

***Academy27 Presents...***



**Apple Tree Yard**  
by James Wylder  
art by Rachel Johnson

*His hand drifts carefully, slowly, towards Watson's chin. He pulls it up slightly—but not gently.*

*"S-Sherlock! What are you doing!?"*

*He put his foot up on the couch, letting his unbuttoned shirt fall open to reveal his surprisingly muscular chest. Watson held back from his urge to reach out and feel the contours of them.*

*"What am I doing? Why, it's elementary, my dear doctor." He leaned in close enough to whisper. "I'm playing doctor—"*

"NO!" Sang Mi said, dropping the padd that she had been handed, and then hastily shoved it back to Li Xiu with her fingertips like trying to push a plate of spoiled food away.

"So... you don't like it?"

"Of course I don't like it!"

Li Xiu frowned. "You don't like the ship?"

"The ship isn't the problem! I've written it myself before, but..." She gestured at the document. "This is the film you want to make!? And you want to cast me in it!?"

Li Xiu stood up, and put her foot up on the chair, an action that reminded Sang Mi too much of what she just read, and she stood up just to push Li Xiu back down into her seat and return to her own.

"Well, it's *a film* I want to make..."

"You asked me to play Sherlock Holmes!"

"You're perfect for the role!"

"I have so many questions I don't want to know the answers to!"

"You have black hair!"

"How does your mind work!?"

They'd been so into their back and forth that when Jae Hyun coughed pointedly to get their attention, they both turned in unison like they were in a cartoon. Jae Hyun waved, while Saki Suzuki, who was next to him for some reason, sipped her boba tea.

"That's not allowed in class," Li Xiu said.

"I know," Saki replied, taking another sip. "I overheard you discussing your movie idea. It's... interesting."

Li Xiu perked up. "See, someone understands."

Saki smiled, and set the boba down on Zhyrgal's desk, then walked over and picked up the padd, scrolling through it. Sang Mi frowned; she could see the gears were turning in her forced acquaintance's head, and she would rather those gears stopped. "...There's definitely something here." She carried the padd over to the window, and looked out at what looked like nothing at all but an unused plot on the campus covered in weeds. "...Because there is nothing there..." The look in Saki's eyes screamed. "I have a plan!" and Sang Mi began thinking about how to get out of talking to Saki after class.

Maybe she could use the excuse that she didn't want Zhyrgal following them.

Mrs. Ichinose came in, and everyone hurried into their seats. "Okay, class, we have—Zhyrgal, you know that's not allowed, please see me after class."

Zhyrgal looked down at what was definitely not her tea. "But I... it's not..."

Saki smiled at Sang Mi.

The little shit.

\* \* \*

On a planet that was once called Mars, there was a school called Academy 27. The second-best school in the domed metropolis of Takumi, its student's ancestors had fled to the planet Gongen (Mars' new name) centuries ago to escape disaster and start a new life. And as Sang Mi followed Saki through the hallways, she couldn't help but

feel helping a classmate she didn't like with her illegal experiment wasn't what they had in mind for a better future. But oh well, that's life for you.

\* \* \*

Saki seemed to have a real talent for finding unattended classrooms, so once again they found one. Saki didn't wait around this time, she got right into it.

"You've been having strange dreams, haven't you?"

"Everyone has strange dreams; you might as well be asking me if I know someone with black hair. What next, are you going to guess my card? Tell me the spirit of someone close to me is reaching out from the other side? Get lost."

"In those dreams there is something pulling you in, isn't there? A swirl of blue or purple?"

She frowned. "...I'm sure lots of dreams have that..."

"Don't play dumb, Sang Mi. You're not, and it's unbecoming. You've seen things in those dreams. Things that are yet to come."

"I don't see how that would be possible. It's all just coincidence."

"Tell me, do you know what Apple Tree Yard means?"

"You're certainly changing the topic."

"I'm not."

"It's a reference to a television show from hundreds of years ago, right? Something about the fans inventing a fake episode or something? I read about it on holovidtropes."

Saki nodded. "That's basically correct. There was a TV show called *Sherlock* where the fans were extremely dissatisfied with how the show was given an ending in its fourth series. So, they looked for clues, and came up with this absolutely outlandish concept: there was a secret fourth episode that was going to be airing under the codename Apple Tree Yard. Which sounded like it wasn't a real TV show, but was listed on the schedule. Of course it turned out it was an actual TV show, and people got very frustrated."

Sang Mi squinted. "This feels like incredibly niche knowledge."

"You're one to talk?"

"...Okay fair."

"The point here is, that people wished so hard for this episode to exist that they tuned in expecting to see it. So, what if it had aired?"

Crossing her arms, Sang Mi stared her down. "That's a ridiculous hypothetical."

"Let me rephrase," Saki said unperturbed. "What if they believed so hard that it had come into existence?"

Sang Mi stared at Saki.

Saki stared back at Sang Mi.

Sang Mi looked left and right. And then started laughing. "You're joking? You're joking, right!? You think this is like *Peter Pan*. I do believe in Sherlock, I do, I do!"

"Humor me."

"I am humoring you, this is hilarious."

Saki ran a hand through her hair. "Let me be clearer then. Because I've figured out the ultimate test of what we're trying to do here. Your mission, should you accept it, which you will, is to save the Apple Tree Orchard of Academy 27."

The pair stared at each other.

"...That's going to be pretty difficult."

Saki smiled politely, something icy and dangerous glinting behind her eyes. "And why would that be?"

"Because there isn't a single apple tree on campus, let alone a whole bunch of them."

Saki's grin widened into something predatory, a cat studying a canary. "It wouldn't be much of a test if it were easy, now would it? So, it's agreed. You're going to go to the Student Council, the Board of Governors, whoever it takes, and get them to save the Apple Tree Yard!"

Kalingkata threw her hands up, then gestured wildly trying to convey the futility of all this. "But I can't do that! Because it doesn't exist."

"But you're going to do it."

Sang Mi closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. It was starting to make a very unpleasant sort of sense now that it was all sinking in. She was pretty sure she understood it. "So you want me to humiliate myself in public, right? Look like a girl who has absolutely lost it in front of everyone trying to convince them of your daydream."

"Now you're catching on, what a good girl."

"...Stop pressing your luck."

"Darling, that's something only people who Fortune has left behind would say."

"Well, that's me."

"I'll be checking up on you, to make sure the project goes according to plan."

Kalingkata edged toward the door. "...Right. Well, I'll be going then." But as she reached the door, she suddenly began to feel dizzy, and all was black...

When she awoke, she was in her bed at home, it was an obnoxious amount of time before her alarm went off, but she still felt relief. It had all been a dream.

She got up, and rubbed her eyes, walking into the living room where she was immediately taken aback. There at the table was her mother, laughing at something that Saki Suzuki had just said.

"Oh, thank goodness. Your friend Saki here has been worried about you, she helped you get home after you passed out after class."

She stared at Saki blankly. "Did she now." It wasn't a question.

"She tried to say no, but she's going to stay the night here with you. You're welcome—I know it's a school night, but these things are good for you."

"Thank you so much for letting me stay over, Mrs. Jhe," Saki crooned.

"Oh, think nothing of it. Call me Hei-Ran."

They both laughed. Sang Mi stared quietly.

“Aren’t you excited?” her mom asked.

She did not blink. “Ecstatic.”

“Are you still not feeling well?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“Well you girls just hold tight, I’m going to get some take out Bibimbap. Your father—my husband,” she noted to Saki as though that wasn’t clear, “just got an award for the project he pitched, so we’ve got lots of reasons to celebrate.”

“What am I celebrating?”

Her mother tousled her hair as she went past her. “Your new friend, of course!”

Sang Mi continued to stare down Saki. Saki just smiled serenely.

Only when her mom had closed the door behind her did she speak. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Having a sleepover with you, obviously. People our age do that right?” She squinted, as though actually unsure about something. “They do that, right?”

“Yeah. With friends.”

“We’re friends.”

She grunted, and sat down. “Whatever. So, what do you want, I’m obviously not getting rid of you tonight.”

“We’re taking the pills again,” Saki said resolutely.

“Shouldn't we be somewhere more... controlled? Clinical?”

“I do have another place in mind, perhaps you'll see it soon. But I want you to be comfortable for now.”

“I'm not comfortable.”

Saki grinned a Cheshire grin, as if that pleased her. “The readings are high tonight, and we can’t waste it.”

“What readings?”

“I’ll tell you if I can trust you.”

“Hopefully it doesn’t have to be mutual.”

She sighed. “Cards on the table, Sang Mi. I need you to help me with this. Need, not want. I tried with another test subject, and the results were less than satisfactory. I found you here because I needed you to help with my previous issue—”

“The cats’ eyes.”

She nodded, pleased. “You figured that out.”

“I figured something out.”

“You did what no one else did. I can’t do this alone, one person just isn’t enough to... harness this phenomenon to its fullest extent. If things work tonight, I’ll explain more later.”

Sang Mi thought a moment. She clenched her hands. She didn’t want to do this, but she didn’t want to do a lot of things. She did them anyway. “Fine,” she conceded. “I’ll help you tonight.”

Saki smiled. “Good girl.”

“Don’t say that, it’s weird. Just... don’t make dinner awkward.”

“I have manners, you know.”

That did, at least, make Sang Mi laugh.

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“Have you.... *ever* cleaned your room?”

Sang Mi shoved a bunch of dirty clothes into a laundry hamper. “Oh, come on, it’s not that bad.”

Saki did not look convinced, and just stood there, glancing around the room. “...Is that a paper book?” she picked it up and turned it over in her hands. “It’s not even an antique—”

Sang Mi snatched it away. “Don’t touch that.”



“I’m just surprised; print books are expensive, especially here on Mars.”

“On Gongen.”

Saki smiled thinly. “Did I say something else?”

Sang Mi put the book back on the shelf. “Sometimes people print vanity copies of books, the extras end up...” She stopped talking, her hand lingering on the book. “So what, are we just taking the pills again and nodding off?”

“Basically. I have a monitor we’ll hook up to to take readings from our bodies, and see how we react to everything.”

She looked at the book a little longer. “You need to learn that not everything can belong to you.”

Saki didn’t reply, but Sang Mi couldn’t help but think she didn’t believe her.

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Sang Eun came over to his sister. "Okay, what's with you this morning? You just seem..."

"Frustrated? Annoyed? Ready to punch Saki?"

"Yes, those."

"I just wanted a good night's sleep, but Saki had to invite herself over for a sleepover, and not only did I sleep terribly, it wasn't even a fun time. We didn't talk about anything fun, we didn't do anything fun, and we didn't even accomplish anything. In fact, I'm sure that because we didn't accomplish anything, it's only going to get worse from here."

He nodded slowly, leaning onto the lockers as his brows furrowed increasingly. "It... sounds like you guys have a complicated friendship."

"We're not friends! That's how complicated it is!"

Sang Eun tried to work through what this meant. He clearly came to no conclusions. "Then why are the two of you hanging out?"

"Great question!" she threw her hands up, and then threw them down just as dramatically. "No, I know why."

"Okay great because I really do want an answer to that at this point in this conversation."

Sang Mi finished putting her coat and bag into the locker and sighed. "Because I need to know. I need to know if we can make the Apple Tree Yard. That's why."

"The Apple... What?"

She was about to answer, when a hand tapped her on the shoulder. She looked up to see Tsetseg.

"Um, Sang Mi, your boyfriend is outside the school."

She looked at her brother, and then back at her friend. "What do you mean my boyfriend is here? I don't have a boyfriend, if I did I'd be about 20% cooler."

Tsetseg frowned. "You two broke up? When?"

"Me and who?"

"You and Kyon?"

Her stomach twisted, and she slammed her locker and pushed past them both. "This joke isn't funny, whoever set you up for it is... you know, I thought better of you, Tsetseg. God."

As she stormed off, a confused and hurt Tsetseg looked at Sang Eun. "What's going on with her?"

He shrugged.

Sang Mi had planned on going out the front door and chewing Kyon out. Chewing him out for breaking her heart, for two-timing her for months with another girl, for breaking up with her while she was still grieving her grandma... but as she peeked around the corner and saw him standing there with a bouquet of flowers, her heart and her stomach began doing dizzying leaps, and then her head decided to get in on the dizziness too. She pulled back around the corner, and slid down the wall, covering her face with her hands.

"This is like some sort of bad dream."

"Yes."

She looked up. Saki was there looking down at her. "You didn't realize? This is the dream. We're in the dream. So stop feeling sorry for yourself, and get back on the mission."

She blinked. Of course it wasn't real. It was a bad dream. That's all. There was no way Kyon would ever apologize to her. Saki put out a hand, and she took it as the other girl pulled her up.

"So what are we... do you hear that?" Sang Mi said.

Saki was about to answer, but then paused, hearing it too. "Dripping water?" They looked down at their feet—the floor of the Academy had turned into black water, and they were sinking into it. Saki grabbed her hand, and pulled her along as they started to run, splashing water all over as they rushed. And yet, they were dry. The sides of the hall turned to Apple Trees, and yellow apples dropped down on them as they ran. Some splashing them, some knocking them in the head. "We have to keep going!" Saki yelled.

And then Sang Mi saw it. Just for a moment. A single hoof, disappearing past a tree. "No, turn here!"

They did, and as they made the corner around the apple tree—

Sang Mi gasped awake, and tried to steady her breath. Saki was there next to her on the floor, doing some sort of careful breathing exercise.

"I didn't realize we were dreaming," Sang Mi said, still out of breath.

"You'll get better at parsing it. Tomorrow night will be better."

"...Tomorrow night?"

"Every night until this works," Saki said with finality.

Sang Mi checked the time, and slid back under her sheets. Maybe she could get a little more sleep in. At least tomorrow at school would be easier.

\* \* \*

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

Sang Mi looked out at the room full of people. Some of them were actual journalists. She shrank into herself. "Saki, did you call an actual press conference?"

Saki patted her on the shoulder. " Anything worth doing should be done properly. Now, go on. Apple Tree Yard."

"Does it have to be done at all?" Sang Mi asked, but her question was only met with a light push forward.

She took a deep breath, and let it out. Did it help? No. But she pretended it did, and that helped a little bit. She squared up her shoulders. and walked out. The end result was oddly stilted, but at least she wasn't totally hunched over like she felt inside. She got up to the podium, and glanced at the big display board next to her that was rotating through a set of facts about their project.

Facts about a place that didn't exist.

A banner hung above her head said. "Save Our Apple Tree Yard!"

She coughed into her fist, and then into the microphone of the podium to test it. A padd with the script Saki had written for her lay just below the mic. "Okay, okay. Uh."

Everyone was looking at her.

"Hello there, my name is..." her name stuck in her throat. Was she really attaching her name to this. "...never mind that. For generations, students of Academy 27 and their families have enjoyed the fruits... goddamn really, fruits, that's not even a good gag... ahem. The fruits of our apple trees on campus. But now, it's possible that we could lose forever a timeless and cherished tradition of our campus."

Images flashed on the display board of families having picnics under the trees, students hanging out, doing homework, finding romance... Of course none of those things had happened so Kalingkata had no idea where those photographs had been taken.

"And who will protect the memories of future students that could have been made under those trees? So, as a proud student of this Academy I say—save our Apple Tree Yard!"

She raised her fist in the air.

One person in the back clapped.

"Thank you, Bashrat, you're a real one."

A hand raised; it was Ihor, the theater nerd.

"Yes, you there on the left."

"Is um... this some sort of art project?"

"No, we are dead serious about saving these apple trees."

"Who is we?" he asked.

"Me and Saki Suzuki."

"And me!" a voice called from the back.

"And Bashrat, because he's a goddamn saint."

The hand of a grown-up raised. He was on the news. "I... wasn't aware that Academy 27 had any apple trees?"

"Well, I was surprised too. I still am. Constantly. To this very moment."

"And why do you keep calling it an 'Apple Tree Yard' and not an apple orchard?"

"Talk to Steven Moffat. Or don't. Because he died centuries ago and also this isn't his fault."

The journalist opened his mouth, and then closed it.

A little girl who was here with her mom raised her hand, her mom tried to push her hand down but Sang Mi was too quick on the draw—for some reason. "Yes, you in the flower print dress with the doll."

She looked out the window. "I looked outside and there aren't any Apple Trees."

Sang Mi smiled with dead eyes and nodded. "Astutely observed. But also, yes there are."

She looked back out the window. "No, I just looked again. They're not there."

"Look harder."

"You can't just make things appear by saying they'll be there, that's silly."

Sang Mi looked over at Saki who was standing just out of view in the wing of the stage. "Gosh, that is an astute observation as well. If only more people had your insight. Next question."

Another hand raised, it was Tsetseg, who was there with Bashrat, she didn't wait to be called on though. "Sang Mi, if someone is forcing you to do this, blink twice."

Saki was silent, but Sang Mi could feel her pointed gaze suggesting that it would be a very, very bad idea for her to blink twice.

"I'll blink twice if I want to!" Sang Mi shouted back, and then looked back at the crowd. "That concludes our press conference. Save the Apple Trees. Or don't. But don't come crying to me if you don't have... trees." She finished lamely, stood there for a moment awkwardly, then gave the audience finger guns and rushed off stage.

"That went well," Saki said brightly.

"What press conference were you watching?" Sang Mi said, retroactively covering her face.

"Well, no one walked out."

"Because they were watching a train wreck!"

"Exactly, you did good. Now onto the next phase of our plan."

Saki was already walking away before Sang Mi could get another word in. She huffed, but then sauntered after her, grumbling all the way.

\* \* \*

"So you going to tell us what that was all about?" Sang Eun asked Sang Mi.

She rubbed her eyes. "We're... saving the apple trees! Like we said."

"Do you really think anyone believes that?"

"Bashrat believes that!"

“Anyone but Bashrat.”

“My... loving and supportive twin brother believes that?”

“Kalingkata, you don’t even believe that.”

She slumped in her desk. “I shouldn’t say.” She paused, and traced a pattern on her touch desk, that lit up into a colorful ribbon behind her finger. She hadn’t intended to tell *anybody* but she should be able to tell Talinata. Even if she couldn’t say everything, or even most of it, she had to tell *someone*. “...No, I should say something. You... you know Min Jun’s promotion with the Tenryu Party?”

Her brother nodded, looking at her intently. “How could I not? It’s all mom and dad talk about.”

She drew the symbol for Gongen, and then traced out the symbols associated with the Earthers—two wavy green lines and a dot, and the winged skull of the solar system’s Mavericks. The three symbols looked back at her like they were asking her to choose one of them. “I’m doing this so he can keep his job. That’s not the only reason. I’m also just... so curious if I was a cat I’d have lost all nine lives already. But... that’s why.”

He let that sink in. “Does anyone else know about this?”

She shook her head. “Just you, and Saki.”

“And Saki.”

“And Saki.”

As if saying her name three times had summoned her, Kalingkata’s phone buzzed. She glanced at it. “Duty calls. I’ll see you later.”

As she stood up, he surprised her by giving her a hug. She thought of saying something sarcastic, but.. softened. She hugged him back.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

\* \* \*

Saki had called her back to room 307, which seemed to be becoming her unofficial office on school grounds. As Kalingkata walked in, she saw that Saki was looking at a

series of chemical formulas projected as holograms into the center of the room. She came up next to her, and tried to read through what they might be.

"I don't recognize this. Is it a drug?"

"Well spotted; it is a drug. But not one you'd recognize."

Sang Mi sat down. "I figure that part of why I'm here is explaining why I wouldn't. And I also figure it has to be the pills you've been giving me before bed. Am I right?"

Saki gave a thin smile. "Tell me, Miss Jhe, have you ever heard of Delirium?"

"Like, being disoriented and confused?"

She shook her head, "I mean the drug. Developed by XeLabs."

Sang Mi frowned. It did ring a bell. "I think I saw some marketing for it a while back? I don't remember it ever coming out."

Saki grinned. "That's because it never did come out. The drug went through clinical trials, was approved, commercials were aired, ads were run, an entire launch shipment was produced... and then it simply disappeared, as though it had never been worked on to begin with. Now why do you think that would be?"

Sang Mi shrugged. "They found out it made people's ears explode. Who knows?"

"I know."

"Okay, great."

She frowned. "I thought you'd be at least a little curious."

"Products get canceled all the time; this isn't special."

The two stared off for a minute.

"...You *are* curious! You're trying to hide it."

"Am not."

"You sure are!"

"I really am not."

"Then why are you still here? Why didn't you just walk out?"



"Because I'm curious why you're being so weird, not because you read the wiki entry on a failed drug trial."

"There's no wiki entry on it, if you'd been paying better attention you could have inferred that. Really, Sang Mi, I expected better of you." This stung Sang Mi more than Saki intended.

"And I expected you to be less boring." This, in return, stung Saki more than Sang Mi or Saki had expected.

She took a deep breath, centered herself, and when Saki's eyes opened they were... sharper. Focused. Predator like. "Let's start over. You've been having strange dreams for the last few months, haven't you?"

Sang Mi was indeed interested by this, and sat down on one of the desks. "Okay, you should have led with that. Read your audience better."

Saki ignored that. "You know what XeLabs is, yes?"

"The Earther research company, ironically centered over Venus."

"Right. A few years ago, XeLabs noticed faint traces of a cosmic phenomenon—or perhaps I should word myself more clearly—they figured out that there had to be traces of a cosmic phenomenon, but they couldn't actually figure out what it was."

Sang Mi frowned and crossed her arms. "You're going to need to unpack that." Sang Mi was a little annoyed at how smug Saki was looking now.

"They were doing trials of a new sleeping pill, one they were calling Delirium, or DLXCU-22823."

"Catchy."

"Right? During the drug trials, they noticed that a small number of patients were exhibiting strange behavior and having strange dreams. By moving the patients around, and monitoring the changes, they began to realize that the effects seemed to only happen on a set schedule, consistent with an oscillating waveform."

"That must have taken a lot of money."

"They have a lot of money."

"Good for them."

"They quickly realized that their drug was allowing their patients who already had a sensitivity to this phenomenon to react to it when they would be most vulnerable to its effects—that is, while they were asleep. They pushed ahead with the launch—and then can you guess what happened?"

"They shut the project down like you opened with."

"But who was they?"

"XeLabs?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't them. Someone else came in and forced them to shut it down. The patients disappeared. The researchers disappeared. Every trace of it that could be scrubbed off the internet disappeared too. But nothing is truly gone, and I have... resources."

Sang Mi stretched her neck. "So you're saying my dreams were part of a drug trial for a drug I never took from a company that now claims they didn't make it?"

She shook her head. "No, you idiot. I'm saying that you have an obvious sensitivity to the phenomenon as well. One that is probably nearly as much as mine." She paused and grinned like the Cheshire Cat before saying with heavy emphasis, "Nearly."

Sang Mi began to put the puzzle pieces in place, "You believe that this... Delirium phenomenon can make things in your dreams real?"

"Perhaps. We certainly know that they can show you the future and the past. You know that all too well, don't you?"

Sang Mi thought of her dreams. Being lined up in armor. Plasma bolts whizzing by her head. Some... terrible spiral. She shook her head. "Those can't be real."

"They will be. But... let's say you can change reality. Perhaps your dreams won't have to come to pass."

"So that's what this Apple Tree Yard thing is about. You're trying to make the unreal real."

"Saki Sanobashi, you got it. Actually, I was thinking of naming myself Apple at first, but when you got trapped in the bathroom it was too delicious to pass up."

"I'm surprised you knew what Saki Sanobashi was."

"Oh, sweetheart, I have more important things to do than that. I just looked it up after I stole your browser history."

"And how exactly did you do that anyway? I encrypt things, you know."

"Encryptions aren't so difficult to bypass. Besides, You're too lazy to password lock your home computer. Your mother was kind enough to let me in to get some homework I told her you'd left for me."

Sang Mi's eye twitched. "I see. So, I help you with your little project, which sounds... nuts. And hypothetically I can change the future."

"Hypothetically."

"And you get... what?"

"To see if my theory is right."

Kalingkata sighed, rubbed her temples, and then got up off the desk and walked toward Saki. "Okay. Maybe this can work out." Sang Mi put both hands on Saki's shoulders, which the other girl seemed hesitant about, but since Sang Mi was at least seeming to acquiesce to her request, Saki let it slide. Sang Mi took a breath. "Okay, so I'll go along with your plan. But there's one thing I need to be clear about."

"And what's that?"

Sang Mi smiled, and moved to look like she was leaning in to whisper, and then slammed her forehead into Saki's. Saki tumbled over, holding her forehead as she cried out. Sang Mi had thought she'd look cool doing that, but it actually hurt her too quite a bit so she stumbled back into the desks rubbing her own forehead—though still saying what she'd intended, "Don't you DARE mess with my mom again!"

"Did you just HEADBUTT ME?!" Saki sputtered, palm against her forehead. "I... you...!" Her cheeks turned a splotchy red. She was clearly not accustomed to surprises or physical assault.

"Message sent, then. See you later." She gave Saki finger guns and tried to look cool as she wobbled her way out of the room, running into the doorframe in the process, but held off on wincing until she was in the hallway.

\* \* \*

For some of the afternoon, Kalingkata had a fairly ordinary time. She went to track practice, and had a big session of mutual hyping with Hee Jin about beating Academy 2 in the upcoming meet. She got off school, and kicked around with her brother and JackBox for a bit. JackBox showed her a new attachment she'd gotten for her cybernetic arm that was supposed to be able to cool drinks as she held them, but all of them determined it was a waste of money as it just made her palm mildly cooler. They were sitting in Higen Park arguing about whether they'd reboot the TV Series Professor X again soon, when Kalingkata got a message from Saki. Waving goodbye, Sang Mi marched off to grab the next train to the location she'd been sent, where Saki was waiting outside to greet her.

Sang Mi looked over at Saki, and then back at the building.

"I am not staying in a hotel with you."

"Oh stop being so childish, it's nothing like that."

"I've read this story online. We get to the desk and the guy is like, 'Oh no there was a mistake, there is only one bed.' And then hijinks happen."

"There is not going to be one bed. I reserved this room weeks ago." Saki said, matter-of-factly. Evidently, she was not up to date on romance tropes.

She sighed, and gestured grandly for Saki to lead the way. The lobby of the hotel was extremely luxurious, and surprisingly empty. A fountain complete with fish in the pond at the bottom stood as the centerpiece of the room, which was made of an earthy-orange stone marbled with black lines.

"...How did you afford this place?"

"Afford?" Saki said with something that could be read as either confusion or derision and went up to the desk. "We'd like to check in. Suzuki is the name on the reservation."

The man at the desk bowed, and held it for an excessively long time. "I apologize, miss, but there has been an issue."

"What do you mean there is an issue?" Saki's voice was sweet, but there was something dangerous layered under her tone. She may have been a petite teenager, but the annoyance radiating off of her could have belonged to an Earther CEO. Or a mob boss.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. "I mean... that the room you reserved is unavailable."

"Can you please explain to me how it is that the room *I* reserved weeks ago isn't prepared?"

He pulled at his collar. Kalingkata kept a dead-eyed stare on the whole situation. "Well, uh, you see there was a gas leak. All the rooms with double beds were affected, but thankfully we still have all the single bed—"

"I KNEW IT!" Sang Mi exclaimed.

Saki's face flickered with annoyance at Sang Mi. She leaned across the counter, eyes boring into the manager's. "I am going to be very generous and give you ten minutes," she paused to study his nametag. The man's throat bobbed. "Mr. Kinzai. Ten minutes to prepare the room I asked for. If it isn't ready in that time..." she paused, settling back onto her heels as if an idea had struck her. She held up a hand to the hotel manager. "Wait. This is a sign."

"I'm not actually into you; that was just a joke."

Saki waved her hand dismissively at Sang Mi. "The room you have prepared will be fine." The manager sagged with relief, informing Saki that the room had already been "keyed to her" and bowing excessively again. She waited until they were closing the door to their room – which had opened with a scan of Saki's eye – behind them before saying,

"Reality changing based on our will. It might already be starting."

"But we're not dreaming."

She shook her head. "But we're already on the medicine, it doesn't exit your system fully in 24 hours. I don't entirely understand how it works, that's why we're doing this. I know it works when you're sleeping, but what if it still has a dulled effect when you're awake?"

That was a new consideration. "You mean... the hotel changed because I was daydreaming about a gag?"

"It could be."

"Well, I guess let's get this going. I'll take the left-hand side of the bed."

The room had been immaculately appointed with fresh flowers, fruit, and bottles of both sparkling and still water in ornate glass bottles. Saki took some time to unpack several pieces of impressive looking medical equipment, as well as several packets of Delirium.

"So, here's how it works, we get into pajamas, then wait for 8 o'clock, take the pills, and lay down. When the wave hits, hopefully we'll be asleep and ready to go."

"What if we're not asleep?"

"Then this sleep aid drug failed on several levels."

They got changed; Sang Mi had done enough Track and Field that she wasn't particularly self-conscious about changing in front of other people, but today she went into the hotel room's bathroom and shut the door. She took the opportunity to steal all the complimentary soaps and lotions. When she got out, Saki was already ready for bed, in extremely cozy-looking silk pajamas with an elegant pattern of stylized grape vines on them. Sang Mi's pajamas were a mismatched set of knit pants styled with characters from the Drakesword video games, and an oversized shirt that proclaimed how the Academy 27 Track and Field Team was Achieving Excellence in Body and Mind.

Sang Mi slid into the bed on the other side, and noted that each of them had a bottle of expensive-looking water conveniently placed on their bedside tables.

"You took all the soap didn't you?" Saki said.

"Just give me the pills, rich girl."

Saki popped out a pair of the pills, and pressed them into her palm hard enough Kalingkata could feel their size and shape. She held that position for a moment, continuing to press. "If you die I'll make sure your family is compensated properly."

Sang Mi looked back up at her. "You're kidding right."

She smiled back politely.

Pulling her hand away, she downed the pills. Now it was time to see what was real.

\* \* \*

She focused. She was running through the darkness, and where her feet hit the non-existent ground splashes of something kicked up. Something purple and distant was far ahead of her, but whatever it was the only thing that truly mattered about it was it was light, and no other light existed here.

Apple Tree Yard.

This stupid idea. She'd make an Apple Tree Yard by dreaming about it?

In one moment her foot was traveling through the darkness, the next it was hitting the pavement. But... it wasn't the pavement she was used to. The air was thick. The sky was the wrong color blue, and her clothes had changed. People passed by her not seeming to notice or care about her, their faces fading from her mind as soon as they left her sight. She kept turning, and saw Saki. Against her better judgment, she was relieved to see her. "Is this the same dream?"

Saki nodded. "We synched, but something is wrong—ah, obviously. I should have realized, my head is still spinning."

Sang Mi frowned. "This... is this Earth? How would I know what Earth feels like?"

"You don't, but I do, we made this dream together. We lost track of what Apple Tree Yard is, this is Londonplex."

She looked up at the zooming monorails, and squinting could see that the sky was an illusory screen to hide that a whole layer had been built above them for other things to be built on top of. "This... wait, we're on Baker Street?"

It was obviously Baker Street. The white brick buildings she'd seen in so many Sherlock Holmes adaptations made it clear.

"I've been to Baker Street before, it's preserved historically. That's probably how it's so realistic."

Sang Mi touched a black railing in front of one of the buildings. It felt real, metallic. "I thought it would be more... dreamlike?"

"That's the Delirium. We're in complete control here."

"But... we're not really on Earth are we?"

She frowned. "Of course not. If we were really on Earth... well if that were the case this would be a more powerful phenomenon than I imagined."

"It changed your eyes. It... you want to make apple trees appear out of nothing."

Saki sighed, and gestured for her to walk with her, they got to a cafe where they sat down and ordered illusory coffee. "Think of reality like this string." A red, silken cord appeared out of nothing into her pale fingers. She set the string on the table. "Now let's say I set it on the table, and I shake the string." She shook it back and forth, and it wiggled like a snake. "Now where will the string end up, what will its final shape be? Until that point, it could be any of the shapes I shift it into. But when I stop—" she stopped, leaving the string a long set of wiggles "—the possibilities of what it could end up collapse into its final form."

"It's Wave Form Collapse. I've read about it. I didn't need the whole demonstration. You could have just said what it is."

Saki shrugged and sipped her coffee. "Then you understand my theory here."

Sang Mi thought about it. "You think that this... phenomenon allows you to choose what point the waveform collapses at, choose which possibility?"

"I knew you were smarter than you looked."

"But that doesn't mean things can just appear, lots of things can happen at any moment, but there's a zero percent chance apple trees will appear out of nowhere."

Saki smiled. "That's where you're wrong. There is an infinitesimally small chance that they will appear out of nowhere."

Sang Mi shook her head. "That's junk science. You can't really think this will work."

"Honestly, Sang Mi. We're having a conversation in a shared dreamscape, but theoretical quantum mechanics is where you draw the line on what's plausible?"

"And because we thought about Apple Tree Yard the TV episode..."

"We dreamed we were in it, instead of dreaming of actual apple trees."

On cue, a police officer burst into the room, his green and gray uniform open at the front to ease his heavy breathing.

"Is... I heard the master detective is in here?"

Saki smiled. "Oh, she's right here! Have no fear!"



Sang Mi rolled her eyes, then pretended to be Sherlock Holmes to the best of her abilities. "Why yes sir, you're in the company of Sherlock Holmes, only she's now a Korean girl from space for reasons I'll explain later."

He squinted. "I uh... well I don't know what a Korea is?"

She patted him on the shoulder as she passed him out the door, popping her collar up. "Don't worry, no one is testing you."

Saki followed behind her, and the two of them walked as dramatically as possible behind the police officer as he led them to the crime scene, which was in a nearby apartment. The resulting room was like something out of an old novel, aside from the people in modern crime scene forensics gear wandering about it. There were big claw-foot wing chairs, an ancient double-barreled shotgun over the mantle, paintings of hunters with their dogs out on the moors all over the walls, and the distinct smell of real tobacco. The place was impeccably clean, and seemed almost like a museum. In the connected kitchen, several unopened boxes sat around. There was a body on the floor, lying on the edge of a carpet, which was stained from soaking up the wound on the man's neck. On the wall was scrawled one word in blood: "Rache".

"Oh thank god, he's dead," Sang Mi said.

The rest of the room—crime scene investigators—turned to look at her with a mix of horror and disgust.

"I just mean I can handle dead people, but I can't handle almost-dead people, it's—never mind."

She knelt down by the body, and examined it. Saki stood behind her, careful to avoid any of the pooling blood. "So, what's the verdict?"

"Well, he's extra definitely dead."

"Well spotted."

"And it's clearly murder."

"Why do you say that?" Saki said with the air of a teacher giving a quiz.

Sang Mi pointed. "The wound was clearly meant to look self-inflicted; they even gave him a knife, but there's two problems."

A man in a CGC jacket scoffed as he approached her. His graying hair and stubble marked him as a veteran of the force.

"I don't know who you are, but it's obviously a suicide. The AI said so."

"The AI is wrong."

He gestured. "The knife is in his dominant hand, and the way his hand fell matches perfectly with the movement he would have made, we ran the numbers."

Sang Mi shook her head. "This man wouldn't be caught dead dying in Londonplex. Wait. I mean, he was, but... you know what I mean!"

"Let's say I don't," the man said.

"Alright then, Lestrade. Look at this room. This man is clearly a paleophile—a lover of old or ancient things. He's wealthy, wealthy enough to have a centuries old apartment in the preserved districts of Londonplex, one he barely uses. Note the unopened boxes, the lack of wear on the furniture. If he was going to kill himself, he wouldn't do it here. He'd do it out on the moors, or at the castle he presumably owns."

The man sighed. "People do strange things, not everything is like a book where actions line up perfectly with expectations. Plus, the room was locked, and we reviewed all external footage. No one else came in or out for months—and his last visit was months ago in itself."

She smiled. "And what about the word 'Rache' on the wall?"

"Well, there are three possibilities. He knew someone named Rachel, he was writing the German word for revenge, *rache*—or he was a massive fan of Sherlock Holmes and was copying that from the story."

Sang Mi frowned. "I'm Sherlock Holmes?"

"What?"

"Never mind. But no, all three of those options are wrong. Would you like to take this bit, Watson?"

Saki rose. "Of course. He's a paleophile, and his apartment is impeccably clean. Too clean. Yet he's never here—he hasn't even unpacked boxes from months ago. But no one has come in or out for months. So what does that mean?"

The man sighed. "You're going to tell me anyway."

"Of course I am, because you're wrong. The answer is obvious: he's obsessed with old things. *Rache* is an old word for a type of hunting dog."

"There's no dog here."

"But what would his loyal dog be?"

Saki and Sang Mi looked at each other, and then said in unison. "The cleaning bot!"

There was a whirring of motors, and from deeper in the apartment a bot walked out. He was wearing an old timey butler's outfit. "I see you sussed it out."

Sang Mi rose. "Hello there, Rache."

"Rache-4, he hasn't been very creative with naming my predecessors or myself."

The gray-haired officer blinked. "The... bot did it?"

"The bot-ler did it!" Sang Mi said.

"I'm afraid I could no longer take master's abuse," Rache-4 confessed.

"But... civilian grade bots are incapable of hurting humans?" the officer said.

Saki pulled up a page on her phone. "He's not actually a civilian bot. He's army surplus, essentially. You really think enough money can't get you something not available to the public?"

He shook his head. "I... I gotta give it to you. You two are the real deal. What are your names anyway, I didn't even ask."

"Oh," Saki said, pulling Sang Mi towards the door. "She's just a regular ol' Sherlock Holmes with her Watson!" Before he could reply, they were through the door, slamming it behind them and running out, and as they ran the world turned to black, and their footsteps fell in water that wasn't wet, and—

Sang Mi gasped as she woke up. Her heart was pounding. She looked over at Saki, who seemed to be having a similar reaction but was taking it better.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Saki nodded, but was clutching her chest. "That... was the most realistic one we've had. It was like a long lucid dream."

"But... that stuff didn't really happen? It was a dream. We were just having fun, we didn't actually get to do anything towards the experiment like you said, right?"

Saki's brow furrowed. "I'm... less sure. I don't know. Something feels off, doesn't it?"

Sang Mi frowned at her hands. They looked like her hands. "...I don't know either."

\* \* \*

"Sorry, I was in the bathroom," famed Detective Mara Willox said as she stepped back out into the cafe. "Did anyone come looking for me when I was out?" She asked the man at the counter.

"Well, not for you but for the other famous detective I think."

She blinked. "The other what?"

\* \* \*

Yawning as she looked at the poster, Sang Mi couldn't help but feel she was somewhat in over her head.

"How is there already a rally today?" Sang Eun said.

"I wish I knew, I wish I knew," she sighed, as if to follow up the yawn. The poster exclaimed to all who saw it that yes, there was a rally today at the school's Apple Tree Yard to save it. She wasn't sure at this point if Saki was really onto something, having a psychotic break, or being the biggest troll to ever pull a prank.

He put a hand on her shoulder. She didn't push it away.

"It's just been a lot, you know? I've always told myself that anything I'm dealing with isn't as bad as what Min Jun dealt with. He's sacrificed so much for the family." She stroked her finger down the poster. "Do you think he ever really has done what he wanted to? I don't think anyone ever said he needed to do what he's doing, but he saw it in their eyes. Just pushed around by people by force of will, accomplishing things he never sought to accomplish for the pure accolade of not being a disappointment."

Sang Eun squeezed her shoulder. “I’ve thought the same thing myself. Doesn’t mean he’s not an absolute killjoy though.”

Sang Mi laughed. “You’re right, but well, maybe that’s my fault. I’ve been doing this stuff with Saki for... well barely any time at all and I’m already feeling exhausted. Not that... honestly the last thing we did was pretty fun. But... am I making sense?”

He nodded. “I get you.

“Sometimes I feel like my role in the family is to be the disappointment.”

His hand loosened. “I’m not sure what to say to that.”

She shrugged, and pushed his hand off. “You don’t have to say anything. Will you come to hear me embarrass myself with another bad speech?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for all the code in Shocho.”

She smiled, and the pair headed off to the back field of the school.

Whatever Sang Mi had expected, it wasn’t this. She’d expected that either:

1. No one would be there. Or rather, less people would be there as their curiosity dwindled.
2. More people would be there all ready to jeer at her.

What actually met her, was a real rally. There were students there wearing headbands with a row of apples on them, which were all wearing deerstalker caps. As she approached, Tsetseg ran up and handed her one. She put it on as if in a trance. “What exactly is going on here?”

“People heard your message! I think they aired it on Gongen Patriot news? And then people shared it?” Tsetseg said.

Sang Mi turned around and began to decide which city or planet she would start her new life on, but Tsetseg grabbed her arm. “You can’t just leave; my dad even came. He never gets out like this.”

Hissing through her teeth, Sang Mi made her way to the front. Saki wasn’t even here. She waved to the crowd, and was handed a microphone by Bashrat. In front of her were more journalists, two members of the school board, a bunch of parents and members of the community, most of her class including even Zhyrgal, and for some reason even JackBox who was seemingly getting a pass on her un-Gongen-like

cybernetics for the fact that she had agreed to wear a cardboard tree costume like in an elementary school play, and was handing out fliers to the new arrivals.

Kalingkata should have been nervous, but honestly this was just too weird for her to be upset. “Hi everyone! If this is another dream, then it sure is a strange one!” People laughed and applauded as though that was actually funny. “As you know, our Apple Tree Yard is in danger.” She gulped. There wasn’t a script—or if there was, the person who was supposed to hand it to her had forgot. She said the first thing that came to her head. “When I was little, my father took me into the city of Kazuki, to see the cherry trees. He told me they were beautiful, and they were. The petals fell down on me like gentle confetti, and I held my hands up to catch them. It was magical. Doesn’t that sound magical?”

General noises of agreement, though also confusion at where this was going.

“But that’s Kazuki. And in Takumi—they also have cherry trees. Maybe not the big, amazing orchard they have in Kazuki—but they have them. But this is Cheonsa—our home. They say this is the Korean district, and it has a Korean name—but that’s not my experience of this Cheonsa Dome. Yes—we’re Korean, but we’re also Mongolian! Chinese, Japanese, Ukrainian, Indian, Malaysian, Vietnamese, and there are even Earthers and Mavericks here. And all of that,” she swirled her hand around to gesture at the crowd. “That’s our community. We’re one people because we’re many people—we’re together because we remember our heritage, even when we’re asked to melt into the whole.” She wasn’t sure if she was going too far but she’d already started. “And that’s why we deserve our own trees. When you come to Cheonsa, you can see the apple blossoms bloom. Not like cherry blossoms, like themselves. So um,” she hit a sudden verbal wall. “That’s all I’ve got to say uh, save our Apple Tree Yard!”

There was a surprising amount of applause. Actual applause, and as she stepped down, people patted her on the back, and someone threw a scarf around her neck like she was dressed like the centuries old Sherlock show. She smiled and waved, and all the while wondered what the hell was even going on.

\* \* \*

Saki was waiting for her in the hotel lobby, swirling an extremely fancy-looking drink with marbled green and black layers that didn't seem to mix. She was dressed casually, which was apparently in trendy clothing, but not... too trendy. Saki gave Sang

Mi the vibe of someone on a just-out-of-date fashion spread. She looked good, and you knew she was dressed well, but she also came across as profoundly forgettable. Like a store mannequin. Was that intentional? If she hadn't been skeptical of Saki, she never would have thought that. Maybe she was just being paranoid. Maybe.

"Finally," was how Saki greeted her, downing the rest of her drink in a single gulp.

"I had to give a whole speech, unprepared. And then go home and pack."

"You did a good job. I saw the speech. Not exactly government sanctioned, but it seems they're letting it slide."

She rubbed her nose. "I thought we'd just be taking the pills and sleeping. This is a lot more work than I expected. And my mom keeps asking how you're doing."

"Oh good, she invited me out for coffee, you know. Despite your headbutt I'm sure you won't mind if I accept."

Sang Mi grumbled her acceptance.

"Wonderful. How was your stop in at home?"

"It was kind of awkward. I don't usually stay over with friends twice in a row, and my mom wanted the address which raised a whole bunch of new questions."

"You're not doing anything wrong, you're just staying overnight here again."

"I'm staying in a hotel overnight again with a weirdo."

"You mean yourself?"

"Mature."

She got up, and gesturing for her to follow, Sang Mi glanced behind her to see if her suitcase was still following her. It was, thankfully. As they got into the marble-tiled elevator, Sang Mi gave a quick bow to the man operating the buttons. Why did they need a man to operate the buttons? That was some Earther excess if she'd ever seen it. The hallway leading to their room was filled with lush carpet, and the door opened with a touch as it registered Saki's biometric data.

It occurred to Sang Mi that the hotel had never had to scan anything when they'd initially checked in, and that most of the other rooms operated with keypads rather than biometric scans. "How did they already have the room ready? With your eye scan and everything?"

“I’m a preferred customer,” Saki replied. Her tone suggested it was best to drop the subject.

When they were in the room together, they went through the same routine as last time. They got changed. Sang Mi stole the soap. The only difference was a pair of bots that were in the room, waddling around to hand them water and pills.

They woke up.

"Did anything change?"

The bots stared at them, and one waddled over to hand their master a padd. Saki frowned as she looked over the data. “Nothing really happened. Maybe the pills were duds.”

Sang Mi got up, and started getting dressed.

“It’s early morning, you should get some more rest.”

Sang Mi shrugged. “I’ll see you later. If you want to do this again, come over to my place. I’m sure my mom won’t mind.”

Saki’s frown was only growing. “Every calculation fits. I don’t understand what could have gone wrong.”

“People get things wrong, that’s just existing.” Kalingkata didn’t say anything else as she slipped out the door, and went out into the night. Takumi’s Cheonsa Dome was cold at night, the temperature regulators just weren’t as well put-together as the main dome ones. She pulled her coat’s collar up, and started out towards the train station ignoring the concierge’s insistence they call a car for her.

Her foot fell through the ground into an endless void.

They woke up.

Saki looked at the padd. “This can’t be right, something should have changed.”

Sang Mi bit out of the apple, and handed the rest to Kyon. “I don’t know, something feels off.”

Saki shook her head. “But if something is off, then we should notice, there should be some evidence!”

They woke up.



They were marching up a tall staircase, all the students around them were wearing blue uniforms, and a tall banner of someone she didn't recognize was hanging down ominously over them.

"Wait, Saki, we were at the hotel."

"We were at the hotel—"

They woke up.

They were tending to an apple tree, Sang Mi had shears and Saki was placing apples into a wicker basket. They both had big floppy gardening hats. "It's a pity they want to get rid of this," Sang Mi said.

"We won't let them," Saki said firmly.

Saki tossed her an apple, and they both took a bite.

And then Sang Mi woke up as her alarm for school blasted. She moaned, and fumbled around for her phone. As she turned it off, the events of the previous day come back to her. Saki was here with her. They'd taken Delirium together.

She looked over at Saki.

"Nothing happened."

Saki was lying on her cot staring up at the ceiling, calculations going on behind her irises that didn't add up. "...Something should have happened. Maybe we just didn't remember our dreams?"

"If this stuff is so powerful, why would that be the case?"

Saki sat up. "I'm going to eat breakfast."

Sang Mi sighed and got up to go see if she still had clean socks. When she went into the kitchen, she bumped into a chair someone had left a pile of clothes on by her door. Why'd they done that anyway? Her dad was adjusting his tie in the wall-screen he'd set to mirror-mode.

"Shouldn't um," she was still waking up, her thoughts jumbled together, "shouldn't you already be at work? Where's... your uniform?"

He looked back at her and laughed. "Just cause it's a new suit doesn't mean the old one was my uniform." She'd meant his coveralls but whatever. She opened the cabinet and fumbled through it. "Where are the bagels?"

"Do you want bagels?" Her mom's voice grew louder as she exited her parent's room, putting an earring in as she spoke. "Why are you dressed up too? Did I forget something?"

She looked down at her outfit. "...Did I do too much? Are the earrings too much? Maybe I should—"

"You're fine, honey," her dad called. "Sang Mi is just struggling to wake up."

Her mom kissed her on the cheek as she walked towards the door, and she startled. That also didn't usually happen.

"Hey," her mom said, stopping, and putting her arms around her shoulders, suddenly teary eyed. "You... you know that even though I was distant, you're my only daughter, and I'll always love you. And—" she covered her mouth, trying to stop from crying.

Sang Mi was baffled but hugged her. "Hey, uh, hey it's really okay, Mom. Everything is going to be okay. I'm right here, yeah?"

She pulled away and nodded. "I shouldn't cry, I just got my makeup done."

Her dad had approached, wrapped them both in a bigger hug. "She's right, we're here together, and we're still a family."

Embracing them both back, Sang Mi tried to figure out what the hell had inspired this until they pulled away and finally made their way to the exit. As her parents left and said their farewells, Saki came out of her own room. "My parents are sure acting weird. Do you think... do you think we made some sort of change, like with the cat's eye?"

Saki shook her head. "I didn't see anything on the monitors. I guess it was just a fluke, there must not have been an energy surge last night like I predicted. That's just part of gathering data though—I'll be able to keep making the prediction model better as we go along."

"...As we go along?"

"Yes, is that an issue?"

She sighed, and grabbed a muffin from the cabinet, tossing another one to Saki. "Whatever, let's just get my brother and get to school." She rapped on his door. "Hey, lazybones get up. Sleepyhead you're gunna be late." She banged on it louder, and then tried the handle. The door made the ping and quick red flash that showed it was locked.

"He never locks his door—well, almost never. He does when he's doing teen boy stuff he's trying to keep to himself, but other than that." She frowned. "I guess he must have already left for school?" She pulled out her phone to message him, and sent out a quick, "Hey—you already at school?"

But no reply.

And he hadn't seen her last message either. "I miss you."

Well, that had to have been an emotional evening that she didn't recall. She and Saki started their way to the train station. Everything still felt off. The video screens around the city still had ads about the spring festival, but it was an entirely different ad campaign. Every so often an aircraft would go overhead—Self-Defense Force TSV's, but painted green, beige, and silver instead of yellow or red.

But it was when they got to the train station that things went from "off" to "concerning".

People weren't just getting on the train, there was a line, and every person who got on was being checked by a pair of Earther soldiers in full armor, and an officer in a long green coat. "What the hell are Greenbacks doing here?" she whispered to Saki.

Saki bit her lip. "I think... I think this might not be reality."

"But we... I remembered waking up?"

"We woke up inside the dream. This is the dream."

Sang Mi looked her up and down. "That doesn't feel like it's a good thing. This feels like it's a bad thing, the opposite of a good thing."

"It's just a dream. All we're doing is trying to push a wave of probability a nudge to the left. These aren't real places, try to keep that in mind. It's just reality pushing back on our attempt to push forward."

Pushing down the feeling in her gut, Sang Mi nodded, and the pair got in line, as she pulled up her citizen ID info on her phone, which was in the wrong place and also off. They waited for fifteen minutes, till the officer reached out, and they handed

him their phones with their citizen ID information pulled up. He looked them over, and then smiled and handed them back.

"Ah, Sang Mi, I know your father, he's talked about you."

She smiled. "Oh uh, well you know how he is. Good to see you around?" she said, hoping it sounded remotely normal. It seemed to pass, and the pair of girls spent an awkward train ride in silence till they got to the school.

Academy 27 was not called Academy 27. Instead, a big new sign in front of it read, "Elon Musk Academy for the Gifted".

They wandered through the gates and made their way inside. Saki and Sang Mi started to take their shoes off as they entered, but the lockers for shoes were gone. They'd been there, there were rectangular ghosts on the tiles where they'd been. A few pairs of shoes still sat awkwardly in the corner, as though in defiance of the change.

"...Do they really expect us to wear our outdoor shoes inside?"

"People on Earth do it all the time."

Sang Mi looked at Saki with a level of disgust that took her aback. "Do they eat their dog's poop after it's done its business too?"

"I think that's a little much."

Sang Mi grimaced, and walked in.

As they walked through the hallways, a message played on a loop on every screen on the walls. "Welcome to Elon Musk Academy for the Gifted, I'm Margaret Atlas. As Director Governor of Mars, it's important that we foster the greatest minds of our most precious commodity—our children. Some of the changes going on at your school might seem scary or new to you—but trust in the Central Governance Corporation to have your best interests at heart. Some of the changes you may see coming include your mandatory re-education classes—" it went on like that. Sang Mi tuned it out after a while. Thankfully, their classrooms were the same, but it seemed the dress code had been loosened considerably. They sat down at their desks, and exchanged another look, before Jin Jae Hyun approached Sang Mi.

"Did you get the homework done? I got most of it but—"

She cut him off. "Hey, have you seen Sang Eun this morning?"

Jae Hyun blanched. "...Sang Mi, what are you... you know..."

"I tried to open his door, but it was locked, and he won't answer my texts."

Jae Hyun stumbled down into the seat behind him, clasping his hands on his lap and running his teeth over his bottom lip, trying to figure out the right words. "Sang Mi... it's been... it's been half a year now. We all miss him... but..."

"What do you mean we all miss him?"

Jae Hyun put his hands over his face. "Don't make me say it, please."

Sang Mi blinked and put her hands up. "Okay, I'm sorry, I didn't realize..." she saw Li Xiu, and waved her over. The other girl scoffed. "Hey, Li Xiu, have you seen my brother?"

She screwed her face up, and then laughed. "Oh my god, you really are losing it. I knew you were crazy when you got out of the hospital, but I guess you're more of a loony than I thought."

She frowned. "Okay, there's no need for that. I thought we were past that."

"Past that? God. Why are you talking to me like we're friends?" Li Xiu marched forward and pulled her barrette out.

"Hey—give that back!"

She held it up above where she could grab it, smirking. "Losers like you don't deserve nice things like this. You think you're special just because your parents have cushy government jobs now? How quickly they move on from their dead son."

Sang Mi's face lost her color. "What are you talking about?"

She laughed harder. "You really are having a mental break! He died in the bombings, how on Mars could you forget?"

She stood up. "You take that back."

Li Xiu made a fake pouty face, and looked over at Jae Hyun who was trembling. "Oh, will your boyyy-friend tell me off? You know he's not as loyal to you as you think, we kiss—"

"I told her about that, it was a mistake!" Jae Hyun snapped.

Sang Mi was trembling. None of this made sense. None of this could be real. None of this... if none of it was real then what she did didn't matter.

So she snapped.

She was on Li Xiu in an instant, slamming her face with her fist. The other girl dropped instantly, unprepared for Sang Mi actually having the muscle she did.

She panted, as Li Xiu tried to stop the slurry of blood coming from her nose, and bolted from the room as Jae Hyun and Saki tried and failed to go after her. She was faster than both of them.

"APPLE TREE YARD!" she screamed out. "APPLE TREE YARD!" Shoving past teachers, she made her way down the stairwells, and then cutting through the computer lab out the window that couldn't lock there, out onto the grass towards the empty field. And it was empty.

She reached it, panting, and stomped on the fruitless dirt. "WHERE'S THE DAMN APPLE TREES HUH? Why am I here? What's the point of this stupid nightmare? GROW. I told you to grow already." She fell to her knees and started digging with her hands. "Where the hell are you? There has to be a seed, at least, something."

A hand touched her shoulder, she slipped it away, her heart was pounding. It was Saki. She was pale. "We need to wake up."

"How, how do we wake up? What kind of a dream is this?"

"I'm not sure. I'm genuinely not sure."

Sang Mi rose and held her hands up. "I have dirt under my fingernails, Saki. I can feel it. Why can I feel the dirt under my fingernails so clearly?"

Saki gulped. "I think I may have... no, no it's not just me. Everyone did. Sang Mi, I think the experiments other people have done—I think they failed because... because they were making the wrong assumptions."

Sang Mi looked past Saki's shoulder. Teachers were running over towards them. "So, tell me what's going on."

"You already figured it out."

"I want to hear you say it." She shoved her. "Say it!"

"Stop touching me!" Saki ordered.

"I'll shove you if I want to!"

Saki's placid facade broke and, for a moment, she was a normal, annoyed teenager. She scowled and shoved Sang Mi back, eyes ablaze. "Taking it out on me isn't going to solve this, Sang Mi!"

"Just SAY it. You got me into this, so say it."

"We're not... pushing the string, we're on the edge of the string. We're in some sort of... limbo state, in a possibility."

She threw her hands up. "So, is this *real*?"

The next words seemed to pain Saki to say. "I'm not sure." She studied their surroundings, seeming to find her center again. "This place may be an Apple Tree Yard. We need to focus on something..." Sang Mi panted; the teachers were nearly on them. She looked around. In the spot of forest the school owned, where they ran the cross country races through and which the biology classes used, a hoof emerged, and antlers. From a hundred meters away. A deer stared at them.

"Yesterday, I saw a deer," Sang Mi said.

"What?"

"It's a line from a story—" She grabbed Saki's hand, and pulled her towards the forest.

"They're not maple trees, they're apple trees. They've always been Apple Trees."

Saki got it. "They overgrew—they're a menace."

"Honestly it's not surprising the school is considering cutting them down."

"But they're such a part of school history."

They were running through the forest, their footsteps became wet as though the ground had flooded as the dark leaves of the canopy grew and covered the light above them. They followed the deer like their lives depended on it, their hearts pounding as the deer's tail disappeared as it bolted into the brush, and then they found themselves back in the hotel room.

Sang Mi struggled up to a sitting position; she had soaked through her clothes and the sheets with sweat. Saki was in the same state. They each grabbed the waters from their nightstands, gulping them down. “Did... Saki, I need to go.”

Sang Mi was already scrambling out of bed as Saki looked over at her. Saki stumbled up herself, struggling to find her balance. “Sang Mi, wait! We need to check your vitals.”

She turned and pointed at her, tears in her eyes. “Shut up. Shut up! I need to see if Sang Eun is okay—I, I have to. Don’t you dare stop me. If anything happened to him I’d... well you don’t wanna know what I’d do!”

“This really affected you,” Saki stated plainly.

“Of course it does, Saki! Because I have normal human emotions about things! I love my brother! Both of them! I... I have to go. I have to go.” She stripped and dressed quickly with no regard to her own privacy, stuffed everything in a bag, and rushed out. Saki sat there on the bed as she left, an expression on her face that Sang Mi wished in hindsight she’d paid more attention to.

\* \* \*

Sang Eun was playing Drakesword when his sister flung the door open. He’d been trying to leap up a set of rocks to get to a secret area, and was beginning to suspect it wasn’t actually possible to do it, despite what the guide he’d looked up online said. He looked up from the game at Sang Mi, whose eyes were filled to the brim with tears. When she saw him, they boiled over. “Talinata,” she said, and flung herself on him, hugging him tightly and weeping. “You’re alive! You’re really alive!” He patted her on the back, absolutely confused.

“I... I sure am. It’s okay, whatever it is.”

“You can’t ever die, you promise me that?”

“I’ll do my best, I guess?”

“No!” She pulled back, and looked him dead in the eyes. “Promise me.”

He held a hand up as if swearing an oath. “I promise.”

She nodded, and sat down next to him, cuddling up. “You can’t get up those rocks you know, it’s an urban legend.”



“I kind of figured. Are you okay?”

She nodded into his arm. “Now I am.”

\* \* \*

Saki tried to talk to Sang Mi a few times that morning, but she ignored her. The one time she cornered her, Sang Mi pulled her phone out and blared music until Mr. Xu started rushing over to chew them out.

Mrs. Ichinose leaned over and looked at the message from the main office. “Sang Mi, Saki? You need to go to the main office.” Sang Mi sighed and got up without looking at Saki.

Saki trotted after her. “You know that you can’t ignore me forever, right? And that I’m not responsible for what happened last night. That wasn’t my doing, so I’m not sure why you’re angry at me.”

She glanced back. “I’m really tired of all this. It’s not like we’ve done anything. I’m...” she sighed. “Look, something happened with your eyes, but are you sure it was the Delirium?”

Saki met her pace. “What do you mean?”

“You told me that all the other experiments failed. Maybe they failed for a reason. Like, it does seem that Delirium is a... wild drug. I’m sure you could make a killing off of it. Weird hyper-real feeling shared dream states is definitely nothing like anything I’ve experienced before.”

“You think it’s all a coincidence?”

“I normally wouldn’t tell you this, but you know everything about me already, so... I’ve been to Colocog a bunch of times. They sell injections there, things that contort your body temporarily. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen someone with cat-like eyes before.”

Saki was quiet. “You think I’ve been lying to you. That I’ve been making all this up.”

“No! No I don’t think you’ve been lying. I’m... Saki, what if your hypothesis is wrong? We’ve been doing experiments, and they really have been proper experiments. We have data, we have records. We’ve gotten farther than anyone else has but...”

"But you think our last jaunt was a bad trip."

It was Sang Mi's turn to get quiet for a moment. "I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all."

"You're not like the other people here, Sang Mi. You know that as much as I do. Even the people you love. I can see it when I look at you. You're not content, you're not happy. You keep trying to find new ways to make your life feel like it matters, and nothing comes close. But you haven't stopped. You don't stop even when you hate yourself."

"I always hate myself."

"And you always keep going."

"If this is your attempt to get me to keep going with your experiment, I'm flattered but you haven't dealt with my actual argument."

"I can't deny you might be right," Saki admitted, though her tone was unbothered. "This was the biggest wave we've had so far, but I don't think we did anything. I scoured the field behind the school this morning, nothing. I even had a drone do a scan. Nothing. But you are missing one important thing."

"What's that?"

"Do you really think I'm so naïve as to enter a situation where I will lose?"

Sang Mi stopped in her tracks. "Are you kidding me?"

She shook her head. "I've already won, even if this experiment fails. When you enter a scenario, sometimes the optimal win won't happen. But you can still win. You can still come out ahead. You can gain knowledge. Wisdom. Experience. Confidence. A realization you need to improve a skill. And allies. You can also just set it up so you're playing both sides, but that doesn't really apply here." She looked at her nails. "So what are you going to gain from this?"

"It's your plan."

She shrugged and sped up towards the office.

Inside, the principal was waiting for them with his hands clasped neatly together on his desk. "Please sit. Now, I've heard all about how you girls have been campaigning for there to be an apple tree orchard on site, in the unused field."

Saki nodded, “Yes sir, I’m sure you’ve seen the posters.”

“Yes...very clever how you framed it as ‘save’ the Apple Tree Orchard, when it’s a vacant lot. I suppose people are more naturally predicated to save something in danger than start something. And it hasn’t gone unnoticed.” He tapped something on the screen of his desk, and one of the walls lit up, showing a woman’s face that both girls recognized in a pre-recorded message.

“Hello there, I’m Margret Atlas, CEO of Atlas Botanics, a division of XeLabs. Your desire to beautify your campus reached the embassy, and Howard Martin connected me with you—I’ve always had a great interest in Marsian culture, and if I can do a small part to bring humanity closer together, I’d like to. That’s why we’re going to be donating twelve apple trees to the Academy 27 campus, which will be shipped from Earth as part of our cultural exchange. I remember fondly sitting under my own family’s apple tree growing up, and I hope this gift can give you the same joy.”

The company logo took up the screen and the principal turned it off. “We’re sending them back some cherry trees. Earthers just can’t get enough of cherry trees for some reason. So congratulations, you girls are making a real difference here. I hope you can feel proud of what you’ve achieved.”

Sang Mi sat dumbfounded, so Saki answered for them. “We do, sir, it’s a huge honor and we’re so grateful to have helped.”

They stumbled back towards class, Sang Mi letting out little half-laugh now and then.

“Funny?” Saki asked.

“I mean, I guess we did cause change. Not... not how we planned, but you’re right. We still won. The Delirium had nothing to do with it but... yeah. I guess we won. And you won our argument earlier.”

“Of course,” she said as though that wasn’t worth stating.

They came back into the classroom only to find they’d been broken up into groups working on an assignment. Tsetseg was already in one, so Sang Mi and Saki joined Li Xiu and Jae Hyun who’d somehow ended up with the short straw of members.

“What’s the assignment anyway?” Sang Mi said as she slid into a chair.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Jae Hyun sighed. “We have to make a presentation about one of Conan Doyle’s stories, and one story written by someone else after him in any medium.”

Sang Mi tilted her head. “Why are you sighing? That sounds awesome.”

Jae Hyun scoffed. “I didn’t sigh. It’s obviously awesome. I love this assignment.”

“You kind of totally sighed.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“ANYWAY!” Li Xiu interrupted, “What were you two doing?”

Saki leaned back in her chair. “Oh, that little project we put together worked out. There’s going to be an Apple Tree Yard on campus.”

Jae Hyun looked at her skeptically. “You mean... an orchard?”

Li Xiu snapped. “Wait--That’s it! Apple Tree Yard!”

Saki and Sang Mi looked at each other. “I don’t follow,” Saki said.

Li Xiu gestured wildly with her hands. “Okay, it’s this wild obscure bit of Sherlock Holmes lore. There was this TV show adaptation made by the BBC centuries ago that was going into its final run, and the season finished airing, but then fans looked at all these clues and started to realize that there was a fourth secret episode called Apple Tree Yard—”

Sang Mi cut her off. “Yes, we know all about that.”

Not losing her momentum, Li Xiu barreled on. “—So they started to get really hyped up about this secret episode and—”

“We can’t use that for the assignment Li Xiu,” Sang Mi droned.

Saki nodded, “We’ll have to figure something else out I’m afraid. Plus, honestly, I think I’ve had enough Apple Tree Yard for one lifetime. No point wasting more time on a dead end.”

“That’s not fair,” Li Xiu said. “What if the rest of us want to cover it?”

Sang Mi could not hide the deeply patronizing tone from her voice. “Li Xiu. Honey. Sweetheart. Buddy. Pal. Amigo. We can’t exactly cover a story that doesn’t exist.”

Li Xiu frowned. “What do you mean it doesn’t exist, I’ve seen it.”

“I have too?” Jae Hyun said.

Sang Mi raised both hands palm out. “That’s very funny, but you don’t need to keep the gag up. Honestly at this point it’s too much.”

Jae Hyun frowned too, “We’re not kidding; it’s one of the most famous TV stunts ever.”

Saki slowly straightened her back and focused in on Jae Hyun. “Sorry, what did you just say? I need to make sure I heard you properly, I was tuning you out.”

“...It’s one of the most famous TV stunts ever?” he stammered.

“Don’t be rude to Jae Hyun, look I’ll show you.” Li Xiu pulled up a video on her phone, and started playing it. “See, Season 4 episode 4, Apple Tree Yard by Steven Moffat.”

Saki and Sang Mi watched. They watched just long enough to be sure it was real. To be sure it wasn’t a lazy fake. Sang Mi began to tremble. Saki checked something on her own phone, and showed it to Sang Mi.

The pair looked at each other.

Li Xiu and Jae Hyun were confused.

“Is this...” Sang Mi’s voice quivered.

“It exists. It exists now. All these years. All this time...”

They stared at each other, Sang Mi’s jaw trembling more and more.

Li Xiu tried to interject, “Sorry but could you two—”

“WE DID IT!” Sang Mi cried, bolting up in her seat and sending her padd flying towards Tsetseg who caught it in a scrambled panic.

“I knew it would work. I knew it. For years. For years he said the calculations were wrong but I knew it...” Saki mumbled like the words of a long held confession, triumph shining in her eyes.

Sang Mi flung herself from her chair into Saki’s, throwing her arms around her. For once, Saki did not reject the embrace, but instead wrapped her arms around Sang Mi in return.

“WE REALLY NUDGED THE UNIVERSE!”

“We folded the string!”

“I NEVER SHOULD HAVE DOUBTED YOU!”

“I’m glad you finally realize that!”

“DON’T RUIN THE MOMENT.”

The pair rose in unison, something neither could have imagined days earlier, and Sang Mi began to chant, “APPLE TREE YARD! APPLE TREE YARD!” taking the other girl’s hands and jumping up and down. Despite herself, Saki joined in the chant, albeit a little less uproariously than Sang Mi.

The pair broke out in a riotous mutual laughter.

“Ahem,” Mrs. Ichinose said. “I can see you girls are happy, but I’m afraid I’m writing you both up for disturbing the class. Please go meet Coach Jo in detention.”

They were laughing so hard as they staggered out of the room that they had to support each other arm in arm to get out the doorway, and could be heard for some time down the hallway, chanting their singsong refrain of “Apple Tree Yard! Apple Tree Yard!”

“What the hell was that about?” Jae Hyun asked.

“It’s a mystery,” Li Xiu mumbled. “I didn’t even think the episode was that good.”

# School Announcements

## ***NEXT TIME!***

Did you know that we have clubs here at Academy 27 outside of Track and Field and the Broadcasting Club? From the dirty looks I'm getting from across the office, I see that you did! One of those clubs is the Roleplaying Game Club, and I hear they've been up to some really strange shenanigans lately.

Personally, if I was them, I would be focusing on my Track and Field practices but... well I'm sure they're all having fun. Even if they're playing a lot of the time at the Cao Family's religious compound.

But when you're rolling the dice on fantasy, whose dreams are going to go too far? Till next time, I'm your announcer from the Broadcast Club, Hee Jin!

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

### **A27: The Roleplaying Game**

**By Dillon O'Hara, James Wylder, Callum Phillpott, and  
Kimberley Chiu**

**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)**

## **A27 Apple Slab Pie**

### **Crust**

3 3/4 (470 grams) cups all-purpose flour

1 1/2 tablespoons sugar

1 1/2 teaspoons table salt

3 sticks (340 grams) unsalted butter, very cold

3/4 cup very cold water

### **Filling**

3 1/2 to 4 pounds apples, peeled, cored and chopped into approximately 1/2-inch chunks (about 8 cups)

Squeeze of lemon juice

2/3 to 3/4 cup sugar (depending on how sweet you like your pies)

3 tablespoons cornstarch

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

1/4 teaspoon ground allspice

1/8 teaspoon table salt

### **To finish**

2 tablespoons heavy cream or one egg, beaten with 1 tablespoon of water

### **Glaze (optional)**

1/2 cup confectioners' sugar

1 tablespoon milk, water, lemon juice or fresh apple cider, plus a drop or two more if needed



Make pie crust: Whisk together flour, sugar and salt in the bottom of a large, wide-ish bowl. Using a pastry blender, two forks, or your fingertips, work the butter into the flour until the biggest pieces of butter are the size of tiny peas. (You'll want to chop your butter into small bits first, unless you're using a very strong pastry blender in which case you can throw the sticks in whole, as I do.) Gently stir in the water with a rubber spatula, mixing it until a craggy mass forms. Get your hands in the bowl and knead it just two or three times to form a ball. Divide dough roughly in half (it's okay if one is slightly larger). Wrap each half in plastic wrap and flatten a bit, like a disc. Chill in fridge for at least an hour or up to two days or slip plastic-wrapped dough into a freezer bag and freeze for up to 1 to 2 months (longer if you trust your freezer more than I do). To defrost, leave in fridge for 1 day.

Heat oven to 375 degrees F. Line bottom of 10x15x1-inch baking sheet or jellyroll pan with parchment paper.

Prepare filling: In a large bowl, toss apples with lemon juice until coated. Top with remaining filling ingredients and stir to evenly coat.

Assemble pie: On a lightly floured surface, roll one of your dough halves (the larger one, if you have two different sizes) into an 18-by-13-inch rectangle. This can be kind of a pain because it is so large. Do your best to work quickly, keeping the dough as cold as possible and using enough flour that it doesn't stick to the counter. Transfer to your prepared baking sheet and gently drape some of the overhang in so that the dough fills out the inner edges and corners. Some pastry will still hang over the sides of the pan; trim this to 3/4-inch.

Pour apple mixture over and spread evenly.

Roll the second of your dough halves (the smaller one, if they were different sizes) into a 16-by-11-inch rectangle. Drape over filling and fold the bottom crust's overhang over the edges sealing them together. Cut small slits to act as vents all over lid. Brush lid heavy cream or egg wash. Bake until crust is golden and filling is

bubbling, 40 to 45 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack until just warm to the touch, about 45 minutes.

In a medium bowl, stir together confectioners' sugar and liquid of your choice until a pourable glaze consistency is reached. Use a spoon to drizzle over top. Serve slab pie in squares or rectangles, warm or at room temperature.

It keeps at room temperature for at least three days.



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