

A Wasps' Nest of Ghouls

by James
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Academy27



Academy 27, WARSONG, and WARS TCG Present,
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Part 1: The Red Mask Lady

There was something wrong with her dreams, and not just because Sang Mi didn't really know what she was doing with her future; no, it was mostly the cosmic horror. Most of the world around her was a black void which seemed to rush her lungs with a terrifying emptiness when she tried to breathe. She clutched at her throat, and below her a great swirl moved – blue and purple and white and wonderful and terrible. She had seen this in her dreams before – it had to mean something. But whatever that was was obscured to her. She reached a hand out towards it, and whispers greeted her. She faded out, and the world of the waking faded in.

Her hand was reaching up towards the ceiling, the marbled paint coming into focus between her fingers. In her other hand, she was still holding the blister pack that had held the pair of Delirium pills she'd taken. Pills that her long-term-acquaintance (she refused to use the word *friend*) Saki had given her. Pills that, whenever she took them, seemed to take her to that void, and the monstrous and glorious swirl of light and color that cut through it all.

"How'd you dream?" Saki said, rolling over on the other bed in the hotel room. "And don't use me asking as an excuse to not fill out the questionnaire. I'm collecting data, not girl-talk."

Sang Mi lowered her hand and rolled over to look at her. Saki Suzuki, presumably also 17, ish. Somehow both beautiful and nondescript in a way that unnerved Sang Mi. "I saw the swirl again."

Saki nodded, and sat up, taking a sip of water from a bottle that was quickly handed to her by the porter-bot that was part of the room's amenities. "It's the most common image we've gotten while taking Delirium. It has to mean something."

Sang-Mi shrugged. "Maybe. Hey Saki, this drug was made by XeLabs, you said that right? And discontinued?"

Saki nodded again.

"How do we keep getting a hold of them? If they haven't been manufactured in years, wouldn't the pills expire, or the supply run out?"

Saki held her gaze for an awkwardly long moment, and then got up and turned her back on her. "Don't worry about that. You take the drugs, I make sure your big brother keeps his internship. That's all you need to know."

"Great, love the transparency in our partnership."

Saki turned back, smiling ear to ear. "I know! Isn't it great?"

Sang Mi groaned and reached over to turn on the room's entertainment system, slamming play on one of the recommended films for the day without much attention. To her surprise, Saki turned towards the screen, and seemed to lose herself in it, so Sang Mi gave it her full attention too.

It was a movie in Japanese, a language Sang Mi was fluent in even though she hadn't enjoyed learning it in school. A woman was waiting under a streetlamp, presumably for an autocar pick up, when she looked up to see another woman across the street from her wearing a white facemask. The lights flickered, and suddenly the woman across from her was gone! Turning to look for the car, she startled in a cheap jump scare as the masked woman was suddenly next to her. The masked woman leaned in too close and asked: "Do you think I'm pretty?"

The woman stumbled over her words, before answering: "Yes! Yes of course!"

The masked woman removed the mask to reveal that someone had carved through her cheeks all the way to the jaw to make a grisly, wide smile. This effect was however undercut by the prosthetics and CGI not lining up entirely right. With wild eyes, she

leaned in even closer, pulling out a pair of sharp surgical scissors. "How about now? Am I pretty now?"

Saki glanced over at her. "Have you seen this one before? It's pretty good, the effects aren't great but the lady playing Kuchisake-onna is very good. Kuchisake-onna means--"

"Slit-Mouthed Woman, I know." Things were getting very bloody on the screen as they conversed. "We call her the Red Mask Lady around here. The big difference being that... well, her mask is red."

They watched the movie together for longer than either had planned, and when Sang Mi went home, she just hoped she wouldn't dream about the monster when she went to bed the next night.

Of course she did.

A red mask pulling away to reveal a disfigured face, the sharp scissors, and the warm breath as she leaned in to ask "Am I pretty?"

* * *

The blow from the wooden sword on her forearm stung, and caused Sang Mi to drop it, shaking her arm out while hopping up and down and making "ah!" noises.

Their teacher, Ms. Shion, did not sigh (she was a robot after all), but she looked like she wanted to. "Miss Jhe, you cannot continue trying to block a sword with your arm. The best case scenario is you get bruised like you just did, and the worst case scenario is it is an actual sword in which case you would be on your way to the hospital with one less arm."

Leaning down to pick her own practice sword up, she mumbled a "Yes Ms. Shion" and got back into position. She was facing off with her classmate Jae Hyun, who had a massive crush on her. She'd hoped that this would mean he'd take it easy on her, but she had realized too late he was going for "I'm going to show her how good I am!" rather than "I'll let her win!" today in terms of gambits to get on her good side. It was unfortunate--Sang Mi knew she was going to have to put forth actual effort, something she tried to avoid whenever possible. Or at least so she told herself.

Jae Hyun squared his shoulders up, and with a smirk he clearly thought made him look cool, came at her again. This time, Sang Mi used her training and blocked it, the crack of wood against wood echoing in the chamber. He looked flustered that she'd parried so easily, and swung down again harder, which she blocked with a horizontal upswing, keeping the momentum going to try to swing his sword off to the side. It sort of worked, but he put his muscle into it and they ended up with their swords locked in the air each trying to outdo the other.

After a moment, a bead of sweat dripping down her face, Sang Mi suddenly realized what she needed to do, and stopped pushing back. Jae Hyun, who had gotten absorbed in winning their contest instead of the actual goals of kendo, was unable to stop his swing going downwards, and losing his balance in the process. Taking a step to the left, Sang Mi lightly whacked him in the tummy.

"Point," she said with a little too much self-aggrandizement.

"Excellent maneuver, Ms. Jhe. While I'd like for you to finish your match, it is now time for all of you to clean up before heading to your next class. Please be sure to shower--even you, Ms. Ahn, I don't care if you're just going to have to shower again at Track Practice, Mr. Xi has complained to me about your sweatiness in maths class again."

Ahn Hee Jin mumbled an assent, and the class headed out to follow their teacher's orders. She slid into her class locker to get her shower kit, only to have her peace broken by Li Xiu.

"Is your arm okay?"

She looked at the bruise. "Yeah, I'm fine. At least no one carved my face up."

Li Xiu tilted her head. "That's... a weird reply?"

"It's.. there's this urban legend about a woman in a red mask who carves your face up if you say yes when she asks if you're pretty. It's a whole thing. Saki and I watched a movie about it yesterday, so I keep thinking about it."

"So, are you and Saki dating?" Li Xiu asked her.

Sang Mi groaned, and looked to her left for a friendly face. Unfortunately, there was only Zhyrgal Osmonova. Whom she may have spent a day stalking and accusing her of being an Earther spy in the past. Zhyrgal looked at her with the unfazed look of someone about to enjoy someone else having a bad time.

Sang Mi sighed and turned back to Li Xiu. "No. Absolutely never not ever no."

"Dost thou protest too--"

"No, I'm protesting just enough, too little even. Look, is this about Jae Hyun?"

Li Xiu tried to nonchalantly throw her hair back, but overdid it and whacked her hand into the locker door, making her yelp. "Ow! I mean uh, no, of course not. Why would that be, uh, no."

"Thou dost protest too much."

"Whatever. Look, I invited him to the big wedding my family is having this weekend. That's not a problem for you is it?"

She looked away from her, and felt her stomach twist in her chest. "Why would it be a problem for me? He's just a stupid boy who follows me around everywhere."

Li Xiu didn't reply.

"If I was bothered I'd say something. Okay?"

Li Xiu bit her lip.

"I'm really not bothered, okay! It's not something I'm concerned about. I really couldn't care less about—where did you say it was happening again?"

"The Pinnacle of Light Skyscraper we own in the Main Dome."

"Yeah, I couldn't... your family owns a skyscraper?"

"That's not really the point."

Sang Mi shrugged. "Whatever. Like I said, I don't care. Do whatever. It's not like I'd be able to show him a skyscraper even if I wanted to." She looked over at Zhyrgal, who looked much more awkward about how the conversation had gone, all while rooting through her bag. Sighing, Sang Mi reached into her locker and pulled a pad out, holding it out to Zhyrgal.

"...Thanks," she took it, awkwardly.

"No problem. You had the look."

Sang Mi looked back at Li Xiu, and slammed her locker as she walked away towards the showers.

Damn girl was getting worked up over nothing.

Sang Mi was glad for the chance to shower; if the water was a nice medium-hot temperature she would gladly sit in the shower all day. Of course, this wouldn't do at school, and at home her mom got worried every time she was in there too long that her depression meds weren't working anymore, but she'd take the enjoyment nonetheless. And right now, the water felt like it was washing away the stress of the day. Or, well, it was at first.

"We're not meeting tonight," a voice came from the stall next to her. It was, of course, Saki.

"Could you please let me just enjoy my shower?"

"You should be happy, congratulations, you have the night off. Gosh, thank you Saki, what a kind and generous person you are."

"Something has come up you don't want to tell me about," Sang Mi sighed, tilting her head up to let the water douse her face.

"I'll contact you when I'm ready to meet again."

"Great conversation."

* * *

After school was Track Practice, which went well enough, though the bruise on her arm from where Jae Hyun had hit her was still sore. And it was still sore when she got on the train for the ride home. Usually, she'd take it with her twin brother, but he, in an update that was not frustrating or jealousy-inspiring for her at all, promise, had a date that night. So, she was alone in the car scrolling through her phone when the train stopped, and a woman got on.

The timing seemed odd; they'd just stopped at the station that led to the grocery store, and it seemed like it had been too fast for them to have reached Higen Park. So she looked up.

It had been too fast. They hadn't stopped at a place on the schedule. This was worrisome by itself, but the passenger who had gotten on made it doubly so. She was wearing a red face mask, which accentuated her piercing brown eyes, which hovered

between the mask and the straight bangs of her long black hair. She wore a light brown trench coat with large lapels, and brown slip-on shoes.

The woman stared at her.

Sang Mi gave her a fake smile, and then tried to get back to her phone.

"Tell me, am I pretty?"

Sang Mi sighed. "Sorry, lady, I don't talk to people on the train."

The woman got up and slid in next to her.

Sang Mi slid away down the bench. The woman didn't stop staring, her eyes fierce. Manic, even.

"Am I pretty?"

"I think that we shouldn't define ourselves by beauty standards that are still defined by--"

"AM. I. PRETTY!?" she howled, and Sang Mi could have sworn her hair billowed as if a gust of wind had come by.

Holding both hands up, Sang Mi scooted further away. "Okay, look, I get what you're trying to do here. I know all about the Red Mask Lady, the whole schtick. You ask if I think you're pretty, and then if I say yes, you cut my face open or kill me or whatever. So just to make it clear, we're in a public transit car with cameras..."

She glanced up and trailed off as she realized that the little indicator lights that showed that yes--everyone in the car was being monitored at all times by the government--were off. "Ah," she finished lamely.

The woman reached up and pulled the mask fastener on her left ear down so it hung from the other ear.

Beneath it was a too-wide smile carved from ear to ear, and as the woman spoke again, double rows of shining and sharp metallic teeth glinted. "I asked you, am I pretty?"

Sang Mi sat in silence, trying to figure out the answer that would best work. In some of the legends...

"I think you look... average?" she ventured.

"Yes or no," she countered, and from her coat drew a large pair of long red scissors. In the legends they were supposed to be fabric or surgical scissors, but Sang Mi knew these weren't that--those were bone cutting scissors. Her parents owned a pair, though Sang Mi couldn't remember a time they'd ever used them in the kitchen so they'd gathered dust.

But these were bigger, and maybe it was just her imagination, but sharper. She imagined they had to be used on larger animals. Or corpses.

Her mind was a blank. She tried to think of what to do. She'd had countless fantasies in her head of dangerous situations like this where she'd been a kick-ass heroine, but here she was, and she couldn't think of what to do. What to say.

In the end, she did the only thing that came to her.

She chucked her phone at the Red Mask Lady's head.

The good news was that it slammed into the woman's forehead, and she reeled backwards. The bad news was that the woman surged forward again, and Sang Mi's instincts came in again—she raised her forearm, and the woman sank her metal teeth into her arm, ripping through skin and dribbling blood out onto the floor. Sang Mi screamed. The woman grinned.

But her training didn't end there. Ms. Shion would be proud—because she immediately counter-attacked, swinging her fist down onto the woman's head. She screamed, opening her jaw and freeing Sang Mi, falling down onto her back on the floor as she held her head. This gave Sang Mi time to rush towards the doors of the train and hit the emergency stop button, grabbing onto a railing as the force of the sudden stop threw the woman back further. The emergency release on the doors went off, and Sang Mi rushed out into a cold Gongen night, the thin air stinging her lungs as she ran. And she ran hard, ignoring the blood that trickled out as her arms pumped. She had to escape. It was the only thing that mattered. She was in the wastes, the area between the habitation domes in the middle of the long process of terraforming. The train wasn't supposed to have left the dome--her school and her home were both in Cheonsa dome, and the rest of the city of Takumi was connected by enclosed tunnels and paths.

The train wasn't supposed to leave the city.

Her heart pounded even harder as she kept running. She had dropped her bag, her school supplies weren't worth her life, and whatever was happening she wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

It had to be the Delirium, right?

It wouldn't be the weirdest thing that happened because of that drug.

Or maybe her meds really were fading. She didn't want to think about the things that might fill her mind if that was the case.

She ran. And ran. Until she knew she needed to stop, regardless of who was chasing her. Not only were her muscles giving out, but she was feeling lightheaded. Maybe she'd lost more blood than she'd like to think about.

Sang Mi came to a halt in nowhere. She panted, and spun around ready to come to blows--there was nothing behind her. She was alone, and no matter which direction she looked there was nothing. She reached under her jacket and ripped off a chunk of her shirt, wrapping it as tightly as she could around her wounded arm. She scrunched her shoulders in and folded her arms. It was cold, far below freezing. The panic she'd felt had kept her going without her body really registering the temperature, let alone the pain, but now it suddenly sank into her bones, made worse by the layer of cooling sweat on her skin. The planet had warmed up considerably over centuries of terraforming, but there was a reason people lived in the habitation domes. Gongen might make jokes about how Earthers couldn't stand the cold or the thin air, but everyone knew getting caught unprepared in the wastes was a death sentence.

More than one family had been sentenced to walk into the wastes with no gear or food as punishment for some transgression. Many debated whether that was cruel or kind.

That being said, it was definitely embarrassing she had put herself in this situation.

She couldn't just keep standing here, she needed to keep moving. *Come on then, you're smart. Think.*

Takumi was located on the planet's equator--which allowed the moon of Phobos to pass directly overhead as it followed the path of it. One of her elementary school teachers had told her they'd put the city there just so the moon would pass overhead, which was romantic, but after some fact checking she'd learned they'd just picked this location because the equator was the warmest place on a cold planet.

Phobos was on the horizon--it moved from west to east in the sky, and passed overhead three times and some change each day. She tried to think if in the last 7 hours and 39 minutes she'd looked up at the sky.

She closed her eyes, and tried to ignore the cold, tried to think.

She'd been running at track practice. Hee Jin's ponytail was in her line of sight as they circled the track, but beyond the back of her friend's head... The side of the track closest to the wastes faced west. She knew that because her friend JackBox lived in Colocog that way. Over the course of practice, it had moved slightly overhead... starting from the side of the dome to the west.

Phobos was in the East now. That was East.

She'd seen the moon out the window on the other side of the train, that was east. The Train had been heading south-east-ish out of the city. She turned herself, and started in a direction she was pretty sure was north-west and started trudging.

It got colder, and colder, and pretty soon Sang Mi was regretting not letting the woman carve her face in. Then she saw it--a little moving thing on the horizon. She began to yell, to jump up and down, waving, then running towards it. Her exhaustion took a brief leave of absence as her body went into overdrive--she stumbled as her cold limbs pushed themselves. She couldn't let this chance pass her by. She didn't know why any of this was happening, but she sure was hell wasn't going to die out here.

The dot settled, and then turned, and started heading towards her.

Thank God. Praise God. She fell to her knees, it was too cold to cry, but she wanted to. Her body gave out under her as she continued to wave.

Eventually a hover truck pulled up in front of her, the lights blinding her and leaving the two figures who dropped off the sides of it to be black shapes.

"It's a kid, what the hell is she doin' out here?" She could tell by the accents, and the English, that they were Mavericks from the Colocog colony.

"I got attacked! I was on a train, it's... look, thank you, please I just need to get home."

The pair got closer; one was a Caucasian man with short blonde hair who was handsome even with the facial tattoos that weren't to Sang Mi's liking, as well as more than a few cybernetic parts, and the other a woman who gave off strange vibes of being a bit Earther, a bit Gongen, and a bit Maverick, dressed in a refined business suit with red tattoos curling up from under the collar.

"You're pretty far from home, kid," the woman said.

"Like I said, I got attacked!" She held up her arm to show the now reddened shirt scrap bandage. "Look, you're from Colocog, right? I know JackBox, I'm a good friend of hers."

"Who?" the woman asked.

"An agent of ours in the area. Not someone to mess with," he grunted.

"Can I please get in the truck, I am freezing. I really don't feel good."

"We should just shoot her," the woman said. "Better no one knows we were here."

Sang Mi froze up, on top of being frozen. Her jaw trembled slightly. That was... that had to be a joke, right? Yeah. Yeah...

He shook his head. "Nah," he said as he pulled out a comm, and hit a switch on it. "Hey JackBox, it's Starhawk."

JackBox's voice chimed out of the comm. "Hey boss--wait, there's no delay, you're on world?"

"Long story here with Horus' aide, Petra. You got a friend named... shit, what's your name, kid?"

"Jhe Sang Mi! I'm Jhe Sang Mi! Or Kalingkata, that's a nickname! I--"

"I got it, shut up. You hear that?"

"That's my friend, she helped me land the deal with Ito Ryuu, she's cool. You don't need to worry about her."

He smirked at Sang Mi as she shivered below him. "You hear that kid, you're cool. You might even say... frozen!"

No one laughed.

"Oh, come on, that was good!"

Petra sighed. "Whatever, just get her in the truck."

* * *

After about half an hour, Sang Mi finally felt warm enough to talk beyond mumbling thank-yous. They'd wrapped her in a blanket (it smelled only a little weird), wrapped her arm in a new bandage (thankfully clean), and gave her a cup of hot steamy coffee (it tasted like they'd burned the beans, not ground them finely enough, and then steeped it too long and hot).

Sipping it, while it didn't exactly taste good, had made her feel human again. "So where exactly are we going?"

Starhawk winked, which she thought was maybe a bit much. "We're actually here to see your friend. Crazy coincidence."

She furrowed her brow. "Yeah, sure is. Hey, you haven't had anything weird happen to you since you've been here? Like, see a face behind you in the mirror, or get trapped in the bathroom, or find a strange arcade cabinet, or watch a lost episode of the *Sherlock* TV show from the turn of the millennium?" She paused, and realizing she'd gotten away from her point veered back onto it. "...Or seen the Red Mask Lady, the Slit-Mouthed Woman?"

Petra sighed, and got more engaged in work on her padd.

Starhawk was raising an eyebrow. "You don't seem like the kind of kid who'd ask that out of nowhere."

"She's a kid," Petra said with exasperation. "She might have just seen a weird *Professor X* episode or something."

Sang Mi sipped the coffee, trying to think of a good reply, but her thoughts were cut off by the driver in the cab in front of them calling back. "We're here."

Petra and Starhawk threw on thick parkas, and since there wasn't a spare one, Sang Mi kept the blanket around her like a kid sneaking downstairs to raid the fridge. Starhawk threw the doors to the back of the truck open, and they stepped out in front of a warehouse--a huge warehouse in rows of other warehouses. Takumi was a manufacturing hub, amongst other things, and the massive warehouse districts outside the city were testament to that.

"This some sort of heist?" Sang Mi asked, pulling the blanket tight around her.

Starhawk just gave a "ha", and walked forward to a side door, tapping it with a key card. Petra pushed on her back lightly, getting her through the door, and the inside

caused Sang Mi's jaw to drop. They were in a glass box that looked out on what appeared to be a factory. Large vats of chemicals stirred, machines formed pills and tinctures, and people in white sanitary jumpsuits wandered around the facility making sure the machines were working properly, making adjustments if necessary. The really distinctive thing about their suits though was that the employees wore a black mask that covered their face--up to just below the hairline, with a hood above it doing the rest--and that black cloth displayed blue lines that formed emoji-like expressions so that they could communicate with each other as they spoke.

She got up to the glass, and as she watched the manufacturing work, she realized what the place was.

Because she recognized what one of the machines was making.

Most of the processing here was making mass productions of pills or the like, but off to one side was a very unique set of machinery, far unlike the rest. It didn't just have a dedicated employee inspecting it; it had a pair of guards.

And the fluids being heated and cooled while running through glass tubes, formed into tablets, and stamped out, were becoming something she was incredibly familiar with.

Delirium tablets.

She knew Saki couldn't possibly have a supply of pills that was still potent after all this time. She knew Saki had money--she owned a hotel, she owned a pharmacy. That she was working with Maverick gangsters from the infamous Accord shouldn't have been particularly surprising.

A pair of the jumpsuited employees stepped into an airlock that led into the glass area, were sprayed with a series of blasts of presumably a cleanser or disinfectant, and then stepped into their glass enclosure. Both had blue smiley faces on their black masks, though that didn't last long as one was ripped off to reveal her friend JackBox, who practically tackled her in a hug.

"Oh my god! You have no idea how worried I was, what the hell were you doing in the wastes? You don't have frostbite do you?"

"I'm alright! I'm alright, your friends here took care of me."

JackBox pulled back, though she kept a hand on Sang Mi's shoulder. "I really appreciate you looking after her, boss."

Starhawk shrugged. "No trouble at all. I see things are going well here." He gestured to the other person who had walked in with her. "Who's the double?"

Pulling her own mask off, the face of Saki Suzuki smiled pleasantly back at her. "Surprised?" she said, as if following a cue card. And knowing her, she might have been.

"You know, I am. I am surprised a lot today," Sang Mi said as she glanced at JackBox, and then back at Saki. "There's actually something we need to talk about Saki, about dreams again."

Clearly exasperated, Petra sighed. "It doesn't matter if you're super interested in urban legends; Ms. Suzuki doesn't need to hear about Slit-Mouthed Women or--"

Saki spun, her eyes wide and her entire demeanor going from smug to alert. "What did you just say?"

Petra lowered her padd. "She was talking on the ride here about urban--"

"No," Saki said firmly, and looked back to Sang Mi. "Did you see her? Did you see The Red Masked Lady?"

Sang Mi nodded.

JackBox looked down at the bandages on Sang Mi's arm. "...Wait, I heard you were cold, but did something bite you?"

"Yeah, the Red Masked--"

Saki grabbed Sang Mi, forcefully, even as she tried to pull away and JackBox tried to interfere. JackBox yelling and slapping her didn't stop Saki from ripping the bandages off, revealing the bloody bite mark. Her face cold, Saki seemed to grow to twice her height. "We need to go on lockdown, get all the security--"

She had the right idea; once again Saki Suzuki was obnoxiously correct. And if Sang Mi had had a few more moments to let it sit in, she might have been indignant.

But no one had any time to do anything.

Not when the wall exploded.

The concussion knocked them all to the ground and shattered the glass around them. Sang Mi felt herself lose the ground beneath her, and she could see shards of

glass in the air shining like snowflakes, and her hand reaching out, her foot flailing into view as she flew.

When she hit the ground, her ears were ringing, and soon the world faded out, but not before her view of the ceiling and smoke was interrupted by an overly wide smile of two rows of metal teeth. The Slit-Mouthed Woman said something, but all she heard was ringing.

And then the ringing stopped, and it was only dreams.

Part 2: Into the Hive

Earlier that day...

Zhyrgal Osmonova checked over her shoulder another time. Still no one behind her. She wasn't usually this nervous, but usually her meetings were with other Earther spies. CISyn Spooks planted in some part of the Gongen government or infrastructure. As far as she knew, she was the only one who had been planted in a high school.

When she'd taken the job, she'd assumed it would be easy. Well, maybe not easy, but at the very least it wouldn't involve much outside of the school itself. But she'd proved herself to be too good at her job, and too useful, and so now she found herself being told to wander through the alleys of the underground levels of Takumi. Most of the city was underground, though people lived in the domes if they had any choice in the matter, it was just more pleasant. The corridors of the underground city were mostly well lit and painted with colorful and inviting patterns. The halls opened up into artificial parks where fake sunlight would rain down on laughing children, sports matches, and people spending a pleasant afternoon reading on a park bench in the breeze of the recycled air. But no city this big and old didn't have its rundown areas. The Tenryu Party that ruled the planet might boast that every citizen had enough to eat, that nothing was wasted, and everything was perfectly maintained by the planet's AI Shocho, but in practice any utopia was a fairytale, even if Gongen was living up to their ideals more than people on Earth expected. Here was the slums of Takumi, under its poorest dome, Cheonsa, far from the sky. The colorful halls turned into chipped and peeling paint jobs and dimmed or flickering lighting. Here those without traded their government rations for drugs; here deals were made for illegal off-world weaponry; here, the Ebon Gate Yakuza held court. Still, compared to anywhere else in the solar system, the small amount of crime might seem like a miracle. But it was still here, if you knew where to look.

Stepping over a junkie who was curled up against the wall, Zhyrgal found the door she was looking for--a faded chicken mascot of what had been a lunch spot before

they'd moved the manufacturing that had been here to a new set of tunnels closer to the warehouse districts.

She rapped on the door, just the way she had been instructed to. There was the click of an unlocking, and she opened the door just far enough to slip through, and closed it behind her.

The room before her was the remains of a restaurant--signs that listed the same things in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese instructed long-gone diners where to drop their trays or where the line started.

A dead body, decently fresh, was laid out between her and her hosts. She daintily stepped over it, trying to be as poised as possible.

The current occupants had shoved a few of the tables together and had made court in the colorful chicken-themed chairs, lined up on one side, with one chair on the other side for her.

She sat down and inspected who she was meeting. Two of them were Yakuza, wearing the gaudy black coats of the Ebon Gate covered in gold Kanji, tattoos of moving ink playing along their necks and down the backs of their hands. The other two were Mavericks, one a bruiser with a pair of metal arms and an electric eye to match. The other was a woman who could have passed as Gongen if it wasn't for the rather horrific looking gash of a maw opening up to a mouth of razor blades she had.

"Who's the corpse?" she opened before the maw woman could form a word.

"An employee of our target. We got our information, but nothing would have stopped him from selling us out in return," she said as she smiled, in what would have been a polite smile if it wasn't for everything else about her mouth.

Zhyrgal nodded. "Right. So how can my employers help you?" She nearly left it there before indicating the Yakuza. "And why are they? Actually, you're clearly working for the Cartel Gang, you're rivals with the Ebon Gate for the same turf. Make this make sense."

"None of your business," one of the Ebon Gate spat.

"It is literally my business or I wouldn't be here."

The woman gave a surprised huff. "They said you weren't to be taken lightly even though you're just a student. I'm Chomper; this is Wackwack," she said, gesturing to the bruiser. "And we're working with our new friends here, and your bosses, because

the Accord has been getting far too successful here. They have a stranglehold over the Colocog Colony, and their new agent on the surface is even getting Tenryu party members in her pocket. That's not good for business for anyone."

"That wouldn't matter to my employers," Zhyrgal said plainly.

"True. But it looks like the Accord is doing business with someone who has something your bosses want. They've told me what to look for, and not to ask what it is. If you help us, we'll give you what they want, and we'll stop the Accord from cornering the market in Takumi."

She mulled it over. It made sense. It wasn't great, but it made sense. "Alright, so how can I help?"

A padd was slid towards her, showing a picture of a pair of girls leaving a hotel. "We've been monitoring these two. Both of them seem to have ties to the Accord's operations here. This one, Sang Mi Jhe--"

"Jhe Sang Mi, she puts the family name first."

"Whatever, I see you're already familiar. The Jhe girl has been spotted going in and out of Colocog, as well as meeting the second girl at the Rook Hotel frequently. The other girl is Suzuki Saki."

"Saki Suzuki, she puts her family name second."

"I really don't care! Anyway! Several of our operatives have disappeared or met mysterious accidents following her, but she's made several trips to both the wastes, and Cogworks Lounge where the Accord is operating out of in the city proper. We've also seen her going in the direction of the warehouse districts, though that's too much space to investigate. But most suspiciously, she opened a pharmacy recently."

Zhyrgal furrowed her brows. That was odd. Unless she needed a way to easily move pharmaceuticals legally without drawing suspicion...

"I see you're putting it together."

Zhyrgal nodded.

"You go to school with them, we need to figure out where the Accord is operating their drug operations out of. They've flooded the market lately--at prices that couldn't be smuggled from Titan."

"So, they have a factory. If that's what you want to find..." Zhyrgal said, thinking. She pointed at the image of Sang Mi. "...there's your weak link. Don't get me wrong, she's incredibly clever. I haven't been able to find anything on Saki--though I doubt that's her real name. She's got a perfect fake history, and clearly has power and finances. Sang Mi is poor, her family is hated by the local government, and she has mental health issues that can be exploited."

Chomper glanced at Wackwack. "How so?"

She thought of Sang Mi's small act of kindness in the locker room earlier and shoved it out of her mind. She had a job, a duty. She worked for CISyn. That overrode anything else. "Sang Mi has an obsession with urban legends. She's constantly investigating weird goings on. For example, she was involved in an incident last year that she assumed had to be replicating the plot of a lost anime called *Saki Sanobashi*, and seemed convinced it wasn't a coincidence."

"I don't see how that helps."

"You don't know where what you're looking for is. But you don't need to, you just need to put Sang Mi in a situation where she'll feel like she needs to call for help from someone who can deal with that level of danger. She gets off school late because of track practice and takes the train from the school's station down the Peony line. I'm sure your friends at the Ebon Gate can get that train to switch tracks to go towards the warehouse district. Freak her out. Play to her fears and take her hostage. You can play it multiple ways from there--monitor the warehouses and see where people come from when you call to demand a ransom, or just set up a meeting spot and try to draw out the power players."

The four gangsters looked at each other. They were clearly sold on this.

"Okay, how would we freak her out?" Wackwack asked in a baritone.

Zhyrgal took the padd, and pulled up a picture, sliding it back over to Chomper. "She's been talking about a new urban legend today. And you could pull the look off."

Chomper stroked her chin. "I know this story. So I just ask her if I'm beautiful. Threaten her with scissors. Not that I have scissors."

One of the Yakuza raised a hand like he was in class. "We got the bone scissors we're going to use on the body there later."

"Perfect. And you're sure, this will freak her out?"

Zhyrgal nodded. "And even if you screw it up, as long as she runs out into the wastes with her phone, the most likely people she'll call for help are your targets anyway."

Chomper grinned. "Guess I'll get a red mask."

They shook hands. Zhyrgal slipped out and made her way back from the slums to her apartment. She figured she was done for the day, so she got into her pajamas and put on a movie.

Fittingly, there was a movie about the Slit-Faced Woman on the recommended films page.

She was just getting settled in, the woman leaning in to her victim on screen asking, "Am I pretty?" when her phone rang, rang with her work alert.

Sighing, she paused and picked it up.

"...Hello?"

Chomper's voice greeted her, hoarsely. "So uh, we got her on the train."

"...But?" there was clearly a 'but'.

"But uh, she hit the emergency stop and ran out into the wastes."

"Okay, did you follow her?"

"...She sort of knocked me out."

Zhyrgal held back a groan. "Track her phone."

There was a pause that Zhyrgal couldn't help but sigh during. "She uh... threw her phone at my head. I have it."

Zhyrgal could have screamed. She may only have been seventeen, but she was already tired of working with amateurs. "Did you do anything, anything at all, that might let you track her?"

"I bit her, but the blood trail stopped at--"

"Stop. You bit her?"

"...Yeah? On the arm."

"Did you lose a tooth?"

"I don't see how--"

"DID YOU LOSE A TOOTH?"

She could imagine the next silence with Chomper feeling around her mouth.

"Oh! Oh I did."

"A tooth from your cybernetic mouth that is currently embedded in your arm. A tooth filled with electronics keyed to your body."

"Oh," Chomper said.

"I assume you can take it from here?"

The call ended. Zhyrgal threw her phone across the room where it thudded lightly on the carpet, only to be picked up by the apartment's porter bot and returned to the coffee table. Someday she'd work with professionals.

* * *

The world came back into focus slowly, and on its side. First it was blurry outlines, and then her outstretched arm surrounded by twinkling glass and wrapped in red-stained bandage. Figures in jumpsuits were staggering around, trying to help their fellows who hadn't been able to rise yet, or moving debris.

She stirred, trying to sit up, and finding the pain to do so was intense.

Sang Mi handled pain in two ways: either she pushed past it beyond all reason and at a danger to her own safety, or she was a big baby about it. Today was time for the latter, and she gave up and dropped back down moaning.

A face leaned over her. It was Starhawk, a bandage on his face where presumably some glass had cut him. "She's awake."

"I mean, kinda," Sang Mi moped.

He sighed. "Come on, let's get you up."

"Carry meeeeeee," she said, holding her arms out.

Starhawk blinked his organic eye, and after a moment of hesitation that Sang Mi guessed was filled with some mental cursing, he scooped her up.

She had a clearer view of the room as he bridal-carried her, his metal feet crunching the glass underfoot. Saki looked over at them, and Sang Mi felt some pleasure that she looked absolutely done with her that she was being carried.

"We have a situation."

"Yeah," Sang Mi replied incredulously.

"We have people moving our equipment out, the Takumi Self-Defense Force is on its way, presumably because of the explosion."

"We can't have any of the Colocogs caught here," Starhawk said, adjusting his grip on Sang Mi like he was trying to figure out how to handle an annoying cat.

"We can't have anyone caught here," Saki said coolly. "I'll handle things here, you two need to handle the hostages."

Sang Mi looked up at Starhawk, his face was grim, then back to Saki. "What do you mean hostages?"

"JackBox, Petra, and a few others are being held hostage by the Cartel. They're demanding we cede our business here to them in return for their release."

"I'd trust them as about as far as I'm going to keep carrying Sang Mi," he said, immediately setting her down.

Her feet on firm ground, a rush of shame greeted their arrival, moving all the way from the soles of her feet to her head. She'd been messing around and...

This was serious. This was real.

She felt herself tearing up.

"What are we going to do? JackBox is my friend. I can't... I can't..." she said, then wobbled, and put a hand to her head.

"We're not leaving them. My operation here is too important. And I know you're not going to get your head cut off by Raving Red-Jane."

"Just Red-Jane," Starhawk said by rote.

"She's not here and we all know," Saki said. She had grabbed a metal briefcase and was shoving pills into it. "We just need to keep a level--" An alarm went off, and a jumpsuited employee ran up to Saki, shoving a padd in her hands. "Shit."

Starhawk grimaced. "What now?"

"Both of you, do exactly what I say. Ask no questions."

Their lack of response was acceptance.

"Good. Both of you grab emote-masks, they can mask your voice and face," she rushed over to a broken conveyer belt, and grabbed a handful of hyper-injection syringes, and then climbed over to another to get another. From a different batch. She scrambled back over and shoved some of the syringes into Sang Mi and Starhawk's hands.

Sang Mi turned them over in her hands. "What are these--OW!?"

She staggered back. Saki had just jabbed her in the neck with the single syringe from the second batch. "You're holding knockout drugs. The one I just jabbed you with is a stimulant; you're in too rough of shape to do what needs to be done without it. Don't worry, it's what they give to CGC Special Forces so it's safe."

Everything seemed to be coming into extreme focus for Sang Mi, the entire world seemed clearer, slightly slower. She felt like a lot of her doubts had dropped away. "...When this is over, I'm punching you."

"Whatever it takes," Saki said without hesitation. "There is a Self-Defense Force TSV on its way here. Me and Kalingkata will go out there and talk to them, Starhawk will hold back to rush out when the time is right. Our goal is to knock out the soldiers, and get inside the TSV. Don't overthink your tasks."

"Kalingkata?" Starhawk asked.

"Sang Mi's nickname."

"Suits her," he said, pulling on an emote mask.

Kalingkata pulled her own mask on, and allowed herself to smirk since no one could see it. It did.

Seeing in the mask was surprisingly easy, the inside had to be beaming the view from the other side of the mask right into her retinas.

"Are we--oh my voice," she stopped speaking as the mask automatically distorted her voice.

Saki pulled her own mask on. "Shut up."

The sound of air being displaced by grav plates made it clear why they should. Something was landing outside the warehouse, and they had to go meet it.

Starhawk waited just inside the doorway as the girls went out to greet the TSV--it was hovering only a few feet above the ground, and shaped like the hull of a stylized Chinese junk, a hatch on the side opening up to drop a pair of soldiers in Takumi-Yellow armor.

"What are you doing here? This is an automated warehouse area," a woman's voice said.

Saki put both hands over her face. "Oh thank the gods, oh goodness... We're really saved." She stumbled forward, and the second soldier raised his rifle.

Saki screamed and dropped to her knees, holding her hands up, and Sang Mi followed suit without the scream. "Please don't kill us! Please! PLEASE! We're not the kidnappers, oh god, oh no..."

"Kidnappers?" the man said.

The woman frowned. "Okay, just stay calm, no one is going to hurt you," she tilted her head, signaling her comrade to go over to Kalingkata. He retracted his faceplate so they could see his face, and his comrade did the same. "Just explain what happened."

"Okay," Saki took in a breath, and seemed to sob. "Please can we just get out of here--"

The woman got closer. So did the man. "We just need to know what's going on. Who kidnapped you?"

"It... it was..."

The soldier closed the distance and knelt down. "It's alright just--"

Saki didn't hesitate. Her hand jabbed forward like a lightning bolt, and the hyper-syringe had deposited its contents into the woman's jugular before she could finish her sentence.

The man looked stunned. He wasn't as close to Kalingkata, but she rushed him too. It wasn't like her, it had to be whatever Saki had put into her--she could feel her heart pounding, and while he was still trying to form his friend's name, she had ducked under his arm trying to push her back, and reached up, the hyper-syringe connecting with skin, and emptying in a blink of an eye.

"INTO THE SHIP," Saki called. "Don't wait!"

She would have, and as she rushed past the man he tried to grab her shoulder, but he was already feeling the drugs and his grip was soft enough she pulled out of his grip, and ran. She was faster than Saki--she was a runner after all, so she outstripped her and leapt up into the hatch before Saki.

And just as the TSV started lifting off again.

She stumbled, grabbing onto the side of the hatch as she was almost thrown out, then dragging herself in. She looked down to see Saki watching below as the TSV got out of reach.

Shit.

There was no one else in the hold, though it looked like it could hold a whole fighting force. This was just checking up on a weird explosion in an abandoned warehouse, no need for everyone to get out of bed.

She staggered towards the cockpit, losing her footing repeatedly as the craft started accelerating. She reached the cockpit door, and as she tried the controls realized that the pilot had wisely locked it.

Shit again.

She bit her lip.

Then a lightbulb emoji appeared on her facemask.

Kalingkata scrolled through the messy user interface of the mask--you controlled it with a mix of blinking, eye movement, tongue movement, and voice commands, and saw that yes--the mask had recorded the last few minutes. It had to, the front of the mask just had tiny cameras so the user could see on the other side since it wasn't actually see-through.

She pulled up an audio file, and told the mask to output that voice, and covered the camera by the door.

"Hey, it's me, open up!" the female soldier's voice said into the panel.

"...Mi-Young? I thought you were--"

"I got in before you took off, I took down the hoodlum that jumped on, but I need the med kit in the cockpit."

There was a pause.

"You'd know there was one out there."

"It got thrown out in the struggle, along with--" she looked back at where the medical kit was clearly displayed on the wall next to, "the fire extinguisher. Please, I need to patch this wound."

There was a pause.

And the door unlocked, and slid open just a crack with the finger's of a man's hand pushing it open.

Kalingkata shot her hand through, jabbing the syringe into his wrist and jamming her foot in the door.

"Oh you bitch," he spat.

The TSV didn't lose control as he dropped to the deck, the autopilot was too good for that. She squeezed through the door, and while she didn't know how to fly this thing, she did know how to slam the big button under a safety shield that said "EMERGENCY LANDING."

* * *

Starhawk had taken the helm, which suited Sang Mi just fine. They were flying back to the Main Dome of Takumi, and Sang Mi had intentionally not asked where that meant. It was wherever the kidnappers were holding her friend JackBox.

She sat in the belly of the TSV trying to process the events of the last few hours, and not coming to any conclusions that felt meaningful. She took to rummaging through the crew's bags, trying to find something to wear for whatever was happening that was less identifiable than a track suit.

She kept her black compression gear on, but threw on a Takumi-Yellow hoodie that one of the crew had, and a pleated black skirt that was short enough it wouldn't restrict her movement, but long enough she wouldn't feel weird about running around in compression gear.

Saki slid the door open from the cockpit, and looked her up and down. "It's not a bad look. You look like you're a real Poison Pill."

Sang Mi looked down at the mask in her hands, "I'm certainly not that."

Sliding in across from her, Saki clasped her hands together. "Sang Mi, in just a little bit we're going to be mounting an operation to rescue your friend JackBox, and Petra who is an important attache to the Accord higher up named Horus."

She nodded. "Okay, should I just... stay in here then?"

Saki sighed. "No, Sang Mi. No you shouldn't. Do you think you're not a part of this."

"Not really, no?"

Saki got up, and grabbed her by the collar in a move so sudden Sang Mi didn't know how to react, and dropped her mask. "You hang out with gangsters. You learn how to kill people with swords at your school. You are part of one of the most important experiments of all time in your work with me. And I know exactly what you did last year, no one has done a hack like that before. Not on that scale. They don't even realize it yet."

She racked her brain, she wasn't sure what Saki was talking about on that last count, but she had done a lot of weird stuff when she was bored. She held her hands up. "I'm just a high school student! I'm a normal girl--I mean, I'm not normal, I'm a weirdo! But I'm not like you, I don't... this is too much. I'm terrified right now." Tears started welling up in her eyes. "JackBox was taken, and I don't know if she's okay, and I nearly died in the wastes, and I helped you steal this ship, and I... I kind of committed assault on a member of the Self-Defense Force? Oh God, I committed--"

"Stop talking. Stop." Saki let go. "You're saying this now, but that's Sang Mi talking. Where's Kalingkata, the expert hacker? The one who breaks into Colocog? Where's your arrogance?"

"I'm not arrogant."

"It wasn't an insult. And I'm tired of having this conversation with you. There's only so many times I can tell you you're worth more than you think."

"People have been telling me that my whole life, get in line."

"There you go, there's that arrogance."

Sang Mi bit her lip.

"We're rescuing your friend. And I need you in top form."

Sang Mi picked her mask up off the desk. "Fine, but I'm not going to enjoy it."

Saki open an armored viewing panel, the city below expanding out beneath them. "Yes you will. Once you get a taste of life beyond your tiny life, you won't want to go back. I'm going to take everything I want, that's a fact. And you can too."

Sang Mi scoffed. "As if."

Wanting to get out of this conversation, Sang Mi looked out the viewport at the city of Takumi below. After everything--this whole ordeal so far, nearly freezing to death, the bomb going off... tears came to her eyes again, but this time from the warmth welling up in her heart. This really was home, whatever she thought of it, these three domes. A gate opened up in the roof of the dome that allowed air travel in--she didn't know exactly how they'd pulled that off but she was too tired to care. The TSV descended, and slipped by the roofs of skyscrapers.

"That one," Saki said, and Sang Mi looked where they were adjusting to land--and all the warm feelings in her heart sank down through the floor of the TSV and down into tunnels below the city.

"You're kidding, really?" she mumbled.

"It's not a government owned building, they rent out parts of it. It's not surprising they have space there."

Kalingkata hissed. "But the Cao Family's Skyscraper? Really?"

"Cults have to pay the bills too. I'm sure they didn't ask too many questions."

"Don't let Li Xiu hear you calling them a cult."

Saki didn't reply, and instead went over to a locker, opening it up, and tossing Sang Mi a long object from it.

She awkwardly caught it, only realizing what it was after she had a moment to inspect it.

It was a sword. A mono-molecular bladed sword, military grade. The kind that could cut through spaceship hulls.

“...I can’t take this.”

“You just did. You’re better with a sword than me, you should feel good about that.”

She had to admit, as she pulled the blade out of the sheath a few centimeters to check it, she kind of did. But she wasn’t sure she could really fight someone.

Well, it seemed that choice was out of her hands.

The TSV descended, and Starhawk’s voice came from the cockpit, “Alright, lets get this done. You have the entrance ready, Saki?”

Saki pulled another weapon from the locker. “Of course.”

* * *

JackBox had had a lot of luck dealing with Gongen criminals. They had a lot of trouble remembering that her cybernetic arm and leg might be able to do a little more than just act as arm and a leg. She'd been tied up after a negotiation gone wrong before while setting things up for the Accord, only to cut her bonds as soon as someone turned their back for a moment. So it was frustrating to be dealing with fellow Mavericks again who remembered to do things like turn her arm off.

"I'm telling you, you don't want to mess with the Accord," she said for the third time.

Chomper turned to her. “Oh please, no one is coming for you.” The woman took a glass of white wine from a server bot, and downed it in one large gulp. “And the Accord’s business here will be ending soon.”

JackBox glanced over at Petra, who was silent, and nearly motionless, her eyes moving around as if cataloging the entire room. It wasn’t much of a room—just a large suite with couches, chairs, a bar and kitchen, and a big glass window looking out at the city beyond.

Wackwack, the embarrassingly named flunky of Chomper clapped. “Yeah, you tell em, boss!”

She grinned back them. “What about your friend here, Petra right? You’ve been awful quiet haven’t you. You know I could start biting your fingers off.”

“Five,” Petra said.

“Yes, that’s how many fingers are on one hand, well noted.”

“Four,” Petra continued.

Chomper and Wackwack exchanged a look, and the handful of Yakuza lounging about looked over with a confused interest as well.

“Three,” Petra said, and JackBox was starting to wonder herself.

“Alright, enough of that. Stop counting,” Chomper ordered.

“Two.”

“That’s it,” she stormed up to her.

“One.”

It was at that moment that JackBox, and much of the room who could see the windows, saw a Gongen Self-Defense Force TSV drop down into view, one of the doors on the side wide open, and a young lady holding a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher sitting there in the gap.

“Ah,” Chomper said.

And then the rocket hit the windows.

They exploded inwards, and the TSV followed, scraping the side of the building as three figures leapt from it into the smoke.

A man with cybernetic legs leapt farther than the others, tackling one of the Yakuza to the ground in a flying kick that ended in a stomp. JackBox grinned. She knew he’d come for her.

Another person, a young lady in black clothes with a yellow hoodie rushed one of the Yakuza, and he drew a gun, which she sliced in half. His comrade draw her sword, and the young lady slashed that in half too.

The pair looked at each other and bolted as she sheathed the sword again.

Chomper scowled, and turned to the intruders, as JackBox mockingly sang behind her.

Starhawk had engaged Wackwack, the pair locked arms and wrestling with each other.

The yellow hoodie lady was walking towards Chomper with intention, and JackBox recognized the gait—that was Kalingkata?

"Aren't you scared, little girl?" Chomper grinned her razor blade smile, and held up her hands, from which the nails shot out into ten short blades. Apparently she was more cybernetic than she'd let on.

The face on the mask contorted, till it formed a jagged face of blue lines, it almost looked like laughter, and Kalingkata held the sword out in front of her, a hand on the hilt and a hand on the scabbard, drawing the blade in a slow shining stoke, and extending it out to point at Chomper. "You know, I'm really not. I've realized we have something on Gongen you don't in the Cartel."

She laughed, shaking her head. "And what saccharine thing is that?"

"Dentists."

Chomper's eyes widened, and her jaw dropped as she howled in rage, charging at Kalingkata, swiping with the knives coming from her fingers, only to have her hand blocked by the sheath of the sword, the blade coming in at her chest. Chomper blocked it with her other hand, and stumbled back. "Where the hell did you learn to do that? Aren't you a schoolgirl?"

"I learned in 5th hour Kendo, now come on then. You're the one who wanted to fight," she started walking forward.

JackBox felt her arm turning on, and looked down to realize that Saki was next to her now, she'd already untied Petra who was flexing her hands.

Chomper looked back at where Wackwack and Starhawk were dueling, and taking a deep breath, she did what she should have done from the beginning.

She ran.

And Kalingkata followed.

“Wait—” JackBox called.

She wanted to tell her to stop, that there was no need. That she’d rather have her here next to her. But she was already gone.

The hallways of the tower emanated luxury just like the rest of it—fine polished stone surfaces, gold inlays, fine art worth fortunes casually displayed. It was through those hallways that Chomper barreled through, slamming into those refined walls, knocking over waiters carrying food to some event going on in the building, but as she ran the Poison Pill behind her didn’t stop. Didn’t relent.

And she began to get nervous.

“You know, Saki was right,” the Poison Pill called, chasing her down a staircase. “I do like this.” The young woman laughed, and Chomper felt a chill down her back. “Are you enjoying this?” Chomper called back in a panic. “What’s wrong with you?”

She had reached a door at the bottom of the stair well, slipping through it, and slamming it shut, grabbing a chair from the other side and trying to prop it closed.

The door rattled.

Then the laugh came again. “Ready or not, here I come!”

The monomolecular blade cut through the frame of the door.

And Chomper ran faster than she knew she could run.

* * *

Two Weeks Earlier...

Sang Mi pulled the curtain in front of her face. "It is I, the mysterious Phantom! Hohoho, hahaha!"

JackBox laughed, as did Jae Hyun, and they sort of tried to out laugh each other which got awkward extra quickly as they were the only ones laughing.

Li Xiu was cringing. "I don't really think it's funny, Sang Mi. One of our classmates lost his marbles and pretended to be the Phantom of the Opera. That's tragic. He was in a really bad place."

She shrugged. "I was the one who had to deal with the whole thing—you weren't there when he nearly caused a disaster before I caught him and Charlie punched him. Plus it's always been fine for people to tease me when..." she sighed. "Never mind, I see your point, sorry."

Li Xiu nodded. "I mean... maybe any of us could have been in his place?"

Jae Hyun raised an eyebrow. "I don't really think I'd pretend to be a book character."

"That's telling on yourself; expand your breakdown horizons, Jae Hyun," Sang Mi said.

This time Li Xiu laughed. "See, that was a good joke."

Jae Hyun mumbled that it wasn't.

Li Xiu reached under her shirt and pulled out a necklace with a D20 on it that seemed to be made of real topaz. "People can hit their breaking points. Our church helps a lot of people down on their luck. You meet people of all stripes, and some of them used to be big wigs. Tenryu party higher ups, facility managers, a former Deputy Director even. You never know when you're going to hit a breaking point, and how you'll react. Maybe we all have a Phantom in us, waiting to break free."

Sang Mi gave an approving smile and a nod to all that. "You're right. I don't really think I'd snap like that, though, and I definitely don't have a secret side all bottled up in me. I'd just curl up in a ball like I did over winter break."

"Don't talk about that so lightly," Li Xiu said.

"Hey, look at me, I'm fine now. No worries."

The look Li Xiu gave her wasn't angry, or annoyed. It was pitiful. Like this poor little naive lamb was trying to eat plastic grass and complimenting the flavor.

Sang Mi scoffed, and shoved her hands in her jacked pockets. "Whatever," she mumbled.

* * *

Chomper turned the corner, and skidded to a halt.

Her brain went into overdrive. She couldn't wait long, the Poison Pill behind her would catch up to her.

But this corridor led to an indoor balcony. It was overlooking a massive indoor venue lined with tables set with expensive plates and cutlery, though at the moment no one sat at the place settings. Bottles of fine wines sat in buckets of ice on carts. An indoor waterfall took up an entire wall of the place, and for some reason there was an entire table covered in complimentary dice. Fountains of chocolate and cheese topped with real stone sculptures dotted the layout, and--there were banners.

It was some sort of wedding, whatever, but there were enough banners and streamers, maybe she could hit the ground not too hard from this height.

She heard the woman turn the corner too.

Chomper had to make the call.

She ran, clambered over the railing, and jumped.

She caught onto a banner, trying her best to grasp it, and indeed it slowed her fall, but she pulled the whole banner down with her and still made impact with enough force the pain was horrible--she crushed a table, the legs buckling and snapping under the weight of her cybernetic parts, bits of fine china breaking under her and making small slits in her clothes and skin. She panted, and then sat up, willing her body to move. To escape. To keep moving. It had hurt, but the Poison Pill would have to do the same thing.

She looked up at the balcony.

The Poison Pill looked down at her, the scribbled blue circles the mask had for eyes staring down at her disdainfully. Climbing up on the railing of the balcony, the Poison Pill looked for a moment like she too would jump.

And then she put a foot against the wall.

It stuck.

The other foot came next.

And while it was clearly a strained effort for her to do so, the Poison Pill began walking down the wall.

She had some sort of grav-shoes, what the hell?

Chomper scrambled up, having to disentangle herself from the table cloth as she escaped the table's wreckage.

She had to keep running.

The pain was incredible, but she did it, running between the aisles of tables, ignoring the calls of waiters and staff.

She glanced, there was no one behind her, but as her head tilted back, her brief moment of relief faded.

That Poison Pill was running along the wall now, and had her eyes fixed on her.

Panic filled her, and Chomper wailed for a moment, but then it hit her--grav shoes. She wasn't out of this yet. She could still escape.

She just had to... she looked along the walls, and saw it. Her one chance. She just had to pull this off. The wall opposite the waterfall was covered in glass--indoor glass.

She ran towards that wall. The Poison Pill followed.

Come on, just turn the corner.

For a moment, she thought the woman wouldn't fall for her bait, but then her foot moved from the polished marbled black stone of the balcony wall to the glass one.

Indoor glass. Not meant to be walked on. Not meant to survive the elements, or go through space.

And it shattered.

Gravity went out of whack for her opponent, and as she fell through the glass, her body contorted as her shoes tried to place the gravity below her, and found little purchase aside from shards of glass and the hanging art pieces.

Finally, she fell normally, through another pane of glass, and out of view.

Chomper stood for a moment, panting, stunned. Half expecting the Poison Pill to leap from the pit like a wronged demon.

But there was only the tinkle of falling glass, and the rushing footsteps of venue security.

She grinned a wide sharp grin, and got moving.

Everything was coming up Chomper.

* * *

"Why did you never join the Theater Department?" Jae Hyun had asked Sang Mi one day. The question had hung in the air in a way that Sang Mi decidedly wasn't as she tumbled down through shattered glass.

"I don't know, maybe I didn't want to be a nerd."

He had looked at her incredulously. "I don't believe that for a moment. I mean, I don't believe you could be that delusional, you're not a nerd. You're literally wearing a Professor X necklace right now."

"And you know what that is, nerd," it wasn't said in mean spirits, though. It was more playful than she'd intended, honestly.

He sighed. "You're just..."

She turned to him, frowning. "I'm just what?"

"It's like you're always running from things you're good at. I saw you at the comedy show, you know. I saw you when they made you fill in during the Parents' Night play. You're a good actress, maybe the best one in the school."

She scoffed. "Yeah right. Look, let's just get back to more important things, like helping me make this Magician: The Hammering deck." She had held up a card, a completely random one she hadn't looked at, and said in a magician's voice: "Is this your card, young man?"

He looked shocked. "Oh, it is, actually!"

She laughed at his obvious lie to get on her good side.

It had been a good time.

When Kalingkata hit the ground, she moaned, the mask morphing the moan into a dark distorted banshee cry. Thankfully her shoes had screwed the gravity up around her enough that the impact was pretty light, but it still hurt, and as she tried to get up it was impossible to not cut herself on the spangled circle of glass around her.

And as she looked up, she froze.

She blinked, and reached up to rub her eyes before realizing that her face was still completely covered by the mask.

She was in a room walled in the same marbled black stone it seemed a lot of this building had, the floor tiled in a black and white hypnotic spiral which she'd landed annoyingly off center of. A part of her wanted to move the entire circle of glass so she could sit perfectly framed in the center of a whirlpool for the other person in the room.

A person who just so happened to be Jae Hyun.

Who was, for some reason, sitting in the corner, knees to his chest, wearing a bear costume.

She rose up from the glass, reaching over to grab her sword which had landed next to her as she did so. His head rose as she did, following her every motion.

"Hey there, nice shirt," she said, and as her distorted voice bounced around the small room, he raised his hands.

"Look, I've already had enough today, I just need a break. This really is too much. I don't know what exactly you've been told to do--"

She laughed, and realized that he didn't recognize her. This wasn't Sang Mi in front of him.

He thought he had seen Kalingkata before, he thought he knew her, but Sang Mi had left the room. Kalingkata took a step towards him.

"Told to do? Do I look like the kind of person taking orders? I just fell through your ceiling with a monomolecular blade, you know the kind that can cut through a spaceship, and you think I'm following orders?"

She walked closer, and squatted down within reach of him. "I'm not following orders today."

He nodded quickly. "Yes ma'am!"

She reached out, and touched his face. His eyes seemed so much prettier today. This was fun. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you, Jae Hyun."

"How do you know my name?" he gulped.

"The same way I know you like dangerous women," she said as she stroked his cheek. His eyes darted around the electric blue scribbles of the mask face. "And I don't know, maybe it's fate we met here today. It feels like it, doesn't it?"

He blushed. "I really don't know what you mean."

Her heart was racing. She hadn't planned this. She didn't know what she was feeling; if she'd put any thought into this she wouldn't have come this far, but there was some desire in her heart she couldn't place, one she hadn't felt before.

"I'm tired of planning," she said as she stroked his cheek again, and his hand came up to lightly cradle the back of hers. "I don't want to think about what I'm feeling right now. I feel like I've never really seen you before this moment."

She leaned her face in, and reached for the bottom of her mask, starting to pull it up over her chin to reveal her lips.

"Well uh, you haven't seen me before this moment so..." but he kept leaning up towards her lips, and she felt a rush that he quivered a little. And then--

His hand slipped between their lips. "No, no look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really can't... I can't. I just... look I realized recently--today actually, that I might really care for someone. Beyond just a crush. Like, really care for them."

Sang Mi stopped. She could feel his breath between his fingers. But she smiled, and pulled back, pulling the mask back down before he could see any of her face.

"You're making the right choice." She rose again, retrieving her sword. "I've actually got to find someone. You haven't seen a woman with a metal jaw have you?"

He shook his head.

She sauntered towards the door, her heart spinning in her chest. Had she really just done that? She felt giddy. She reached for the door controls, then stopped and looked back at him. "That special lady, the one you're thinking of, she's real lucky. And maybe she's starting to think feeling the same way might not be the worst idea. Maybe."

"You really think so?"

She laughed. "Yeah, I have it on pretty good authority."

She stepped out of the room, coolly and casually, closed it, and then bolted, sprinting in the first direction she faced with abandon. She laughed, in happiness and confusion, and a newfound sense of power. She skidded around the corner, and gave finger guns to a staff member carrying a box of cups as he recoiled in shock.

She was Kalingkata.

And she could have anything she wanted.

And she would have anything she wanted.

* * *

Chomper threw herself around a corner, plastering herself against the wall as though she could sink into it. Glancing to her right, she saw that she'd entered a small hallway that had a few doors marked only with the word "Storage" in several languages. Hearing the guards coming, she took her chance, and tried the closest one.

Thankfully, it opened, and she shut it as quietly as possible, then pressed herself back against it with her ear smashed into the metal. The sound of security boots got closer--and then started drifting away. She slumped down against the door. Her heart was pounding, and as soon as she realized she was safe she took several heaving breaths, clutching her chest and shaking. Everything had gone wrong, this whole operation was supposed to get her in the Gambler's good graces but now she'd be lucky to even escape this building alive. She felt bad about abandoning Wackwack, but she'd known with a name like that he was going to be temporary help. Still, he'd been loyal for a time. The Accord wouldn't go easy on him.

She waited there in the dark room until she'd calmed down, and pulled her phone out to light the place. It was a boring storage room, and a brief inspection showed there was nothing of value to steal there--but there was something useful: facemasks. She'd be able to hide her cybernetic mouth on her way out. She wasn't sure why the building's surveillance system hadn't spotted her hiding spot yet, but she wasn't going to ask questions about that till she was seated on a transport ship to Ceres. She cleaned herself up as best she could, put the facemask on, and stepped back out.

Chomper strolled like she knew what she was doing, where she was going. Important business, somewhere to be, no time to talk. The body language worked, and she slipped by a few groups of passers by till she saw it: her salvation.

The elevator.

Chomper wasn't a praying woman, the closest thing she'd gotten to religion was believing she could still win the lottery Dooley had been throwing at the Rat's Nest. She wasn't sure anyone had won it, which was sketchy, but she still entered. Even so, she found herself praising whatever deities she could think of: God, Jesus, Budha, Thor, David Bowie, Talos, Artemis, whoever had helped her, she was just grateful to be done with this.

She stepped into the empty elevator, and watched the doors shut. The touchscreen controls had a floating cartoon bunny head that was looking down to inspect the icons representing each floor.

"First floor--ground floor? Whatever they call it here. Lobby?" She told the bunny.

The bunny nodded. "Okee dokey! Thanks for visiting the Cao Religious Group--please remember that by entering this building you have waived all liability for damages to persons, property, or finances you incur related to the Cao Religious Group! I hope you had a wonderful time!"

The elevator started descending. The rent here had been cheap for a hideout, but the place was run by a goddamn cult. She closed her eyes, and started thinking about how to get off world.

Then the elevator stopped.

She opened her eyes. It shouldn't have got her down to the lobby that fast? And it seemed odd no one else had gotten on in such a busy building. She looked at the screen--they'd stopped at floor 27. Well, whatever, if the elevator was faulty she'd just get another one. She pressed the open door button. Nothing happened.

"Bunny, er, whatever your name is, open the door."

The bunny head bounced up and down. "Wow! Turns out I can't do that, that's weird! I'd apologize, but it turns out I can't do that either."

She took a step back.

"...Open the door. This is a user override command. AI Safety protocols, those, activate them."

The bunny smiled, "Chomper Chomper, arne't you being a little hasty? Why leave?"

The elevator started moving, going up again. Chomper tried to pry the door open--and the bunny face morphed and melted--the screen turned jet black, and a scribbled face of blue lines appeared on it.

"Come on now Chomper, did you really think I'd let you go? You mess with the best hacker in Cheo--in Takumi--no, the best hacker on goddamn Gongen, and kidnap her friend, and you think you're getting away that easily? Tsk tsk. Did you really think the guards didn't find you because you were slick? I didn't want them to. You're mine."

The doors opened, and there was only darkness beyond.

She pulled her phone out, and turned the light on. It was some sort of hallway, lined with screens. Well, it was better than being on the elevator, probably. She stepped out, and the doors shut behind her before she could rethink her plan.

The screens all turned on, the same scribbled face on them.

"Don't you know who Kalingkata is?" the faces said.

She walked down the hallway slowly, cautiously.

"We asked you a question."

"Y-You're some sort of Poison Pill! I didn't know who I was messing with, okay? I'm leaving! So just, have mercy? I won't come back to Gongen, I swear it."

The faces laughed, their jagged mouths somehow sharper than her own. She expected more words, but they just kept laughing, louder and louder. She ran--but she didn't seem to go anywhere. The hallway couldn't be this long? But she'd run at least a hundred meters, and... she stopped, and stopped just fast enough to feel the floor move her slightly backwards.

It was a treadmill.

She couldn't go forward. She couldn't go backward. She was trapped. Her only path was sideways. She turned to the screen to her left, where the face smiled smugly at her. She reached out to where the edges of the screen should be--and her hands slipped through.

The face grinned, and a shining sharp blade drew in front of her. She leapt and scampered as it swung, slicing through the screens nearby like scissors through paper. She extended her claws, she had no choice but to fight.

There was this poison pill Kalingkata, hair in a black bob, a yellow hoodie over black compression gear and a black skirt, with grav shoes on her feet, and that ghoulish mask.

The woman swung again at her, her claws barely parrying the sloppy slice, but even a sloppy slice from a sword like that was terrifying.

And now her left hand didn't have claws, or cybernetic fingers. There was no pain, and she could buy new ones, but the phantom sense that she'd lost her fingers still sent her into a moment of shock. She lost her footing as the treadmill below her started pulling her towards the Poison Pill.

The face tilted to the side. "Tell me Chomper, am I pretty?"

She nodded, then shook her head, and the Poison Pill laughed, putting the blade below her chin.

She froze. A wrong move would mean death. Her breath seemed as loud as a rocket.

"Did you know wasps exist on Gongen?"

Chomper didn't know where this was going, she glanced to her left and right but there were only the glints of broken screens. "No?"

"They do. They stowed away on ships that came here long ago from Earth, digging their filthy nests into the crevices of vessels that were otherwise bringing aid to all the shuddering masses that had fled here from the nuclear disaster. Now they're pests we can't get to go away."

"I--I'll go away, please."

"Shut up," Kalingkata said.

She shut up.

"But do you know why people hate wasps? I suppose you wouldn't. You've never lived a day in your life. If you try to kill a wasp's nest, you have to be patient to make sure they're dead. Because if you don't wait, they can still sting you after they die for a short time. Those little ghouls still give you pain, get their revenge, and you can't do

anything about it because you already killed them. You should have made sure I was dead, Chomper."

She raised her hands up, tears welling in her eyes. "I'm sorry! Please, I'm sorry!"

Kalingkata raised the sword up, and Chomper closed her eyes, and whimpered, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die!"

She waited for the sharp stab of pain, but it didn't come.

She opened one eye, and then the other.

Kalingkata stood over her, the sword shaking in her hands.

"...God, what am I doing? What am I... this isn't... this isn't who I am! I'm not like this!"

She took a step backwards, then another, lowering the sword, and placing a hand on her temple. Chomper scooted backwards. "Does this mean..."

The sword slashed down thirty centimeters from her feet, carving a line in the floor. "Just go! Go! Get out of here." The Poison Pill's voice was cracking.

Chomper rose, and started backing up towards the elevator.

The Poison Pill ripped off her mask in the darkness, and threw it on the ground, stabbing the sword down into it. She tore the hoodie off, and hurled it down at her feet. Chomper could hear her crying.

"This... I'm not..."

The Poison Pill turned and ran, disappearing into the shadows.

Chomper clutched her broken hand to her chest and made it back to the elevator. This time, she was able to set it to the lobby for real.

She was never coming back to Gongen, this place was a wasps' nest if she'd ever seen one, and she was tired of getting stung.

School Announcements

NEXT TIME!

Well, it looks like it's time for a break. The broadcast club has been delighted to come into your classrooms each week with our announcements. And thankfully we have a great one—we'll be back! Yes, Mr. Mori has allowed us to keep doing these broadcasts even though he scolded us about it at the same time, we just need a little break to get things together. So, we'll see you again real soon. What happens next you won't want to miss, so till then, this has been Hee Jin, your beautiful and talented host here at Academy 27. Sweet dreams.

COMING SOON

Academy 27 Season 3 – The Final Season

WARSONG: Steel Changelings

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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