



**WARS** UNDER . . . .  
**CONSTRUCTION**

By James Wylder  
Illustration by Bri Crozer

She'd been staring at the message on her tablet for minutes, and now her daughter was starting a family tradition by staring back at her with a little too much interest. "So, what are you looking at anyway?" Sang Mi finally asked her.

She blacked the tablet, and smiled up at her, "Nothing important, just an unexpected work delivery. I'll have to head out, I'm afraid."

"If it's not important, then why are you heading out this late at night?" her son Sang Eun cut in, even as he and his sister kept tinkering with the machine they'd taken apart.

Jhe Hei-Ran, Gongen Courier, knew she wasn't hiding anything from the twins. She'd never been good at bluffing, her face gave everything away all the time. Which made the fact she'd been selected for this job all the more troubling...and intriguing. It wasn't from her employer, so she had every right to reject the freelance job. But the money was good, and their family could use it.

"Well, even if it was important, I have to respect my client's privacy," she said with a wink.

"Sure mom," Sang Mi sighed.

"Just hold tight, I'll be back before morning. If your father or brother get back, just tell them I had a job. And if I find out you two have run off to Colocog again in the night--"

"We won't," they said in practiced unison.

\* \* \*

There was something itchy with her grey and black courier armor, but she tried to put it aside as she focused on the task at hand, and not get too bogged down in all the risks involved. And it was risky, very risky. You don't make drops at night for this kind of paycheck to people who are entirely on the level. Thinking about it too hard would just lead to bad places—she didn't need to know. It was probably gangsters though—those Mavericks from the rim who'd set up in Colocog, shining insincere smiles and chrome prosthetics. Probably the Cartel or the Accord, they'd have the cash on hand. And what they'd be having her deliver? Even more important to not think about that.

It hadn't been a plan, but it was good she'd warned her kids off from sneaking off to Colocog again, not just because their fascination with the city made her uncomfortable, but cause it was her destination. She lowered the goggles over her eyes, and took in the thin night air of the Gongen surface. Now for the best part of the trip: time to fly.

She always took a running start to turn her jetpack on, she didn't need to, but she'd had an old cheap model as a kid she needed to do it with, and it was a force of habit. So she ran. Arms pumping. Breath moving quick. And then—she shot off the ground! The twin engines on her back blasted Hei-Ran over the Gongen wastes, over red sand, spinning atmosphere machines, and long lines of rocks. She spun in the air, looking up at the stars and the light of the moon of Phobos above her, and flashed a mock salute to the monitoring station up above. The same stupid joke everyone did. She enjoyed the cold air on her face, till she neared the unpleasant part of the adventure.

All traffic in and out of Colocog was heavily monitored, no one was supposed to go in or out. Which was where couriers like Hei-Ran came in. With a suit that reflected wide-range scans and a low-disturbance jet pack, you could fly under the sensitive scanners that were built to pick up shuttles, ships, and autocars: as long as you didn't mind getting sand blown up in your face. Low enough the slight sand you kicked up muddled the sensors a little extra. It was the roughest

part—you couldn't wear a flight mask because the only way you could tell you were flying low enough to miss the sensors without impacting the ground was to feel it. Use your own sensors? You'd be tracked. And plenty of idiots had been, and been locked up on Phobos just for it. So she checked her teeth were fit tightly into the rebreather, and dove down. The sand pelted her face—and she felt some of it get into her mouth and suit despite her precautions. Even itchier. She kept count, timing the seconds till she had to cut her engines...and...there.

She cut them, turned her body so she'd roll in the right direction, and dropped. The impact hurt, and she bounced, and rolled, and then she heard the swoosh as the doors opened for her, and she tumbled inside landing sprawled in a heap on the floor. She spat her rebreather out, panting, and rolling onto her back as she took in the scattered laughter and applause from the Mavericks.

"Even less graceful than your last one, 8-Bit."

She raised a fist in the air in recognition, even if she didn't entirely understand the nickname. She slowly sat up, then stood up, and stumbled up to Spare Knee Nick.

"Hey," she coughed, "I'm meeting a client at the Fortinbras Taphouse."

"Cover fee?" he said perfunctorily, and she dug into a pocket and dropped the credit chip into his outstretched hand. Spare Knee Nick had had his eyes replaced with cameras, and so he didn't blink, and it wiggled her out a bit but she was getting used to it. Other than that, and a chrome left arm, he was a handsome and fairly muscular young man. He nodded, "All in order as usual, 8-Bit, though we weren't expecting anyone to zip in under the radar tonight."

"I wasn't expecting to zip," she replied. "Late call."

"Ever the professional. C'mon then."

Colocog was a mess of interconnected buildings, tunnels, bunkers, warehouses, and docking bays without the usual domes that the citizens of the world lived in. It was an exception in every way, really. Thus, the best place for under-the-table transactions, and the Fortinbras had the tables. Nick led her through some badly-held-together oxygen tunnels to the bar, where her client stood out like a sore thumb. She inhaled through her teeth. It was never a good sign when she could tell her clients on sight. Still, she got to the table, and sat down.

The client wore dark glasses, despite the room being dark, had messy brown hair with a streak of grease on his white skin, a dirty brown suit with an out-of-season novelty Christmas tie, and smoked an ecig between a rusty metal jaw and his organic top teeth. On his side of the table was a black case. "You 8-Bit?" he coughed.

"That's me. I take it that's the cargo?"

"Yeah," he said.

She pulled her tablet out of the suit's built-in backpack, and opened the message again:

*Urgent pick up from Colocog. Payment upon delivery of 35,000 credits. Look for a man in a bad suit with a bad tie and a rusty jaw carrying a black case in the Fortinbras Taphouse. CLICK THIS SENTENCE TO PAY CLIENT. Upon collection of case, travel southwest of Colocog till outside of sensor range, then 500 meters further, and then CLICK THIS SENTENCE TO SEND DROP OFF COORDINATES. Do not click either link until conditions have been met. Do not allow yourself to be followed.*

*Do not communicate with anyone about the nature of your transaction.*

*Destroy the device you received this message on upon completion of job. You will be compensated for double its value.*

"You ready to slide it over?"

"You ready to pay?"

"Yeah."

"Cool."

He rolled his sleeve up, and revealed a screen built into his arm. Hei-Ran tapped the first link in the message, and then "TRANSACTION RECEIVED" appeared on the arm-screen.

"Double cool," he rasped, and slid the case over. "Pleasure doing business with you. Staying for a drink?"

"Fraid not, same-day delivery or your money back."

He nodded, "Heh, still funny to see you Gongen going under the state-owned radar making money on the side, but I respect the hustle..."

She grabbed the case, and stood up, giving him a little wave, and began to move towards the door.

That was when the woman stood up. She'd been innocuous, completely innocuous, that was until of course she'd pulled a gun on Hei-Ran and yelled at her to drop the case. She looked just like all the other mavericks, a blonde woman in a lot of edgy leather, till she pulled some rather impressive metallic prosthetics off her face with her spare hand, "I said put the case down. That's an order."

Hei-Ran slowly lowered herself to a crouch, so she was technically lowering the case down.

"Now slide it over to me."

"Not so fast," another voice said. A second woman stood up, gun drawn, "Agent Clarkson. You really thought you could get past the eyes of the Tenryu party on Gongen? I've been tracking you for months."

Clarkson, apparently, scowled, "Agent Min. You do realize you're interfering in a CiSyn operation authorized by the CGC itself? You don't have authority here, Earth does."

"Gongen is a sovereign planet, and it's you who have no authority!"

Hei-Ran tried to quietly slide towards the door as they yelled at each other, but quickly both guns were turned back on her.

That was when her client rose from the table, "Alright, that's enough of this," he drew an orb from his pocket, and held a button down on it, "now ladies, this grenade here will activate if I let go of this switch, and that'll blow this whole room to kingdom come."

The usual clientele of the Fortinbras hesitated, some tried to move towards the doors or their own weapons, but Min and Clarkson each drew another gun and kept one on Hei-Ran, with the other sweeping across the tables.

"Alright, so now let's talk."

"That's not a real grenade you idiot, none of us are buying that ruse," Clarkson growled.

The man held his other hand up, "Okay, whoa. There's no reason for--"

That was when Clarkson jerked her gun at the man and blasted his metal arm off at the elbow, the screen still reading TRANSACTION RECEIVED as it dropped to the floor and the grenade rolled out of it.

"No one would use a real grenade in a closed room like this, come on now."

The grenade began to beep.

"Oh," Clarkson said, and Hei-Ran bolted for the door. Several things happened in quick succession: Clarkson shot at Hei-Ran, and singed her shoulder, Min shot at Clarkson and hit her in the arm, and then as Hei-Ran made it through the exit, the grenade went off. Hei-Ran was blown forward, through the ratty plastic walls of the oxygen tunnel, and tumbled to a halt on the sand. She moaned, it felt like she'd broken some ribs, her breaths were hard, and as she pushed herself up, she saw the burning building, felt the case still in her hand, and began to stumble backwards. Time to go.

She almost turned around, almost. If she had, things would have been a lot easier. But she saw Clarkson, her back literally on fire, face half burned, charging from the mess of fire and rubble. Hei-Ran was a good courier, and sure she'd done some unsavory jobs to help the

family, but she wasn't a soldier. And she'd never seen anything like this before. So as Clarkson charged at her she just stared with her jaw open for far longer than she should have, and only when the woman was nearly upon her did she think she should move.

Hei-Ran switched her jetpack on.

She turned, and began her running start. And she didn't need that, but it had never hurt her, it was just the muscle memory. The things she'd learned when her grandad taught her, going out to the wastes to fly around for fun. But today, it meant she stayed on the ground a bit longer, and as she lifted off, two hands grabbed hold of her legs. She yelped, and blasted forward, clutching the case to her chest as she zoomed inches from the ground, sand filling her mouth. She tried to hold her breath, tried to count so she knew when she was out of the scanning zone, but she couldn't focus. She felt one hand grasp harder, and the other...move up her leg, and pull up closer to her.

She accelerated. Hard. The sand hit her face hard enough it burned, she jinked right and left and up and down and felt like a human rocket--till she hit the sand dune.

Hei-Ran didn't know how long she was out, but it was light out when she came to. Colocog was far in the distance, practically a dot with the smaller flashing dots of emergency vehicles above it. Closer, she could see a pair of feet a few hundred meters away poking up out of the sand from where Clarkson had made impact hard enough to bury her remains to the ankles.

Stumbling up, she spat out as much sand as she could, and held her head in her hands. This was not how this was supposed to go. She was just a courier. She'd assumed this had just been drugs or something, not something CiSyn agents would come after. She knew she had broken bones. This wasn't worth it. Just go home, leave the case here in the wastes and...

She closed her eyes, pulled her goggles up, and reached back into her pack to see if she still had her tablet.

She did, though the screen was pretty ruined.

She tapped on the flickering cracked image till she pulled up the message, and tapped the second link.

Coordinates appeared on the screen. They were hard to read, but she noted them, and pulled them up on a very fuzzy map. It was in the middle of nowhere, not too far from her nowhere. Taking a deep breath, she got up, and turned her jetpack on, taking a limping start, and got in the air.

For once that day, she had an uneventful trip.

"UNDER CONSTRUCTION: NO ENTRANCE PERMITTED"

As signs went, not the most welcoming. The location was a simple metal building shaped like a half-cylinder, a landing pad not too far from the door. She ignored the sign, and limped to the door, which she banged on.

Nothing.

She kept banging.

"I thought you couriers were supposed to be polite--" the woman who opened the door looked angry, but her face changed to shock as soon as she saw Hei-Ran's face. "Oh dear."

"Special delivery," Hei-Ran said. "I definitely, definitely am not handing this over till I receive payment."

"Yes, apologies, please come inside."

She followed her in. The woman was in a technician's outfit, and the building turned out to be a single room filled with storage crates, a bunk, a portable shower/toilet unit, a workbench, and a huge loading elevator.

The technician gave an overly cutesy fake cough, "You do of course, understand that you

didn't enter this building, did not see anything in here, and did not meet me, and if you say anything about it to anyone your entire family will die in a tragic accident?"

"Yeah, it seems like the kind of day for that sort of thing."

The technician gestured for her to set the case on the workbench, and Hei-Ran did so. The woman bit her lip, eyes glowing, and placed her hand on the case. It suddenly lit up, and the locks snapped open. Hands shaking a little, she opened the case.

Inside were rows of small cylinders, each only three centimeters tall. They were unremarkable in every way to Hei-Ran.

"Well that's...underwhelming," she grumbled.

The technician turned to her, shaking her head so fast her hairband came loose, "No no no, they're the most remarkable! They're the missing piece we've needed. Once I test them and make sure they work they can filter the Tragin...well I've said too much." She smiled politely and bowed, "You have done Gongen a great service today."

Hei-Ran bowed in return, and really hoped she didn't expect to be paid in the knowledge she'd helped the planet's ruling party or something.

"Your payment has been transferred directly to your account, along with some extra for," the technician waved a hand from her head to her toes, "your troubles."

"Thank you. That's...traceable though?"

"We have made it invisible."

She looked around the room, at the giant loading elevator that went below the planet's surface...there, through a crack in one of the crates, Hei-Ran could have sworn she saw a gigantic metal foot. She was either losing it, or whatever was going on here she really didn't want to know.

"Now you must go. Be patient, Hei-Ran, you may not see the fruits of your labor for some time, but do not despair: things are under construction. You can trust us on that."

She nodded, and shambled out the door without another word. The quicker it was behind her, the better. She'd been away from home too long, everyone had to be worried sick. But she had no idea how to explain her injuries, and her flight back gave her no ideas.

\* \* \*

"Mom!" the twins ran at her together, and practically tackled her in a hug, which really hurt the ribs.

"Ow, alright, a little less pressure." They let go, but they were only replaced by her husband, and her oldest son.

"We were worried sick, especially after we saw the news."

"The...news?" She slurred.

"We all saw it," Sang Mi replied, "I can't believe you were that brave, going all the way to Colocog to help with the accident there."

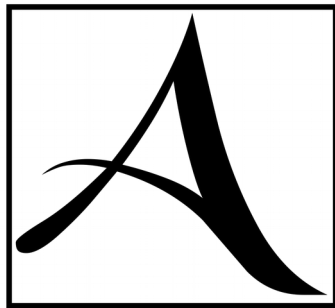
"Oh...yeah," Hei-Ran replied, "it was pretty nasty."

"You're a hero," her husband said, "we're all so proud of you, come on, we're all here to take care of you. Sang Eun, help your mother out of her suit."

As he did, Sang Mi leaned in, and whispered in her ear, "It's okay mom, it's morning now. It's a new day. We'll make it a good one."

# **THE WARS UNIVERSE IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

NEW BEGINNINGS TAKE TIME



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**Return to the future soon.**  
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