

34.0 - PRELUDE

Sundown over the Himalayas.

Grassy plains, peach-colored skies, the odd pine erupting from the soil - further away, cold pyramids reaching the almost pink clouds above.

On the 29th of July, two stars sought to illuminate their skies.

"You don't seem nervous at all."

"Oh, no, I totally am. Don't get me wrong, I just got better at calming myself"

"Huh! I still struggle with that. But I heard that chewing on something helps, so good on you!"

The older figure took another bite off his cereal bar, mincing it at a pace that was neither slow nor fast. Indecisive was the keyword.

"Yeah, I heard that too. Helps my stomach... even though it's virtually edible cardboard. *Blegh*," he groaned.

"I was just gonna say! Unusual to see you eat something like that," the younger figure grinned knowingly. "Just like your coat. Took some inspiration from me, *hmm?*"

"You wish, dude. I rock one with *far* more style than you," the figure clad in a dark grey coat snarked, to which the younger drew a long face. "It's not just for show though. See how it's revving up? It's excited. Gotta hide it to stay at an advantage," the older one added, his right arm sparking the occasional tangerine flame.

"The other one never makes such problems, right?"

"... Well. It can be *worse*, honestly. Haha. So Sennin's coat comes in handy for both."

A name that struck the younger figure. "—Oh, I didn't know it was his," he fumbled into words.

"I feel like he's with me when I wear it. But recently, I tried... separating myself from the thought. Being my own person. Unhinged, independent, yadda yadda. Today's a special occasion though, and I could really use him."

The younger one gulped down his secret thoughts. "Y-yeah. Big day. You better come back as a Mid-Rank!"

To that, the older one threw a thumbs-up, taking another slim bite off his snack. But as he set sight toward the horizon, an idea arrived.

"You'll go back to train now, right?"

"Yup!"

"Know what would be fun?"

"Uh... Enlighten me?"

"A race."

"A *race?* —How?"

"Well, today could be a big day for you too! If you're quick, you could finish the rest of your regiment. So we could see who's back here first, me from the mission or you from the training."

"Dion, that... sounds insane," the marine-haired adult uttered. "You want to *race* an important mission?"

"We both gotta be fast anyways, right? It'd add another layer of motivation, don't you think, Shimon?"

A small silence. "Uhm... maybe? I *guess?* ... Maybe as an unofficial race? Like, no pressure or anything? Just for fun?"

Dion smirked. His face looked more sharp, more mature than some time ago. His grey hair remained unchanged. "Sure, that's what I meant, just for fun. The first one that returns here, uh, sticks a tree branch into the ground. A big one, so it's obvious."

Shimon, too, smirked. His marine hair was ruffly as usual but longer, partly reaching down to his shoulders. Ironically, he himself was lacking his cloak. "Alright. Alright! Wanna countdown?"

A quick nod. Dion turned toward his destination once more. Shimon followed suit, turning the exact opposite, and began counting.

"Three, two, one—"

The wind flashed with energy.

"Let's go!" both shouted.

No second later, they blitzed off.