

The Thursday afternoon after school let out, Daniel is gathering his things in his bag before heading home. The textbooks are so thick, a swiss army knife couldn't even make a dent in them. The rest of the stuff is just as worthless. A bunch of papers filled with pointless assignments, useless notes, and unanswered questions. He questions all the time whether or not he actually needs this stuff or teachers just like to pile stuff on kids for no reason.

Daniel slams his locker door closed before he hears a voice behind him.

"Hey, Dan."

It's Eliza's voice. He turns around and sees her fiddling with a strap on her bookbag. Her eyes are avoiding him and she seems nervous about something. She has never called him Dan before.

"You need something?"

"I was wondering," She begins, her fingers playing with the zipper pull. Her face looks flushed, as if she was running a fever. "There's actually this place I wanted to go to for a while, and I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come with."

Daniel can feel his insides distorting like a surrealist painting. He isn't sure if his heart is pumping blood or ice water.

"I-I'd love to." The words are coming out before Daniel has any control over them. It was like his mouth was moving on its own. But it doesn't matter. This is an opportunity and he knows it. Even though Daniel admitted to himself things are moving a little quickly considering he just met this girl two days ago. But who cares? This girl wants to hang out with him! Willingly!

The two of them leave the school and walk to the courtyard. Walking through the maze of students, Daniel instinctively covers his arms, feeling his skin turn to bubble wrap. He glances over to his left and sees an old man creeping outside of the school gate. He has a black trench

coat and old tattered clothes underneath, like ragged swiss cheese. His hands are more veins than skin, and his nails rotted like chipped wood. Thinning white hair plasters his face. The thinning white hair and beard makes him look almost friendly. As friendly as a creep can be, anyway.

Daniel's goosebumps fade away as he continues to glare at the man. Even though he's potentially a school threat, Daniel doesn't feel compelled to report him or to scream or anything. The man has an aura around him. An aura that calms him, one that makes him reflect on his life up to this point.

"Weirdo," Daniel shudders, snapping back to reality. "Should we get going, Eliza?"

He looks over and sees that Eliza is staring at the man too, also covering her goosebump-riddled arms. Whatever Daniel just sensed, she sensed it too.

"Huh?" Eliza spits. "Did you say something?"

"Where did you want to take me?"

"Right." She nods. Her eyes are still darting about a bit, unnerved by the mysterious old man outside of the school. Daniel doesn't say anything else about it, since he also didn't want to think about it.

Eliza leads him downtown at an alleyway. The alley runs between a coffee shop and a metalworks plant. It is dirty, dingy, and smells like mold and wet dog.

"Um, this is just an alleyway." He comments, surveying the environment.

"It's just a little farther in the alley." She sings, a little too happy about the area they're in.

"Are you sure? Cuz the only thing interesting here is that dead cat over there."

"Why is that the thing you focus on?"

"I just think it's kinda funny how cats stretch out when they die. Especially if their fur sticks out as well."

Eliza points past Daniel to the dead end. “Try looking over there.”

“If this is how I get a girlfriend,” Daniel mutters. He creeps toward the dead end, Eliza keeping a distance behind him. Daniel scans the whole wall, from every broken cobweb to the individual grain of dirt coasting down from the mortar cracks. “Where is it?”

“Keep looking.” Eliza sneers. She takes one small step, a small splash rippling from a rain puddle. Hidden behind her back is her right hand. A cloud of frost envelops her hand. The frost hardens and forms into a crystal mallet. Despite the sheer cold of the ice hammer, Eliza’s fingers remain warm and nimble.

“There’s nothing he—” are the last words that escape from Daniel’s mouth before a loud THUD rings out in the dark alley. The sound of Eliza’s ice hammer striking the back of Daniel’s head. His legs crumple as he collapses on his back, his tie fluttering in the air. His eyes are shut tight. His mouth is ajar and drool seeps from his lips. The tie from his uniform drifts in a puddle beside him, its end dipping in and out of the water.

Eliza smirks as she lets go of the ice hammer, which shatters itself into snow flurries. She approaches his limp body and hovers a hand over his chest.

“Wait a minute,” she says suspiciously. “I can’t sense it from him anymore.”

She immediately goes for his neck and places two fingers on it. A pulse.

“Thank the Gods,” She sighed with relief. “I can’t get a read on this guy. Every time I think I nailed down his aura, it’s completely different the next day. I know he has one.”

Eliza stands up. She knows that whatever plan she has is off the table. For now, anyway. Stuffing her hands in her uniform blazer pockets, she strolls out of the alleyway before any bystanders notice the unconscious body of the boy she just assaulted.