



Shadow of the Phantom
by Aidan Mason

The Phantom

Within the shadows

Of this school

We were told he was gone

Saved from the delusions of madness

Right?

Was he the Phantom?

Or was it someone else?

Should the story have been called...

The Phantom(s)?

* * *

The bell rang as it always did. The students marched throughout the halls, a melody of words and shouts and music spewing from unplugged headphones, the beat of footsteps of shoes marching down to class after class, cafeteria to bathroom.

And amidst it all, Charlie Parker watched like he always did. While others had friends beside them, lovers intertwined in their arms, or even a hidden pet snake slithering in their backpack (no one tell the principal), Charlie watched alone. There were others that watched alone, but those were only temporary. Soon enough they'd find a partner or their friend would return from being sick, or they'd get a friend that would march with them throughout. Charlie, on the other hand, was a permanent watcher. Alone.

But that was okay. He wouldn't be for long.

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It was the middle of class when it all started. Sang Mi was looking out the window, trying desperately to ignore Saki's latest ramblings about Delirium and the latest findings and god knows what else, while Mrs. Ichinose went on with her lecture. Then Helena Kiner's soft voice cut through the noise and turned the entire day on its head.

"Excuse me, miss?" Helena asked. "Can I...you know...do the **thing**?"

"Oh yes, of course," Mrs. Ichinose replied, her face slightly flustered as if she'd forgotten. "Go ahead; I'll let the officials know."

"Hmn," Saki said as Helena raced out the door. "Wonder what she's doing."

"Oh, she's probably going to see her brother," Ihor interjected. "Since he's in juvie and all."

"Oh, really?" Saki said, her eyes widening with interest. "Tell me more."

"Wait, Sang Mi didn't tell you?" Ihor laughed, turning towards the two girls.

"Well, she mentioned **something**, but she didn't really give me any details," Saki said, giving Sang Mi a bit of a harsh glance. Sang Mi shrugged.

"I wasn't **that** involved in it," she replied. "Besides, it's all done and over with now."

"Regardless, I'd still like to hear it," Saki said with a slight smile, the gears in her mind already turning and sparking to life.

So Ihor spilled the beans, whispering the tale of Maquois the Phantom and his shenanigans with the theater department. Saki listened the whole time, furiously taking notes all the while. Sang Mi, meanwhile grimaced as Ihor went over her involvement and the aftermath, knowing that Saki was going down yet another rabbit hole that she'd be dragged into. Her dread was only cemented when Ihor reached Charlie punching Maquois and the tearful reunion with Helena. Saki would definitely be interested in this.

Almost as soon as the bell rang, Saki turned and hissed,

"Meet me outside and cancel all your plans. We're going on a little trip."

* * *

While everyone else was racing away to get home, Charlie merely walked amidst the marathon of the crowd, not in any rush. Others had parents and families to go back to, so it was understandable that they were in a hurry. Charlie, on the other hand, didn't. And it was all his fault.

* * *

"Tell me again why we're here?" Sang Mi hissed as she and Saki walked into the visiting room of juvie. A soft lofi playlist was wafting through the speakers, but she didn't pay it any attention, instead trying to poke through the ice walls of Saki's mind.

"I had a hunch," Saki simply replied, not even bothering to look at Sang Mi as she sat down in one of the hard plastic seats.

"A hunch?! Really?"

"Look, people don't just decide to reenact *Phantom of the Opera* for no reason," Saki said as Sang Mi took a seat. "This was a mental break and I hardly doubt that it was something that can be brought about by just schoolwork."

"This is lunacy," Sang Mi grumbled. "Ever since you heard about this damn incident you've been obsessed with it."

"Who wouldn't be?" Saki shot back. "This sounds exactly like something we'd be looking for."

"I was involved in it, remember? I got the tapes that caught him. I didn't see anything that would be anything connected to Delirium."

"So then what's the other explanation? Besides, if you didn't think there was anything to it back then, why did you get involved in the first place? You hacked the school's cameras and had your brother show a teacher... how would I put it, not-school-appropriate videos so you could give Ihor the tapes?"

Sang Mi sputtered, but nothing came out. Was there really anything she could say in regards to that? Saki leaned back with a smile as the facility's staff brought forward Maquois. It was that same old annoying smile when she knew that she was right and it hurt Sang Mi to her very core.

It had been in the back of her head, hadn't it? All this time. Sure, with everything going on she wasn't ACTIVELY thinking about it day and night, but it had always puzzled her. What had gone on during **that** day? Could it have been connected to Delirium?

Then Maquois came up and it all came flooding back. The boy's hair had grown longer and he was seemingly a couple inches taller, but the biggest change was his eyes. He'd seemingly had a weight lifted off his shoulders and it showed. His eyes shone brighter than they'd ever had before and the slight smile on his face was genuine.

"Wow, seven whole visitors today?" he joked. "Must've won the lottery."

"Seven?" Sang Mi asked in amazement.

"Yeah. Sister, parents, friends...they add up." He let out a laugh and leaned back in his chair. "So, what can I do for you all?"

"Well, uh, I..." Sang Mi stuttered. She didn't know how to put this. She had no idea what Maquois' mental state was. He seemed perfectly fine now, but who knows if the therapy had done anything for him or not.

"Maquois, I'm Saki, just transferred, blah blah blah introduction over," Saki butted in without a second of hesitation. "I...we are interested in the phantom incident."

Maquois gave a little laugh. "Join the club," he said. "I'm practically famous now from that."

"We don't mean to intrude," Sang Mi hurriedly interjected, poking her elbow into Saki. "All we really wanted to know is if there was a potential...thing...that started the path of the Phantom."

Saki glared at Sang Mi, but this time Sang Mi held her ground. There was no way Sang Mi was going to allow Saki to ask the dozens of invasive questions that she'd obviously had planned.

"You mean a trigger?" Maquois said, furrowing his brow as he went deep into thought. "I guess it all started because of those dreams."

"Dreams?" Saki asked with a smile of interest on her face.

"Oh yeah, that was the catalyst," Maquois said. "I was trapped with the strange...creature, if you can even call it that."

"What kind of creature?" Saki probed.

"Honestly I have no clue," Maquois said. "I couldn't even tell if it was human or not; it was just...a mess of flesh and robotics."

“And do you still have those dreams?” Sang Mi asked.

Maquois shook his head. “Not since the incident, no.”

“Any idea what made them stop?” Saki interjected.

“Either the power of siblinghood or Charlie’s punch,” Maquois laughed. “My therapists say it was Helena, but I think it was the punch.”

“Indeed,” Saki said, looking at him with a new kind of intensity, one that worried Sang Mi ever so slightly.

“Yeah,” Maquois said. “So, any more questions?”

Sang Mi shook her head and turned to look at Saki. That look was still there on Saki’s face, one of discovery, of a generation of new questions.

But she simply shook her head. “No, no more questions from me.”

* * *

It happened again. Charlie hadn’t meant to fall asleep. He had homework to do after all, being a loner didn’t mean he was a bad student. And he had gotten plenty of sleep last night; it was easy to do when there was no one in your house.

But snore into slumber he did and the dreams that he’d had for so long began yet again. It was something familiar this time, a far cry from what he’d been dreaming about lately. Maquois was in the front and center of this one, years older than he was now. Battle armor glistened in what Charlie could only assume was shiplight, a gun strapped to Maquois’ back. Then a monstrously inhuman creature marched down beside him, full of strange implants and mechanical parts melded together with flesh.

“Oh, hey Bog.” Maquois said.

“It’s BOOOOG!” the creature replied, its ugly face frowning in strangely childish anger. It was so repulsive, if Charlie wasn’t forced to watch it due to ‘dream logic’, he’d look away in an instant.

“Jesus christ,” Charlie thought to himself. “If THIS was what he saw, no wonder he went crazy.”

Then it ended like it always did; the vision melting away and the nightmare that he’d created began again. And then the ending; the final act of his story.

The grand explosion.

* * *

“So what now?” Sang Mi said as they walked out of juvie. “You were so hyped about coming here and now you’re just gonna leave?”

“Yep, you hit the nail on the head,” Saki replied. “Meet me back at school tomorrow.”

“Now wait, hold on!” Sang Mi shot back, hurriedly racing in front of Saki. “You’re planning **something**; you let Maquois go way too easy. I know when you’re hiding something, we’ve been looking into Delirium for too long for me not to notice.

Saki sighed. “Look, this isn’t as exciting as I thought it was, but I’m closing up the last of the leads. We’re gonna check out Charlie and Helena tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Cause I’m curious. It could totally be a coincidence that it stopped when it all ended, but there’s always the possibility...”

“The possibility of what?”

“That something else happened on that day. Something that stopped Maquois’ visions.”

Sang Mi practically laughed. “Really? You think that one of them could’ve stopped it?”

“Look, there’s something odd about Charlie at the very least,” Saki said. “You barely see him around; he’s clearly hiding **something**.”

“What if he’s just antisocial? Plenty of people are introverts.”

“I thought about that. But then again, why did **he** end up in the center of the whole Phantom saga?”

“Huh?”

“Think about it. Ihor was involved because he was directly affected by it. Helena and Maquois for obvious reasons. Hell, you and your brother were involved because of your connection with Ihor. But why Charlie? Remember, he went in to **punch** Maquois. He did that deliberately even though **he wasn’t involved at all**.”

“He was a suspect though,” Sang Mi countered. “People saw him in the hallways.”

“Yes, but no one told him that. Come on now, Sang Mi, I thought you were clever. For all intents and purposes, he wouldn’t have known what was going on.”

“What’s your point?” Sang Mi sighed.

“The point is that Charlie somehow knew enough that Maquois would be in that theater. The investigation cleared him of being the Phantom or being involved with Maquois, so there’s only one other explanation.”

“And that is?”

“He had knowledge of an event he couldn’t have possibly known was going to happen.”

* * *

Charlie groaned as he woke up. What time was it? He glanced at the clock next to his bed; 2AM in the morning. Great. Just what he needed. With a grunt, he fell off of his family’s couch and stood up rubbing his eyes.

Glancing towards the door, his heart beat faster when he saw a nice little brown package outside the window. Perfect; his delivery had arrived. Hurriedly opening the door, he grabbed the package and pulled it inside.

As the door slammed shut, he couldn’t help, but notice the little painting that was on the front. His father had done that, back when he had a father at least. “It’ll make our door the talk of the town!” the old man had said. At the time Charlie had only laughed at his father’s pie-in-the-sky dreams, but now he’d given anything to hear them again.

His mother too. He could just imagine her voice, encouraging his Dad as he stroked the brush across the door, still energetic even after coming back from work. That was the thing about his mother; what she lacked in common sense, she made up with in enthusiasm and spirit.

He tore open the package, fueled by those memories. Metal parts spewed out onto the floor, around five or six in varying sizes and shapes. To any outsider, it would look like utter junk, but it was exactly what Charlie needed.

“Now all I need is fuel,” he thought to himself. *“And then I’ll have everything I need.”*

* * *

“So who’s first?” Sang Mi reluctantly asked as they walked into school the next day. The hallway was so loud with the hustle and bustle of students that she had to repeat it over the mass of sound.

“Well, Charlie technically, but we need to stop by Ihor first,” Saki replied as they finally reached a quieter section. “Charlie’s slippery; I certainly don’t know where he hangs out most of the time.”

Sang Mi opened her mouth, but shut it before she said anything. It hit her; she didn’t know where Charlie hung out most of the time either. Even when he was in her classes she had no idea where he went afterwards.

“And what makes you think Ihor’s gonna know?” Sang Mi shot back. “Charlie left after he punched Maquois, remember?”

“Well it’s better than just standing around, hoping that he magically falls into our laps,” Saki said.

“Fine,” Sang Mi said as they walked into the class. The two looked around, only to see a grand total of zero Ihors situated amidst the desk. Before they could do anything else, the bell rang, forcing the two to sit down as the lecture began.

“That’s...unfortunate” Saki hissed. She hadn’t planned for this. It was around the time people started getting sick, sure, but it hadn’t gone into full swing yet.

“Now what?” Sang Mi asked.

“I...don’t know.”

* * *

“Hey! Rager tonight at 10! You down?”

“Hell yeah!”

Charlie sighed a little bit as the two students walked past him. He couldn’t help, but long to join them, even though he knew the reality of his situation. He didn’t like being this distant, this far away from everyone else. There was nothing more he wanted then to join that rager, dance in the purple lights with his peers as they committed acts of debauchery and mindless fun in ways only those who were still young could.

But he had to remain a watcher, a silent seer. This had to be the way it was done. Otherwise when he was gone, he’d leave behind a sea of shattered hearts and he

didn't want that at all. It was easier for him to just hurt himself rather than potentially leave behind a world of hurt.

He checked his phone; the delivery of fuel had arrived. Good. All could come together tonight. Shoving it back into his pocket, he started to walk down the hallway, ready to skip the rest of his classes to get it done.

Or rather, he would have, if he hadn't sleepily slipped on a puddle of alcohol, left over from a confiscation earlier in the day. Normally he would've been able to recover, but the leftover tiredness from last night overtook him and he fell to the floor, knocking himself clean out.

* * *

The visions began again. This time he was seeing a vision from **his future**. It was hard to make out, but he could see two women; Sang Mi and Saki, sitting in front of him as the three sat around a table on the theater stage. He could vaguely hear snippets of what they were saying; "phantom", "punch", "delirium", and "care".

Almost as soon as it had begun, it fell away to his nightmare. To **that day**, when his parents were erased from reality. He relived every second of the original nightmare, the initial shock when he'd woken up as the morning light streamed through the room, and the journey to the kitchen where he was ready to have a hearty laugh about the stupid dream. Only to find that they weren't there. And they weren't in their room. They weren't even in his mother's work database or in the school system's "legal guardian" list. They were nowhere. Erased from reality.

Then came the grand finale. The vision of the future that was always clear, a path that he knew since he went to sleep on the first day of his new reality, a path that he had decided to take once he knew what it would bring.

He was flying, over the houses, over the school. Then, once he was above the roof, he detonated the jetpack, blowing him to pieces and bringing back his parents.

* * *

Charlie let out a groan as he woke up. The school nurse was fussing over him, checking his vitals and placing a bag of ice over his aching head. She said some stuff and he answered her questions semi automatically, watching out the window for the inevitable arrival of the two girls.

The clock that sat on the wall ticked away and Charlie anxiously tapped his feet as the nurse continued to write on the clipboard. What was taking so long? Couldn't

she hurry up? It didn't matter if he had brain damage or a concussion or whatever; he'd be dead by the end of the night anyway. There was no reason to waste resources on him.

But eventually she finished and sent him on his way with a lollipop. Rather outdated given their grade level, but Charlie appreciated the gesture. He instinctively stuck it in his mouth, letting himself indulge in the old childhood memories. Oh, those simple days, before he'd been given this strange power, these visions, and been thrown into this hell he could tell nobody about.

Tossing the candy in the trash as he walked out the door, he turned to find Saki and Sang Mi walking down the hallway, the two arguing furiously about what to do next. He could hear his name multiple times, Saki in particular. Taking a breath, he marched into the hallway and turned to face the two.

"Heard you said my name?" he said, causing the two to instantly stop in their tracks.

"Oh, hi Charlie!" Sang Mi said nervously.

"Do you have a minute?" Saki asked, not even wasting a second.

Charlie nodded.

"Of course," he said. "I've been expecting you."

* * *

It was exactly as Charlie's vision had foretold. The three of them sat around a table set up in the center of the theater stage, Charlie on one side and Sang Mi and Saki on the other. The lights were dim, but not completely dead, giving the room a vibe of interrogation, of secrets waiting to be uncovered. Any other kid brought here would've probably been freaked out beyond belief and spilled any secret the two girls wanted to know.

That is, it would've been if Charlie was like the rest. But he wasn't. He had gone through so much and seen things beyond human imagination. Barely anything fazed him anymore. To him, all this was just one last hurdle before he could finish his mission, save his parents.

"So, what's this all about?" he asked. It was a genuine question, to be fair. Just because he knew they were coming for him didn't mean that he knew what they were here for.

“Well...uh,” Sang Mi stuttered.

“We’re here about the Phantom incident,” Saki jumped in.

Charlie frowned slightly. That was...odd. Why would they want to know about **that**? All that nonsense had been dealt with a while back. He hadn’t even been that much involved in it in the first place. All he’d really done was punch Maquois and watch the chaos unfold, just like it had played out in his dreams.

“What about it?” he asked. “I told everything already to the school officials and I’m pretty sure that my punch was considered self defense, right?”

“It’s not about that,” Sang Mi said.

“Then what is it about?” Charlie asked. He was somewhat confused. What else could there be to ask about? And for that matter, why were **they** asking him? Was this some kind of true crime podcast?

“Well,” Saki said, leaning in a bit. “We’re just curious how you found out how this thing was going on.”

“Huh?”

“Like, you weren’t involved in the theater at ALL. The most you probably knew was when Maquois ran by you in the hallway. So how did you know where he was gonna be?”

“I listened?” Charlie said, trying his best to keep his composure. “It’s not hard to hear rumors.”

“But what **rumors** would tell you that he was going to be there at that time?” Saki said. “The rumors were about **who** the Phantom was, not **where** he was.”

“Wh...what are you trying to say?”

“Tell me,” Saki said, getting up from her seat and leaning right up against the table. Her eyes practically met Charlie’s and he shivered slightly. “What were your dreams like?”

His heart skipped a beat. The room suddenly seemed to shrink around him and his mind raced rapidly. How the hell did they know about that? Did they have those dreams too? Or were they just bluffing?

“Stay focused!” he thought to himself. He had to get through this so he could get home and trade his life for his parents’. That meant that he had to get through this without arousing suspicion or getting detained in any way.

“Excuse me?” he said in the most baffled tone he could muster.

“You don’t have dreams of the future or anything like that?” Saki pressed. “Of events yet to happen? Deliriums of moments yet to pass?”

“Uh...no?” Charlie said. He looked at her as if he had exactly no idea what they were talking about. It was practically a perfect act; Sang Mi was already pulling at Saki’s sleeve to try and get her to stop.

“Are you sure?” Saki said, leaning in closer and closer.

“Pretty sure,” Charlie replied. “Seriously, Saki, is everything okay?”

“Saki!” Sang Mi cried out, pulling her back into her seat. “He doesn’t know! You’re barking up the wrong tree!”

“But then how did he know?!” Saki shot back.

“He probably just got lucky! Come on Saki, let it go!”

“You know, just because I’m a bit of a loner, doesn’t mean that I’m a future killer in the making,” Charlie added on. “Some people just don’t have a lot of friends.”

That cemented it. Saki looked utterly humiliated, all her confidence and aggression drained away. Defeated, she muttered an apology, then gathered up her things and started to walk out of the theater, her shoes leaving behind defeated footsteps in the empty auditorium.

Sang Mi grabbed her backpack and turned to follow her as well. But before she started to walk, she paused and turned around to face Charlie.

“Hey,” she said. “Have you, by any chance...lost someone?” Charlie nearly fell out of his chair, only just barely able to keep his composure.

“Uhh...yeah,” he said, not quite sure what to say in response to that.

“Thought so,” Sang Mi replied. She pulled her chair back and sat down in it slightly, her eyes meeting Charlie’s as she continued to speak.

“I’ve been through...tragedy myself,” she said. “Grief, the whole shebang. And I know how it can isolate people. So...if you ever need anything, come talk to me okay?”

“S...sure. Wil...will do,” Charlie stuttered as Sang Mi stood up and raced after Sang Mi. His heart was racing. The words kept playing in his head and he felt feelings that he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

“*Focus!*” he thought to himself. He grabbed his stuff and raced out of the theater, running towards his house as fast as he could. He tried to keep the thoughts of his mission in his head, the memories of his parents strong. And yet for the first time in a while, there was doubt in his heart.

* * *

“What took you so long?” Saki asked.

“Personal stuff,” Sang Mi replied. “You know, you really need to get your head out of your ass every once in a while.”

“Excuse me?”

“Charlie’s clearly going through some shit,” Sang Mi said as the two walked out the door. “He’s just detached, that’s all.”

“Are you saying that I’m trying to be an asshole?”

“No...I just think that perhaps you have a bit of Delirium of your own. A delirium that you can’t always see past.”

With that Sang Mi split from Saki and walked away. Saki just watched her go for a moment, then turned the other way and started to walk down her own path.”

* * *

The jetpack felt heavier and heavier the longer Charlie kept holding it, but he just couldn’t find it in him to put it on. There was nothing stopping him; it was dark as void outside and the house was empty as usual. Barely any sounds were left, apart from the occasional drunk stumbling around or the TV in the background spouting some shit about a secret Maverick group that were building flesh starships or something like that.

“*Come on, move!*” Charlie thought to himself. He practically forced himself to put the jetpack on, pulling the straps and tightening the belt. And yet the whole time he couldn’t stop thinking of Sang Mi’s words.

She was right. That was what he'd been doing this whole time. Somehow, without the proper context, this girl that barely knew him had exposed his feelings bare and it felt...strangely good? To finally be seen, to be out there.

"The mission," Charlie tried to focus, just repeating the same phrase over and over. *"The mission."*

He had to do this. To bring his parents back, he had to die here and now. That was what his visions, his "delirium" had told him. There was no other way. It happened this very way every time he dreamed; an exploding jetpack, taking him out and bringing back his parents.

But...was this what he wanted? He thought back to Maquois; why had he gotten involved then? The visions he'd had showed Maquois getting punched, but it had never shown him **who** did it. It didn't have to be him. So why? Sure, his punch had effectively ended those visions that tormented him, but he didn't know that at the time. So why did he do it?

More memories came back, of his fight with Hanzo. He didn't remember much about it, only that Hanzo was bullying some kid. This wasn't even a part of a vision, he'd just seen it happen. Why? What was connecting it all?

The desire he'd had earlier when hearing about the party came back, only this time he truly understood what it was. He didn't just want to belong, he wanted to help other people, to be a part of a community. In spite of his grand mission, those little moments where he'd let himself intervene, let himself be a part of something greater.

"That's why I have to do this!" Charlie tried to rationalize. But it just didn't work. Desperate, he raced outside and took a look at the painting at the door. It shone there just as vividly, but it wasn't enough this time to get him to focus.

If anything, that very image made him pause again. Words, images floated into his head, a memory that he'd long forgotten. It was strange; he'd tried so hard to preserve any memory he'd had of his parents, but this one had slipped through the cracks.

"Awesome drawing!" he'd said on that day, crawling into his father's arms for a hug. His dad had laughed and his mother too.

"Indeed," his dad had replied. "But my greatest painting is you, don't you forget."

“Mine too,” his mother had interjected. “This door will break down someday, but we’re gonna keep you forever!”

Charlie shook his head, but he couldn’t stop the tears flowing from his eyes. Everything was just so confused, so messy, he just wanted clarity, he wanted his parents back, he wanted to save them but also himself and and and and...

With a scream, he slammed his hand into the jetpack and it roared into the air. The wind blew in his face as he flew over the houses, over the buildings, over the terraformed surface. He didn’t stop until he reached the school, floating just above the roof.

“This is it,” he thought to himself. He pushed a button situated on the right arm strap of the jetpack, priming it for detonation. The device let out a loud beep, a warning that it was going to explode. Taking in a deep breath, Charlie opened his eyes for the last time and took a look at the view.

And then he tore off the jetpack and fell to the roof, rolling as he landed so he wouldn’t break anything. The jetpack spun through the air, no longer attached to anything as the beeping got louder and louder. Filled with panic, Charlie raced to the edge of the roof only to see it slam into his house directly into the painting, exploding and sending a stream of fiery light into the darkness.

Charlie screamed. This hadn’t been what he’d wanted to do at all! His eyes were waterworks now as the painting burnt away in the flame. Now who was going to remember his parents?

He stopped. Remembering his parents. The thought caught into his brain like a fishhook and it wouldn’t let go. That...that was why he’d let go of the jetpack. It wasn’t an accident, it was a choice, and that fishhook stayed there because that was **his** reason for the choice. He shook his head. What a mistake. It would’ve been so much better if they were **here**, not just memories...

But would they have been happy here? Without him? He tried to convince himself the answer was yes, that he would’ve been making the right choice. But would they? The same people that had told him that he was their painting, their eternity?

“No,” he thought to himself as he watched his house burn. *“No, I guess they wouldn’t be.”*

Clarity came over him, for the first time in a while. He had pushed himself away, not just from society, but from the wishes of his parents as well. They probably hadn’t wanted to be erased from reality by whatever the hell he had done, but they

wouldn't have wanted him to die either. And if he died, who would remember them? He had to live; that was the only way.

His mind instantly flooded with the possibilities. There was so much he could do now, so much that he could experience. But would it be appropriate here? No, he decided, not here. This wasn't a place for him anymore. He'd overstayed his time here. He had to move forward now, on a path of his own. Maybe he could go find that Maverick group breeding living spaceships or chart a path of his own through space. Anything was possible.

"Although," he thought to himself. *"There is one thing I have to do first."*

* * *

"Maquois!" Helena shouted. The entire lunchroom turned to see the sheepish student standing there, a goofy smile on his face and a duffle bag over his arm. Without a second of hesitation Helena lept up from her table and raced over to him, throwing her arms around him in a hug.

"He's been released?" Saki said in surprise.

"Guess so," Sang Mi said. "There's been rumors he was supposed to be sometime soon, after all."

Practically all conversation stopped as the lunchroom watched the Kiner siblings reunite. Helena finally pulled away from him, her face a mess of streaming snot and tears.

"But how?" she asked. "They told me someone had to come get you and Mom and Dad were busy today..."

"Oh, Charlie did it," Maquois laughed. "Said he owed me one after that punch."

"Charlie?" Helena said.

"Yeah, can you believe it? Funnily enough, it seemed like it was the happiest he'd been in months. Even said that he'd 'see me again someday', whatever that meant. Oh, yeah..."

Pausing for a moment, Maquois rummaged around in his duffle bag, until he pulled out a letter. "Anyone know where Sang Mi's at? Charlie told me to give this to you. Said he couldn't stay cause he's got 'business' elsewhere"

“Right here!” Sang Mi said, racing over and grabbing the letter from him. Saki followed close behind, her eyes widened and eager.

“What is it?” Saki hissed as the crowd dispersed and Helena led Maquois back to her table.

“Just wait a minute!” Sang Mi shot back. She tore open the paper and pulled out a sheet of paper, one that seemed to have been ripped out of a notebook. There weren’t many words on it, but the boldness of the sharpie made up for that.

Thank you Sang Mi, for rescuing me from my delirium.

Saki gasped. “So he **was** hiding it!” she said. “I knew it! I knew it!”

“Alright, alright, calm down,” Sang Mi replied. She let herself smile a little bit. Saki may have gotten her meaning from the note, but there was a special little meaning just for her that Saki would never really know.

“Good to have you back, Charlie,” she muttered.

* * *

SOMETIME LATER

“Come on, hurry up!” a woman’s voice shouted.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Charlie groaned. “Just give me a second Lydia; I’m not used to this kind of armor.”

With a grunt, Charlie put on his boots and stood up. He shook his legs to make sure that they were on right, then started to walk down the hallway. It was heavy as hell, but he was sure that he’d get used to it soon enough.

“Oh, hey Bog,” Maquois said, his voice wafting down the hallway and into Charlie’s ears.

“It’s BOOOG!”

Charlie snorted. His life had definitely changed, but some things really did seem to have stayed the same.

Still, that was part of the joy of living, wasn’t it?

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

Twenty years ago, a card game came out that changed the world. And next week, we'll celebrate it. Uh... why did you hand me this card Mr. Mori? What card game? War? No that game is too old for that... huh. Wonder what kind of anniversary this is talking about.

Regardless, have you been seeing anything weird around town lately? Like... something out of the corner of your eye?

Something... unnatural?

Probably just me.

But if its not...Well...

Till next time, I'm your announcer from the Broadcast Club, Hee Jin!

Tune in Next Week For:

A Wasps' Nest of Ghosts

By James Wylder

A WARSONG 20th Anniversary Tale

New Academy 27 stories will drop each Thursday!

Read past stories and learn more about Academy 27 at:

ArcbeatlePress.com/A27

**Don't let your dreams be dreams.
Make them everyone's problem.**

Delirium 
BY XELABS

It's not just a sleep aid, it's a dream aid.



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