

## 9 - ANOTHER DEPARTURE

"Tha's corror—"

Charna couldn't form a two-word sentence yet without mixing up noises.

"Co-oor-di-nates."

"Co-oor-di-nates?" Shimon repeated, perplexed. "I've never heard of that... uh, word?"

Slight surprise filled the young woman's face, but considering the multitude of things that should've killed her fragile heart by now, this was the least surprising one. She had no clue about how steadfast her heart truly was. Shimon did, though.

"It'ss—" the girl started and stopped again. Instead, she chose to grasp the letter and waddle over to her boxlike PC, frantically clicking away at her worn mouse. Its cable twisted around its axis at least ten times - fitting to the overall state of her room. Her otherworldly guest spectated the process eagerly, unaware of what it was good for.

After some time, she waved him over to come look at the screen. From the edge of her bed no less, lacking the space for a chair to fit at her small cupboard. On the screen, Shimon spotted a thick outline surrounding a highly detailed cluster of edges and curves, some big enough to carry a word inside them. '*Complex and important-looking*' was his initial impression - until his memories helped assert the picture.

'*Oh! Of course, that's a map!*' he realized, thinking back to the directions that the friendly receptionist printed out for him. '*—Wait, in that case, that means that—*'

"Here'ss..." Charna began, pointing her index on a red point at the top, "thee corrorndates. Iss'in thee Him-al-aye-as— the Hima-layas."

This new sort of language was so out of place that Charna decided to just roll along with it. She realized that she had to adapt to what had been thrust upon her; else she would get left behind with heart attacks forever. Additionally, she seriously wanted to help Shimon.

"So— so— you mean, that's where it leads? It's a location?"

The boy's deep green eyes scintillated with awe when he witnessed the blonde girl nodding.

"That's... wow! I'm— wow! How did you figure that out? And that quickly, too?"

Charna's cheeks blushed up three shades of pink. She twirled her messy hair into a coil.

"Mmm... I liked geogrph— geo-gra-phy. Inn school."

"Uh-huh," Shimon replied obliviously. His second-grade education limited him behind basic algebra.

"Prblem though," the tech-savvy girl added. Instead of continuing her sentence, she pulled a post-it note from her desk and scribbled a number on it with a loose, ink-leaking pen. Four digits.

"Iss'... It's ovrr... Eight thousad killomeeter away."

There was, of course, no real connection of distance that the marine-haired traveler made with that number. Eight thousand sounded just like eight hundred to him, and eight hundred was already far more than he could keep track of. Doing it once to trace his time in the other world was plenty, enough for one lifetime. But Charna's expression made it clear that this was nothing to be scoffed at.

"Like I said, I just woke up with it. No idea who brought it to me - how, even - or where it came from..."

"Mhm..."

The girl tuned in to her awe-struck company but was already multiple steps ahead, looking for flights leaving to the Himalayas. Multitasking was one of her specialties. After a short while, she narrowed the search down to one specific plane, leaving...

"... to-mor-row."

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow what?"

Charna suffered from the same fate as her guest - explanations were the worst part of already exhausting conversation.

"*Phew...* Che-Cheriiiize Airprt— Che-rize Air-port," she assembled with admirable skill. "Yuu can booard plaine— plane, and fly. To-mor-row," she added, feeling a particular sting in her chest upon muttering the last word.

Then, silence. For once, Shimon was the one who needed time to reflect. Not only did the girl he accidentally hurt so much seem to forgive him, not only did she figure out a mind-boggling mystery in the blink of an eye, but she already secured a route to his end goal as well. All without him even noticing. Awe-struck was an understatement. Intense admiration came closer.

Still, Charna lost no time and instructed her printer, the most fresh-looking object on the desk, to hand out directions. To the airport, the plane and, in the end, the red spot over 8000 kilometers away. Efficient as a cogwheel.

"Thank... thank you so..." Shimon breathed as he skimmed through the detailed sheets of paper. He didn't see the self-satisfied grin that cracked on his savior's face.

Now was the time for what he wanted to do all along. He turned to the girl and embraced her deeply. All sheets were now scattered on the ground.

"Thank you so much, Charna. Seriously."

"N-no prob..." the girl began and stopped, her fingers trembling around the slightly younger boy's cloth. Unsurprisingly, her face turned a dozen shades redder; perpetual shaking not waiting long to appear either. Rarely had she been in such an embrace of gratitude and appreciation - so rarely, in fact, that it may have been the first time.

"... Oh!"

A few moments into their embrace, both agonizing and wonderful to the anxious girl, she recalled something she noticed since the unusual boy entered through her balcony. Mustering all willpower, she rid herself of the affectionate hug and skipped to the small hallway that connected her condo to the staircase exit. There, she scrambled through a few thin cabinets, in search for something. Shimon sat and waited patiently, still on the edge of her bed.

"... Here, here. They ore u-ni-sex. For mahn and womn," she roughly pointed out as she returned to her room with a pair of cherry-colored high-top sneakers. Her affinity for numbers extended to foot sizes as well - due to the fact that her feet were slightly bigger than the boy's, finding fitting shoes wasn't that difficult.

'*Aww, shoes again?*' Shimon immediately dreaded, vastly preferring his barefoot lifestyle. He was grateful, just not necessarily happy. At least until he properly bound them around his feet. With quite a bit of shock, he found them to feather his soles a lot better than his bare feet could. They even felt comfortable - if a little restricting, which seemed inevitable for shoes in general.

"Th-thanks! They're great!"

A smile of accomplishment colored Charna's rosy face. A tainted smile, however.

"So... you want leave to-mor-row?" she asked in a somber tone. The stinging pain she felt earlier reared its head into the conversation.

"Y-yeah! I mean - if I can do it tomorrow already, then..." Shimon stammered, oblivious to the girl's hidden concern. Time wasn't the only factor in his decision, however.

"... also, things are gonna be easier for you. You don't have to be careful all the time because I'm around - neither you, nor my brother..." he whispered with the same tone Charna's voice had. "... it's only gonna get better without me. Plus, honestly, I'm super curious about where that letter sends me!" he added, far more brightly.

Shimon's words made sense, at least somewhat. But emotions couldn't simply be blocked out. Charna felt her heart becoming heavier, like a rock that wanted to pull her downward.

"Okay..."

It wasn't quite heartbreak, but something close to it. Then, an idea.

"... umm, doo you have phn— phooone?"

"Oh! Yeah! I actually do, good thing you reminded me!" he said as he pulled it from his cloak. "... Uhm, but I don't really know how it works; see, my brother gave it to me and—"

Before ending his sentence, the resourceful blonde already snatched it from him and typed away. Just a few seconds later, the screen displayed 'CHARNA CHIERKE' above a long sequence of digits. "Cleek— klikk here an' we cann talk," she explained swiftly while pointing at her name.

*'Incredible. Incredible,'* Shimon thought. Every technicality Charna ironed out only dazzled him further.

The eventual goodbye was bittersweet. Both parties appreciated each other immensely - Charna didn't know where her head would have gone if it weren't for the warm boy, and Shimon would have had no idea what to do next if it weren't for the resourceful girl. None wanted to leave the other. But, sooner or later, it had to happen.

Around an hour after the arrival of the acrobatic young man, he left again through the same entrance. The two shared a final hug with each other - one that Charna initiated this time, in an attempt to feel more comfortable hugging someone. Specifically Shimon, at that.

"Goodbye Shi-moan," she whispered softly.

"Goodbye Charna," he replied with a smile. "Don't worry, we'll see each other again! And we'll talk a lot, okay? Promise!"

As their embrace eased out, she wobbled her head in agreement. "... Yuu think I can lerrn aura?"

"Yes! Of course! You're super strong already!" the boy emphasized while turning his body to the open city of Cherize. "If you need help or feel unsure, call me! I'll help you as much as I can, and we'll solve this together in the end, alright?"

"Okay," Charna beamed. It was now truly time to part. Shimon climbed on the railing of the tiny balcony, whispering a heartfelt 'see you' before lunging into the dark blue night, only lit by the lights of the street.

"See you..." the girl replied.

It would take some time until the two young adults would see each other in the flesh again.

—

"Can you meet under... uhm..."

"The bridge?"

"Bridge! Meet under bridge?"

It was back to deciphering code for Shimon. When he called his home-stuck brother, slithering through the dim avenues of Cherize, he still felt liberated from the way he freely talked with his new friend. Talking in Pangaeian was bothersome, but something deep had been heaved off his chest, so it was tolerable.

"Uhm, I'd love to, it's just that I don't know when Mum and Dad will return home..."

"Ah, right, that bad..."

"Don't worry! But I don't think I can go to the bridge, since I won't be home should they come back..."

Zeke pondered a little whether he should ask his brother what he was about to ask. But he didn't see a better solution.

"... Shimon, we could meet... if you came to our house."

This sentence stopped the marine-haired blur of the night in his tracks.

"The house?" he murmured under a street lantern bathing a skyscraper alleyway in tangerine shine.

"Yeah. Sorry," Zeke added with concern, "but I don't know how else we could..."

"Okay," Shimon agreed quickly. Less because he was convinced, more because seeing Zeke trumped every hurdle regardless. "Okay. See you, okay?"

"Uhm, uhm, sure, I was just thinking you'd be more—"

Beep, and an ended call. From what Charna showed him in their brief time, Shimon felt like he understood phones more now.

For once though, he didn't just sprint off. Instead, his back slid all the way down the tower wall, until he sat on the concrete ground.

*'The house...'*

Shimon felt his head starting to throb, as if lightning ravaged the middle of his brain. For some reason, he felt that this lightning was specifically grayscale. His breathing rhythm accelerated and decelerated on a whim.

*'Oh man... I don't want to...'*

His lips pressed tightly against one another. His eyelids did the same.

*'Argh... I don't want to. I don't want to, I don't want to...'*

And then, he stayed put. For a good minute, Shimon Astrai did nothing but confront his obvious fear of returning to his former home. He even noticed the irony, it having been what made him return to the Human Realm in the first place. Until suddenly,

*'... The Himalayas.'*

something new entered Shimon's mind.

*'I can go tomorrow... find out about aura... It's far - it seems insanely far, I'd leave Zeke and Charna behind... but...'*

His frown ebbed off, almost forming a smile.

*'But it's so exciting! I wouldn't have to live on the run anymore... They'd be safer...'*

Shimon's back slid up the tower wall again.

*'I could improve! Maybe even by a lot! I could find out what the letter means, how I got back from space, what this weird time difference is...'*

A bonfire ignited within the 17-year old's soul. With newfound vigor, he lowered his knees like a sprinter and shot forward once more.

*'But I need to do this first, though... There's no getting around that.'*

The determination to overcome his obstacle coursed through Shimon's veins.

Shortly before the large clock hand pointed to the sky, turning 9 to 10PM, the lost son returned once more to the place he formerly called home. The person he formerly called big brother was already waiting for him; sitting on the same cold stone step that drained Shimon of his lifetime.

"Y-you're—!"

Almost 48 hours passed since the two had last seen each other. A span decidedly too large. Zeke couldn't hold his urge to fall over his brother once he arrived.

"You're back! Holy hell, Shimon, you're back..." he exclaimed, doing his best to hold back tears for once. Shimon, too, felt relieved when his brother's raven hair brushed against his collarbone - but he couldn't lift his eyes from the front yard that he'd been dreading so much to see again.

"—I, I understand, I think, but... the Himalayas, of all things?"

Eventually, they placed themselves on the stair that was hungry for life, as Zeke obliviously insisted. A hard task for the marine-haired brother to follow. He lowered himself as slow as possible - even stopping entirely for a second - until his determination powered him through; fueled by his brother's presence. It didn't feel like his time was being sapped anymore, but it still felt freezing and uncomfortable.

"It's, just, I... it's a lot, don't you think? I-I mean— *eight thousand kilometers*? Because of a letter that you don't even know where it came from? Why? Shimon, we couldn't..."

The news had to be given sometime. In his talk, Shimon mentioned how he sorted things out with Charna - which must have been smooth, as Zeke noticed from his new cherry-colored sneakers. However, it would be the letter and its instructions that undermined all other topics.

"... we, we couldn't see each other anymore, you know? At all..."

Shimon grew solemn and quiet.

"... I know."

This wasn't easy to say. Even harder to swallow.

"But... b-but..."

Zeke had to assemble his thoughts again, knocked out of his hands and scattered across the floor.

"... but, Shimon— it's... it's just... I... I..."

It took long until Zeke found any words at all. The older brother waited patiently, expecting the worst.

"... You— you know - I actually thought about it, and, and— and you could just come back home!"

The worst it was indeed.

"You know, you could just— show them your powers! That's irrefutable proof, right? If you do that, they are gonna believe you, right? And maybe you could actually become part of the house again! It— it might even become full of life again, and we could hang out and, and watch TV on the couch together or something! It'd be amazing, right? And your room is still untouched too! You could settle right back in—"

"Zeke..."

An interruption far more violent than Shimon wanted it to be. Heavy emotions hung in the

air.

"I... I don't know... I'm not sure... They— they looked at me like they... don't even want..."

At last, Shimon's worries were out in the open. Zeke hadn't thought about it that way before.

"It, it hurt... Actually... *still* hurts..."

He neglected how deeply the rejection had affected his brother.

"Don't think I want return... Only cause bad... for you, and mum, and dad... and Charna..."

In this moment Zeke felt vile, disgusted by himself; as if he was convincing someone to be a hostage.

"I'm sorry, Zeke..."

The younger brother couldn't reply. He could genuinely not come up with a response. He found nothing. To lift the anvil resting on his chest a little, Shimon exhaled a deep breath. He was sick of focusing on pain.

"But— they alive! *You* alive! I'm happy! I'm so happy that you here! And— and we have phone! We can call!"

His smile brightened the grey that enveloped Zeke. The younger brother now understood what the older one felt when he returned, but Shimon did his utmost to ensure that he wouldn't die because of it.

"That enough for me. Oh, and, they would no leave me a-ny-more, right?"

Freedom was one of the most valuable gifts Shimon possessed. He couldn't and wouldn't give it up; especially now that his destiny was at a turning point. Zeke understood, but struggled to accept.

"I... I will miss you... I will miss you so, so... *So much...*"

He felt miserable for attempting to influence Shimon's decision. But he hit total desperation. These were the only words that left his lips.

"You can't... you can't just do it... for me?"

And yet, they were meaningless. Shimon's mind was made up.

"Sorry, Zeke..."

Through their talk, Shimon fully expected his parents to return and get shocked half to death once more. Maybe even fully this time. He shuddered of the mere thought, preparing himself mentally for the grey hell to arrive. But when Zeke received the text that Marcos would stay another night with his recovering wife, he felt the pressure disappearing almost entirely. Only the hurt that he caused his brother remained. So, in his best efforts to make up, he snatched the 14-year old onto his back.

"Huh? Wait, what are you—"

And without another word, Shimon dove through the wintry air of Cherize City one final time. Zeke was utterly stunned by Shimon's inhuman speed. He trusted his brother to keep him safe, but he didn't anticipate such sheer velocity to clash against his face. Five minutes later, when he finally accommodated to the speed, he was shaken once more when Shimon decided to run up a wall. Not just any at that - the wall of Cherize's tallest skyscraper.

"Shimon! Are you— you can't— are you kid—" was all that left his lips before his vision turned 90 degrees and gravity lost all meaning. Not losing any speed whatsoever, Zeke felt a new sort of nausea as the two brothers skip-climbed Rain Tower in a minute.

Motion sickness aside, there was another feeling occupying Zeke as well, though. Curiosity.

Finally stopping at the black tower's summit, known for being covered in watery fog whenever it was downcast, he posed a simple question to his brother: why.

"Why? Well... You sad, I make de-ci-sion that hurt you, but..."

The answer was straightforward. But it could only be fully grasped with a perfect view above the metropolis, Shimon had decided. A sea of lights revealed itself, clad by the reds and yellows of cars and windows in the midst of the navy blue night. No cloud in the sky. Truly a view that could only be experienced.

"I wanted to show you. The reason why leave. My freedom," Shimon said, pure as a newly formed snowflake.

It was then that Zeke's spirit broke for the last time. The tears he'd been holding back so bravely found no resistance anymore. He realized the true reason his brother needed to leave. He felt like a monster for begging him to stay. He loved him. He needed to let him go.

"Shimon... I'm so... so, so sorry..."

But he misunderstood.

*'Why are you sorry, Zeke? I'm the one who's leaving you...'*

A long, tear-filled embrace could be witnessed at the top of Rain Tower that night.

"... at least this time, I get to say goodbye..." Zeke said.

*'... this hasn't gotten any easier...'* Shimon contemplated.

—

Cherize City's airport was a notorious tourist trap, earning the metropolis a whopping 10% of its total income. Once the passengers arrived, they'd have no choice but to ogle the absurd amount of high-class duty-frees, carrying Cherize's signature souvenirs - mouth-watering sweets and the most bleeding edge tech.

And still, there was the one boy that wanted nothing more than to get out.

*'Just a few minutes more. I'll board that huge thing and fly to the Himalayas... somehow. I still have no idea how this metal sausage is supposed to fly...'*

A bright Sunday morning awaited the airport workers, one that wasn't special in the least. They carried the same sleepy gaze that also graced their faces yesterday, and this wouldn't change until they eventually entered retirement age. None of them could tell that today would become the strangest day of their workplace's history. They wouldn't ever learn about it either.

Shimon Astrai checked his baggage once more before leaving for good. When they returned home, Zeke handed him an olive canvas bag that he bought while they turned heads in Cherize's mall; filled with all kinds of fruits, drinks and necessities that the 14-year old could scramble together.

"Flight 9CH70 Check-Ins will close in five minutes," echoed a voice through the entire building.

That was Shimon's signal. He'd sneak on the landing strip as stealthily as he could and then ride the plane from above. Absolutely crazy for a normal Human, but a fun experiment for the marine-haired pilgrim. Charna texted him about this, and after long discussion on how to ride a plane without tickets, this was the most promising idea they came up with. Of course, it was his own idea.

*'... I kind of wish...'*

But right as Shimon faced departure, he was met with a sudden surge of melancholy.

*'I kind of wish they were here. To wave me goodbye, at least... I would have liked to see them smile as I leave...'*

But no one came. Though it was hard to acknowledge, repressing all emotions toward his parents, Shimon felt a little distraught. He hoped to the very last second that they would somehow turn a different leaf and come visit his departure. Even when he himself cut the remaining ties, the wish lingered on.

Suddenly, vibration. The young boy was still adapting to the way phones notified him of their existence, grabbing the jittering item with haste.

*'GOOD BYE! SAFE TRAVEL! HOPE TO SEE YOU SOON!'*

Zeke had sent him easy-to-read messages, all in capital letters to help his struggling brother. A smile flourished on Shimon's face.