

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

Junk Dog Night
By James Wylder



"Don't you think we'll get in trouble?" Jae Hyun asked. Kalingkata, who had already vaulted the fence, scoffed. "No, I mean... wait, do you think we will?"

"That's why I was asking you!"

"Well you should have asked me before I vaulted the fence!"

"Just jump back over it."

"No way, I made it over. I may as well do what I actually came here to do."

Jae Hyun looked back at the road leading away from the junkyard, and then back at Kalingkata. "What did you come here to do anyway?"

She shrugged, "Browse."

Letting out a huge sigh, he nonetheless relented. Kalingkata, Jhe Sang Mi to most of the world, watched his attempt, trying to not laugh, as her attempt had definitely been more awkward than his was. Jae Hyun had an obvious crush on her, one she was keenly aware of, and which he was absolutely certain he had managed to conceal from her. She pulled the hood up on her hoodie and a facemask up right below her eyes as he watched her, probably disappointed he was seeing less of her instead of more. He looked away quickly, cheeks lighting up red as embarrassment at his own gaze took hold.

"If you didn't think there would be any trouble why're you so covered up?" he asked.

"I just wanted to get in the right aesthetic of an infiltrator!"

He looked around. "At the junkyard?"

She nodded and started off without another word. Jae Hyun followed obligingly, waiting around as Kalingkata stopped every so often to grab some piece of junk, dust it off, and examine it. Every time, she'd pause on it for a moment and then toss it back. He'd hoped to have something more to converse with her about, but he was beginning to have the nagging feeling in the back of his head that the two of them didn't have much in common aside from going to the same school, a thought which he was trying very hard to push aside.

Thankfully for his ego, just before it reached a crescendo of *You should just leave, dude*, Sang Mi's eyes lit up as she dug something out of a junk pile and set it down, only to immediately have to prop it up as it began to fall over from missing a leg. It was a toy dog bot, an older one, but about the size of a real medium-sized dog.

"Look at it, I can't believe someone threw this very good boy away."

"... I think they threw it away because it's broken."

She poked it. "Well, sure it's missing a leg, and it's a little rusted and scratched up, and its battery is dead, and it might have some other issues, but it's still in way better shape than you'd expect! I'm pretty sure I can fix it."

Could she actually do that? At school, Kalingkata was well liked but definitely awkward. She had that weird trait some kids developed where they'd learned how to diffuse enough situations with their own bullies they could engage in a magnanimous cowardice that would burst into a cornered bravery. She was always fiddling with technology, but he'd never considered that she might actually be talented at it outside of the copious time she spent playing online games.

He'd tried playing those games to spend time with her.

He was not good at them.

After further examining the DogBot, Sang Mi pulled her phone out and, biting her tongue out the corner of her mouth, scrolled till she found a picture of a mechanical part resembling a spool of wire. "Find one of these, I'll look for a leg."

He was going to ask what it did, but the girl was already back to sifting through trash before he could get his thoughts together, and he liked the focused look she got too much to interrupt it. Did Jae Hyun know where to look? No. So he just wandered enough away that Sang Mi was still in sight but it would be hard to see he was clueless, and he began picking up junk. After some time lifting up rusting chunks of metal, a headless, armless porter bot was revealed. It wasn't in good shape, but he supposed that didn't matter as long as the part was okay... and it was a bot, after all?

The casing was difficult to open till he realized he'd been pulling it the exact wrong direction, and was extra glad he was far enough away the red on his cheeks couldn't be seen. As the bot's chest popped open--he saw it clear as day: the part Sang Mi had shown him the picture of. He had to undo two screws, but after that it popped right out and he rushed over to where she had already attached a replacement leg that had the right proportions to match the other legs while in all other ways looking completely different.

She grinned seeing the part, and his heart pounded. "Hand me that, let's get this good boy up and at 'em."

He silently obliged, and she gently put the part in, replacing a burned-out one on the ground nearby. Nothing happened.

"...It didn't work."

She gave a scoffing laugh, "The thing has been here who knows how long. I just need to give it a jump start." Plugging her phone into it the dog with a cord, small lights on the dog lit up, and a boot up jingle played.

"It's alive! It's alive!" Kalingkata said, and Jae Hyun very much saw the difference her self-chosen moniker entailed as she gave a dramatic pose gesturing to the sky wildly.

"Woof," the dog said.

"It worked!"

"Of course it did," Kalkingkata replied with a bit too much relief for him to believe the confidence.

The dog sniffed the air, or pretended to, and its fake eyelids made a shuttering plastic sound as they blinked over the camera lens eyes. A multi-jointed tail swooshed back and forth, and the dog tested its legs out, running happily in a circle, and then coming over to the pair happily. Without even thinking, both of them started petting the dog, and saying what a good dog it was. It just sort of came instinctually.

"Hey Sang Mi," he began. "Does this dog have an AI core or is it just a Virtual Intelligence?"

"I'm surprised you know the difference."

Jae Hyun did not mention that he had only learned the difference because he wanted to try to keep up with her in conversation. Nor that it had taken him far longer than it should have to grasp that a Virtual Intelligence was simply providing the outward appearance of sentience but with nothing going on below the surface, while Artificial Intelligence was a true artificial mind. "Psh, of course I know the difference."

"Well, I think this one has an AI Core, albeit an older one--"

At that, the dog's head perked up, their ears twisting as though trying to locate the direction of a signal.

"Something wrong?" Sang Mi asked, but the dog just bolted off, heading with intention toward the junkyard fence, and vaulting over it. "What are you waiting for?" Sang Mi said starting after it.

Jae Hyun followed, of course he did.

They followed the dog for what felt like a long time. Across city streets, past the neon glow of holographic signs that glistened in puddles. It stopped occasionally, as if confused by the layout of the streets and buildings, and then would barrel off again giving the pair only enough time to pant for a moment with their hands on their knees before following once again.

The chase finally ended in front of a building whose dilapidated sign read 'Cheonsa Senior Living Center'. The dog ran through the automatic doors, the pair of teens close behind.

An attendant looked down at the dog, then awkwardly at the pair. "Is uh, this your bot?"

"Yeah, he-" Kalingkata put her hand over his mouth.

"Nope, he belongs to someone here, we're just returning him."

He frowned. How was she so sure of that?

The attendant furrowed her brow, "... Alright, let me follow you back."

They walked with the lady past door after door in the center, when the dog stopped in front of one, and barked. The attendant tapped the entry button, and the door slid open to reveal an old woman sitting in a wheelchair watching holodramas.

“Mrs. Hong?”

She looked up, and the dog’s tail went into a flurry as he bounded up to her. Her eyes were glassy with cataracts, but they lit up with instant recognition. “Strawberry? Is that you?”

Her withered hands graced the plastic and metal shell of the dog, gently stroking it. “... After all these years, you came back to me.”

“So he’s your dog bot?” the attendant asked.

She nodded, “My father said he ran away when I was just a little girl... I always suspected he threw him away. Oh but you found your way home, didn’t you Strawberry? What a good boy!”

He ran in a circle, and then curled up at her feet, as she kept giving him compliments.

“Come on,” Sang Mi said. “We finished our part here.

They walked out of the building into the cold night air. Sang Mi looked up at the stars that glittered through the dome above their heads. "It's wild, isn't it?"

"Hmn?"

She reached a hand up, as if trying to grasp the light. "She's been here so long, and never forgot her dog. She was so happy seeing him again. It makes me feel like all this, life, really matters in the end. Even if it's only little things, they still mean something."

He didn't know how to reply to that, so he just nodded, and then turned his head up to the sky, and reached his hand up. The stars glittered between his fingers.

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