



**Jae Hyun
Puts on the Moves**

*Written by
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The night had unrolled into a crisp morning over the streets of Takumi. It was raining, but only lightly, and it was pleasant against the heat. And Kalingkata, out of nowhere, tackled Jae Hyun so suddenly that he almost fell over.

“Ahhh!” he said in as dignified a tone as he could manage. “What are you—”

“You,” she said, “are not going to believe,” she said, “what I saw yesterday.”

This was on the route to school. Jae Hyun wasn't really awake yet, so this was more than he could deal with. “Did you find, like, a robot *cat* this time?”

“I wish. That would be amazing.” She strode on ahead - she was shorter than him but somehow had a longer stride, so he had to hurry to keep up. “Put it this way. What's the weirdest thing that happened to *you* yesterday?”

“Oh, I'd say it would be Li Xiu making me larp as a guy who really wanted that money. Why *did* he want that money?”

“You were a drug dealer.”

“Oh!” Jae Hyun blinked. “That- yeah, that actually tracks. Can you slow down a little? I had a big breakfast.” (He had not had a big breakfast. He just didn't move at a brisk jog at 8.15am.)

Kalingkata dialed it back to a brisk walk. “So, exactly - you'd think the weirdest thing about yesterday would be the roleplay, and Li Xiu losing her upper-upper-upper-class mind, and you needing to bridal-carry Tsetseg outside.” She paused. “Actually, before I say my thing. Any updates on that?”

“We're not a thing,” Jae Hyun said quickly.

“I meant is she still alive, jackass.”

“Oh! Sorry. Yeah. She just needed a lot of water.”

“Okay, cool.” She clapped her hands together. “But *actually*. The weirdest thing about yesterday was when I went over to Li Xiu’s parents’ house.”

Jae Hyun didn’t know what he had been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t what followed: Li Xiu’s parents acting out a LARP based on some sort of Swedish pagan ritual, Mrs. Cao pretending to bonk her mother on the head with a big squeaky hammer. “That’s nuts,” he said. “That’s actually insane. Are you making this up?”

“If I made it up, it’d make sense,” she said; at this point, she had distractedly returned to her original pace, and Jae Hyun just had to keep up. “So of course, I *have* to figure out what’s going on. These people are filthy rich *and* they act weird? There simply has to be an overlap. The universe hates a coincidence.”

Jae Hyun wasn’t sure the universe had strong feeling one way or the other, but he didn’t say that. He was too eager to please. “So you reckon they’re part of some tabletop cult?”

“And that’s where they get all their money from!” she said. “I don’t think anyone’s ever made a connection between tabletop games and cults before, but there might be something in it. So, I’m going to investigate. I just don’t know how yet.”

“I could help!” Jae Hyun said, the words out of his mouth before he’d fully thought them. “I mean, we have the experience from investigating Zhyrgal.”

“We *do* have the experience getting our ass kicked, yes,” said Kalingkata. “I guess I won’t say no, but I wasn’t, like, trying to recruit you. I just had to talk to someone about this before I went insane.”

“You didn’t tell Talinata?”

“That barely counts.” She tousled her hair as she thought. “I’m pretty sure I’d be able to hack their home computer. I’d just have to email the grandmother like,” - she put on a deep voice - “*bubb, I’m the gubberment, give me your password.*” She paused. “But that’d be pretty bad. She’s, like, 200 years old. No class in that.”

Jae Hyun shrugged. “We could break into their house? That’d be cooler.”

Kalingkata squinted at him. “Bit of an escalation, yeah?”

He huffed. “It could be a cool way for us to, like. Hang out.”

“Larceny?”

“We’ve done it before, in the junkyard.”

“That was *giving something back!*” Kalingkata said; her indignation was only mostly a joke. “*Nobody* lives in that junkyard. I hope. And we *returned* a lost pet. And I was *nice to an old lady*. So you have me all backwards. You’re imagining anti-Kalingkata.”

This wasn’t going well. “Well, uh. We could get the information out of Li Xiu?”

“How so,” Kalingkata said flatly.

“Oh, you know me,” he said unconvincingly. “I can put on the moves.”

This did something unusual: it brought Kalingkata to a standstill. She turned to look him in the eye, her expression neutral. Jae Hyun wasn’t sure what to make of this, so he just looked back.

“Can you,” she said. “Can you, *put on the moves.*”

“I- I guess?” said Jae Hyun. Then, more confidently, “Yeah! I know you’re pretty oblivious to flirting and things like that, so let me assure you - when I decide it’s on, it’s on.”

There was something in Kalingkata’s expression that Jae Hyun couldn’t pinpoint. He could only assume his gambit was working.

“How about,” said Kalingkata, “you go ahead and do that.”

He paused. “Huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, and patted him on the shoulder. “Go try it on some other girl for a day or two. I’d appreciate that.”

Jae Hyun didn’t get this right away. Then his eyes widened in understanding. “Okay, got it! Wink wink!” He smiled widely and galloped off.

The plan was simple. He would put the moves on Li Xiu and gain her trust. She would tell him everything he wanted to know about her family and their pagan RPG cult. Then he would report all this information back to Kalingkata, and she would be so grateful that maybe she would give him a little kiss. Maybe that was how it all worked. He chuckled to himself giddily. Finally, it was all happening!

“You wink with your eyes,” Kalingkata muttered to herself. “Saying it is ridiculous.”

The first few periods creaked by. Mrs. Ichinose was talking about wavy lines and the equations used to pinpoint what kind of wavy they were, but Jae Hyun had a harder time paying attention than normal. All he could think about was the plan of attack. How would he open? He'd be able to approach at break, and they'd both be at the canteen, so he could talk about food. That would be a start. He had an idea for something to say, something he'd seen in a video.

Eventually, 11am did tick around, and everyone milled into the canteen, chattering noisily. He scanned the crowd for Li Xiu and was happy to see that, unusually, she was sitting alone. He took a deep breath and sidled up to her. It was time to say something about food.

“So, like,” he said to her, “is ramen a comfort food, or am I just depressed?”

She blinked. “What?”

It was funnier in the video, he guessed. “Uh, I mean. So I was thinking of getting some.” He paused. “If you wanted some too?”

She seemed very interested in the woodwork of the table. “No thanks.”

“Or maybe a coffee?”

She looked up. “They don't do coffee. It's a high school.”

“Well,” he said, trying to adapt, “maybe we could just get one later.”

She smiled - not unkindly, but definitely not impressed. “And does that work for you very often? Lines like that.”

He froze up. “I mean, uh. I didn't mean anything by- I didn't mean to-”

She laughed a little at his flusterment. “Don't worry, it's just funny. Really, I'm lucky anyone's talking to me at all.”

“Oh, you mean after-” He caught himself, rather than say *after you went insane and nearly sent Tsetseg to the hospital.*

“After I went insane,” she said, “and nearly sent Tsetseg to the hospital, yeah. I’d like to say I was just in character, but that was only part of it.” She tapped her fingernails (long, painted pastel pink) against the table. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s probably Tsetseg you should be apologizing to.”

“I did. She was pretty gracious about it, but I don’t know if we’re cool.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I guess we didn’t know each other that well anyway.”

“Sure. Why are you...” He gestured. “Like that? About tabletop stuff? Is it a family thing, or-”

She laughed shortly. “Oh, trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“No, I do.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry.”

This seemed like a dead end. But he didn’t feel the need to nope out. “Well, tell me this instead, then,” he said. “Yesterday, with the lights and cameras and stuff. Do you want to go into film?”

Li Xiu went a little red in the face. “You make it sound silly.”

“What? No. I think that’d be cool.”

She didn’t respond. But she put her hands together and smiled in a gentle, happy way. “Uh. Thanks.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Nothing good.”

“Tell me your bad idea, so.”

“*It’s not a bad idea!*” she said in mock indignation - she was smiling now. “Alright, I’ll tell you a bit of it. It’s, like,” - she made a little square with her hands as if she was picturing it - “it would be about, like, this guy who’s really nice and cheerful? But his wife is cheating on him with his best friend.”

“Right, right,” he said. “Kind of a drama thing.”

“Definitely, yeah,” she said. “But like, I don’t know. I’d have a lot to learn, and it feels impossible to start. I look at what I have of the script so far, and it just feels like the most garbage thing. And I don’t think my parents would want me to do it.”

This was an opening to push on what her family’s deal was, but he found he didn’t want to take it. “Well, you gotta do what you gotta do, right?”

“I don’t think I *gotta* do this.”

“No? You don’t *gotta* follow your dreams? You wouldn’t be the first girl to piss off her parents.”

She sighed. “You think so?”

He swiveled round to lean back against the table and put his hands behind his head; this did not make any sense as a maneuver, but it felt right. “I can be the drug dealer again in your movie. Or I can just get up on a rooftop and demand money from you. Whatever works.”

That got a laugh out of her, so he was satisfied with a job well done. “Thank you,” she said, and she clearly meant it.

Jae Hyun wasn’t sure what he was trying to do. This didn’t really seem to be resolving in the direction of putting on the moves or getting any information. But he was enjoying spending time with Li Xiu. So he decided to stay a while, maybe.

So he did.

They hung out a lot over the next few days talking about Li Xiu’s screenplay idea. Jae Hyun started trying to explain story structure to her, but these turned into long explanations of what *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and ‘the Scottish play’ actually were, and that led sideways into a ramble about *Journey to the West*, or ‘that dumb monkey book.’ And Li Xiu explained her many contradictory ideas, and they got no work done whatsoever.

Li Xiu was concerned with the question of how they would fund this movie. Apparently, her parents wouldn’t just stump up the cash; she had to find a way to generate it herself. Jae Hyun was quick to say that they should probably write at least a first draft of the script first, but Li Xiu dismissed this. The movie was all in her head ready to go. “All we need,” she said, “is for someone to sell me a whole load of stuff at a low price point.”

Jae Hyun would later rationalise that this was the sort of thing that might illuminate how the Caos operate, where their money comes from. But really, he was just happy to hang out with a girl after school.

What he wasn't expecting was for Li Xiu to lead him to a bar. The sort of where you spoke to the bouncer through a reinforced door with an open-and-shut grille. And that door was somehow the most welcoming thing on this street; otherwise, it was all dumpsters. Not his usual environment. He suspected it wasn't hers either, and said as much.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "They know me here."

She rapped primly three times on the grate, and it slid open. The dude on the other side looked like a mattress shoved into a tracksuit.

She leaned in. "*Starboard*," she said conspiratorially.

"That hasn't been the password for three weeks," the bouncer growled. "It changes every night."

Li Xiu huffed. "I'm Li Xiu, I know JackBox."

"JackBox doesn't get to let people in."

"Then at least let her know we're out here."

He paused, then grunted his assent. "I'll send word."

"Appreciated, darling."

Jae Hyun put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Should we even be here? Like, is it safe?"

She scoffed. "What, do you think they're going to kill us? You do realise murder is illegal."

"Yeah, but it's not against the laws of goddam physics."

"It's four-thirty in the afternoon," she said, laughing a little. "And it's just a bar."

"Right, I was going to ask," he said. "Why is JackBox here?"

"I can answer that," called a familiar, hoarse voice from around the corner. Sure enough, it was JackBox, sweaty after a day at work, decked out in her usual 50s-goth-

housewife dress. She patted the wall with her cybernetic arm. “Just checking in with some work stuff.”

Jae Hyun raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t realise you worked at a place like this.”

“I don’t,” she said. “It’s like, I just supervise people who sell the—” She caught herself. “Like, the products I sell.”

“This is *exactly* what I wanted to talk to you about,” Li Xiu said, smiling widely, laying a hand on JackBox’s shoulder. “You said you sell leather jackets, right? Let’s walk and talk.”

JackBox let herself be led along by Li Xiu, who had now linked arms with her and was heading back out onto the main street. “Yeah, now you mention it, I definitely did say that I sell leather jackets. Some water beds too. Although I mostly sell to, like, politicians and stuff.”

Jae Hyun laughed a little - the alley was only wide enough for two people, and he had been shuffled down the pecking order to walk behind them. “What politician goes around in a leather jacket?”

“I don’t name names,” JackBox said neutrally.

“And you don’t need to,” said Li Xiu. “So I’m asking because - you have people under you who sell for you, yes?”

JackBox met her gaze. “Uh-huh.”

“My proposition for you is, what if I were to become one of these people? Selling for you.”

JackBox paused. They had just stepped out from the lip of the alley and into broad daylight, where normal people were walking home from work. “I don’t think you fit the profile,” she said, still very level.

“How about me?” said Jae Hyun. “I haven’t really been a salesman before, but I wanna help with Li Xiu’s thing.”

“You would also be bad,” said JackBox, “but Li Xiu *extremely* does not fit the profile.”

“I’m very adaptable,” Li Xiu said with a smile vaguely reminiscent of a shark. “Would it make more sense if I said I was trying to fund a film I want to make? And that I would buy the product from you at a low price point and sell high?”

“No?” said JackBox. “What? No, it would not make it better if you told me you were ripping me off. Like... my guys get a twenty percent cut. It’s a system.”

Li Xiu exhaled thoughtfully. “There must be something we can do to make it worth your while. Some sort of social favour, or—”

“Oh *hey!!!*” JackBox exclaimed in the other direction, suddenly much more cheery and energetic. Li Xiu and Jae Hyun were confused for a moment, and then they saw: Kalingkata was on the other side of the road, on her way home. JackBox trotted across to her, presumably to say *hey!!!* at her some more.

“Oh, hey dude!” said Kalingkata, friendly but without any equivalent note of frenzy. Then she saw Jae Hyun. “Hey dude.” Then her eyes shifted to Li Xiu, and Jae Hyun next to Li Xiu, and she did some mental calculations. “Oh, uh. Hey dude.”

That, Jae Hyun thought, was the sort of reaction that someone might find suspicious. But Li Xiu didn’t seem to notice at all. She was smiling - not just happily, but smugly. Knowingly. It was the happiest Jae Hyun had ever seen her, and the most dangerous.

“Hey dude,” Jae Hyun said in his best impression of JackBox’s neutral tone from earlier.

“You havin’ a good time,” she asked flatly.

“Sure.”

“A good,” she said, “and normal and respectful time? With boundaries and... stuff like that?”

Li Xiu laughed and linked arms with Jae Hyun. “You don’t have to worry about this boy at all. He’s a total sweetheart, and he’s been so supportive about my screenplay.”

“Right,” said Kalingkata, visibly skeptical about supporting Li Xiu’s cinematic ambitions after last weekend. “Well. Be sure to mention me in your acceptance speech. But I gotta go help my mom with dinner. So I’ll catch you guys around.”

And she prowled off without waiting for them to say goodbye.

JackBox sighed, full of nerves. “Was that weird?” she said. “Was I weird? Was that too much?”

Li Xiu smiled widely.

“*What?!*”

“Let me answer with a question,” she said. “When did all this start?”

She huffed, red in the face. She even fully crossed her arms. Strange behavior from a girl who had just a minute ago been hard-assing them. “I mean. I’m not gonna say in front of *him*.”

Jae Hyun put his hands up. “Not a word’s gonna make it back to her. I can fully just tune out and stare into space if you want.”

And truth be told, he didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t want JackBox to go off schmoozing with Kalingkata. *He* wanted to schmooze with Kalingkata. That, he reminded himself, was the point of this whole operation.

She went quiet for a moment. Then she leaned in close to Li Xiu. “So, like. Basically immediately.”

“That is just precious. Why? She’s nice and all, but she’s a mess.”

“She’s *cool*,” JackBox insisted. “She always seems to be going on adventures, and she’s just super full of energy and stuff, and she’s easy to be around.”

“She’s not that cool,” Jae Hyun said unconvincingly. “I’d say you’re cooler.”

“She *is* cool, and also has her life together,” said JackBox.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Jae Hyun, his mouth running faster than his mind again. “I mean, last year, she dragged me on this whole wild goose chase through a junkyard. Because she, like, goes through the junkyard looking for stuff for fun? Which I think is weird.”

Li Xiu lightly slapped him on the arm. “You *must* stop being such a killjoy! No, I can see what she means. Sang Mi does have an enthusiasm about her.”

“They both do,” JackBox smiled shyly. “Her and Talinata. Honestly, not to be weird, but I’d take either.”

“I mean,” Jae Hyun cut in again, trying not to laugh, “do you mean *either*? Because I think you’re thinking b—”

“*You said you were going to tune out.*”

“This is vulgar and I cannot condone it,” said Li Xiu, smiling wider than ever. “I believe we’ve found the favor we can administer upon you.”

“You absolutely have not,” said JackBox. “I don’t know what you mean, but whatever it is, I would *die*. I’ll never give you any jackets for the rest of my life.”

“Oh, we’re well past jackets.” Li Xiu was fully grinning now. “This is so much more delicious.”

This was not a good direction for this to be going. “Hey now,” he said. “Hey now hey now hey now. Doesn’t it seem like interjecting ourselves into people’s feelings like this could get a little weird?”

“I just want to help out my good friend JackBox,” Li Xiu said innocently.

“But this is ridiculous,” he insisted. “You’re not seriously going to set them up.”

“No, Jae Hyun.” Li Xiu made a little ceremonial *ta-da* kind of a gesture. “*You* are going to set them up.”

JackBox buried her face in her hands. “Oh my God...”

“Yeah, oh my God!” said Jae Hyun, his voice getting squeaky now. “How am I supposed to—”

“You know Sang Mi way better than I do. And I’d say you’d be well able to put on the moves,” Li Xiu grinned.

“Uh?!”

“C’mon,” she said, giving him the big doe eyes. “I’d *really* appreciate it...”

She might even appreciate it enough, he thought, to open up a bit about her family. Maybe this was the solution. “Sure,” he said. “I can make that work.”

JackBox looked up. “Two seconds ago, you thought this was a bad idea.”

Which was true, in that he wanted to keep Kalingkata for himself. So he had to thread the needle on this one. “I just mean that I don’t see what you see in her,” he said easily. “Like, she’s a weird trash lady, and you can do better. But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Oh my *Godddd*,” JackBox said into her hands in embarrassment. When she looked up again, her face was resolute. “Fine. I’ll let you do the thing. But this had better work.”

“It will!” Li Xiu smiled.

“Unless it doesn’t,” said Jae Hyun, “which is okay, because, like, plenty of fish in the sea, right?”

“It had better work!”

JackBox tried to push past them and run off, but Li Xiu grabbed her arm. “One more thing.” She pulled out her purse, fished out a pretty decent whack of little pieces of paper, and pressed them into JackBox’s hands. “As many leather jackets as that will buy. I trust you to cut a good rate for your matchmaker.”

JackBox stared at the money in her hand. “Damn,” she said. “I shoulda come to you months ago.” And with that, she left, speechless. She was nearly stumbling from the exertion of it all.

Li Xiu was still beaming. “She is absolutely adorable,” she said. “I have never seen her like that.”

“Yeah, I guess me neither,” Jae Hyun said absently. He was watching Li Xiu’s hands, how she tapped the tips of her fingernails together with nervous excitement. It was deliberate and kind of endearing.

“You keep looking at my hands,” she said. “Is there something on them?”

“Oh? No. I guess I just like how you do your nails.”

“Ah!” She tucked her hair behind her ears nervously. “It’s not me that does them, I just went to the salon last week. But thank you. Maybe we’ll have to get yours done!”

He laughed. “It’d be wasted on me.”

“She’s funny,” he said. “She goes to the salon to get her nails done. Who does that? Like, under the age of 30.”

“I could never.” Kalingkata wagged her fingers. “Need these girls for gaming. Gotta keep my mash optimal.”

This was the next day at lunch. Jae Hyun hadn’t run into Kalingkata in the morning even though they usually walked to school together. She’d presumably overslept. But he’d caught her when class broke; she looked a little reluctant, and he second-guessed himself, but it was important to debrief about the mission. Now they were sitting out in the sun on the outside wall; it almost felt like they should be having cans of something they weren’t old enough for yet.

“And you might want to keep your nails short for other things.”

She looked at him blankly. “What other things?”

He realised his error. “Y’know.”

“Oh, like, just in general?”

“Yes, that is what I meant,” Jae Hyun said steadily. Time to change the subject. “Anyway. Are you excited to find out what the deal is with Li Xiu’s cult? Because I think we’re just one or two steps away.”

Kalingkata shrugged, staring off into the middle distance. “Honestly, don’t break your back over it. I was going insane on Monday, but so long as I don’t get bonked on the head with a big squeaky hammer, I could take it or leave it.”

“Well, maybe take it,” Jae Hyun said, mentally scrabbling a little, “because I need your help for this next bit. *Can* you go on a date with JackBox?”

For the first time in the conversation, Kalingkata actually looked at him. “I, uh. What?”

“Basically, Li Xiu is playing matchmaker,” Jae Hyun rattled off - he had spent an embarrassingly long time last night figuring out a more elaborate lie before remembering that Kalingkata was actually in on the original ruse. “So if I help her out with that, then I’ll earn her trust, and she’ll tell us everything we want to know.”

Kalingkata’s mouth was a straight line. She steepled her fingers together. “And does JackBox know about this?”

“Uh-huh,” Jae Hyun said neutrally.

A pause as she computed all this. “So what you mean is,” she said, “this is a convoluted way of JackBox asking me out?”

Jae Hyun scrunched up his face. “More like me asking for Li Xiu asking for her?”

“Sure,” said Kalingkata. She ran her fingers through her hair, clearly stressing a little. “It’s just. I didn’t think she fancied me? I can’t tell.”

“Yeah,” said Jae Hyun pointedly, “I don’t think you’ve ever noticed anyone having a huge crush on you.”

“What can I say? I’m not gifted with your unparalleled ability to read the goddam room.”

“Exactly!” said Jae Hyun. It was nice to get some credit, at least. “Anyway, are you going on the date or not?”

Kalingkata thought for a second. “I have never thought about whether or not I fancy JackBox,” she said honestly, “but she *is* cool, so I suppose it could be worth checking.” Then, more assertively, “Sure, tell her we can go to the ice cream place just up the road when school breaks. I’ll give anyone a chance.”

Unbelievable. “Will do, ma’am,” he said weakly. Then attempted a joke: “Maybe you’ll even get a leather jacket out of the deal.”

Kalingkata blinked. “A what?”

“Oh, sorry, it was this whole thing. JackBox was saying that she sells leather jackets at the local bar.”

“Is that so.”

“Yeah, like. She supervises sellers who work at street level? And she mainly sells to politicians. Which I think is crazy. I’d like to know what politician would be getting a leather jacket.”

He turned around, expecting Kalingkata to at least be doing an obligatory fake laugh, but she seemed more irritated than ever. “Come the hell on, man,” she said. “She’s, like, sixteen. Do you seriously expect me to believe that shit?” She hopped off the wall and stormed off. “*Leather jackets*. Christ. Just talk straight.”

Jae Hyun was stung. Was it something he said? What was it about leather jackets that were so bad? Was she vegan or something?

Oh well. He pulled out his padd and, with no small amount of annoyance, texted JackBox the good news.

It was of course imperative, or at least appropriate, that Jae Hyun also be in the ice cream parlour to see how the plan played out. But it was also important that JackBox not see. So he went and got one of those print media ‘news papers’ that hipsters liked, to block his face. And he had a sunglasses-and-baseball-cap setup too, for safety. And he’d even slipped away before the last class to make sure he’d be there early.

Kalingkata was the first in the door. Since she was in on the plan, he lowered his newspaper to wave hello. Apparently, this was an error. She stormed over to him and was clearly just about stopping herself from grabbing him by the jumper. “What,” she said, “in *God’s* name are you doing here?!”

“Just making sure everything goes well!” he said squeakily.

“I am here on a *nice date* with my *normal friend*—”

“I don’t understand. This was the plan?”

“Why do you have a big newspaper?!”

“It’s a disguise!” He gestured at a woman across the room who was also reading the paper. “It’s in vogue here!”

Kalingkata took a step back and started massaging her temples. He needed to say something to set her at ease.

“So,” he said, holding up his mostly-empty paper cup. “Why do they sell coffees here? Like, it doesn’t go with ice cream. Although I guess that’s what affegatos are?”

“Perish.”

This wasn’t salvageable. He started folding up his newspaper. “Y’know, maybe I should just get out of your—”

Nope nope nope nope JackBox was walking in the door. He unfolded the newspaper again like a springtrap and hoped desperately that she hadn’t noticed anything amiss, just staring in blind panic at a 750-word report on a planned windmill development.

“Hey!” he heard JackBox say. She didn’t seem any the wiser. “*Heyyy!!!*”

A long pause from Kalingkata. “Hey. Do you wanna go somewhere else?”

“That’s okay, I love it here!”

“I think the park could be good,” Kalingkata said firmly.

“I’ll just order,” said JackBox. A pause. He guessed she was looking at the menu. “This is crazy,” she continued. “That we’re here, I mean. Sorry to do it through a weird chain. It wasn’t really my idea.”

“Yeah, I think a lot of people have been having weird ideas.” Then she seemed to catch herself. “I don’t mean it’s not nice to hang out, though. I’m down for that.”

“... of course, yeah,” JackBox said, all shy.

“You could have just asked me out, you know.”

“I *knowww*,” she whined. “But, like, those two were cool about it. They were bigging you up, talking about all the cool adventures you go on in the junkyard.”

“Oh yeah! That thing with the dog. That was a nice night.”

“Well, I say ‘bigging you up.’ Jae Hyun called you a weird trash lady.”

Uh oh.

“Did he,” said Kalingkata. “*Did he now.*”

Oh dear oh dear oh dear.

“I mean,” JackBox said quickly. “I don’t think he meant it in a very mean way? I don’t know.”

“No, he’s actually a pretty weird guy,” Kalingkata said, obviously pissed off now. “I’d give him a wide berth. I wasn’t going to say anything, but he was trying to convince me you were a drug dealer.”

What?! This was actually crazy. He hadn’t said anything like that at all!

JackBox had suddenly gotten very quiet, and when she did speak, her voice was shaky. “What?”

“As if I was going to fall for that!” Kalingkata continued. “I mean, you’re what, sixteen? I can’t believe he thought I’d think that. That you’d get mixed up in some dumb seedy bullshit just because you’re a Maverick? You’re clearly way above it.”

“I mean. It’s complicated.” She was definitely sounding uneasy now. The temperature in the room was dropping real fast. And Jae Hyun was just starting to piece together that JackBox possibly did not sell fashionable clothing. “What I mean is,” JackBox continued as best she could, “other people, who find themselves in these situations. There are a lot of extenuating circumstances that they might be born into. And a lot of trouble that they might be trying to stay out of.”

“I guess,” said Kalingkata, who clearly was not getting it. “But you always have a choice, right?”

“There’s a *lot of stuff*,” JackBox snapped, “that *these kids* didn’t have a *choice* in, and there’s a lot of—” She cut herself off. “I’m gonna have to step out.”

“Uh? Are you okay?”

She seemed short of breath. “I definitely gotta step out. You order whatever you want, and I’ll be in the park unless I have to— I don’t know. Give me a second.”

From the footsteps out, Jae Hyun could tell that it was at least safe to lower his paper. JackBox was, of course, gone. And Kalingkata was at the counter, looking lost.

She apologized to the woman at the till and stepped over to Jae Hyun discreetly. “Okay, I’m gonna give you credit on exactly one thing,” she said quietly. “I thought you were trying to bullshit me about the drugs thing, and I am now picking up that was not the case. So I’m sorry for flipping my shit at you over that.”

“I literally did think it was leather jackets.”

Kalingkata breathed in deeply. “You,” she said, “are actually a goddam moron.”

“Yeah, I’m picking up on that,” he said sheepishly. “This whole thing was just meant to be a bit of fun, y’know? I just wanted to get to know you.”

“I think you know me pretty well,” said Kalingkata, who was now annoyed again. “I’m your friend, the weird trash lady.”

“Alright...”

“Maybe we can hang out again and I can eat out of the trash again.”

“Sang Mi,” he said, “I actually had a really nice time that night.”

She gave him a shove. “*So did I!*”

“I was just trying to put her off you because—” He caught himself. “Listen, the point is. I can get out of your hair for a while.”

“I think you definitely need to, yeah,” Kalingkata said. She was aiming for ice-cold, but she was too sore with it. “And don’t hassle Li Xiu either. Your ruse is dumb.”

“I mean, honestly, I stopped doing the ruse after sixty seconds.”

She squinted. “No you didn’t. You did all this stuff. You set me up with JackBox just to shoot it down.”

“But like,” he said - and he was figuring this out for the first time as he was saying it - “I think the big plan kept going because it had momentum? Really, I was just hanging out with Li Xiu because I like hanging out with her, and she really listens to me and stuff, and she really wants to make her movie.”

Kalingkata scratched the back of her head and shrugged. “I think you’re nuts,” she said. “Don’t hurt her. Now, I gotta go see if I can rescue this dumb date.” She turned and made to leave.

“I hope JackBox is okay!” he called after her.

She didn’t reply or look back. Just straight out the door.

He deflated into his chair. He could hardly keep track of all the ways he’d screwed up in the last week. The last of his coffee sat at the bottom of the cup, getting colder and grosser.

On the upside, maybe some of this could go in Li Xiu’s movie.

Across the room, behind her newspaper, Li Xiu smiled and had another spoon of her affegato. Through the open window, she could hear a light spring rain far off somewhere, and something had begun.

She picked up her book.

Underneath was a neatly folded note on a torn-out scrap of paper.

Your disguise sucks. Check under the table for your leather jackets.

Li Xiu was impressed that JackBox had seen through her disguise and slipped a note somehow, but she'd messed up the simplest part: actually giving her the jackets. She'd just left behind a plastic bag of crystals. Perhaps it had all been some sort of euphemism? Li Xiu had never pegged her as an astrology type.

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

Finally. FINALLY. You know what happens next week? You know what happens!?!

OUR TRACK MEET.

AGAINST ACADEMY 2.

AFTER ALL THIS TIME WE'RE GOING TO KICK THEIR—

Uh, kick their academy leniency respectfully and without vitriol, Mr. Mori.

So let's get ready for the track meet! I'm sure nothing else important will happen because of it. No-sir-ee, that's the biggest thing happening next ween for sure.

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

Tune in Next Week For:

Sit Down Comedians

By James Wylder

New Academy 27 stories will drop each Thursday!

Read past stories and learn more about Academy 27 at:

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**Don't let your dreams be dreams.
Make them everyone's problem.**

Delirium 
BY XELABS

It's not just a sleep aid, it's a dream aid.



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