

Run, Rabbit

The drone of Ms. Callaway's voice hums lowly in the 8th-grade classroom. Many of the students are fidgeting in their seats or anxiously glancing at the clock in anticipation of leaving; it's their last class of the day, after all. Plus, it's Friday; any kid would love to be free from school for the weekend. However, instead of the usual excitement and buzz of energy, it's quiet and stifling. Friday signals a day of freedom. But for them, today means hell.

There are three cardinal rules for a small portion of Ms. Callaway's class on Fridays.

- 1. Don't get distracted. That's how they'll catch you off guard.*
- 2. Pack up your things early, yet slowly, so you don't get caught by the teacher and held back for a scolding. You're easy pickings if that happens.*
- 3. As soon as the final bell rings, it's every man for themselves. No one will save you if you're caught.*

Zuri discreetly slides his pencil case into his backpack, leaving only his textbooks to put away once the bell rings. He glances down at his watch. Five minutes until class ends, yet he can already feel familiar calculating eyes survey the room for their next target. He knows the others can feel it too. Zuri is aware of every shift in movement they take to 'get a better view of the board', every quiet, mocking chuckle that passes one of the trio's lips, and every scrape of pencil against paper as they pretend to take notes. Ms. Callaway's voice fades into nothing but sound as he braces himself.

Two minutes.

Then one.

RING!

Zuri slides most of his textbooks into his backpack in one move, though his notebook slides out and hits the ground. A couple of other kids step on it in their haste to leave.

No, no, no!

Zuri tries to reach for it, but a different hand snatches it up before his fingers can touch it.

“This yours?” a voice cuts in.

Zuri freezes and snaps his head up. Beneath his maroon-colored bangs that cover the top half of his face, he sees eyes looking down on him. A wide smile takes up the other boy’s face, but it’s hard to tell from a glance if he means it. With short, straight, black hair, coal black eyes, and a face that fools teachers, parents, and other classmates into thinking he’s a charming boy, it’s no wonder Lumir became so popular. Zuri has no choice but to nod as Lumir’s two lackeys, Tara and Graham, flank him on either side. Suddenly, his heart races as he takes back his notebook and puts it in his bag. Though each of them seems as friendly as ever in front of the teacher, they know, and he knows that they’ve chosen him as prey.

Zuri’s heart hammers in his chest as each of their gazes lock onto his form. Underneath Tara and Graham’s smiles and friendly demeanor are the stares of hungry dogs, eager to tear him apart at any given moment. Lumir helps Zuri up, then drapes an arm around the darker-skinned boy.

“Since you’ve got your stuff, why don’t we walk home together?” he offers, and the other two chuckle. It’s not like Zuri has much of a choice.

Lumir guides him out in the hallway, and Zuri takes this chance before Tara and Graham can fully get out of the classroom. He uses his body to shove Lumir to the ground and slips on his backpack before booking it down the hallway, weaving in and out of lingering students, along with ignoring any yells of teachers warning him not to run.

“**Lumir!**” Graham and Tara are quick to help the black-haired boy up. But he waves them off, and a warping grin etches itself onto his face.

“Are you okay?” Graham asks worriedly, his bright green eyes looking over the other.

“I’ll be fine. *Get him.*”

At those words, it’s like a switch flips for both of them. Wide grins stretch on their faces, and the two break into a full sprint. They watch as Zuri turns the corner and bounds after him. It doesn’t take long for them to catch up with him in the long hallways. Zuri may be fast, but Tara and Graham are gaining ground on him. Like starving hounds, they chase him from floor to floor. Any student left over for after-school activities either turn their gazes or look on. Zuri doesn’t

notice that Tara breaks off from Graham and turns a different way until it's too late. He skids to a stop, worn sneakers squeak harshly against tile floors as he changes direction, darting right into the boy's bathroom. In a split-second decision, he climbs into one of the stalls and moves to stand on the toilet.

He can hear the distant call of "Get him outta there!" from Tara, before rushing footsteps and a panting breath enter as well.

"Why you gotta make this so difficult? We just wanna *hang out* with ya, what you think you're too good for us?" Graham calls out with a heavy breath; he's always been on the heftier side of the three.

It's unfair how fast he is... Zuri thinks as he tries to contain his own breathing to be as quiet as possible.

He just needs to make it out of here.

"If you come out now, we might go easier on you today." Graham offers, however, Zuri knows full well that's a lie. The creaking of doors lets him know that the brown-haired boy is opening stalls now. His chest hurts a little from how hard his heart pounds against his chest.

"Come out, you little rat! Or I'll drag your sorry butt to Lumir by the ankle when I get my hands on you!" Graham tries to open the stall Zuri's hiding in, but it doesn't budge, prompting the boy to begin banging on it. "I know you're in there!" he spits harshly.

Out of time and options, Zuri opens the door quickly and drops to the floor, squeezing himself under the joining walls sideways because of his backpack. He feels a hand wrap around his ankle and attempts to yank him back, but Zuri stops himself on the wall and bucks his free leg until it collides with something solid.

"ACK!"

A cry of pain follows a loosening grip. Not wasting this opportunity, Zuri scrambles to his feet and rushes out of the stall and out of the bathroom. He has to pivot sharply thanks to Tara lunging for him, but he dodges her hands narrowly, and the chase starts again. By now, the hallways are empty, and after making it to the first floor, he beelines it to the exit.

He's almost there!

Just a little more!

Right as he exits the building, something grips his forearm and harshly pulls him to the side. His feet come out from underneath him, and his body crashes to the dirt below, falling harshly on his side. It knocks the wind right out of him, but Zuri doesn't get time to recover or process before he's forced to stand.

“And *where* do you think you're going?” Zuri snaps his head up only to see the leader snatching his arm again and giving him a closed-eye smile. “You didn't think you were getting away that easily, did you?”

Tara comes through the door, breathing heavily from exhaustion. When she notices Zuri in the hands of Lumir, her freckled face perks up. Zuri tries to escape again, but Tara is quick to seize his other arm, and neither lets go. It takes a moment for Graham to catch up with them this time; however, he has tissues up his now red nose. Once the other boy arrives, the trio walks Zuri to the woods behind the school building. From an outside perspective, they all look like any normal group of friends as Lumir, Tara, and Graham all laugh and joke around him.

But Zuri knows better.

With each 'joke', they glance at him with anger or coldness in their eyes, contrasting the smiles on the trio's faces. None of them like it when their prey gives them this much hassle. Especially the nasty kick in the face Zuri gave Graham.

They're going to eat him alive. He can feel it deep in his bones.

After a bit of moving through the woods, they shove him down to the grass. Before Zuri has time to react, a shoe gets him in the side. He cries out in pain as Tara strips him of his backpack with those perfectly manicured nails. They feel like claws against his skin.

“You think you're so clever, huh? Trying to outrun us like that.” Lumir's foot rains down on him again, and again, and again. “Now look at you. I might've gone easier on you today, but you just had to go and piss me off.” That's a lie. They never went easy on anybody.

“Yeah! And you kicked me in the face, you little rodent! And for that, we should give you a double beating!” Graham shouts angrily, directly kicking Zuri in the stomach, sending the boy tumbling a few inches. Zuri chokes as the wind pushes right out of his lungs, and he struggles to breathe. He can only curl into himself as the two continue to hit and berate him relentlessly.

“You brought this on yourself, you know.” Tara chimes in, ignoring the violence beside her in favor of rummaging through his things. It’s hard to tell how long goes by before Zuri completely stills underneath their stomps, kicks, and punches.

“Hey Lumir, I don’t think he’s squirming anymore,” Graham points out, poking the other boy with his foot. Zuri doesn’t move.

“What, did he faint or something?” Lumir snickers, before crouching down and lifting Zuri’s head up by his dirty, curly, maroon hair. He doesn’t react at all, and since his bangs cover the top half of his face, they can’t tell if his eyes are open or not. Lumir carelessly drops him. “Huh, I guess he really did pass out.” He stands again.

Tara looks over at the three with a bored expression on her face. It seems she didn’t find anything worth stealing in his bag. “So, what now?”

“Do you wanna go get some ice cream-” Graham starts, about to turn to Tara, when out of nowhere, Lumir falls to the ground from the corner of his eye. Suddenly, he’s on the ground as well before he knows it. There’s a bit of flailing on Zuri’s part as he’s trying to dodge both of their attacks from the ground after tripping them by their ankles. Zuri manages to stand again on shaky legs, and with adrenaline coursing through his body, he forces himself to take off. Tara is the first to stand and start running after him.

“Well, don’t just sit there! Come on!” she yells at the other two, and they scramble to get back up as well.

Zuri stumbles and almost trips as he weaves his way back through the forest and to the school. He can’t go on for long because of his injuries, but he just needs enough time to get somewhere safe. He can hear their angry shouts and pounding footsteps chase after him. With no time to waste, Zuri recklessly runs across the street separating the school from the neighborhood.

HONK!

A car comes to a screeching halt right before it can collide with Zuri’s worn-out body, and the boy gets around it without stopping. The bullies have to stop because of traffic, but they watch as Zuri somehow makes it across. He’s finally in the home stretch since the trio behind him has to wait for the crosswalk or risk getting run over. He forces one final push of his body as he runs, jumps, and manages to scale the wooden fence of a yard before heaving himself over it.

He’s safe.

For now, at least.