

SIT DOWN COMEDIANS

BY JAMES WYLDER



Academy27



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She felt like her friend Jae Hyun was shaking his head every time she looked away from him. Either that or he was just trying hard to pretend he wasn't staring at her legs (he was staring at her legs). She sighed. He was well meaning for an obnoxious and hormonal teenage boy, she'd give him that. But right now he was definitely being obnoxious.

"They're just running shorts. For running. That's what you use legs for, generally."

"Huh?" he said, which was also obnoxious.

It wasn't worth it. "Are you coming to watch our meet against Academy 2? We could use all the people cheering us on we can get."

"Absolutely--wait when is it?"

She pointed at her uniform, "We're all wearing our uniforms today because the meet is today. Coach Jo said it's advertising."

"I thought coach Jo did basketball?"

"She does, Coach Park quit, so she's been filling in."

He nodded slowly. "...I actually have play practice for Romeo and Juliet."

She smiled, yes! He was getting his own interests. "That's great. I'll be sure to go see it."

"I... sort of thought you'd be trying out for the play."

She tilted her head as she finished grabbing things from her locker, "What do you mean?"

"I mean you helped out with them in the winter..."

"There's no Track or Cross in the Winter. Plus the fall season ended early because we got knocked out in Sectionals."

She could see the wheels turning in his head. "...I wish I could have known."

"Did you try asking?"

He opened his mouth, shut it, and then exclaimed that he had to get to practice and scampered off. Well, that could have gone worse?

Trudging along to the girls' locker room, she moved her things from one locker to another trying to ignore Hee Jin's griping next to her. She was rubbing aloe vera all over her legs. "I wish I didn't have to show my legs at these meets."

"You don't," she replied. "Just wear leg compressors or leggings."

"But I don't want to wear those."

She didn't know how to help her.

"Anyway look at my poor calves, I broke open my heat-shaver and turned off the inhibitor so I could do it faster--"

"...You what?"

Hee Jin gulped. "...Broke open the shaver and turned off the heat inhibitor."

Sang Mi sighed, "You're lucky you didn't burn your foot off. Those things have an inhibitor for a reason. They're just low powered blasters for the consumer market, you know."

She appeared not to have known this, and promptly changed the subject.

"So... think we can beat Academy 2? We didn't last year. And we lost our Coach."

Sang Mi shrugged, "We'll do our best. I think we have a good chance."

She got her cleats out, and put them into her track bag. Coach Jo came in, and called on all of them to settle down. "Now today is a big meet, so we need to all be on top form. You've all been training your hearts out, and I know how much this means to a lot of you. Now I know we beat Academy 14—"

There was a general cheer.

"—But we can't let that get to our heads! Nor can we let the pressure get to us. This is just like any other meet. Do your best, and you'll do great. Now, we've got some announcements, for shotput—"

The speech went on, but Sang Mi was focused on steadying herself. Her heart was already beating fast. This meet, they'd be facing Academy 2.

Where her ex went.

She'd been heartbroken when she found out he'd been cheating on her after he dumped her. But now what she was feeling wasn't heartbreak, it was anger and confusion.

She wouldn't be directly running against Kyon at this meet, but it was still his school. She knew his new girlfriend Tetora wasn't even on the track team—but she felt like the whole team for Academy 2 was him in proxy. She wasn't the greatest runner on the team—but today her head was filled with fantasies: she burst ahead of the pack, neck and neck with the leading runner from Academy 2, then charged forward In the last stretch and--

A personal best!

First place!

Everyone cheers and claps as she leads Academy 27 to a victorious win!

But before she knew it, it was time to leave for the actual meet.

Academy 2 was the third best high school in Takumi, and the second best funded, and it sure looked the part. They'd had to take a train between Cheonsa Dome and the Main dome to get there—thankfully they got their own car so they didn't disturb the other passengers, which was a blessing because Coach Jo had to tell them to settle down twice after they got too rowdy. From what Sang Eun told her, she was sure the boy's car was worse.

There wasn't much of a view for most of the journey—the tunnels were mostly underground to save all the precious space possible inside the domes themselves. They stopped still underground, and came out to a stop that only a handful of other students got out on—Academy 2 had its own station. No one had to walk from a station to get to it.

Hee Jin and Sang Mi exchanged a look that they both understood.

The Academy 2 uniforms of the students who got off were on a whole other level to their own: black blazers and black pants or skirt, all with yellow-gold hemming and a shining badge on the breast with “A2” on it. A matching yellow-gold tie and white

dress shirt completed the look, along with black spats or mary-jane shoes. The cloth was rich, each piece carefully tailored for each student. It made their own uniforms look shabby in comparison. They knew that was the point.

Other students from Academy 2 passed them to go into the train as they entered, and as the door shut behind them she could have sworn she heard someone say “Sang—” a car over before being cut off.

They got onto the lift, which took them up to the campus itself: the smatter of students staying afterschool, or who had missed the first train, wandered broad paths of yellow-gold stones lined with cherry trees that gently wafted petals with the artificial airflow.

“Do they think this place is the freaking Land of Oz?” Kalingkata spat.

“The what?” Hee Jin replied.

“You know, the road of yellow brick in “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz”. Dorothy and friends go to the Emerald City by walking it.”

Hee Jin shook her head. “I don’t know the story.”

“Nevermind.”

They walked the road of yellow brick up to the stadium, where a bot displaying a hologram of their school name wheeled up, and guided them across the track to their section of grass. Everyone set their track bags down and started to stretch and prepare. Hee Jin and Sang Mi helped each other get the partner stretches done. The Academy 2 track team was already doing warm ups, their black and gold uniforms pristine and stylish. Their shoes looked custom fitted for every runner’s foot.

“Hey. Jhe, stay focused!” Coach Jo called. “I can see what you’re looking at. Focus on what you can do, not what you don’t have, that won’t get you anywhere today.”

“Yes coach.”

But it did help her. It made her pissed.

The announcer called for the runners to get to their marks for the first races; they started with the sprinters, and the results were mixed. It would have been nice if the meet was a blow out for them, but that was never in the cards. They’d lost their coach, and Coach Jo had the spirit but she knew Basketball not Track. Their equipment was worse. But they were holding their own. Even so, that wasn’t enough. They had to win.

“Runners for the first distance event, the 800 meter run, please get to your marks!”

Hee Jin slapped her on the back as they dropped their jackets and made their way to the track. Sang Mi’s spikes felt tight on her feet, but she knew they were just right. She looked over at the girls from the other team. There was Hikari Megumi, the star runner of Academy 2’s distance team. Despite her fantasies earlier, deep down Sang Mi was pragmatic. She couldn’t match Megumi’s times, or Jee Hin’s times, but she could aim for third. Getting third would help their overall team score.

The official went through the race’s rules, all of them knew it, the line of girls standing with their eyes laser focused ahead. The whirring cycle of air-reprocessing far above them in the dome ended, and in the ensuing silence the sound of each runner’s breath filled the area. The official raised the starter pistol.

“On your marks!”

They tensed, muscles preparing to burst forward.

“Get set.”

Many leaned forward slightly, making sure not to lean too far.

“GO!” there was a bang, and they exploded over the line. Sang Mi got blocked in the running pack by an Academy 2 girl with a pair of blue streaks going down her ponytail, and she coasted behind her as they went around the first curve—and as soon as they hit the straight, charged past her, trying to move from the back pack to the front one. She got most of the way there, another Academy 2 runner hanging onto her heels—she could only see them from the corner of her eye, but she picked her pace up—it didn’t get the girl off her, but she wasn’t passing her either. As they finished the first lap, they were up with the lead pack—it was five runners, Hee Jin and Megumi were trading first and second like a kid unable to pick her one allotted treat at the grocery store. Behind them was an Academy 2 runner, and then Masha and Seo Yeon from her own team. She could do this.

First she had to pass the A27 duo, and she did so right when they finished the first curve of the second lap. It was good she did too, she could tell both of them didn’t have a lot of gas left in them for the end. Ahead was her target. She summoned up her strength, and pushed ahead—she wanted to time it so she’d pass her right before the curve. And she did, the girl’s head turning as she slid past her, and she could tell she was dropping back from the demoralization of it. She just had to push this to the finish.

She got around the final curve, onto the final straight.

And then she realized—she wasn't alone. Blue streaks was there, moving from on her heels to by her side.

She couldn't let that go. She kicked hard, pushing her body as hard as she could manage, her breath was ragged, but she didn't slow down. She couldn't even keep track of whether she was in third still — she just focused on the line ahead of her. Just a little more. Don't lose it. Keep pushing even when you're crossing the line. She crossed it—then slowed to a halt, dropping to her butt on the track as she tried to get her breath back. The only thing she could feel was her heartbeat and the need for her body to get air in. She heard Jee Hin, and felt her and Masha pulling her up, patting her on the back.

“You did it girl!” Masha screamed.

“First and third?” Sang Mi rasped.

“YEAH!” Masha cried.

Sang Mi wanted to celebrate, but she was too exhausted to do that. Even so, she'd done it! She'd placed! Now she just had to keep this up. She went back to their camp on the field to rehydrate and stretch, and get ready for the next race.

As she got to the line for the mile run, something became incredibly clear: she hadn't paced herself. She felt tired still going up to the line, and as the starting gun went off, she found herself in the back pack, and unable to push forward. Her legs hurt, and it became clear she was going to have to treat this whole race as a cool down before the next one—she'd messed it up. She placed 7th, better than she expected, but pretty terrible nonetheless.

She went back to the camp and tried to do nothing but rest. Hee Jin had gotten second in the mile, and Academy 2 had clinched third. The other team's scores were looking pretty similar. She had the medley relay next, and that was another chance for her. The 800 meter was her event—and she might have bombed the mile, but she would have another chance to excel—her leg of that relay was an 800, with the other legs being the mile, 400 meter, and 1200 meter.

Sang Mi waited next to the starting line, where she'd get the handoff from Masha, who was starting the race and was currently shaking herself out and adjusting her grip on that baton — while next to her, Academy 2's runner did the same. Sang Mi would pass off to Hee Jin, who'd run the mile, and Seo Yeon would finish it with the 400 since she had the best kick on the distance squad.

Masha and her opponent tensed as the starter pistol was raised and—BANG!

They were off. Masha took an early lead, though only time would tell if she would hold it. By the end of the first lap, she was, but the second lap proved more troublesome. Masha's opponent was making up lost distance, and by the end of the lap was neck-and-neck with her. As they started the third and final lap of their leg, Sang Mi slipped into the hand-off zone, shaking herself out, and getting into position with one arm facing back to accept the hand off. This caused her to see her opponent—it was miss dual-blue-streaks in her hair. Rematch time apparently.

She put her focus back into the handoff, and watched as Masha came around the corner—it was indeed neck and neck, she'd have to try to regain their lead. Masha slowed as she got closer—which was a bad sign. Sang Mi started moving, and Masha tried to kick in as much as she could, but it looked like she'd used everything in the tank. Masha slapped the baton into her hand, and Sang Mi kept her forward momentum going and took off. They'd fallen slightly behind—and the dual-blue-streaks waved back and forth in the ponytail in front of her as if taunting her. She pushed on the curve, trying to catch her as much as she could, and made up some ground but not enough to try to pass on the straight. They hit the second curve, and she'd made up enough that she could try to push on the final straight of the first lap if she wanted, so she did.

She dug in. Her muscles were screaming, but she pushed past the pain, and as they exited the curve, swung out and charged. She saw blue-streaks glance at her as she got side by side, and the other girl tried to accelerate so she wouldn't pass her before they started the second lap, but Sang Mi wasn't about to lose this chance. She could hear her breath, loud and rhythmic, and her own groan as she put the extra kick in and slipped in front of dual-streaks. She held the lead on the curve, and could hear dual-streaks right behind her—too close behind her. She tried to increase her lead, but the other girl wasn't letting go of this race easily either. The crowd was cheering, as dual-streaks kept almost passing only to get fended off.

They hit the final straight, and Sang Mi focused on Hee Jin ahead of her. She'd make up as much time as she could on this last straight and—then something hit the back of her foot. There was pain, a different kind of pain than her burning muscles. Something much different: sharper and more stinging. She fell forward, and landed on her arm, rolling over, she felt tangled for a moment against some other skin as the sky and the track itself flipped between each other, and then her foot bent in a way it shouldn't and she screamed.

She could see the baton ahead of her, and she tried to stand up, and fell down again as intense pain flooded her brain.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry! Are you okay!?!”

She saw dual-streaks, who was teary eyed and holding her hands out without touching her as though wanting to help but not being sure if she'd hurt more than she'd help.

Hee Jin was there ahead of her, dumbfounded.

Sang Mi closed her eyes. And gave herself the talk. The same one her dad had given her and her brothers when they were so small. He'd taken them out to the wastes, riding them through the seas of dust and rock on a rusty hovertruck he'd borrowed from work. Min Jun had at to his right, and she and her brother had each perched on one of his knees as they'd looked out at the domes of Takumi from the top of a great rocky plateau. The three domes glistened, and little dots moved within them like it was some grand terrarium. He'd tousled her hair, and told them all a truth to remember forever.

"We've always been beaten down. We've had everything taken from us. Our home, our money, our family members. We don't take that lying down. When someone hurts us, we get back up and keep moving forward. Because we're Jhe's. Because people think they can stop us with pain, because they don't know what it feels like—"

"—cause when you're born in pain, you can thrive in it." She finished in a rasping gasp.

"What?" dual-streaks said, baffled.

She felt lightheaded as she grabbed the baton, and pushed herself up off the track. She nearly fell over, she could feel blood running down her leg—dual-streaks had spiked her in the back of the calf, and she must have broken her foot in the fall. She moved her good leg forward, and dragged her other leg behind her.

"You uh—you should stop!?" dual-streaks cried out.

She ignored her.

A drone flew over to her, hovering by her face. "Runner #311, please remove yourself from the track for medical assistance."

She pushed it out of the way. "I waive my rights."

"Please move off the track for medical assistance."

"I said—" she groaned, pulling herself forward in another grueling step. She was seeing a white haze with specks of light. "—I waive my rights."

She could hear Coach Jo right up by her, she must have gotten right next to her. “Sang Mi, we can just forfeit the race, it’s okay. You don’t need to push yourself like this, you’re seriously hurt. No one is asking you to keep going.”

She pulled herself forward. Step by grueling step. “I’m not losing,” she rasped.

The Academy 2 coach was yelling at dual-streaks: “What are you doing? Start running! Do you see her, she’s beating you now with a broken foot! Go! GO!”

“But I spiked her!”

“I don’t care if you shot her dog, beat her!”

Sang Mi pressed onward. And then something happened: the crowd started clapping.

“Go Sang Mi!”

“You can do it!”

“Don’t give up!”

Coach Jo was looking at the crowd with disgust, but their words were what Sang Mi needed. She was almost there. She was staggering now, the world around her was spinning.

Just a little further. Then the words of the crowd solidified: “SANG MI, SANG MI, SANG MI!”

It was just like she’d imagined and fantasized: they were chanting her name. She felt a strange glee at her own suffering. She reached her arm out, she could see Hee Jin’s hand—the world was only that hand, the baton, and her own name, all surrounded by the sounds of the wind and the sparkling white.

The baton hit Hee Jin’s hand.

And Sang Mi collapsed.

She came to a bit later, being looked at by the physical therapist, as she was reassured that they would be getting her to the hospital soon.

“Did we win?”

“That’s really not important right now,” the therapist said.

“Did we win?” she asked more firmly.

“...Yeah. Yeah, you won the race.”

Sang Mi relaxed. The tension left her shoulders. She had really done it.

Academy 27 won their meet against Academy 2, and then spring break began.

* * *

Sang Mi stared at the boot on her foot, holding it firmly in place so it wouldn't bend at the ankle. Thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, it didn't mean her track season was over, but she could definitely write off any sort of future glory on the track this year. Groaning, she slammed her VR goggles on, and tried to get into some Drakesword XVII: Force of the Blade.

She wandered around the virtual world for a while, looking at the indistinguishably realistic trees, and killing a few animated skeletons that spawned, before saving and quitting, pulling the device off with more force than was recommended in the manual. Talinata wasn't here to scold her; he was busy actually being at Track Practice. She'd tried helping out on the sidelines at practice, but not only did she not actually have anything to do beyond carrying things for the coaches which they had the hands to carry themselves, watching everyone run while she was stuck hobbling around in her boot was a level of frustration she just couldn't take. It made her feel worthless--more worthless than she usually felt.

Not that this was much better.

After another half-hour, Kalingkata decided to do what you always do when you've tried nothing and exhausted all your ideas: take a walk.

Cheonsa wasn't particularly vibrant right now; sure, it was the start of spring, but that meant a lot of folks were taking vacations to nicer places, and the people who couldn't go on vacation were getting drinks to console themselves of that fact. School was out, but this only compounded that. She hobbled along, trying to ignore all the shop keeps calling out to her to check out their stuff. That was, until she passed a pharmacy, where bursting from the door came a familiar if unwelcome face. Only Saki seemed to be wearing a white lab coat as though she was a real pharmacist and not a high school student.

"Well well well, Kalingkata, what a surprise--and I mean that I actually didn't expect to see you here, what are you doing here anyway?"

She pointed at her broken foot.

"Yes yes, I heard about that, pity, etcetera etcetera. Would you like to step inside?"

Well, she didn't have anything better to do.

The inside was nice and clean, with a team of pharmacists filling orders in the back, and rows of refrigerator cabinets with drinks and shelves with snacks, as well as home medical supplies.

"...How do you have a job here?"

"No," Saki answered with too much confidence.

"...You know what, I don't want to know," Sang Mi grabbed a can of sweetened soy milk from a fridge, and tapped her credit chip on the receiver to purchase it. "It's spring break, I thought you'd be busy using your inexplicable influence to take a vacation to Olympus Mons or something."

"Please," Saki replied. "I already saw it."

"Of course. And you have... whatever your job is to do."

"That's right."

Sang Mi raised her can in a mock toast, and headed for the door. "Well, happy Spring Break."

She wandered around for another hour. She sat in the park and watched some kids run around on the playground and a guy throw a frisbee to his dog that was about 50/50 on catching it. She wandered some more.

She realized she had made a loop, and was back in front of the Pharmacy. Oh well. She was about to head back, when for the second time that day, she heard someone calling out to her.

"...Sang Mi? Jhe Sang Mi?"

She turned slowly; the voice wasn't immediately familiar to her, though the face was. It was a Japanese girl, wearing a kimono. She bowed, which Sang Mi returned,

albeit a little awkwardly. Firstly because of her book. Secondly because the person in front of her was Tetora, the girl her ex-boyfriend had cheated on her with.

"...Nice to see you, goodbye forever!" she said as she started hobbling away.

"Wait!" she grabbed onto the loose fabric of Kalingkata's elbow, and bit her lip. "Can we talk?"

Kalingkata weighed the options.

On the one hand, she would rather smash her hand with a meat tenderizer.

On the other hand, she would also rather smash her own hand with a meat tenderizer than stay this bored and listless. At least it would be a new and different form of unhappy.

"Yeah sure, why not?" She turned around to face her. "...What's up?"

Tetora gave a deeper bow. "I'm really sorry, I didn't know he hadn't broken up with you when we started dating."

Kalingkata waved it off. "You don't need to bow, that's... yeah you can stop. Look, it's fine, I don't think you're a bad person or anything." She paused. "How's Kyon doing?"

"Oh, we broke up."

"Oh," Kalingkata nodded slowly.

"We tried to make it work for a little while, but in the end, I just couldn't trust him after finding out how our relationship started."

Sang Mi felt a sudden wave of sympathy for the girl. "Yeah... Yeah I feel you on that. Maybe we should go somewhere to talk, instead of standing in front of the Pharmacy. I think Saki is staring at me anyway."

"Who is Saki?"

Sang Mi pointed. Saki waved. "The one cosplaying as an expert."

Tetora looked confused by that, but didn't inquire further. "Why don't you come over to the Comedy Club? I perform there."

Sang Mi furrowed her brow, "You're a comedian?"

She scratched her cheek. “Well, I’d like to be one. I can’t say I’m like... a good one. I’m a comedian in training! I’m learning Rakugo, it’s a Japanese form of stand-up comedy. Only you do it sitting down. So I guess it’s not actually stand-up comedy in the literal sense.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Just sit in for a little bit, I can get you some of the snacks in the dressing room.”

“I’m in.”

Tetora smiled, “I’m glad. Just follow me.”

She led the way to a building that had to be one of the oldest ones in Takumi—the wood it was made from had that “shipped from Earth” look that was hard to describe, and hard to notice unless you grew up only seeing the wood from the handful of enclosed tree-farms on the planet. A sign outside read “Midori’s Rakugo Comedy Club” in Japanese. Tetora guided her to a side door, where she hobbled inside to find a group of teens sitting around—one of them was a stranger, a boy with glasses that had text scrolling down the lenses, which he was reading as he lay on a mat by the wall. The other two, however, she recognized immediately.

“Midi? Alice? What the hell are you two doing here?”

Midi looked up in surprise, Alice looked over in mild awareness. “Sang Mi!” Midi said. “I could ask the same thing, I never took you for a comedian.”

“My jokes are that bad, huh?”

“Oh I didn’t mean uh...”

“That was a joke, so I kind of played myself.”

Tetora coughed, “Everyone, this is Jhe Sang Mi, she’s... someone I know! From places! Since her foot is broken I thought I’d invite her to sit in on our comedy show today?”

The boy sighed, “You mean not pay?”

“Shut up, Shinji,” Midi, Alice, and Tetora said in the kind of unison that can only come from intense repetition.

“Yeah! Shut up Shinji, or whatever!” Sang Mi said to fit in.

He sighed and lay back down to read whatever was on his glasses.

“...I don’t have to pay right?”

Tetora shook her head. “That’s Shinji, as you can tell. And I see you already know Midi and Alice?”

Sang Mi waved at them. “Yeah, they go to my school. Midi’s a good friend of mine, and I’m good friend’s with Alice’s sister.”

Midi looked absolutely chuffed at the “good friend” comment. Tetora smiled, and shoved a can of boba tea and a melon bread into Sang Mi’s hands, “Well, we’re about to go on soon, find a seat in the audience and we’ll see you after the show.

* * *

Sang Mi felt a little awkward about how easy the “find a seat” order was to fill. The place only had a handful of people in it, scattered around, more than one an elderly person snoozing. She settled in, propping her foot up on another seat since it wouldn’t bother anyone, since no one was behind her. The theater smelled of cedar and mothballs, and there were a lot of stains on the seats and the floor. It was at least dark enough they were hard to think too much about.

The sound of a woodblock counting time rang out, and the curtains opened to reveal Tetora, who was sitting on a small platform on the stage, dressed in a kimono and holding a fan. “Welcome, valued guests and customers to today’s performance of the Junior Rakugo Girls—plus a boy and an enby because we couldn’t meet quota!”

A light chuckle followed this from the crowd.

“My name is Fujibayashi Tetora, a student at Academy 2, a school that has produced more second-class men than any other.”

Silence.

“Ahem. Anyway I’m here to start off our show. My performance is about a pair of friends—a fisherman at the artificial lake, and the owner of a café.” She bowed. “I hope you enjoy it!”

She rose from the bow so her back was straight, but she remained sitting down, and began to put on the airs of the two different characters, communicating that they were different just through a turn of her head and a shift of her voice, gesturing all the while with the fan.

“Oh, hello there, I was just setting up shop for the day. Any luck at the lake?”

“Not a lot. But I’ll catch one soon, I just know it!”

“Will you? You know, you’ve been going to that lake for five weeks now.”

“I sure have, every day. My big catch is just this close!”

“I decided to look into that lake, and there are two problems with your plan.”

“And what are they? You don’t know anything about fishing!”

“It’s an artificial lake! They farm fish to put in them, and they’re all the same size. You’re never going to catch a big one, at least not until they start breeding on their own for a while.”

“Well, I suppose that would be a problem, but if they’re all the same size, they’re all big ones!”

“Or all small ones.”

“Agree to disagree. So, what’s the second problem?”

“They haven’t put any fish in that lake.”

There was some light laughter.

“What do you mean they haven’t? Where am I supposed to fish?”

“Tell you what, I hear if you go to Hongtu there’s a lake where there’s an absolutely rare fish — it supposedly has a star on its side! If you caught me that fish, I’d buy it from you, stuff it, and put it over the door.”

“A fish with a star on it? I’ll catch it for sure, just you watch.”

“Sure sure.”

She put on a third voice, her own. “So, the two friends split for a time, and the café owner doesn’t hear from the other for a full month. It’s a very quiet month, but he begins to get worried—when all of a sudden one day...”

“Hey! Café owner, look what I got!”

“Sweet Shocho, is that really it?”

“It really is, I caught the legendary fish with a star on it.”

“Well don’t wait, lay it out so I can see this star.”

“As you wish.”

She mimed the sounds of the fish flopping onto the counter, dropping the fan in such a way it did indeed flop like a fish a little.

“That’s not a star! I’m not paying you for this.”

“It is, just take a closer look.”

“Let’s see... wait, that looks just like that singer Janice Rose my daughter listens to?”

“See I told you there was a star on it!”

She bowed, showing that the performance was complete, and there was light applause. Sang Mi tilted her head to the side as she watched Tetora rise and shuffle off stage as the curtains closed. She was probably supposed to wait for them to have closed completely, but who cared? Midi followed, and gave a performance with a much better punchline, but which involved them being so nervous the whole time that Sang Mi had trouble following it. Alice gave one that was a little too deadpan to properly play, and Shinji gave a performance that was technically perfect if you were trying to grade it on hitting all the beats and movements, but which didn’t seem to adapt well to the audience’s reactions even as he barreled on with confident charm.

She applauded each of them, and then the curtains rose one last time for the performers to do a very simple dance and sing a song thanking the audience for attending. A simple show.

Tetora slipped in next to her after the audience who wasn’t asleep had filtered out. “So what’d you think?”

“I mean uh, it was...”

She sighed. “You can say it. It’s rough. We were supposed to be being mentored, but our teacher never really shows up so we’ve been trying to figure it out by ourselves. We have a big performance coming up at the Takumi Centre for the

Performing Arts, and I don't feel like we're ready. We don't even have five people, so it might not even happen since that's a requirement. Yolanda and Shin were on the team but once they started dating they got into that gross phase of ignoring all their other friends and spending all their time cuddling and hanging out. So yeah. We're still looking for a new fifth."

For a moment Sang Mi thought that that was a not-so-subtle hint she could join the Rakugo troupe, which Sang Mi had no interest in. However, Tetora's demeanor and even tone, and the way she continued barreling on into a description of how much they'd been practicing showed that this thought had in fact never occurred to Tetora.

Which, really, was fair when it came down to it. Whether you called her Sang Mi or Kalingkata, she was practically a symbol of what had to be one of the most awkward periods of her life. She'd gotten the same handsome, hardworking, track star boyfriend who excelled at school to boot. It just so happened they'd had the same boyfriend at the same time without knowing it. That wasn't either of their faults, and as Sang Mi watched Tetora talk something twinged in her chest.

"...How far away is this performance?"

"In just over a week."

Sang Mi nodded. The mechanisms in her boot should have repaired the break soon after that. And if she got to sit down the whole time she performed... "How would you feel if I joined your little troupe for just a week—literally just a week, because when I get this boot off I'm going back to track immediately. But if you need five people, I can be a warm body. I won't be very good but I can keep it short."

Tetora startled. "Are you sure? I thought you weren't interested?"

"Oh I'm not, I really don't care about this and I really don't like the idea of wearing a kimono, but look..." She took a deep breath. "Neither of us did anything wrong. And Kyon isn't going to make it up to either of us so... maybe it'd be right if we made it up to each other?"

Tetora stared at her, jaw slipping open, and Sang Mi awkwardly shifted in her seat.

"If that's not—"

Tetora shook her head, and now there were tears. Lots of tears. And she was throwing herself on Sang Mi and wailing and crying and squeezing her. "Yes! Yes, that's the most amazing thing Sang Mi! How could he hurt such a good person as

you? I'd love to have you on the team, and we can help each other like you said! And I'm sure it'd be fine if you wore a hanbok instead of a kimono, I mean, I haven't asked but—no I'm sure it will be fine!”

She patted her on the back. “Okay, great. I'm really glad this idea works out so well for you.”

Tetora gave her some information about their practice tomorrow, while Midi hopped up and down a bit in excitement that they were in the same activity for a bit. With a wave goodbye to the group, Sang Mi hobbled back out to make her way home. Well, she'd certainly got herself into something.

* * *

The first day of practice, Sang Mi hobbled her way back over to the theater, and slipped in through the side door. The scene was much the same as yesterday, except that Midi and Alice were playing catch with a hacky sack. “Aloha, it is I, Kalingkata.”

“Congratulations, no one cares,” Alice replied.

“I care,” Midi mumbled.

“Are you here to join us?” Shinji asked.

“Yep, I'm ready to do my best and try to be funny.”

He gave her a glance. “Good luck.”

“See? You're already showing me how.”

He gave a ‘hmp’ and returned to his reading.

Smiling, she turned back to Midi, Alice, and Tetora. “So then, teach me comedy.”

Midi glanced at the others. “Well uh, I can't say that any of us are particularly... um...”

“Good,” Alice finished for her.

Sighing, Tetora rolled her shoulders. “Yeah, I guess honesty is the best policy there. So look, we don't really know what we're doing.”

Sang Mi's eyes narrowed. “So what are you doing?”

“Our best,” Tetora answered.

Sang Mi nodded slowly. “So... what’s the first thing I need to do?”

“You’re going to try practicing one of our routines, and then work on your own for the big show. The actual set up is pretty simple: you go out there, you sit down like we were sitting, bow, pull your fan out—or don’t, it’s optional, but it’ll give you a storytelling prop—and start telling a story. It should be funny, but really the most important thing is having the ending be a zinger.”

Sang Mi processed this, then nodded. “Alright. I’m a little worried anything I do is going to turn out as a shaggy dog joke.”

Alice chimed in, “A what?”

“It’s a joke form,” Shinji replied. “And a bad one.”

Sang Mi pointed at Shinji in acknowledgement of his correct summary. “You start telling the joke, and then you ramble on for a while about how shaggy the dog is—and anyway the whole point is, the joke is pointless. You waste a person’s time, and that’s the gag.”

Frowning, Alice nodded. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“Hence why I don’t want to tell one! We’re on the same team!”

Tetora waved her hands over-dramatically. “It’ll be fine! You’ll do great! And even if you don’t, as long as you don’t bomb it the rest of us can do okay and they’ll drop our lowest score in the judging!”

Sang Mi grunted. “Lovely.” She held her hand out, and Tetora passed her the padd with the routine on it. Sang Mi scanned it, and squinted at Tetora.

“What?”

“This has a like, intro section.”

Midi’s hand shot up. “Cause we’re supposed to do that!”

Shinji continued to not look at anyone. “None of you mentioned that.”

“You could have chimed in,” Tetora grumbled, and lightly pushed Sang Mi out of the room and onto the stage. The stage was bright, the rest of the room dark. Tetora, Midi, and Alice had filtered in and taken seats, along with a fourth person in the far back who was probably Shinji, but she couldn’t tell. She bowed, hobbled her way to the platform, and sat down, and bowed as she set the padd down in front of her, then

took her shoe off her non-medical-booted foot and used it to prop the padd up so she could read it without looking straight down the whole time.

“Hello hello, thank you once again for joining us here at our amazing theater—and I’m not just saying that because my boss told me he’d give me some melon bread if I called it amazing. It really is amazing. It’s amazing just how little the floors get cleaned for one thing. Pause for laughter.”

“No! Don’t read that bit!” Tetora yelled.

“Read all those bits, that was funnier than the joke,” Alice called out.

“Sorry,” Sang Mi mumbled. “Alright, so I’ll have you know my mom has been pestering me about getting a job lately—okay but she hasn’t, like my mom wants me to focus on school—”

“It’s just a routine! You’re acting, think of it like acting or roleplaying!”

“Right, sorry, sorry... Ahem. So my mom sat me down the other day with a big bowl of udon in front of me... mime eating the.. oh okay!”

Sang Mi reached out for an invisible bowl of Udon and pulled it closer, “Oh gosh thanks mom, these are my favorite noodles.”

She leaned to look at the padd. “...Switch characters to... Oh got it.” She shifted her body language a bit and put on a different voice. “Only the best noodles for my growing girl.”

“You know, my classmate Suni told me that if I get much taller I’m going to look stretched out like a noodle.”

The mother wagged a finger. “Well, I guess if you stop growing then maybe your father and I can stop worrying about feeding you so much. Prices are hefty on Earth—Oh this is on Earth! ...Wait.”

Midi could be heard sighing. “Tetora you did it again! You said it’s about you and then said it was set on another planet! This is the fifth time!”

Tetora’s reply was too mumbled to be heard.

Sang Mi barreled on. “—Prices are hefty here on Earth, so you really need to get a job!”

“But mother, I don’t want to get a job! I want to eat noodles!”

“Well you can’t eat noodles if you don’t have a job.”

“But I don’t want to work. I want to take naps when I want, and go out and play with my friends, and drink milk tea!”

“Hmn, I’m not sure there are any jobs like that.”

The daughter character turned to the audience as an aside. “Oh! I just need to push my mom further on this and she’ll give up!” She turned back. “And I have some other stipulations! I need to get paid a lot of money—even get paid for napping.”

“Dear, there are no jobs like that!”

“Actually, I need to get paid more even when I do my job badly.”

“Hmn... actually... oh! There is a job like that! I’ll go see if there is an opening for you.”

“Wait! Wait I was just—oh there she goes. Is there really a job like that?”

She flicked the fan open. “A few days passed, and the daughter got a message telling her to report to work. So she goes to see what it is...” She flicked the fan closed and became the daughter again. “Oh! Wow what a big building, it’s so silver and shiny. I guess I better head in. Hello, receptionist! I’m here for the job.”

Sang Mi straightened her back. “Hello there, we’ve been expecting you. I hope you’re excited to take on your new position.”

“Hey,” she leaned in conspiratorially, “is it really true that I can take naps whenever I want to?”

“Yes!”

“And eat noodles? And eat whenever I want to? Get paid a lot of money—and get paid even more when I do my job badly?”

“Yes, those are the requirements for this job.”

“I can’t believe it, so what am I doing?”

“Congratulations! You’re the new CEO of the Central Governance Corporation!”

There was some actual laughter at that.

“Thank you, sorry it was sloppy,” she bowed again.

Tetora got up and approached the stage. “No no, that was great! You did better than Midi or Alice did their first time through. Go ahead and sit down, you can watch the rest of us practice. Spend that time thinking about what your own routine could be. How you could present it. Oh, your friend wants to have a word with you first though.”

“My friend?” she looked towards the back where a dark silhouette stood by the main doors. Of course. It could only be one person.

Making her way to the tiny lobby, she was not disappointed. “Hey again, Saki.”

She wasn’t wearing a lab coat now. Instead, she looked... normal. Incredibly normal. It was almost off-putting how Sang Mi struggled to figure out words other than “normal” and “unassuming” to describe her appearance. But she knew inside there was a tiger. “Hi there. I didn’t expect you’d be doing stand-up comedy.”

“Technically it's sit-down comedy.”

“Don’t split hairs. I’m just curious.”

“Curious?”

She sighed, and crossed her arms. “Curious. As to why you’re doing this of all things?”

Sang Mi scoffed. “Like I owe you an explanation. It’s just something to do while my foot heals.”

“Your usual patterns would be playing video games or hacking into something. You’re not a comedian.”

“Hey I’m not that bad!”

Saki didn’t smile at the joke. Maybe she was that bad. “That’s not my point. What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything! All my friends are off doing other things with other people! I can’t run track, it's too late to join the play, so I’m doing sit down comedy.”

Saki frowned. “I see. You’re giving up.”

“Of course I’m giving up! God, you keep showing up acting like I can do something special. You just give me drugs. Anyone could take my place—you’re

probably giving me the drugs cause if I die no one will give a shit. Hell, my friends might thank you to finally be rid of me.”

Saki’s face went from a frown to blank. “That’s really how you see yourself, deep down, isn’t it? That’s why you finished a race with a broken foot bleeding all over the track. You really think so low of yourself. I already told you, no one else can do what you’re doing.”

“I don’t believe that. Who would believe that? I can’t keep a boyfriend or girlfriend, no one sticks around me. I’m just... I’m just doing this comedy stuff because I have nothing else to do. Tetora offered it, and since I’m worthless and no one else offered anything I said yes.”

Saki stood for a moment, perhaps trying to figure out what to say, before turning toward the door. As she left, she said one sentence timed just enough that Sang Mi heard it clearly but couldn’t reply as the door slammed behind her: “Sang Mi, do you really think I’d work with someone I thought was worthless?”

She wouldn’t have been able to come up with anything to say back to it regardless.

* * *

Rehearsal after that was pretty normal. She’d go in, and try her hand at the routine she’d written up at home, get notes from the other young comedians, and then watch their performances. They were all pretty good. Annoyingly, Shinji was a whole different person up on stage and went from stuffy and stuck up to immediately funny and charismatic.

“Wow,” Sang Mi said. “That’s not fair, he’s funny.”

Tetora patted her on the shoulder. “I know, trust me, I know.”

As she was patted, she checked her phone, and jolted so her back was straight. “Oh. Tonight is the stage show my friend Jae Hyun at school has been doing.”

“It happens during break?”

“The Theater Department is intense. Anyway we’re doing this during break,” she gestured at the stage.

“Right but... wait, you’re going just for your ‘friend’ Jae Hyun? Do you, you know—”

Shinji sighed. “Could you two shut up?” he called down.

“Sorry,” they replied in unison, and then Sang Mi sent a message to Tetora: “Want to see the show with me tonight?”

She replied with an image of a cartoon cat nodding vigorously.

Later that evening...

Tetora scrolled through the program for the play on her phone. “So is this Jae Hyun...”

“No,” Sang Mi said.

“I didn’t even finish the sentence.”

“I know what you’re going to say though. I don’t like him.”

Tetora frowned. “You’re going out of your way to see this play he’s in.”

She shrugged without looking back at Tetora. “He’ll come and see my bad comedy routine in return, it’s just polite.”

Tetora screwed her mouth up, nearly forming words a few times before speaking. “You can’t count on people being there forever.”

She huffed. “I know that better than you do, now hush the show is about to start.”

On stage, Ihor strolled out to deliver the prologue: “In fair Verona where we make our play, two families, both alike in dignity...”

Tetora leaned over to whisper. “So your friend—”

“—who is only a friend—”

“—Your completely friendship-based friend-like friend is playing Romeo, but who is playing Juliet?”

“My other friend Li Xiu.”

“Is she a good actress?”

Sang Mi thought for a moment. “I mean, she’s good at roleplaying games. If a little too intense.”

The play continued. Hanzo, naturally, was cast as Mercutio because it was the best role and everyone knew it. Sang Mi was rooting for him to drop the ball, but he apparently had full possession of the ball and was the team’s top scorer.

“Wow, he’s really funny, and kinda cute...” Tetora whispered.

“He’s the worst,” Sang Mi said.

Tetora frowned. “I really need better taste.”

“You and me both, sister...”

Li Xiu was pretty good. Jae Hyun wasn’t a natural, but his awkward earnestness gave him a charm that carried his Romeo forward, till the show finally reached the all-important balcony scene.

With an elegant but practiced grace, Li Xiu stepped out onto the balcony. She looked out into eternity, hands clutched on the railing of the balcony that jiggled slightly as she gripped it. “O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name!” The faintest hint of a smile hit the edges of Li Xiu’s lips as she knew she’d nailed the bit everyone knew by heart. Then her eyes grew wide and the smile collapsed as she realized she’d focused so much on nailing those first two lines that she’d completely forgotten what came next. There was a prolonged awkward silence.

A voice called from stage right that Sang Mi recognized as Jorani, the stagehand. “Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love!”

“R-right. Or... or if thou wilt not, be but... uh...”

Jae Hyun coughed into his fist. “Sworn my love.”

“That’s my line!” Li Xiu exclaimed.

“I’m trying to be helpful!” he replied.

The audience laughed, but Sang Mi only felt an awkward pain in her chest. Part of her was happy to see Li Xiu get publicly embarrassed, and part of her hated it. Part of her hated herself for feeling happy. Li Xiu had bullied her in the past, sure, but she didn’t have any reason to feel spiteful or jealous these days. She was happy that Jae

Hyun was spending time with Li Xiu on this production instead of bothering her — that only made sense logically, right?

Li Xiu managed to get her nerves in check enough to keep going, and the scene finished playing out, albeit not as romantic as the bard had probably intended. The rest of the play went mostly well too, though Li Xiu never got her confidence back all the way. After the play finished, Sang Mi and Tetora went to go greet the actors.

“You came?” was the first thing they heard, and Jae Hyun’s jaw nearly dropped off his face.

“Is there a reason I wouldn’t?” Sang Mi retorted. Jae Hyun simply closed his jaw and smiled.

Li Xiu looked somewhat defeated at her presence. The show had to still be eating her up, Sang Mi reasoned. “Hey, you both did great. That’s one of the most iconic plays of all time, you should be proud.”

“It wasn’t... exactly what I was hoping for,” Li Xiu opined.

Sang Mi hobbled closer and patted her on the shoulder. “Hey, not everyone can recover like that. Most people would have run off stage and put their head under a pillow. You’re not defeated till you give up.”

Li Xiu blinked repeatedly, and then gave a smile that seemed to be knowing, though Sang Mi knew not what. “Yeah. Thanks, Sang Mi.” She ran her tongue along her lower lip and then changed the topic “What have you been doing since you broke your foot, anyway?”

“I’m healing up great, thanks for asking. As for what I’ve been doing, I’ve been learning sit-down comedy with her,” she pointed at Tetora. “We’re actually putting on a show ourselves in two days at the Takumi Centre for the Performing Arts.”

Li Xiu’s eyes widened. “The big citywide arts Showcase?”

“Yeah, I guess?”

“We’ll be at your comedy show too. Promise!” Jae Hyun said.

Li Xiu’s head whipped around to that statement faster than a cheetah. “...Yes, we will both be there. Definitely.”

Tetora cut in, “We’ll look forward to seeing you!”

“Oh right, this is my friend Tetora, she’s teaching me comedy.”

The pair glanced at each other. “You mean... the uh...”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Tetora replied.

“It’s okay, we were both two timed. We’ve made peace.”

Li Xiu was about to reply, when a little girl came up holding a flower to give to Juliet.

“Well, we’ll see you both then, then.” Jae Hyun said with a trademark awkwardness, as Li Xiu knelt down to talk to the child.

“See ya, and good work again!” Sang Mi said. What a show.

* * *

The master of the comedy club finally showed up on the day they were supposed to go perform. Sang Mi had expected to feel salty, but as soon as he stepped out of the autocar, supported by a cane and a butler-bot, she could only think of her grandmother in the days before he passed. He was dressed in a fine kimono, and shook gently with every step.

“Oh, are you my lovely comedians?”

“Yes, sensei,” Tetora said with a bow. The rest of them bowed too.

He smiled gently, and hobbled up to Tetora. He reached out, putting a frail hand on her shoulder. “I’m so happy to see you, Shuna. You’ve made me so proud, making sure our traditions here continue.”

Sang Mi mouthed, *Shuna?*

Tetora chewed her lip for a moment, then smiled. “Of course, I’m happy to do that as well, Grandfather.”

Grandfather? Sang Mi and Midi mouthed.

“You’ve made me so proud... so proud...” he paused, and it seemed like clouds went over his eyes. “I’m sorry, who are you again?”

Sang Mi and Midi pursed their lips. *Ah.*

Tetora directed him back into the autocar, assisted by the bot, and the young comedians followed suit. The car was lush—faux leather seats so soft they might have been cotton candy. Once it started moving, the old man dozed off.

“So uh, who is Shuna?” Sang Mi asked.

“His granddaughter. I’m her friend at school. She thinks all this stuff is stupid. She told me that if her grandfather didn’t put a group together for the City Arts Showcase they’d close down the comedy club he’d spent his whole life building. She was supposed to do it, but she didn’t want to. Thought it was funny it was finally going away. So I decided to give it a try and see if I could save it.”

Everyone was silent for a moment.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Midi asked.

“I knew,” Shinji said.

“Shut up, Shinji,” the others replied.

Tetora shrugged. “I didn’t want to guilt anyone into it.”

Sang Mi put her hand on her shoulder. “You know you’re a good person, Tetora.”

Tetora lowered her head, and closed her shoulders in. Sang Mi glanced around. “You... okay?”

Tear drops fell onto Tetora’s lap.

“Oh God, uh, I’m sorry?”

Tetora shook her head. “No, no, don't apologize. Thank you. I... I’m just really glad to hear you say that.”

Alice reached over and poked them both. “I’m glad they’re happy tears, cause we need to get into the zone. We’re supposed to be performing comedy, you know.”

Tetora wiped her tears, smiling from ear to ear, and nodded.

Sang Mi chuckled, she looked like the cartoon bunny she’d sent earlier.

They dropped off the old master first, allowing the staff of the Centre to help him inside to his seat. Then pulled around back to the loading dock area, shuffling in and letting the backstage staff guide them to the greenroom where they sat down on cheap

plastic chairs that had been shoved against every wall of the packed room. Other people bustled around them, and each of them took turns going into the dressing room to check their stage makeup.

“Is that Janice Rose?” Alice asked, leaning over and not-quite-whispering because it was too noisy for that. They all peered over to see a rather annoyed looking woman surrounded by entourage.

“No way, why’d she be here?” Tetora answered.

“I heard Director Jojan wanted to make a big display here for the Earther Ambassador, so he was bringing in big names,” Shinji explained.

“But an Earther popstar? Seriously?” Alice said.

“Janice, you’re on!” a stagehand yelled.

“Thank God,” she said in English, which Sang Mi hadn’t heard anyone speak in long enough she startled. “Let’s get this over with.”

They all watched the woman’s entourage push their way through the crowd, making a bubble around her, as she made her way to the stage entrance. The crowd outside exploded with sound—cheers, applause, whoops, shrieks—it was raucous.

“Don’t worry everyone, it’ll be super easy to follow that up!” Sang Mi said.

“...Shut up, Sang Mi,” Shinji said.

She blinked, and then they all laughed. “Okay, that was pretty good,” Sang Mi admitted.

“But seriously,” Tetora said, “We’ll be fine. We’re doing a whole different thing.”

“Would have been nice if they saved the big name for last,” Midi mumbled.

“She probably has to catch a transport back to Earth,” Alice concluded. The pounding of bass resonated as the sounds of the hit single named, ironically enough, “Si-Si-Si-Single!” rang out.

“Look over your lines, everyone,” Tetora reminded. They all did, and when the last notes of the concert faded out, and the final encore walk off had concluded, Tetora rose up, and made sure the stage hands were carrying the platform for them on as Janice Rose’s set up was being carted off. “Alright!” she turned back to the group,

speaking over the din. “I’m going on first, then. Alice will follow, Midi in the middle, then Shinji, and Sang Mi will take the final hand off.”

“Wait, why am I the anchor? I never finish relays? And this isn’t a relay, I’m the worst comedian here?”

Tetora winked. “I know you’ll come in for the clutch.”

She gave a thumbs up. “Great, last time I got trusted with this I broke my foot.”

“Then…” she dramatically backed away toward the stage exit, and gave Sang Mi finger guns. “BREAK A LEG!” and ran through the door before she could reply.

The four all stared at the door.

“Damn, she should have saved that one for the set,” Shinji mumbled.

They all sat in a nervous silence as they waited for the noise from Tetora starting her set. They couldn’t make out her exact words, but they could hear the muffled sound of her amplified voice through the wall. They crossed their fingers.

Then, laughter.

They all exhaled.

Sang Mi crossed herself and said a *Hail Mary*.

Alice’s set went well, so did Midi’s, so when Shinji went on Sang Mi was feeling incredibly chill, and was mouthing the lyrics to a Janice Rose song with Tetora while each listening with an earpiece. Laughter came from the audience.

And then, the laughter stopped.

And they stopped singing.

And there was a length of silence from the stage that was quite worrying.

And Shinji came shuffling off stage, looking down, pale as a sheet.

They all rushed over to him. “Shinji, what happened?” Tetora asked.

“So uh, you know the joke I was workshopping? You know, the one about the girl who was cooking for her girlfriend and dropped the knife on her foot?”

“Yes?” all four said, but not at all in unison so Tetora had to clarify “Yes, that joke killed?” because it wasn’t clear.

“So uh, apparently Director Jojan’s niece dug her spikes into someone during a sports thing, and uh... she sort of started sobbing?”

“Oh no,’ Tetora said.

“Oh shit,” Sang Mi said.

Shinji nodded, and flopped down in a chair.

“Well, that’s it then. I don’t think they’ll be giving Midori’s Comedy Club another arts grant. Let’s just go home,” Alice said, sitting down herself.

Tetora’s eyes watered. “No... I mean... I really tried? I really tried?”

“...Sorry Tetora. I let you down. I know how much this meant to you after the Kyon disaster...”

She shook her head. “No, no, it's fine. It's fine.” She nodded, tears jostling loose to roll down her eyes as she nodded. “Things always go wrong.”

Sang Mi looked between them all. “You guys know I can still go out there, right?”

Tetora shook her head. “You really don’t have to. It's fine, I know you weren’t really into this...”

Sang Mi rolled her eyes, and with thumping slow steps walked to the door. “Nah, don’t worry guys, I got this. You know me. I never know when to quit.” She pushed through the door, and after it closed heard it open again—they were probably following to convince her not to, or watch her. She didn’t turn around again. She reached the edge of the curtains. The audience was mumbling to themselves.

Sang Mi took a breath, and shuffled out on stage. The room was dark, dark enough she struggled to see the audience. She’d never been out on a stage this big before ever—so probably for the best the fact that it was a ton of people was being obscured. Though she didn’t feel as nervous as she’d expected. She’d embarrassed herself in front of people before, like that time she tried to sing a song parody in elementary school and had the whole class laughing in the wrong way. At least here if she was bad enough people laughed she could play that off as part of a brilliant gag. And if they hated her—so what? That was normal too.

She got to the platform, and sat down. She could make the people out better from here, but they were like paper silhouettes that moved around a little in a gentle breeze. She unfurled her fan, and bowed. “Most of you don’t know me, and those of you that do are probably thinking to yourself “That girl doesn’t look like she’s funny!” and to that I’d say... I may not be funny!” She flipped the fan shut and held it pointed at the audience. And kept holding it. “That’s it, there is no rest of the sentence.” And she got her first halting laugh. Tension left her shoulders, this wouldn’t be a disaster.

“I’m actually new to comedy, I got introduced to it by an enemy of mine, she asked me to drop everything and fill in here at the last minute to help her out, and holding a longstanding grudge against her, you know what I said?” She cast her gaze around the crowd. “Yes.”

Pause for laughter. “And you might be thinking, Sang Mi, you don’t sound very smart, and to that I say: I may not be smart!” She paused. “Yeah once again there’s no ‘but’. That being said we’re good friends now, and that’s the power of this kind of thing. And you know it’s funny, you go a lot of places in life. And you get there in funny ways.” She shoved her boot off the platform and gestured to it. “I’m actually usually an athlete. What I do is that I run in a big loop over and over and if I do it fast enough, I get minor validation! But big surprise I actually got in an accident while running track and field. I’m not mad about it though, because I made new friends, and had a good time! And you know what that makes me?”

She paused.

“Probably a little weird for feeling grateful I broke my foot. But I am, so no hard feelings.”

She held her hands out for effect. And it took a second for everyone to catch up, but as a loud set of clapping that was probably either Jojan’s niece or someone else in the family started, other people noticed, and promptly began following suit. She held the pose a while, smiling and nodding, as she got a really lengthy applause for something that was neither very funny nor very clever. Once it died down, she pulled her foot back up on the pedestal. “But this isn’t the first time I’ve taken on a weird new hobby. For a real brief time, I told my parents I wanted to be an advice columnist. Can you believe that? Would you ask me for advice? Didn’t think so. But I did meet some people who helped solve other people’s problems, and one of them told me a funny story about one of their customers, it went something like this...”

She mimed opening a sliding door. “Hello, is this the home of the legendary problem solver?”

She changed her body language to the second character. “It certainly is my home, a home, so who am I speaking to?”

“Ah! So I wanted you to help. I think I’m in the wrong career.”

“That’s a more common problem than you might think. So what aren’t you enjoying about your current career?”

“Well, it’s not so much that I’m not enjoying it... it’s uh... more that I’m getting a lot of customer complaints.”

“Complaints? What about?”

“Well...” she scratched her cheek. “I do massages, and I’m pretty good at it. Or so I thought. You see, they always go well until...”

“Until...”

“Until!”

“UNTIL!?”

“Until I scratch their back!”

She put her eyes wide and blinked in confusion. “How can you mess up a back scratch?”

“By sending them to the hospital!”

“What are you using to scratch their back?”

“Ah! It’s a family heirloom, my grandfather passed it down to me from his grandfather.”

“You skipped the fathers?”

“They were losers. Anyway, take a look. My one and only, legendary one of a kind... back scratcher!”

She made her eyes wide and blinked again. “You think that’s a backscratcher?”

“Of course it is!”

“You think that is a backscratcher!”

“I already said yes.”

“That’s a freaking SWORD!”

She got the laugh.

“What... what do you mean, ‘that’s a sword’? It’s a backscratcher! My grandpa used to laugh and tell me that he scratched the backs of a bunch of pirates with it.”

“Oh I bet he did. So uh, then why is it in two pieces?”

“Well I tried scratching a guy’s back with it, and he sort of snapped it in half.”

“I bet he did.”

“Well, I think you’ve been a great help to me. I now know—I wasn’t meant to be a masseuse, I was meant to be a swordsman!” She mimed waving a sword around.

“Well its going to be hard to do that with a broken sword.”

“Hmn... I guess you’ve got a point... Wait! You’re the legendary problem solver! Can you fix my sword?”

“Can I fix it? Why, I can fix it, or my name isn’t Hattori Hanzo!”

“Oh, thank you so much!”

She mimed handing the sword off, and then spoke as herself. “After the sword got fixed, a week passed, and the man came back...”

She mimed opening the sliding door again. “The sword you made me broke! You said it wouldn’t break, or your name wasn’t Hattori Hanzo!”

She shrugged. “Well my name isn’t Hattori Hanzo, it's Greg.”

There was laughter. She held her pose, she could hear her own breath. The applause started—the applause started! She bowed, and that was great because it meant the audience couldn’t see the overwhelming relief flooding her face. She held the bow till she could get it together, and then sat up smiling, waved to the audience, and walked off. As she got off stage she was tackled in a hug from Tetora and Midi.

“You did it!” Midi said.

“I had nothing to worry about, you were great!”

She smiled — a real smile, not a stage one. “Only cause I had a great team. And like, I mean that I had no idea what I was doing.”

Alice and Shinji, just to the side, each had their arms crossed, but looked pleased too.

“You did good,” Alice said.

“You weren’t terrible,” Shinji said.

Sang Mi laughed. “Thanks Shinji.”

They made their way out of the stage, and skipped returning to the green room.

“To comedy!” Tetora said.

“To comedy!” They all repeated.

“And to...” Sang Mi looked up at Tetora. “Friends.”

“To friends!” They clinked the plastic cups together, and sipped the sparkling juice. Sang Mi swirled her cup, and looked back around the packed banquet hall. She wasn’t an introvert, but this had been a lot for today.

“Hey, I’ll be right back, I just need some air.”

“Alright, just make sure you’re here for the cake. And take care, it’s cold out there.”

She gave a lazy two-fingered salute, and hobbled her way through the crowds to the outside of the venue. There was a small garden for just this sort of need outside one of the side doors, and as she stumbled under the mood-lit hanging lights she couldn’t help but feel that the entire area had had a lot of work done on it for somewhere she actually was able to be alone during such a packed event. Tetora was right—it was cold out, cold enough that snow was starting to waft down in gentle tufts that were settling on the lawn. Moving across the grass towards a bench on the far side, she heard a voice. It was a voice she hadn’t expected to hear, coming from the doorway to the Performance Centre.

“Sang Mi?”

She turned her head. There he was, in all his obnoxious handsome splendor. Kyon, dressed in an elegantly simply upscale suit he’d opened the top button on and loosened the tie on probably moments ago. She finished turning around, stomping her boot down to try to get something of a firm standing, but she still wobbled.

Sang Mi let out a breath in the cool night air, allowing it to fog out towards Kyon.

"...What are you doing here?"

"I'm allowed to go wherever I like, this is a public show."

"Two of your exes are here, don't give me that crap."

He sighed, and looked up at the sky. "You can't see the stars right here, there's too much light."

"Yeah, what's that have to do with anything?"

Kyon shook his head. "Forget it. I wanted to talk to you."

"Okay," she adjusted her weight on her boot. "Talk."

He looked at her, and it was a way he'd looked at her in the past, so she averted her own eyes to ignore it. "I think you've been unfair to me."

Her eyes turned back. "Unfair? UNFAIR? You cheated on me!"

"Did I?" he said blandly, "As I see it, our relationship was dead a long time ago. But you can't see that. Maybe what happened wasn't right, maybe I should have told you but... would you have listened anyway?"

"I would have!"

"Did you? Because I did try to tell you. I did try. And it just... you just didn't listen."

"I always listened to you."

"You didn't. I spoke, and you took the words you wanted from me. You clutched onto me, and you wouldn't let go. So yeah, I started dating Tetora. And I didn't know how to tell you."

Sang Mi felt her heart turn in her chest. Maybe this was her fault. She couldn't exactly say she'd been a good girlfriend. She had never introduced him to her friends. Maybe she'd known deep down that if she'd done that, Jae Hyun and JackBox would move on. Of course they'd move on.

They'd leave her alone. And she'd be alone. Like she was here, now, doing something she wasn't good at because she couldn't say no to someone she hadn't ever wanted to see again not too long ago.

But then Saki's words hit her again. "*Sang Mi, do you really think I'd work with someone I thought was worthless?*" She gritted her teeth.

"You can't just... show up here and say stuff like that to hurt me. You can't just blame me, and make me feel like the villain."

"I'm not making you the villain! But you have no idea how to communicate with people, and you blame me for it. I told you I needed time to figure things out. I told you you'd let me down."

"Time to figure things out doesn't mean an ending, I agreed to give you some space so we could figure things out, and you never corrected me when I introduced you as my boyfriend after that. You still took me out on dates!"

"Those weren't dates, they were just..."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't get semantic with me. You took me on dates. You thought you could get all the perks of having me around without any of the burden of it."

"So you admit you're a burden?"

She threw her hands up with an aggravated cry. "God, that's the thing about you, Kyon. You take such pride in how petty and vindictive you can be—you brag about how you get your friends to clean up your messes like you were the most clever boy on Gongen to do it—but then when somebody else is human and just fails at something or isn't good enough, you're suddenly personally aggrieved. No one in history has ever been more wronged!"

He darkened. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it? You excuse cheating because you didn't communicate with me well enough, and then get mad at me for not asking all the questions I couldn't have known to ask." She shrunk in a little bit. "I was so proud to be dating you. I was so happy to be dating someone who also was driven to get good grades, who cared about track, had a lot of friends, we're even both Catholic. You know I don't really grasp that stuff well but everyone says you're handsome and I'm plain, and I liked the way you didn't look at me like you thought I was. You went to our rival school but we made it work. I thought I could... bridge all those gaps."

"I guess maybe there were too many gaps to bridge," he said looking down.

"Maybe," she replied.

He blew out a breath, and watched it curl into smoke and fade. “You’re right, I came here to see Tetora. I wanted to talk to her. I didn’t expect to see you. But I wanted to talk to you too, once I saw you.”

“To have it out with me?”

“I thought you’d admit you were wrong.”

She clicked her tongue. “Tetora isn’t into you. You can’t two-time two girls and expect you can charm them back.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know. I already talked to her.”

Sang Mi laughed, now that was funny. “...God, even when you want to have it out with me I’m second place.”

“It’s not like that.”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter. I think I understand this all now. I get the humor in it all. I didn’t get why God led me here to this dump to do comedy, but I had fun, I learned a lot, and I guess I needed to chat with you to figure things out.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’d you figure out?”

She gave a wistful smile. “I guess in the end our whole relationship was a shaggy dog joke.”

He tilted his head. “I don’t know what that is.”

She sighed, and knelt down in the snow, wiping a bit of the dirt off, and pulling out a fan. “Well, let me tell you one. Thank you for coming today.”

“You don’t need to kneel down and do the whole Rakugo spiel.”

“And you didn’t need to cheat on me so deal with it.” She flicked her fan open. “So there’s this guy, and he has the shaggiest dog you’ve ever seen. Everyone says so. He’s walking down the street one day, when this man comes up to him and says. ‘Good sir, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a dog shaggier than that. Not even in Hongtu. I daresay, that dog is so shaggy I bet it could solve a problem I’ve had, you see my daughter can’t find her stuffed animal, and has been desperate to hug something shaggy, so if you could come over and let her play with your dog I’ll give you a hundred credits!’ Now the man is skeptical, but he brings the dog over, and lo and behold he gets a hundred credits just for letting the girl play with the dog. So he’s feeling good about himself, and he takes the dog over to the park the next day when this woman comes

over and says, 'My gosh, I don't ever think I've seen a shaggier dog.' She's cute, so the man asks if she wants to go to the dog park with him, and the pair hit it off. Time passes, and soon there are wedding bells and they're going to use their dog as the ring-bearer at first but they decide they might lose the rings in its fur because it's so shaggy. His parents are at the wedding, getting introduced to his bride for the first time, but they keep getting distracted by the dog. "That's the shaggiest dog I've ever seen!" his dad says. And the wedding happens, and after they get back from their honeymoon the man has made a decision: he's heard the same thing for years now, so he goes to enter his dog in the planetary shaggiest dog competition, and he takes it up to the judges and they look at it and the judge shakes his head and says, "That dog isn't even that shaggy." She bowed. "Thank you for listening, this concludes this evening's performance."

Kyon stood there, brow furrowed. The snow settled on Sang Mi's black hair in shining white bunches as the silence following the joke stretched on. "What was the point of that?" he asked.

She got up, dusting herself off. "Good question. I've been asking myself the same thing. See you later, Kyon." She turned around, and hobbled off back towards the Performance Centre. She might not have been able to tell a joke, but for the first time in a long time, she didn't feel like one.

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

Well wasn't that fun? You finally got to spend some real time with me, the beautiful, glorious, talented, modest, Hee Jin! Oh, and we kicked Academy 2's butts! Heck yeah! But I still have to do the announcements... um... there's a bake sale to support orphans in Colocog on Tuesday in the cafeteria. Also, looks like Zhyrgal Osmonova is still puttering around.

I know my friend Sang Mi tried to investigate her earlier about something, but she's still been helping feed the animals on the roof and everything... but what does she do with her time? Who is Zhyrgal to Zhyrgal?

And what would that girl do if you put her in a situation where she had to decide what the right thing was? Well, I guess we might find out next week!

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

Tune in Next Week For:

Kindness

By James Hornby

New Academy 27 stories will drop each Thursday!

Read past stories and learn more about Academy 27 at:

ArcbeatlePress.com/A27

**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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