

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

***HE CAME FROM
ANOTHER WORLD!***

By James Wylder



Ryan Wilson had never been off Earth before. He'd been content to live his life in Louisvilleplex, playing soccer, hanging out with his friends after school and practice, and eating the instant meals his mom bought en-masse from the grocery store. He never really considered the world beyond the spaces he moved between: his family's apartment, the maglev rail station to school, the school, the soccer pitch, and the rail station back. A store on the weekends. A friend's house sometimes. It was a small world, and he tried to reassure himself of its size with its exceptions.

So, when his mother told him they would be moving, he was more than a little startled. His whole world was there in Louisvilleplex.

"I know your job has to take you places, but can't we just stay here?"

She shook her head, crossing her arms and leaning against the kitchen wall as she tried to think of how to break the part of the news to him she hadn't gotten to yet.

"If you have to go away for a little longer than usual that's fine, I can just stay here and take care of myself anyway, it's not like that's what I'm not doing already most of the time right?"

He flinched, because the look in her eyes said that that had stung far more than a tantrum could have. She let out a long breath, closing her eyes and rubbing the bridge of her nose between her fingertips. "...Ryan. I can't leave you here because we're going to Mars. Feed the Stars needs me to coordinate the new meal distribution center in one of the biggest cities on Mars. And..." she said the next sentence with a defeated tone that made him feel guilty for any doubt in this plan he'd ever thought about. "...look, if you want to go live with your dad, I can message him. I'm sure he and Katrina would--"

"No," he wouldn't hear more of that. "I'm not living with that man. I'm sorry, mom. I'll go, just don't say anything like that."

"I didn't mean to guilt you, this really is your choice Ryan you can--"

"No, I'm going," he forced a smile. "It'll be alright mom, we can start over there for real this time."

She gave him a smile back. He hoped it was less forced than his own. "I'm glad. We'll be happy there. I promise."

* * *

The first time Ryan saw Mars, he was surprised that it wasn't actually very red.

"What would you call that, ochre?" he asked his mother.

She just laughed, "I'm not sure that's the important bit."

Still, it was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. Looking down at it from the space transport, he felt an incredible sense of togetherness with the universe, realized for the second time after looking down on Earth when he'd left that he was just one piece of a larger whole. There was a preciousness to the tiny people down there, because he was no different.

And that feeling was emphasized in a less glorious way when he finally set foot on red soil.

Mars, or Gongen as the locals called it, was a world of vast deserts with domed cities carefully meted out across its surface. The city he was in was Takumi, a huge hub of industry and trade, close to Colocog, the only place on Mars the strange Mavericks he'd only read about, and watched schlocky action films featuring them as the villains, were allowed to call home on the planet. He was living in the poorest part of it: Cheonsa Dome, where most of the factory workers called home.

"But, it's also where Academy 27 is."

He stared at his mother as she tried to reassure him with that, "I've never heard of it."

"It's one of the most prestigious high schools on the planet, you'll be with a lot of other really bright kids. Teens. Young m—"

"I get it. I'm looking forward to it mom, promise."

The dome itself was dingy, it had the air of not being fixed enough over the last two hundred years. Sometimes he saw the tenants of buildings doing work themselves on the mechanical boxes linked up to their homes. The air was tinged with a metallic taste, while somehow also feeling too filtered. He wandered the streets, trying out his language skills practically, and feeling incredibly distant from everything around him. And before he knew it, it was time for school.

"Do you have everything? Maybe you should double check your--"

"Mom, I'll be fine. This isn't me going off to Kindergarten for the first time."

She bit her lip. "Right, right..." She adjusted his jacket and looked up at him, "You'll do great. I'm sure they'll all love you." Her eyes said "When did you get so much taller than me? Weren't you just a baby yesterday?"

"I know I know, I gotta get going or I'll miss the train. Love you."

"Love you too! Have a great day!"

He waved goodbye and slipped out the door before his mom could smother him more. He couldn't blame her for that. It wasn't her fault he was all she had left. But... he was a lot more nervous than he let on about his first day here. He'd been studying the national languages of "Gongen", as the Marsians called their planet, and was pretty good at most of them though he was sure his accent was absolutely atrocious. He had a translation app on his padd ready to go to make sure he at least understood the lectures properly. The station was less crowded than he expected, but then again it was early morning. The only other people there were workers who looked like they wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep, and a few students who Ryan did not manage to get up the nerve to talk to. Not all of them had the same uniform anyway.

Once he was settled in a seat on the train, he did notice the girl standing across from him holding onto the yellow handle dangling from the ceiling did have the same uniform. Only with a pleated skirt going just below the knees instead of pants. Beside her was a boy who was so unmistakably her brother there was no need to ask. Was it rude to say hello on the train? It was absolutely silent, and the siblings were both scrolling on their phones so...

"Hey, you got five credits?" the girl asked.

"What?"

"She asked if you have five credits," the boy repeated.

"Uh, yeah, sure..." he stopped reaching into his pocket halfway. "What for?"

The girl laughed, "I was going to roll on the gacha on this game I'm playing."

He blinked.

"I wasn't really going to take your money; it was a joke."

"She was going to take your money," her brother clarified.

"Don't give him a bad first impression of me!"

"He's clearly from Earth, he already has a bad impression of you."

He raised a hand at chest level, "Hi, yes, what gave you the impression I'm from earth?"

"The accent," they said in unison. "Plus like..." the boy gestured, "Your entire..."

"Vibe," the girl finished.

He nodded. It wasn't surprising he stuck out like a sore thumb, just disappointing.

"I'm Ryan Wilson, I think I'm at the same school as you?"

The pair went, "Eyyy!" making matching wide arm gestures with one arm.

"Welcome to Gongen, greenback," the girl said. "I'm Jhe Sang Mi, this is my brother Sang Eun. Yes, we're twins."

"No, we're not alike," they once again said in unison, and making Ryan not quite believe the sentiment.

"So, which one of you was born first?" he said, reaching.

"Who cares?" Sang Mi answered.

"It was me, that's why she's trying to play it off like it doesn't matter."

"It was only by five minutes!"

Sang Eun gave Ryan a conspiratorial look, and they both laughed, which caused Sang Mi to blush while looking intently at her phone.

"Anyway, we were messing with you. Our homeroom teacher told us an Earther transfer student was coming to our school two weeks ago, you're actually in our class," Sang Eun said.

"Oh."

Ryan couldn't escape the feeling the twins had just mildly bullied him, but now that they'd gotten it out of their system they proved to be very helpful in guiding him through the rest of the train trip, so he decided they'd be a good foothold to build some connections at the school. Maybe even real friendships.

Academy 27 was larger than he expected. Cheonsa dome was less well maintained than the rest of Takumi, but the school had a special attention paid to it (that belied the fact that it was a much older building than either of the nicer schools his research online had told him were its rivals, creatively named Academy 1 (the #1 school), And Academy 2 (the #3 school, after this one). But he'd be here for... well that was another conversation he'd need to have with his mom. Was this their permanent home? He knew too little about this place to know.

Sitting in his uniform at his desk, the twins drifted off to talk to other kids as they entered, and he adjusted his tie and looked out the window. Maybe it was better to just not draw attention to himself?

"You're the Earther right?" he turned to see a girl, posed with her hip cocked to one side and her arms crossed, chin high.

"Yes, my name is Ryan Wilson. I'm new here."

"I know. Anyway, I'm Cao Li Xiu, I'm the class representative so if you need anything you can just ask me, alright?"

"Thank you, I'll be sure to." She nodded curtly and strolled off. When the teacher arrived, she summoned him up with a warm smile and gave him a much kinder speech about if he needed anything to help adjust here just ask. "I know the lighter gravity can be a big issue."

"My mom got some pills for the headaches so I'm doing alright."

"That's good to hear. Would you like to introduce yourself to the class?"

He didn't, but he agreed to. It went better than he expected, standing in front of the rows of filled desks of his new classmates, writing his name on the touchscreen board, and giving some facts about himself.

A hand raised, which he sort of expected. "Hi, I'm Jae Hyong."

"Um, hello Jae Hyong."

"I was wondering, is it true that you have to pay to go to the hospital on Earth?"

The rest of the class listened closely, "Well uh, yes. That is true."

The reaction was much stronger than he expected, everyone was very surprised by this as though it was a rumor they'd all expected to be wild propaganda but had turned out to be true. Like the CGC had announced aliens were real, and they were ruled by Elvis who was still alive after all these centuries.

"Any, uh, other questions?"

There weren't any good ones, but there were questions.

The rest of the day was a fairly intense first day, there wasn't any let up at a school like this, so he already had homework for the weekend. In some ways though, it was nice that aside from lunch there wasn't any pressure to socialize.

He got through day one. Now just the rest of the school year.

Ryan was gathering his things up, when Sang Mi slid onto his desk, sitting there tapping away on her phone.

"...Can I help you?"

"Hey. My brother and I want you to join us after school."

"Your butt is on my homework."

"It's all digital, it's already been uploaded."

"And now it's been uploaded with butt marks."

She didn't react to this, "So are you busy or not?"

His mom would naturally be home late from work... he was sure even on his first day of school that wouldn't change.. and he really didn't have anything better to do. But the Jhe twins were, for lack of a better term, weirdos. "...No, I guess not. What are you going to be doing anyway?"

She laughed at something on her phone, saw him staring and waiting, and turned the phone so he could see it. He didn't get the joke. Pulling the phone back, she adjusted her hair with her other hand, "There's a festival this weekend. We already said we were taking Zhyrgal—she's the other transfer student, but like, not from Earth—so you can come too."

He deadpanned his reply, "I'm so honored."

"Good, you should be," she hopped off his desk.

Finally able to close out his homework (which did in fact have gibberish typing from her butt) he grumbled, "Aren't you scared of hanging out with the evil Earther?"

She shrugged, "Not really. Do you want me to be? I mean, I have some real hard-hitting questions if you want to go that route."

His better instincts said to shut his mouth and end it there, but unfortunately, Ryan had the kind of curiosity they warned cats about. "...Okay sure, what's your first question?"

"Are you sure? You won't get mad."

"I won't get mad."

"So, I hear you kill kids with money on Earth, do you like shove it down their throats, or is it like a social program?"

Ryan opened his mouth, closed it, stood up, and turned on his heel to walk away.

"We're meeting by the trees in Dangun Plaza to head to the festival! Be there, it'll be fun!" She called after him.

He was definitely not going to that festival.

* * *

"Oh hey, you're the first one here Ryan," Sang Mi said.

He looked at Sang Eun, "Your brother is right there."

"We're a unit," he replied.

"In an RPG, we can occupy the same square and share our health gauge and juice packs."

Sighing, he sidled up next to them on the low wall the pair were sitting on that housed a small circular grove of trees in the middle of the city. Sang Mi was kicking her feet, Sang Eun was reading his phone.

"Did you hear back from Tsetseg?" she asked her brother.

He shook his head, "I think she offered enough excuses about needing to check and not being sure but she'd get back to us that it was a no from the start."

Sang Mi looked up at the sky, "I think she wanted to come."

"Why's that?" Ryan said, trying to join in.

"The same reason you did in the end. Oh hey, more people!" Sang Mi waved her arm in a wide arc above her head, and they could see Zhyrgal, Jae Hyun, and a rather tuned out Li Xiu were

approaching them. Sang Mi looked pretty surprised that Li Xiu was there, even as the other girl didn't look up from her phone once as they approached.

"Hello everyone!" Sang Mi said with as much cheer as she could muster. "Who is... ready for an exciting day at the festival?" She did a pose like an over-extended cheerleader. Only Jae Hyun gave the enthusiastic reply she seemed to be looking for. After that, she went around and introduced everyone to everyone else just in case they forgot.

"So, let's go in already?" Li Xiu griped.

"Not yet, we're waiting on one more person."

Jae Hyun tilted his head, "Tsetseg change her mind?"

Sang Eun shook his head, and then pointed, "Ah, there she is."

Running toward them, to the glares and stares of countless Marsians was a young caucasian lady in a black skirt and button up short sleeve shirt, both adorned with stitched stylized dogs that were both cute and gross in equal measure. Black braided hair, blue eyes, but most notably a shiny metal left arm and leg. This was the reason people were recoiling at her: she was very obviously a Maverick, one of the people who didn't swear allegiance to any government and lived lawlessly outside civilized space, or so the holodramas had told him. Ryan had never seen one before in person. He was taken aback, but also surprised how friendly she seemed. All of the ones in media were pirates, slave traders, gangsters, drug dealers, and sadists. "Sorry I'm late!" she panted.

Li Xiu recoiled a little, as though someone had just dropped a rotten egg in front of her.

"Everyone, meet our very good friend Geraldine McGraw, she's our age and a resident of Colocog with a visitor's pass to Takumi for boring business stuff," Sang Mi introduced.

"Hello! It's nice to meet all of you, I've heard about most of you from the twins before. You can just call me JackBox, that's what most people do."

"Like... jack in the box?" Jae Hyun prompted

She laughed while reaching back to scratch the back of her neck, "That's right. It's a long story, but I did jump out of a box once and--well, let's not get into it."

"Um, why did you invite a Maverick?" Li Xiu said. "Aren't they... you know?" she did a little shimmy, and Ryan genuinely wasn't sure what she was trying to convey with it, other than it being something not good.

Kalengkata stared at her with a smile that could have cut a lightpost in half with the daggers radiating from it, "Gosh Miss Cao, tell me please, what exactly is she like, you know?"

Li Xiu looked around, sensing that she was not getting the popular support for her discomfort she expected.

"It's alright--Li Xiu right? I'm sure you have a lot of questions and misconceptions, but I think you'll find I'm a lot less scary once you get to know me." Ryan had heard that tone of voice a lot in his life. His mom had worked serving food to the poorest of the poor in the slums of Earth, and even helped out on a mission to do the same with Mavericks, and the Marsians, though she hadn't taken him with her on those. He had seen the people that were cast out on Earth though, struggling to survive despite the abundance all around them that they couldn't touch. Some were like JackBox. She said her lines with a practiced gait, like she'd been rehearsing them in a mirror for just this instance. She was not alright, it was obvious. He knew there was a lot bubbling under her surface, but she was putting Li Xiu's discomfort ahead of her own because she hoped that it would work out better in the long run. After all, if she punched her, which Ryan wouldn't blame JackBox for at all given the circumstances, she'd probably get kicked off the planet.

Should he step in?

Would that be bad for him? Or worse for her? Would that be overstepping, or was it the right thing to do?

Thankfully, Li Xiu seemed to think over the last few moments and shrug, "It's fine, I don't actually care anyway I just wondered."

Everyone let out a collective sigh of released tension.

"Well if that's settled how about we actually have some fun?" Zhyrgal said.

"Yes, let's. I want to ride the Ferris Wheel," Sang Mi said.

The festival was filled with tents, and rides and stalls with all sorts of goodies. Ryan was surprised that everything here was free--was it state sponsored? He wasn't really sure how things worked here.

"Oh, have you tried Shrimp Chips?" Sang Mi asked Ryan, Zhyrgal, and JackBox excitedly.

"No," Zhyrgal said.

"They're not really like, festival food but--"

"--She loves shrimp chips," her brother explained, as if he needed to.

"Well you do too!"

"This is also correct."

Sang Mi hurried off and came back with a bag of them, popped it open, and gave them each a handful of the chips, which were shaped like hard crunchy french fries.

He bit in.

Despite Sang Mi's enthusiasm, he thought they were disgusting.

He could tell the other two were having something of a similar reaction.

Sang Mi frowned. "Well, not everyone is born with good taste."

"What is that?" JackBox asked her.

"It's the taste of the sea!"

"Have you ever seen the sea?" Ryan asked her.

"No, but I know what it tastes like. It says so on the bag." He clearly looked skeptical, so she continued. "They're probably an acquired taste, just trust me you'll be craving them in no time."

They washed away the taste of the Shrimp Chips with a ton of other things: corn dogs, kimchi pancakes, sundae, tons of random fried things, hotteok, and more. They were all stuffed by the time they finished, laughing together at some impression Sang Eun was doing. For the first time since he'd arrived, he felt... normal.

"What's this festival about anyway?" Ryan asked.

Holding a piece of pancake up in her chopsticks with one hand, placing the other over her heart, Sang Mi answered dramatically: "The Great Journey!"

"That's... when all the settlers came to Mars right? Isn't that in June?"

"Gongen," they all corrected him in an overlapping unison.

Li Xiu sighed, "Its Dome Day. Basically, it's the day they finished building Cheonsa Dome. It was finished before most of the other domes on the planet, and the workers who built the rest of the first domes that make up Takumi all used it as their base of operations."

Zhyrgal finally found an opportunity to chime in, "We have a similar festival in Lybid, but the first dome got disassembled so they could build a better one there so it's sort of a different vibe since it doesn't exist."

"I like that there's so much to eat, I think I might have overdone it though," JackBox said, who had definitely eaten too much.

"Dome day, huh? I guess I'll have to memorize all these festivals."

The Gongen kids looked between each other, before seemingly appointing Jae Hyun their spokesperson by unspoken agreement, "So uh... how long are you staying here anyway?"

He shrugged, "I don't know. It might be permanent. We don't really have anything waiting for us back on Earth. I think my mom is waiting to see how well I settle in before she digs our roots in though."

"Just you and your mom then?"

"Li Xiu!" Sang Mi scolded.

"No, it's fine," he said with the same air of how things had been 'fine' earlier. "Yeah, it's just us. I hate my dad, so I'm glad he's on a different planet from us."

"Yeah, I'm glad to be far away from my parents, wherever the hell they are," JackBox agreed. "Look, not everyone here is going to be welcoming, I know you're going to get some flak, but Gongen is still a place where we can start fresh. You're on a whole new planet, whatever your past was, whatever scars you're carrying, even though you can't uncut a scar, you can live today like it doesn't define you anymore. You get me?"

He was a little stunned, but nodded. "That's... really good advice."

"Let's go on the Ferris Wheel," Jae Hyung interrupted, "We spent too much time eating, it's getting late."

"We'll have to split up into two groups," Zhyrgal pointed out. "The cars only hold four people."

"Let's randomize it, that'll be more fun," Li Xiu suggested, clearly having some ulterior motive, which did not pan out as she hoped as fifteen minutes later she was being raised up in a car with JackBox and Ryan.

"...Stupid idea..." she grumbled with her arms crossed looking out at the city as they rose up.

"It was yours, you know," Ryan pointed out.

"Yeah yeah," she sighed. "I'm sorry about earlier," she said, still looking out the window. "I was out of line."

JackBox shrugged, "It's whatever."

"I know it's not, but thanks. Anyway... what do both of you think of Gongen so far? You both seem set on staying here."

"I love it," JackBox said, and she meant it. "I never want to leave."

Li Xiu turned, and scanned the other girl's face. She gave a guilty nod and turned to Ryan. "You?"

"I think... it's growing on me."

Li Xiu huffed a laugh, "Well, that's a start."

* * *

He got home before his mother, despite how late he got back. He ended up making tea to stay awake so he could see her, and by the time she did he had almost forgotten it had been such a big day through the haze of exhaustion. She wrapped him in her arms, reminding them both again he was way taller than her now. "How was your first day?"

"It went really well. I actually went out after school with some of my classmates to a festival. I even met a Maverick--it was a wild time I guess. But... a good time. I think I'm already starting to weave the first threads of friendships."

She pulled back and smiled at him, "I'm really happy to hear that. I was worried, you know, this place is so different... but..."

"It's really okay mom. We made the right choice. Gongen is a place where we can start fresh. we're on a whole new planet, whatever happened before, whatever scars we're carrying, even though you can't uncut a scar, we can live like it doesn't define us anymore."

She looked at him with a teary pride, "When did my little boy get so mature and wise?"

He smirked, "One of the other kids told me that, so they really get the credit."

She smiled back, "Tell you what, I know it's late, but since we don't have any snacks here, let's walk over to the convenience store and grab some stuff to celebrate. Celebrate... a new home. Unless you're too tired?"

He shook away his tiredness, along with the suggestion. "No, I'm fine. That sounds great." He paused a moment, and then laughed as he looked up at the ceiling. "...Geez I hate that she was right?"

"Who was?"

"This girl... unfortunately it seems I'm craving Shrimp Chips."

They both laughed, and headed back out the door.

Gongen was going to be just fine after all.

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