

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

Vanishing Twin Syndrome

By Dillon O'Hara



Reclining easily on a park bench, Kalingkata breathed in the cold evening air. The sky was soft orange, and through the mist, she could see Talinata and Min Jun making their way over. Min Jun posture was correct, he held a gray travel mug of coffee, and his coat flapped a little in the wind; he looked like he was on his way to work at the business factory. Talinata had two little paper cups and a little paper bag. It wasn't a money thing; they were all siblings. Min Jun was just more together.

Kalingkata was pretty together, in her own chaotic way. She thought back to the other night, how she'd hopped the fence into a junkyard and recovered an abandoned old bot dog. Neither of her brothers would have done that. Well, maybe Talinata would have, if she'd been there to give him a push, get the momentum going.

She hadn't been like that right away. When she was a very small girl and she saw other kids in this park, she was so scared that she actually screamed. Her mother would have to pick her up and shush her embarrassedly. She wasn't that bad for too long, but on her first day of school, she still wept quietly and clung to her mother, and went back for a second hug goodbye, and a third.

"You'll be okay," her mother had said. "You'll do great. Your brother will look after you."

And they did, in the morning. Min Jun especially had long since taken to the role of older brother, so he was happy to hold her hand, lead her inside, and tell her which classroom to go to. It was Sang Eun's first day too, but it was like he'd been there a year or two already, and he had made friends with the other boys just from meeting them in the park. He'd impressed them by knowing how to do a T-spin in Tetris on one of the other kids' Talinata handheld. That was why they started calling him Talinata.

During lunch, Sang Mi - she hadn't picked up a nickname of her own yet - tried to sit with Min Jun, but one of the teachers said she had to sit with her own year. But she didn't know anyone, and Min Jun hadn't noticed her at all. When they got out for break - all pandemonium and strangers running around yelling - she tried to go over to Talinata, but he shooed her away. He wasn't trying to be unkind - really, he was worried the boys would beat her up. He ran off over to use the swing and stood on the seat rather than sit on it, enjoying the other boys' attention.

So Sang Mi went to the toybox, where a 3D puzzle cube thing caught her eye, and she sat down by herself on a low wall to figure out which grooves fit together.

As different as the Jhes had been, Hanzo started as he meant to continue; he always did seem like a firearm that came out of the box fully assembled. He came over to Sang Mi when he saw she was on her own, her posture screaming New Kid. "What's your name?" he said gruffly, hands in pockets. In retrospect, Kalingkata found it silly that she had ever been scared of a seven-year-old trying to act tough. But he had been taller than her, and stocky.

"... Sang Mi."

“You’re Min Jun and Talinata’s little sister, yeah?”

She wanted to say that she wasn’t Talinata’s *little* sister - as a teenager, her go-to joke was that she must have popped out first. But she just nodded.

“You’re the girl who screamed in the park, right?”

Her face went red and she looked down. She had only been little then. She didn’t think she would meet anyone who would know.

Hanzo pushed her shoulder. “Are you gonna scream now? You a scaredy cat?”

Again, thinking back on it, Hanzo hadn’t even been very good at bullying. He would get better, just as she would get better at talking her way out of trouble. But the first time, she couldn’t talk at all.

She was so frozen up that she didn’t even notice Talinata hopping off the swings and coming over to them until he was right next to her. “Leave her alone.”

Hanzo sneered. “Or what?”

Talinata raised his hands, not knowing what to do with them. “Or I’ll, like—”

Hanzo lit up; he knew how to do this. Right away, he decked Talinata in the stomach. Talinata doubled over, but he was too proud to give in so fast. “Just leave her alone!”

Sang Mi stood there uselessly. She had no idea what to do here and she was scared to talk or move in case Hanzo hit her too. But he didn’t. He just gave Talinata another shove and strode off, satisfied that he’d won.

Talinata straightened up as best he could and brushed himself down, trying to save face. “I told you to stay away from them.”

“I didn’t go near him,” Sang Mi said meekly. “And it’s half boys anyway.”

“Just be careful,” he sighed, and he went back to play with the other boys.

Hanzo didn’t give her trouble after that, but not for the reasons she’d hoped. She’d been a boring target, all quiet and resigned. Talinata had stormed in out of nowhere to shout, started a fight, and immediately lost it. That was funny. So Hanzo focused on him instead.

She wondered if she should tell Min Jun about it. He got on great with all the boys in his class; she’d never realised that her boring, serious older brother was super popular in school. He even hung out with Hanzo, so he presumably didn’t know what was going on. But she was hung up on what Sang Eun had said. *Stay away from them*. She couldn’t stay away from Min Jun; she didn’t want

to, and it would be silly to try, they lived together. But maybe she should stay away from him *while in school*. Maybe she'd just get in trouble with the teachers again anyway for talking to people in other years? Maybe that was how it worked.

So on the second day, she scrounged together a little nerve and started talking to a couple of the other new girls. That was how she met Tsetseg and Jorani. Back then, even Li Xiu deigned to hang out with them because she didn't have a notion in her head that she might be above it. The canteen food was kind of bad, but they all complained about it together, and that built camaraderie fast. They even tried to figure out what Sang Mi would be called if Sang Eun was Talinata, putting letters together more or less at random.

But over the next few weeks, Talinata suddenly seemed to be having a harder time. Maybe he had friends of his own that Sang Mi just never bumped into, but half the times she spotted him - and she really would only spot him in passing rather than hang out with him - he would be getting pushed up against the fence by Hanzo, or needled by him, and he'd always be visibly fuming from it. And the other half of the time, he'd just be walking down the hall, walking the halls of a school in a circle for something to do, trying to keep moving so nobody would single him out for anything. Eventually, Sang Mi plucked up the nerve to ask him if she should talk to Min Jun about it, but he told her firmly to not worry and not get involved. It seemed like he was trying to protect her, but he said it all as if she had broken a rule by saying anything about it.

And for a while, she followed the new rule. She stayed shut up. But in October, Hanzo had freaked Talinata out by putting his little finger through his pants zipper and tricking him. She'd seen it happen from across the playground, and nobody else seemed to notice, or care to notice. She told all this to Tsetseg, who said it was weird and gross and typical of a boy and that yeah, she should tell someone.

So, that evening after dinner, Sang Mi slipped into Min Jun's room and very meekly indicated that Sang Eun was having trouble from Hanzo. She asked him to not tell Sang Mi that she'd said anything, but he just sighed and went straight into Sang Eun's room even as she shouted at him not to.

"You should have told me sooner," Min Jun said sternly, sounding like a tiny dad. "I can talk to Hanzo."

Sang Eun stood, glaring at Sang Mi. "I told you not to tell anyone! I told you!"

Sang Mi was running out of patience now. "I had to tell him, you won't stand up for yourself," she snapped.

From the other room, their mother's voice came: "Stop that shouting!"

“Sang Eun’s getting bullied!” Min Jun called back evenly. Sang Eun groaned in frustration, put his head in his hands, and threw himself back on the bed.

A few tense seconds scraped by as their mother made her way down to the room with their tired father in tow. “What do you mean?” she asked. It was a command.

“Ugggggggh,” Sang Eun uggggggghed. Sang Mi stood by the wall, head down. What had she started?

“It’s Hanzo,” said Min Jun. “Do you know Hanzo?”

Their father pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know his parents, yeah. That tracks.”

“He’s just fooling around,” Sang Eun said, unconvincingly. “It’s nothing I can’t deal with. I don’t want you talking to anyone about it.”

“Well, we can’t just let it—” their father began, then stopped himself and calmed his tone a bit. “We don’t want to smother you. We just want to make sure you’re not miserable in school.”

“I’m fine.”

“Hmm,” he said. It was a very quiet noise, indicating that he had heard his child and didn’t have any further response just that moment. He’d had another long day in the factory. All of them always wished he didn’t have to work so hard.

Sang Eun didn’t want it to go further, and Sang Mi found that she didn’t want that either anymore. But the wheels were in motion, and it took a couple of days for the boot to drop, but drop it did. Sang Mi wasn’t privy to the whole process, but she inferred that her parents talked to teachers and to Hanzo’s parents, who hadn’t taken it well either, and that Hanzo had been called into the principal’s office.

She didn’t see the argument between Min Jun and Hanzo either, but she was able to piece it together from different people later: that Min Jun had berated him like a teacher. That made sense, because it was supposed to have happened at Friday breaktime, which would put it just before Hanzo stormed over to Sang Eun. This wasn’t a Hanzo picking on Talinata for his own amusement; this was a Hanzo that had been given out to by his mother. He’d been made to feel small, and now he was angry.

Again, Sang Mi found she couldn’t stand by and watch.

She jumped down from the swing and ran over. “Hey Hanzo, what’s the big rush?”

Hanzo glared at her. “I should beat you up too for what you did.”

“Sure, you could do that,” Sang Mi said quickly - again, she was surprising herself, like her mouth was running ahead of her. “But like, I don’t *want* to have to go tell my mom about stuff. That’s lame.”

“Yeah! It *is* lame!” Hanzo barked. Behind him, Sang Eun was gesturing across his throat, trying to get Sang Mi to shut up. But she wasn’t going to stop now.

“Right!” she said. “Like, that wasn’t fun for anyone, and it kind of got out of hand. You were just trying to have a laugh, yeah?”

This gave Hanzo pause. “I mean—”

Sang Mi charged on ahead, making it up as she went along. “You play football, right? I liked that... goal. You scored.”

“I haven’t scored a-” Hanzo stopped himself. “I mean yeah thanks.”

“Sure! You gotta be pretty good at it, right? You can show us.”

“You’re obviously just trying to distract me.”

“Oh, do you think you wouldn’t be good?”

“I’m not stupid,” he huffed. And he did not go off to play football. But he had gotten bored from trying to out-talk Kalingkata, so he just prowled off muttering about how they were both losers.

Sang Eun didn’t say anything. He hadn’t learned how to admit he was wrong yet. But once he was satisfied Hanzo was gone, he gave Kalingkata a big hug. And they stayed that way for a little while, even as a few of the other kids gave them looks.

It had been weirdly terrible, being a little kid.

But they weren’t little kids now. What even is a memory? A small dead creature, still moving when you press the nerves.

Her brothers sat down on either side of her on the bench. Talinata handed her one of the cups and the paper bag. “The one with the icing is mine.”

That meant the other one was hers. She smiled. “Thanks, dude.” She looked at Min Jun. “You didn’t get one?”

“That stuff will drive your cholesterol up,” he said evenly.

“Yeah, it’ll give me an ass. Nothin’ wrong with an ass.”

He hadn't meant it unkindly. It hadn't even come out unkindly. It was just annoying. She sipped her coffee. It was a caramel latte, the exact kind she liked.

Kalingkata looked at him, trying not to seem melancholy. Maybe if he hadn't stormed in that day to try to save her skin, it would all have happened differently, and he'd be a different person now, a happier one. But he was more at ease now than he had been, even if he still didn't fit with the grooves of the world around him.

He fit with her. And they'd look out for each other.

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