

Nani stares at the clock as the seconds tick by slowly. Her leg bounces and she taps her foot vigorously. Her nails are nibbled down to tiny stubs, and many bleeding hangnails are found as a result of the bad habit.

Jordan's eyes are locked on the whiteboard in the front of the classroom. He can hear the teacher, but he really isn't listening. His mind constantly drifts away to the fun he'll have after this terrible class is over, and he'll get to see his friends again.

Mitch cracks his knuckles and darts his eyes between the teacher and the white analog clock he can barely read that sits above the door. As the minutes pass he taps his pencil into different beats.

"Mitchell Hughes, I understand it's Friday, and this is the last class of the day, but I really need you to stop disrupting the class," the teacher demands.

"Yes ma'am," he states in a very disrespectful manner.

"Do not speak to me in that tone of voice young ma-" The long awaited school bell interrupts her nagging. The whole class flies out of the room, chatting and talking about their weekend plans.

Nani sprints through the halls, and out the doors into the cool outdoors, where she sucks in a deep breath of the almost-summer air. She runs to the large rock in the front of the school, feeling the cool breeze across her bare arms and face. Nani climbs atop the rock and stands on her tiptoes, looking for her friends. She sees people staring at her and whispering, so she drops back down into a sitting position, pulling her knees to her chest and trying to cover up the redness in her cheeks.

Jordan walks out the front door of the school and immediately spots Nani sitting at their usual meet-up rock. A smile spreads across his face and he heads directly for her. Once Nani finally spots Jordan she grins and brings her hands up to her mouth to amplify her words.

"DO A FLIP!" she shouts to Jordan. He stops and tosses his backpack as far in front of him as he can. Adrenaline starts pumping through his veins as he prepares to do his weekly backflip. "JORDAN, JORDAN, JORDAN!" Nani chants from her rock. Jordan sucks in a breath and takes a short running start.

Right as his feet leave the ground something hits him with a force so great that it knocks him a few feet away. Jordan rolls several times before coming to a stop. A loud

shriek from Nani can be heard in the distance. Jordan squeezes his eyes shut and holds his side.

Mitch strolls out the doors to the school and looks over at the meeting rock. Instead of finding Nani and Jordan practicing flips and cartwheels as usual, he sees Nani standing over Jordan, who lies in a heap on the ground. Mitch jogs over, not sensing the importance of the situation, and stands next to Nani, shaking his head.

“Did he trip and fall again?” Mitch asks, a teasing tone to his voice. Nani glares up at him, tears brimming in her eyes. It’s now that Mitch becomes worried “Whoa, whoa, whoa! I’m sorry, I take it back!” He says, holding his hands up in surrender. “What happened?”

“Jordan was about to do a flip and those jerks over there pushed him over,” Nani says pointing to a group of guys laughing and high-fiving a few yards away. Mitch clenches his fists and stomps over to the group, ready to fight if he needs to.

Nani tries to help Jordan over to their rock as she keeps an eye on Mitch. At six foot two he towers over the group of boys, but his scrawny stature takes away the majority of his intimidation factor. Nani watches in horror as Mitch connects his fist with one of the boy’s jaw. Nani drops Jordan to the ground and drags Mitch away quickly. The three friends grab their skateboards and ride away from the pack of boys closing in on them. Once the boys are out of sight, Jordan insists they stop. They pull over into the grass so Jordan can rest. He falls to the ground, clutching his side and moaning. Mitch rolls his eyes at Jordan’s weakness.

“Dude, calm down, you aren’t going to die. You just got pushed over,” Mitch says to Jordan. Jordan moans something about a rock and lifts up his shirt. He reveals his side, which has already started bruising badly. There is practically an indent where he landed and a stream of blood coming from a large wound near the bottom of his rib cage. Nani screams at the sight of it and Mitch gasps. Jordan’s eyes begin to close and he moans again.

“Oh my, Jordan, that is a serious wound. Maybe I can be of assistance,” a deep male voice says from behind the group. Mitch and Nani whip their heads around to be face to face with a young, scruffy bearded man. His eyes twinkle with a slight mystery behind them. Mitch and Nani, equally terrified and curious of the man, are unable to

speak. "You must be wondering who I am and how I know your names, Nani and Mitchell." Nani begins to cry in horror, but Mitch can only stare at the man, intrigued. "You can call me Cryaotic."

"What kind of name is Cryaotic?" Mitch asks skeptically.

"Obviously, not a normal one," Cryaotic states. "You see, I am not from here, but I assume you already guessed that. What you have not guessed however is that I am not from Earth." Nani's cries intensify at the new and strange information. She tries to drag Jordan away from the odd man, and escape, but Cryaotic mumbles foreign words and suddenly Jordan's flesh begins to morph under Nani's hands. She drops him to the ground with a squeal. "Your friend's injuries have been healed," Cryaotic says.

Nani lifts Jordan's shirt to see Cryaotic was telling the truth. "How did you do that?" She demands.

"I can do much more to help you all, you just have to trust me," Cryaotic hums, deliberately ignoring Nani's question. Seeing the still terrified expressions on the faces of the group and realizing they don't trust him yet Cryaotic addresses them, "I can help you all. I can make your lives happier and give you more to live for. I can help you to overcome your biggest fears."

"I trust you," Mitch replies. Nani turns to Mitch, shocked. "What? Did you not see what he did to Jordan? This dude is obviously telling the truth," Mitch says, in response to Nani's expression.

"Or," Nani spits, "He is some psychopath wizard who saved Jordan to gain our trust and is now going to murder us with his magic!"

"I guess there is no way to know unless you try it," Cryaotic says with a small smile.

"I don't know Mitch, this guy is creepy as Hell," Jordan says, regaining his full consciousness.

"Fine, you guys don't have to trust him, but I do," Mitch says crossing his arms. Jordan sighs and looks at his side.

"I guess I believe you. I mean you did save my life," Nani groans at the boys' stupidity. "Come on Nani, I don't want to do this without you." Jordan says. Mitch nods in agreement. Nani groans again, but finally gives in.

“Splendid!” Cryaotic says clapping his hands. “Let’s begin!” Nani opens her mouth to protest, but before the words can come out the world around her disappears and is replaced with a strange new scene. Jordan and Mitch find themselves in the same situation, but each teen experiences a different scenario.

Nani’s breaths are fast and shaky and she sweats from every part of her body. She watches as her school begins to form in front of her, and a street appears under her shoes. Her legs begin moving her forward, even though she does not command them to. The doors to the school open on their own. As soon as she steps through the doors, every person in the halls turns to stare at her. One person in the front row slowly lifts her hand to point at Nani, and then the person begins laughing. One by one, every person in the school join in on the chorus of laughs and teasing. An abrupt silence falls over everyone. The crowd parts to make way for a few familiar faces. One after another friends and family walks in, each with a large smile plastered on their faces, and a note in their hands. Nani’s softball coach confronts her first, and hands her a note. It reads: “You will never be good enough.” Next her mother and father hand her a note reading, “You are the disappointment of the family.” Then her old best friend, “I never really liked you. I pitied you.” Mitch, “Do us all a favor.” Nani stares at this note confused, her emotions of anxiety and uselessness and sadness clouding her thoughts, keeping her from thinking clearly. Jordan follows Mitch, but instead of handing her a note, he throws items at her feet. A razor, a bottle of pills, a rope, a gun. Suddenly Mitch’s note becomes clear.

Nani wants to run, she tries to turn and sprint through the doors, but her feet refuse to move. They are planted in place and she has no control over her body. She falls to the floor, curling up into a ball. Tears flood her eyes and she can’t help but consider taking Mitch’s advice, using the supplies Jordan conveniently placed in front of her. Her stomach churns with anxiety and she wrenches onto the floor beside her. The crowd of people in front of her erupts into laughter and cries of disgust.

Nani stays there in the ball, the stench of her vomit filling her nose. She begins to sweat profusely, and takes her sweatshirt off. Underneath she wears her LEGO Ninjago Tee-shirt that she only wears as pajamas, so nobody will know about her secret obsession. She tries to put the sweatshirt on again quickly, but it seems to have disappeared. She turns to the crowd, shielding her shirt from them. Then she realizes that

there could never be a situation worse than the one she is already in. Compared to the past few moments a silly shirt couldn't possibly make this any worse. She lifts her head and makes eye contact with as many people as she can. Then, she slowly begins to stand. She presses her arms to her sides, hands balled into fists, and holds her head high. Everything slowly fades away.

Jordan finds himself in a large box. Suddenly, the tile he is standing on rises a few feet into the air and glass appears on all sides of him, encasing him. Jordan pounds on the glass, calling for help. A door in the box below opens and a strange man walks in, looking directly into Jordan's eyes. A malicious smile spreads across his face and he slowly pulls out a gun. Jordan begins to panic, positive death was seconds away. The man does not shoot, but instead presses his finger to his lips, implying he wants Jordan to stay quiet. He slips the gun into the back of his pants.

The door opens again and a girl walks in. Jordan can't tell who it is at first, but as soon as she turns he can't help but gasp. It is Nani. She doesn't seem to be cautious of the strange man. She hugs him as if they have known each other forever. Jordan beats against the glass and screams, trying to warn Nani to get away. Both Nani and the man look up at Jordan, Nani looking shocked and the man furious. The man shouts something, but Jordan can only see his lips moving. The glass must be soundproof, and that is why he doesn't hear the gun go off. He only watches in horror as Nani collapses to the ground in a pool of blood. Jordan is too shocked to cry.

Too many emotions swirl in his head and he is unable to grasp on to just one of them. Jordan's platform slowly begins to descend. The glass box lowers into the floor and Jordan stands in the middle of the open room. The man stands nose to nose with Jordan. He puts a gun in Jordan's hand and then presses the barrel of his own gun to Jordan's head. The door opens again and Mitch walks into the room, a large smile on his face. The man leans into Jordan's ear and whispers, "shoot him."

Jordan stares at his best male friend. The grin on Mitch's face shows that he has no idea what Jordan is about to do to him. Jordan begins to shake, every part of his body trembles in fear. "I can't," Jordan mumbles under his breath.

"Oh, but you must," The man hisses. Jordan stares ahead at Mitch, unable to move a muscle of his body, let alone murder his best friend. "It's either him, or you

Jordan,” The man says after a while. “And I’m not going to wait much longer.” Tears stream down Jordan’s face as his arm slowly begins to rise. “Pull the trigger...” Jordan opens his mouth to speak, but terrible sobs take the place of his words.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers. Jordan squeezes his eyes shut, and he hears the loud bang of the gun.

Mitch stands in the middle of nowhere, literally. He can see nothing but blackness around him, but his body is perfectly illuminated. He can see even the smallest wrinkle of his hand, every piece of fuzz on his red and black checkered sweatshirt. His feet are on solid ground even though it looks like he is floating through space. The feeling of total nothingness makes Mitch’s head spin. His heartbeat begins to quicken and each breath takes a tremendous amount of effort. He can’t help but think that in a place where there is nothing, there wouldn’t be air either. He starts to think that this must be what death is like, that this where you go when you die.

With that thought a patch of the blackness glows as if to confirm his theory. The glow begins to flash images of Mitch in various acts of dying. Drowning, fighting to find the surface of an infinite pool of water. Buried alive, clawing at the musty, heavy clay of the earth crushing down on him. Murdered, bullets and knives plunging into his body from every angle. Old age, sitting alone and frail, too weak to move. The scenes flicker seamlessly in a gruesome assault of scenarios. Suddenly the images stop and large words appear “CHOOSE A DEATH OR ONE WILL BE CHOSEN FOR YOU” Mitch stares in horror as a timer glows in front of him and numbers begin to count down: 60, 59, 58...

Mitch quickly tries to think of the fastest and least painful death, knowing somehow that the mysterious screen will choose the worst one for him. He takes a deep breath.

“Death by murder. Gun to the head,” he whispers. He suddenly finds himself lying in his bedroom. He hears clanging from downstairs and he knows it must be the person who is going to murder him. Mitch decides to stay in his bed, not to be an idiot and chase the strange noises, for it would surely lead to his immediate death. But the sounds go on, and on. He lies in bed for what seems like hours.

Finally he realizes that the noises won’t end. He understands that he chose the fate of being shot and he must follow through with it. But he refuses to let go of the hope that

there is some way to avoid it. Mitch searches his clothes to find his cell phone. Out of the corner of his eye he sees a flash of light from his cell phone on the dresser. He lets out a sigh of relief and reaches for the phone. The instant his fingers come in contact with his phone a shock of electricity surges through his body. He screams in pain then immediately bites his pillow. But it's too late. The noises from downstairs stop, and are replaced by the sound of creaking footsteps on the old wood floor. Mitch tries to get up from his bed to hide, but he is not in control of his body anymore. The only parts of him that can move are his eyes that dart around the room in panic, and his chest as it rises and falls with his uneven breaths. The door creaks open and a man walks in. His features are hidden behind a mask, but the gun in his hand definitely isn't.

"Nice weather we're having, huh?" Mitch trills, trying to do whatever he can to end his life the fastest. And it works. He hears the sound of the gun, and then suddenly the world around him fades.

All three of the teens wake up in the grass at the same time. They slowly open their eyes, moaning, wiping away tears. Mitch is the first to sit up. He places his hand on his chest and laughs. "I'm alive!" He shouts. Jordan bolts upright and looks over at Mitch.

"You're alive?!" He shouts. The boys make eye contact and Jordan tackles Mitch to the ground. "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Soft cries can be heard from behind the boys and they each turn to Nani who lies in a ball. "You're alive too!" Jordan screams. He picks Nani up and crushes her in his arms.

"Leave me alone." Nani snaps. She shoves Jordan off of her and starts to walk away.

"Whoa there!" Cryaotic says, appearing in front of Nani, blocking her path. "It was all a dream. None of it was real!" Nani glares up at him, then places a hate filled punch into his jaw. The impact, and the surprise, makes Cryaotic fall to the ground.

"WHY WOULD YOU PUT ME THROUGH THAT?!" Nani screams. She kicks Cryaotic in the stomach, then the shin, then the chest.

"Nani stop!" Mitch cries. He pulls her away from the wizard, stroking her hair to calm her down. "Look, I want to murder the guy as much as you do. And... Well... I'm not really sure where I was going with this..."

“Please, give me a moment to speak.” Cryaotic wheezes from his position on the grass. The three teens stand, arms crossed, waiting impatiently for an answer. “This experience was to help you all face your biggest fears. Nani, you learned that getting a bad grade on a test, or someone not replying to your texts immediately isn’t the end of the world. You now know that there are situations much, much worse. That will help you to just be yourself, and be comfortable in your own skin. Jordan, you have learned that you can’t always please everybody. You can’t always put other people’s needs above your own. Sometimes you have to think about yourself. Mitch you learned that death is inevitable. There is no avoiding it, and therefore you must accept it. Accepting death is the first step to not being afraid of it. So I have actually helped you all. You are welcome.”

Nani kicks Cryaotic in the nose, grabs her skateboard and walks away, mumbling obscenities under her breath. Jordan and Mitch stare at the groaning man on the ground. They notice Nani isn’t slowing down, so they quickly grab their boards and run after her.