

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

By James Wylder



On a planet that was once called Mars, in a city under a dome, there was a school. Like most schools, it was filled with classrooms, a lunchroom, music rooms, athletic facilities, break rooms for the teachers, a library, and other such amenities. Students from all walks of life, and their teachers, roamed its halls with laughter, boredom, or tears. But for our purposes, we are most concerned about a girl. And we should be concerned because she had fallen asleep in class.

This wasn't a normal occurrence for her, after all you had to be a good student to even think of getting into this school. It was the second-best high school in the whole metropolis called Takumi, and both her twin brother and older brother had managed to get in, so it would have been fairly embarrassing if she'd missed the mark. Even so, today, she was dozing with her head pressed down on her touchscreen desk constantly moving between two screens on the menu over and over.

"Miss Jhe?" Mrs. Ichinose called out to her. The class's eyes turned toward her. Her brother, Jhe Sang Eun, poked her, "Sang Mi, come on. Wake up."

She pulled her head up, bleary eyed, and blinked, looking around, then shot her back up straight. "I'm up! I'm awake!" the class snickered, which of course was what she was going for. The teacher sighed.

"Miss Jhe, would you please answer the question then?"

This was a classic gotcha question, to prove that she hadn't been paying attention because she was snoozing. This was true, and Sang Mi didn't sleep in class often, but she also wasn't such a rube to be caught off guard like this. Under the guise of a stretch, she leaned right, opening her mouth for a yawn, and then glancing at Li Xiu's notes. She took what Sang Mi thought was an absolutely pointless amount of notes--literally transcribing the lecture complete with questions and answers without paraphrasing it. It matched her lack of creativity. But

thankfully, there was the question, and she'd long ago memorized the answer.

"It was at 7:51 PM, on March 23rd, 2071."

Mrs. Ichinose narrowed her eyes behind her spectacles, "What was?"

"That was when the network of power plants run by the Pan Asian Nuclear Coalition on Earth had a mass failure, causing the disaster which forced our ancestors to colonize the planet Gongen, then called Mars, and make it our new home." She had answered the question, but she was annoyed by being called out, so she went a little further. "Led by Higen Shijin, the designer of the Shocho AI system that still co-ordinates our planet to this day, the colonists began to build dome cities including--"

"--Yes, thank you Sang Mi, you made your point. Now if we could move onto the next point..."

She looked over at her brother, who gave her a thumbs up, that she returned.

Only now that she was awake, and doing her best to actually pay attention and take notes for history class, did Sang Mi notice that there were two new desks in the room, and one of them was filled by a girl. Had she slept through a new student introduction? Earlier in the week Mrs. Ichinose had told them they'd be getting a new student from Earth, but her mannerisms didn't scream "Earther" and she certainly wasn't a brown haired boy. If anything she seemed a little... stilted? Was she just nervous? She had black hair, with brown eyes couched behind a pair of glasses, her mid-neck length hair kept back with a hairband decorated with a green glass leaf.

Sang Mi was instantly suspicious of her, for reasons she was absolutely unable to articulate, even after Mrs. Ichinose called her up to introduce herself to the class. The girl gave a bow and wrote her name on the board.

"My name is Zhyrgal Osmonova, and I've just moved here from Lybid. I enjoy writing stories, math, and raising animals. I hope we'll all get along."

Applause applause applause. She sat back down.

Sang Mi looked at her brother, who seemed to not understand the look she was giving him at all.

"Isn't this SKETCHY?" she tried to convey.

"What the hell are you talking bout?" he squinted back.

"You know, this feels off?" she head bobbed.

"No, it doesn't?" he patronized.

She went back to her work, as Zhyrgal sat down. What was it? She wracked her brain, and lost track of her work again as something came to mind from last weekend when she and her brother were getting up to trouble.

* * *

She had snuck into Colocog, again. It was hard to. Getting in required dodging several detection systems, and she'd mostly just copied the way her mom had figured out how to for her Jetpack Courier job by logging into her padd when she was asleep. Her brother usually joined her, but sometimes they went each by their lonesome, often for Sang Eun because he wanted to see JackBox, because of course he did.

"Ahoy!" JackBox said from over at her booth. She was their own age, and most importantly had a pass that let her go into Takumi on business, a stay that she always overstayed so they could hang out. After all, nearly everyone in the Maverick colony of Colcog wasn't allowed to leave its borders. Her cybernetic right leg stuck out from under her poodle skirt, and her equally mechanical right arm did from a black t-shirt with a winged yellow skull on it and the words, "Fight or Flight Risk" encircling it right next to her black braid of hair. "How goes the infamous Talinata and Kalingkata, delinquent Gongen teens to the stars?"

Among friends, the two were very often their nicknames. And in Sang Mi's own head, she was usually Kalingkata.

"Calling us delinquents is a stretch," Talinata said, slipping into his seat. "We don't actually skip school, and we both brought homework to do here."

"You are such squares."

"Are we squares or delinquents? I'm getting confused now, Geraldine."

JackBox squinted at her, "Pulling out my first name there, I really riled you up."

"Nah," Sang Mi pulled out her padd and activating the holo keyboard, got to work on a paper, tapping away at the keys made of light that seemed to pop up out of the table.

Talinata smiled at JackBox, who obviously smiled back not catching the obvious. "So, what's got you so excited today?"

"We caught an Earther spy here in Colocog!"

The twins glanced at each other.

"No--"

"--Way!"

"We really did! He wasn't a very good one, I think he was probably fresh out of the academy, or whatever."

Kalingkata leaned in, "Okay, then how'd you tell?"

JackBox brightened up, excited to have the chance to spiel, her cybernetic right arm gesticulating along with the story at high speeds.

"Okay, so, if you need a new operative, you can't just like... get them from nowhere, right?"

They nodded.

"Right, right! So, you either get someone from your own folk and train them up so they know everything about who they're infiltrating--"

"--Or you find someone you can train who already knows the culture you're putting them in."

"Precisely. But you can't send them back to Earth or Venus or whatever, so you have to train them on Phobos." The mention of Phobos caused the twins to twinge. Both of them tried to stay away from the state-sanctioned political club at the school, and even had some resentment towards their own government... but this was different. The Earthers controlled Gongen's moon of Phobos, and the military base and monitoring center called Overwatch Command nesting on its surface, and nobody on Gongen was happy about that. The knowledge that strangers from another planet were looking down on them night and day was unnerving. JackBox didn't slow down though: "So you get this guy, straight out of training, and you can just notice the way he isn't fluid, you know what I mean?"

"No," the twins replied in unison.

Jackbox bit her lip as she thought for a minute, and then with an "oh!" mimed looking like she was studying, and then straightened her back quickly and

extended a hand like she was shaking it, then jerked into a concerned look.

"Okay, I get it. They're good at acting, but they haven't had the time to train enough to switch between the scripts they were trained in fluidly," Kalingkata summarized.

"Ding ding ding! We have a winner," JackBox said, waving her hands in the air.

"What did I win?"

JackBox thought again for a second, and leaned over the table, giving Kalingkata a peck on the cheek.

Talinata was red in the face, jealous.

She just sheepishly grinned back at him apologetically.

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She was broken out of her reverie again by Mrs. Ichinose's voice. "Could I get two volunteers to go get something from the theater department?"

Li Xiu raised her hand.

"How about... Zhyrgal and Sang Mi?" neither of them had raised their hands. Mrs. Ichinose was smiling, that sly dog. Of course, she'd noticed her obvious suspicion, so now she was going to help them both make friends. An outrageous use of time, but she'd get over it. "Come on then, Zhyrgal. I'll show you the way."

The pair stepped out into the hallway, the motion sensors flicking the lights on as they walked and turning them off as they moved out of range.

"So, why'd your family move up here to Takumi?"

"Work," she replied.

Damn. That was the obvious answer, and so simple too. It would have been nice if she'd had an elaborate cover story ("A cover story for WHAT?" she

could hear her twin brother screaming in her head).
"You've got the languages here down pretty pat."

She tilted her head, "Everyone on Gongen knows the official languages? They teach them in school there too, you know. I also speak Kyrgyz."

Lybid certainly wasn't anywhere near the size of Takumi, but it was still one of the larger cities on the planet. Sang Mi was really making basic mistakes here.

When they reached the theater department, Jorani was there working on props. "I was wondering why you weren't in class," Sang Mi opened.

She looked up nervously, "I--I'm not skipping! Mr. Shevchenko gave me an exemption because the school play is behind. I'm getting notes from Li Xiu."

Sang Mi sighed, of course it was from Li Xiu.
"Gotcha, well this is our new classmate Zhyrgal."

"A pleasure to meet you," they exchanged bows.

"Mrs. Ichinose told us we were supposed to pick something up from the theater department."

Jorani gave a long pause. "Was... was she more specific at all?"

"Ah," Sang Mi said. "No."

"...And you didn't ask or follow up about that fact?"

"Now that you're saying it, I may be seeing some personal errors, yes."

"It sounds like she just wanted to get you out of the classroom."

Zhyrgal furrowed her brow, "...I think it was something like that."

Pulling out her padd, Sang Mi sent a message to Mrs. Ichinose asking what it was she wanted them to bring. In a blink, the answer appeared.

"Look for a box labeled Athletic Photos 2870-2879."

Sighing, she held the phone up to Zhyrgal who just nodded, and they got to work.

After rummaging through a ton of stuff that could only with some politeness be called "junk", Zhyrgal and Sang Mi were forced to conclude that there was nothing there.

"It must be in the loft," Jorani yelled out to them after Sang Mi had complained very loudly and indirectly so that Jorani could definitely hear it.

"Thanks!" Sang Mi replied. There was a pause.
"What's the loft?"

Jorani let out a sigh that managed to echo, pointing at a ladder leading to a hole in the wall. "It's a bizarre feature of the age of the school. Back in the day, they needed it to swap out the old gas canisters they used for the old multi-spectrum holoprojectors. Now it's just an awkward storage-space-slash-makeout-spot."

"I'm not making out with Sang Mi, we just met," Zhyrgal clarified.

"No, that wasn't--" Jorani fumbled.

Sang Mi blinked repeatedly. "...Cool. Anyway, Zhyrgal want to go up to the loft and not make out in an enclosed space for fifteen minutes?"

She nodded, and the pair scaled the ladder as Jorani let out a string of random syllables. Lighting the way with her phone, she led the way crawling through the loft. The walls were adorned with scattered initials and names in hearts, a few badly written poems signed lovingly at their bottom, and the occasional slapped on motion-stickers which were moving in discolored jerky loops as their power ran out. Of course, there was also the obligatory extremely elaborate mural some art student had made decades ago.

"How far in do you think this is?"

"That is a great question," it didn't seem to Sang Mi like they were anywhere near the end of this thing. The sound of movement stopped behind her. "You still there, Zhyrgal?"

"I have a question for you."

Sang Mi stopped, and awkwardly turned herself around. "...Alright."

Zhyrgal's glasses were white panes in the glow of her phone. "...Why have you been looking at me so funny since I got here? Do you have something against people from Lybid?"

She dropped her phone for a moment as she frantically waved her hands, "No! That's not it, really not." How was she supposed to say, "I just had this weird feeling you were sketchy."? Trusting your gut was not a solid rebuttal, and the more this set in the more Sang Mi began to feel bad about it. This girl had transferred in here to a place she knew not a soul, was trying to make new friends, and Sang Mi was busy being weird to her... for what? Some weird mannerisms? Some weird rant her friend JackBox had given about an Earther spy that she suspected really didn't entirely exist, or had at the very least been incredibly exaggerated by JackBox so she'd sound

cool? She tried to dig in and figure out what it was, and biting her lip, a thought came to her.

"You know I have a weird reputation at this school, yeah?"

"No. I really don't know anything about you."

She adjusted her cramped position under the low ceiling. "My brother and I nearly went to prison one time."

Zhyrgal very awkwardly looked back at her.

"Cause we hacked into a government news site on April Fool's Day and posted a fake article about Updog."

"Whats Updog?"

"I dunno, what's up with you?"

There was a pause, "Oh I get it, you say that, and then you get me to say the other thing." They made eye contact in the resulting silence. "...That's funny."

"If you really thought that it wouldn't have taken you so long to decide it. It's cool, anyway no hard feelings, okay? I didn't mean to make you feel like people weren't going to be friends with you or anything. I'm just kinda paranoid sometimes."

She nodded. Kalingkata could tell she had taken the story about hacking to be a joke. Kalingkata did not correct her that the only part she'd exaggerated for comedy was that they'd actually been anywhere close to being caught. They'd bounced their location data around so much, and gone through so many hoops to protect their butts, that the only reason they'd had any suspicion thrown on them was the pair couldn't help but brag about it to an upperclassman when they'd stayed up too late chatting outside a convenience store once.

"Look, Zhyrgal, me and my brother are hanging out with some friends at the carnival on Friday. You can come if you want. We're all going there from school together, so it'd be real easy."

Zhyrgal looked down, her hair hanging, but Kalingkata could see she had flushed cheeks.
"...Yeah, that'd be cool. Sure."

"Fantastic. Let's find out what the hell we were looking for in here..." They reached an alcove filled with ratty boxes. Shoving them around, Kalingkata pulled out the one in question, and sifting through it, found what they'd been looking for. It was a motion-print from a decade prior, and showed two basketball teams shaking hands. It needed a recharge to fix the jerky movement, but if you tapped the people on the teams, their names would pop up, though when they disappeared the text would sometimes linger as a garbled imprint. But one face stood out, and when Kalingkata touched it, she and Zhyrgal exchanged a look.

"It's Mrs. Ichinose!" the transfer student exclaimed.

"Sure is. I didn't realize she was from Kazuki. Or played Basketball."

"So, she wanted us to see her in High School during an away game at this school?"

Sang Mi smiled, "I think the point is that she came here to this school from another city, and we all like her." She nudged her classmate with her shoulder, "Forcing friendships since 2477."

Zhyrgal gave a little laugh, and then realized their faces had gotten awfully close together and scooted away. Kalingkata did not pick up on anything, and just tilted her head in confusion.

"A-Anyway, let's head back. Or Jorani is going to think we really made out!"

"Let her."

"N-not on my first day here!"

Kalingkata laughed this time, "Okay, we'll wait till you've settled in."

Zhyrgal fumbled her words, and hastily scrambled out of the loft.

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"So, as you can see here, I actually visited this school when I was in High school," Mrs. Ichinose looked down fondly at the frozen memory.

Li Xiu raised her hand but didn't wait to be called on, "Mrs. Ichinose, you used to have muscles?!?"

She laughed, "If that's what you got out of that, sure, yes I did have muscles. But more importantly, I remembered this school. When I was looking for places to teach after college, I spent a little time bouncing around, but when a position came up here I jumped at the chance. Because whatever you think about it, and I know at your age everything sucks at least a little, this school really is a special place. There are students from all walks of life here, trying their best to be their best in different ways. So, I hope you'll all try to help each other achieve that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mrs. Ichinose," they called back in unison, but they could all hear it was a little less rote than usual.

After class ended, Sang Eun had come over to Sang Mi's desk along with a few hangers on like Jae Hyun.

"Oh right," she yawned. "I invited the new girl to come with us on Friday. I hope that's fine."

They all assented. "Yeah, no problem at all," Sang Eun reassured her. She smiled back pleasantly. Boy was she tired. She just wanted to curl up in bed...

"I was thinking of making a Colocog trip tonight."

"She's just not that into you," Sang Mi mumbled.

"...Not yet. I mean, I think I can get her around. After all it's not like she dislikes me."

She snuggled her face into the crook of her elbow on the desk. Maybe he'd wise up and cozy up with that boy from the other class that liked the same games as him. What was his name, Jianhong? Whatever, she was fading out. She'd been tired all

day, and the warm sunlight coming in the window was just so comfy... “You go ahead... I’m just going to close my eyes for a minute...”

Whatever her brother said next, she was swept away in dreams before the words could sink in.

* * *

In her dream, JackBox was standing on a box beatboxing. Her brother was attempting to conduct a symphony orchestra playing the soundtrack of “Warstringer: CGC Masters of Combat 7” to impress her. She tried to run towards them, but the harder she ran, the more distance grew between them. She tripped, and the ground she landed on was wet and dark. Looking up she saw something metallic. As her eyes trailed up it seemed to be some sort of giant, hissing steam, and making scraping noises with every movement. She tried to get up but sunk through the ground into a deep ocean. A red eye stared at her

through the endless murky water. She opened her mouth to say something, but when she did, water flooded her lungs. The water churned into a spiral, and she was at its eye.

She landed with a splash into her desk, water spreading out and flooding the floor to her ankles.

“Kalingkata,” a voice whispered in her ear as a cold wet hand slinked up her shoulder. “You shouldn’t sleep in class.”

* * *

When she woke up, there was no light coming in the window but for the faint glow of streetlamps, and the skyscrapers beyond. She rubbed her eyes, the weird dream already slipping away. How long had she slept? Tapping her wrist comp, she realized the answer was “too long”. Horridly she did the work of closing the classroom up she should have done hours

ago, and quiet as the mice the school governors denied were living in the school basement, stepped out into the hallway. She knew all about avoiding motion sensors from going to Colocog, and she crept down the hall against the wall, not triggering the automatic lights. She was within sight of the doorway when she heard it: someone else was still in the school.

The voice was too soft at first to make out, but Kalingkata soon realized it was coming from an empty classroom. The faint light of a holoprojector the only light illuminating a girl through the door's small window. Pressing her ear up to the door, she could hear it much clearer.

“—ing yourself here is important, and as long as you keep up your work, the compensation will come though.”

“What am I supposed to do when I've located the target though?” Zhyrgal replied.

“Then I’ll pass the information onto Rathe, and he’ll make the call from there. Do you understand?”

“I’ll be sure to follow whatever orders CISyn gives.”

Kalingkata put her hand over her mouth, and backed away slowly, moving toward the door keeping her eye on the classroom, till she was out of sight, got out of the school, and took off like a lightning bolt into the night.

She hadn’t really heard that had she?

She should have trusted her gut.

No, she’d obviously just made it up, some trail from her dream that had stuck around. Why would the Earther spy agency CISyn recruit a child to be an agent at a high school? Why would you infiltrate a high school at all? It didn’t make any sense. Sure, Academy 27 was for gifted and talented students but... that didn’t mean that they were doing anything particularly notable. The theater department sure thought so, but that was just Ego on Mr. Shevchenko’s part.

She ended her sprint, which had taken her all the way to the train terminal, where she was now going to have to wait for the next one to come by. Should she tell Sang Eun? Pulling out her phone, she almost did, but closed the app quickly. No. Not yet. Not without some sort of evidence. And really when it came down to it. She really didn't want to be involved. This wasn't trouble she could control. She wasn't going to turn Zhyrgal into the cops regardless, she wasn't a snitch. But... she'd be on the lookout.

This was going to be an interesting school year after all. Looking up, Phobos was passing overhead. Up there, shining down at her, some guru analyst was staring down at them. She waved, and then shut her eyes. An artificial breeze of reprocessed air blew across her face.

“Hope you enjoy looking at Academy 27,” she said to the sky. “If nothing else, I hear the basketball team is decent.”

The light of Phobos twinkled as if in reply, and the platform ding'd to alert her to the train's imminent arrival.

Time to go home.