

When Snow Falls on Mauna Kea

Jun-ha Chung abhorred winter, or, more specifically, the snow that accompanied the season. Since birth, he had been shrouded by the glistening, cotton-soft element. He was born in Inha University Hospital during a blizzard on January 3, 2000. He spent his tenth birthday alone with his parents, trapped inside their two-bedroom Itaewon apartment by Seoul's heaviest snowfall since 1937. Before his first-ever date, which happened to be with the most popular girl in his high school, Chae, his taxi got stuck on an icy bridge for two hours. His phone had been confiscated after he was caught texting in class, and he was in such a rush to get to the date that he forgot to retrieve it at the end of the school day. Chae waited for Jun-ha in a small cafe just west of the Han River where they had planned to meet, but after assuming she had been stood up, she walked home in the freezing cold. She never spoke to Jun-ha again, even after he bought her dozens of flowers and tickets to see her favorite girl group in concert. So, when he was seventeen and his father accepted a job offer in Honolulu, Jun-ha was more than thrilled to never have to suffer through a snow-filled winter again.

The States were like a dreamland in Jun-ha's eyes. He had read stories of prosperity and opulence in Western novels, like *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Jun-ha idolized Fitzgerald and Faulkner, but was, to say the least, disappointed when he finally touched down on American soil. He quickly learned that the lifestyles portrayed in those stories were reserved for white men whose native tongue was English and whose eyes had double lids.

Though he learned English throughout primary and secondary school, his confidence in speaking to Americans with pidgin accents was low. He did not understand the island's culture or slang, finding it hard to connect with his peers through words. But words were insignificant when it came to racing.

Two weeks into his senior year, Jun-ha received a flyer disclosing the location of “The Circuit.” New to the city and eager to be a part of something, he snuck out on that fateful Saturday and took his father’s Honda Civic to the unfamiliar address. The first thing he saw when he parked on Kalakaua Avenue was an array of brightly-colored Supras, Mustangs, and Subarus littering the asphalt, their drivers revving their engines, sending chills of excitement down his spine. Everyone at The Circuit had an edge about them; boys with sharp features and piercings, leather-clad and bruised; girls in ripped shirts and short skirts, with dark makeup and wind-blown hair. Jun-ha, with his cable-knit sweater, khaki pants, and sleek, black hair, appeared more out of place than ever.

“You lost?” asked a lanky boy with an unkempt, neon-green mop atop his head.

“I’m not sure,” Jun-ha replied.

“Well, you’d better get out the way before the race starts.”

The strange-looking boy started walking in the opposite direction Jun-ha had come from, so, naturally, he followed closely behind.

“A drag race?” he inquired.

The boy laughed. “Yes, a drag race. You’re at The Circuit now, baby, that’s what we do... Who are you anyway? You got a funny accent.”

“I’m Jun-ha. I just moved here.”

“Well, Junny, I’m Panda.”

“Panda?” he questioned, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Like the animal?”

“No.” He stops in front of a black-and-white BMW. “Panda, like my X6. You ever raced before?”

Jun-ha shook his head. "The most I've done is donuts in an abandoned parking lot with my friends back in Korea."

"You wanna come along for the ride?" Panda offered. "This one's 80/20 in my favor."

"Sure. I've got nothing to lose."

Everything changed after that night.

Three years later, Jun-ha, now known as Junny, was ruling the underground race scene along with Panda. Between the two of them, they had made over half a million dollars in bets, more than enough to afford a bright blue Yenko Camaro. Junny was a king and The Circuit was his castle. His reputation as a shy immigrant wasn't the only thing that had changed, though; his appearance became unrecognizable over the years. Two diamond studs poked out of his brow bone, tattoos covered his arms, hands, and neck, and his jet-black hair messily covered his forehead. No longer did he wear cable-knit sweaters or go to church on Sundays. He was revered by everyone, and even feared by those who did not know him on a personal level. But one stranger was never intimidated by his hard exterior: Sammi.

Junny first laid eyes on Sammi at The Circuit after winning the quarter-finals of the Race to Hell and Back. She stood next to Panda amongst the sea of spectators, her doe eyes shining in the moonlight. He casually swaggered over to his best friend, hands in his cargo pants, cigarette hanging from his lips.

"You did it again, boy," Panda cheered as he dapped him up.

"And who might this be?" Junny asked, nodding his head toward the tan girl with the pretty brown eyes.

"I'm Sammi, Panda's sister," she said, "It's nice to finally meet you, Junny."

Junny tilted his head like a dog who just heard the word “treat.”

“How the hell have we lived together for two years and I didn’t even know you had a sister, P?”

Panda shrugged nonchalantly. “I never let her come to the races. I don’t like her being involved in all this mess, but since it’s the semi-finals I thought I’d make an exception.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. It was very nice to meet you, Sammi.”

From that point on, Sammi was all that occupied Junny’s thoughts. He couldn’t even think about the finals on Mauna Kea. When the time finally came for him to fly from Oahu to the island of Hawai’i, he made sure to purchase an extra ticket, eager for her to watch him win the race.

The course was daunting. Junny had never been so scared in his life. Neither he nor his opponent had once driven up the mountain, as the rules forbade them from practicing before the meet. The tournament managers picked out a 5-mile, upward road course with unknown terrain. All is fair in love and street racing.

Butterflies filled his stomach as he sat at the start line. It was a crisp December afternoon. The air felt thick as he struggled to breathe 12,000 feet above sea level. His palms were sweating against the leather steering wheel, so he slipped on his Sparco gloves and prayed to God. Panda tried to help calm his nerves, but the only thing keeping him sane was the thought of seeing Sammi at the finish line, proudly waiting with a bouquet of bluebells that matched his paint job.

The scent of gasoline filled the air. A woman in a skin-tight leather dress stepped between the blue Camaro and a matte-black Mustang. She reached for the red scarf around her neck,

signaling that the race was about to commence. She raised the fabric and uttered three words before the cars took off down the dirt path.

“Ready? Set. Go!”

Junny slammed his pedal to the floor, head jolting back from the sheer speed of the Chevy. He kept vigilant, trying to anticipate the sharp turns and uneven landscape. But he could have never foreseen what awaited him.

Within minutes, he was nearing the top of the mountain, well ahead of his competition. For a second, he turned his head, in awe of the view. He felt like an angel witnessing Earth from Heaven’s perspective, so high in the clouds. But when he looked back to the road, it was too late.

Snow covered the ground. There was no way of foreseeing this, but even if he had, it would not have stopped his tires from slipping on a patch of permafrost. The rubber skidded across the icy path, spinning him violently off course. He tried to correct it, twisting his wheel with all of his strength, but it was no use. The Camaro slammed against the side of the mountain, becoming a mangled piece of metal in mere seconds.

Sirens soon rang out as an ambulance rushed to the top of Mauna Kea. Bystanders watched in horror as Junny was pulled from the wreck, blood pouring from his head. His eyes opened slightly enough to see Sammi’s ravishing face before everything faded to black.