



The Roleplaying Game

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Session 1: Head Out on the Highway

A beaten-up car tore through the black night at breakneck speed. Li Xiu was at the wheel; beside her, an anxious Jae Hyun tried to ignore the speedometer as it crept past 180 li per hour, then 190, then 200. In the backseat, Bashrat writhed in Talinata's arms, struggling to breathe.

“Just hold tight, dude,” Talinata said levelly. “We’re almost at the hospital. You’re gonna be okay.”

Bashrat wheezed. If he’d known that it had hazelnuts, he never would have had a slice of that Gamer’s Delight. He needed more air, somehow. He pushed himself up and moved toward the open window. Talinata tried to pull him back but was pushed away.

The cold night air whipped around Bashrat as he stuck his head out the window; he felt like it was trying to peel his face off. He opened his mouth wide as he could. He knew, vaguely, that high-velocity air wouldn’t really push down a constricted windpipe, but he had to try something, anything, just to buy himself a few more seconds to—

The electrical pole came out of nowhere.

All the rest of them heard was a sharp, deep *clunk*.

There was a long, terrible silence. There was no reason to go to the hospital anymore.

“I mean,” said Li Xiu, who had not slowed the car, “didn’t I say I was going toward the temple? To get the next, like, emerald thing?”

Bashrat, who was fidgeting with a twenty-sided die in the real world, looked miffed. “Wait just a second. You mean you weren’t even going to heal me?” He turned to the GM, Kalingkata. “Tell her! You’re in charge!”

Kalingkata put up her hands. “Not at all!”

“Yes you are! You’re...” He waved a hand vaguely. “God!”

“Do you think God’s in charge of anything here?”

Bashrat huffed in agitation and turned back to Li Xiu. “*Why* would you not be going to the hospital?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the, like...” She snapped her fingers, trying to remember the word. “Healer?”

“You *know* I’m underlevelled! I can’t heal a status

ailment like that yet!”

“Yeah, you suck,” said Li Xiu. “And I remember, Kalingkata said that if your character died, you could just come back as a different guy? So maybe your next guy will be better.”

Talinata rubbed his temples. “I’m not sure that’s quite in the spirit of the game.”

“But it *is* funny,” said Kalingkata, “so I’ll allow it. Bashrat, you are extremely dead.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Well, hang on,” Jae Hyun cut in. “Li Xiu, why did your *character* let Bashrat die?”

“What, like, the pretend version of me?” said Li Xiu as she adjusted her (very nice) artificial nails. “I guess she finds Bashrat annoying too.”

“Well, that’s a little petty of a reason to *kill* someone for real,” said Jae Hyun. “So! Uh. Jae Hyun tries to wrestle control of the car from Li Xiu. I roll for... dexterity?”

“Sure, let’s say dexterity,” said Kalingkata. She picked up one of the dice, made a big show of shaking it around, and, as was customary, threw it down so hard that it bounced off the table and

landed on the floor. Facing up was a neat little 11. “Allrighty,” she said. “Let’s say... Jae Hyun makes a pretty decent swing at it, but Li Xiu doesn’t give up right away.” She looked over at Li Xiu. “I assume you don’t give up right away.”

“Whatever, I guess.”

“Cool.” She throws up her hands. “The car is swerving backwards and forwards! It’s going out of control! What do we do?!”

“That is when,” Bashrat butts in, “my *new character* arrives on the scene!” With no small amount of pride, he lays down a pre-prepared character sheet. “I would like you all to meet your saviour, the All-Powerful Zaphex! He’s an alien, and he has telekinetic alien powers, and a cool alien girlfriend, and—”

“What was that last one?” Kalingkata said levelly.

Bashrat paused. “Cool alien powers.”

Session 2: Live Deliciously

Tsetseg stepped through the creaking doorway into the barn, where Black Billy the goat stood waiting.

Her skirts rustled stray bits of hay as she walked toward him.

“I’m here to sell my soul to you, Mr. Devil Satan Lucifer.”

In reality, the table went silent.

Li Xiu was incredulous, “...Mr. Devil. Satan. Lucifer?”

Tsetseg looked around, “Did I say something weird?”

Talinata sighed, “I mean we were kind of having a whole serious scene here and then you said ‘Mr. Devil Satan Lucifer’ which really just...”

“Broke the ambiance,” his sister finished.

Bashrat looked between them all, “But its an accurate statement, isn’t it? The goat is all of those things, right?”

“I mean, yes, technically,” Li Xiu replied. “But its just not a very dramatic way of stating it.”

Talinata grumbled, “Especially after you got all of our characters killed when you weren’t even here last week.”

Tsetseg stood up and waved her arms around with the grace and dignity of a floppy fish, as she spoke. “It was all of your faults for not making characters who wouldn’t get killed by the evil witch!”

“Its spelled with two V’s at the front,” Bashrat said pointing at the cover of the roleplaying game’s corebook. “So, its not witch is like... vih-vitch.”

“I don’t think that’s how English works,” Kalingkata mused.

“AND FURTHERMORE!” Tsetseg continued, not to leave her thoughts unfinished, “I couldn’t show up last week because my dad needed me at home.” She paused mid statement, holding a single finger up as if this was merely the first part of a larger argument, before lowering her finger quickly and staring up at the elaborate and obviously expensive wood-paneled ceiling of the rec-room Li Xiu’s family was letting them use.

“Not to be weird,” Li Xiu said. “But uh, what did your dad need you at home for so badly you missed your weekly social interaction with other human beings?”

Kalingkata snapped in front of Li Xiu's face like she was getting a naughty puppy's attention, "No! Bad! Do not taunt our friend about that! Bad Li Xiu."

"Don't patronize me just because you're the GM, what are you going to do anyway? Kill my character? She's already—"

"For the record my dad needed me at home to uh..." Tsetseg trailed off precipitously.

Li Xiu crossed her arms, "What was that, Miss Tsetseg?"

"...I just thought he looked kinda lonely."

The group awkwardly rearranged their own individual play areas, and suddenly found placing their dice in numerical order to be an extremely engaging use of their time.

"A-anyway," Li Xiu said. "Let's finish this one-shot up, since Tsetseg is the only one still alive."

"Also, if we do that she can sit down," Bashrat noted with an air of thinking this was a much more helpful suggestion than the awkward one it was. Tsetseg did sit down though, feeling the heat on her cheeks. Finally ready to play the game again,

Kalingkata took a deep breath, and tried to set the mood again.

“So, you’ve just betrayed all of your friends and family, and let them be killed by the witch. You’ve managed to survive though, and while your farm is in bloody ruins, the goat who you have suspected is really the devil in the guise of a beast is waiting there for you to make a deal with it, his black eyes glinting in the darkness like the edges of blades. What do you do?”

Tsetseg coughed, and put her hands together, “Oh, Black Billy, who may or may not be Lucifer, Satan, or the Devil, or all three of them if they are the same person, I conjure thee to speak with me! Do you understand me? Are you actually just a goat? If so this would be very awkward, but otherwise answer me!”

Kalingkata put on a surprisingly low and sultry voice, “What dost thou want, child?”

“Oh wow,” Bashrat said.

“Yeah, that’s actually really good Sang Mi,” Li Xiu added.

“SHHH,” Talinata said.

“Ahem, yes. What dost thou want, child?”

“What can you give me? Is this like... are we making a deal here?”

“Wouldst thou like the taste of chocolate? Pretty dresses?”

“Oh, well yes and yes, actually. But I think you can do better than that.”

Kalingkata squinted at her, “...Name thy desire?”

“A Talinata game console, and a new pair of sneakers, and some tri-range wrenches so I can help work on the hoverbike, and a porter bot, and—”

“Is this just your birthday wish list?” Li Xiu asked.

Tsetseg frowned, “I’m making a deal with the Devil. I figure I should get what I really want, right?”

“I am not the devil! Your character is making the deal with the devil!” Kalingkata said, with some measure of both exasperation and defeat at how her session was going. “You’re a puritan girl in 1630. You want things from that time period.”

“Right, yes. Sorry, I’ll get into character...” she closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them with an attempt at seriousness. “I want chocolate, and dresses, and gold.”

“It shall be thine.”

“I want land, and power, and a dozen lovers who never part from me.”

“I shall grant thee this also.”

“A horse to ride, with a coat as soft and rich as a feather pillow.”

“Done.”

“And a new phone, with an unlimited data plan.”

Kalingkata paused, trying to decide if she should push this or not. “...Sure, that shall be thine as well. I guess.”

“Then let’s get this deal signed, what a great session everyone.”

Session 3: I’m Waiting for It

“Okay,” said Talinata, frowning down at the map on the table. “Explain the rules again?”

Because the thing was, the *thing* was, the map wasn’t actually a map. It was just sheet of grid paper, totally blank except for a pair of lines drawn about an inch away from either end of the sheet, parallel to

each other. A row of little figurines were set up along one of the lines. Each little figurine had its own horse.

D&D was always weird, but this was, like, *weird*.

“So,” said Kalingkata, “all of you are *here*” – pointing at line one, with the figurines – “and you are trying to get to *here*” – the other line, naturally – “where you will meet the legendary Green Knight, who has promised to cut off your head. Heads.”

“And then, uh,” said Talinata, “we have to... fight him?”

“No,” said Kalingkata, “he cuts off your head. Or doesn’t. That’s totally up to him, really. The point is just to get there.”

“Hm,” said Talinata.

“This is ridiculous,” said Li Xiu. “What kind of storyline is this? I thought you said we were going on an adventure!”

“It *is* an adventure,” said Kalingkata, shrugging. “It’s a quest narrative. Apparently.”

“*Apparently?*” said Li Xiu.

“It was Jae Hyun’s idea,” admitted Kalingkata. “I just thought it would be funny.”

Every person at that table turned to glare at Jae Hyun. It was almost eerie. Jae Hyun stared back, unrepentant.

“Well,” said Li Xiu, after a moment, “that explains the – *gameplay mechanic*.”

A round of grumbling about the gameplay mechanic. The people, it seemed, were not fans of the gameplay mechanic. Jae Hyun huffed and crossed his arms, not at all defensively.

“It’s really not that difficult,” said Jae Hyun. “You ride for as long as you can keep narrating your actions. First person to the finish line wins.”

“As long as you can keep narrating your actions in the correct verse form,” Kalingkata clarified. She was smiling with the sort of smugness that was typically only achievable by cats.

“That’s right,” said Jae Hyun. “Twelve syllables per line, alliterative verse. Simple.”

More grumbling. Bashrat let out a groan so loud you would’ve thought someone had told him to get up and run laps. Bashrat did not like to run laps.

“Fine,” said Jae Hyun, “look. I’ll start.”

He cleared his throat. He shook out his shoulders.
He began:

*“Jae Hyun rode jaunty and joyfully to the join
Of brush and bramble, of bush and blooming
blossom,
Made off across the moors, mile and mile and
metre,
To the good Green Knight who would give him
great glory.
On and on he rode, over owl-grass and onions,
Passing his peers, who could play only poor poets
–”*

Bashrat slammed his hands onto the table.

“This isn’t fair,” he said. “It’s ridiculous. That’s not even real poetry – it doesn’t even rhyme!”

“Actually,” said Jae Hyun, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a literary classic.”

“It doesn’t even rhyme,” said Bashrat, again.

He was glaring at Jae Hyun: absolute daggers. Much like the great Sir Gawain himself, when faced with a big old green giant with a massive axe, Jae Hyun flinched.

“It doesn’t have a consistent meter, either,” added Bashrat, and then, peevishly, when everyone looked at him: “I do go to literature class too, you know.”

“Fine,” said Jae Hyun, sighing. “There are parts of the original that are in rhyming verse, maybe we could just stick to that. Iambic quatrains, ABAB rhyme scheme, seven-syllable and six-syllable lines alternating.”

“What,” said Bashrat, seemingly on the verge of tears, “are you *talking* about?”

Jae Hyun smiled. He paused, then took a breath, and then he began again:

*“Jae Hyun rode past the gable
Past rock and tree and gate.
He knew that he was able
To ride and meet his fate.”*

There was silence for a long moment. Then Kalingkata shrugged, picked up Jae Hyun’s little horse figure, and moved it halfway across the map.

Chaos around the table. Talinata sighed hard enough to rock him in his chair. A paper ball bounced off Jae Hyun’s head, which was probably Bashrat’s fault, but possibly Li Xiu’s. Tsetseg was

frowning hard, her forehead creasing, staring down at the table.

Finally she looked up. And then she *stood up*. And then she cleared her throat, which was a bizarre enough occurrence that everyone shut up. And she said:

“Tsetseg got on her charger

She rode fast too, of course.

She rode real quick and far – ger – uh –

‘Cause... she... was on a horse.’”

She sat down with an almost-audible snap. Kalingkata looked at her for a long moment, and then moved her figure forward. Two squares.

This time the yelling lasted nearly thirty seconds.

“Fine,” snapped Kalingkata, and gave everyone her best Scary Badass stare until they all calmed down. “Plan B it is.”

She pulled out another map. This one, shockingly, had an actual map on it.

“You are in a tavern,” said Kalingkata. “It’s Christmas morning, and you have been invited to the

King's Great Hall for a feast. You wake up, hungover, beside your lover, Essel –"

A loud, horrified squeak.

"*What,*" said Tsetseg, her eyes very wide. "All of us?"

Session 4: The Tragedy of the Triangle

"Look, I just think this whole process would go easier if you murdered them all and took the throne," Li Xiu explained for the fifth time. Jae Hyun looked around at all the other players hoping for guidance, before looking to the Gamemaster, who had her fingers steepled like some sort of third-rate mastermind.

"I, uh, I don't know..." Jae Hyun fidgeted. "I don't want to kill the other player characters..."

"Player versus player combat is allowed," Kalingkata reminded him.

"But what if they feel bad about it!?!?" he exclaimed, and a long sigh went up from the table.

Tsetseg pulled the corebook up on her padd again, "This game is confusing, all these political machinations..."

“I don’t get why we can’t say the name of the game,” Bashrat added.

“Like I explained earlier, its called the Scottish Game because to say the real name of the RPG is bad luck,” said Kalingkata. “Now are we doing the bloodbath or not?”

Jae Hyun slowly nodded. “Alright, let’s do it Li Xiu. Though I still don’t see why our characters have to be married.”

“That’s just how the game is,” she replied, fiddling with the dice in her hand.

“Do we have any kids?”

Kalingkata blinked, “It’s a time of conflict and despair in Scotland.”

“Right, so wouldn’t having kids help with that? Like don’t people, you know uh, enjoy making kids?”

Talinata eyed Jae Hyun warily, “This is a very weird angle to be taking with my sister.”

He waved his hands, “I just mean like...” he got very quiet trying to figure out exactly what he meant. This only made things more awkward. Tsetseg, tired of it, got up to use the restroom only to knock her cup of pop over, which successfully distracted everyone

briefly as they all stopped to clean it up. “Out, out damn spot!” she muttered as they rubbed stain remover that Mr. Cao had brought over for them. They resumed play while trying to get it out, Tsetseg now wearing one of Li Xiu’s shirts from her room whose style did not suit her in the slightest.

“So, lets get back to the core aspect of most roleplaying games,” Kalingkata said, ushering them back in. “Unrepentant murder.

Jae Hyun looked at his character sheet, “Alright, I’ll go ahead and stab Talinata’s character.”

Talinata and his sister exchanged glances. “You made it weird again.”

“I didn’t—”

“Just stab him already,” Kalingkata sighed.

“Right...Is this a dagger in my hand?”

“No, it’s a +2 battle ax.”

He shook the twenty-sided die, and looked down at the result. “Seventeen... plus my two strength and three... twenty-two?”

“That’s a hit, and since he’s sleeping you can take a coup-de-grace and do max damage.”

Talinata bowed his head in an exaggerated mock defeat, "Alas, I die!"

"Don't worry, I'll avenge you!" Tsetseg cut in, "Or my name isn't... Macduff. I forgot I named him that."

Cao Li Xiu crossed her arms, "You know, these game sessions aren't the way I would do them."

"Okay," Kalingkata said, having given up on having a normal time tonight.

"I could do a way better job Gamemastering."

"Okay?"

She rose up and pointed accusatorily at Kalingkata "And I could also be a way better wife for Jae Hyun!"

There was an indescribably awkward silence.

"...In the roleplaying game. As Lady MacBeth."

The silence continued to linger.

"I didn't mean in a weird way."

"Who wants dinner?" Mrs. Cao said cheerily, opening the door to the rec-room with bags of take-out. Everyone very quickly scrambled to pick out their favorites from the delectable smelling dishes,

and also escape the situation they had all just found themselves in.

“Thanks for the food, Mrs. Cao!” Kalingkata said.

“Oh, it’s the least we can do, we’re just happy Li Xiu is bringing friends over,” she looked over lovingly at her daughter, and Kalingkata felt a sympathy for Li Xiu she had never felt before. Had Kalingkata invited her into their RPG group purely because she had the nicest house to play the game in? Possibly.

Potentially. Very much so. But they had been growing closer just by proximity, and maybe the awkward tension between all of them would break given time.

“Yeah, it’s been a lot more fun than I expected,” Kalingkata mused.

Putting a hand on her shoulder, Mrs. Cao leaned in conspiratorially, “So I overheard things before I got in, you know if there’s a love triangle between you, Li Xiu, and Jae Hyung, you should really consider a polycule.”

All the color drained from Kalingkata’s face and she waved her hands frantically in front of her chest. “No, uh, its not, that’s not—what I mean is—we’re uh, all already a group, you know?”

Li Xiu's expression softened, "Ah, I misunderstood. And here I thought you were just a roleplaying group. Just be sure to let us know if you need some privacy." She winked and turned around. She had already walked away before Kalingkata could put words together.

"What's wrong, Sang Mi?" Tsetseg asked as she looked at her friend staring at the closing door.

"...Burnham wood attacks all of you. The trees are alive, and they kill you all. End of session."

Session 5 : Torn Apart

If Tsetseg was standing on a real rooftop right now, she'd be happier. As it was, she was standing on an oddly detailed replication of a roof (paid for by the concerningly deep pockets of Li Xiu's parents) in a set that wasn't well ventilated, and she did it all under the glare of Li Xiu's film camera and movie lights, sweating up a waterfall in this heat. It didn't help that the clothing Li Xiu had gotten for her character (part of something called "Larping" though she wasn't sure why the film equipment was also there) included a long-sleeve shirt and a jacket... and a propeller hat.

“Uh, GM?” she asked Li Xiu.

“Hm?”

“How old is my character supposed to be again?”

“Like, your age, uh, six.”

“... I’m the same age as you.”

“Then pretend you’re younger... anyway, let’s start the PVP session now, action!”

Jae Hyun burst through the door, wielding a gun that shot foam darts. Tsetseg was immensely jealous that he got to wear a sleeveless shirt rather than being dressed for winter like she was.

Jae Hyun charged towards Tsetseg like a raging bull, waving the toy gun at her head. “WHERE IS MY FU-uh, FU—... Fricking... MONEY!”

Tsetseg jumped back against the ledge, slightly startled, her heart thrumming and drumming at the sudden panic. “What money?”

“THE MONEY! FROM... THE MONEY!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” And she really didn’t.

“I’M TALKING ABOUT THE GOD-DA– darned MONEY!”

The room was poorly ventilated, and it was boiling hot, and she was panicked, and she was finding it difficult to breathe, and she didn’t know where this money was and–

Jae Hyun caught her as she fell so she didn’t hit the concrete.

“You weren’t supposed to actually hit her!” said Li Xiu, annoyed.

“Wait, you hit her?” said Kalingkata as she got out of her chair and walked on to the set.

“I did not hit her, she just passed out–”

“Why did you hit her?” asked Bashrat as he walked through the set door, also holding a toy gun.

“It’s not true, it’s bull- nonsense, I did not hit her–”

Li Xiu stepped on the roof set. “But she’s–”

“I DID NOT! It’s because you’re keeping us in here with no water and film equipment! Why do you even have film equipment?”

“I’m making a real actual play series, Jae Hyun.”

“We don’t need sets and cameras for an actual play series, you need a table and a camera, what you’re doing is movies, YOU’RE THINKING OF MOVIES–”

“I want to make the experience more cinematic.”

“You don’t need to! You shouldn’t! You’re just wasting time and money–”

“Money isn’t an issue.”

“Seriously, where does all that money come from?” Kalingkata muttered.

Jae Hyun checked Tsetseg. “We need to get her outside.”

Li Xiu looked annoyed. “She’ll be fine, look, put her on that chair over there and we’ll check on her during lunch, let’s continue with the scene–”

“No. We’re not playing, this isn’t working.”

“The only way I’ll let you leave is if your character dies.”

“Fine.” Jae Hyun raised the toy gun at his head and pulled the trigger, causing a foam dart to plonk on his face. “I’m dead now–”

“That’s not how damage works, roll damage.”

“I shot myself in the head—”

“Roll damage!”

Jae Hyun threw some dice against the floor.

“There, am I dead now?”

Li Xiu counted up the total. “No, you still have one hit point left—”

Jae Hyun shot his head again and jumped off the roof set, attempting to lift up the prone Tsetseg. The others there realized they could quickly create a character death just by jumping off the roof, so they did so and helped him carry her.

This would be the only time they ever larped, and the footage (thankfully) never made its way online.

Session 6: Cliffhanger

Usually, Kalingkata wasn’t the sort to bring someone’s family into it. She knew how bringing in adults could go sideways. But Li Xiu was acting nuts, and her house was only ten minutes away on foot, and she was raging. So she stormed on over.

When she arrived outside, walking up the garden path, the warm weather was holding. Holding too hard. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky, and it was too bright. The sunlight reflected off the sheer-white walls of the Cao's huge house.

She found that the front door was still unlocked, so she called inside. No answer. Nobody in the kitchen, in the lounge, in either of the offices, the pantry, upstairs or downstairs. She was about to let it go when she passed by the kitchen again and saw, through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Li Xiu's mother and father in white dressing gowns.

She paused. Something was stopping her from calling out to them, and they hadn't seemed to notice her. And those weren't dressing gowns. They were more like robes, but not kimonos or any other kind you'd find on Gongen; they were an airier cut. Kalingkata had never seen Mrs. Cao put up her hair in tidy braids before. The whole thing seemed vaguely Swedish. Also, there was a mattress in front of them.

There was a long, terrible pause. Kalingkata couldn't tell if she had been spotted. It seemed preternaturally silent, and still so bright, so bright.

And then an old woman fell from the balcony above face-first onto the mattress.

Kalingkata jumped, clapped a hand to her mouth, barely stopped herself from screaming. Mrs. Cao took up a large novelty plastic mallet and approached the woman – Kalingkata recognized her now as Li Xiu’s grandmother. She was wearing the same white robe. Was she okay? Was she safe?

From the mattress, the old woman croaked: “Roll for damage.”

Mr. Cao hunkered down and rolled a twenty-sided die onto the grey-tile patio. “Thirteen.”

Mrs. Cao swung the plastic mallet and brought it down beside her mother’s head. The mallet gave a little squeaking sound.

Mr. Cao rolled again. “Seven.”

Another swing, another squeak.

He rolled again. Paused, looked up. “Twenty.”

Decisively, Mrs. Cao brought the hammer down. It never touched the old woman, but she started wailing loudly, a high, throaty scream. And Mr and Mrs Cao joined hands and started wailing with her, harmonizing as if it were a hymn.

Alright, Kalingkata thought as she turned on her heel and walked straight back out the front door. I'm gonna leave it.

.... April Fools!

But the story is canon, actually. Surprise.

Fooled you twice.

-Your foolish pals at Arcbeatle Press



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