

**Academy27**

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

**WARSONG**



**A Wasps' Nest of Ghouls**  
by James Nylander



Academy 27, WARSONG, and WARS TCG Present,

# A Wasps' Nest of Ghouls

by James Wylder

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 in to 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?"

"Its.. 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. Who she may have spent a day stalking and accusing her of being an Earther spy in the past. Zhyrgal looked at her with the unphased 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 both over did 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! Its 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. Its 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.”

She 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 that hovered between them 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 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, 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 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 co-incidence."

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, and 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. "Whose 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," she glanced at JackBox, and 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 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.

**END OF PART 1**



# School Announcements

## ***NEXT TIME!***

Wait a second, part 2? A second part? This isn't over? What's going to happen to Sang Mi? We have track practice she can't get caught in an explosion! This isn't acceptable! We have to have next week get here immediately I need to know what happens.

How are they going to solve this!?!

Oh, and the Chess Club is meeting in Mr. Xi's room today.

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

## ***Tune in Next Week For:***

### **A Wasps' Nest of Ghouls Part 2**

**By James Wylder**

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**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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