

## IV - THE TOURNAMENT SEASON ARC

### 34 - BUT LET'S START FROM THE BEGINNING

*Four months earlier..*

Rustling. Nearly inaudible rustling. A finger moving over serrated paper, left and right, back and forth, again and again. Maybe a sign of nervousness, maybe an innocent habit. But the longer Shimon stared at the envelope in his hands, the more certain he got that it was the former. Every step toward his destination increased the rustling.

The inked piece of paper in his hands was the product of nearly twenty-four hours of drafting. Writing was still a hardship and sentences were still a challenge to the near-adult, but with the help of his more literate friend, Shimon eventually managed to express himself in form of an explanation. Not an apology. The polar opposite of an apology. A withdrawal.

Shimon's feelings were certain and his decision was firm. This was what his heart desired, and yet it failed to suppress the fear that came along with it. The pace at which it hammered against his ribcage reminded him of the last time he took such intimidating steps. He surmised that this was two months ago and surprised himself with how quickly this frame of time passed. And then, his mind returned back to the wooden halls of Juniper. But only physically - his eyes were still stuck on the envelope. The well-carved, softly lit aesthetics of the High-Rank dorms were completely lost to him, just as much as the sound that his footsteps lacked. Silence was the norm at this point, not the exception.

Earlier than he hoped for, he stopped. There it was. *'Rinnezaki,'* Shimon recognized from the tag at the mailbox. This time, no knocking was necessary. A quick slip into the box was all that was needed. But it still meant a decision. The moment he let go of the envelope, he'd be a changed person. Shimon's clenched hand hovered just above the box's opening, reluctant to let go just yet. There was still time to rethink. Right now he could still pull it out and rewrite or change his mind entirely, right now he was still able to reflect on what he was about to—

It fell in. Shimon gasped, covering his mouth with both palms. In a moment of weakness, his hand lost the grip to hold on to the letter. It was gone, forever lost in the black abyss of Jin's mailbox. That was it. *'That's it,'* he repeated with equal amounts shock and relief.

Ten seconds passed, in which the boy kept staring at the void in front of him. It was time to turn and leave, but his legs struggled with strength like his grip had. Eventually, a decisive step to the side would end his eternal moment and shift his mind toward the exit. Steady steps toward fresh air, exactly what Shimon needed. It took a few moments for him to balance his breathing and calm his rumbling heart. When he was able to focus on all of the subtle vegetation creeping out of the gaps of the hallway again, his brain connected the events.

*'I'm free now.'*

And his heart leapt once more. And his smile brightened to a grin.

*'I've done it!'* he almost shouted, barely able to contain himself. His steps grew from careful inching to confident lunges, eager to make it outside. The rest of the plan was easier than what he'd just done. He would do a couple jumps, frolic in the snow, enjoy his regained freedom. After that, he would head to Moiren and talk with—

*"Is that so?"*

Sudden stop. A familiar voice lapsed Shimon's enthusiasm immediately and froze him. Right around the corner of the hallway that he just took, Jin was waiting. Letter in hand, eyes focused on the inscription. At least for a little - then, they turned to the boy. His synthetic, discolored cheek didn't help his frightening appearance.

No words. Only a stare that rivaled the frost of the Himalayas.

The only thing that could break it was a warm breath of confidence.

"Yup."

Shimon nodded. He couldn't allow himself to falter. This was his decision only. His bright jade eyes now directly fought with Jin's cold black. And then nothing, for three agonizing seconds.

"I see," Jin eventually said in the most emotionless voice Shimon heard from him. No inclination toward anger, contempt - pure nothing. A moment later, Jin merged with the shadows of the hallway and faded out of sight.

When the last traces of Jin's aura subsided, an anvil fell from Shimon's chest. He gasped for air, fresh air that would rid him of his panic. It took five almost meditational breaths to calm his heart.

*'I have no idea what he's thinking right now. This is scary.'*

Anxiety was hard to get rid of, but Shimon still tried his utmost. The cloaked boy folded his hands like he was so used to and divulged into himself. He sank down and enjoyed the water around him for a little. It was only recently that he was able to explore his aura again, and also be confronted with the intimidating black depths of what had not been found yet. Shimon took another, more astral breath. There was only one way to go, and that was forward.

*'If she's on my side, I'll be fine.'*

—

About three hours later, Shimon sat at the place he was so used to, on the couch he adored and hated at the same time. Comfort was beautiful, but forced stagnation was one of the worst feelings he'd experienced so far. His legs needed to move, his arms needed to strike, but his wounds needed to heal. Luckily, he endured enough of this monotone hell to roam around freely again, his body patched up and raring to go. His soul still wailed in agony from time to time, but with the passing of days also came a bit of clarity. I could have died that day, Shimon often found himself thinking. Worse, Zeke could have died had I been less proactive. Guilt didn't fade, it only took more of a backseat, but conviction that there was no other option kept Shimon going. It kept him looking forward to the next step. This entailed another talk.

"Kiddo, kiddo, look, I-I haven't said no to anything yet, but— you know it ain't that easy, right?"

"Why not?"

"Cause it's gotta be formal, and it's gotta be correct, and—"

"I know! I've worked everything out with Dion and delivered it today!"

"—*what?*"

Miss Uramaki began jittering. Usually, this happened whenever her alcohol consumption rendered her unable to react in any meaningful way anymore, but there wasn't a drop of booze in her system. It was far simpler: worries crept up. Deep, ingrained worries.

"Wh-when? What? Why— what are you thinking, kiddo?"

"I told you! Become my teacher! ... Please!"

"As in— permanent?"

"Yu-huh!"

"Are you *insane?*"

"Maybe!"

A small pause. The ivory-haired lady's equally ivory eyes were stuck in a state of shock. Her head was traipsing back and forth over a question that she didn't have to face for a long time.

"Why *me*, Shimon?"

"Well," the near-adult began without missing a beat, "because you're the best person to ask! You're cool and know so much, and you've already taught me before: I think you'd make a really great teacher!"

"I'm— I'm," flattered, is what Uramaki wanted to say, but the abyss of her mind kept reeling her back into doubt. "I'm retired, Shimon. I *can't teach you.*"

"Then stop being retired!" Shimon said with a smile.

"You make it sound so easy."

"Isn't it?"

Wasn't it? The idea of returning to Juniper's forefront hadn't crossed the thirty-something woman's mind in a long time. This request came so suddenly, she knew no other answer but to shoot the eager boy down at first. But wasn't it? Why couldn't she just return into action? Ironically enough, Miss Uramaki seriously searched for a reason. Something solid that would render it impossible for her to teach Shimon. Her jittering increased as her mind failed to find something.

"Shimon..."

There was one reason. Disbelief. The ever so lingering idea that she wouldn't amount to anything positive in her life anymore. That she existed to create chaos and destruction. That it was better to sit inside for the rest of her life and wither away before she'd hurt anyone else. Of course, articulating this was impossible. It'd reveal too much of what she was afraid to have Shimon know.

"Please give it a try, Miss Uramaki! I really believe you would be perfect!"

The boy's bright encouragement made things easier and harder for her at the same time. For the first time in years, Zonya Uramaki was properly terrified. And yet, she felt a different, just as rare emotion as well. It was hard to pin down, but it may have been something akin to determination. The last time this occurred was at the beginning of February.

"Y-you know this would be—"

"Hard, hell to endure, life-changing, yeah, sure. I've also made my fair share of experiences this month, so believe me when I say I'm ready and I want this!"

Another silence. All defensive options were exhausted. There was nothing holding her back but the crushing tides of self-doubt. However, it felt a bit easier to endure than usual, Zonya noted. She took a deep inhale, then an even longer exhale. Then one more, and then another one. Finally, a gulp. Her eyes focused on the boy's glimmering jade.

"I'll ask you once more—"

"Yes, I am!"

"*Bumpkin,*" she articulated with gravity. "These aren't games anymore. Let me talk when I talk. Don't answer this immediately, all whimsical and happy. Really think about this for once. *Are you certain?*"

Shimon bit back his wish to shout out a 'yes' immediately and wandered his mind. His teacher didn't always credit him with the respect he deserved - this wasn't a decision on a whim. He thought about this long and hard, even before he learned he could quit Jin in the first place. He saw the potential dangers, he felt them multiple times on his body already. He accepted them all. Just like he always did. There wasn't an inkling of 'no' remaining in his mind.

"I'm certain."

Silence once more. The clock of the apartment kept ticking, though for both inhabitants, it seemed slower than normal. Moiren's cool springtime wind made barely audible noises through the open window. Zonya hoped that it would distract the boy enough to ignore her and her decision, but that was wishful thinking at best. She glanced at the bleached sake bottle in her glass cabinet for a second, only to look back again. Another needed breath. It was time to speak.

"Returning into Juniper's system will take at least a bit of time to realize, so I'd say that we can start in about two days, the 29th. In the morning, like we used to. Agreed?"

"Yes!" Shimon shot out with far more vigor than he intended to. The three meters between teacher and student couldn't hope to stop him from falling into her arms for a deep hug.

"Thank you so much, Miss Uramaki!" he sang. And while the lady reciprocated the hug, her hard demeanor didn't shift, leading her to push the boy away after three seconds.

"I'm your teacher, not your mum. I won't be any less harsh than I need to be."

"Didn't expect anything else," Shimon grinned.

*A) the style of training. B) a perceived lack in progress. C)... what's C)? What could possibly serve as another reason? I always proved to be resourceful. He made substantial progress since we first met. The methods were harsh, but necessary. And I saved him from certain death at the very least twice. He should revere me as a god. He should be so attached to me that he'd never stop clinging. Everything speaks against this decision. Why? What's C)? What's the reason he withdrew?*

If anyone were to enter Jin's dormitory, they'd be met with a pitch black front of aura, far darker than the tyrian purple he was known for. He didn't consciously exert it, it was merely a byproduct of his attempt to rationalize the events of just eight hours ago. An emotion broke out and transformed his aura, one that Jin hadn't encountered in a long time. It was located somewhere between irritation and bitterness.

When his wooden door gave off four rhythmic knocks, all seeped back into his body.

"Who?" Jin asked in a vexing tone.

"Dion," the voice on the other side replied in fluent Eulanima. And this immediately caught the 30-year old's attention. "Enter," he said, careful not to show how much this name took him aback, and the door opened wide in the same moment, seemingly on its own. Another gaze later, Dion's lemon eyes connected with Jin's black irides. The bare 18-year old stood tall, decisively.

"That was one hell of an aura."

"You noticed?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if everyone in June's did."

Snark was something Jin despised, mostly because he saw himself as the only one allowed to lay it down. His look became one of annoyance, but that didn't phase Dion in the least.

"What do you want?"

"Shimon left you today, didn't he?"

A sentence that cut deep. The High-Rank forgot what a piercing effect words could have. Where it hit, black oozed out again.

"Ah. So that's where that aura came from."

That was when Jin's restraint ran out. His next words were filled with clear animosity.

"Why have you come, boy? To *mock me*? If so, it will take me less than five seconds to rip you apart."

"No, nonono. Nothing of the sort," the boy with ashen hair replied remarkably aloof. At this point in his life, death was merely another prospect of the future. And right now, he was still breathing. That was sufficient to keep him calm as a monk.

"I want to train under you."

Several seconds passed in which Jin's gaze shifted. From an irritated flame to the wholly neutral stagger he already carried once that day, then to an introspection. His look wandered from Dion's eyes to a random point in the room. Jin saw nothing; he thought. He analyzed and assessed. And right when Dion felt that he needed to repeat what he said,

"Okay."

he was met with a reply. Jin's synthetic cheek stretched to serve a small smile, which actually threw Dion off a little.

"Uh, o-okay? So when do we begin?"

"In two days, in front of the entry hall, 7AM. Don't be late."

"What? Shimon told me it was 8—"

"Don't be late, rook," was the last thing Jin sizzled before his door closed, again seemingly on its own. The tense silence subsided, making place for Juniper's regular silence. Dion was stunned for a few seconds until deciding to move his feet to the exit again. '*Rook. Bleggh. So it's official now?*' he asked himself, surprised at how swiftly everything happened.

On the other side, Jin's brain was stimulated. It felt exactly what it craved to feel. Delight.

*'How do I put this? It's not something like a second chance. It's more like... another shot at an experiment.'*