

'Pruning Shears'

Sunlight trickles in through a slit between the curtains, left ajar last night.

It hits my face and I grumble, ready to roll over, when a dozen sharp edges dig into my skin and I jolt upright. *Not here*, I think. *Not now*. I reach for my glasses, but I don't need them to see what's changed. Vines coil around my wrists, my arms, my torso, tight enough to pinch. *Well, Noah, here we go again*.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I blink at my room, at my open laptop on the desk and the post-it clinging to the upper corner, reminding me that 'CLASSICS ESSAY IS DUE MONDAY'. It's been a couple of months since I moved to uni and in many ways, even the simplest tasks still feel like adjustments. The vines just happen to be...one of the bigger ones.

I tug the light of my ensuite. It clicks on, revealing my reflection in the bathroom cabinet and streaks of grey in my dark mop of hair. It also gives me a better look at the vines. They're thin, green, a little thorny. More than I ever had to hide at home.

"There's me thinking this was under control," I mumble and open the cabinet, pushing aside my anxiety meds, the vitamin pots Da packed for me. My hand finally closes around what I'm looking for. I pull it out, squeezing the handle of a pair of garden pruning shears. Now all I need is time and patience. I glance at the clock on the opposite wall. There's about an hour before I have to meet Colson and Max downstairs. It'll have to be enough.

I perch on the closed toilet seat, the tool heavy in my palm and familiar as the day Da gave it to me, then manoeuvre the sharp end to a vine at my wrist. The shears twitch and I take a breath. With a squeeze, the blade cuts and the vine falls, leaving a single, green stump in its place.

From there, it's just a matter of angling myself, twisting to snip the ones growing out of my neck and back. Some curl tighter as I do. I shudder, trying not to recall all the mornings trapped

in their hold, struggling to breathe. Greenery soon carpets the bathroom floor. Stumps scatter across my skin and I spin to catch them in my reflection, knowing they will shrivel and sink back under the surface in a few days' time. Until then...My finger brushes a rough edge.

With a sigh, I place the shears on the sink, leave the mess for future-Noah and cross my dorm to the wardrobe, where I flick through t-shirt, t-shirt, hoodie, t-shirt, jumper...

"Aha," I say, pulling a grey jumper off the hanger and over my head. It sags like a bin bag. But when I close the wardrobe door and look in the mirror, I see it does the trick.

It's fine, I think, tugging the sleeve over the stump at my wrist. *It's one outing, then back to assignments, again*. I spare a look at the plates and mugs on my nightstand. *Just like usual*.

The clock tsks in disapproval by the time I pull on trousers and grab my backpack, more than fashionably late when I rush to the door. Half out, I stop and stare into the middle distance. There's something I was forgetting, wasn't there?

"Shoes!" I realise and go back to shove on a pair, their laces trailing as I leave the door to slam and lock behind me. The corridor and stairs pass by in a flurry. My fingers grasp at my sleeves, trying to hold them down.

"About time, slow poke!" comes a voice from below.

"Max," says another. "Don't be rude."

"S'not rude, Col. Just facts."

I pause at the top of the last flight and look over the rail, into the lobby. Max's orange cap and pink hair are impossible to miss against the grey wall she's leaning against, while Colson hunches beside her and frowns, his focus on a fidget cube. He catches me watching and waves.

It's just one outing, I tell myself.

"Finally," says Max. "Mr. Recluse emerges."

“Sorry,” I reply, taking the last few stairs. “Sorry, I got caught up with something.”

“Hey, no worries,” says Colson and goes to put an arm around my shoulders. I shift away, careful to make the motion seem natural by brushing a hand through my hair and pretending not to notice. “We weren’t waiting long, anyway.”

Max scoffs. “Speak for yourself.”

“Aw,” coos Colson and plucks the cap off Max’s head, placing it onto his afro, before taking the lead to the automatic doors. “Someone hasn’t had their coffee today, huh?”

“Yeah,” she says, going after him. “And if you don’t gimme that back, you’re gonna find out exactly what that means. Right, Noah?” She looks back at me, squints.

Still in the shadow of the lobby, I twitch against the temptation to turn and run back up the stairs, while Max stands there and watches me. It’s piercing. Too close to the stare Da used on my vines: narrow-eyed, suspicious. The stump on my wrist begins to itch.

“You ever worn that jumper before?” she asks.

“Yeah, it’s just old.”

“Oh,” she says. “Something else changed?”

Colson half-turns, to look between us. “Max, cut it out.”

“Probably just my eye bags,” I reply, putting on a weak smile.

“The assignment keeping you up?” Colson asks.

Stepping through the automatic doors, I blink in the brightness, until it fades to reveal redbrick accommodation blocks, tree-lined paths, the sheen of the lake. Huh, maybe I have been inside for too long. “Something like that,” I mumble.

“Well,” says Max, falling into step with me. “You can always pull an all-nighter, like me.”

“Oh, hell no!” interjects Colson and blocks our way on the pavement, hands on his hips. “Not after you knocked on my door blaring ABBA and asked me to proof your stuff at 4am after, like, four espresso shots—”

“Three!” says Max, squealing as Colson shoves her cap back over her eyes.

“No sane person plays ABBA at 4am!”

“Noah, I wasn’t that bad.”

“Noah, she was worse than my sisters.”

“Alright, smartass, what’s your point?” counters Max.

“Be more like me,” says Colson and hooks his thumbs through his belt loops. “And start a month in advance. No last-minute panic, no existential crisis. Problem solved.” He catches his foot and stumbles, righting himself before he can hit the pavement. Max snorts.

As we turn a corner, the bustle and buildings of campus emerge, and I start to think that maybe this isn’t such a bad idea. I squint at the pale, shifting sky. The familiar sound of Max and Colson’s bickering fills the air. *Maybe things really could be different here, I think. Maybe Max and Colson wouldn’t mind my vines, maybe I wouldn’t have to hide them, like I did at home.*

My backpack brushes against a stump and it’s reminder enough of why they would mind, a reminder of what Da said on moving day. “Keep those covered up,” he told me. “And don’t go making a scene, you’ll only scare your classmates.” He was probably right, the vines are more than enough for me to handle, let alone anyone else.

Just forget it, I think, trailing behind the others.

Crossing through the concrete maze of department buildings, we angle towards the towering block of the library, its glass and metal surface reflecting the greying sky. Our actual destination, the boardgame café, squats in its shadow.

“So, you’re writing on transformations?” asks Colson. He holds the door open and I slip through, narrowly missing Max, who almost knocks me over on her way to the cake display.

“Yeah,” I reply. “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, maybe ‘Apollo and Daphne’ or ‘Narcissus’? Something about willing transformations versus unwilling transformations? Though I haven’t figured it all out, just yet.”

“Huh,” he muses. “Don’t you think ‘willing’ is a stretch?”

“That’s what I was thinking!” I blurt.

Colson flinches at my outburst and I worry I’ve gone too far. Then, he smiles. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I agree and find myself smiling back. “I-In both, the protagonist just gets given these circumstances and has to deal with them. There’s no agency there, no…” I twirl my hands through the air and try to find the right word. Colson nods along, bemused.

“No carrot cake?” grumbles Max, from the display. “Man, this place sucks.”

“Max,” groans Colson and gives the bearded man behind the counter an apologetic look, before sidling over to join her. I go to follow, but stop mid-step, conscious of where I am. Stood in a public place, with my stumps. Worse, in a room crowded with antique furniture and people that I could brush against, bump into. A vine twines around my wrist.

Don’t make a scene, I tell myself. You’re fine. It’s fine.

“Hey, Noah,” calls Max. “They’ve got your favourite!”

Hesitantly, I wander to the display, where the others are pointing at latticed pastries, stacks of cookies and cakes topped with swirls of icing. There’s a coffee and walnut slice on the second shelf. My stomach gurgles.

“You getting that one?” Max asks.

“Actually.” A pricking sensation comes from my wrist. “...I might pass.”

Colson frowns. “Have you even had breakfast?”

Sharp edges dig into my arm. “Um.”

“Alright, I’ll go up,” says Max. Giving Colson a nudge, she goes up to the nearby counter and rattles off her order. “Can I have a coffee and walnut slice, then a black coffee for me, please.”

She flashes her debit card; only then do I realise what she’s done.

“Wait, Max, you don’t have to –”

Her card beeps against the payment machine. “Too late, slow poke.”

“Hey,” says Colson, mock-offended. “What about me?”

“Eh, you’ll live,” she says and turns on her heel, in search of a table.

“Gremlin,” scoffs Colson. All I can do is stare at the menu behind the counter, baffled at the sudden kindness. A question sits on my tongue. It’s one I don’t feel I can ask, not until I notice Colson watching me from the corner of his eye.

“Colson, what was that about?”

“What was what about?”

“Max,” I say. “She bought me cake.”

Colson’s mouth forms an ‘o’. “That. Well, we didn’t want to make any assumptions or anything, but you seem pretty out of it, today. Coffee and walnut is your favourite, so maybe Max thought it would cheer you up?”

“But there’s nothing wrong,” I tell him.

“Isn’t there?”

Yes, I think. “No.” I tug my sleeve down. “No, I’m fine.”

“If you’re sure,” he says. I’m not, but before I can admit it, Colson tilts his head and gestures across the café. “Though you might want to see what board games are on offer or Max’ll force ‘Cheat’ on us, again. Go ahead, I’ll bring over the stuff.”

“Sure, thanks,” I say and cross the café, apologising as I edge around several tables, to get to the game-shelf on the opposite wall. *They’re starting to notice*, I think and go on tiptoe, to grab the Scrabble box teetering on the highest shelf. *Worse, they’re starting to worry*. I open the box, checking for missing pieces. *And if it’s between them worrying and knowing, maybe I should...*

Maybe you shouldn’t, echoes Da’s voice, at the back of my mind.

“Maybe I should,” I mutter, putting the words into the open.

When I find Max, she’s shuffling cards in the corner, away from the chatter and jostle of other groups. I put down my backpack and the Scrabble box, sitting next to her. “‘Cheat?’”

“You bet,” she grins. “Gotta see if you really are a great liar, or if your winning streak from last week was nothing but a bluff.”

“Well, I’ve got some practice from home.”

Max’s dealing falters, then picks up speed. “Really, how so?”

Vines grow out of my skin when I get too in my head. Vines grow out of my skin when I get too in my head.
Vines grow out of my skin when I get too in my head, I tell myself.

I shift in my seat. “Vines...”

The clatter of crockery comes from nearby and we both look up. Colson stands halfway between the counter and our table, holding a loaded tray. Its contents tremble. He cringes, an expression that sticks until the tray is safely placed onto the tabletop.

“There we go,” he breathes. “Sorry, did I interrupt anything?”

“No, not at all,” I say and help him unpack the tray, doing my best to ignore Max’s frown. I take a large bite of coffee and walnut slice. It sticks in my throat.

“Anyway,” says Max. “Seeing as there’s no room for board games... ‘Cheat?’”

Colson slumps into his seat. “Not again.”

One game, I decide. *One game and I’ll say something*. “One can’t hurt.”

“Fine,” Colson huffs. “But I better win.”

Max slides his cards across the table. “Says the person who forgot to actually lie about his hand last game, but sure. Right, I’ll go first.”

Cards fall face-down onto the tabletop, to claims of “ace of hearts”, “two of hearts”, “three of hearts”. Colson scratches his chin, thoughtful. He puts down three of diamonds, I put down three of spades and Max passes her turn. Rain starts to patter against the café windows. The lamps flicker on, to a grateful cheer from a nearby table. After Colson passes, I look at my cards, choose the truth and put it on the pile.

“Four of spades.”

Max glares at me. “Cheat.”

Readjusting my glasses, I school my expression like Da taught me to and gesture at the card, in an invitation to flip it over. Max reaches out, turns it. “Oh, come on!” she groans, throwing the rest of her cards down onto the tabletop. “How many you even got?”

I unfurl two cards between my forefinger and thumb. Colson whistles.

Max reaches to grab them. “Liar, lemme see.”

I flinch back, a vine curling out from under my sleeve.

“Hey,” says Colson, holding up his cards. “What happened to the game?”

“I mean, Noah’s basically won,” says Max and snatches at my cards again, rocking the table. Her fingers brush closer to the thorns at my wrist. *She’s too close*, I think. *Say something*.

Max pouts. “C’mon Noah. Just let me take a look.”

“Alright,” I retort. “Alright, hold on, just don’t put your elbow in my cake.” I go to move the slice and my attention wavers from the hand holding the cards. A few seconds, that’s all it takes. Max’s hand wraps around my wrist and I feel myself stiffen.

“Gotcha!” she shouts. “Now – Ow! Fuck, what is that?”

She recoils, falling back against Colson with a wince. I clutch my wrist to my chest. Vines push between my fingers, curl around my knuckles and palm. Max just stares, her eyes moving from my face, to my vines. A line of blood trickles between her fingers. My breath catches and I glance over my shoulder, to the man behind the counter, to the people around the café. Some meet my eyes, then return to friends or screens, unaware of what was unfolding.

For now, I think.

I turn back. “Please,” I hear myself say. “Just let me explain.”

“Noah,” says Colson, sounding hoarse. “Noah, what are those?”

“I can explain,” I whisper and roll back my sleeve. Vines sprout from the stump at my wrist, twining their way up my arm. “I was going to tell you. Look, it’s alright, they’re just plants. They grow because of me, when I can’t control myself, see? It’s alright.”

Colson grimaces. “Jesus.”

“*You* did this?” snaps Max, uncurling her bloodied hand. “With those? What the fuck, Noah?”

I blink. *It's me*, I realise, pulling my sleeve back down. *They're scared. Of me.* My chair topples and cracks against the floor. Da was right, he'd been right from the moment he gave me the pruning shears. People nearby turn in their chairs, to stare.

I take a step back: one, then another.

"Noah," says Colson. "What are you doing?"

Before they can speak again, I spot a way out: the toilet in the opposite corner.

I glance back at Max and Colson, meeting their wide-eyed looks, then do the last thing I can and run. The cubicle door slams, I turn the lock. My legs tremble beneath me. *There's me thinking this was under control*, I think and laugh, sinking down onto the closed toilet seat. It sounds more like a sob, one that bounces off the walls of the cubicle, too close, too loud.

"Stupid," I mumble. "I've been so, so stupid, Da."

If only I was normal. I tug off my jumper; leaving it to pool on the cubicle floor. If only I didn't have to hide myself and my emotions like this – I touch the vine at my wrist. *If only I didn't have to deal with this at all*, I think and pull it, hard enough that the stump begins to give way. A ring of blood wells around its base. Maybe, just maybe, if I kept pulling, it would–

A knock stops me from going any further.

"Noah?" asks Colson, his voice muffled by the door. "Are you alright?"

I glance up, to see my vines reaching towards the ceiling, crawling across the walls and floor of the cubicle. A shuddering breath escapes me. They sprawl, more erratic than I've ever seen them. "I'm," I struggle to form the word, "sorry."

"It's alright," says Colson. "You don't need to be sorry; we do. I do."

"I do," says Max, her voice low. "It was scary, but I acted like a right prick."

“Can you just let us in?”

“Open up, just for a second?”

I stare at the door, wondering if I could or can, after the way they recoiled from me. My vines creep up towards the doorhandle. I watch them, recalling late-night conversations with Colson, the sound of Max’s laugh. Tears well in my eyes, spilling over.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. “I don’t know if I can.”

A prodding feeling comes from the stump at my wrist. Not like the pulling sensation from my vines, but gentler. Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I look down and flinch at what I see there: a closed flower bud. It leans towards the door.

Great, I think. Even my plants are telling me what to do.

Still, as the bud starts to unfurl and my vines claw at the door, I think of Da’s stare and wonder if this all there is, shutting myself away, closing myself off from people who would offer me an open hand. My vines shrink back. Leaves uncurl from the bud and I get to my feet, to close the distance between myself and the cubicle door.

A single, pale yellow flower blooms out of my wrist. Whatever comes next is mine to decide and so, I reach for the handle.

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