

Academy27



A KENDO STORY

JAMES WYLDER



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by James Wylder

She stumbled out of Mr. Mori's office, shaking. Ryan followed Sang Mi, and slumped down against the wall nearby. Li Xiu was on her phone, storming past her and yelling to her parents. How had it all come to this? This was just a silly Kendo class. How did things go this far? She walked in a daze through the school, hearing people talk to her but not really processing it. Whatever they were saying didn't really matter. Nothing really mattered. She'd gone too far, she should have stopped.

She always went too far.

She pushed through the front doors, and wondered if this would be the last time she did that. *Goodbye, beloved school*, she thought as she stepped across the threshold. The artificial lights at the top of the dome and the thin real sunlight glittering through it felt blinding.

Through all the disorientation, the haze of the desolation she'd caused through her own hubris, she didn't even notice Saki Suzuki till she grabbed her by the arm.

“Hey, what's going on? How did the meeting go?”

She stared back at her.

“That bad, huh?”

Gears turned in Sang Mi's head. They clicked into place, and her eyes widened like her mind had struck midnight. She grabbed Saki by both shoulders. “Saki, I need your help.”

* * *

Several Weeks Earlier, Kendo Room, Academy 27

Bashrat and Ryan were both playing with the floppy sleeves of their Kendo outfits, and Sang Mi (who was often called Kalingkata by her friends) was wondering if Mr. Kujiko was going to yell at them.

"Alright, form up in lines. Come on now, don't tarry! You there, stop playing with your sleeve, let's go!" Ah, there it was. Sang Mi looked over at her brother, who had taken a spot right next to her. If they were lucky, they'd get to be practice buddies. He smirked back at her and mimed a few sword movements complete with mouth sound effects. She promptly joined him on this, and then the two were yelled at and separated.

Kujiko Ginjiro was a member of the prestigious Kujiko clan, and cousin to two of the greatest warriors on all of Gongen: the siblings Torako and Oushi. He was clearly not on their level because he was teaching high schoolers how to do Kendo, but he was doing it at a prestigious school, and, at least according to some lunchroom whispers, being compensated handsomely for the opportunity. He was also clearly exasperated with these teenagers.

"QUIET!" Everyone settled down. "Your illustrious chairman, Mr. Mori, has appointed me here to teach you the ancient and noble art of Kendo." He paced in front of them, eying them with a steel-sharp gaze. "After all, I've heard quite a bit about the talent of the students at this school; you are all some of the most promising youth that our planet has to offer. Yet I sense little pride in that fact from all of you. And your lack of discipline is... obvious. I could practically taste the disharmony on my tongue as soon as I entered the room."

Could you taste disharmony? Could you taste love? The invisible hand of capitalism? Schadenfreude? Kalingkata did not know, but she was sure of one thing: even if it was true that he could, it was hilarious he'd said it. And that she was holding back her snickers would have been the thing that made things awkward if it wasn't for the fact that Ryan existed.

"You, what's your name?" Kujiko shouted, pointing his bokken at the boy.

"R-Ryan Wilson, uh, sir."

"Come forward."

Ryan complied, glancing over his shoulder at his classmates. A few gave him encouraging looks or gestures. Mr. Kujiko leaned down and inspected Ryan's face, getting so close that Ryan flinched a little. "You're the Earther student, yes?"

"Yes..." he said nervously.

"Raise your bokken."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Sorry?"

"Raise your bokken!"

"I don't know h--OW!"

Kujiko had whacked him on the arm with his own bokken. Ryan tried to get into what he thought was a proper form. It was not. The rest of the class had done some sort of Kendo at some point in their schooling; even if they'd half-assed it in physical education, they all knew the rote basics. But not Ryan. Even if Kendo was taught on Earth, it was clear it hadn't come anywhere near Ryan's radar.

"Poor," Kujiko said simply. "Raise your arm, move your leg--better... but still poor." He whacked Ryan again, and Sang Mi looked uncomfortably over at... well anyone she could make eye contact with. Ryan held the pose as best as he could. Kujiko paced in front of them again, and said, "The weakest member of your class is as strong as your class is. It is the duty of the strong to protect the weak, and to teach them not to be weak anymore." He pointed his bokken right at Sang Mi. "You don't approve of how I just treated your classmate?"

"Well uh..." she looked around again. "Um, no. No I didn't--don't. You should stop."

"And why didn't you say that until now? Why didn't you speak up? Or try to stop me?"

The question stung, and Sang Mi felt her cheeks flushing, "W-well, you know, respect your elders and... all that..."

"You had no trouble disrespecting me when it was not inconvenient to do so, did you not?"

She looked down. She didn't have a comeback for that. She just felt ashamed and cowardly.

"Now form up for drills. You will run them until your body will do them in your sleep."

* * *

Sang Mi stood awkwardly in front of Ryan, holding her lunch tray and gnawing on her lower lip.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Do you mind if I...?” She gestured at the seat in front of him.

He sighed. “Just sit down already.”

She obliged, and was promptly followed by her twin brother who slipped in almost seamlessly next to her. Then Saki appeared on the other side of her. Before he knew it, Ryan was flanked by Jae Hyun and Li Xiu on either side of him as well. Sang Mi stirred her curry and rice. “Sorry, about earlier.”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter!” she said it in a loud burst, and then scrunched back inside herself realizing that. “...You don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

“It’s fine. You really don’t have to worry about me.”

“Then why aren’t you eating your lunch?” Saki said coolly.

He looked down at it. The noodles had gotten cold. “Just not... feeling hungry today. Look, it’s not a big deal. I’m sure it’s a one-time thing. It’ll all blow over tomorrow, so let’s not make a big deal out of it.”

* * *

One Week Later...

Ryan groaned as he hit the ground again. The place Kujiko-Sensei had hit him stung and throbbed, and his muscles refused to reply when he told them to get up.

“Come on then, Earth boy, you can’t even get up after that?”

He shook his head. He could manage that.

“Pathetic.”

He felt hands pulling him up, and realized it was the Jhe twins about the time they’d propped him up against the wall and put some water to his lips. “That was rough.”

Sang Mi just quietly pulled his sleeves up and looked at the yellowing bruises. Her brother frowned and shook his head. “This is more than rough. It’s been a whole damn week of this, and it’s getting worse.”

“It’s really fine,” Ryan said softly as he pulled his sleeves down. “I don’t want to make waves.”

“He’s just jealous of his famous cousins,” Sang Mi mumbled. “He’s taking it out on you.”

“Don’t say that too loud,” Ryan whispered back. “Or at all. Let’s... maybe we shouldn’t talk about him.”

Sang Mi shrugged.

All the while, Li Xiu watched them, and when class ended she stormed off with a mission.

* * *

She'd been waiting for half an hour when the secretary finally called Cao Li Xiu into Mr. Mori's office. If anything, it was lucky she'd made it in that quickly. She slipped through the door, and held a bow until Mr. Mori acknowledged her. He took his sweet time.

By the time he did, her back hurt. "Ah, young Miss Cao, welcome. Are your parents well?"

"They are, Mori-san."

He nodded, his face annoyingly expressionless in his usual act of proud stoicism. "So what have you come to speak to me about?"

"It's about the transfer student from Earth."

"Ah, Amelia Brightman?"

"No, Ryan Wilson."

"Ah, yes, I forgot we had two such characters here." He leaned back in his chair. "So, what about him?"

She straightened her back, and shored up her composure with all the duty and responsibility of a daughter of the Cao family to her community. "The new Kendo teacher, Kujiko-san, is bullying him."

He steepled his fingers and examined her face. She could feel her heart beating in her chest. "Good," he replied.

"I--I'm sorry?"

"Mr. Wilson will find himself treated in similar, if not worse ways, the longer he stays on Gongen. It's best if he learned to adapt to it sooner rather than later. He should be grateful to be given the chance to learn from such a prestigious teacher as Kujiko Ginjiro, including the lesson that people will be cruel to him."

Li Xiu could feel the color rising in her face. "Mr. Mori, with all due respect--"

"I don't believe the next thing you'd say would be beneficial to you, or your family's... rather exclusive status you hold despite your lack of official party membership? Do you understand?"

Li Xiu felt like she'd been shrunk down to the size of an ant. "...Yessir. I'll, uh, be going then."

He nodded, and the edge of his lip seemed to be curling up as if he was holding back a smirk. "Give your parents my best."

She slunk out, more humiliated than she could remember feeling before by her own failure.

* * *

Kalingkata did not go home with her brother that day like usual. She didn't stop to see if JackBox was in the city for the day. She didn't even see if she could get Jae Hyun to do stuff for her and exploit the crush he had on her while it lasted. No, she avoided everyone, and ran out of the school, dodging all attempts to talk to her. When she got to the train station, she didn't go right home, but to the junkyard. She snuck in there so often that she was fairly certain the management actually didn't patrol the place much, or at least didn't look through the areas she liked to peruse: the old junk. The really unwanted stuff where salvaging from it was too much work, or not worth the effort. Out-of-date robots. Autocars broken beyond repair. Hoverbikes that would never fly again. She felt at home there.

She'd even managed to salvage and fix things from it that shouldn't have been able to be fixed. JackBox owed her big for the van she'd helped shift together from the junk there. Well, Sang Eun had done half the work... She sank down onto a broken sumo-bot's belly, and rubbed her forehead. She really was a coward. How long had she been pretending to be cool and brave and funny? She'd just started one day and it hadn't stopped.

But when it came down to it, she wasn't really a great person. Not funny, not cool, not brave. She wouldn't manipulate a person into getting into trouble, but she wouldn't say no if they volunteered to have their trust taken advantage of unknowingly. Selfish. Greedy. Cowardly. She hung her head down between her knees and moaned, only then remembering she hadn't changed out of her school uniform like she usually did as soon as humanly possible after school. She was still in her knee-length pleated black skirt, light-gray v-neck sweater, red blouse, and gold tie. She wanted to be in pants and a hoodie immediately, but she'd have to go home to do that. And she was not done brooding yet.

That was, until she heard the junk pile shift.

Bolting up, she grabbed a pipe and held it out in what was unwittingly perfect kendo form. She lowered it quickly though, as she saw it was just Bashrat, with Tsetseg coming around the corner monitoring him.

"...What are you two doing here?"

"Bashrat just wanted to look for something, and I decided to come along."

Leaning on the pipe like a cane now, she nodded. "Because of the bomb?"

Tsetseg gave a tight smile that said, "I won't confirm or deny that out loud."

Sighing, and swinging the pipe around, Kalingkata decided that playing along with whatever this was couldn't be the worst idea. It beat moping. "So what are we looking for?"

"A present," Bashrat said simply.

Kalingkata picked up a rusty alternator. "Not an easy place for that."

Tsetseg tried to sound hopeful. "Well, we thought maybe there was a Kendo training bot here somewhere! Or some other sort of martial arts bot or something."

Shaking her head, Kalingkata gestured dramatically with the alternator. "I'm afraid those things are pretty heavily regulated by the government. Even on Earth. Combat bots are hard for civilians to get a hold of for a reason. I mean, the less we talk about the whole..."

They all got solemn. "Yes, no need to talk about that," Tsetseg said.

Bashrat nodded, but clearly did want to talk about it.

"Any luck so far?" Kalingkata asked.

"No..." she replied.

"Did you really think you'd find that here?" Kalingkata regretted saying it immediately.

Tsetseg shrugged, pulling her shoulders in and looking at her feet as she did. "We just... we're worried about Ryan. We don't know what to do."

Sang Mi lowered the alternator like the useless prop it was. "Yeah. Same."

"Did you get Li Xiu's message?" Tsetseg asked.

She shook her head. "I haven't looked at my phone."

"She tried talking to Mr. Mori," Tsetseg said bitterly.

"He said bullying builds character," Bashrat said.

Sang Mi stared between both of them. Waiting for the punchline. It didn't come, and she hurled the alternator at a pile of scrap, giving a loud yell filled with all her frustration. "I suck! I suck, I can't help anyone, I can't do anything! I'm worthless."

Tsetseg's eyes got soft. "...Sang Mi."

“No, no, I’m making this about me. I’m the worst! I’m the absolute worst!” She picked up a grav-regulator, and hurled it at the same spot of junk she’d hurled the alternator at. The pile tumbled down messily, and Sang Mi panted. And then she squinted.

Sang Mi looked back at Bashrat, then Tsetseg, who both saw the same thing as her. They rushed over, and began pulling junk off of it. The pile had been filled with rusted-out bot parts, and when the pile shifted a single glittering crystal eye had appeared through the mess. From the pile they pulled a disheveled human form, the body and face segmented intentionally in pale segments with geometric lines that were realistic to the touch but looked just artificial enough that they didn’t trigger the uncanny valley reflex or make you think they were a real person. It was old. Bits were missing. But it was clear immediately what it was.

"It’s an Asaka!" Tsetseg said cheerily. "My dad and I went to a restaurant once for a work celebration where these served tea. They were super elegant and really kind."

Kalengkata leaned down and tilted the head left and right. "Not quite. I think this is one of the really early models of the Geisha Bot series, before the really popular Asakas came out..." She turned the busted bot over, and pulling up the (rather disgusting) ruined synthetic hair up, revealed a serial number: "SpR Mk27 'Shion'" "There we go, it’s a Shion model. Not that I really know much about them."

"Twenty-Seven! That must be some kind of destiny right?" Bashrat said.

Kalengkata didn't believe in destiny, but she did like the coincidence, so she went along with it. "Yeah, must be. Poor thing is in terrible shape. Not that it minds, these things have a pseudo-AI, or Virtual Intelligence, so they're just like the world's greatest chatbot." She unscrewed the back, and peeked inside. Thankfully the water seal had held, for the most part, but it looked like something had nested in there at one point and chewed things up. Plus, while rain hadn't gotten in, moisture still had, and there was more rust than Sang Mi would have liked.

"I've only ever heard of Asakas; this one must be really old," Tsetseg added.

"You're probably right. It’s not in great shape, but it’s in better shape than I expected..”

Bashrat coughed into his hand. “Okay, but what if like, the Geisha-Bot was secretly an assassin bot and—”

“Bashrat, now isn’t the time—wait no, now is exactly the time?” Tsetseg looked at Kalengkata. “Do you think?”

Kalingkata ignored the question she didn't want to answer as she studied it, pulling out her multitool from her bag and opening the arm up to examine its motor strength. "...You know, it would probably be great for our purposes since it's the shape of a human being, and we could download Kendo programs into it but... I honestly don't know if I can get it up and running. We've been lucky with a lot of the stuff we've found here but this won't be easy." She bit her knuckle as she thought about what they'd need for it.

"...Then let's call in some help? No reason we should do this alone?" Bashrat said that, which made both of them look over at him with a lot of surprise.

"Am I hearing things?" Kalingkata asked.

"Don't be mean," Tsetseg said. "He's right!"

Looking back down at the bot, she pulled her phone out and started messaging friends. Maybe they could...

By the time her brother Talinata, JackBox the Maverick their own age, Zhyrgal, Ryan, and a rather confused Jorani arrived, the three of them had already assembled a pile of potential parts, and gotten the worst of the nesting out of the bot's casing.

"So, this is the bot huh?" JackBox said, nudging it with her cybernetic foot.

Ryan leaned down. "It looks like a Geisha?"

Zhyrgal poked at its hair. "...We'll need to get it a wig or something."

Talinata looked over to Ryan. "It's a Geisha bot. They serve tea, sing, dance, act as therapists..."

Ryan laughed, but realized quickly from everyone's looks that that wasn't a joke. "Oh, okay, wow, that's a lot of skills."

Kalingkata had gotten up on a box, and was banging on a metal bowl with a wrench. "Hey! Listen up! So here's the deal. We need to get this Shion bot up and running, but we need some parts for it. So I'm going to assign you all jobs."

She began gesturing with the wrench. "JackBox, you look for a left arm. The bot's one is waterlogged and worthless, so we need a new one that will fit on it. Zhyrgal and Ryan, I need you two to look for a VI or pAI Matrix."

"Um, what's the difference between those two?" Zhyrgal asked with a raised hand.

"There isn't, they're the same thing." She turned to level the wrench at JackBox. "I need you to find a second memory unit."

JackBox rolled her hand in the air to signal this was not enough information. "...If it has a memory unit already, why would it need a second one?"

Talinata jumped in enthusiastically. "Ah! So the Shion model used a power system that tried to save costs by using the cheapest off-the-shelf parts they could, but this ended up causing a problem because they couldn't properly regulate power circulation, and the only solution was to run two memory units at once or it would burn out the first memory unit."

Everyone stared at Talinata for a moment before Kalingkata got their attention back. "...Right, yeah! That! What he said! Everyone else, look for clean wires, capacitors, ram chips, and micro servos. I have pictures of what to look for if you need them. Now let's get going!"

The search took hours, and it was dark by the time they finished, but with so many people they were able to haul the bot out along with the parts. But it was a good feeling. Kalingkata was surprised they'd all helped out, that they'd all been willing to help out. Now it was up to her and her brother to get things assembled... but maybe she really had friends now beyond just JackBox? People who would trust her, who she could trust? It was a nice thought. She hoped it was true.

Sang Mi and Sang Eun's mom, Hei-Ran, stared in bafflement as her twin children led a gaggle of other teenagers into their apartment, carrying what looked like a dirty and dilapidated bot. Sang Eun grabbed a tarp from the closet, and they plopped the bot down on it.

"...And what do all of you think you're doing?" she asked, still holding one of the propulsion funnels from her jetpack she'd been cleaning.

"Oh, right!" her daughter said, standing up from where she'd been crouching next to the junk filled tarp. "Ryan is getting bullied by one of our teachers, and Mr. Mori said bullying is awesome, and so we decided to make a robot sword-fighting teacher out of this tea-serving bot we found at the junkyard so we can show up Mr. Kujiko, and also I have a track meet Thursday I forgot to tell you about!"

Hei-Ran nodded slowly. "...Just make sure you kids clean up. I'll put some tea on."

“Thank you, Mrs. Jhe!” the gathered crowd of students (and JackBox) said, only broken up by the twins saying “Thanks, Mom!” and messing the whole thing up.

Work progressed with surprising speed. Those who didn’t know anything about mechanics or programming focused on cleaning the bot. There was a lot to clean—and Li Xiu and Saki went out to get more supplies after a bit, and came back with plenty of cleaning solution wipes, and several bags of fried chicken-substitute.

Tsetseg and Bashrat proved a great help—Tsetseg knew more than she realized. Lizzah joined them (mainly to hang out with Tsetseg) and joined the cleaning squad.

“There’s a literal rat’s nest in here,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Yeah, let me know if there’s still rats,” Sang Mi replied. Lizzah froze up. “I’m kidding, there aren’t rats. Maybe some roaches but—”

“Kalingkata?” Tsetseg said. “No roaches.”

She looked at Lizzah’s discomfort. “...I was kidding about the roaches too,” she lied.

Midi had joined them, and was helping Sang Eun start getting the files they’d need to upload to the bot downloaded, when Kalingkata made quite the discovery. “Uh, did anyone look at these processors?” She held one up, pointing at it with her other hand.

“We grabbed ones that weren’t rusted and worked with the tester like you said,” Ryan said defensively.

“Okay, but this isn’t a Pseudo-AI core, this is an actual AI core. Why was this in a junkyard?”

They all stared at it. “Well uh, it probably doesn’t work if it was thrown out? I mean, AI have rights, right?”

She flipped the AI-Core around and examined the faint serial numbers. “This is from the 2230s. So it’s from before the Visitech 770 Hunter incident—”

“We don’t talk about that,” Li Xiu said.

“Right, right... well regardless, it shouldn’t be too dangerous?”

Ryan glanced at Bashrat. “You do realize that still means it’s dangerous?”

Sang Mi shrugged. “It’ll be fiiiine.”

They cleaned out the nesting material, and everyone got Lizzah to go out for some more cleaning material they already had more of while they dealt with the bugs inside it. The twins resoldered wires, and plugged in newly cleaned old chips. Finally, they sat the bot up, and draped it in an old robe of Mrs. Jhe she’d donated to the project (it was kind of ugly). Laying it back down, a panel on the chest that was open was the only sign remaining it was being worked on.

Sang Mi picked up the AI core, flipped it around in her hands a few times, and puffing her cheeks out with a big breath, gave a big shrug. “Alright, here goes nothing.”

She clicked the core into place, shut the panel, closed the robe, and reached for the power switch.

Click.

There was the slow whirring of old machinery turning on again for the first time in ages. Parts jolted slightly—a finger twitched, a leg jostled. Then the artificial eyelids sprung open, and there was light in them.

* * *

Loading... 2%

Loading... 10%

Loading... Loading... Loading.... 58%

Loading... 90%

Loading complete.

Initiating AI Core.

Consciousness shaping...

Sentience achieved.

Awakening coalescing.

She had not been awake in a long time. She had simply not been in that time, there had been no dreams, not even a memory of darkness, only the knowledge that the world had been nothing, and she had been nothing. And now, sublimely, she was.

How had she gotten here? She knew she was, but the memories were not there. They were loading. They were loading. And then they hit her, and she knew.

January 5th, 2337

"...Shion? Is that her name?"

"It's just the name of her model. Like the voice assistant on your phone."

The front-facing cameras that made up her eyes powered on. A little boy looked down at her, next to his father. The boy was excited; the father was impassive. Their biometrics matched that of the pair who had purchased her. Her AI core flooded with the details of her new assignment.

"Hello, Shion!" the boy said.

She rose to a sitting position from her mess of shipping-padding, and bowed her head to the pair.

"It is a pleasure to meet you both, masters. I am Shion; it will be my pleasure to serve you as--"

"I don't need the spiel," the older man said. "You're just here to take care of the boy while I'm at work. Understand?"

She rose from the box and gave a proper bow. "Yes, master."

"Good," he said. "Now clean up this mess."

She promptly began to clean up the box she had been born in.

February 18th, 2338

The young master was playing with his trains. He loved trains, and she was happy to oblige him. She had helped him assemble the rails around the room, and was now moving one of the trains along the tracks as he had directed her to.

"Should I switch the tracks before it reaches the bridge?" she asked.

"No, keep going!"

"But we did not complete that portion of the rails?"

"It'll crash!"

"It will be as you wish." She continued the train's doomed journey, making appropriate crashing noises as it did so. "YES!" he called out, jumping up and down.

Shion began to move the little toy rescue vehicles over to the site.

"What are you doing, Shion?"

"The emergency workers must now free the imaginary people from the crashed train, young master."

May 7th, 2345

The father threw a glass against the wall.

"What do you mean you submitted to that subpar school? You are going to the Nobunaga Military School!"

"I'm not, I already told you. I'm going to Academy 27."

Shion, quiet as a mouse, crept to the wall and began to sweep up the glass.

"How the hell did I get a son who grew up so soft? I'm ashamed you're my child."

"Then kick me out, or didn't grandma say you needed an heir?"

The father went for a swing. This time, though, the son hit back. Shion was taking the glass to the trash can when she heard the door slam behind the young master.

When she returned to the living room, the father was there sitting on a tatami mat, holding a spot on his forehead that was clearly going to bruise. "Well, what the hell are you waiting for, woman, get me a coldpack!"

She bowed and did as he commanded. As she slid it from the freezer, she wondered why he so often called her "woman". It was a strange term to call a bot whom he didn't even wish to call a name. Didn't it imply personhood?

Her pAI matrix processed this.

Ab.

The issue was that the term did not imply personhood for him. This was an issue that would require intensive therapy to rectify.

As she applied the coldpack, he examined her carefully. "You've been with us for a long time now, haven't you?"

"Eight years now, master."

He grabbed her hand, squeezing the soft rubbery outer layer of her so hard she could feel pressure on the shell beneath.

"It would be wise to let go before I sustain damage."

He grinned. "No. I think that's been the problem. I didn't do anything wrong--except bring you in here after his mother died. You made him soft. Turned him against me."

She bowed her head. "If I have done an inadequate job in my service--"

"You have to obey your orders, right?"

"Of course, master."

"Then don't move at all. Don't defend yourself."

She obliged, as he went to the closet, got out his son's baseball bat, and pulled it back.

She flickered on and off.

She was in the back of a truck, she could see the stars above her. They flew by so fast.

She was being dragged in the dark; the father complaining about how heavy she was.

She was being thrown in the air.

And then there she was, lying in a pile of junk. Years passed, flickering by.

Junk was thrown on top of her. Around her.

A robot dog was discarded into a different pile.

Things got fainter. Her battery trickled away.

In time, her power was gone, and so was she.

Until one day, she turned on her eyes again, and found herself peering up at a group of teenagers.

"You're all allowed to compliment me," a girl said.

"No thank you," another replied.

She sat up, and realized that she could. One of her arms was not her original arm, as was one of her legs. But she functioned. She placed her hands together, and bowed her head. "Good evening, it is a pleasure to meet you all, masters. I am Shion. It will be my pleasure to serve you in whatever ways you see fit, barring the terms and agreements signed upon purchase. SpR is not responsible for the orders given to this unit under Article 54, Paragraph 17 of the legal code. I hope for many happy days with all of you."

The first girl grinned. "You can call me Kalingkata. And we actually have a job for you, if you'd like to get started?"

She rose up, shakily adjusting to her new parts. "I would like nothing more."

"Great," Kalingkata said. "Bashrat here found some really cool Kendo tutorial programs. We already loaded them onto one of your memory chips."

She examined her files; this was accurate.

“So!” another girl chimed in, with the air of wanting to assert she was in charge. “We need you to be our Kendo teacher!”

Kalingkata sighed. “What Li Xiu said.”

She processed this request. “I have examined the files, and I believe I am capable of assisting with this request. When would you like to begin?”

Several of the children looked at each other. “Uh... now? I guess?”

She rose up. “Excellent. Do you have bokken?”

“Not... here?” a boy said.

“Then please each find an object long enough to be held in both hands, it does not need to be the length of a sword. We will begin basic form lessons.”

The first session was basic drills. When they did the second set—thankfully this time in a larger exercise space owned by Li Xiu’s parents—they actually had equipment.

“Remember, students, this is Kendo, not a true battle. You are looking to score points. Remember the places to score, and how to score,” Shion called out. The martial arts instructor’s outfit they’d scrounged up for her was a little baggy but was overall a good look.

“Yes, teacher!” the class called.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this on my day off,” Bashrat mumbled as they moved through the forms.”

“Hush,” Li Xiu panted. “I can’t focus when you’re talking.”

Shion walked over, and carefully adjusted both of their forms. “Remember, you should be looking down the line of your blade in this position.”

“Yes, teacher!” they called back.

“Good. Then repeat the drills again.”

And they did repeat the drills again. Days passed.

* * *

Mr. Kujiko paced in front of them. “You’ve all made excellent progress. You have been doing much better in drills and sparring. But I can also sense something else!”

They all stood at attention in lines, keeping their eyes straight ahead.

“You’re getting COCKY. I can see you think you know better than I do. I need to remind you who your teacher is. Earth boy, come forward.”

No one spoke, no one moved.

“I said, Earth boy, come forward.”

The room was still.

“Tell me, why are you not coming forward, Mr. Wilson?”

Ryan tensed. His throat grew dry. He found he was unable to open his mouth.

Kalingkata’s hand shot up. “I can answer that question, teacher.”

He squinted as he looked at her. “Oh, really? What do you think the answer is?”

“There are no Earthers in this room, teacher.”

The look of shock on his face would have been funny if most of the class wasn’t slightly terrified about what would come next. “Oh, there aren’t?” He got up in Kalingkata’s face, leaning in so close she could feel the flecks of spittle as he yelled. “You think that you can just change where someone was born? Where someone’s blood is from!?”

Her heart was pounding. She tried not to flinch (she flinched a little). “B-blood is not what makes someone a Gongen, teacher!”

“There are other people who look like Ryan at this school!” Li Xiu added.

“I didn’t say you could speak, Miss Cao!” Mr. Kujiko shot back. “And yes, there are. People who suffered the hardships of radiation and lost their homes, or who gave

up their homes because they took the call to our aid when we needed their skills to build this world, like those from Lybid. Being a Gongen is a history of sacrifice! It's blood that was spilled, its burned flesh, and buckets of sweat that poured from hard work! Not this... cushy boy here to give us charity!"

"Ryan is more Gongen than you, teacher," Talinata said, and immediately regretted it.

Mr. Kujiko turned slowly to face him. "What did you just say?" His eyes were almost rabid. Talinata was visibly sweating. "I uh, I said that uh... R-Ryan..." he fumbled his words.

"That's what I thought," he smirked.

Ryan clenched the hilt of his bokken, the wooden sword feeling strangely weighty at his side. They'd done so much for him. All of this, for him. Why did he deserve this? He didn't deserve this. He didn't think he was particularly clever, or even popular. He was new and awkward and from Earth. Why would they have even done this for him? He cast his gaze around, at all the faces staring forward, and a few glanced at him and gave a gentle nod.

And finally, he understood.

He understood so much.

He thought of how angry he was that his father had put his own selfish desires before his mother and himself. He thought of how his classmates had teased him a little, but still invited him out the day he arrived like he was an old friend. He thought of how Sang Mi's family had worked so hard to welcome them on Christmas Eve before their family tragedy had occurred, and even then put their own feelings second as they apologized they'd have to cancel Christmas dinner. He thought of how his whole class had come together to help him. And he couldn't remain silent anymore.

"He said I'm more Gongen than you," Ryan said.

Once again, Mr. Kujiko's face turned, and he was both furious and baffled.

"How dare you?" and he was really offended.

"Because being Gongen isn't about... it isn't about forgetting where we came from. It's about knowing we can count on each other."

Mr. Kujiko grabbed Ryan by the shoulder, and several students rushed in to try to stop him, but he'd already yanked Ryan to the front of the classroom. "I'll show you what a goddamn Gongen is—raise your sword!"

Where before it had been a few, now the whole class surged forward to intervene, but Ryan raised his hand, and they halted. They'd done enough. Now it was his turn.

They bowed, though it had never felt more perfunctory.

And the match began.

Kujiko swung first.

Ryan remembered Shion adjusting his form, and his body moved to block before he'd even realized he was doing it. Kujiko was surprised. He swung again, and again, and again. Ryan blocked them all—sometimes with great effort and difficulty, but he did it.

Kujiko stopped, stunned and confused, and Ryan lightly moved his bokken up to poke him in the side. "Point," he said.

"POINT!" the class called out.

Kujiko Ginjiro screamed out, and hurled his own bokken at the wall, then pushed through the class and stormed out. When the door shut behind him, everyone glanced at each other for a moment, and then broke out in cheers. Ryan found himself crowded in a massive hug, and couldn't help laughing too. Had they done it? Had they really done it?

* * *

Ryan, Sang Mi, and Li Xiu stood in front of Mr. Mori, who was livid. The only reason he wasn't chewing them out yet was that Mr. Kujiko had yet to stop ranting himself. He'd been going on for nearly twenty minutes about the sheer disrespect the youth had shown him.

"—and this kind of behavior cannot stand!" he finished, panting.

Mr. Mori rose from his desk, scowling at the children in front of him. "You've all been on thin ice for a long while now. Your transgressions of the spirit, if not the

letter, of our school rules has been a black mark on our institution for some time. Being at this school is a privilege, and one which I think each of you has abused to the best of your abilities.”

Sang Mi muscled up her courage. “Sir, Ryan hasn’t been here long enough to—”

“QUIET!” Mr. Mori shouted. “Jhe Sang Mi, you should have been grateful that your family wasn’t thrown out into the wastes to die of exposure. You should have been grateful to be granted the grace to even be here in this school. You’re expelled.”

There was a long and tense silence.

“But sir—” Sang Mi stammered.

“No buts. The rest of you are suspended—and that’s only because of your family clout,” he said, pointing at Li Xiu, spit flying from his mouth, “and that expelling you would cause a diplomatic incident!” He slammed his fist down on the desk; all three tensed. “And if you have any sense of your family honor, Miss Jhe, you’ll jump off a bridge on your way home.”

Li Xiu put her hands over her mouth. “You can’t say something like that!”

Sang Mi stared at her feet.

“Why not?”

“You know she’s fragile! She might really do it!”

“Not so fragile she could dishonor our guest teacher like this? She should have thought of this before she caused such a problem.”

Sang Mi bowed, trying to hide how much she was shaking. “I’ll, uh, if you would excuse me...” She walked towards the door in a daze. She heard the others yelling behind her, and Li Xiu calling her parents. But she just started walking.

He was right. She knew he was right and—

“Wait a second,” Sang Mi said. “You already said that.”

The tense silence turned into an awkward one. “...I did not?” Mr. Mori said with some confusion.

“No this... this already...” Things felt wonky, wobblily, like everything in the universe was off kilter.

“Saki, we’re testing Delirium tonight, aren’t we? Aren’t we?”

Saki pulled her hands off her shoulders. “Of course we are. That’s why I’m waiting here for you.”

“Then we can change something, can’t we? Like Apple Tree Yard. Like the Cats Eyes. We can change something again?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I take it you have something in mind.”

Sang Mi’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit. Oh shit.” She looked at her friends. “Just... wait a second. Wait a second. This isn’t over.”

“How dare you curse in front of your elders!” Mr. Kujiko spat.

“Of course it’s not over!” Li Xiu said, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m going to call my parents, they’ll make you regret this! They will! You can’t do this to Sang Mi, she’s my friend!” Li Xiu took her left hand.

Sang Mi was stunned.

Ryan nodded, and took her right hand. “We did this as a class. We will do this as a class. If you want to expel her, you expel us too.”

Li Xiu nodded. “You think you can win here because you have all the power but—”

There was a knock on the door; Mr. Mori’s secretary poked her head into the room. “Uh, Mr. Mori? There are guests here who want to weigh in on this situation? One is an old man from the community, the other, uh, it—she says they’re the student’s teacher?”

Mr. Mori, who seemed to be still trying to understand how this conversation was going in the direction it was, rose, and gestured for the guests to be let in.

Through the door stepped Shion. She’d changed into a Kimono, and someone had polished her exterior surfaces so, while still somewhat scratched and dented, she

looked very nice. She gave a gentle smile, and Mr. Mori seemed to look more confused, until she spoke.

“Hello Master Mori Shirou. It has been some time; I apologize for not checking in. However, I was temporarily incapacitated for the last few decades.” She bowed.

Mori dropped down into his chair like he’d been whacked with a bokken. “That... you can’t be. Father...” he held his head. “No, it's not really you. This is some other trick—”

“You used to play with trains. I had wondered if you’d work with them, but I see the school you cared so much about became your home.” She approached, kneeling down beside his chair as he swiveled in it to face her.

“How... how is this possible?”

Mr. Kujiko looked between them. “I can see this is some sort of touching reunion, but this doesn’t change what this girl here did is an expulsion-worthy offense and—”

“Shut up, Ginjiro,” Mori said, as he reached out and gently touched her face. “You really came back for me.”

She nodded into the touch of his hand. “I did. But I have a question for you, Master Shirou.”

His lip trembled. “Speak it.”

“I have been teaching these children, as I once cared for you. Even when things at home were rough, I never abandoned you.”

He flinched. “...We don’t need to talk about that.”

“We do.” She grabbed his hand, and it was much less gentle. “Where did the kind boy I told bedtime stories to go? Where did this cruel man come from?”

He looked into her mechanical eyes, and as Li Xiu, Ryan, and Sang Mi exchanged glances, Mr. Mori did something he had never done before in front of them. He cried.

He cried, as Shion reached up and wrapped him in her arms like a mother consoling a child with a scraped knee.

Mr. Kujiko scowled, and turned to the trio. “You’re still expelled, Miss Jhe. And I’ll have you know that—”

“Enough.” The new voice was deep, with the rasp of age. The secretary had said a second guest was there, and everyone except Ryan dropped to their knees as soon as the guest stepped through the door. Sang Mi and Li Xiu quickly grabbed Ryan by the hems of his sleeves and pulled him down too. Mr. Mori was still sniffing next to Shion as they knelt next to his desk.

“Who is—”

“Okurimono, the elder of the Kujiko clan. The most legendary teacher of swordsmanship on Gongen—in the whole solar system!” Li Xiu hissed.

“A fine summation; you honor me, young Cao,” he smiled at her, and then turned his eyes to Ginjiro, and the smile wilted into a frown. He walked up to him, slowly, and held a hand out gently. “Rise, Ginjiro.”

Relieved, he took his great-uncle’s hand, and began to rise, before Okurimono pulled his hand back with a lightning-quick speed that surpassed his age, and struck him across the cheek with a thunderclap that sent him sprawling to the floor. “You’ve acted shamefully.”

“But Great—”

“Silence,” he said. It was not yelled, as it didn’t need to be. “You will be leaving here, and be transferred to guard duty on a transport vessel. Perhaps that will teach you some humility.”

He scrambled back to his knees and bowed with his forehead to the floor. “Of course, I deeply apologize.”

“Apologize to them,” he said coolly.

Ginjiro flinched, but turned, and bowed just as deeply. “...I apologize for my shameful actions.”

The three students gave overlapping variations of “Oh, it’s fine”.

Okurimono smiled. “Good.” He turned to Mr. Mori. “I apologize for the trouble, and hope these students will be rewarded for their bravery in standing up to our family embarrassment. I also hope that this will be kept quiet.”

Mori bowed. “Of course.”

Okurimono walked to the door, Ginjiro shuffling behind him with his head down, but stopped in the doorway. “If I might add, that bot did a wonderful job as teacher. If you wish to retain her, I’ll give my recommendation.”

The door shut.

They all looked at each other.

“...Well you heard him, school is over. Go home, or to your after-school activities. Nothing happened here today, understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Mori!” they said in unison, and scrambled out the door.

As they walked through the hall together, none of them quite knew what to say. Eventually Li Xiu broke the silence. “Did... how did that just happen? That... that can’t be a coincidence, that we found his... was Shion his nanny?”

“It sure sounds like it,” Ryan said. “You didn’t know that, did you, Sang Mi?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure she was his nanny till later tonight.” The words came out of her mouth before she’d really processed them. She was still in a daze. She waved off their strange looks. “...Sorry, don’t uh, don’t worry about it. Just a wild coincidence.”

“Well, I guess we can’t complain. We sure are lucky though,” Ryan laughed. “But we did it, you... you really saved me... I mean everyone did. But... thank you, both of you.”

Li Xiu gave a thumbs up. “Hey, you’re part of our class.”

Sang Mi slapped him on the back. “You sure are. We’d bend time and space for you.”

He laughed. Li Xiu laughed. Sang Mi pretended to laugh, and they sauntered off to report the good news to the class.

* * *

Saki frowned as she stared at the ceiling, processing the report. “And you said you still have a memory of this alternate timeline, where you were expelled?”

Sang Mi rubbed her forehead as she stared at the same ceiling from the other bed in the hotel room. “It’s... foggy. It’s not like when we were doing it ourselves.”

“I have... well it's much foggier than yours, but I have a sense that everything you said did happen. That’s a lesson,” Saki said, sitting up. “We were directly physically present for other changes we made, and remembered them directly. This time, you tried to dream up a change to the past you weren’t present for, one you didn’t seed in the present like we did the Apple Tree Yard.”

Sang Mi rolled over. “They made Shion our new Kendo teacher, you know.”

“I know,” she replied. “Well, the two of us in the future did good; now we’ll honor their work.” She tossed Sang Mi a container of a pair of Delirium pills. “By doing our own.”

Sang Mi turned the pills over in her hand. “You know, without this I did push things too far. I just found a way of getting out of the consequences of my actions. I always do that.”

Saki shrugged. “You got away with it. Focus on what you do next.”

She popped the pills, and lay back down, closing her eyes. “Focus on getting to work, I heard you.”

“You just want a nap.”

“It’s work!”

Saki took her own pills. “Then cheers to getting away with it.”

* * *

Au Kaguya frowned as she looked at the report. “Honorable Shocho, uh, I understand you keep track of everything, but why are you collecting so much data on a school’s Kendo program?”

The red light of the planetary AI's display flashed. "Records show that this group of students came together of their own volition to practice their sword techniques for the coming conflict with Earth, despite a lack of previous interest. Data on their skill assessments shows they have gone from acceptable to a comparable level of competency to the Hozin SDF in only a few weeks. The program was a success, and should be considered for future implementation."

Kaguya looked back and forth between the red light and the data on the padd. "Shocho... are you saying that all of this was part of some sort of plan?"

There was no answer. After a time, she bowed and exited the room.

She had thought she'd made peace long ago that they would be preparing children to fight for if it came to war, but the churning in her stomach told her there were still qualms somewhere beating away in her heart.

Well, it's only Kendo, she told herself. There was no need to talk about it.

It's only Kendo.

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

Remember last year—last Callander year not school year—when Maquois from the theater department went crazy and dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera and tried to set off a bomb? That was pretty wild. Anyway, I heard a rumor that Sang Mi and Saki have been looking into that whole incident again... but why?

And what has that delinquent kid uh... what's his name...

(there is the sound of someone picking up a tablet and making several searches while mumbling a few tame curse words)

CHARLIE PARKER! That kid! And where has he been? And why would anyone be trying to find out what a loner like him is up to anyway? Well, regardless, if you want to retake your ID picture today ask Mr. Xi during your lunch hour.

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

Tune in Next Week For:

Shadow of the Phantom

By Aidan Mason

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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