

PLAY

Academy 27

[Go For a Punch]

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By James Wylder



It had already been four hours, and Sang Mi was going insane.

“Could you stop playing that?”

Li Xiu didn't look up from where she was laying on the floor holding her blaring phone. “You don't like Janice Rose?”

“Of course I like Janice Rose! But you've been playing that on repeat for hours now.”

“We don't have any wifi and it already buffered this album, so get off my back.”

Tsetseg was avoiding them both by the far wall of the bathroom. Sang Mi wasn't sure why she wasn't spacing herself from Li Xiu, but she had the strange feeling that if she did move over to one of the walls, she would be losing some sort of unstated match against her. With yet another sigh, she turned and looked into the mirror, leaning against the white porcelain sink. At least the lights hadn't gone out, but she was starting to look more bedraggled than she'd expected for the few hours they'd been trapped in here. Who'd have expected that the ceiling would collapse in front of the entryway to the bathroom? It hadn't even had the decency to fall before their morning classes happened, or after they'd eaten lunch. She hadn't even brought a snack with her, which was an extra frustration. Still, they couldn't be trapped in here too long, right?

She frowned over at the stalls. Zhyrgal was in stall 3; the others were empty, though she hadn't actually gone and looked into each toilet bowl.

“Did any of us bring food? I just think it's best if we take stock of our situation—”

Li Xiu cut her off. “If I did, I wouldn't be sharing it with you.”

Sang Mi put on a smile so fake you'd think it was a Halloween mask. “You're such a generous well-mannered person, you know that?”

“Everyone knows you should keep a snack in your purse.”

“I try not to carry one if I can help it.”

“You use a messenger bag, that's just a purse for people who think they're too cool for purses.”

“I don't have that either! Do you see a bag on me anywhere?”

“I don't know, let me check.” Li Xiu stayed glued on her phone.

“Well?”

“I lied, I don't care.”

Tsetseg slapped the wall and spoke loud enough in the closed space it hurt their ears. “Could you two just cut it out for five minutes? I'm hungry, I'm tired, I want to go home, and I am already sick of your bickering.”

They looked away from each other, somewhat ashamed, somewhat unrepentant, as Zhyrgal chimed in from her stall. "Yeah, what she said."

They turned away from each other, trying to avoid making jibes, as Sang Mi's thoughts turned once again to Zhyrgal. What were the chances that she'd get stuck in a bathroom with Zhyrgal anyway? Sang Mi had done her best to be cordial and even friendly with the girl, but the underlying knowledge she was on the payroll of CISyn, a company on Earth that specialized in intelligence gathering (to put it politely), had hampered attempts at a real friendship. Would the two have been good friends if not for her overhearing that call? Sometimes, Sang Mi doubted she'd really ever heard it. It was too outlandish. She was just paranoid and had made it up. The thoughts swarmed around her head non-stop till she decided that she had to trust that her own memories were real. That didn't actually stop the thoughts, but it did make them easier to deal with, which was something.

Another hour passed, marked only by Li Xiu and Sang Mi continuing to make passive-aggressive remarks at each other while Tsetseg tried her best to ignore them. Zhyrgal remained in her stall. Sang Mi couldn't get herself to nap and wasn't sure if that was even a good idea. She'd stayed up watching old horror programs, lots of low-budget 2D stuff from Earth. Nightmares galore, and now she was paying for it with her cranky attitude in an emergency situation.

"Do you think we'll get out of here?" Tsetseg asked. There was a new edge of fear in her voice; Sang Mi didn't like it.

"Of course we will, they have to be working to get us out right now." Glancing in the mirror, her face did not look particularly reassuring.

Li Xiu scoffed from the floor. "You don't know that."

Tsetseg slumped. The poor girl was hitting her limit.

Sang Mi glowered. "Yes I do! And even if I didn't, do you think anyone here needs to hear that right now when we're trapped like this trying to hold onto hope?"

"False hope is worse than no hope at all," Li Xiu countered.

A stall door opened; Zhyrgal was there. The lights flickered, and her glasses turned into white splashes in the darkness for a moment. Her hair hung loose down the sides of her face, covering it in shadow. "Could you two quit fighting?" she spat.

"We barely started," Li Xiu shot back.

"You've been on and off for hours now! Just... work out whatever your weird issues are with each other and get on with it! We're all hungry, we're all tired, we're all scared, so just get it over with so we can have some damn peace in here!"

"Y-yeah!" Tsetseg joined in, and the two girls edged towards each other till Sang Mi and Li Xiu felt like they'd been unwillingly placed on a team together. "Zhyrgal here makes a great point, you two need to cut this out immediately. If we don't all work together, how will we survive if this situation gets worse?"

“Not to mention,” Zhyrgal added, “you’re both the ones who fashion yourselves leaders. Isn’t this sort of bickering below you both, or did I misjudge you?”

“I am not a leader,” Sang Mi said.

“Then why are you always making the other students fall into your little plans and plots?” Zhyrgal asked.

Tsetseg frowned. “Okay, that’s going a little far…”

Li Xiu laughed. “This is exactly what I don’t like about you, Sang Mi. Look at you, you can’t even take responsibility when you do things right! Have you ever faced a consequence or have you just wiggled out of them all?”

“Well at least I’m not eating off a silver platter in the poorest district of the city!” she shot back.

To her surprise, Li Xiu looked genuinely hurt. “That’s not fair.”

“We’re all on the same side here, right?” Tsetseg said, trying to mediate. But this just shifted Sang Mi’s bubbling ire.

“Are we?” she said with a pointed look at Zhyrgal. “Are we all on the same side? It seems to me like this whole situation is awful convenient. Getting us all trapped in here together. How do we know you didn’t plan this, huh? What are you hiding from all of us, Zhyrgal? Why were you sitting alone in that stall for five hours straight? Even you had to get cramped or bored, right? Come on then, spill it! What. Are. You. HIDING?”

Zhyrgal looked down, biting her lip, and after a pause, pulled back the hair veiling her face to reveal the acne outbreak that had spread along her cheeks.

“...What the hell, Sang Mi?” Tsetseg said.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. Sorry, Zhyrgal…” Sang Mi said.

The girls stared at Zhyrgal in silence for a time. It felt like it was going to stretch on for an eternity, until it was suddenly broken.

"Go for a punch," a voice said.

They all turned to stall two, which they'd all assumed was empty despite the door being shut. But that door always looked locked until you pushed on it, so they'd had no reason to suspect otherwise.

"Sorry, what did you say?" Sang Mi said.

"I said to go for a punch."

“I thought there wasn’t anyone in there?” Tsetseg asked.

“It was locked when I came in,” Zhyrgal clarified.

“And you didn’t say anything?” Li Xiu said, while Sang Mi looked relieved she didn’t have to ask the question.

“You were too busy arguing.”

She had them there.

“Why don’t you come on out, we’re all friends here!” Tsetseg said.

The voice laughed at that. “After five hours of this, that’s genuinely the funniest thing anyone has said today.”

Fuming again, Li Xiu gestured accusatively at the door of the stall, which was pointless since the door was very much not transparent. “Who are you anyway, we’ve been trapped in here for god knows how long--”

“Five hours.”

“--right. And you are only now revealing yourself?”

“You’re only now realizing you didn’t check all the stalls?”

Li Xiu and Kalkingkata exchanged a mutual look of dissatisfaction with this revelation. Zhyrgal pursed her lips pointedly as Tsetseg patted her on the shoulder.

Sang Mi raised her voice a little. “Okay, then, who are you?”

“I have a question for you, Sang Mi.”

“I asked you who you are.”

Tsetseg raised her hand as if being called on. “I agree, I want to know who you are as well!”

The voice sighed. “Come now, you think that’s what’s important right now? When you’re trapped in a nightmare scenario like this?”

“They’ll rescue us,” Tsetseg asserted. “We’re not talking till you give us something to work with. Right?” She looked around at the others. Sang Mi and Li Xiu were giving each other the odd dirty look. When the voice replied, it sounded almost giddy.

“Hmn, is that so? Honestly, dear, you’re adorable. But I’m already trying to help you, why should I give you a card when I hold them all?”

“Then—you caused the accident?” Sang Mi said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Now you really are wasting time.”

Zhyrgal took a breath, and then spoke up again, calmly and clearly. “If you are trying to help us, giving us a show of good faith would help build some trust. Especially since you already know things about us, mysterious voice person.”

Li Xiu nodded. "Plus, aren't you going to get bored of us not touching the game you seem to want to play with us?"

"Oh—OH! You are good. You're right, this little appetizer isn't filling me up. Let's get to the entre dears. So to answer your questions... hm. Let's say that I'm someone in your grade, a new transfer student. For today, call me Saki."

"Another one?" Li Xiu and Kalingkata said in unison, and then glared at each other at the insolence the other would be on their level.

"I'm sure you'll meet me in time. Now, Sang Mi, what did you dream last night?"

Zhyrgal furrowed her brow. Sang Mi raised an eyebrow, "What did I dream? What does that matter. It's a dream."

"Indulge me," Saki said cheerily.

Tsetseg frowned; Li Xiu nudged Sang Mi. Zhyrgal screwed her lips up.

"...Okay well. I dreamed that there was something underground. Metal things. Machines. And something moved wrong, and the whole room shook."

The voice laughed. "And doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"This is a school, there's nothing weird and secret underneath it. And earthquakes happen occasionally, that's just how the ground works."

"And yet, the timing is interesting, wouldn't you say? An awful big coincidence."

It was Tsetseg's turn to get surprisingly loud. "Just come out of there already, this is creeping me out!"

Saki sounded positively chuffed. "I think Miss Jhe there is having some Delirium. Capital D."

"What does that mean, Saki?" Sang Mi asked.

"Go for a punch."

Li Xiu sighed. "This is getting us nowhere. Can one of you vault me over the stall door?"

"What if I'm using the facilities?" Saki said in a pouty voice.

"Then pull your skirt or pants up! Tsetseg, Sang Mi, you each lift up one of my feet. Zhyrgal, you spot me from behind in case I fall."

Somehow, they all worked together properly and vaulted her up in one quick motion. Her face turned to a frown, and she scrambled over the top, coming to a landing on the floor with a thump, and then the door opened to reveal only Li Xiu, holding a portable speaker.

"There was no one in there?" Tsetseg asked obviously.

"Mmm," Zhyrgal offered.

Sang Mi turned on her. "Do you know something about this?"

Her face grew serious. "How would I?"

"What the heck is going on?" Li Xiu asked.

"Go for a punch," the speaker said.

"You keep saying that! But what does that mean?"

"What did you watch before you went to sleep last night?"

"You think my dream made this happen, crazy speaker lady?"

"Was it *Saki Sanobashi*?"

"*Saki Sanobashi* isn't real--" Sang Mi's face grew palid.

Tsetseg grabbed Sang Mi by the shoulders and shook her lightly. "What--what is it?"

"*Saki Sanobashi*. Nonsense Japanese with the English title *Go for a Punch*. Might have been called *Saki's Torture Room* and got garbled. It's a probably-fake video someone made up online hundreds of years ago, either as a prank or based on a dream. People actually made adaptations of it since then. I watched a documentary on it last night. It's about a group of girls who get trapped in a bathroom, and then..."

Tsetseg shook her arm less lightly, "Then what?"

"...They all die terrible deaths."

"Well that's not going to happen," Zhyrgal said firmly.

"You just need to punch the source of all your problems. Just go for it. Who is really causing you anguish?"

"Shut up, Saki."

"Who? Come on, Sang Mi, who is it? Who is really wrecking things for you? While you cast blame at Li Xiu and Zhyrgal? While you make Tsetseg feel even more left out? Who are you really angry at? Who do you really want to hit?"

"Shut. Up. Saki."

"Make me. Or are you going to keep sniping at the only people who aren't blood related or offworlders who give you the time of day?"

"Turn it off," Zhyrgal said.

"Yeah, you don't need to listen to this," Tsetseg agreed.

Li Xiu rolled her eyes, "...Yeah, I guess even I think it's a bit much." She looked around for a switch, or any controls whatsoever, but couldn't seem to find them.

"You gave yourself the name Kalingkata. Did that make you feel big? Did it help make you feel different from other girls? Not like them? Better?"

Sang Mi lowered her head.

"Come on then. Go for a punch, Sang Mi. Do it. If you could hurt one person, no cameras around to capture it, who would it be? Are you hesitating because you're a coward? Or because you know it really was your dream that put everyone in this situa—"

"SHUT UP!" Sang Mi turned to the mirror, and threw a punch into her own face. The mirror cracked with an earsplitting shatter, splintering from her left cheek, and she pulled her hand back, cursing at the pain. She panted, and in the stunned silence, Li Xiu reached out, and took her bleeding hand. Gently, she knelt down to eye level, and began pulling the bits of glass out. Sang Mi just looked down and watched her do it, trying to keep her welling-up-eyes from spilling over through both kinds of pain. She didn't pull back, or resist. "Thanks," she managed, as Li Xiu pressed paper towel from the dispenser against it. Li Xiu almost had time to reply.

But then, there was a gruff voice that called down from above them - muffled by concrete, but they all heard it: "I heard a sound down there--hello?"

All eyes turned to the ceiling with a burst of hope. Li Xiu yelled as loud as she could, "We're down here! Help!"

They all joined in, yelling as loud as they could.

It was only later that they realized they must have dropped the speaker in the chaos.

When they were all free and lowered down, they were taken to a medical tent set up outside the school. There were people in official uniforms running around, and in the middle of the rushing and yelling, the four girls signed a form they were too drowsy to read that they later learned was a non-disclosure agreement. But about what, they weren't sure. They were all checked over, and fine, and soon Sang Mi, Tsetseg, Li Xiu, and Zhyrgal were set up with blankets and paper cups of tea on a bench looking out at their school as a big crane lowered material onto the roof to fix where it had collapsed in. No one had been seriously hurt, thankfully. Zhyrgal was picked up rather quickly by someone, leaving the other three to sit there kicking their feet as they waited for family to come get them.

"Gosh, I am taking a dip in the swimming pool when I get home..." Li Xiu moaned.

"The pool is usually really busy this time of day," Tsetseg offered.

"Oh, no, our family's pool. At the compound."

They both stared back at her, "You own a pool?" Sang Mi said.

"Yeah?"

They looked at each other. And Sang Mi came to a conclusion.

"Hey so..." Sang Mi bit her lip. "Look, we've had our differences, but we made a good team back there."

"... After you stopped squabbling," Tsetseg muttered.

"Ahem. Yes. But look, we're all kind of similar, even though we're different."

Li Xiu crossed her arms unimpressed, "Oh yeah, how are we remotely similar? Tsetseg is shy, you're a clown, and I'm cool and popular."

"Because none of us have a lot of friends outside of school."

Neither of them had anything to say to that. Li Xiu tried to, but her attempts deflated along with her pride, and she just stared off at the sunset, wrapping the shock blanket a little closer around her.

So Sang Mi continued, "My brother and I like running RPG sessions for each other. Jae Hyun started showing up recently, but other than that it's usually just us... what if we all met up at the Cao residence and played together?"

"Why at my house?" Li Xiu said.

"Presumably you have the most space," Sang Mi said, avoiding the word 'pool'.

"...I guess that's true. Um, you know you probably wouldn't have guessed it because of how cool I am, but I actually love role playing games," Li Xiu said.

Sang Mi was surprised. "Wait really?"

She nodded, "So... yeah that sounds fun. I guess."

"... I've never played them before," Tsetseg muttered.

"Then we'll teach you! You can bring Bashrat if you want," Sang Mi offered.

Tsetseg lit up, "Okay! That... yeah. I'd like that. Do you want to add each other, you know, on CitrusMessenger..."

Li Xiu and Sang Mi grinned at each other.

"She's cute when she's bashful," Li Xiu noted.

"Don't tease her too hard, we want her to show up!"

"GUYS!"

They all laughed, and clinked their paper cups of tea together. Somehow, things had worked out after all.

It was later that night, as they were all staring at the ceiling, that one of them finally sent the text.

CitrusMessenger Chatlog:

SansarT: Hey! Um, did that all actually happen?

Kalingkata: Y

PinkPrincess2424: omg Kalingkata reply with more than just Y

Kalingkata: K

PinkPrincess2424: yes Tsetseg that really happened I still can't believe it my mom and dad have been fussing over me all night im just glad were all okay

SansarT: ...Um, what about Saki? I can't stop thinking about her.

Kalingkata: Yea, I kinda doubted that was real too. But I doubt its a mass hallucination.

PinkPrincess2424: i think its best to just 4get about it

Kalingkata: I'll 3get about it.

SansarT: But how did she know all that stuff????????

PinkPrincess2424: It was just some weird prank dont worry about it

SansarT: If you say so...

Kalingkata: I was posting about what I was watching last night on LemonNote—anyone could have known that. We were just panicked so we didn't think about it.

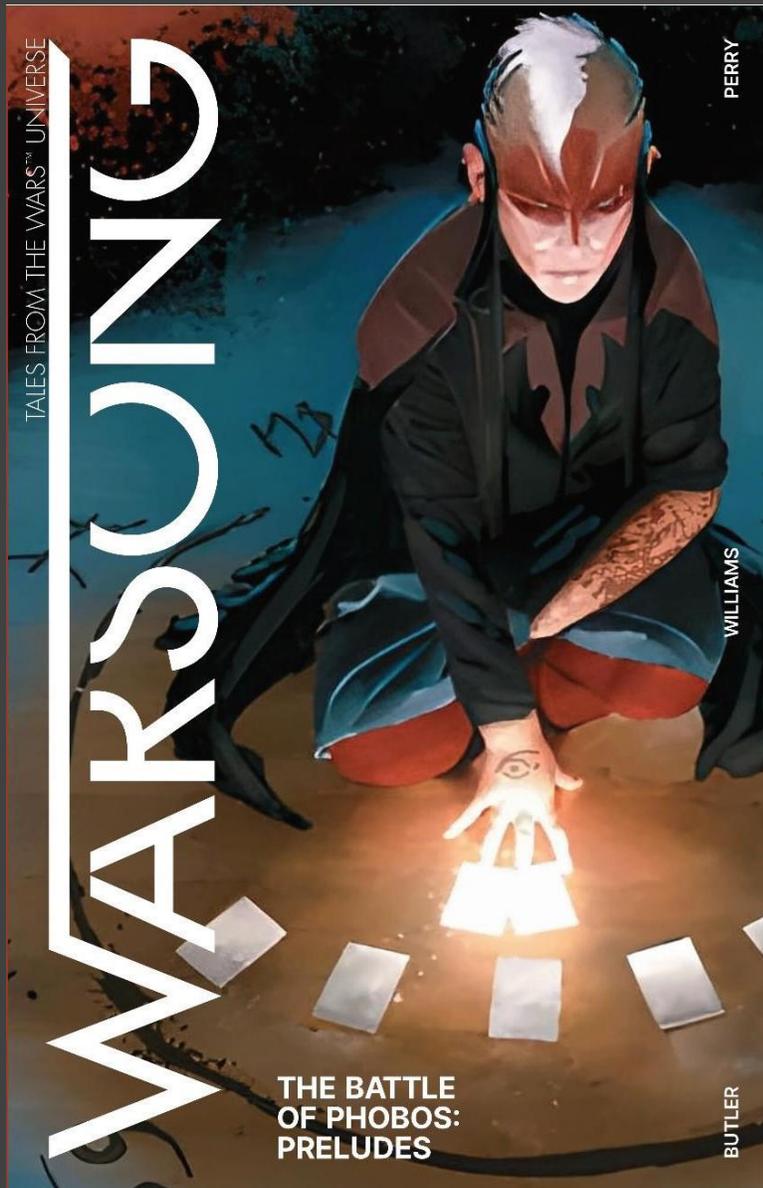
Li Xiu, sadly, is right.

PinkPrincess2424: (kissyface emoji)

Kalingkata: Don't let it go to your head.

Tsetseg: I guess it doesn't matter to me, cause in the end... I'm happy we're all here.

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