

Friday morning's sky is painted all shades of gray in the sky as moist rainwater stinks up the air surrounding the schoolyard. Eliza looks up at the clouds pensively, listening to the faint sounds of thunder from above.

"Morning!" A familiar male voice calls out to her. Eliza turns around and sees Daniel beaming at her. She jumps instinctively.

"You?!" She shrieks.

"Of course it's me. We go to the same school, don't we?"

"It's—" Eliza begins to explain herself, but decides against it. "Nevermind."

Daniel looks up at the cloudy sky. "They said it's gonna rain like hell this afternoon. I forgot my umbrella at home, so I hope it can hold until we get home."

"Yeah." Eliza replies half-heartedly, looking over to the gate. The old man stalking the school is not there today. He normally was. Daniel cocks his head to one side.

"Eliza, you okay?" He asks. Eliza snaps out of her stupor.

"I'm fine." She tries to sound okay, but her voice wavers at the end.

"The rain probably won't be THAT bad." Daniel shrugs.

"It's not that. It's just... I don't have a good feeling about this."

"You're not getting sick, are you?"

Eliza sighs. "Maybe." The two enter the school together with the lingering dream and impending rain looming over them.

It's the final class before lunchtime. Daniel usually has biology in this block. Not just any biology. He has the college-level one. Why make 14-year-olds learn this stuff is beyond him. He usually copes with his biology class by going to the bathroom. Daniel only ever goes when he

actually needs to use the bathroom. A few years ago, apparently some students were caught smoking and drinking alcohol on campus. Ever since then, the teachers have been cracking down hard on the students. The hallway monitors even make it a habit to randomly barge into every bathroom in the hopes of catching ne'er-do-wells in the act. One time, Daniel went into the bathroom to check his hair and the hallway monitor accused him of truancy. He got three hours of after-school detention for that, so now he plays it safe.

Daniel zips up his pants and walks over to the bathroom sinks. It started pouring at the beginning of class and now the torrential rain is slamming down against the small rectangular windows near the ceiling. He can barely hear anything over the roaring storm outside. The fluorescent lights flicker as if they were about to die out at any moment. He washes his hands in a rhythmic motion, making sure to lather every square inch of his hands with soap and water. Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel swears he could see a thin shadow slice through what little light shines through the cloudy windows.

CRASH!

A deafening crash violates his eardrum. Tiny shards of glass fly from the shattered window and rocket towards Daniel's body. A few of the shards slash through his cheek, small squirts of blood shooting from the open wounds. Daniel flies toward the ground in case of another impact. The bathroom lights shut off for good and the pouring rain seeps inside of the school from the busted open window. He musters up whatever energy he could to turn his body to look at what just happened. Green, thorny vines wiggle and squirm through the window. One vine snakes its way across the floor and stops right in front of Daniel. A bud blooms from one of the thorns. Suddenly, a burst of violet mist erupts from the bud, obscuring his vision. Instinctively holding his breath, he kicks the budding vine. Right as his foot is about to make

contact, the vine contorts and slips away from him. It straightens itself out and swings at the young boy. The spiky vine slices his chest, scratching his uniform in a clean, diagonal line. Daniel launches back and flies through the bathroom door, tumbling into the hallway. Unlike the bathroom which had a little bit of light from the windows, the hallway is pitch black. The lights are shut off and in every crevice of the school are the same vines. They twist and curl along the floors, the ceilings, and the walls. They snake across the floor, the ceiling, and the walls, pulsating as if they were alive.

A pair of familiar uniform shoes stands in front of Daniel. He looks up and sees Eliza, surveying her surroundings in a panic. She stops upon seeing Daniel lie pathetically on the ground.

“Daniel! What are you doing out here?!” He scrambles to get back on his feet. Eliza runs over to his side, helping him stand. Her hand is so soft.

“Vine... thing...” He points to the bathroom. “I just wanted to pee and skip bio, but the window broke and a green vine tried to kill me!”

“So it’s gotten the whole school, huh?” She speculates to herself.

“Why is the whole school dark now?”

“The vines most likely broke the generator. A few of the teachers tried calling emergency services, but the lines were dead. The vines also are blocking off all the doors and windows.”

“What do we do?”

“Listen. Go find a place and hide.”

“But shouldn’t you also hide?”

“I’ll explain everything later, but I have to go to the second floor right now. Don’t follow me.” Eliza runs past Daniel, not waiting for a response. She bolts for the stairs.

“Second floor? There's nothing there!” He yells after her. She doesn't stop for him. He sighs and chases her. That's his potential future wife right there. Daniel isn't going to let her get herself killed. The two race up the stairs, avoiding the writhing vines. They occasionally jump to avoid the ones that had grown on the steps.

Eliza reaches the top of the stairs to the second floor. At the other end of the hallway in front of the window. The old man that had been stalking the school for weeks stands there with a confident grin. Daniel stays a few steps away from Eliza, just to make sure she couldn't find out he actually followed her.

“I sensed four stone wielders here,” The old man announces. “I guess The Magician and The Emperor decided to take a day off today. But even one is better than none.”

“What's it to you?”

The old man chuckles. A raspy, scratchy noise, as if his vocal cords were rotting black, splintering off. “I am The Hermit. And I came to retrieve The Diamond of the High Priestess from you.”

“Over my dead body.” Eliza spits back, approaching The Hermit. Small clouds of frost puff every time she takes a step.

“Come now, no need for this to escalate. The Power Stones are too precious of an artifact for mere children like you to be toying with. Give me your Diamond, and I will leave this school with every student mostly unharmed.”

“You want my stone?” She goads. In her palms, she manifests two icicles sharpened into blades. “Then take it.”

“So be it.” The Hermit sneers. Eliza darts through the hallway and towards The Hermit. He sends his vines toward her. Right before they coil around Eliza's body, she shoots shards of

ice at the vines. The vines wilt and die off as the sheer cold penetrates them. She closes the distance between her and The Hermit. He pulls back a vine and swings it at her, but it freezes instantly. The frozen vine falls apart into tiny pieces, the thorns breaking off from each other.

“Not bad for a child.” The Hermit remarks. Vines grow and regenerate from where the old man is standing. Eliza uses a cloud of frost to launch herself up in the air. While she coasts in the air, she brings her hands together and a crystal ball forms in a mist. Concentrating, she moves her hands back and prepares to throw the ice sphere at The Hermit. Eliza yelps suddenly, loud enough to reach Daniel by the stairs. A vine had sneakily grown itself under Eliza’s frost cloud and latches itself onto her legs, pulling her back down to the waxed tile floor. More vines lining up the corners of the hall launch at Eliza, binding her legs, arms and throat. She coughs violently as the vines choke her, trying to wriggle herself free.

“I’ve fought many Priestesses in my time. All more formidable than you.” The Hermit monologues, getting closer to Eliza. Lightning flashes escape through the tiny slits of the vines outside. Eliza’s face turns crimson as she tries desperately to breathe. The vines are beginning to slice into her skin, punishing any attempt to breathe further. Daniel sees something starting to manifest in front of Eliza’s body. Very faintly, an ethereal white diamond is projecting itself, sheeted in frost. It gradually becomes more opaque. The Hermit takes his veiny hand and hovers it over the mystery diamond.

“The Gem of The World will not elude my grasp much longer.” The Hermit grins. Daniel sinks down into the steps. This old man is apparently the one controlling the weird plant thing, and it is currently strangling Eliza. He has to help her, but he isn't a superhero. What could he do? Daniel looks at his palms, thinking hard. He can't just sit and do nothing. But if he tries

something, the old man would snap his whole body like a twig. If he does nothing, the old man will kill Eliza.

Then an image of The Fool he dreamed about yesterday pops into his head.

Trust your instincts.

What instincts? His only instinct right now should be to run away. Run away and hope to the Gods that there's an escape route for him. But he doesn't feel his legs bolting toward the door. His legs don't even gravitate towards it. In fact, he feels himself walking to the old man. Eliza, still constricted, wrestles control of her neck to look at Daniel. The Hermit looks at him with intrigue.

"Another one?" He says with intrigue.

"Let her go." Daniel drones calmly. He doesn't even recognize his own voice.

"Or what? Are you going to tickle me with those noodle arms of yours? I will break your spine without hesitation, little one."

"I'm not joking."

"Daniel, just run, he's dangerous!" Eliza chokes out, her voice strained.

Daniel doesn't listen to her. He doesn't even look at her. His eyes are glued onto the old man. The Hermit lets out another hoarse laugh, a shower of saliva droplets spraying from his mouth.

"If you insist."

A shower of vines sniff in Daniel's direction. From all four corners of the hallway, they point at him and stiffen. They all shoot out at Daniel like lock-on torpedoes.

"Daniel, move!"

But he doesn't move. He closes his eyes, seeing the cliff from yesterday's dream. Dead silent in his mind. The school, the destruction, the vines all disappear. He can only see the gentle breeze and hear the waves crash against the cape.

Eliza notices a faint glow around Daniel's body. A baby blue hue radiating his body. The light then forms into a blue, holographic chainsaw. Without opening his eyes, he clutches onto the handle. Instinctively, his free hand latches onto the starting cord. He pulls. The vibration of the chainsaw massages his hands, and the blade quickly picks up traction, rotating so fast that the sharp edges fade into a smooth surface. His eyes open. He doesn't say a word.

With the same amount of energy as someone opening the fridge to grab a drink, he swings the chainsaw. It cuts through the incoming vines easily, slicing the thorns into miniscule bits. Eliza's eyes widen as she witnesses Daniel effortlessly cleave through The Hermit's attack. The Hermit smiles deviously, the light blue hue of the chainsaw reflecting onto his wrinkly face.

"The Fool has returned." He slithers. The vines binding Eliza release. She clutches her throat, gasping for air. She coughs and hacks as she tries to breathe normally again.

Daniel runs towards The Hermit with the holographic chainsaw in his possession. The Hermit launches more vines at him. Daniel mows them down in a clean, effortless motion.

"Impressive. He seems to have grasped the power well enough," The Hermit speculates. "But his form is that of an amateur!" A few more vines latch themselves onto Daniel's chainsaw and harden, snapping the projection into pieces. Daniel staggers as he stares at the holographic crystals floating down to the ground.

Daniel doesn't sweat. Not even a strand of eyebrow hair twitches. The falling fragments float back up and form into a claymore. For a holograph-like weapon, it has more weight to it

than it should. He holds the sword tightly in both hands. The Hermit summons more vines to pierce Daniel, but the Fool slices through the new batch of vines.

The Hermit staggers. “Impossible! How did he tame such an unruly and volatile power? And at this age too...”

Daniel quickly closes the distance between himself and The Hermit. The Hermit envelopes himself in vines to leap back from the boy. Eventually the vines barricading the windows dissipate and The Hermit leaps out of the giant window at the end of the hallway. The old man faded away into the misty downpour outside. Daniel feels as if his whole body had turned to jelly. With his legs barely standing, he limps over to Eliza on the floor and kneels near her. She coughs twice.

“You... saved me,” She wheezes.

“Of course I did. We never got to go on that date, and I wouldn’t forgive myself if my future wife was killed in front of me by an old man with a plant fetish.”

Eliza tries to sit up, but crumples back down and clutches her side. Moving her hand from her torso, bits of blood drip from a small cut. She hisses in pain, wincing at the injury.

“Watch out. Those vines cut you up pretty badly.”

Eliza chuckles weakly. “I never said that was a date.”

“Since I saved your life, can I call it a date?”

Eliza laughs harder, clutching her wound. “You know what? Sure.”

An army of footsteps ring out from the steps behind Eliza and Daniel. Three people stood behind him. Trent and Val are there, assessing the nearby damage.

“See? We didn’t have to do anything!” Trent brags nonchalantly. Val shakes his head in disapproval of Trent’s lackadaisiness.

The third person beside Trent and Val is a tall, elegant black woman. She has a stance of kindness, yet authority to her. She sees Daniel tending to the fallen Eliza. She looks back at the two students behind her.

“Val, Trent. Go with emergency services and help assess possible casualties,” The two nod and run back downstairs. She approaches Daniel. He feels a calming, yet reassuring aura around her. “What is your name, young man?”

“Daniel.” He blurts out.

“Can you tell me what happened here?”

“Some old dude and his tentacle plants came after us. I used my holo-weapons and scared him out of the window.”

The lady raises one eyebrow at his story. “Holo-weapons, you say?”

“Yes, ma’am. All I did was close my eyes, meditated and swung like hell. That's all I remember, ma'am.”

The lady strokes her chin. She steps closer to Daniel and waits there for a moment. “If you don’t mind, why don’t you follow me? I have some more questions for you.”

“Why not here?”

“It’s not for everyone’s ears. Need to know the basis and all that.”

“But what about Eliza?”

“I can carry her back to where we’re going.”

Daniel stares at her for a few moments, wondering whether or not this was a good idea. But this mysterious lady was asking him to come along, and he had questions for her as well. He garners all his energy to stand up and move out of the lady’s way. She scoops up Eliza and

carries her along as she and Daniel descend down the stairs, towards the distant sounds of crying students, pained moans, and the restless shuffle of emergency workers doing their jobs.