

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG — Academy 27 —

Into the Light

By James Wylder



December, 2386

Gongen, Downtown Takumi

This wasn't what Geraldine "JackBox" McGraw saw as a fun evening, but whatever, if her friends were happy, she was. The van wasn't in good shape--actually the Jhe twins had helped her assemble the thing from parts in the junkyard--but as long as they didn't get pulled over no one would notice the safety violations. That didn't mean that she didn't need someone in the back making sure the merchandise didn't break.

"We're redoing the shocks on this thing!" Sang Mi, or as Jackbox called her Kalingkata, declared with some despair as she prevented a crate of bottles from smashing.

"You're doing great work!" she called back.

Kalingkata's brother, Talinata (aka Sang Eun) looked over from the passenger seat, "You sure she's okay back there?"

"Psh, she'll be fine." There was a yelp. "Probably."

"Thanks for letting us come along," her brother said.

"You're the ones helping me," JackBox said as she made another turn a little too tightly causing Kalingkata to make several entirely new panicked noises.

They finally pulled into their destination, JackBox flashing a pass to the security guard at the gate who looked at it, and her rather skeptically. "Can I see your--"

"Proof of residency? Right here!" JackBox had done this song and dance enough to know the drill. If today went well, the guard would be getting used to seeing her though. He checked that, and ran her through their system, and checked her again, before finally letting the van through.

"Is it always like this?" Talinata asked

"They're a little skittish of outsiders with metal limbs. You get used to it after a while."

"They still shouldn't treat you that way."

She gave him a smile that loosened up his anger, as he caught on that no, he didn't have to deal with this and she did. She gave him a light slug on the shoulder, which he seemed surprised by and not exactly sure what it meant, but she was still smiling. "You're a good bean. Both you and your sister."

"Thanks, I... think?"

She pulled the van into their loading dock, and parked it. Together, they unloaded the crates of Titan Rum out, which wasn't an easy task, and JackBox walked back into the van, but as the twins tried to follow her she halted them.

"Oh uh, just wait outside for a second."

"...Why what's up?" Kalingkata asked.

"I need to go inside and talk to the client, so I need to change out of my loading outfit into a dress. Unless you want to watch me change?"

The twins both stammered and shot out bits of incomplete rebuttals of this as JackBox cracked up. "You're both cute, I'll just be a minute."

When she rolled the van's loading door up again, she was dressed in a sleek black dress that fit her closely, a large white flower woven into her hair. Her metal arm and leg were both polished, and reflected the world around her. She had a simple black bead bracelet on her pale wrist, and carried a black clutch purse with a yellow winged skull on it, a common symbol used by Mavericks.

"Wow, you clean up," Talinata said.

"You look so pretty!" Kalingkata added.

She winked, "I know. But thank you, coming from you two, that means something." She gestured to the alcohol. "So here's the deal, I need one of you to

guard this. The other one of you will change into the outfit I have for you--"

"The outfit?" the twins said in unison.

"Its just a cheap vest-tie-shirt-pants-shoes combo so you look like the wait staff here."

"Right," they replied together, which JackBox wasn't sure was cute or weird now.

"--Anyway, I'll beep you, and when that happens to take this bottle up to the table or booth I'm at with the client, and set it down."

Kalingkata nodded, "That sounds simple enough. Any reason you don't just take it with you in the first place?"

"Its part of the hustle, you go in letting the client think you have a weak opening hand--you couldn't get any of what you're selling in yet through customs, and so they'll be doing you a favor by helping you get it through. Then boom, you catch them off guard, you have it right on hand."

The twins conspired for a moment, "I'll guard it, she'll deliver," Talinata announced.

"Works for me. Well then, wish me luck."

"Wait--one last thing," Kalingkata asked. She turned to look back. "Why did we unload all of this if the deal isn't done yet?"

"Because I'm not allowed to fail."

JackBox turned away again, as she'd reminded herself, it was time to get to work. Nothing else mattered for the moment. She wound her way through the backrooms of the tower to get to the club on the 4th floor. She had to sneak out of the backrooms, out of a service door, and then slip into the women's bathroom to check herself in the light, touch things up, and walk back out as if she'd come in the front door the whole time. Chin high, back straight, eyes ahead. Walk like anyone in your path is a fool to be there. When she reached the club, she couldn't help but sigh though. It was called the 4th Floor Club. Creative. You couldn't see into the club

from the entrance, but she knew the target was inside. After all, if her intel wasn't good, she'd make sure everyone knew it wasn't going to be bad a second time.

At least, that's what she knew she had to do. She'd gone this far with just the threat she'd follow through on that. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

Time to complete the look. She popped on big dark sunglasses, and threw a piece of gum in her mouth. Ready to go, she stormed the gates.

She ignored the greeter, and kept walking until she was physically blocked from continuing.

“Could you move please? I'm here to see my friend.”

“I'm sorry miss, this is a private club,” the bouncer said. “I'll need to ask you to leave.”

“Stop being ornery. You really think I'm going to give you a bribe?”

“I don't want a bribe—”

“Then stop wasting my time.” She leaned around the man, and scanned the room as quickly as she could.

There he was. Amid the sea of mahogany tables with red and yellow tablecloths, was a man sitting alone at one wearing a suit so starched you could shake it and cook with what fell out. Everything about him screamed traditionalist.

“Yooo, Ito!” she called and waved to him.

His eyes turned, and one hand raised slightly, JackBox took the opportunity to raise her own sunglasses and give the bouncer a knowing look. He turned away to look back at her face just in time to not realize that the target hadn't been raising his hand to greet her.

He grunted, “...Alright, go on through.”

She wasted no time strolling up to the table, and sitting right down. The club was nice, lots of refined wood paneling, a dedicated piano player tapping out light versions of classics.

“I know this one, I think this is Beyonce. Or the Beatles. I always get them confused.”

“You’re awful bold,” he said. Ito Ryuu. Tenryu party higher up. He usually stayed in the capital of Kuzuki, but he was here in Takumi just for two nights for some boring meeting.

She gave him her most alluring smile, “I get that a lot. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m—”

“Leave.”

“Nope,” she reached for the menu padd, and tapped in an order on the touchscreen. “After all, I haven’t even gotten my appetizer. Plus you’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

He glowered at her, but also looked her up and down, “You’re a child, and a Maverick. Two things not allowed in this building, in this club, or in this city.”

Reaching into her clutch, she whipped out her credentials and slid them over. “Geraldine McGraw, licensed trader for Cogwork Imports.”

He picked up, and glanced down at it, and back at her, before sliding it over. "I don't make deals with Mavericks."

"We both know that's not true."

"We also both know that you're the owner of Cogwork Imports, and it's a front for the Accord."

She frowned, "You are knowledgeable."

"Just a guess, but I do know it now."

Damn it. He was going to be that kind of client. She shrugged as if the big deal was no big deal, "Then you know just how valuable I am. I can move things in and out of Gongen with a certain lack of oversight related to my specialties that you can't get from your run of the mill Colocog resident. And I can help you out, Mr. Ito."

He did not look convinced, but while he seemed to think he had control of the conversation, she'd gotten him off track of kicking her out of the club, which was all she needed for now.

He sighed, perfect, “Fine, just give me your pitch before my real guest gets here.” Whoever it was, causing a scene was clearly not on his wishlist tonight.

She tapped the button in her clutch to signal Kalingkata. Hopefully she was fairly quick.

“You’re hosting the second day of the talks here, correct? You’re trying to get a security concession from Overwatch Command?”

His glower turned into a laser focus. “How do you know that?”

She tapped her nose, “By being a useful person who wants to work with you, silly. Now, there’s an officer on Overwatch named Ramirez, he’s a big fan of rum.”

“We have rum.”

“You have, and I’m sorry to insult the work of the hardworking Gongen people, subpar rum. And you know it. You’ll never say so in public, because part of your job is saying everything is great, but you know its

not the greatest. But I have high quality aged Whiskey from the finest maker of Spirits on Titan.”

His face was a mask, but that he wasn't glowering now was as much a tell as anything. “And who would that be?”

“Ghostblood Bill. I mean, I never said he had a name you could take seriously. But I can guarantee that I can get you something your guest will want to drink, not just out of politeness, but because he genuinely wants to drink more. And that little edge of tipsiness will give a man like you all you need.”

“All I have is your word that it's as good as you say, and there's no way you—”

“Ahem,” Kalingkata politely said. She had been surprisingly sneaky getting up to the table, though she looked way too nervous to be a real employee, and wasn't wearing the uniform quite right. Oh well, she'd still gotten in. She held out a single pristine bottle of rum on a white cloth. Ito stared at JackBox

for a moment, before taking the rum, and turning the bottle in his hands.

“Pour me a glass,” he ordered Kalingkata.

“Of course sir,” Kalingkata might not be smooth, but she could get into her role quickly, and had some experience pouring drinks it seemed. Ito raised the tumbler, and eyed the two fingers of rum in it carefully, before taking a sip. The surprised look that flashed in his eyes was all the sign JackBox needed: she'd won. Thank god.

Ito swirled it again, then took another sip. “You say you have enough for our event?”

“And some to spare, just in case.”

“We'll take it. Send my secretary your payment details, and your contact details for the next shipment. How soon can you get the shipment to the venue?”

She smiled, this time genuinely, “Its already inside the building.”

He set the glass down, and looked at her differently. "I've misjudged you, Miss McGraw. I offer a sincere apology."

"Don't mention it, I understand the skepticism."

He nodded. "I hope then I'll be able to rely on you for shipments like this in the future."

"I hope so as well, Mr. Ito."

"So, I am curious, what do you think of our home here?"

"You mean Gongen?" She looked out across the club, at the scattered people talking quietly, the occasional laugh, the soft piano, the smell of hot food... "Honestly, I wish I could live here forever. Maverick space is a rough place, and since I moved to Colocog I've come to enjoy Gongen. The places, the culture, the friends I've made. It'd be nice to stay here."

He inspected her closely, as though trying to find some secret she'd scrawled into the features of her

face. "Do you really think the Gongen people will grow to accept the presence of a permanent Maverick settlement here?"

"Perhaps, in time, they'll see us as residents of Colocog instead of Mavericks. For many of this, this is our home now."

"And is it yours?"

"Yes," she answered so quickly it surprised her.

"Can I be honest?"

"Sure."

"You disgust me," she had known it from the moment he laid eyes on her. It didn't surprise her. She could see it every day from so many people on Gongen. The way they crossed the street to avoid her, pulled their children to the other side away from her. Eyed her like she was carrying marspox, or was bulldozing their street right in front of them. As if she would hurt a child, the thought sickened her. That Sang Mi and Sang Eun had never thought that, never

looked at her like she was less than human, it meant something to her. Even so, even with how awful it could be, it was better than being on Titan.

"I know," she replied curtly.

"Does that bother you?"

"I'm used to it," it was a self-affirming lie.

He leaned back in his seat, "I'll tell you what though, if you're honest about what you said, I'll make sure Colocog is protected when I become President."

"The President is still alive."

"He's getting worse and worse, everyone knows it. It's just a matter of time. Make sure you and yours stay in the right camp--Ah, my real guests are here."

A couple and their daughter, who was around JackBox's own age, had entered in, the father was looking at JackBox with a disgust far less pragmatic than Ito's. "Ms. McGraw, meet Dr. Tam, his wife, and their daughter Fei-Yen. I see your son couldn't make it tonight?"

"He had other commitments, he's making us proud that's for sure," he looked at Geraldine like she was a rotting fish someone had slapped on the chair.

"What's this?"

Ito gestured politely, "This is my associate, she's a representative from Colocog. We were negotiating a trade agreement."

Fei-Yen's eyes lit up with curiosity at the mention of Colocog, and Geraldine waved at her, which she sheepishly returned before her mother slapped her hand down.

"I appreciate your time, Ito-San, I'll see you later."

"Another time, then," he replied, and JackBox gathered her things, and headed for the door, stopping a waiter, "I need to go, but go ahead and drop my appetizer at the table I was at. Say it's a gift from Colocog."

The waiter nodded, "Of course, Miss."

Such professionals.

She kept herself contained all the way down the hallway, till she got to the bathroom, and then it all burst free. "I DID IT!" she danced around the tiled floor, making the rough sounds of a Janice Rose song's backing track as she performed whatever dance moves came to mind, before falling on her butt and laughing. She did it. She really did it. Putting a clamp on the door, she pulled out her holotransmitter, and after a moment, her contact at the Accord, Starhawk, picked up. "Why hello there, you're looking fancy. Since you're not begging I'm guessing this is good news?"

"It is, I made the deal with Ito Ryu. We already sold one shipment and have an agreement for more."

Starhawk grinned, "I knew you could do it. I was worried we were going to lose one of our best operatives after that last mission."

"...I couldn't have known the Ebon Gate was going to undercut me like that."

"Let me give you some advice JackBox, you're still young and new at this. You can't be afraid to snuff out the opposition."

"...I've killed people before."

"Sure, during the coup. But that's a battle, its different."

"I'll keep doing things my way."

Starhawk shrugged, "Whatever, as long you get results, I don't care how you do it. Anyway, good work. I'll send Red-Jane the good news. Ciao."

The feed dropped, and JackBox let out a huge sigh.

She'd survived once again.

* * *

When the three met up again, they jumped around in a circle together in joy at JackBox's achievement. The twins didn't entirely grasp the meaning of her success, but they were still overjoyed with it, and she liked that.

How nice would it be to always have people who took pleasure in seeing me succeed and prosper? How nice would it be to have that not be a surprise?

They drove out into the night, and pulled into Higen Park (every city on Gongen had a Higen park, seemingly) which overlooked a sparkling artificial lake. They'd stopped in a convenience store and grabbed a pile of snacks, which they began to dig into while screwing around on the line of park benches under the streetlamps.

"Hey, you're not supposed to stand on those..." Talinata mumbled as his sister and JackBox did a very bad rendition of the Charleston together, that resembled more a memory of someone watching a

holodrama where people did the Charleston wrong than the dance itself.

"Oh come on, we're not going to get in trouble!" Kalingkata said, and the two girls broke out in a fit of laughter while linking hands that Talinata tried to pretend he wasn't happy to see till he couldn't stop the smile from spreading on his face.

Kalingkata raised a can of sweetened soymilk up, "A toast!"

Talinata stood up too, and the other smirked as he wobbled a little. "A toast!" he agreed.

"A, uh, a toast!" raising her drink like the others.

"To good friends," Kalingkata said, and they clinked the cans together, and each took a swig.

"...Okay, I'm sitting down now," JackBox announced.

"...But I just stood up."

"Slow and steady... that saying doesn't fit here does it?" Kalingkata said, which caused it to be her turn to be the butt of the joke.

"How did you even think that was related?" JackBox laughed.

"It seemed right in my head!" she mumbled as they all sat down. The lake rolled gently. It was of course all artificial. Carefully regulated by AI, temperature sensors, water monitors, and security cameras. But it gave the illusion of nature, and for the twins, it was the only sort of nature they'd ever known.

"Have you two ever been off Gongen?" JackBox finally asked, after a long but peaceful silence.

They both shook their heads. "No, I've always wondered what it's like there though," Talinata said.

JackBox looked up at the stars, the glass of the dome putting streaks and glints between a pure view of them. "I'm not sure to be happy or sad about that. One of the biggest joys of my life has been getting to come here to Gongen. To meet you two. To... just be

here," her eyes were welling up with tears. Why was she doing that? JackBox tried to make them stop, to not look weak, but as each of the twins put a hand on one of her shoulders, she broke. A flood of tears came out of her, one that she knew couldn't make sense to either of them.

"JackBox... Geraldine... are you okay?" Kalingkata asked.

She tried to nod, "I'm not worth being your friend. I'm a bad person."

"That's not true, that's not true at all," Talinata tried to reassure her, but she shook her head and cut him off with a bite in her voice.

"Yes it is. You don't know what you're talking about. Or what life is like out there on Titan. I've done things to survive that... that..." she broke down sobbing again, and the warm arms of the twins wrapped around her. It only made her sob harder. When was the last time she had been held like this? When she was five? It was gentle, loving, and wanted nothing

from her in return. She wasn't sure how much longer she cried, but by the time she finished she was being handed tissues by Talinata as Kalingkata rubbed her back.

"You feeling any better?" she asked her.

"...Yeah... Thanks. Sorry. I'm really embarrassed."

Talinata smiled, and dabbed her face under her eyes with a tissue. "No need to be sorry. We both care about you, you know."

She looked into his eyes, and smiled, then turned her head to Kalingkata. Her eyes had the same honest care. Throwing her arms around them, she squeezed them in, "...Thank you. Thank you a lot. I just hope I can stay here, with you two, for a long time. Since I got here its like... like I've been moving out of the shadows, into the light."

They all settled in, looking out at the stars reflecting off the water, cuddled up together.

She'd do whatever it took to make this moment last. To keep these people safe and close. Their warmth soaked into her, and she closed her eyes as if it would trap it inside her.

She was never going to go back to Titan, whatever it took.

* * *

Six Months Earlier (June, 2386),

Titan Station, Saturn's moon of Titan

Content warning: Blood, torture, CSA allusion.

JackBox wasn't sure why she'd been called in to see the boss, but she was hoping she could wipe away all her nervous sweat before the door opened. She was only partially successful.

"Ah, look the guest of the hour!" Nick Murrin, or as everyone knew him, Starhawk, announced, his mechanical eye adjusting to focus in on her. He was the bosses' voice. On the other side of the room, Kinnet, her right hand, was chewing on a stylus as he worked on some data on a padd. Like two wings, they supported the bird of prey between them: red hair that fell just past her shoulders, white facepaint with red over the eyes, down the bridge of the nose, and on the lips. Her irises were so pale it almost looked like her eyes were entirely white--and JackBox had never been brave enough to ask if they were contacts or some sort of modification. There was a man under her boot, tied up and bloody. His eyes glanced over at JackBox with a sad desperation that didn't ask to be saved, just for his ordeal to finally end in the land of mortals. A mono-molecular edged Gongen katana was in her hand, and every so often she'd cause the man some more pain with it, but never enough to kill him. JackBox wanted to throw up, but she swallowed the sensation. She took a deep breath, and let it out through the corner of her

lips. She'd survived worse than this here on Titan Station, a lot worse. She just had to survive another day.

Starhawk made a grand sweeping gesture "Raving Red-Jane, ruler of the Accord, master of Titan Station, Queen of the outer rim--"

"That's not the same list of titles as last time," Kinnet mumbled.

Starhawk ignored the interjection, "I present to you JackBox, aka Geraldine McGraw, a loyal servant of ours."

"This is the girl? She's scrawny," was her only reply as she seemed to be inspecting her victim for a new place to injure him.

"JackBox was loyal to you during your takeover, and actually strangled the owner of the brothel she'd been enslaved in when she overheard he was going to stage an attempt on your life."

Red-Jane's entire demeanor changed, and she looked up at JackBox with something akin to respect, or maybe even sympathy. "I like her, once again you've found a good candidate, Nick." She gave JackBox a nod, and she bowed her head in reply.

"What job will I be doing?" she asked. No point in pretending she had a choice. Whatever it was, doing her best at it was her best chance at surviving. It was definitely not worth pointing out that Red-Jane was still fending off rivals to her rule weekly, even if the largest fight was now over.

"This sniveling man leaked our sniper positions during a deal with the Ebon Gate," she poked him again with the katana, doing nothing to muffle the sounds that that caused. "One of their agents almost killed me." She twisted the sword. "Almost." She'd apparently grown bored with her toy, and finally finished him off. JackBox clenched her hand hard so that she didn't flinch when the splatter touched her. Red-Jane wiped the blade off on her victim's clothes.

"Of course, I won. Took her eye. But do you know what that means?"

JackBox did know. She couldn't show how scared she was, couldn't let her voice tremble. She didn't look down at the dead body that was there on the floor. "...It means that the job you were going to be trusting to the, uh, recently departed snitch there is open?"

Red-Jane nodded. "You brief her, I don't want to hear about that rock again." Without another word, or a glance back, Raving Red-Jane walked out of the room like a passing thunderstorm.

Everyone let out a deep breath, and it was somewhat reassuring that the seasoned men were also not used to her. Red-Jane hadn't been in charge of the Accord that long, her coup had barely settled down.

"You're going to Gongen," Kinnet said. "We need someone to deal with sales of liquor and drugs to higher ups there. We have people doing street sales

of course, but it can't be the same person dealing with the Tenryu party members and the like. Do you understand?"

JackBox nodded, "I understand."

Starhawk laughed, "This was easier than I expected. Glad you're onboard. Get ready to leave on the next transport, we'll have a room for you set up in Colocog, that's a city on Gongen--"

"I know what it is."

"Then we'll have everything you'll need sent to your quarters. You'll also need to watch out for the Ebon Gate there, they're not Mavericks, Gongen is their home turf so make sure they don't get one up on you."

"I won't let that happen."

He laughed again, "Okay then. Just make sure you don't let Red-Jane down. You see what happens if you fail, yeah?"

She nodded. She wouldn't fail. She rose and walked out of the room. She didn't know what she was going to find on Gongen, but she knew one thing:

She'd been surviving her whole life.

Maybe, just for a little, she could do more than survive.

Maybe she could live a little, just as a treat.