



# *Academy27*

The Girl With the Cat's Eyes

by James Wylder



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(A screen turns on. A file opens, a video plays)

Interior: Day

(We are inside a school. It is, as far as schools go, rather large. Right now there are not many students in here. It would appear that class has ended for the day, and the students in front of us are enjoying the freedom of no longer having the lingering gaze of expectation laid on them by their fellow students and teachers. They're sitting in a loosely posed tableau, all of them in some variation of the same school uniform: gold tie and red shirt under a gray sweater with black slacks or skirt and black shoes. The first one to speak is a little bit antsy, a girl who, like her twin brother, is already on her phone.)

KALINGKATA (Sang Mi)

Are we almost done? I have track practice to get to after this.

(A voice comes from behind the camera. This is our director, Cao Li Xiu.)

LI XIU

We've only just started! Now come on, everyone, look at the camera and say the line we memorized.

(Another girl speaks up, there is a real hesitancy to her voice that causes her to stop immediately when she is interrupted.)

TSETSEG

And I want to go hang out with Lizah, so can we--

LI XIU

I just said we were--never mind! Now say the thing!

(A boy raises his hand. He is sitting close to Sang Mi, and yet has left a telling distance between them he seems nervous to pass.)

JAE HYUN

What was the line again?

(Li Xiu makes a rather pained noise. Sang Mi's twin brother helps out by giving the answer.)

TALINATA (Sang Eun)

The line is "Welcome to our school, Academy 27!"

JAE HYUN

That is literally all I wanted!

LI XIU

Now look at the camera--you too--wait, what?

TSETSEG

Oh, Bashrat already left after the first delay--

LI XIU

No, I mean--

TALINATA

Oh, Ryan and Zhyrgal went to help out the costuming crew for the play--

LI XIU

NO! I mean who is that?

(They all turn their heads at a new girl, smiling with confidence, her chin-length bob, well, bobbing as she tilted her head.)

SAKI

Hello there! I'm Saki Suzuki, I'm new here!

JAE HYUN

Oh, well welcome to our--

(Kalingkata's eyes go wide and she BOLTS out of frame.)

KALINKATA

NOPE! NO! NOT TODAY!

LI XIU

GET BACK HERE!

(Li Xiu runs into frame, and then out of it, and then there is a cut and everyone is framed again in the tableau. Everyone is smiling except Kalingkata.)

THE GROUP

Welcome to our school, Academy 27!

(Li Xiu exhales loud enough the mic picks it up)

LI XIU

Great, now just another hour of footage to shoot. Joy.

(The footage cuts here.)

**32 HOURS EARLIER**

Li Xiu set the camera down on Sang Mi's desk, grinning from ear to ear.

“I don't know what you want to do here, but no,” Sang Mi said.

She kept the obnoxious grin up. "I got permission to shoot a video about our school!"

Sang Mi nodded. "Okay, congratulations. You do that."

"And you're helping me."

Sang Mi stared at her for a long while. Li Xiu looked very excited about all this. Too excited. She imagined herself saying "No." very firmly and drawing a line there, but in actual practice she found that the word was stuck somewhere halfway up her windpipe and wiggling around uncomfortably. "...I don't have a lot of free time."

"Oh come on, yes you do. The Track and Field season hasn't really started yet after all."

"We still have practice."

Li Xiu's grin seemed to somehow get larger. "It's in the mornings, isn't it?"

Sang Mi's face went absolutely grim. "How do you know that?"

"You walk to school with Jae Hyun a lot, right? Because he told me he's been waking up earlier to go to school in the mornings."

"Yeah, because he has theater stuff."

Li Xiu just smiled like she knew a secret she wasn't telling and had some power over Sang Mi that the other girl wasn't aware of, but Sang Mi had another superpower against this gaze: she didn't care.

"Anyway, normal practice after school starts again tomorrow."

"Which is tomorrow, not today."

"Whatever," Sang Mi concluded. "How can I help your video?"

"Documentary!"

"Isn't it just going to be like... five minutes?"

Li Xiu put a thumb to her chest. "They didn't give me a time limit, so I'm going to use this opportunity to create something truly masterful."

"Great," Sang Mi said. "You do that. They probably want something that's five minutes."

“It's going to be an hour.”

Sang Mi pursed her lips, and nodded slowly as she pulled her phone out and texted her other friends:

**Kalingkata:** SAVE ME.

**(Jae Hyun):** From what?

**Kalingkata:** Miss Cao's ambitions of stardom!

**Talinata:** We already agreed to that, we thought you knew.

**Tsetseg:** It sounds like fun!

**Jae Hyun:** ...You are joining us on this, right?

**Kalingkata:** haha of course I am jk no worries :)

She set her phone down. This day couldn't get any worse, she thought.

That was, of course, the moment things got worse, as their teacher Mrs. Ichinose called on her: “Miss Jhe? Could you please go up to room 307?”

Sang Mi frowned. There was nothing in that room, nothing at all. “...Are you sure that's the right number?”

“Yes, please take a hall pass.”

She sighed. This was either a pointless errand, or she was about to be chewed out for something. Sang Mi didn't like being chewed out; some people said that words couldn't really hurt you, but she had found this to be one of the biggest lies in the solar system. Standing up, she consoled herself that at least she was escaping from Li Xiu's delusional documentary project.

So caught up in how unfair this was to herself, Sang Mi completely missed her friend Midi saying hi to her in the hallway, and bounded up the stairs muttering with some annoyance til she reached the room. It was dark inside. She sighed yet again. This was probably a prank. Someone was having a laugh and would lock her in the room as soon as she entered it, but if she didn't enter, the hall pass would register as

not having reached its destination and she would get in trouble with the school. It was a stupid prank, but also one she wasn't so naive as to fall for. She reached into her messenger bag, and pulled out a roll of tape, ripping off a line of it onto her index finger, which she pressed against the lock as she entered the dark room. The door shut automatically behind her.

The only light in the room was a beam that came out from the door in the window, and was enough to make out a figure sitting on a desk at the far end of the room. Probably female, lounging comfortably. The most visible feature was a pair of sunglasses, which were reflecting the light in a way that made them two moon like orbs cutting through the rest of the shadows. Was that a smirk, lingering on the face there?

“Well well well, Jhe Sang Mi. I suppose this is the first time we're meeting, but not the first time we've ever met.”

“Great,” she said with disinterest. “Can I go now?”

The girl laughed. “Aren't you curious why I brought you here today?”

“I'm going to go now.”

“You really think I didn't prepare for that, the doors are--”

Sang Mi opened the door, whose lock she had taped over, and walked out.

“HEY WAIT--”

She grumbled as she made her way back downstairs. “Stupid prank, waste of my damn time...”

\* \* \*

### ***The next morning...***

*Sang Mi was running through dark water that splashed up against her legs without getting them wet. There was a light: purplish blue and swirling, but so far and so faint. Why was she running towards it? She didn't know. But she could hear the sound of plasma bolters behind her, could hear*



*screams. The shadow of a woman seemed to stumble in front of her, a shade lighter than the void around her, and she dodged around it. She could tell there was a door, though she couldn't see it, and reached for the handle like she was reaching for a relay baton—the door swung open, and there Sang Mi found herself in a—*

Her twin brother Sang Eun banged on the door. “KALINGKATA. SANG MI. WAKE UP. And turn off your alarm already, please. Min Jun has his interview about whether they’ll be hiring him on after his internship this afternoon, he needs his sleep.”

She moaned and fumbled for her phone. Why did she keep having these weird dreams? At the very least, school should be okay today. They were serving pizza for lunch.

\* \* \*

Li Xiu did not even give them the dignity of lunchtime. As they tried to focus on eating their food, her camera swung around them, catching their awkward demeanors as they tried to ignore it.

“This is terrible! Act natural!”

Ryan withered under the camera lens. “How? How do we act natural?”

Sang Eun looked at his sister, and the two of them wordlessly had a conversation of expressions that went on far longer than these things usually did and culminated in both standing up at the same time.

“Well, it’s been great, but we just realized we need to go do a thing,” Sang Mi said.

“In the art room,” Sang Eun continued.

“Involving art,” she finished.

“Well, I’d certainly hope so,” Bashrat mumbled, nibbling on his pizza after pulling off all the bits he didn’t like.

“Where’s Tsetseg anyway?” Jae Hyun asked Bashrat.

He gestured, and all eyes turned to where Tsetseg and Lizzah were sitting together, making lots of eye contact followed by bashfully looking away. Li Xiu changed gears and started filming them before basically everyone at the table wrestled the camera away from her, ending with Jae Hyun holding it up above his head as she hopped up and down trying to get it.

“Give it back!”

“Promise to behave!”

“I am behaving!”

His unamused face did not budge.

“...Okay I’ll stop filming them” He handed her the camera back, and she checked it over before sweeping the lunchroom with her eyes. Tsetseg and Lizzah were still flirting, Hanzo was telling a boastful story to Jorani Rouy who listened with tired eyes, and some student had stopped in the corner to wipe her dark-lensed glasses off. And yet... “Where did the twins go?”

“To do a thing involving art,” Bashrat sighed.

\* \* \*

“We need to get out of this documentary,” Sang Eun said.

“I was telling you,” his sister seethed.

“I apologize, I didn’t understand.”

“This is why you should believe me at first glance, Talinata.”

They’d made their way towards the art room, not because they actually had any sort of plan in the art room, but because they hadn’t really had any plan on where to go in the first place.

“Ah, Jhe—sorry, I mean, Sang Eun, could you come here for a minute?” They turned to see Mr. Xu, their maths teacher, who was holding up a hand-held holoprojector displaying a set of assignments. The twins exchanged looks, and then both shrugged.

“Catch up later,” he said, giving a single wave of his hand.

She waved back and made her way to the art room. Once again, by herself, she sighed. Opening the door, her sigh turned to a yelp as she was yanked inside.

“Thank god, we were thinking our other model wasn’t coming.”

“What?” she said.

“Get dressed, then sit over there,” the teacher said, shuffling her over to a folding screen and shoving a Hanbok into her hands. Now in that mode of “I might as well go along with this I guess?” Sang Mi quickly changed. The floofy dress mostly fit, it was a little too big for her but not enough she cared to complain. Leaving her clothes scattered on the floor behind the screen, she got up on one of the two stools in front of the class and was directed by the teacher to fold her hands on her lap and look over at the other model. She kept a pleasant smile on her face for most of that turn, until the other model came into view.

“No,” she said.

Across from her, in a perfectly fitted Kimono, was someone who could only be the girl from the dark room. The biggest oddity was that she was still wearing dark sunglasses indoors. She smiled. If Sang Mi had any doubts, her voice when she spoke confirmed her identity. “Hello again, our conversation got cut off last time, didn’t it?”

“How the hell would you know I was going to be here?”

She chuckled. “How silly. You’re talking about me like I’m some sort of Chessmaster. I’m just graciously volunteering my time here for the benefit of the arts.”

Sang Mi threw her hands up, and was promptly scolded by the teacher and forced to re-pose. As close as she could to her original position.

“Now now, don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

“It’s going to be hard to matter what I do, isn’t it?”

“Posing isn’t very hard.”

This whole thing was deeply frustrating, but she couldn’t easily get out of it, and even if she did, she might get forced to film more of Li Xiu’s documentary. She didn’t physically sigh, since that would move her body too much, but her soul sighed. “Fine, what do you want?”

Despite wearing sunglasses and holding still, the other girl looked incredibly smug. “I want you to dream about me.”

There was a long silence.

“I’m very sorry, but not only are you not my type, but I just got out of a relationship and—”

“Not like that, don’t be daft. It’s very simple. I want you to dream about me and imagine what my eyes look like. What color are they? Are they kind eyes, mischievous ones?”

“Creepy ones,” Kalingkata said.

The girl just smiled, and the teacher once again reprimanded them. “It’s okay that you’re talking just don’t move your face much!” he said with a fathomless depth of weariness.

“Creepy ones would be fine. Just as long as they’re human.”

Kalingkata squinted slightly, before putting her face back to normal before the teacher could say anything. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means what it sounds like. Can you do that for me?”

“Why?”

“If you do it I won’t bother you again.”

Kalingkata chewed this over. It was ridiculous as a request. Just absolutely bonkers. “How would you know I did it?”

No reply.

“Fine, whatever, just stop bothering me.”

“Pleasure doing business with you. Aren’t you wondering who I am?”

“No, go away.”

“Oh, you’ll know in time regardless.”

“Congratulations.”

They finished the rest of the art session in silence, and then Sang Mi changed, and took a roundabout route to her next class to make sure she wasn't being followed.

Class after that was fairly uneventful but Sang Mi's mind was elsewhere. She tapped away at the math practice (which usually came easily to her) on the touchscreen surface of her desk, correcting obvious mistakes as after her mind drifted off.

Why did she ask her to dream about her? Why had she gone to such strange lengths to ask that? Why was she wearing sunglasses? Who was she? She was starting to regret being dismissive about asking when she was broken from her trance.

“Sang Mi? Gongen to Sang Mi?”

She looked up to see Jae Hyun waving in front of her face. “Oh, sorry. What's up?”

“You need to press the button to turn your assignment in.”

Was class already over? She tapped it and rubbed her eyes.

“Is something wrong? It's Li Xiu's film, isn't it.”

She wobbled a flat hand in the air. “Yes and no. Have you seen a girl wearing sunglasses indoors?”

He frowned and shook his head. “Why?”

She sighed. “It's probably nothing. Just another weirdo.”

“We're weirdos.”

“I'm a weirdo, you're the most normal boy to ever boy.”

“Thanks? Maybe?”

The bell rang, and Sang Mi stood up. “I've got to get to Track Practice, what are you up to?”

“Zhyrgal asked me to help out with the theater department on something, so I'll be doing that after school.

“Zhyrgal, huh?” she stroked her chin. “I guess even she needs hobbies.”

Jae Hyun looked puzzled, but she didn't elaborate.

\* \* \*

Coach Dani clapped her hands. “Alright girls quiet down.” Sang Mi stopped trying to adjust the laces on her running shoes—she’d always been bad at tying shoes—and sat down on the bench in front of her locker. “Now, I know we all are thinking about the upcoming meet with Academy 2—Na Ri, Hee Jin, I see you raring to go, you too Sang Mi. But don’t forget, we have our meet with Academy 14 first, so we can’t get ahead of ourselves. Understand?”

“Yes, coach!” they all called back.

“Now, we’ve got a special guest today. Cao Li Xiu is filming a documentary about the school, and she asked if she could film our practice.”

Sang Mi sighed; she’d lost count of how many times she’d done that today. She couldn’t escape.

\* \* \*

She was running relay drills with Hee Jin, trying to get the timing of passing the baton off and being passed it while starting her run, when she noticed that the stands were not empty. Well, they were rarely entirely empty. Usually someone’s overly attached partner was there, and a helicopter parent or two. But today, aside from Li Xiu running around capturing b-roll, there was a girl wearing sunglasses, sitting in the stands, drinking a boba tea.

Sang Mi tripped over her own laces as she got distracted and tumbled onto her face.

“Are you okay?” Hee Jin asked, rushing over and helping her up.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

“Sang Mi!” Coach Dani called out. “Go inside and get a drink.”

She pointed to her water bottle.

“I said: go walk inside, get a drink, and walk back.”

She got the point, and thanking Hee Jin, started her way inside.

Getting to the water fountains, she took a drink, and decided she might as well waste a few minutes and go to the bathroom, too. She did her business, and then as she started washing her hands—

“Fancy seeing you here.”

She startled, splashing water all over her practice shirt. “Why are you following me?”

“I thought about it, and I decided I was going to trust you with something.”

Sang Mi squinted. “Why would you do that?”

Ms. Sunglasses got in the way of the exit. “Don’t you feel nostalgic? We met in a bathroom last time. Of course, that time there was a bunch of rubble blocking the entrance.”

Sang Mi took her in truly for the first time. “Saki Sanobashi. You’re the voice I heard when I was trapped in the bathroom after the quake.”

“And we have a winner, took you long enough. But that should tell you enough for you to know I don’t mean you any harm.”

“You didn’t say you were on my side.”

“Trust is earned,” Saki said. She pulled a small metal box from her purse and set it on the bathroom counter. “A gift.”

Sang Mi reached for it, hesitated, and then grabbed it. She popped it open to reveal two pills.

“They’ll help you sleep. Help you dream.”

“You really expect me to take strange drugs from a stranger?”

Saki turned and began to leave. “But you’re curious, aren’t you?”

She waited for Saki to leave, and then popped the pill case into the small mesh key pocket inside her running shorts. She should have been thinking about the pills, but instead one thought wouldn’t leave her mind: Saki hadn’t taken her sunglasses off once. At least that she’d seen...

Venturing back out, she took the long way out, and passed Jorani doing homework on the floor outside the theater. Nearby, Jae Hyun was curled up on one of the benches in the common area, jacket spread over him, his bag an impromptu pillow. Sang Mi stared at him for a moment. Her face was blank, then she pursed her lips and stared another moment.

“...What a dummy.”

She turned around and went back to track practice.

\* \* \*

That night, Sang Mi sat on her bed, staring at the pair of pills in her hand. She didn't have to take them. She probably shouldn't take them. She'd examined them thoroughly—tried to search for other similar-looking pills, looking up the tiny numbers on the side of the pill—but there were no results. The pills seemed to not exist. But that didn't make sense. She'd gone to the more underground parts of the net she could only access with a pile of layers of protections, spoofers, and encoders running, and nothing there either.

“Whatever,” she mumbled, and downed the pills before getting under her sheets.

*At the start of the dream, she was standing there looking down into her grandma's coffin. A lot of her dreams were like that these days. But... she felt a level of control she didn't usually have. Before anything more could happen she turned around, and her mourning clothes turned into a casual hoodie and track pants as the funeral home's walls turned into the walls of her school. It was nice and quiet there, unusually. She took it all in and might have been content to just stand there if it hadn't been for the deer.*

*It had walked around the corner, its broad antlers and black eyes peeking around the lockers. “Hey! Hold on!” She ran towards the deer, but it turned around and bolted back around the corner. She sprinted, sliding around the corner only to find that the hall had turned into a bathroom, with Saki sitting there in a cheap plastic chair. The stall doors were all closed, but there were no feet visible beneath them. Saki smiled.*

*“Take your sunglasses off,” she asked.*

*“Not yet. Tell me about my eyes.”*

*“They're normal human eyes. Take your sunglasses off.”*

*“What color are they?”*

*“Dark brown.”*

*“What shape are they?”*

*“Normal human shaped, I don't know what that question means?”*



*Saki shrugged. “Close enough. I think that should do.” Saki stood up. And it was only then that Sang Mi realized that the bathroom had no ceiling, and above them was a starry blue and purple swirl. It began to drip down the walls, melting them. But something felt wrong. She could feel the vibrations of the room collapsing like it was real.*

*“Are you really Saki, or are you a dream?”*

*“What is a dream? Was Saki Sanobashi real? Are you?”*

*“Don’t be daft—” She lifted her foot up, the tiles were pulling up like they were made of wet chewing gum attached to her shoe in ceramic strands.*

*And then it was darkness, and she was running through a black water that splashed along her feet as she moved towards nothing.*

*Until she saw the deer, the only thing there was in that void, and moved toward it, and then—*

Sang Mi sat up, her heart was racing. She held a hand over her chest, and waited for it to calm down. When it had, she looked at her phone—3AM. She dropped back down onto the bed. Hopefully she could get to sleep.

\* \* \*

### **The Next Morning...**

“What’s wrong with you?” her brother Sang Eun asked as she moaned into her desk.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she replied, half muffled.

Mrs. Ichinose clapped to get their attention. “Hello everyone, I’d like to introduce you to someone very special. We have a new transfer student today—”

“...Another one?” Jae Hyun said before covering his mouth.

Mrs. Ichinose smiled politely. “Yes, Mr. Jin, and I hope you can all welcome her just like you welcomed your friends Zhyrgal and Ryan. Saki, come in please.”

The classroom door opened to reveal a girl their own age with chin length black hair, normal human dark brown eyes, and a disarming smile. “Hello there everyone,” she bowed. “My name is Saki Suzuki, Family name Suzuki, given name Saki. I’ve spent some time on Earth, Callisto, and even Venus over the last few years, so I hope you’ll all be kind to me as I reacquaint myself with life on Gongen. I’ll be in your care!” The class applauded.

“She’s the girl who crashed our shoot yesterday!” Li Xiu whispered as she got up to greet Saki as the class rep. “Who knew she’d traveled so much?”

Lots of people gathered around the new girl, curious. She was instantly likable, it seemed, and Sang Mi couldn’t help but think her request to help her get reacquainted was the biggest burst of false humility she’d seen in ages. Sang Mi didn’t join the mob greeting her, nor did she have the nervous air about her like Tsetseg that caused Saki to warmly come up to her desk personally to put her at ease. Saki did come over to say hello, for effect, but Sang Mi wasn’t having it.

“I believe we met yesterday?” Saki said.

“You said I’d never have to see you again.”

“I collected new data that changed my schedule. Or maybe I was just so impressed with your school I couldn’t help but want to learn from your excellent teaching staff.”

She stared back at her dully. “Where are your sunglasses?”

“Hmn?” she said tilting her head with an obnoxious smile. “I don’t know what you could possibly mean.”

Saki walked away. And Sang Mi set her head back down and brooded.

And brooded.

And then her head lifted up, her eyes wide and shining, and she set it back down again to hide her grin.

\* \* \*

Li Xiu was sitting in the computer lab, dragging clips of footage into place. She’d gotten enough material—at least, she hoped it was enough. She couldn’t help but think

that the middle was dragging, but those thoughts were halted when the door to the lab swung open, and Sang Mi marched in dragging poor Midi behind her by the arm. “Li Xiu, we wanna see your movie!”

She was startled, but also glad that Sang Mi was finally recognizing her art even if she was getting the terminology wrong. “It’s actually a documentary. See—”

“Yeah, okay whatever,” she said, gently shoving her out of her seat and hitting play on the documentary.

Li Xiu cleared her throat, and began. “You see, I was trying to mimic the technique of Andrei Tarkovsky here, and—” She droned on, but Sang Mi wasn’t listening as she watched with rapt attention. It was kind of amazing just how much Li Xiu had shot—the Track and Field practice part was even pretty good. The experimental tone poem bit was a bit much though. Then 47 minutes in, Sang Mi stopped the film. “There. THERE. Midi, where are the security cameras in that area?”

“I’m not going to break them again, I promised Mom that—”

“I don’t want you to break them, but you know where all of them are.”

Midi pointed at a few spots that didn’t immediately look at all like cameras. Sang Mi’s eyes followed along with the demonstration, her pupils zipping around like they’d joined the Track and Field team too. “See, she’d have wiped the cameras, she’s too good for that. But if you’re planning on wiping them you get sloppy...”

“I literally don’t know what you’re talking about, but I am glad I’m helping?” Midi said.

“I also don’t know what you’re talking about and I’m not sure I’m helping?” Li Xiu added.

Sang Mi was no longer Sang Mi, she was Kalingkata: hacker, troubleshooter, and general miscreant. And as Kalingkata went back through every time Saki appeared, there it was: the camera was being held up in the air by Jae Hyun, still filming, even as Li Xiu’s fingertips came into the edge of the frame as she jumped up and down trying to grab it. Saki walked through the far background, and stopped, facing into a corner, and took her sunglasses off, wiping them off on a cloth before replacing them. “Got you,” Kalingkata mumbled, and began to move her fingers in lines through the air.

“Could you give us any clue what you’re doing?”

“She reflected off the security camera lens, and if something else reflected off of that... it’s just a chance but...” Sang Mi muttered as she zoomed in on the black glass screen of a phone being pulled out of a pocket. She zoomed in. She zoomed in more. Cao Li Xiu wasn’t going to use a cheap camera, and if the resolution was good enough...

Sang Mi stood up, and pumped her fist into the air. “I have you now, Saki Sanobashi!”

“...Don’t you mean Saki Suzuki?”

“Sure, whatever!” She transferred something over to her phone, then put things back to normal resolution and sprinted out of the lab.

Midi looked over at Li Xiu. “I’d uh, like to finish watching it actually? I thought it was pretty good.”

Li Xiu hit play. “Thank you, Midi. I’m glad *someone* around here has taste.”

\* \* \*

Saki stopped her walk towards the black car that had come to pick her up from school, as Sang Mi called out “WAIT!” sprinting at full speed.

She turned and raised a curious eyebrow. “...Yes?”

Sang Mi stopped, panting, hands on her knees a moment, before rising up to her full height (still short of breath) and pointing a finger accusatorially at her. “I know what you were hiding.”

“Hmn? Again, you shouldn’t say such odd things.” Saki ignored her and began to enter the car.

“I figured it out. I was able to trace multiple reflection angles on film, and I saw it.”

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked at Sang Mi with what Sang Mi was almost sure seemed to be surprised respect. “You’re serious?”

“I saw your eyes.”

Saki's surprised respect turned into a smile that seemed almost... maliciously giddy. "I see I was more right than I thought to stick around. Get in."

"I'm not getting in your car."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. Get in, we need to talk. In private."

Sang Mi looked around, and slid in. The car was nice—really nice. It was an Earther luxury import from Tice-Lytton Motors. Saki pulled a pair of canned drinks from a cooler in the floor and handed her one. She took it, still a bit hesitant, as the car began to move.

"So, Sang Mi, tell me: what exactly did you see, now that we're alone?"

She held her gaze on her. "It's Kalingkata. And I saw your eyes, they weren't normal human eyes. You had yellow cat eyes. Not just... contacts. They were the wrong shape, the wrong...sheen. Everything was wrong about them."

Saki sipped her drink. "Fascinating. And what is your conclusion from that?"

"You gave me pills and told me to dream about it."

"And?"

"And I've been having strange dreams for a while now—and I'm not the only one."

"And?"

"And I dreamed about Saki Sanobashi, the anime that doesn't exist, and then I got trapped in a bathroom just like was supposed to happen in the anime, and you were there like you knew it was going to."

"And?"

"Polybius, the video game that doesn't exist, showed up in the arcade at Paradox Park too."

"And?"

"And lots of weird stuff has been happening! Too many transfer students! Maquois Kiner started thinking he was the Phantom of the Opera or something! And I want to know what the hell is going on here!"

Saki swirled her drink, looking at the can instead of her. “You aren’t the only person here I was monitoring, and I’m sure you know I have been monitoring. But you have to have realized that there’s something going on, something strange, with how dreams and reality have intersected lately?”

Kalingkata nodded. “Of course, but that’s fantasy. We live in a real world.”

“Did you know that both XeLabs and the Gongen Government have been monitoring a strange wave of energy coming from space? It comes in fits and bursts, like the small ripples proceeding a big earthquake. No one knows what they are. No one has been able to do anything about it or come to any conclusions. Because, of course, it’s messed with people’s dreams, but that has to be just a side effect.”

“You’re investigating all this. You’re trying to figure out what’s going on here. That’s why you’re at our school. That’s why you’ve been lingering around.”

“The waves hit this area in particular with a regular intensity that isn’t easily found in any other populated spot. It’s ground zero. And yes, I’m investigating.” She looked up at Kalingkata. “You’re right. My eyes changed. Because I dreamed about having cat eyes, and then I couldn’t seem to change it back. It took two of us. I wouldn’t have asked it of you if I could have done it myself, but now I’m glad I did. Kalingkata, as you call yourself, I want you to work for me.”

“No.”

“Then think of it as working with me.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re easier to sucker than you think.”

“That’s not nice.”

She finished her drink and set the can down. “I can offer you something better than payment. Something I know you won’t turn down. All you have to do is... help me with my sleep study this semester.”

It was more tempting than she wanted to admit. She wanted to know. Kalingkata tried to pretend that she wasn’t completely invested now, wasn’t aching at the seams to understand what the hell was happening. She tried.

She failed.

“What’s the payment?”

“Your brother, Min Jun, he’s trying to move up in the Tenryu Party, the ruling party of Mars—sorry, Gongen, old habits.”

“You intentionally just said Mars; don’t play coy.”

She smiled wider. “I also know your family is still on the government’s generational punishment list. Your grandparents were dissidents, weren’t they? Min Jun has done well, but you don’t really think that his superiors will let him rise higher, do you?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, they let him in so they can make a fool of him. You really didn’t suspect that? They haven’t forgotten for a second who your grandparents were. I can make that problem disappear for him. I can do it in thirty seconds.”

“Prove it.”

“Agree to help me.”

“If you can really do that, I’ll do whatever the hell you want.”

She pulled her phone out and began typing. “Thank you for your assistance, Dr. Faustus.”

Saki hit send, and seconds later, Sang Mi got a text too in the family group chat.

***Min Jun:** Everyone—I have wonderful news. I’ve just been informed that my performance has exceeded expectations, and I’m no longer an intern. I’ve been hired full time as an aide to Minister Honda. I will be honest—I had begun to suspect from the snickers of my peers behind my back that my job was a farce. However it seems that Minister Honda recognizes the worth of hard work and good character even in the face of our family history. I am so thankful for all of your support and care. I will do everything I can to honor our family name and bring respect back to us.*

Sang Mi stared. “You... weren’t kidding.”

“I hope Minister Honda likes his new penthouse. I’ll send you information about the sleep study. Don’t worry,” Saki said as the car pulled up to the apartment complex the Jhe family lived in. “I already have your number. Ciao!”

Sang Mi stumbled out, unsure of what she’d just gotten herself into.

She guessed it was too much to expect a normal semester at Academy 27. She went inside, ready to congratulate her older brother—he really had earned it, even if it had taken a nudge. A nudge she wouldn't be telling him or anyone else about.

\* \* \*

## **Two Days Later**

Li Xiu stood in front of the school board, nervously clutching her hands together as the film finished playing. The completely blank faces of the board made her sweat as the lights came on.

“Well, it was... certainly an interesting film?” Ms. Zhao said.

Li Xiu bowed. “Thank you, as you can see I—”

“It was an hour long; cut it down to three minutes,” Mr. Mori replied.



# School Announcements

## *NEXT TIME!*

Wow, what an exciting time it is at Academy 27! New transfer students with dubious backgrounds, mysterious goings on, and word on the street is that Li Xiu likes Jae Hyun who likes Sang Mi—

—Sorry Mr. Mori I'll stick to the announcements!

One new student wasn't enough—Amelia is a girl from Earth, like our recent transfer student Ryan, and it looks like the theater department might be taking an interest in her! What could that lead to? Last year there was that kid who dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera and messed up the whole—

Ahem. I'm sure that won't be relevant to anything in the future. But I'm also sure that things for the theater department are about to get very interesting with Amelia around...

Oh, and there's a bake sale in the lobby to support the victims of the Hozin train derailment. See Coach Jo for details. Also, join the track team, we need more members before our big meet against Academy 14!

Till next time, I'm your announcer from the Broadcast Club, Hee Jin!

## *Tune in Next Week For:*

### **Stage Blocking**

**By Elizabeth Tock**

**New Academy 27 stories will drop each Thursday!**

**Read past stories and learn more about Academy 27 at:**

**[ArcbeatlePress.com/A27](http://ArcbeatlePress.com/A27)**

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