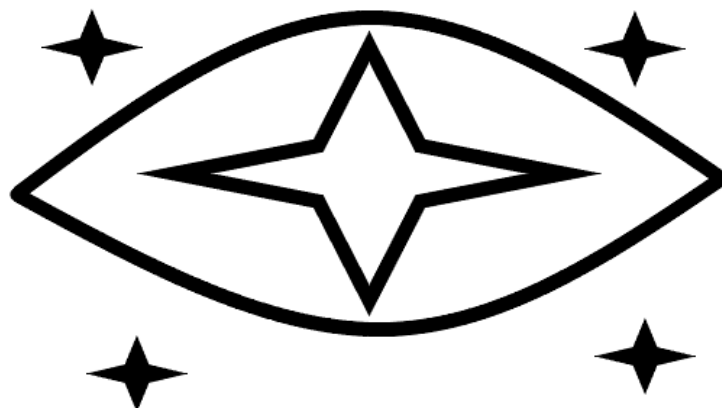
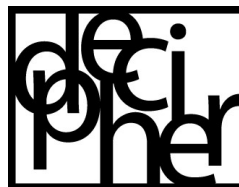


WARS

A STAR IN HER EYE BY JAMES WYLDER



A WARS CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



Dedication:

To Jo Smiley, the most constant friend, and the biggest person to nerd out with. This pandemic year would have sucked without you.

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Christmas Eve, Gongen (Formerly Mars), 2387

Sang Mi (Kalingkata)

Beyond the edge of the catwalk was a glowing pillar of light.

"Kalingkata, you ready to start the quest?"

"Shut up, Sang Eun, the game isn't registering all my fingers." Her digital body tried to open and close it's fist, but only the fore and ring fingers moved.

"Is it really that bad? The sword is locked on your avatar anyway. And call me by my screenname."

"Sure, Talinata. Anyway, fine let's start the mission. I want the free Santa hat."

Tapping the accept quest button, they were immediately dropped into a magnificent firefight: tri-pedal aliens brandishing obnoxiously big guns, carefully animated starships fighting overhead, brilliant explosions lighting up the night sky.

The pair of them dove head first into the fray, and immediately died.

"Okay, this time we focus," Kalingkata said as they respawned. She swung hard, going to decapitate one of the alien grunts, only to have her sword break against its neck. "Oh come on, seriously? They gave them Alexandrite armor? What difficulty did you put this on?"

Talinata sighed, "You said you wanted a challenge..."

"The heater is broken again," their mother yelled, and Sang Mi and Sang Eun, the Jhe twins, pulled up their VR goggles to blink at her.

"...These headphones are supposed to be soundproof, how loud did you just yell?" Sang Mi moaned.

"The housing complex said they can't get around to fixing it till Tuesday, do you really want us or our neighbors to go without heat all weekend?"

"It's Christmas eveeeeeee mooomm," Sang Mi moaned a second time.

"All the more important we do our good deed for the day. Or Santa won't bring you any chocolate."

"Santa is a CGC plant to sell off-world goods for exorbitant prices."

Their mom clapped their hands, "Excellent attention to the propaganda channel kids, now go fix the heating before I cancel our connection service."

"Guess we're losing this match," Sang Eun sighed to his sister. Peeking in the visor, they'd re-spawned and died seventeen times during that chat.

"It's okay, our kill to death ratio is pretty bad."

They logged out, and gathered their tools up.

"You'd think they'd keep the dome warm in the winter," Sang Eun cursed.

"Yeah, you'd think, but this is a subsidiary dome, and the seasons are an important part of our heritage," Sang Mi replied with more than a barrel of sarcasm.

The twins peered at the Heating/Cooling unit outside their building: it was a massive noisy thing, but it easily and cheaply heated the entire complex. Or should have.

"You wanna just hit it with a wrench and tell mom to buy our own heater?"

He rolled his eyes, and went to remove the access panel: the screws were already loose.

"Ah."

They both grew silent, and each taking a side of the panel pulled it off as quick as they could.

Inside were the parts of the heating unit, including a tube that had been pulled apart at a joint in order to let hot air into the compartment itself.

Under the pipe was a ten year old girl.

"Ahhh," Sang Mi said.

"Ahhhhhh?" Sang Eun agreed.

The girl's brown eye just got wide. Eye as in singular, her left one was a strange prosthetic that looked more like a large gemstone than a camera, set into a metal casing that went all the way to the back of her head, behind which dangled a brown ponytail. The gem shined like a star in the sudden light. Her left arm was also artificial. She was Caucasian, wearing a white long sleeve shirt with the logo for some brand of cola that neither of the twins had heard of, and blue pants.

"Hi kid," Sang Eun said, "You do realize you're inside a glorified furnace right?"

She glanced nervously between the two of them, "Who are you guys?"

"I'm Jh--" Sang Mi cut her brother off with a hand over the mouth.

"I'm Kalingkata, this is my brother Talinata."

She frowned, "What kind of names are that?"

"The names of intergalactic mischief makers obviously, which makes you our friend since you climbed in a furnace like an idiot, and I'm known to be a lovable idiot myself."

Talinata cleared his throat, "I'm guessing you're in there cause you're cold, yeah? You got a coat?"

She shook her head, and with a sigh he took his off and held it out to her.

"You're giving it back to me, by the way. But we sort of need you out of there?"

She hesitated then threw his coat on, which was huge on her of course. Kalingkata kept her eyes on her as Talinata climbed into the machine to reattach things, "So where are your parents?"

"Don't have 'em."

Well that wasn't good, "Where are you staying?"

She shrugged.

"Yeah, I don't know what that means."

"Well I was staying in there."

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. They just couldn't have a normal Christmas Eve could they? "Do you have a guardian? Who is taking care of you?"

She cringed, "I'm not going back!" she started to bolt, but Kalingkata grabbed her by the arm.

"Whoa there gorgeous, first off we're not sending you back anywhere bad, and second off you've got my brother's coat on, and while he did get it on sale, he really likes it."

"I appreciate the support," he said as he screwed a bolt into place.

She looked between them, and Sang Mi felt the tension leave her arms. "Will you run away if I let go?" She shook her head, and she released her. "Alright, what's your name then?"

She struck a pose, and said with much unnecessary inflection: "Jasmine O'Connor--Space Detective!"

The twins applauded politely.

"So are you a detective of space, or in space?" Sang Eun asked.

"...Yes," she answered after a confused pause.

"Fantastic," Kalkingkata answered. "I guess we have our next case then detective: the mystery of what to do with you."

Sang Eun looked over at her, and the pair wordlessly exchanged several rejected possibilities before somehow managing to communicate, "We get more information out of her!" using their body language and facial expressions.

"Great, so...you about done, Talinata?"

"Er, yeah," he crawled out, and began to reattach the panel. "So Jasmine, have you ever been to a Christmas Fair?"

She shook her head, "What's that?"

"Well, officially it's a Winter Fair, but they sell stuff around the Winter Holidays. It's a fun place, they've got food and games and the like. You wanna go with us?"

She bit her lip looking back and forth between them, "...Can I get a hat?"

Kalkingkata laughed, "Sure, we'll get you a coat too, so hold Talinata's hand over there."

"Why not yours?" the girl asked with a tilt of her head.

"Cause I'm a big ol' meanie. Now let's head out!"

* * *

The Christmas Fair was a highlight of the season, and even though for most of the city it was essentially a secular holiday, the fun parts of it had spread long ago into the cultural landscape. Little statues of Santa, wearing green robes and a gat cap, sat side by side with red ones with a stocking cap on the tables of the open air stalls, a skating rink filled with couples took up the center of the square, and the smell of roasted walnuts wrapped in persimmons wafted towards them. Jasmine stood out like a sore thumb, her glittering left eye changing color in the light. But her face was lit up brighter than the streetlamps, or the emergency lights hanging from the dome's ceiling. Sang Mi almost wished she'd taken the girl's hand too now as she skipped along with her brother, pointing at nearly every single stall they passed like they were magical wonders. Maybe they were.

"Hey kid, there's coats here, pick one out so my brother can stop pretending he's not freezing to death."

She looked up at him, "Sorry."

He just gestured for her to start looking through the coats, which gave the two a moment to chat.

"...There's something off about this."

"We should just drop her off at the police station."

"You of all people want to go to a police station? Mr. 'Got a visit from the Government for slandering a glorious Tenryu Party official online'? Really?"

"Well we can't just wander around with her forever. She's a child."

"A Maverick Child from the wilds of space, with cybernetic bits. Mavericks aren't allowed outside Colocog without express government permission, remember?"

He frowned and watched Jasmine reach up to pull a coat off the rack, and the friendly stall owner, who at least had the decency to cringe at her cybernetics when the girl wasn't looking, helped her try it on, and then showed her a hologram of what she looked like in it from all angles. "I know they're not. But things have been weird there the last few months. There was that explosion mom helped with the rescue efforts from, and it seemed like things have gotten tense."

Sang Mi couldn't help but nod, "Alright, so what are you getting at?"

"She clearly doesn't want to be found by whoever brought her here. Which leads me to think there are three possibilities."

She furrowed her brows, "Go on."

"One: she's a hostage. Kid of some Maverick big shot someone thinks they can use as leverage."

"That somehow feels wrong with how she's been acting, but it's possible."

"Two: she's a trafficking victim."

Sang Mi winced, "...It's likely but I won't want it."

"I know, me neither. Then three: she's a mule."

Her head shot to look at him, "You think she's got something valuable hidden on her? Like drugs?"

He shrugged, "I think it's possible--"

"HEY! I FOUND ONE!" she said loudly and with an overabundance of excitement. She spun around in it--she looked good in it, and more importantly, she looked much more Gongen.

"How about we get you some gloves and a hat to go with it?" Sang Mi said, grabbing some from the racks."

"I only really need one glove," she said.

"They come in pairs, and one looks funny," Sang Mi said, trying to hide that she just wanted to cover up her cybernetic parts, even as she pulled a knit cap on her, and down over her electric eye.

"Hey! Its hard to see with that on."

"We're going to play pirate," Sang Mi explained. "I'm the captain and you're my first mate, so you need an eye-patch. That's the law. My brother swabs the poop deck."

"Thanks," he replied.

"...Alright," Jasmine said, clearly skeptical but along for the ride.

They continued their walk, and stopped to buy some food and watch the ice skaters by a heating station, Sang Eun clearly enjoying having his coat back.

That was when she saw him.

It was the lack of cybernetics that let him blend in, but Sang Mi had hung out with enough Maverick teens either by sneaking in or them sneaking out of Colocog to recognise the look, the body language. That man was not a Gongen native.

And he was not a civilian.

He had that rough ex-military vibe of hard worn in habits from training worn away at the edges by years of freedom. He was looking at them, trying to make it look like he was scoping out a shop a little to their left, nursing a cup of steaming spiced tea as though he planned to lean on that railing all right.

"Hey Jasmine, do you know how to look at someone without looking at them? Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded, and tapped her artificial eye under the hat, then pulled it up so she could peek. The color had changed back as they'd moved into different light. "It's real easy as long as they're to my left. And I know all about surveillance--space detective remember!"

"Well you're in luck then. You see that man to our left in the long coat?"

She nodded.

"Have you seen him before? Is that the person who brought you here?"

She shook her head, "Her name was Triscum."

Sang Mi looked up at her brother, "Now that is a Maverick name right there."

Sang Eun thought for a moment, "Is she part of the Neoscum Gang?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. She had three eyes though. Two organic, one electric right on her forehead." She tapped her own to emphasize it.

"How do you know about Maverick Gangs?" Sang Mi asked.

"I live online," he replied.

"So do I but--"

Jasmine was tugging on their sleeves, "He's not there anymore." Their heads turned. He was not.

Ah.

Sang Eun tugged on Jasmine's hand and began leading them through the crowd. Their eyes all darted around, trying to make out their pursuer. But there were so many people, bundled up in coats and hats, chatting about this and that, smiling, or expressing things extra with their eyebrows if they had a cold and were wearing a facemask, it was hard to look for one person in the sea of people. Even if they were obviously a foreigner.

"Hi there," a gruff but charming voice said, as Sang Mi felt something hard press into her back. "I'm guessing you two are siblings? So it'd really be a pity if something unhappy happened to her intestinal tract, right?"

They all froze. Sang Eun slowly nodded.

"Well let's not hold up the crowd, keep moving."

They complied. Sang Mi tried to think, tried, but what was obviously a gun was wiping any chance of logical thought from her head. She was way too young to die! Her brother could see her pained expression, and she could tell he was failing to think just as much as she was. The man led them behind the line of stalls, and he shoved her forward so she had to catch herself against the dumpster he'd cornered them against.

Up close, he was annoyingly handsome, despite what Sang Mi thought of as his terrible taste in facial hair, which was brown like the thick mane he had going down his head. Caucasion, clearly a Maverick, but not a local from the Colocog colony. The coat and gun were both local--made sense even if he got through customs getting a gun on world would be more of

a hassle than just buying one. The coat was a pleasant green, with a hood that had probably come in a lot of handy through the crowds.

"Alright, you know what I'm after so just hand it over."

Sang Mi looked at her brother, looked down at Jasmine who was clutching onto him now, trembling, and back up at the man.

She'd done a lot of stupid and dangerous stuff in her life, but nothing dangerous in a way she couldn't get out of. So what if she got caught sneaking out of Colocog? The police just chewed her out despite it technically being a jailable offense. Just give em the puppy eyes, so sorry officer. She was fine. She'd jury rigged a broken jet pack and dropped out of the sky, but even then she'd put in a back up to make sure if the thing malfunctioned it would just turn off and drop her, and not blow up.

She wanted people to think she was a reckless punk, but really she was scared of getting hurt. At least her brother was pretty much what he seemed on the surface. So her next action surprised her and her twin.

Sang Mi spread her arms out, and stood between the man and the child, "I'd rather die than let you take her, you filthy child trafficker. Go ahead and shoot me. I'll scream so loud they'll hear me up at Overwatch Command on the moon."

The man paused, then held up both hands, the gun facing away from them for a moment, "Hold up there, what do you mean 'you filthy child trafficker,' that's you. You're the ones--" he sighed. "I think we might have a misunderstanding going on here."

"Perhaps!" she said. "But you're the one trying to kidnap the child."

"I'm not trying to--she's a mule, you know that right?"

The twins looked at each other, and Sang Mi quietly handed over a credit chip. "My brother can be insufferably right. But no, I didn't."

"I did," Sang Eun said.

"Yes, we all know."

Jasmine tugged on his sleeve, "What's a mule?"

"It means you're carrying something on you to transport it illegally."

She shook her head, "But I'm not..."

The Maverick man sighed, "I doubt the kid knows it was planted on her. You clearly want to protect her--I don't want anything bad to happen to her either. You have my word on that."

"What's your word matter?" She replied.

He put his hand over his heart, "As Captain Jack Wilgress, I solemnly swear on all the Gongeny honor and karma and that sort of thing that I just want the thing she has I'm getting paid for."

Sang Eun sighed, "You know my sister and I don't really care about honor or Karma right?"

He frowned, "Is that so?"

"Not every Gongen is a cookie cutter copy my dude."

He nodded, "You know, that's fair. My apologies. Now give me the goods."

Sang Mi turned around, "Yeah sure, just give me a second to uh, get the goods." She gave her twin a look. She could tell he got it. Jasmine looked scared, so she pulled her hat up, and kissed her forehead. "It's gonna be okay, you trust Talinata here right?"

She nodded.

Kalingkata winked back, and pulling the hat from Jasmine's head, turned around again, slowly walking toward him, hands out, blocking Jasmine from view.

"So Mr. Wilgress, there's something you need to know about your job before I hand this over."

He leveled the gun as she edged towards him, "Yeah, what's that? You can just set it down on the ground and back up, might be better for everyone if you stopped getting closer when I've got my finger on the trigger of a silenced pistol."

She shook her head, "That's the problem, the thing I need to tell you about all this." She edged closer, unsure exactly how much she could push her luck.

"...Alright. Out with it."

She leaned in, as if conspiratorially. He didn't lean in himself, but his eyes were on her. "The thing is," she grinned, "I'm really stupid." She let her lean turn into a fall, the balled up hat going from her hand into his face, and her own hands going to the barrel of the gun.

It was barely a distraction, but it was enough. She could hear Sang Eun and Jasmine running. Wilgress was only thrown off for a moment, and then the pair were grappling for his gun in earnest--and Sang Mi knew she was going to lose.

Sure, she did her government mandated military training. She wasn't out of shape or anything. But she just worked out to avoid government penalties, this guy worked out cause he liked it. As he pulled on her hand, it felt like her wrist was going to snap. So she lunged forward and bit his hand. He didn't scream, didn't yelp, just looked annoyed as he pulled his own head back, and slammed his forehead into hers.

She remembered the sensation of falling, of spinning, of the world going blurry and out of focus, of cold earth against her back and the tail of a green coat leaving her vision as the lights in the sky shone overhead. Then it all turned black, and for a while she was incapable of the worry she should have been feeling then.

* * *

One Week Earlier.

Jack Wilgress

"This job sounds way too good to be real."

"Well, I never said it was actually an easy job," Starhawk, the go between for the criminal gang the Accord, continued. "It's simple on the surface though: one piece of extremely valuable merch is being moved, we want you to grab it for us. We can get you on and off world, and we'll pay you handsomely for your trouble. I'm sure your crew won't mind taking the payday for you going solo for a bit either."

Yeah, this was too good to be true, "There's a catch, so stop messing around and show me the bear trap I'm about to lodge my foot in."

Starhawk grinned, the tattoos on his face bending with the motion. "Always the astute observer. That's why you're good for this Jack. The catch is the mule for the merch is a child."

The silence that followed was long enough that Jack saw Starhawk check the holo on his

end hadn't frozen.

"...Naw."

"Naw?"

"As in no. I'm not moving a child."

Starhawk leaned back in his chair looking far too smug for any person's own good. "But Jacky-boy this is exactly why you're going to take the job. The kid doesn't even know they're the mule, and anyone else we send isn't going to care what they have to do to the kid to get the merch." He put on a voice of mock concern and sympathy as convincing as throwing a towel on a duck and calling it a tiger, "I just thought you of all people would be able to help this poor innocent urchin who has been swept up in this mess."

Starhawk had him by his unmentionables, and he knew it. He didn't show it though, his face maintained absolute stoicism. "You don't know much about me at all, Nick. Can I call you Nick?"

Starhawk sighed, "...Naw."

Jack grinned, "Well if the pay is good, and you have everything set up to get me on Gongen, then why not. But here's my real question--why not one of your local contractors?"

Starhawk licked his upper lip as he thought of his phrasing, "Unfortunately Miss Red Jane had a...disagreement with one of our operatives there, and I'm loath to risk her having a similar disagreement with the other ones we've spent so much money getting on world."

"How many limbs did she disagree with this time?"

"Just three, I think she's cooling down honestly."

Getting onto Mars? Easy, actually. The Accord had forged him excellent documentation, even gotten him some new duds just for the occasion which fit well enough he wondered how they'd gotten his size so precise. Somehow getting the gun was easy too--he walked into a shop whose sign translated roughly to "Grandpa's Gizmos" and after petting the Shiba Inu lounging by the counter was presented with a non-descript box by a friendly looking old man that contained a heavily modified Gongen plasma pistol. If he could get the damn thing off world he could--the silencer on it could muffle a rock concert. Backstory was he was one of the Gongen whose ancestry traced back to Russia just back from work on one of Gongen's mining colonies. Did he know Russian?

Well he didn't not know Russian.

Not that it came up, as everyone just asked him stuff in Mandarin anyway. Easy peasy. Tracked the mark down to a Christmas fair, got to drink some nice tea.

Everything was going just fine until it suddenly very much wasn't.

First some Gongen teenagers accuse him of unsavory activity, then he has to knock one of them out to chase down the mule--the child. And it was becoming pretty obvious that these teens weren't the damn people who had gotten the kid here in the first place--which meant that as he charged after the other one, who'd gone from dragging the kid behind him to swooping her up in his arms, made him wonder exactly what the hell was going on.

Then he lost them.

After issuing an apology and a bow to a mother, a child who witnessed his long string of curses upon losing the trail (they were so uptight here), he went back to a casual stroll. They

couldn't have gotten far, and the way the festival was roped off meant getting out of bounds meant hopping a fence or dealing with a security guard unless you used one of the designated exits. So where exactly did they go?

Before he could find that out, he ran into a second problem. And a third.

Jack had been in this business a while now, and before he went AWOL had been a respected member of the CGC military. He knew how to spot certain kinds of people. People in the same line of work. And he wasn't the only person like himself in the crowd.

Great, just great. He was going to strangle Nicky if he ever saw him again in person. Maybe he'd strangle his hologram just to take the edge off.

There was a big stage where some sort of performance was getting put on, looked like some sort of adaptation of the story of Santa with pan-Asian elements, lots of kids were gathered around the front laughing and pointing as a version of Krampus who looked very much like an Oni got clobbered by an elf with their oversized shoe. To the side, a man who was either Yakuza or former was getting warm spicy cashews in a paper cone from a vendor. He looked very respectable in a high collared black peacoat, but the collar wasn't quite high enough to hide the top of the colorful tattoo that crept up his neck under his slicked back hair.

More obvious though was the woman who kept adjusting her newsboy cap over her forehead. The little glint of metal whenever it rode up told him all he needed to know. So there were a minimum of two other parties here after the kid--the Maverick woman was likely her handler who'd let her slip away.

Too late to undo knocking that girl in the alley out, but that's how these things went.

A group of costumed mascot characters representing different departments of the Gongen Government got up on the stage, and began to bounce around as Santa began a rendition of the new Christmas single by Janice Rose, which Jack begrudgingly had to admit was catchy even though he hated it. He scanned the crowd. nothing. He pulled the hood up, on the off chance he hadn't already been spotted.

Then he noticed it. Two of the mascots were moving... off. They weren't doing a very intricate dance, just jumping up and down and waving their arms, but two weren't even managing that.

He actually laughed, no way! It was the sort of amateur move some kids who'd seen too many holos would try, and he'd almost missed it cause of it. Slipping past security by flirting with the stagehand at the gate till she forgot she was supposed to check his ID, he went over to the ramp leading off the stage, and flattened his back against the wall there.

"Great work Hanzo, you were a great Santa!"

"Oh shut up JOrani, like I want to be playing Santa Claus my whole life--"

One by one the cast made their way down the ramp, the mascots taking their heavy heads off to drink bottles of water handed to them by the stage hands. Then two in particular came down, heads off, the older boy booping the girl on the nose.

"You did great Jasmine, hopefully that bought us some time."

Unfortunately, he then got a gun pressed against his neck as Jack mimed throwing a friendly arm around his shoulder, "Sorry pal, but doesn't quite look like it."

The girl trembled in fear. He didn't like that, but this was for her own good.

"Okay, Mr. uh, Wilgress, how about you just calm down."

"We're not on opposite sides here, I want the girl to be safe too. You're both in way over your heads. You think you can really keep her safe when I caught you? There's a Yakuza and another Maverick hunter out there looking for her. You know what that means?"

The boy and girl looked at each other. She bit her lip and nodded at him.

"Alright... I'll go with you... Just don't hurt him."

He smiled, "Of course, I'm a man of my word. Mostly. Well, a lot of the time. It's at least fifty-fifty. Now help her out of that ridiculous costume, we've got to keep moving."

He looked for an exit route.

One their pursuers wouldn't expect.

He grinned when it hit him. It was stupid, but what they hell. He hadn't gotten into enough trouble on this trip yet anyway.

* * *

Kalingkata (Sang Mi)

Sang Mi moaned as she sat up, her vision still blurry.

"Just stay still, you hit your head pretty hard!"

"Urggh," she replied.

"I'm Tam Fei-Yen, you're in safe hands, do you remember your name?"

"...Kalingkata?" she said.

"...You must have hit your head harder than I thought."

She blinked at the girl, who must have been around her own age, and gave her a big grin that would have been more reassuring if she wasn't swaying slightly, before looking around. "Where's... did you see a man with a terrible moustache? Like, the kind of moustache that you get and you're really proud of so no one has the heart to tell you it's kinda weird?"

"...I genuinely do not know what you're talking about."

She nodded, and pulled herself up.

"Wait--you probably have a concussion!"

Kalingkata shrugged, "I mean, it's not a bad one?"

She staggered up, bracing herself against the wall, and trying to get herself moving.

"I can't in good conscience let you--"

She looked back at Fei-Yen, "No." She didn't expect that level of forcefulness to come out of her mouth, but it stopped her good Samaritan cold. "thank you, though. I really appreciate it. But if I die or anything it's my fault now so don't worry!"

"That is not reassuring!"

Her head didn't so much start to clear as she picked up speed as she just ignored the spinning by keeping her hand against the railing. She felt sick.

Yeah, okay, this was a bad idea, that Fei-Yen girl was right. But there was a kid's life at stake here, so the least she could do was throw herself into danger needlessly--then she threw up.

Panting, clutching the railing, she felt a tap on her shoulder, and she looked up to see the

same young lady holding a bottle of water. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she winked in her general direction, and rinsed her mouth out, splashed the water on her face, and then downed the rest of the bottle. The cool liquid helped--she still felt like shit, but she could focus. The world wasn't so much spinning as wobbling.

"You need to stop, whatever you're doing isn't worth your life!"

"Child in danger," she sputtered.

Fei-Yen looked shocked, and then her face firmed up, "R-right, I'll guide you!" She grabbed her hand and started pulling. Kalingkata followed? "Where are we going?"

"Look for a girl in a pink knit cap and coat, the hat is pulled over one eye. She should be with a boy in a blue pea-coat, just like mine?"

"Boyfriend?" She shouted back, as she pulled her through the crowd. Kalingkata slammed into a dozen people as she moved, going too fast to issue apologies, too sick to focus on their glares.

"There!" Kalingkata pointed up at a high solid metal fence, which her brother was cresting the top of, then dropping out of sight. "Get me to that fence."

Her guide complied, and when she felt her shoulder slam into the fence ("SORRY!") groaned as she looked up at it. She had no idea how her brother had scaled it but... "Okay Tam Fei-Yen, do you know how to vault someone up?"

"...No."

"Great. Well we're going to do a crash course."

She paused, and then looking back and forth between the top of the fence and Kalingkata's swaying form, seemed to make a decision as she bit her lip.

"Okay you're making a face."

"Don't tell anyone I did this okay?" She opened up her purse, and pulled out a silver case, which split with a pop to reveal a series of small glass vials and a pressure injector.

"Alright, drugs. I guess this is where my day is going."

Fei-Yen shot her a dirty look. "They're for my grandfather. Everyone else is too squeamish to--nevermind just hold your arm out."

She complied, and there was a quick hiss as the fluid was shot into her vein. She looked down at her arm, unsure if it was her vision wobbling, her arm shaking or both.

And then it hit.

"Oh baby," Kalingkata grabbed Ms. Tam's shoulder for support and gritted her teeth. Everything was very very clear. Her pulse was high. Her memories were...very present. Like everything she'd ever lived through was popping right into her head, all trying to budge through a doorway at once, one slipping through at a time as they fought for supremacy.

"What is this stuff."

"Kerodone, and don't you dare get addicted. Now teach me to vault you over!"

"Yes ma'am!"

She gave her the most polite worried smile ever as she held her hands out for Kalingkata's feet as instructed, and pushed her over the top. Kalingkata hadn't been sure what to expect when she crested the wall, but it certainly wasn't that.

* * *

Takahashi

Master Takahashi had been in charge of running this Ancestral Garden for twenty years now. But in all that time, and in all the time before it, he'd never felt the kind of disrespect as he did with the mandated decorations for this week.

"String lights, glass balls on the trees, it's a tacky disgrace!" he seethed for the 8th time that day.

"Yes, Master," Fujino, one of his apprentices said by rote, as she moved through the sword practice with the other students. She was good, still years off from actual skill, but he had no doubt the military would scoop her up before she actually hit her full potential. They seemed to be doing that lately.

"All to appease the new Holy Mother of a foreigners religion. You'd think they'd get some backbone--it's not like anyone worthwhile is part of it!"

"...I'm actually, uh, a member of the church..." Fujino said with the air of someone about to get expelled.

He sighed, of course she was. "Well, nobody's perfect."

It was with that statement, as if on cue, that the man and the child dropped down over the side of the fence.

The whole group of students, katanas in mid movement, stopped to look at the pair. The lines of makeshift Christmas trees framed their entrance perfectly. The child blinked her one visible eye at them. Then looked back at the man in the green coat as he dusted himself off. Then back at them.

"Help! I've been kidnapped!" She yelled.

The man just rubbed the bridge of his nose with the hand that wasn't holding a gun. "Look folks, there's a bit of a misunderstanding..."

Fujino looked at him, and Master Takahashi rose to his full height, and gestured with his fan, "Students it's time to demonstrate your skill."

The man, rather than looking afraid, just groaned as he looked up at the sky, and then leveled his gun.

But then things got worse.

* * *

Jack Wilgress

Jack tried to gauge the age of the quickly approaching group of sword wielding students, and determined that whatever their age he was getting very tired of figuring out ways to pull his blows here on Gongen. Could they just send one person who wasn't legally a child at him? Just one?

He quickly regretted thinking that as he barely dodged the sword that was coming down at his head. The man holding it landed in a crouch between him and the girl--it was the Yakuza. The monomolecular blade effortlessly sliced the tops of the grass and rocks arranged on the

ground as he pulled it up to swing at him again. He fired, and the two dodged in opposite directions, sending Jack slamming against the fence, and the Yakuza to push the momentum of his swing into a spin that led one of his hands to grab a hold of the girl by the collar and tug him behind her as he broke into a run. The man sprinted forward, the students trying to intercept, calling out battlecries with youthful passion, their white practice clothes bathed in the twinkling colored lights around them.

The Yakuza pulled his blade back, and it hit Jack that this guy didn't have any qualms about inflicting excess damage on the youth. So he aimed his pistol, and shot at his foot. The dirt flew up, and he side stepped it. But the sidestep pulled his blow out from decapitating the most enthusiastic girl in the lead of the group.

Then things got more complicated.

First, the other girl hopped the fence. She pulled her hat up to fully reveal her third eye on her forehead, and assessing the situation in a glance, opened said third eye. Instead of enlightenment, it seemed that that eye contained a continual burn laser beam attachment. So it goes. He had to drop to the ground to duck it, as the beam silently burned through carefully grown trees, and sent the students reeling and dropping to the ground too in order to stop it. The Yakuza, sensing the sweep was aiming for him so dropping wasn't going to help, dropped his sword, and drew his own gun. Jack recognized the model--they were twins!-- and he let out a burst of quick blasts, which missed their target as the woman bolted right. Towards Jack. The beam burned a line through the ground before she turned it off, and found herself running right into the rising hand of Jack Wilgress, the butt of his pistol impacting the fragile beam weapon and crushing it. She cried out, holding her now concave forehead, as Jack turned his attention back to the Yakuza, before getting tackled.

There was just too much happening all at once, and it took him a moment to realize it was the boy from those Gongen twins who'd had the kid in the first place. He got his hands around Jack's neck before Jack saw the boy's eyes notice where the child actually was now, and let him keep his momentum as he quickly moved off of him, and then stopped as the Yakuza had snatched his sword back up, with one hand holding it a centimeter from the child's neck, the other training the gun on the rest of them.

The Yakuza backed up slowly, towards the building at the far side of the garden.

"If any of you follow me, you know what happens."

The woman who'd dropped over cursed again, then shouted back, "You know who you're dealing with? The people who are paying for that girl aren't the kind of people you want on your bad side."

He didn't look impressed by the threat.

The boy in the blue coat looked back at him, "Okay space pirate, you got any ideas here?"

"I did before you tackled me."

He cringed, "...Right."

He kept backing up. Jack kept his gun trained on him, edging forward, but he knew he wasn't the man in charge right now.

But just when it seemed like things couldn't get any more chaotic, their final guest fell over the top of the fence, rolling on the ground to her feet, eyes somewhat bloodshot.

"Hello Garden!" she shouted as though entering a stadium.

"Are you okay?" Her brother asked.

She just started cracking up at him, "I'm on grandpa drugs!"

Now he looked concerned and worried.

But she just stumbled forward, laughing, slapping the back of one of the befuddled students, as if she expected her to be in on a joke. The Yakuza was just as confused as everyone else, but continued backing up.

"This is so funny!" Kalingkata told the poor student, who just politely nodded along with her delusional statement. "I should have figured it out beforehand, but you know what I am?"

"Er, mentally unwell?"

Kalingkata laughed harder, "Well, yeah. But other than that!" She reached down and picked up one of the rocks from the ground, tossing it up in the air and catching it. "I'm an absolute idiot."

She threw the rock right at the child's head.

Jack heard himself yell, "Don't!"

And everyone reacted at once.

* * *

Jasmine O'Connor

They'd offered her the mule job for more money than she'd had in her life. More than her parents had before they'd died. They even gave her new cybernetics. Why her? She'd figured it was cause she didn't matter. No one would miss her. No one would notice if she turned up dead in a ditch somewhere. But it was the last part of the deal that was really interesting: she'd get to live on Gongen if she made the trip. Get placed in a foster home, get adopted if it worked out.

Anywhere was better than Mimas, the whole moon was practically made of poverty more than it was made of rock. Things had started well, till her handler had been killed. The woman who did the deed, with her murderous third eye, planned to take her off world. But she'd been too cocky--Jasmine had broken free when she turned to argue about a ticket price at the maglev train station, and she'd hid. And she'd run. And she'd hid. And then she'd been found, and then she'd been chased.

And now she was here.

In this moment, a rock coming right towards her head from the girl she'd thought would help protect her. The sword by her neck instinctively moved up to block the rock, and she was looking right into the sharp edge of the blade.

Then she realized that the other side of the blade wasn't sharp--it wasn't going to cut the rock in half or anything. And then the rock hit it--and she closed her organic eye, and turned off the feed from her other one.

And she felt a little shove against her face, and there was a metallic snapping sound, and she opened her eyes to see the snapped snub of a sword sticking out pathetically from the handle. The Yakuza looked stunned.

And then the Maverick man shot the Yakuza in the head.

The next moment she was crying, but she was warm, as arms wrapped around her, warm in the cold air, the stars and the strings of lights glittering to her in the darkness.

For the first time since her parents died, she felt safe.

* * *

Kalingkata (Sang Mi)

The high had been sure high, but the low was awful and lasting far far longer than the high had. Sang Mi reminded herself to agree to a don't do drugs PSA if she ever got famous, because this sucked. It was made worse by having to answer questions.

"And the Maverick ran off?"

"He tied up the uh, the murder-eye lady first, and winked, and said something witty I can't remember, but yeah then he ran off."

The interviewer nodded, and typed something into a tablet. "But I think that gets to the big question... you took a big risk there, with the rock."

She looked down at her mug of tea, and shrugged so that the shock blanket on her shoulders bounced a little, "It didn't feel like it at the time. But... I was absolutely sure about what the item they were competing for was, and as it turned out I was right."

The Interviewer smiled, "You indeed were. So, how did you figure out it was Alexandrite?"

Sang Mi flipped one of her hands around so the palm and back of the hand shifting facing her. "When we went between different types of light, the gem in her eye changed color, and it did so regardless of angle. Alexandrite is rare, and a piece that big of it would be worth a fortune."

"More than you can believe..." The Interviewer muttered, "And how did you know about its effect on monomolecular blades?"

"Video games."

She sighed, "Well, I suppose they had some educational value for you then... But yes, in reality the purest type of Alexandrite, with a refined color and structure, can cause havoc with the structure of monomolecular blades upon impact. So there's two reasons it's so rare. It's an incredibly valuable stone that girl was carrying in her eye."

"Is the gem going into a museum now or...?"

The Interviewer just smiled pleasantly, "That's Government business."

Sang Mi sipped her tea. It was hot, and sort of flavorless, but hot was all she really needed. "...Miss um, what do I call you?"

"You can call me Kaguya."

"Right... Well Miss Kaguya, what's going to happen to Jasmine?"

She shut off the tablet, and adjusted her glasses. "Jasmine will be placed with a new family for adoption here on Gongen."

She furrowed her eyebrows, "In Colocog?"

Kaguya shook her head, "In the general populace. You might say this is a...special circumstance."

This was sketchy, but Sang Mi figured she'd pushed her luck pretty far as is. Still, she was

an idiot, and that had worked out so far today... "Miss Kaguya, if you already have extracted the gem from her... Can I ask a favor?"

* * *

Christmas Day, 2387.

Jasmine O'connor

She had to hold the police officer's hand the whole way there, and the whole way she felt like she should run away. She'd been taken to too many places lately by strangers after all. But when she saw the housing complex, her heart skipped a beat.

He led her up to the door, and the sensors by the door scanned them and sent the info to the occupants, who swung the door open all smiles.

There were two adults, and three teenagers, the twins she'd met before and an older brother! Her face lit up.

"Kalingkata and Talinata!"

The women frowned, "You told her your screennames?"

Kalingkata laughed, pulling the santa hat off her own hat, and pulling it onto Jasmine's head. "Merry Christmas Jasmine. How'd you like to spend the day with us?"

She nodded, and was pulled inside to where there was light and warmth, the smell of cakes and pies, and so many smiles.

To her, this was brighter than any gemstone.

/fin

WARS Roleplaying Game

A Star in Her Eye Rules Supplement

You can find WARS Roleplaying Game Corebook from our friends at Mongoose Publishing at:
[Wars Rpg - Mongoose | OGL and D20 | DriveThruRPG.com](#)

Locations:

Takumi's Residual Cheonsa Dome

Before Takumi proper's large dome was built, the Residual Cheonsa Dome was built to house the earliest colonists as their real home was being built. Never intended to be a permanent structure, the Cheonsa dome was listed for demolition for years. But years turned into decades, and decades are now centuries, and the shoddy dome has become a thriving home for many Takumi citizens. Jokes about its imminent demolition are common in the main dome, and

Linked to the main dome by an enclosed mag-lev train route, the Cheonsa dome has the cheapest housing in the Takumi region, with conditions to match. The dome heats and cools with the seasons in ways other domes don't, and the dome and the housing within it are constantly being fixed by its own residents who are afraid that if they wait for someone to come help, the dome itself will collapse. As such, it's not uncommon for children to grow up with a high level of mechanical knowledge.

Both of these facts, as well as the dome being close to the Maverick colony city of Colocog, have led to a steady illegal trade between the two areas, usually facilitated by Jetpack couriers who can make the difficult flight below the sensor lines monitoring the area. For most Gongen citizens who want Maverick equipment or goods, Cheonsa is the place to go. Much to the displeasure of other Gongen, Cheonsa residents tend to be more accepting of Maverick ideology, and it's one of the few places you'll find Mavericks openly married to Gongen citizens.

Cheonsa has a large number of citizens with Korean Ancestry, and is the only dome on Gongen where Catholicism is the majority religion. Holy Mother Flavia has made several appearances there since her ascension to the role.

Cheonsa is a vibrant community, with fantastic festivals and holiday markets throughout the year. Visitors come to the dome throughout the year for these events, and they've become it's main draw for outsiders.

On a darker note, the dome is also a haven for criminals. The Yakuza have a large presence there, and all of the major Maverick gangs have a safehouse and a few agents there, if not entire gangs sworn to loyalty. Venturing outside of the tourist friendly areas can be dangerous, and festivals and markets usually have security and barricades to make sure people stay where they want them to be. Of particular note to criminals is Grandpa's Gizmos, a long running front for illegal weapons and equipment on Gongen. They sell to anyone, any faction, any belief. It's unclear how they've stayed in business all these years, but it is clear that anyone who tried to take them over or rat them out to the cops disappeared quickly and quietly.

Equipment and Assistance:

Drug: Kerodone

Class III Enhancement

Unlike most other drugs available to Medics, Kerodone has built in benefits, and unavoidable side effects. Developed to help treat certain degenerative disorders, Kerodone removes inhibitions while tightening focus in areas of recall and motor control. In a medical setting, this can help remove uncontrollable shakes, treat concussions, and restore some capacity to recall memory in patients. It's been long known however to be popular with certain criminal groups who don't mind the side effects, or just don't mind some of their more 'disposable' flunkies having them.

Taking Kerodone grants a character an immediate +4 to Dexterity and Intelligence based rolls, and -4 to all Wisdom and Charisma based rolls (including saves).

It's duration is equal to 1 Minute+Another minute for each Medic level the character administering the drug has.

After the duration ends, the recipient of the drug experiences a "low" for 1 Hour+30 Minutes for each Medic Level the administering character has. This low gives them -2 to all rolls. The duration can be halved by the recipient character sleeping for at least one hour.

Weapons:

Hyper-Silenced Gongen Plasma Bolter

A creation of Grandpa's Gizmos, an underworld front that sells weapons and equipment to anyone who doesn't want their stuff registered with the Gongen Government, the Hyper-Silenced is a weapon of short range assassination.

The Hyper-Silenced does not break the user's cover when fired due to sound. If someone sees you shoot someone with it, or where the plasma bolt came from, you're still in trouble though. Attempts to hear a shot from the Hyper-Silenced take a -10 penalty.

Firearm

Damage: 1d10+2 fire

Damage Type: Energy

Crit Range: 19-20

30 metres/15

Semiautomatic

12 charges

Small 1.5 Kg

Cost: 1,200 credits

Cybernetics

Extra-Eye Enhancement

A variant that can be added to any Optics Enhancement. This allows the character to have one or more extra eyes, with the primary benefit being the ability to switch between different optic modes seamlessly. Characters can “Open” an Optic with the Extra-Eye enhancement using a move action, and close it with a reflexive action. Opening the eye deactivates other active Optic Enhancements until it is closed.

**Look for More WARS, coming soon.
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