

And the clock ticked. And March turned to April, and April turned to May. And just as the June sun filled the Himalayan peaks with warmth, clearing the white for more green and lush landscapes, a forgotten promise was to be fulfilled.

At the time, the promisee was still drifting away. The past two months exhausted body and mind greatly. However, he found that he could dive far deeper in return. Where the blue water became dark posed his limit no longer. In fact, the dark took on a new meaning. It wasn't as suffocating as he imagined it to be; it even seemed to twinkle. An innumerable amount of tiny lights in every direction, just barely visible. Was this still projection or just a dream? Shimon wasn't sure. This wasn't the first time he asked himself this question. These days, reality and metaphysics regularly fused. This helped training, but also confused him at times. On the other hand, it was soothing. Gliding through the monochrome depths of his soul felt serene, and he didn't mind staying a little—

*"Happy birthday, kiddo!"*

Shimon was ripped out of his sleep and nearly jumped to the ceiling. When he landed on the emerald sofa again, he frantically checked his surroundings, adjusting to real sunlight.

"Miss— Miss Uramaki? Is that you?"

"Uhm, duh? You're still at my place. Happy birthday!"

"Birthday?" Shimon asked with sand-riddled eyes.

"Oh. Crap. Isn't that what you meant with six-six? The sixth of June?"

*"It's my birthday today?"* the boy yelled in shock, to which his teacher exhaled a sigh of relief.

"Yup! Typical bumpkin. Today's the day!" she said before blowing into a party horn that gave off a silly toot. Once more, she settled for her black tanktop while her pupil stuck with his sapphire one, using his cloak as a blanket. "Yo, Shimon, look at my hands."

As he perceived his surroundings again - the same living room he was so used to - he noticed that his teacher held a square, brown block. A burning one, at that. Eighteen slim sticks on top carried a little light each.

*"Whoa!"* Shimon said, unsure how to react. His last proper birthday celebration had been half his life ago.

"Bitter lemon cake. I know you're into weird food but I didn't wanna just make burnt crisps, so I tried, uh, *something*. I'm not the best pastry chef though, so it turned a little shit—"

"This is so cool! Thank you!" he grinned ear to ear. "Can I eat it?"

"All of it. *I'm* not touching that. *I* got myself some ice cream, since you don't like any. But maybe you should kill the flames first," Zonya winked.

"Okay! Sounds fun!"

"Now you know why people celebrate birthdays," she added. "Wait, actually use Stream! See if you can hit them all!"

"O-okay! Yeah!"

Shimon quickly invoked Unlock and readied his palm. But as Zonya gazed around her flammable apartment, she had a change of mind.

"—Wait, *actually* this feels like impending disaster. Just, uh, just blow them out with your lungs, please."

Slight disappointment, even if the boy knew how correct his teacher's call was. So he loaded his chest with as much air as he could gather and released a tiny tornado from his lips. Contrary to her expectations, Zonya witnessed all flames expunge.

"Hey, not bad! Look at you, Mister 'of the Stars'! You're an adult now! Happy eighteenth!"

She was right. He paid it no mind for a long time, but Shimon of the Stars had lived long enough to become an adult. This epiphany ignited two emotions: excitement and sudden dread.

"What should I change to be like, now?" he said in worry. "Will— will I become like Jin or Sennin?"

"Hahaha! Nothing's changed, kiddo. You're a kid at heart. You don't have to change at all," Zonya said softly. "But I *would* like it if you're a bit more careful."

"Yeah, I'm still working on that," the fresh adult grinned. "No, seriously! That's the reason I'm training so hard! I don't want to make you worry so much again!"

"Cute. If you say it five more times, I might believe you," his teacher smiled. "Cake time now! I'd ask if you wanted some whipped cream, but I already know the answer."

"This is good," Shimon uttered in surprise. "This is actually really good. It's got so much flavor, but it's still... so *strong!* I love it!"

"See? You should trust my skills!" his teacher claimed, hiding how much this surprised her as well. What she couldn't guess was that the word 'trust' triggered something that lingered in her pupil's mind for a while.

"Miss Uramaki?"

"Mmm?" the woman looked up from her frozen treat.

"I think I would trust you more if you told me what's bothering you."

"Mmm," Zonya gulped. "Bothering me?"

"Like with the bell. Back in the restaurant."

Hiding the evidence wasn't possible. The woman had to tell the truth someday. The timing was just bad.

"Okay, but— right now?"

"Why not?"

*'I'm not prepared,'* she wanted to say but forced herself not to. She didn't want to look weak as a teacher. So she remained silent.

*'Come on, Zonya. It's his birthday. He's an adult now. You should ease his mind,'* she eventually concluded. Regardless of how much effort it took.

"I was a Sentinel."

And Shimon felt a sting to his left eyeball, of all places.

"Y-you? A *Sentinel?*"

"Not exactly the kind you know. Not like your girlfriend," she continued, "back when they were more... *liberally* used by Juniper."

"What does that mean?"

"Officially, the Sentinels are a splinter group from June's. They make their own decisions but work for the school and its money. Wasn't always like that," the 32-year old mused. "Did you read any of Juniper's books?"

"No," Shimon admitted with a sigh.

"Big surprise. The Sentinels used to be a war force."

"You fought in war?" the boy shot up.

"Me and Jin."

Quiet shock. Not just over the revelation, but also Jin and Zonya's relation.

"And hundreds of other students as well. Basically most High-Ranks and some Mid-Ranks. Hella profitable, after all."

"Who did you fight?"

"Various people. Not too—" she interrupted to release some pressure, "—important."

"And why the bell, then?"

Zonya hoped her pupil would forget about his starting question.

"Be-because of the sound. The way it rings reminds me of the time then," she improvised.

"Huh. Makes sense," Shimon added earnestly. He then focused back on his cake, and dug in. This served to hide how conflicted he really felt.

*'I'm getting trained by a Sentinel? Am I actually turning into Sennin? What about Charna? Is she becoming a soldier?'* suddenly bombarded his mind. Munching kept at least his body busy. But a valuable impression remained: his teacher's honesty.

"Thanks for telling, Miss Uramaki," he stopped to say.

"Thanks for listening, Shimon. You're right. It's important to mention stuff like that," she smiled. "Yo.

Wanna snatch a few slices to-go and head into the wild?"

"Yeah! First Envelop or Stream?"

"None! Kiddo, it's your birthday! Let's just take a stroll. And don't forget your phone, people are already blowing it up."

"My phone blew up?" Shimon shouted. "Why?"

"No— no, no, not like that. Check for yourself," Zonya simmered him down. She instinctively gazed at her leather jacket, but failed to raise from her seat. This was new to her. At this point, Shimon noticed how unusually sweaty and exhausted she looked. At the same time, how she looked 'mightier' - he couldn't find a better word.

"Actually, why don't you go ahead without me? I think I need a sec," Zonya told her pupil.

"Uhm, sure!"

*'Is baking that intense?'*

—

Six days of the week, Shimon trained mind and matter. From sunrise until sundown, channeling aura was all he thought about. It's all he allowed himself to think about - his mind also had a darker side that he suppressed by any means. He disliked facing it. But at the very least today seemed like a bright day, and his brother's bright voice accompanied the summer sun perfectly.

"I mean, *technically*, you're twelve."

"I'm eighteen! Just— time is weird!" Shimon argued in Pangaeen. The language never stopped being arduous, but his skills improved.

"I'm kidding bro, I'm kidding! Hahaha." *'It still makes no sense though,'* Zeke pondered behind the phone. "So! Are you gonna get *wasted* tonight?"

"Waist-ed?"

"Well, go out and drink, I mean! But don't start with vodka! Start with something small like beer, trust me!"

"I never drink al-coe-hol before—" he suddenly stopped, "—wait, how do you know?"

Zeke paused to think. Even eight thousand kilometers away, he was able to get busted.

"I-I mean - I have tried *some* in the past."

"Zeke! You are not sixteen yet!"

"Yeah, but I'm *fifteen*," the once-older one retaliated in shame.

"You are fourteen, Zeke."

"Oh. Right. Uhm, you sort of forgot my birthday."

Shimon felt something like a dagger hit his chest. He thought of what he was doing one month ago and couldn't tell. All he focused on was to train.

*'I did?'*

"Yep! The fourth. Hey, don't sweat it!" Zeke said sincerely. "Shit happens. Let's just say we're even now, okay?" he grinned behind the phone.

A fair deal. "Okay," Shimon sighed. "But it is still not good!"

"A lot of things aren't good. I won't overdo it! I'm not an idiot. Just - have fun tonight! You're an adult now, big bro!"

There was that word again.

*'I still feel like a child, though.'*

"Yeah! Thank you, little bro," Shimon said. "But keep safe!"

"That's my line," Zeke laughed. "You too! Love you! Bye!"

And before the older one could say the same, the call was ended.

*'That felt nice. His voice sounded less heavy,'* Shimon noted. He couldn't tell how much worry still lingered on Zeke's mind. One notification kept blinking up his block phone. Or rather four, disguised behind one.

And as the boy pressed green to access them,

"Hey! Hi! Happy birthday, Shimon!"

Charna's voice rang through his speaker.

"—Oh! Hi! Tha—"

"I'm sorry that I can't talk to you normally— no, seriously, I'm super sorry! Today's just really bad - I-I'm busy all day and I don't know if I'll get a break to—"

Shimon pressed red. The woman's voice paused. He pressed green again.

"—say hello in a call, since I'm patrolling outside of Cherize the whole day with Kari, a-and—"

Another button press, another pause.

*'That's not a call. It's like... she already said this? Like a cassette? I didn't know phones could do that!'*

After gazing at the length of each voice mail, a fair four minutes each, Shimon decided that he'd answer them later. Somehow. For now, another oddity occupied his attention. According to his chat, Dion was still 'writing'.

*'It said that before Zeke called! Is he trying to write me a cake?'*

*'I just firmly— no, uh, solemnly... seriously? Seriously. I just seriously believe that the training... that I will benefit from the training. Benefit? Really? Am I a banker? That I will... profit from the training. No. Profit's not any better. That the training is going to... help me if I... stay here today? Oh my god,'* Dion groaned in agony.

"Are you *seriously* still writing?" Jin threw in.

"Damn right. It's the least I should do."

"It's been half an hour."

"An important half an hour!"

"Wasted time for wasted words. Quite honestly, do you expect him to even read all of that?"

"And what do *you* know about that?" Dion called out. It was either an angry response like that or admitting that Jin was right. Number two was off the table.

"I'm not telling you because I want to anger you. I'm telling you because you literally waste time," the teacher spoke softly. "Time for the important training you're telling him about."

Unintentionally, the young adult found that he agreed with Jin's criticism. But before he could retort,

"Let me make you a different offer."

his teacher spoke up once more.

"Go ahead and train right now. Get into it. Then, take the evening off and spend it with the fledgling."

Silence. Dion's brain was rattling down scenarios. None showed what he wanted to know.

"And what would *you* gain from that?"

*'Offer, not deal. Am I not permitted to act friendly once in a while?'*

"No. Not since you forbade me to do that," the pupil responded, still skeptic.

"Fine. Take it or leave it, it's the same for me."

And silence once more. The tension wasn't quite as dense as the first few days, but thick nonetheless.

"And you won't spy on us? Or some other weird bullshit?"

"And what would I gain from *that*?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why you did it before."

"Because I cared about my pupil's life," Jin said. Despite the kind words, his voice carried no warmth. "I know now that that was a mistake."

*'So melodramatic. Like a baby,'* Dion sighed. Another few seconds passed before he talked again.

"Okay. I'll take the offer. Thank—"

"The rule still stands for you. No sympathies."

"Why do you hate being nice so much?"

"Efficacy is hindered by empathy," Jin shot out. "Always."

"Now *that's* pessimistic," Dion grimaced. He then rose from his ice pedestal, only to throw Flux's arm forward. By spreading his fingers like wings, he invoked Scatter.

"What's my best?"

"Three-hundred and sixty-one meters. In other words, just under two petal rounds."

"Oh, right. Still kind of embarrassing that I couldn't round it to two."

Suddenly, Flux started producing raindrops from its arm. A second later, it dripped water that fell to the glacial ground.

"You're joking, kid. More."

"As expected."

The rain increased, to a pace where one could mistake Flux for an actual tiny raincloud. "How about that?" Dion said with obvious strain.

"Acceptable. Well then, start marching, soldier!"

Without another response, Dion began walking into one of the five dark gates. As he did, Jin reminisced to the first time his pupil attempted this challenge, just over two months ago. He remembered the number 'thirty-one' as his score, and how he dropped down to the floor just from that.

*'Is this still the same kid that needed bottle and lighter?'*

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"But is-still really funny. Thought you'd send me a *wall* of text, hehe."

"*Nah*. As if you'd ever read that," Dion laughed in shame. "*Aaaalso*, I can't miss your birthday, bro!"

With a grateful smile, Shimon and his friend clinked their beer bottles together, taking a sip each. Going by their bar table, it was their second one already - especially Shimon found the beverage to taste 'refreshing'. It didn't take much for that to change to 'it makes me swirly'.

"Ah! When'sh-your birthday, actually?"

"Oh, uh. I don't really know," Dion nonchalantly explained, "so I basically just celebrate at New Year's. The Nepalese firework is *sick!* Sennin and me always went down the valley for them."

A sharp bolt of lightning electrified Shimon's body top to bottom.

"Ah shit, I'm sorry Shimon. I know it's tough without Zeke. I try to not bring up Sennin too much."

"It's-it's okay," the marine one answered, equal amounts shook by alcohol and the mention. He couldn't muster another word right now. Shimon started coming to terms with the temporary nature of their friendship - once the secret was out, it was obviously over. Friends on borrowed time. But despite his acceptance, facing the facts always proved difficult. Though maybe it wasn't the raw facts but rather Dion's lost expression whenever he talked about his brother. Another sip and beer number two was emptied. Then, shakeup.

"Think y'all can stomach a third one?" Miss Uramaki hollered as she exited the women's bathroom. This woke both boys from their semi-drunken trance.

"Th-thank you very much, Miss Uramaki!" Dion said and bowed. The immense respect he expressed for a legend of Juniper, in his words, was more than awkward.

"Damn kid, calm down. I'm a bag of flesh and bones like you. You're worse than the bumpkin."

"Sorry!"

"Speaking of whom," Zonya turned to Shimon, "what'cha say kiddo? Another round for the birthday boy?"

With more enthusiasm, he gazed at the bottles hanging on the ceiling from their neck.

"Actually, I wanna try these!"

"Liquor? What, beer's not strong enough?"

"They smell sweet!" Shimon grinned. "Especially that one!" he added as he pointed at a flask of herbal schnapps.

*'They're closed! How does he even smell them?'* Uramaki pondered. *'Is this a good idea? It's his eighteenth, for sure, but as an amateur—'*

Suddenly, a purple flash zoomed through her mind. Zonya halted for a second. She knew exactly what this meant.

*'Really? Again? Today, of all days? What an asshole... none of the boys seem to have noticed, though. I guess I'll play mama bear.'*

"Okay bumpkin, sure. Why not celebrate a bit! But let's drink outside, it's *sweltering* in this cramped bar," she said just quiet enough to not offend the barmaid. Zonya improvised.

"Cheers, everyone!" the dark-skinned lady said without a glass of her own. As she did, both boys zipped the glasses to their lips and emptied the contents.

"This is awesome!" Shimon said as he enjoyed the herbal sweetness dance on his tongue. "Whoa-ho, this *really* makes me swirly though," he added with a giggle. On the other hand, Dion was wrestling with the beverage. He couldn't quite down all, so he physically grappled the barrel-table to swallow the rest. The lingering scent nearly made him hurl. Eventually though, he managed to free himself of his taste buds' herbal curse. "Disgusting," he spoke, notably drained.

"Beautiful, my children. You may thank me tomorrow morning," the woman laughed. This was more of a farce than anything, though.

*'He's still at it. This must be a circus for a voyeur like him. Alright, I'm done with this shit,'* Zonya decided as she looked toward the dark distance.

It took her ivory gaze five hundred meters to collide with Jin's.

*'Shit!'* the 30-year old thought as he immediately skipped from his rooftop, far away from Moiren's amber streets. Even when he felt no aura at all anymore, alone in the darkness of 11PM, he kept running. After a minute of that, the shadow of the night finally let loose what occupied his heart.

*'The fledgling is with her. No doubt. How the hell did this happen? Was she the one that taught him Unlock? Just how long has this been going on?'*

Jin ground his teeth. He clenched his fingernails hard enough for his dead skin to rip open. His aura grew black.

*'And she saw me. That's it for recon. Goddammit! You were a non-option! You were practically dead! Are you serious, Zonya?'*

The cluster of emotion that he felt couldn't just be described with a single word. Anger and frustration were naturally prominent, but more complex feelings arose too. Betrayal. Confusion. A lot of vitriol.

However, in the midst of it all, there was an inkling of relief.

*'You didn't drink anything.'*