninterrupted tobacco streak. She now had to settle for confronting the thoughts that lingered in the corners of her brain. Her fingers mashed her cheeks and forehead consistently. Being told to forget what had already been forgotten only lead to startled curiosity.

'Corner Link. I entered Corner Link. I sat somewhere. I drank something. Then... pain.'

Charna's shell was shaking by the mere thought of the hell she endured. Of all events, this stuck.

'But why the boy? Why is there such a clear image of some boy? And glass... why is there so much glass?' cycled her brain again and again, no hint of resolution.

There was something horrible rooted inside the last evening; so deeply intertwined with it that her mind outright prohibited her from remembering. Maybe the two men had a hand in this, she considered, but had no idea how they tied into the situation either. Their faces remained, but no location or situation allocated to them.

At this point, Charna's mind was a fried, scattered mess. She didn't even realize her surroundings anymore - the ash-covered blanket, the cloth-covered mirrors, the mess of miscellaneous items scattered across her floor went completely beyond her. The same images of Corner Link and the boy were all she saw.

It was 8:03PM when a solid bang on the tiny balcony forced her back into reality.

"H-hey! It's you! I finally found you!" a crystalline voice rang out, behind the shut curtains that connected her condo to a square meter of porch. When this voice entered her ears, a lightning of horror ran down her back. All concerns faded, a new one took full priority.

'Oh my god. I'm being robbed.'

How this was even possible from a porch on the 9th level didn't occur to her. Hyperventilation overrode her. In two seconds, she took six breaths. There was a high chance she'd blackout without even knowing what's going on.

"Charna!"

At least until the voice continued.

"It's me! Shimon! ... It's you, right, Charna?" the boy said. Once more, a single word determined fate. Once more, it turned out to be the boy's name.

'... Shimon—'

Something set ablaze within the young blonde's mind, as if there was a gas canister full of memories hidden deep inside her that had just been hit by a bullet. A six-lane highway of remembrances had been spawned as a result. Every car was a remainder of the previous night that returned back, all driving in time lapse.

'Shimon Shimon Shimon Shimon Shimon'

The echoing name sounded remarkably familiar. Somehow, it traced deep roots through the last evening, like an underlying layer that couldn't be removed.

For the first time in six hours, she lifted herself from her bed and stepped onto the cigarette-strewn carpet. Only then did she notice that she never took off her sage-colored high heels.

"... Charna?" the boy behind the curtain whimpered. Exhaustion clearly seeped through his words. Then, finally, the shades were pulled aside, the barrier now broken. In an instant, the two youths' eyes connected with each other. Periwinkle and Emerald clashed and combined. Something else happened as well, but to only one of them.

"—it's you!"

Emerald started to grow more glassy.

"After all—," Shimon gasped as he took another needed breather, "it's you! Finally!"

Charna neglected to notice that she could hear the boy perfectly through tempered glass, like there wasn't anything between them. In this moment, she certainly felt so. However, she also found herself unable to reply. Shimon's name and face had set things back to their original position. Her memories took shape, a gradual reconstruction of the 31st of January. She quickly unlocked balcony door - retaining the momentum to fall right back on her bed. Shimon felt the urge to hug her, but was too late.

The already six-lane highway doubled in size and became a clustered mess of lights in the night. Charna direly needed time to process.

'Corner Link Bar Socialize Friends Notice Anxiety Alcohol - Shimon - Marine Jade Pangaean Place Ashlowe Show Hand Hand Hand Hand...'

At this point, Shimon grew quite worried of the struggling girl.

"—Hey, Charna," he muttered as his right palm went for her lifeless left. Practically the worst move he could have made. Right as his hand encased the much softer female's,

"AH!"

Charna skittered back. Her already disarrayed train of thought was shattered by the intense fear of touching another hand. Like a conditioned dog, she now connected it to the horrifying pain she felt.

But she couldn't quite pull the palm away.

"Hey, don't worry, don't worry, don't worry! It's okay, it's fine, it's not gonna happen anymore, okay?"

Shimon hooked his fingers into hers, in the most gentle way possible. And suddenly, there was another remainder of last night. Warmth. Charna was trapped between the horrors of her returning memories and the warm embrace of someone she secretly hoped to see again.

"It's never— *never* gonna happen again, okay? It's fine. It's okay. You're safe, okay?"

Every syllable that the boy sang seemed to ease her mind a little more. Bit by bit, she started remembering the first time she touched his hand, how flattered she felt. It began to override the all-encompassing fear. Her resistance died down. In the end, she began feeling a different emotion than the initial terror she expected.

"It's fine. You're safe with me. I promise, okay?"

Comfort. Being cared for.

"... *Shimon?* What..."

She struggled through her first words of the day. There was no way she could finish a whole sentence. She broke down midway through, and her head collapsed right onto the boy's shoulder, immediately dripping tears of all kinds of origins. Confusion, shock, but also closure.

A little silence passed by. Remedy for both hearts. After that, Shimon revealed his observation.

"Hey! Look at you! Y-you've got aura now!"

It didn't take very long for Charna's social fears to settle in again.

After exerting all of her emotion by drenching Shimon's shoulder - which he very kindly offered - they began discussing how the events of yesternight came to be. A solid meter apart from each other on her bed, as bodily contact started making the young woman nervous again. Her messy home and appearance didn't help her confidence either.

"... and I think it's because of your aura that you can talk to me like this now. I didn't know it was such a gamble... I'm— I'm really sorry for doing this to you, Charna. I'm so incredibly happy and glad that you're well... Oh! Also, sorry for lying about Ashlowe. I'm actually from Cherize too!"

The barely adult woman listened intently to the cloaked boy's recap of the previous night. It sounded horrible, deeply unsettling - there was now apparently a power within her body that she could keep inside if Shimon's words were to be trusted - but there was no denying that it was the truth. All points matched perfectly with her own memories, and it even explained how she got back home. Why she was being eyed now. The 'Sentinels', what Shimon called them, were supposedly a defending force - though even the near-adult himself seemed relieved when he heard that someone took Charna home, likely members of those Sentinels.

It was a lot for a mundane Human to swallow. Especially when said Human swallowed her own words as well - as every time Charna spoke up, she shot out words at a rate that seemed almost illogical to her. Like bad lip-sync of a foreign movie.

"It's actually awesome to talk to you like this. I really missed talking normally. Haha."

"Mhm," the girl answered in short bursts every now and then. Not out of disinterest, but because she was still struggling to comprehend. Six hours of contemplation helped immensely on readying her for a reveal that made Zeke question reality, but the initial shock was inevitable.

"Hoowd you do—" Charna began and stopped immediately again. "How do yooud the—"

To Shimon, she sounded like a toddler trying to combine noises into a sentence for the first time. She thought of the exact same picture.

"Don't worry, don't worry, take your time! It's probably really hard for you."

The blonde gobbled another burst of air and began extending her arm the same way she helplessly did on the bar's floor.

"... how doo you doo thee auraah?" she finally spoke. But upon witnessing her extend her palm, Shimon's face spiked in worry.

"Oh— don't— no, don't do that now!" he prattled as he moved her arm back. "You'll break stuff if you're not careful!"

A deeply unsettling warning to Charna. As if her body was now a highly dangerous weapon.

"But— but don't worry! You need to really focus before you can do anything with it. You're not dangerous! Don't worry!" he put together quickly, sensing her brewing fear. *'What a mind-crushing world have I entered?'* Charna thought.

"Diidyo— did youu read mye thoghts?"

"No, but I can kind of... uh, feel your words? Not completely, just sort of? I don't know, it's kind of what we're talking in, I guess?"

Ironically, since his encounter with Zeke, the roles had now been reversed. Shimon was fluent, Charna was learning. His patience and honesty was refreshing to the girl, doing her utmost to adapt and not freak out entirely. The warmth he offered her didn't fade. If he hadn't been as crystal clear of a person, she couldn't tell if she could have been responsive enough. Between all suffering and perplexity, she felt calm with him. The excessive nicotine may have played a part in this too, however.

"—Oh! Right! Can I ask you something, Charna? Completely unrelated..."

Before he could even perceive the girl bopping her head forward, he already picked his inquiry out of his cloak. Next, he unfolded it.

"I received this letter yesterday, totally out of nowhere... Uhm, can you make something out of it?" he asked with caution in his voice.