

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

Hall Pass

By Callum Phillpott



10 Years Ago - 2376 - Scrapyard

Two men in boiler suits were given the task of searching for useable robot parts there. Piles and piles of metal sheets and screws and wires, dead toasters and computer corpses, furniture and bad food. At one point, one of them thought they saw a guard dog and prepared to call the whole thing off, but then they realised it was yet another scrapped machine. Normally it would be a good find, but they were looking for a better prize. Then, after hours of searching, they found it: C.L.I.N.O.R. The men smiled at each other. Even better, it was basically intact (though obviously it must've been slightly broken since it was in a scrapyard rather than cleaning the floors of a mall). The two men picked it up, ready to carry it to their van... however, picking it up caused a plate at the front to fall forward, revealing the cold metal barrel of a machine gun.

One of the men looked at their partner. "Hey, uh, why's there a gun in it?"

The other man looked at it with slight familiarity. "I think I've heard of these, yeah, the Ebon Gate would use these to carry out executions."

The first man's eyes widened in shock. "But why does it look like a cleaning robot?"

"Well, they'd replace a normal cleaning bot with one of these, right, so the owner doesn't suspect a thing until... BANG! They've been shot dead by the thing mopping the floor!"

"Really?"

"Yeah, and then the robot would clean up the crime scene, meaning no-one ever knew until it was too late... scary stuff."

The first man was completely shocked by this information, but not too shocked to not be able to carry the murder machine. "So... what do we do?"

"Eh, we can just hack off the gun, patch some cleaning learning programs onto it, then it's just a normal cleaning bot. I mean, if it's here, it's already killed whoever it needed to."

With the slight issue of the cleaning robot actually being a dormant assassination machine sorted out, the two men continued walking without a concern in their minds.

Now - 2386 - Academy 27 Main Building

It wasn't entirely Jhe Sang Mi's fault that she was falling behind in computing class lately. Recently she'd had trouble sleeping, and she found herself just staring at the ceiling waiting for it to happen. It took a while to do so, and she'd almost always have these weird nightmares... Great blue tendrils of light swirling into the distance, forcing her to follow, and she felt like she was falling... She'd wake up tired, feeling as though she had just landed on her bed, and walk through the school

hoping that just maybe it would be the last day; that this tiredness would help her sleep better... it didn't. She was the most awake when she needed to sleep, and the most asleep when she needed to be awake. One time, during computing class, her fogged up mind typed up a kill code from muscle memory, causing the computer box to spark from within, frying the machine completely. There was only exactly enough computers for the students in the class, so now she had to look over someone's shoulder rather than do her own work. If any of it went in before this, it certainly wasn't now. Today, Mr. Xu pulled her aside and told her she might be moving down a set. She couldn't have that.

This brought her to where she was currently: climbing through one of the lower windows in the main school building on a Friday night. If she was most awake at night, she supposed she'd just do most of her work at night too. She'd do it at home, but only the school computers had the right software, and you could only get the software in the first place if you happened to be running a school (well, she did see it up on some piracy sites, but a lot of the comments below talked about getting a virus from it so she decided against it).

She dropped onto the cold metal floor of the science room. Instantly, the motion-activated lights turned on, bathing the room in an orange glow. Sang Mi squinted as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. There was something eerie about being here at this time; she was so used to the brightness and the noise that came with the room. Even when there weren't any lessons, there was usually meant to be a teacher there. These all combined into a feeling of unease as she unlocked the door and made her way into the hallways.

The lights were already on in the hallways, which also got under her skin slightly since they were also motion-activated... of course, the only thing that'd be roaming the halls at a time like this was probably the cleaner bot, but there was still a part in the back of her head that thought there might be a person there... after all, it wasn't exactly hard to break in. Even worse, a lot of the security cameras had gone missing lately (an act of vandalism that the school was still trying to find the cause of) meaning that, if anything happened that night, no one would know until the morning...

Sang Mi shook her head free of these thoughts, focusing on getting to the computer room. Art projects she had grown familiar with took on a sinister edge, pop-art eyes tracking her movements in place of security cameras. Then, she heard a familiar whirring... the cleaning bot.

It was a rather antiquated piece of tech even when it found its way to the halls of Academy 27, essentially being built like a black upright hexagonal prism with robotic claws protruding from each side. From the front of it also protruded a structure, similar to 2 dinner plates glued together at the lip, with a red bar in the middle that scanned the bar codes on Hall Passes. At the base of the pillar were six discs of blue bristles that spun around, acting as a floor brush and a mop depending on the settings.

At the moment, it was facing one of the refuelling stations, filling up on water and cleaning fluid... and it was right by the nearest computer room. Maybe it was exhaustion, maybe it was fear, maybe it was desperation as she looked at the clock and saw that an hour and a half had passed since she left home... she didn't know anything besides what she felt compelled to do. Drawing in a deep breath, she pressed her back against the wall and tried to slide along, past the bot.

The bot's head twisted around, glaring right at her, blinding her a bit with the searing red light. "SHOW ME YOUR IDENTIFICATION." it buzzed at her.

Normally this would be when the student would show the bot a hall pass... needless to say, her excursion here wasn't authorised by any teacher, so she didn't have one. She pressed her back further into the wall as if she expected to somehow sink into it.

The bot moved closer. "SHOW ME YOUR IDENTIFICATION. A SIREN WILL SOUND IF YOU FAIL TO COMPLY."

Now she really had to do something, anything. Her calm mind knew the bot couldn't be reasoned with, but she didn't have access to that mind right now. "Oh, sorry, I left it at my desk, could I just go into that room and—"

One of the bot's claws tried to grab at her arm, but she moved it away. "DO NOT RESIST."

"I'm not resisting—"

Suddenly, water flowed from above like a liquid sheet, drenching the top of the robot and causing it to spark. Sang Mi would've been hit if she had not ducked under the arm and moved out of the way. She could see the source of the water now: a figure, roughly her age with green hair holding a bucket. "Take that, bin head!" they said, kicking the likely deceased bot.

It all happened so quickly that Sang Mi couldn't think of what to say. It took her several seconds to come up with the question "Who are you?"

The green-haired one quickly turned away from the victim of their assault, waving towards Sang-Mi. "I'm Midi!"

As soon as the first molecule of water made contact with C.L.I.N.O.R.'s circuit boards, it commenced the salvaging protocol. Exabytes of data it had accumulated and learned over the many years it had cleansed the hallways of the school were moved onto a portable disc and deleted from the main hard drive so that it didn't attempt to carry out its routine while broken. The disc was ejected, stored inside a cup hidden by the bristles of its sweeping attachment.

Now all that remained in the robot's memory was what was already there before the cleaning programming repressed it. It had no idea that decades had passed since it'd taken care of its target, not even the conception of an hour.

The bot felt itself being dragged along the ground. It decided it was best to play dead for now. It turned the camera encased inside its head, making an effort not to move the outer shell. One of the people carrying it was a humanoid with black hair (fillername - EBON). The other was a humanoid with green hair (fillername - LIME). It was estimated that LIME was likely physically stronger than EBON based on how they moved the bot: the green-haired one choosing several violent tugs without a sign of strain.

A horrible thought crossed C.L.I.N.O.R.'s mind as it observed the two: directive 3 - No witnesses. How could it have been so careless! The assassination was perfect until these two showed up... they probably saw the body... they needed to be taken care of and in a clean way. Nice, clean, and unseen.

LIME turned to EBON and spoke in a tone that indicated curiosity and annoyance with the prior silence. "So... are you going to tell me why you're here, or...?"

EBON sighed. "I'm just trying to do my homework."

LIME gave a look that indicated confusion. "Really? Can't you do that at home?"

"Why do you care?"

"I just thought you'd be doing something more exciting, like, here I am, wrecking the cameras—"

EBON's tone shifted to shock. C.L.I.N.O.R. felt a slight jostle. "You're the one wrecking all the cameras?"

"Mhm." (C.L.I.N.O.R. wasn't fond of this non-word.). After a pause, they continued. "Thank you for helping me take out this hunk of junk, by the way, he's been on my hit list for a while."

C.L.I.N.O.R. noted down the possibility of there being a rival hitman here, ready to steal the credit and valour that the bot rightly deserves. Finally, the two assailants placed the bot at the end of the hallway. It quickly rotated its head. No witnesses. Several missing security cameras. Night. Perfect. In an instant, the chest compartment split down the middle, letting the gun reveal itself. It activated the fire but stopped immediately in confusion... instead of bullets, what came out was a quick jet of blue cleaning fluid. The humanoids looked back and stared at the bot. Its cover was blown, messy, it needed to be quick and abrasive to clean up this problem. It delegated analysis of the contents of the blue fluid to the background processor, dedicating its main processes to taking care of the witnesses no matter what. It raised two claws into the air to prepare to attack. The sweepers at the base of its body spun rapidly to ensure they couldn't get past them. Finally, it approached the two, and a chase began.

While she did think of something like this happening, no part of her believed it until the moment the bot started chasing her and Midi. They both ran down the corridors, trying to get away from this beast, who roared in a way only a janitor could. A robotic voice reverberated throughout the hallways, screaming "STAY WHERE YOU ARE, DO NOT MOVE!". Neither of the humans spoke, but they both silently agreed that whatever they planned to do, be it vandalism or homework, was cancelled, and they needed to get out.

Jets of soap water shot past them, landing on the floor and making running even more difficult. At long last, Sang Mi could see an exit, and she tried to turn towards it, but Midi stopped her.

The bot was gaining on the both of them, so she dared not stop. “What was that for?” she asked in an annoyed whisper.

Midi pointed at the ceiling behind her, she didn’t look back. “There was a camera there.”

“Really, you care about a camera now?”

“Maybe? I don’t know!”

Midi nearly stumbled over a puddle of cleaning fluid but regained their balance by slamming the side of their body up against the wall. Most of the classrooms were locked during the night, so Sang Mi tried to keep an eye out for the ones that rarely ever get locked, or a flight of stairs.

Meanwhile, the bot was changing tactics. Instead of aiming for the floor in front of the two, it fired its shots up at the ceiling in front of them, creating a curtain of cleaning fluid droplets falling onto their face, some, unfortunately, getting into the eyes of Midi, causing them to sting slightly.

At long last, Sang Mi saw a staircase and yanked Midi up the stairs with them. Finally, they could catch their breath.

Sang Mi looked at Midi, who was rubbing their eyes like a scratchcard. “So how do we get out of here?”

“Uh, just trying to remember which upstairs classes don’t have cameras... uh, the first and second science room... the computer lab... that weird upstairs bit in the gym by the rock wall, you, know, the booth...”

Sang Mi nodded. “I don’t think that place has an outside window though.”

The bot reached the staircase, thudding against the stairs, unable to get up. The two humans chuckled at this as they casually walked up the rest of the stairs. The bot moved backwards. They assumed this was so they could take an elevator or something, which would give them time... only to be surprised when it again moved towards the staircase at full speed, the momentum causing it to fall onto what you could arguably call its face. It remained in this position for a few moments. The two were at the top of the stairs now, watching the bot curiously, assuming it was helpless. It reversed, dragging its “face” across the marble-ish tiling. Then, using its frontwards claws, it pushed itself up off the floor, flipping its body completely upside down. It elevated itself off the ground using its claws like feet, and it began moving up the stairs with speed and ease.

Without thinking, Sang Mi rushed towards the first upstairs science room, and Midi followed. Most science lessons took place downstairs, so the upstairs rooms were rarely used. When they were used, they were rarely locked when the people were done. In this case, the room was unlocked. Sang Mi nearly ran into the desk as she opened the door and ran towards the windows. Midi took the time to close the door before they joined her in trying to open the windows... keyword, trying...

Midi began violently shaking the handle, as though they hoped it would shake the window loose from the wall. “It’s stuck!”

Sang Mi shook her head. “No... it’s locked.”

C.L.I.N.O.R. halted before a room labelled “B11”. It could hear the voices of EBON and LIME arguing behind it. It calmly flipped itself back over as it listened in.

LIME was in a state C.L.I.N.O.R. recognised as panic. “Well, what do we do then, what do we do?”

EBON was calmer, though still had a slight tremble in their voice. “Well, do you have, like, a lockpick or something?”

“Look, just because I break into school every night doesn’t mean I know how to pick locks! They’re just really bad and inconsistent with locking this place up for the night.”

EBON paused for a moment to think. “Maybe we could—”

“We could break the window! Help me with this chair—”

“NO, we don’t need to do that... look in the desk, there might be a key there.”

If C.L.I.N.O.R. could smile, it still wouldn’t at this moment, but it knew it would be an appropriate response to their fortune. The bot grasped the vacuum tube and placed it through the grating above the door. From the analysis of its own body, it knew the tube was multi-purpose and was able to fumigate any room as quickly as it could suck up 50 kg of dust.

It didn’t take Sang Mi long to notice green smoke begin to pour into the room. Midi was still rifling through the drawer, coughing slightly as they did so, which worried Sang Mi. “Just pull out the drawer!”

They did so, running towards the windows and emptying the drawer on a nearby table - and good thing they did, as keys rested underneath (now on top of) a copy of a tawdry spy novel... along with a book of matches Midi hastily pocketed. While Midi got to work testing the various keys on the windows, Sang Mi explored her other options, pulling on the door that connected the two science rooms. It was locked.

The smoke was getting thicker, forming a translucent green wall that kept the two up against the window. Midi covered their face with a nearby paper towel in a pitiful effort to keep the smoke out of their lungs. They both realised that this bot wasn’t just trying to detain them; it was trying to kill them.

Sang Mi decided it was hopeless. “Throw me the keys, I’ll try to open this door.”

She caught them and got to work, quickly slamming the shapes into the keyhole. The smoke was now so thick that she could barely see, and she had to cover her mouth with her jumper sleeve. Her eyes stung. Midi backed themselves further into a corner. Though most of the room was filled at this point.

No one knew it, but a small nest of Marslocusts living in one of the cupboards were now dead.

It took her four tries with the same key to get it in, but finally, it locked into place, and she opened the door. They both took in a deep breath because they knew it'd be even more running once they got out of that room.

Any knowledge C.L.I.N.O.R. had about the layout of the school was gone along with their janitor routine, so it had no idea the two science rooms were connected until it saw the two humans rush out of B12. After a brief pause, it gave chase, once again spraying jets of cleaning fluid in the hopes of halting them, except now it had practice, now it knew what steps they needed to trip the humans up on.

Midi was running fine until their foot rested firmly in a puddle of soapy blue liquid. Instead of moving forward, they slipped, landing on the floor with a fud. Sang Mi was half a metre ahead of them when she heard them fall, and turned back to make sure they were alright.

"I'm fine! Keep going!" Midi yelled as they failed to get up off the floor and their clothes became bleached by the cleaning fluid. The sweepers of the bot got closer and closer, the bristles scraping against their ankle by the time they were halfway up. As the claw grasped around their neck, and they were forced to face the glaring red light, they regretted telling their only hope to keep running.

Thankfully, Sang Mi didn't listen. She pulled a fire extinguisher off the wall and charged at the bot, bashing and beating and breaking down its head, which now dangled limply on the body, still connected through wiring. She turned her assault to the claw grasping Midi's neck, breaking it off completely from the body. Quickly, she grabbed onto Midi's arm and ran away from the scene... she knew it wasn't dead. It would keep chasing them. The best they could do was gain some distance... and she had just the idea.

C.L.I.N.O.R. flooded its neck with expanding glue to keep its head attached to its body. These humans had proved to be more capable than C.L.I.N.O.R. had estimated. With one arm missing and their head dangling and bobbling every time it moved, it needed to escalate the attack if it was going to have any chance at leaving no witnesses. Its head tilted down slightly, noticing a box of matches resting in the puddle of cleaning fluid.

The analysis had shown that the cleaning fluid was highly flammable.

Sang Mi slammed the door shut. They were now in the booth above the gymnasium, a cluttered room where the school's latest wannabe comedians would sit and commentate over school football/soccer/basketball/tennis games... Sang Mi wasn't here to use the microphones though, she was here to use the windows.

"I don't think they open," said Midi, assessing the damage done to their clothing.

Sang Mi saw this was true. Without flinching, she picked up the fire extinguisher and bashed it into the pane of glass closest to the rock wall, making sure she didn't stop until it was a perfect vacant square.

Midi looked on in shock. "Oh so *now* it's alright to break the windows, is it?"

Sang Mi was going to respond, but as she looked back she saw the outline of the bot through the glass on the door. She climbed up onto the edge and grabbed onto one of the easier rocks, and tried to make her way down both quickly and carefully. Midi followed suit, cautiously grabbing onto a nearby rope.

The bot entered the booth, similarly picking up the fire hydrant to knock out another one of the windows, but then throwing it at Sang Mi. Thankfully it missed. Sang Mi and Midi were prepared for cleaning fluid, so they were caught off-guard when flames erupted from the end of their nozzle, licking at the rock wall and threatening to seriously burn them. Their climbing became more quick and clumsy as they moved simultaneously downwards and rightwards, away from the booth, leading them to the more difficult rocks to climb.

As they got closer to the floor, they decided to just let go rather than land entirely safely. Their knees hurt, but they were pretty sure it hurt less than a faceful of flame would.

They saw the bot move out of the room, likely to crawl down the stairs again. Sang Mi looked at Midi. "I think I know how to take care of it."

Midi looked annoyed. "Can't we just leave?"

"Then what? If it's going this far to kill us, it's going to leave the school. The chase needs to end here and now—"

Suddenly, the bot re-entered the booth at a high speed, claws gripping the front of the window to help it up as the bot flung itself out of the window, landing with a harsh crash on the gymnasium floor. Bits of it were flying through the air, another claw broke off entirely, most of the outer casing was gone, revealing the crude circuits and wires and pistons contained within... but it was still alive, it was still able to get up and rush towards them, still throwing flames their way.

They ran out of the room and through the same corridors they ran through before. Sang Mi looked at Midi. "Right, I need you to distract them, I'll go off and—"

Before she could finish, the corridor split off in two directions, and she went down one way, pointing down the other. Midi couldn't stop to question, instead, they made noise, hoping the bot would follow them instead of Sang Mi. Sure enough, it did, and Midi had no time to rest. Sure, it wasn't flinging cleaning fluid anymore, but the fire was way worse than that - and apparently, it's flammable! They were drenched in it!

Every second they ran, they reconsidered why they were even here to begin with... why were they here? Why did they even want to destroy the security cameras? It started with picking the screws loose on one during the daytime, then they went in at night to finish the job, and then they just kept coming in at night to remove more and more cameras... but why? Why did they feel happy doing this? It was a question that bubbled in the back of their mind for a while, but now it had all

boiled to the surface thanks to the heat of the bot chasing them down the hallway with an improvised flamethrower.

But then, they heard Sang Mi charge, screaming angrily through the hallway, carrying a bucket. The bot swivelled to face her, preparing to fire, only to be met with a sheet of blue cleaning fluid that coated the front of their heavily damaged body. When the flame made contact with it, it ignited, and this once formidable foe was now a moving bonfire... but it wasn't even moving for long, as the heat firmly melted its circuits and the metal inside its wires all pooled and splashed around their insides.

The fire alarm went off, and Sang Mi walked around the cause to check on Midi... they were exhausted, their bodies hurt from all the running, jumping, climbing and tripping... they were both happy they didn't have to come into school tomorrow (or today at this point)... they were both happy to be alive.

To: Jhe Sang Mi

From: Mr. Xu

You're probably aware of the small fire that occurred yesterday. So far, it seems to not have damaged anything (except the ex-janitor obviously), but the school will be closed next week to assess the damages. This is unfortunate, as I was hoping to help you catch up with your computing lessons on Monday. So, I've broken a rule somewhat.

I know the computing software is rather hard to come by, but the school has installer files for what you need, and I've attached these files to this email so you can catch up from home while the fire damage is fixed. Please have all your evidence sent in by the start of the week after next week.

Best of luck,

Mr. Xu

THE END

WARSONG

Arcbeatle Press and Decipher, Inc. announce the return of WARSONG: The Battle of Phobos.

Arcbeatle Press will be re-releasing the original six novellas, starting with a collection of the first three on April 26th titled WARSONG: Preludes. Written by Nathan P. Butler (Star Wars Tales, 10,000 Dawns), Sean E. Williams (Wonder Woman, Fairest), and Jim Perry (Bladewielders), these three novellas will start readers on a journey that will lead them to a magnificent intertwined conclusion at the end of the series.

“Bringing WARSONG back to readers has been a passion of mine, and one we’ve worked hard for here,” said Arcbeatle Press founder James Wylder. “The Battle of Phobos series was sadly cut short before its completion, and we’re excited to bring those stories back, in a richer and deeper form than they would have been otherwise.”

After the release of the previously released novellas, Arcbeatle Press will finish the Saga with the unreleased final three novellas containing the series’ epic climax, as well as a reworked version of the ‘lost’ original version of one of the tales. “Readers will be in for a real treat with this series, and with our new edition of WARSONG: Preludes, a whole new generation of readers will have the chance to experience these stories filled with adventure, heartbreak, action, and drama,” Wylder said.

Based on the WARS Trading Card Game from Decipher Inc., the world of WARSONG was crafted by such notable creatives as New York Times bestselling author Michael A. Stackpole and Lord of the Rings artist John Howe. Arcbeatle Press is the publisher of several licensed Doctor Who spin-off book series and their original series 10,000 Dawns.

WARSONG: Preludes will be available in both print and ebook formats.

You can find out more at arcbeatlepress.com/WARS

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