

"That's why Ryosuke's a fraud during his Shirohebi fight!" Marcus speaks over the desk of his friend, Jake, watching a phone video clips of a colorful Japanese teenager holding a slender black and green sword, performing flips to dodge the serrated sword of a pale horned humanoid with four blood red eyes and a long black cape. "Bullshit! Jake shakes his head, "Shirohebi got washed by Yota even without Press Style!"

"Marcus! Sit down or I'll fail you!" Mrs. Hall bellowed across the classroom. "There's still people finishing their final exams!" Marcus fumbled back to his regular desk next to his other friend, Dondre, as Mrs. Hall barked at Jake about his phone.

"Ugh! Hate that I still got to stay here after these exams." Marcus stretched in his chair as he surveyed his muted classroom with only the faint sound of classmates whispering to each other, while others had their heads down in the paperwork of their own tests. "The school should just let the kids who finished leave early already."

"It's what? Two more days of school?" Dondre mumbles absently while flipping through the phone in his backpack. "Think we should walk out?" Dondre continues, "Maybe say we're going to the bathroom and just hop on the bus early?"

Marcus shifted his seat, his eyes turning to Mrs. Hall, sipping from her water bottle as she scrolled on her computer at her own desk. "Probably. The security guy don't care if we walked out." But after another beat, Marcus furrowed his brow shaking his head. "No...shit...my mom would see me home early..."

Dondre raises his head from his phone. "You mean your folks aren't on vacation yet?"

"Not until Friday!" Marcus's eyes brighten, "I got my parents to let me stay home for the two weeks they're out to visit my sister in Atlanta! Even got food money from my dad to order what's needed!"

"For real?" Dondre tilted his head to Marcus

"Yeah," Marcus smiled, "As long as nothing's broken or burnt, and keep our pool clean, the house is mine for the start of summer!"

Dondre raised a finger, "We should have a big pool party then!" he wags his fingers to the group of girls to his right, "Bet I can get Shana and her friends to come too!"

"You think Erica will come to the party too?" Marcus rises back up on his chair tilting his head to the girl four desks ahead from his left side, where she raises her eyes from her own phone and curls a small smile in her lips.

"Pfft! You still trying to get with her?" Dondre jeered

"Shana said she was into me," Marcus leans back to Dondre "So I got a chance! I'll ask her out after class."

"Ha, sure!" Dondre's backpack vibrated and he answered the message inside. "When are your folks leaving again?"

"Thursday night," Marcus leaned back in his chair, "We can start the party after the half day, Friday!"

Two days later, Marcus cleans his suburban house to get ready for the pool party in a few hours. He knocked out his mom's general to-do list: Cleaning dishes, vacuuming carpets, closing away bedroom doors, moving lawn furniture, packing up errant garden hoses. Charging on a pad on the kitchen counter, his phone plays a random song from some "For You" party mix playlist to his Bluetooth speaker next to it. The song pauses with a notification beep, "30 minutes until your pizza is delivered!" before returning to the simple electronic drum droning.

While doing his obligatory counter clean up, Marcus accidentally kicks a large tied plastic bag leaning next on the kitchen sink

garbage can. "Crap..." Marcus blinks, "Thought I tossed this out already?"

Marcus swings the trash bag in his hand as he shoulders his garage door. Upon reaching the bin at the side of the driveway, a small sedan rolls up and Dondre, Shana, and Jake step out of the car.

Marcus walks to the car, "You're here early? That's a first!"

"Managed to get a ride from my sister," Shana replies "She won't stay because she's got her own thing tonight"

Marcus's eyebrows raise as he sees the last passenger from the sedan in a flowy yellow and indigo print beach robe, "Erica!" Marcus blurted, startling her! "You thought about hanging out with us."

"Hey Marcus." The single peep from Erica as she gazes at his house, "Your garden is beautiful. I love the azaleas and daisies."

"My mom's spent a couple years working on that garden." Marcus rubs the garbage bag on his swim trunks, "I help her out sometimes."

Marcus and Erica chat until he pulls his gaze away back to his friends, "H-hey! I can't keep you all waiting!" Marcus shuts the garbage pail "The pool awaits!"

Marcus leads his friend toward the garage door leading inside his house, but the knob refuses to turn. Perplexed by the sudden knob struggle, Marcus turns the knob again, but it goes nowhere. Even with a left and right shake, the door knob didn't budge.

Marcus sucked air in his teeth and marched past his friends out the garage to his front door. Upon sight of his solid shut green door, a rock ran down Marcus's gut. The others followed behind him hearing a faint "Naw..." as Marcus's hand gripped the front doorknob. It, too, refused to turn.

"Marcus?" Erica probed but he started rocking on his heels looking up and down his house windows. Marcus stopped rocking and pointed his finger to his left blurting "Fence!" and turned his heels toward the side of his house and ambled past his mom's garden of azaleas.

Marcus's brisk paces fell to a halt as his hands confirmed then memory his mind refused to tell him! The fence is also shut and the wood is too high and smooth to climb barefoot.

Marcus turns his eyes to Erica and his friends as the rock in his gut sunk deeper.