

BERMUDA

THE DAY THEY MET

Written by: InvertMouse (invertmouse.com)
Illustrations: Alastair Sew Hoy (studioash.net)

"Honey, I've never had a student say her dream is to join the Suicide Squad." The teacher looked at the paper in her hand, as if to confirm that was indeed what the page read.

"I want to serve our people," Mukan said. "Besides, I've nothing to live for."

The teacher cupped her hands over Mukan's shoulders. "A kindergartener should never say such things."

Mukan remained expressionless. After an awkward moment of silence, the teacher sighed, let go of Mukan and returned into her staff room. Mukan assumed that meant she was free to go.

Now in the schoolyard, Mukan sat onto her favorite bench under the stairs. Her eyes had long since adjusted to the darkness here. The kids rarely came to this area. That meant there was no chance of falling victim to any stray balls.

Mukan pulled out a book about family trees from her bag. Before she could even read the first page, a boy appeared and snatched the book from her hands.

"There you go again, reading these dumb books." The boy grinned and flashed his missing tooth. "Books are for loners. Loner! Loner!"

Mukan eyed the boy and waited for him to return the book. Any scowling or pleading would be a waste of effort on trash like that.

The boy flipped the book around to read the cover. "Why are you reading a book about family trees? You don't even have a Mummy and Daddy. Nobody loves you!"

The boy hopped around, purposefully knocking into Mukan as he did so. Mukan knew she could break this boy's every limb if she wanted. But a warrior must remain calm under any situation. Mukan took pride in her composure. This boy stood half a foot shorter than she. Hardly a cause for concern.

The boy stopped skipping when he bumped into a girl standing behind him. "Finyomu? What're you doing here?"

"That's my question," Finyomu said. "You're always being mean to Mukan. Do you like her or something?"

The boy's face went red from ear to ear. He shot Finyomu a glare. Though Finyomu stood a foot shorter, she betrayed no signs of backing down.

"You two are going to regret this!" The boy threw the book at Mukan before sprinting off.

Mukan caught the book with one hand and dumped it back into her bag. "I could've handled it on my own."

"Hey, that's rude." Finyomu pressed both hands over her hips. "If you smiled more, people would let you play with them and stuff."

Finyomu leaped in and began to tickle Mukan. Despite her greatest efforts, Mukan never even flinched. A surprised Finyomu darted back. "Wow, what's your secret?"

Mukan wore a confused look. Finyomu moved a hand toward her armpit. She burst into laughter before she even started to tickle herself. "See? I crack up just thinking about it."

"You're real weird, you know that?" Mukan put on her bag and began to walk off. Finyomu was known to be the school weirdo. If Mukan hung out with her, that would just give that bully more ammunition.

Finyomu grabbed Mukan's wrist to stop her. "I saved you back there, so you owe me one now."

Finyomu's grip was weak, even for a child. Mukan could have flung her off several feet if she had wanted. Instead, she let Finyomu drag her into the school's back alley. Aside from catching a few teachers on cigarette break, Mukan had never seen anyone here. The place made even her feel uneasy. Every wasted second with Finyomu was a trial on her patience.

Mukan noticed a line of crabs cawling along a crevice on the wall. The crabs were as small as her fingertips. Insignificant as they were, Finyomu observed them as if she had unveiled a new species. "I saw one with green spots on its shell. Help me find it."

Mukan had no appreciation for being bossed around like that. Besides, she had never seen a crab of that description before. Finyomu must have been seeing things. Either that, or she was pulling a trick. The possibility made Mukan want to leave right away.

"See, see!" Finyomu lifted a crab from the wall. Mukan raised her brows upon seeing those green spots on that shell. She leaned in for a closer look.

Finyomu smiled cheekily. "I can tell you're impressed."

"It's just a tiny crab. Nothing special." Mukan averted her gaze. That was when she glimpsed patches of green inside the crevice. Finyomu gasped as Mukan stretched her arm into the hole.

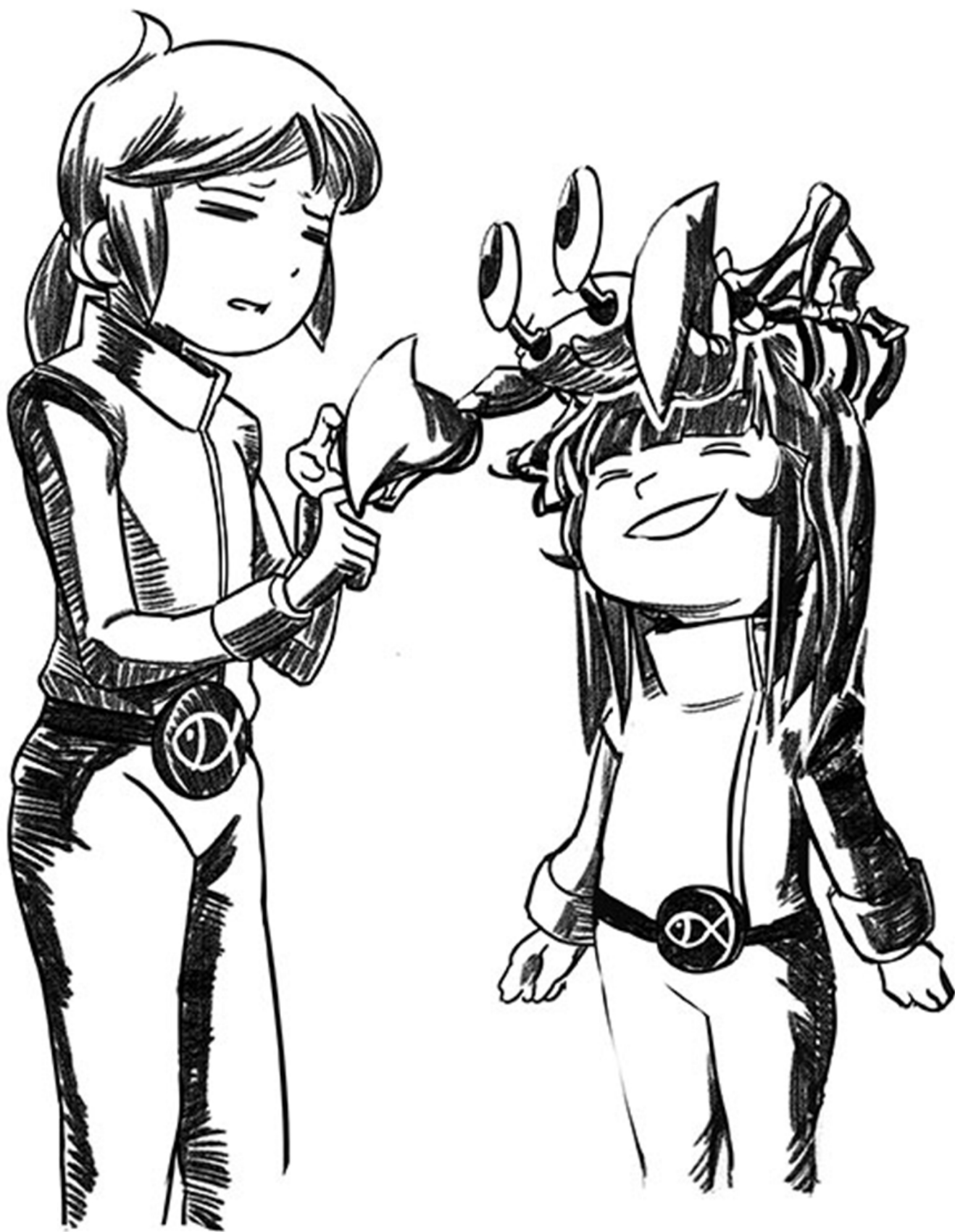
A claw pinched Mukan's finger. Gritting her teeth, she pulled out a second green spotted crab. This one was almost as big as Finyomu. How it managed to fit inside that crevice, Mukan had no clue. All she knew was that the crab had clung onto her finger. Before she had a chance to wave the crab off, Finyomu threw both arms around her.

"What a find!" Finyomu jumped up and down, almost bowling Mukan off balance. "I'm so glad you came!"

Never had anyone dove into Mukan like that. Finyomu had to be the smallest kid she had ever met. It must have taken some serious bravery to stand up to that bully the way Finyomu did. Courage happened to be the quality Mukan respected most. For a brat, Finyomu sure felt pretty warm. As she maintained her embrace, Mukan had forgotten about the crab that was still squeezing her finger.

Finyomu beamed as she let go of Mukan. "That worked even better than tickling."

Mukan felt her cheeks heat up. Her mouth had curled into a stupid smile without even realizing. With a grunt, she shoved the crab back into the crevice.



As Mukan stomped away from the alley, Finyomu called at her from behind. "I'll be here an hour before school tomorrow. This is our little secret."

Mukan continued to walk as if she never heard Finyomu's words. She questioned why Finyomu told her that. It almost sounded like an invite. No, Mukan said to herself. She no longer owed this kid a dime.

The next morning, Mukan woke up three hours sooner than usual. She was the type who arrived at school a minute before class. Today, she paced around the carpet, unsure if she should head out early. Finyomu said this was their little secret. Something about that gave Mukan an urge to don that foolish smile again. If Finyomu never meant to invite her, then showing up would be embarrassing. That weirdo could at least have been clear about it.

Mukan remembered the book in her bag. From memory, it was due today. Yes, she should return it before class. Using that reason, she left the orphanage and trotted for school.

Mukan arrived an hour and a half early. There was no way Finyomu would already be here. Still, with a racing heart, Mukan peeked into the back alley. That bully from yesterday stood next to Finyomu. He brought a few goons with him this time. Next to his shoe was the green spotted crab Mukan had discovered yesterday. It had been trampled to death.

"Told you I'd make you two regret this!" The bully kicked the crab's carcass aside. Finyomu stared at the ground with her fists clenched.

The bully crouched to look at Finyomu's face. "Go on, cry!" With a sneer, he pushed Finyomu in the arm.

Mukan jumped in and smacked the bully across the face using a branch in her hand. She had no idea when she had even picked up the branch. By the time she regained awareness, she was already sitting on the bully, thrashing him all over with the stick. The bully wailed as he begged her to stop. Cuts had appeared all over him. His underlings started to cry as well. Mukan knew all along they were nothing but talk.

Finyomu tugged Mukan on the arm. Mukan dropped the branch and backed away from the bully. It had been a while since she last puffed this much. She loathed herself for breaking the warrior code of keeping cool.

Just as the bully finished wiping tears from his eyes, Finyomu muttered under her breath, "Now Mukan really, really hates you."

Those words made the bully erupt into tears again. The droplets fell harder than when Mukan was beating him. Maybe he really did like her. Mukan had no care. She would never harbor an ounce of feeling for that scum.



The bullies fled from the alley. Mukan spun around and seized Finyomu's arms. "Why did you keep quiet? Stand up to them!"

Finyomu bit her lip as she continued to watch the ground. Her eyes were red. She must have been crying before. Mukan recalled how all this had unfolded. Finyomu became involved with those bullies because she stood up for Mukan. Now she was getting yelled at as well. Mukan, sensing a rush of guilt, released her grip.

Finyomu opened her mouth to speak. Mukan anticipated getting shouted at. Instead, Finyomu said, "Thank you, Mukan, for coming."

Mukan wondered why she needed to fluster over all this. When the bully had insulted her, she handled it fine. She never imagined seeing another person fall victim would be the thing that made her snap. Loosing a breath, she gave Finyomu a defeated smile. "You're real weird, you know that?"

END

Thank you for reading this short story. I hope it was enjoyable to you.

This tale came about as a result of Bermuda's campaign surpassing its stretch goal. Thank you for your support and making this possible. I hope this experience brought you closer to the Bermuda universe.

See you again m(_ _)m.