

by James Hornby



Kindness

Academy27



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Hurried steps carried Zhyrgal beyond Academy 27's grounds and out into the wider world. The school day had ended an hour ago, noticeable not only by the time on her watch, but by the silence around her. The moment the bell rang, the Academy emptied, its students trying to get far away as fast as possible. By this time Academy 27 was the quietest place in all of Gongen — just how Zhyrgal liked it.

The end of the school day was the perfect time to write, void of the disruption that plagued the lesson time. Once she had finished tending to the animals on the roof, she remained there for a time, writing the latest adventures she'd cooked up during lesson time.

With the sun falling in the sky, Zhyrgal knew it was his time to put down the pen and return home. Making her way down the quiet street, she stuffed her notepad and pen into her rucksack and threw it over her shoulder. Even when the writing tools were away, Zhyrgal rarely found that her mind was at rest, always utilising the long walk home to think up more story ideas. She found that the walk across the Cheonsa Dome yielded some of her greatest inspirations. Yet today, no more than a block from the Academy gates, she found her creative processes blocked, disturbed by one of her body's fiercest urges: the unmistakable cry of hunger.

Her stomach growled, and no matter how hard she tried to turn her thoughts to inventing strange and wonderful literary worlds, the persistent pangs came calling. She knew she should have had the panini at lunch — the salad was disgusting, and most of the parts covered in dressing had ended up in the garbage. Her stomach continued to wail, begging her to find some form of sustenance, anything to end its torment. Home was six blocks away, and who knew when dinner would be on the table. Until then, chocolate would sate her hunger just nicely, not to mention taste good!

Her mind made up, Zhyrgal knew just the place to go. Despite only being part of the school a short time, she had heard several students talk of a local store that sold exactly what she needed: Gilhurst's News, the one stop place for pre and post school snacks. Once again, her eavesdropping skills had paid off. Looking around to get a bearing of her surroundings, Zhyrgal was pleased to note the shop was around the next corner, and set off with a spring in her step.

Outside the store, however, was something she wasn't quite prepared for. A group of students — the ones she tended to avoid on the corridors between lessons — crowded the benches near the entrance. She recognised some of them: Summer White, Asim S'Tar and Tanaka Hanzo. They all seemed to be preoccupied with one of their number, who came stumbling out of the store roaring with laughter. The student was soon followed by an elderly lady with a face like thunder. Once she'd shoed the boy out, she bellowed at the others: "Off with you, you ignorant little fiends!" She batted her hand at them. "Don't you have somewhere else to be? Some of us have a business to run!"

The old lady's rant was met with a cacophony of laughter. Admitting defeat, she huffed and went back inside. The students then proceeded to point their fingers, chanting: "Grumpy grumpy Gilhurst!"

Their name calling was met with more angered shouts, muffled by the confines of the store, and again the students were laughing.

Zhyrgal thought about turning back, chalking it up as a loss and heading home. She didn't want to get caught up in this, not at the end of the day, yet despite her better judgement, her stomach had other ideas. It grumbled so loudly that it threatened to catch the attention of everyone in the vicinity. She had to eat something, she just had to. And so, with her bravest face, Zhyrgal marched on, determined to get what she needed from the store with minimum attention from the students outside.

To Zhyrgal's relief, her approach elicited little more than some mocking questions about her love for animals. As heckles went, she found them quite tame. Once she had made it past the entrance, Zhyrgal felt like she had entered the lair of the beast.

The store was small, by all accounts: two sets of shelves lined the walls, one filled with candy, and the other with local newspads. Where the shelves ended stood the counter, behind which sat (Mrs?) Gilhurst, staring at him with snake-like eyes.

Zhyrgal quickly scanned the shelves for something that tickled her fancy, all the while feeling Gilhurst's watchful eyes bore into the back of her skull. To her relief, Gilhurst's comm rang, and the stifling presence of the store lifted somewhat.

"Oh, hi Alice. Yes, they've been at it again, making my life hell."

Zhyrgal's heart sank at Gilhurst's words. She was clearly a very unhappy person, and no wonder, considering the people loitering outside her place of work.

Not wanting to eavesdrop on her conversation any further, Zhyrgal set to choosing something. The selection was almost too much: from Applemack Bars right through

to Liquorice Ripples. One confectionary in particular caught her eye, and after that the choice was simple. Zhyrgal picked up a dark chocolate Whizler and smiled as the colourful wrapper brought back happy memories of her childhood.

With her choice made, Zhyrgal wandered over to the counter, where Gilhurst continued her conversation, almost oblivious to her presence.

"I can't retire," she said to the person on the other end of the phone. "The shop has been in my family for generations. I'm the last one left! If I close the shop the legacy dies. I have to keep going, I—" She stopped, alarmed and a little angered to find Zhyrgal waiting patiently to be served. "Sorry Alice, I have a customer. Speak soon." Ending the call, she threw him a disgruntled look. "Come on, what are you having?"

Zhyrgal's mouth gaped open, about to speak, but was suddenly bereft of anything to say. The venom in the woman's tone had her petrified.

"Come on, out with it! You're not hiding anything in those pockets, are you?"

Offended, Zhyrgal shook her head. "No, maam."

"Then what are you being so coy for? Do you want to buy something or not?"

Zhyrgal nodded and reached out to place the chocolate bar on the counter. Hearing raised laughter from outside, she hesitated, the painful memories of a dozen gym classes stabbing her in the gut. She turned to see the same collection of students outside, pointing and laughing, not at her, but Mrs Gilhurst.

"Grumpy grumpy Gilhurst," the students began again, giggling and guffawing to themselves. Despite herself, Zhyrgal cracked a smile. From her limited exposure alone, she could see how she had earned the nickname.

Feeling brave, Zhyrgal turned back to Mrs Gilhurst, and to her surprise caught a look of hurt on her aged face. Behind her steely exterior, it was clear to see their taunts wounded her.

"Bloody youths!" she yelled at them, shaking her fists. "Clear off and leave my store alone. My customers are too afraid to come in with you loitering out there. You're making me lose business!"

Gilhurst's words only served to rekindle the students' amusement, and the mockery began anew.

Despite the old lady's abrupt and accusatory attitude, Zhyrgal's heart went out to her. She could see how frustrating it must be for her, trying to earn a living only to be subject to the same abuse day in, day out. She remembered, back in Lybid, how Tony Henderson had made her life miserable for weeks. It stopped her wanting to turn up to school in the mornings. At least she'd move to Takumi, this poor lady was stuck here.

Gilhurst exhaled sharply, and for a moment Zhyrgal thought the Whizler bar was going to fly off the counter. A few seconds later, the taunts from outside subsided. Gilhurst's attention drifted back to Zhyrgal and her steely expression returned. "Right," she sighed. "That'll be twenty-five."

Zhyrgal placed her finger on the scanner to pay and the transaction completed with a satisfied beep.

"Thanks," Gilhurst huffed, and slouched into her chair.

"Thank you!" said Zhyrgal, extra cheery, and turned to leave.

She had made it less than three steps before Gilhurst called after her. "You've left your chocolate bar!" she yelled.

Zhyrgal turned around to face her. "No," she replied with a smile. "It's for you. Have a nice day."

While she didn't remain long enough to see her full reaction, Zhyrgal caught the look of pleasant surprise on Gilhurst's face, and for her, that was more than enough.

Stepping outside, she caught the full attention of Gilhurst's hecklers, and they began their tirade of abuse.

"Hey there, animal girl. Where are your birds today?"

Zhyrgal rolled her eyes and chuckled to himself. She wasn't going to give them any fuel today. Instead she clutched his rucksack tight and headed for home, pleased that, for at least a moment, she had brightened someone else's day.

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

The whole school has been getting on the Kendo train, and everyone has been learning how to hit other people with sticks. My dad says this is blatant war-hawkery—sorry Mr. Mori, I’ll get back onto the announcements.

Anyway we have a new guest teacher, a man from the famous Kujiko family! I mean, not a famous guy from the family, but still. It doesn’t sound like he’s getting along well with Ryan, our transfer student from Earth, so how is that going to play out? And how will the class handle it?

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

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A Kendo Story

By James Wylder

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Make them everyone's problem.**

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



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