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# SANG MI INVESTIGATES!

*Academy27*



**Sang Mi Investigates!**  
**by James Wylder and Molly Warton**

“Could we please go home?”

“No,” Kalingkata said, slapping the wall with her pointer, zipping through the web of linked pictures that made up her holographic conspiracy board.

“Then could we—”

“No! Okay, so, who all do we have here?” She looked over at the gathered room. “Obviously my brother.”

“Well you don’t have to say it like that,” Talinata said.

“I mean we all knew you’d be here,” she replied.

“We have to ride home together.”

“We’re twins!”

“We’re not joined at the hip.”

“Buuuuut I love you?”

He gave up. “Damn, okay yeah love you too. I’m all in.”

“That’s the spirit! Crush boy is here!”

“C-crush boy? Who would that be?” Jae Hyun asked, looking around obviously.

“Just messing around, Jae Hyun is here clearly out of the goodness of his heart. Thanks.”

He blushed. “Oh! Yeah um... n-no problem!”

“Bless you,” she turned to Ryan. “And of course our resident ambassador from Earth, Mr. Wilson.”

“I’m two months younger than you.”

“Thank you for your service, Mr. Wilson. And, of course, the one, the only, Tsetseg!”

“Do... do you need to announce us all?!” Tsetseg said, nervously adjusting the oversized tinted glasses she was wearing for some reason today.

“Yes. And thank you for being here, Bashrat, I appreciate you helping me set up the conspiracy board.”

He gave her a thumbs up, like an old pro watching his apprentice take her first steps.

“And that leaves only...” she pointed the pointer at the final occupant of the co-opted classroom. “I don’t actually know who you are.”

The girl sighed. “Yeah, I figured.”

There was an awkward pause. “So um, who are you?”

“Right, yeah. Alice Cao. I’m Cao Li Xiu’s younger sister. I’m in the grade below you.” She had accented her school uniform in every way the student handbook allowed, and every accessory was black and death themed. There were more skulls on her outfit than Kalingkata could count.

“Huh. I had no idea she had a sister.”

“Half-sister. And we don’t talk to each other, so that’s fine.”

“...I feel like there is a lot of family resentment there to unpack and I don’t think I have time to get into that right now!” Sang Mi said, whipping the pointer through the air, “So let’s get back on topic: We have an issue here at Academy 27, and that issue is that there is an Earther spy here.”

Everyone stared at her blankly.

“Oh, is this one of those alternate reality games Bashrat told me about?” Tsetseg asked, raising her hand.

“...No,” Kalingkata said, flicking her pointer in her direction.

“Is this part of our roleplaying stuff?” her brother asked.

“No!” she reiterated. “I’m serious! This is a serious meeting, where I’m being serious.”

“Then why are you joking?”

“I’m...” she rubbed her forehead, “Okay, let’s start over. Deep breath. Exhale. Fresh go at it.” She pulled up an image of Zhyrgal Osmonova.

“Is Zhyrgal joining us?” Tsetseg asked happily.

“No that’s—that would kind of defeat the point here.”

Sang Eun nodded in understanding. “So, we’re planning a surprise party for her.”

“No!”

Tsetseg put her hands over her mouth, her eyes widening in what she thought was understanding. “Are... are you in love with her?”

Kalingkata stared at her, her posture drooping. “No.”

Tsetseg gave a little disappointed moan.

“This,” Kalingkata continued, gesturing to the picture with her pointer, “is secretly an Earther spy!”

She waited for everyone’s laughter to die down.

“I’m serious!”

She waited a second time, and then sighed, pulling up the next part of her presentation with a flick of the pointer.

“Okay so... look, on October 20th of last year, I overheard Ms. Osmonova taking a call in an empty classroom from her Earther handler. He was pretty explicitly giving her orders.”

Alice leaned in. “So how do you know she’s a spy?”

“Well, they said the word CISyn, you know, the spy organization.”

“I can say the word CISyn, watch,” Alice paused for dramatic effect. “CISyn.”

Kalingkata paused. “Well uh... look it was very sketchy! And that’s why we need to investigate! And if we don’t, I guess we just won’t hang out after school this week.”

Jae Hyun stood up. “We’re absolutely investigating.”

Talinata rolled his eyes. “Well, I guess we’re doing this.”

Ryan just nodded.

Tsetseg and Bashrat looked at Jae Hyun, then each other, and shrugged in unison.

“Okay, I guess I’m in. Why not. So where do we start?” Alice asked.

Sang Mi snapped her pointer forward. “Exactly the right question, Alice! Zhyrgal has been staying after to feed the animals that the school keeps on the roof — she usually leaves about an hour after school ends.”

Sang Eun’s hand snapped up just as fast as the pointer had.

“...Yes?”

“That sounds, like, kind of admirable, right? We’re always struggling to find people willing to volunteer to feed them—”

“Okay, but isn’t that suspicious?!”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Look, we’re going to follow her when she leaves the building and that’s that. Any objections?”

The head shaking repeated.

“Okay, then! Let’s go!”

They filed out, and all awkwardly gathered around a corner by the entranceway, leaning over each other in a precarious stack so several of them could peek around the corner at once. Alice and Bashrat stayed back, having pulled their phones out to play some game against each other. Sang Mi stayed laser focused on Zhyrgal as she got to the entryway, and changed her indoor shoes for outdoor ones. Her black hair was in a bun today, her hands showing the nicks and cuts she’d received from caring for the animals on the roof. She started to make her way out of the building, and Sang Mi, still watching, held a hand up — then, after waiting for her mark to gain an appropriate distance, ordered the group forward with a wave.

As she led the group onward, eyes fixed on the target ahead, Sang Mi’s concentration was suddenly broken by the sound of a slight, inquiring cough. She halted mid-stride, realizing with a start that someone had been watching their apparently-not-so-secret maneuvers. This halting also made her realize that much of

the group had been walking with big exaggerated steps like they were in a cartoon. This only made it more awkward that Mrs. Ichinose was standing in the doorway, a shrimp chip held halfway to her mouth as both sides of the standoff froze like startled deer. Mrs. Ichinose lowered the chip and tried to look professional.

“...Hey kids. Uh. What are you... up to?”

Bashrat spoke up first. “We’re investigating!”

Sang Mi leapt in front of him, waving her arms. “A totally normal investigation!”

Ichinose nodded slowly. “Are... any investigations normal?”

Jae Hyun backed her up: “This one is! So normal. I was just talking to Sang Mi here earlier,”

“That’s me!” Sang Mi added, unnecessarily.

“And she was like ‘Wow, I don’t know if I’ve ever done anything this normal before in my life,’ and I was like... same, girl.”

Mrs. Ichinose just blinked at them.

“So anyway, we’re going now! Have a good day, say hi to your wife for... all of us I guess!” Sang Mi said, rushing behind the group and ushering them forward physically.

She waved goodbye. “Try not to do anything weird, Sang Mi!”

“Oh, you know me!” she called back.

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” she mumbled to herself when she thought they were out of earshot, and continued her walk back home.

The walk trailing Zhyrgal was pretty bland. The only complicated part was when they got to the train station and they had to figure out how to trail her on the train.

“We could all just wear disguises,” Jae Hyun suggested.

“We don’t have disguises,” Tsetseg countered.

Sang Eun stepped between them. “Okay, since we have to keep doing my sister’s thing—”

“No need to sound so enthusiastic,” Sang Mi mumbled.

“—We should send someone Zhyrgal doesn’t know into the car with her, and the rest of us will go in the car behind her.”

“That’s... actually a good plan, let’s do that,” Sang Mi admitted. “But who is there she doesn’t know?”

Everyone turned to Alice.

She sighed. “Fine.”

They followed the line till Alice messaged them to say that Zhyrgal was getting off at the next stop.

“That’s Paradox Park!” Tsetseg said. “We’re going to the theme park!”

Sang Mi narrowed her eyes. Why the theme park?

After the train pulled in, they met up with Alice, who swore Zhyrgal didn’t look up from her phone during the trip, and followed her to the still-being-renovated theme park. The Ferris wheel shone above the park — none of the roller coasters had met safety standards yet, so they stood dark and silent, but the sounds of many of the smaller rides rang out from across the wall.

“Zhyrgal already went in, but there’s a line that’s gathered since then. Bad timing,” Alice said. There was indeed a line, which was surprising, considering the state of the place not that long ago.

“They’ve sure fixed this place up since last time; the graffiti is all gone, at least,” Sang Mi said.

Alice sighed, and looked over at the wall around the park, which had been carefully painted with images of the elders of the Cao family in a style that mashed up Christian and Buddhist imagery around themselves in a way that was tasteless at best. “Yeah, Dad has invested a lot in the place. Watch out for the recruiters. Honestly the place is just a conversion trap.”

Ryan frowned and exchanged a look with Jae Hyun. “Isn’t that like... frowned upon?”

“In public. The whole park is coded as a religious facility. Welcome to the Cao family,” she said bitterly. “Do we really have to go in?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, it’s your family after all,” Ryan countered.

“Not really. I’m kind of an embarrassment to everyone,” Alice replied.

“What’s that mean?” Jae Hyun asked.

She shook her head. “Just follow my lead.”

Alice approached the gate, and pulled something out of her pocket that Sang Mi could have sworn was a polyhedral die. She showed it to a woman waiting at the gate, and then turned and gestured for everyone to follow her. They shuffled through, past the line, ignoring people grumbling, and ignoring what sounded like mumbled prayers from the staff as Alice walked by.

When they got inside, it became pretty clear they had lost Zhyrgal. This, however, proved to be only a minor inconvenience, as once again Alice pulled out what Sang Mi was now very certain was a polyhedral die to an employee, and after allowing several members of the religion to place their hands on herself as she passed through, Alice rushed her friends past and ushered them to the Arcade.

It was one of the less popular areas of the theme park, filled with replicas of old arcade cabinets, and there was a smattering of people playing games, including Zhyrgal, who was playing an old co-op beat-em-up game. They all hustled around behind one of the rows of cabinets, and watched.

“Uh, Sang Mi, it looks like she’s just playing a game,” Sang Eun said.

“I can see that. Just keep watching.”

Bashrat was jittering. “That’s a co-op game. You’re supposed to play it with a friend.”

“I know that, Bashrat. Which makes it weird that—”

“I can’t take this, sorry!”

He ran around the corner, and skidded to a halt next to Zhyrgal, who looked over at him with a smile as they began to play together.

“Well this was a waste of time,” Tsetseg said. “Sorry, but I’m going to stay with Bashrat. He’ll want to keep playing even if Zhyrgal moves on.”

“No, wait — ” Tsetseg didn’t wait, and soon she was over by the arcade cabinet watching them play. Zhyrgal did move on, and Sang Mi got the others to follow her, but she could sense that the inquisitive spirit of the group was waning. But if they just kept following... She knew what she’d seen, what she’d heard. There was something



going on. The weird stuff with Saki proved it. There had to be some connection. Or at least, she hoped so.

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It turned out that Tsetseg didn't stay as long as they all expected, because Bashrat had to go home to feed his turtle. That he had a turtle seemed to be news to everyone except Tsetseg. She caught up with them as they were waiting for the next train, sitting on the far end of the station trying to avoid Zhyrgal's line of sight. Sliding into a seat on the bench with them, Sang Eun finally got the courage to ask what everyone had been wondering.

"So uh, Tsetseg, what's with the glasses?"

She looked up. "Oh, it's nothing much. I just needed a procedure done and, well, I shouldn't have to wear these very long! And I am fine without them. Just, you know, blind. Ish."

"Ish?" Jae Hyun asked.

"You know, like, you could make an argument in court I wasn't blind."

Sang Mi leaned over, inspecting her face. Tsetseg leaned away from her.

"What are you doing?"

"You don't... happen to have cat's eyes, would you?"

Everyone looked at Sang Mi weirdly. Tsetseg broke the silence, but her voice stammered a bit. "Is that some sort of reference? Like, to an obscure silent movie from the 1900's or something?"

Kalingkata sighed. "No, nevermind. Oh—the train is here."

They followed the same plan as last time, but it quickly became clear they were going somewhere unexpected.

"No way," Ryan said as they exited the train and watched Zhyrgal walk towards the Feed the Stars Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry. "My mom works there."

They approached the building, and as they slipped through the door a woman wearing an apron with a name tag that said "Anne" finished handing a bag of rice to an old woman, and wiping her brow looked over to see who was entering.

“Oh, hello, Ryan,” said his mom. “What are you doing here?”

“Shh,” said Ryan. “It’s a secret.”

“Ah,” said his mother knowingly.

“Hi, Ms. Wilson,” said Sang Mi and Sang Eun cheerily.

“Oh, you’ve brought your friends with you, that’s nice,” said Ms. Wilson. “And who are you?” she said to Alice and Tsetseg.

Alice and Tsetseg introduced themselves, and Sang Mi said to Ryan’s mother, “is, uh, Zhyrgal here?”

“Yes,” said Ms. Wilson, “She’s being very helpful. Shall I tell her you’re here?”

“No!” said Sang Mi quickly. “We’re, uh, hiding. From her. As a joke, you know.”

“That’s the secret, then?” asked Mrs Wilson, smiling.

“Yes,” said Sang Mi.

“No,” said Ryan simultaneously.

“Good, good,” said Anne Wilson, smiling kindly. “I’ll get you some aprons, and you can come and help out in the kitchen. It’s always good to have an extra pair of hands!”

“Right,” said Sang Mi delightedly, as Ms. Wilson bustled off to get the aprons, “We’re going to need disguises!”

She produced, from her pocket, a fake mustache, which she fastened to her upper lip by means of the mechanism provided.

“Where did you get that from?” asked Sang Eun incredulously. “We didn’t have any disguises earlier!”

“I’ll explain later,” she said. “Right, Tsetseg, give me your glasses.”

“Okay,” said Tsetseg, taking them off, “but I can’t really see without them.”

“Never mind that now,” said Sang Mi, and plonked the glasses upon Sang Eun’s head. “There,” she said, “nobody will recognize us now. Alice, you’re fine, Zhyrgal doesn’t know you. It’d make sense for Ryan to be here, so he doesn’t need one –”

“Oh,” said Ryan, disappointedly.

“And Jae Hyun... uhh... you’ll just have to hide every time Zhrygal comes past.” Taking a deep breath, Sang Mi clapped her hands, clearly pleased with herself. “Right,” Sang Mi said to Ryan and Alice, “You go and hide in that cupboard over there and spy on Zhrygal, and Sang Eun, Tsetseg and I will make the food. We’re great at cooking. It’ll be great!”

So Ryan and Alice went and hid in the cupboard, and Sang Eun tried to close the door on them.

“Ow!” cried Sang Mi. “That’s my nose!”

“Sorry,” said Sang Eun. “It’s quite hard to see with these glasses on.”

Sang Mi shut the door to the cupboard, locking Ryan and Alice inside, and she led Sang Eun, Tsetseg, and Jae Hyun to the kitchen area.

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They were making soup. Ostensibly.

It was a rather nice kitchen area — very clean, with all the different sorts of implements that one needs to cook, and a fair few that one doesn’t, but are quite handy to have anyhow, for time saving and suchlike.

“Now remember,” said Sang Mi, “I,” (and here she affected a quite terrible French accent) “Am ze Marquis du Dupont, ze best chef in all of Parees!” (she returned to her normal voice) “Tsetseg and Talinata, you think of names for yourselves, and Jae Hyun, you’re not here. Right, let’s get cooking!”

Ms. Wilson popped her head around the door.

“You all know what you’re doing?” she asked.

“Yes, Ms. Wilson,” said Sang Mi. “We’ll be quite alright, thank you.”

“Good, well. In that case I’ll leave you to it,” she said, and left again.

Sang Mi opened the recipe book.

“This seems simple enough,” she said. “Carrots, onions, garlic, ginger, potatoes, and celery all need chopping. Tsetseg? – ”

Tsetseg's hand moved in the general direction of the knives.

“Aagh!” cried Sang Mi, pulling her away. “I think perhaps you should wash the vegetables instead. Jae Hyun and Talinata can manage the chopping on their own.”

“Okay,” said Tsetseg, picking up a bunch of carrots and moving over towards the oven.

“Aargh!” cried Sang Mi again.

“The sink's this way,” said Sang Eun, guiding Tsetseg to it. (He had, rather sensibly, pushed the glasses to the end of his nose so that he could see what he was doing.)

The soup-making set off at a steady pace. Sang Mi managed to wrestle some lentils into the pot, and get them boiling nicely, and with Tsetseg washing and the boys chopping, they got through the vegetables at a quite decent lick. The chopping of the onions made everybody's eyes water, which really didn't help with visibility, and as they began to go into the frying pan to be fried the effect only worsened. The air was steamy, and the room smelt deeply of onions and garlic and other nice spices. (Sang Mi had picked up the recipe for dhal by mistake.)

It was all going marvelously, thought Sang Mi. What could possibly go wrong?

Just at that moment, Tsetseg turned blindly to grasp for another potato to wash, and, failing to see that the floor was wet, slipped, and, without eyesight to assist her balance, fell forward into Sang Eun, whose glasses fell forward onto his nose as his knife slipped out of his hand to bury itself into the floor with an ominous *twang!* Just as she turned, Zhyrgal opened the door and entered the room, causing Jae Hyun to panic and duck behind a table, while Sang Mi tried her very utmost to look French. Jae Hyun having ducked meant that there was nobody else for the domino effect of Tsetseg and Sang Eun to knock over, so instead they barrelled over him and knocked the table over, sending pieces of carrots flying across the room. Zhyrgal just stood there open-mouthed, but Sang Mi was assaulted by flying carrot pieces, and flailed about a lot, dropping the tea-towel she was holding onto the cooker. It set ablaze quite suddenly, startling everyone.

Sang Mi and Jae Hyun could only stare in shock. Sang Eun and Tsetseg were still tangled up in the table (and couldn't see anything anyway), but Zhyrgal leapt into action, grabbed the fire blanket, and threw it over the stove, smothering the fire completely.

Sang Mi, Jae Hyun, and Zhyrgal heaved a collective sigh of relief.

“Ow!” cried Sang Eun as Tsetseg accidentally kicked him in the shin.

“Sorry!” she said, wincing.

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Thankfully, people had liked the soup, even though they had to restart it from scratch while Ms. Wilson seethed. Less thankfully, they’d nearly lost Zhyrgal while getting caught up actually serving the soup to needy people. “It would be nice to stay here, and keep serving them,” Jae Hyun noted. “Maybe we can put off the investigation till later?”

Kalingkata grabbed him by the shoulders. “That absolutely cannot happen. We’re on a mission.”

“But...”

“No buts! All of you agreed to do my thing, so we’re seeing it through, right?”

Everyone glanced at each other. Sang Mi looked between them, why were they looking unsure? This was important! Even so, they did all keep going with her, and picked up on Zhyrgal’s trail. And that got Kalingkata skipping with joy.

“All things considered,” said Sang Mi, as they walked along, “that could have gone a lot worse.”

“She managed to see through our disguises,” said Jae Hyun.

“Well, yes, but – ” began Sang Mi.

“Ms. Wilson didn’t seem very happy,” said Tsetseg dolefully.

“She said it was quite all right,” said Sang Mi.

“She didn’t look like it was quite all right,” said Tsetseg.

They stopped, as Zhyrgal had, and hid behind a wall. A bus pulled up, brakes screeching, and Zhyrgal hopped on, heading to the back. The group followed, making sure to keep their heads down, and got on near the front, making sure that Zhyrgal was looking the other way. There was a brief, tense moment when Zhyrgal turned when Sang Mi thought they had been spotted. She hissed to the others to keep their faces hidden, but by the time they had done so, Zhyrgal had turned back again. They sat in their seats as the bus rattled off, rhythmic rumbles and groans emanating from its engines.

The company seemed pleasant enough, the bus was quite full, but nobody was exceedingly rude or anything. Sang Mi was engaged in a quite pleasant conversation about the weather by a nice-looking young man with blonde hair. She thought he seemed quite nice.

The journey was of a moderate length, but was longer than they expected. The bus stopped once or twice, but both times Zhyrgal failed to depart. At length, the bus stopped, and the voice of the announcer said, tinny through the tannoy, that this would be the last stop before the bus's return to the depot.

The group dismounted quickly, spurred on by Sang Mi, who wanted to make sure they did before Zhyrgal had a chance to. The bus had halted just outside of the city, and desert spread out before them. The group hid behind a small derelict building as Zhyrgal alighted from the vehicle.

“Where are we even going?” said Sang Eun.

Sang Mi turned her head in the direction that Zhyrgal was headed.

“Well,” she said, surprised, and stopped, “there’s your answer.”

Sang Eun gasped. In the distance, across a small sea of sand outside the city of Takumi’s domes, lay a collection of haphazardly connected buildings, tents, and small habitation domes. Unlike the sleek clear dome they lived under, this was a mess that had been erected bit by bit by the sheer necessity of the people living in it. Nearby, a group of hovertrucks was filling up with Gongen, the spaces between the people being crammed in with boxes of something or other, Sang Mi presumed to trade with the town. And it was a town. A town quite different from any other on the planet Gongen. “Colocog!” Talinata said.

Tsetseg looked alarmed. “Colocog?” she exclaimed.

“There’s definitely something fishy going on,” said Sang Mi, trying to look solemn. “Let’s follow her in.”

“Isn’t that forbidden?” said Jae Hyun, “Like, I thought nobody was supposed to go in or out without a pass?”

“Yes, well,” said Sang Mi, sauntering over to lean on her twin’s arm, “we know ways of getting around the sensors.”

“It is *quite* difficult,” said Sang Eun.

“Eh,” said Sang Mi.

“Stop showing off,” chided her brother.

“Uh,” said Jae Hyun, looking nervously at the high level of security surrounding the expanse of buildings, and thinking of all the stories he’d heard of the Mavericks (though obviously not JackBox; JackBox was nice), “How about I wait here while you go in? After all, it’s still a way off.”

“I’ll stay too, I think,” said Tsetseg nervously.

“Alright, then,” said Sang Mi, “Come on, brother mine! Let’s go!”

They started on their way, ducking around sensors and moving carefully, watching the hover trucks they’d seen loading up pass them by.

“How are those trucks going in?” Talinata asked.

“They must have a trading license, like the one JackBox uses to come into Takumi, but in reverse,” she answered.

Talinata only frowned. “I don’t think they give those.”

As they made their way in, they were thankfully able to spy Zhyrgal and pick up her trail as they slipped through the entryways to one of the main buildings.

Colocog was a cobbled-together place, a place of the forgotten and the left-behind, of the fringes of society, the burnt crud at the bottom of the pan. Much of it was constructed of concrete, a dull, dirty, dismal concrete that seemed to seep into everything. It smelt of chemicals and cement dust and smoke, and licks of black where places had been touched by fire’s fatal grasp lay sprawled nonchalantly along the sides of walls.

Zhyrgal moved about the place as if she knew it well, from one alley to the next, hither and thither, darting about in the tunnels and the reddish rusty dust of Gongen.

The twins followed semperdistans to her, following behind just far enough to be able to duck out of sight if needed, but close enough that they could still see where she was headed. They followed quietly, bantering softly with each other as they went on about this or that thing, until quite suddenly, Sang Eun, who was not looking where he was going, ran slap-back into a young woman who had also been looking elsewhere.

“Oh!” he cried, “Oh crap, sorry. Are you alright?”

“JackBox!” cried Sang Mi in surprise.

Indeed it was. The twins' Maverick friend regained her breath and beamed at them.

"Oh, hello!" she said delightedly. "Wasn't expecting to see you here today, I thought you were busy with some investigation or something after school?"

"Well – " began Sang Mi, but JackBox interrupted.

"Oh, Talinata, before I forget, I wanted to show you this thing I've been working on, I think you'll like it..."

JackBox began to detail the workings of this gadget that she was fiddling with, and Talinata listened attentively. Normally, Kalingkata would have found it very interesting, but she was desperate to continue, and the knowledge that Zhyrgal would be getting increasingly further away with every second spent talking was at the forefront of her mind.

"Uhh..." she said, "don't wanna interrupt, but we kinda have to get going?"

"Oh," said Sang Eun, and she could see the disappointment in his eyes.

"Hmm," she pondered, and an idea sprung joyously into her head, "How about," she said, "you stay with JackBox, and make your own way back, and I'll carry on following Zhyrgal."

Sang Eun brightened up. "Yeah," he said, "yeah, that sounds good."

"Great!" said Sang Mi, "See ya later, then!"

She gave her brother a quick hug, fist-bumped JackBox, and ran off after Zhyrgal, legs pumping furiously. Luckily, Zhyrgal hadn't gotten too far, and the route she had taken was quite straightforward, so Sang Mi was soon able to catch up, and follow Zhyrgal the little bit further she went, before stopping, and heading into a tall multi-story building.

Kalingkata was stumped for a moment, then noticed the rickety metal fire escape that clung protectively to the wall of the building. She bounded over, and made her way up. Rust crept along it, creeping, clutching tendrils of age and decay worming their way over its ancient frame. It creaked in a nerve wracking manner as Sang Mi went up its stairs, up and up and up until she heard voices emanating from a window right by the escape. She stopped, and leant over to listen in. The drop below stretched out before her, for far too long for comfort, so Sang Mi didn't want to lean out too far. However, she managed to get a glimpse of the room in which Zhyrgal was situated.



It was a quite nice room, well furnished and decorated. On the walls were hung a variety of oddities: a poster of some actor who Sang Mi couldn't remember the name of in the 2145 film of *Twelfth Night*; a pastel-colored watercolor of the Roman god Janus; a picture of David Bowie performing in Manchester as Ziggy Stardust. The walls were a sort of lime green color. She couldn't see very much of the room, but she could just about see Zhyrgal's arm. She leaned back in and listened.

The voice of the individual with whom Zhyrgal was so deep in discussion was that of an older man, a kind voice, thought Sang Mi. There was some sort of shuffling sound, and a sort of muffled clinking, as the sound of wood upon wood.

"White or black?" said the old voice.

"Black," said Zhyrgal.

"Interesting choice," the old man replied.

There was a shuffling noise.

More clinking. Silence. Clinking again.

A chess match is not the most riveting of things to listen to when one is halfway to the heavens standing on a rickety old fire escape and a bitter wind is biting into one's face. Sang Mi zoned out for a bit, then attempted to follow the match via the conversation. It seemed that there were some complicated strategies and things going on, and that each party was trying to deceive the other about their strategy. It all seemed terribly complicated, and Sang Mi wasn't quite sure what was going on.

Suddenly, Sang Mi was distracted from the conversation by noises from the ground below, from just outside of Colocog. She turned.

"Jesus," she whispered.

Down below, swarming like enraged ants, yelling and screaming and shouting, was a great mob of people, the same ones they'd seen on the bus. Their eyes were full of rage, and their faces were screwed up and contorted with hatred. The wildebeest were stampeding. She pressed herself back against the wall as Zhyrgal and the man opened the window to look out, which at least brought them into clearer view for her.

"Gongen for the Gongen!" the rioters were yelling. "Down with the Mavericks!"

They wielded fireworks, which they set off sporadically, wheeling and crying in the air, and exploding with great bangs. Every time one of them was set off, the three spectators jumped. However many times they were set off, it was always a shock.

This rather put a dampener on further conversation, and so Zhyrgal said good-bye, and made to leave.

“Zhyrgal?” said the old man.

“Yes?” said Zhyrgal.

“Would you like to meet up for coffee sometime?”

Zhyrgal hesitated, then “No,” she said definitively, “I’d better not.” But there was a sad look in her eyes, as if she did want to. A look that was so pained that it troubled Sang Mi for some time after she saw it.

\* \* \*

*A television. The screen flickers on. On it is a sleekly-dressed politician. He smiles the smile of a crocodile. “Yes,” he is saying, “I absolutely condemn this violence, these riots. However, the Mavericks do pose a threat to our society, and I think it is very easy to downplay their influence when such things as these occur. Extremists who wish to change the order of things are of course terrible, but they have reasonable concerns at heart, and we should bear this in mind. We’re not fascists, we’re not monsters, but we have Gongen’s best interests at heart.”*

\* \* \*

Jae Hyun looked troubled, but Sang Mi tried to push him on as if nothing had happened. Sang Mi cast a short look to where friendly people from the neighboring area were gathering to help clear up the wreckage from the anti-Maverick riot, but quickly decided that Zhyrgal was more important.

“What happened to Tsetseg?” she asked Jae Hyun.

“Oh, she went back home, I think,” said Jae Hyun. “Said her dad would be worried. What about your brother?”

She waved it off. “He went off with JackBox, she wanted to show him something. And they messaged me during the riot—they’re both safe so no worries.”

He cast a look back. “I have worries. I can’t believe they did that. People could have been really hurt.”

“Well, hopefully no one was. I had lots of relatives I never met who died in the reform protests thirty years back. It’s not a great way to go.”

He nodded.

They continued in silence.

Jae Hyun was alright really, thought Sang Mi, just a bit annoying.

\* \* \*

Getting back inside the dome had been easy, but once again their trail had led them into an odd position.

Kalingkata and Jae Hyun lay on their bellies beneath a large bush, concealed beneath its foliage. The branches scratched their faces and hands a little, and the ground was rough and uncomfortable beneath their bodies. Zhyrgal stood on a large concrete expanse, flat and dull and gray, in the center of the square. The air smelt of cherry blossoms. They settled in to watch, all of them sharing in the scent and sight of the delicate petals.

\* \* \*

Zhyrgal would always remember the cherry blossoms, floating in the air, every facet of their being immaculately placed, falling like teardrops into the square, littering the floor with blossoms. Blossoms fell into her hair, brushing against her skin as they fell, falling, falling, always falling.

“Zhyrgal.”

The voice was so beautiful, thought Zhyrgal, like wind chimes on the air. She turned.

“Aigul,” she said, smiling. Aigul remained solemn. Zhyrgal could see there was a sadness in her eyes that was not usually there.

“Hey. I’m glad you came. I... well I wasn’t sure you were going to.”

“I’ve been busy,” Zhyrgal replied, trying to stay cheerful.

“Yeah, you’re always busy. Like I’m guessing you were yesterday.”

Zhyrgal wracked her brain. She really had been busy. She’d had to work, staying out all night on a job for her boss... she’d nearly skipped out on volunteering at Feed the Stars today. But what was yesterday? “I was, yeah.”

“I see,” Aigul sighed. “You really don’t remember at all do you. My recital? The one I’ve been working on for months?”

The wind blew past them. Zhyrgal felt her heart churn. "...Oh god. I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to, truly. I... I've had so much on my mind..."

"And I've really... Zhyrgal, you're great, but, you have too many excuses. Do you know how hard I had to work to memorize that, I—" She kept talking, but Zhyrgal was distracted again by her own thoughts.

The realization of what was coming hit her like a hard stone wall, large round stones crashing against her head. She screwed her eyes up tight, bright colors dancing before her perception. Blues and greens and reds, all in the dark space behind her eyelids, and she stared into the darkness, and scrunched her eyes tighter and tighter and tighter and the colors grew brighter and brighter and brighter. Her hands danced about each other like butterflies in the sunlight, and she felt as if a great weight was pushing down on her heart, dragging her into the darkness, down and down and down. The waves of words washed over her as if she were naught but a bedraggled figure lying on the sand, and they rolled and they rocked and they frothed all around her, hanging in the air.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?" said Aigul, sadly. "You're not even bloody *listening!*" A tear rolled down her cheek, and she was louder now, and more upset, and more angry. "We can't go *on* like this, Zhyrgal. It has to stop!"

She walked away, towards the city, full of people, loud and busy.

"I love you," she said.

Zhyrgal's heart whispered *I love you too*, but the only cracked word that escaped her lips was a whispered "Goodbye."

Aigul disappeared into the city, mingling and merging with all the hundreds of people with all of their busy, bustling lives. Zhyrgal could have gone after her, said she loved her, but she didn't, because she loved Aigul. It was better this way, thought Zhyrgal hazily. In that moment, she knew that she would never see Aigul again.

The tears floated to the ground like cherry blossoms.

\* \* \*

Sang Mi was hyperfocused on the scene in front of her, staring at Zhyrgal's body language as Aigul walked away. She didn't even hear Jae Hyun when he'd made the first noise of discomfort, and it took him repeating "Kalingkata, I think we should let this go," for him to get her attention.

She looked over at him. What was he thinking? They'd come all this way! They'd even found this good spot in the bushes. "What are you talking about? We're just getting the really good info here."

He cringed, and she found she didn't like the way he was looking at her.

"She's by herself, we can—"

"Nah, no. Sorry. I... Sang Mi, look. I'd do anything for you, but I can't do this."

She threw her hands up, rustling the bushes. "Then you wouldn't do anything for me, that doesn't even make sense!"

He sighed, and slid back and out of the bushes. Sang Mi scrambled to follow him.

"Did I do something to piss you off? Look, I'm sorry whatever it was--"

"Just think about someone other than yourself for once, god."

He turned and walked away. Sang Mi stood there, dumb and frozen, the sounds of Zhyrgal crying the only noise as she tried to come up with something to say. "Wait?" she asked, and for a second he did turn, and then he got a notification and as he looked at his phone he returned to his convictions.

Then it was just her and Zhyrgal.

"Are you happy? Is this what you wanted to see?" Zhyrgal spat through sobs. "I don't know why you've been following me all day but can't you just leave me the hell alone?"

Sang Mi frowned. "Oh, you noticed us then?"

"Of course I noticed you! You weren't exactly subtle. Like when you pretended to be... um..." she put a finger on her lip mimicking a mustache.

"...French?"

"That's a salad dressing."

"No, it's a language."

"I mean it's that too."

"It also used to be a country."

Zhyrgal sniffed. "I don't need to know about ancient peoples that invented pyramids and salad dressing."

"No that... never mind. Look, why don't you just tell me."

She pulled a tissue out her purse, and tried to wipe her tears.

"I want to go home, don't you have a heart? Can't you just let me be?"

Sang Mi felt a sting. She hissed through her teeth, and immediately turned around and started walking. "Okay yes, sorry. Forget I said anything."

She got about five meters and turned back around.

"No, no. I came here for a reason. I'm trying to find proof."

Zhyrgal crossed her arms. "Proof of what? That I'm a bad girlfriend?"

This was getting ridiculous. She'd gathered everyone up, and they'd all come here to help with what was a noble quest, and she was somehow the last one standing, and now Zhyrgal was going to play dumb?

No one was around. She might as well just go for it. She closed her eyes, and breathed in.

"Because..." she pointed at her. "J'accuse! You're a spy! An Earther spy working for CISyn, under Jylan Rathe."

There was no hiding the surprise on Zhyrgal's face. "What?!"

Kalingkata took two steps forward. "I said you're a spy. I saw you reporting back to your spymaster. Heard you reporting back. I know. I know, Zhyrgal. I've known from the first day you were here."

A flurry of facial expressions flashed across Zhyrgal's face: surprise, panic, sorrow, fear, anger, and then it all collapsed into a stone cold mask.

"So?" Zhyrgal said.

"So!?! You're a spy for Earth!"

"Prove it."

"I'm trying," she gestured around. "That's why everyone was with me to... to you know, find evidence."

Zhyrgal huffed, and closed the distance between them, looking up at Sang Mi as she got close enough they could feel each other's breath. "And where is everyone, huh, Kalingkata? Where have they all gone?"

Sang Mi's face grew pale. "You know, they had other stuff to do?"

She gave a humorless laugh. "Oh really?" Zhyrgal gestured behind her. "You know who that was? Someone I loved, Sang Mi. Loved. And I just had to let her go. Do you know why?"

"Because... you're... a spy?"

Zhyrgal grabbed her shirt below the collar in two fists of cloth, and pushed her into the wall of the building next to them. Sang Mi didn't see it coming, and only really processed it had happened about halfway through the sentence that followed.

"Because I believe in something greater than myself. I believe in good. I believe in justice. In helping others. In doing the right thing. You just believe in doing whatever the hell you want, no matter how many bridges you burn in the process. Cause you're oh so smooth, right? You don't like to admit it, you like playing the card that you're a helpless little nerd but you're sly and cunning. You can just get new toys if you break the old ones, right?"

They breathed together for a moment, Zhyrgal's face having gone from a cold mask to a cold anger. Breaking from the trance, Sang Mi shoved her back. "Get off me! And I love my friends, you don't know what the hell you're talking about. I'd die for my friends!"

Zhyrgal shoved her glasses back up her nose. "But would you live for them? Would you take care of yourself for them? Or is that a job you port off on other people?"

She stomped her foot. Why was she coming off as the bad guy here? She felt the world spinning around her. "That's not true either! And you're betraying everyone here to our colonial overlords."

Zhyrgal finished tidying herself up, and smiled back at her. "I'll see you at school. And none of this happened, so let's just pretend it didn't. Good luck with your friends. If you still have them." She shrugged. "Maybe on that front we're more alike than I'd like."

"Shut up," she mumbled.

Zhyrgal smiled, and walked away.

\* \* \*

Sang Mi lay in bed. Her brother had sent her a message saying he was staying out late with JackBox to go to a concert of a lousy David Bowie cover band visiting from Hongtu. She hadn't heard back from him since.

She messaged Alice. Nothing.

Li Xiu. Nothing.

Tsetseg. Nothing.

Bashrat. Nothing

Ryan. Nothing.

Jae Hyun. Nothing.

She rolled over. She couldn't get up the energy to play video games. Even staring at the wall felt like too much effort. Her heart was thumping, and she felt a pain spiderweb up from it into her shoulder.

She grabbed her phone and messaged someone she didn't want to.

**Kalingkata:** You up?

**SakiSuzuki777:** Perhaps. Why do you ask?

**Kalingkata:** Don't be cute. I'm free for an experiment tonight, if you want to?

**SakiSuzuki777:** You know as well as I do that our experiments are timed carefully with the ebb and flow of the cosmic pre-shocks I've been monitoring. If you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to work.

She read the message through four times, and then chucked her phone across the room. After a moment, she grumbled and got up to retrieve it. Picking it up, the black glass reflected her face. It was a bit puffy, she had cried a little. She wanted to smash that face in. Go for a punch, like Saki had said.

"God I hate you," she mumbled.

Everyone was sick of her. Everyone was tired of her. Everyone was...

"I'd do anything for you, but I won't do that."



Maybe Zhyrgal was right, she'd just reel everyone back in. Maybe it was better if she left them alone, blocked them all for their own good.

But she didn't want to.

She didn't want to be alone.

She pulled on a hoodie, and slid out of her room, tiptoeing through the apartment, and then rushed out the door. She ran through the night, her shoes thudding against the rough concrete, stumbling over some trash the street bots hadn't gotten to yet, past the neon signs of adult nightlife, ignoring a shout that it was past her curfew.

She found herself in front of a nice townhouse, and staggered to a halt, panting with her hands on her knees, covered in sweat that had made her hoodie damp, the reprocessed air rapidly cooling her from the post-run inferno in her chest into a icepop.

Shivering now, she walked up to the door, and pressed the intercom button, which scanned her genetics and compared it with the planetary database to let the homeowners know who she was. A hologram of Jae Hyun from the shoulders up, yawning, appeared. "Sang Mi? What are you doing here?" He squinted; she'd clearly woken him up. "You look awful."

"I—I need you to help me solve a mystery."

He groaned. "Go home, Sang Mi. My parents are already going to be unhappy if the door woke them up—"

"*Sherlock Holmes*. The first one, the silent movie with William Gillette from 1916. The actor invented a lot of stuff about the character—"

"How is that—"

"I haven't seen it," she finished loudly. "I haven't seen it yet. Ever."

His squint evolved into a confused rapid blink. "How is that a mystery?"

"Watch it with me. We need to investigate."

Rubbing his nose, he bobbed his head back and forth in consideration. "Yeah, sure. We can do that sometime."

"Tonight. Let's watch it together."

"It's late."

"It's not a school night."

"I don't really think..."

She threw her hands up. "Jae Hyun, I have run here in the middle of the night to watch an obscure silent movie with you. Solve a mystery for once in your life and open the damn door."

She couldn't really read his expression through the intercom, but after a moment, the door unlocked.

Jae Hyun's mom woke up and fussed over her, making her change into something that wasn't sweat-soaked, and got her and her son a snack, seemingly just glad that he had a friend over.

Sang Mi pulled the blanket up around her. "I didn't prove anything today."

"Yeah, I don't know why you thought she was a spy?"

She shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Let's start the movie."

*Sherlock Holmes* (1916) began to play as the lights dimmed.

A few minutes passed, and Jae Hyun looked more and more confused. Sang Mi glanced at him in confusion at his confusion, till he finally voiced it.

"Hey, Sang Mi? Why aren't they talking? Like there's no dialogue."

"In the silent movie?" she deadpanned.

He nodded sincerely.

Sang Mi laughed, doubling over on the couch. Tears came to her eyes; she wasn't sure if it was from laughing or as if some weight felt a little lighter and they could roll out again. "It's a mystery!"

# School Announcements

## ***NEXT TIME!***

Why Alright it looks like we have a special announcement from Saki Sazuki—Sazuki is her family name if you're confused—and my good personal close friend Jhe Sang Mi who needs to remember to bring her spikes this week for relay race practice—and let's see its...

What?

That doesn't make any sense. I don't... I don't understand.

What exactly is this... an Apple Tree Yard? What the heck is an Apple Tree Yard? Like... like an Orchard? We don't have any Apple Trees at the school?

I don't understand why they'd want an Apple Tree Yard?

Apple Tree Yard

Apple Tree Yard

Apple Tree Yard

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

***Tune in Next Week For:***

**Apple Tree Yard**

**By James Wylder**

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

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*Sabrina and Song  
Mimi*

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