

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

Im-Probe-Able

By Leo Irons



When Bashrat Jahan was happy, his feet would tap. Mostly his right, but they'd both get in on it for really good news. When he was stressed, he would - often against his will, because he was fully aware of the looks it earned him - compulsively twist his shoulders and bend his arms so that the backs of his hands covered his eyes.

Lately, he had been doing a lot of foot-tapping.

The year had gotten off to a bad start, sure. Bashrat's parents thought he should be proud to attend Academy 27, the best school Cheongsa could provide. And he accepted, academically, that it was better to go there than somewhere with fewer facilities, or louder bullies, or - ugh! - more sports.

But it was still school. It was still regimented, and unpleasant, and a waste of time. Bashrat had far better things to do than learn off whatever the government's drones needed him to internalize in order to 'function in society'.

It was all going to come crashing down soon anyway. Society, that was.

Bashrat was ahead of the curve on that, and like all great geniuses, was unappreciated in his time. But he knew it in his bones. The aliens were out there, and it was only a matter of time before they arrived. How stupid all that Earth versus Gongen versus Mavericks nonsense would look then! Politics (boring, weird) would be instantly sidelined by the appearance of non-human life (cool, weird in a good way).

Maybe it would take the form of an incredible artificial intelligence, something that would make Shocho look like an overgrown telephone. Maybe the aliens would be pacifistic travelers, although Bashrat, young as he was, knew this was deeply unlikely.

No, anything that journeyed here all the way from another solar system would probably arrive in a pretty foul mood. And they would strike down all the foolish humans who opposed them... and maybe give cool

superpowers to the humans who didn't. Bashrat lived in hope.

Until that day, he kept busy with his studies. Not his actual studies. He stuck to the far more important topic of extraterrestrials. Long hours spent scouring the internet had mostly resulted in the kind of 'information' even a teenage enthusiast couldn't use - a selection ranging from breathless myths to barefaced lies. But he had the drive to find whatever slivers of useful data he could. The truth was out there, probably.

Sometimes, Bashrat even carried out field research, which was his scientific term for the days his mother demanded he turn off the computer and go outside. He would wander his boring neighborhood and observe his boring neighbors and sit under his boring life support dome, knowing that he would never make a major discovery while he was trapped in here.

That had all changed yesterday.

Here he stood, in the Advanced Mathematics classroom, because Mister Xu was the only teacher who would trust Bashrat with his room. The school day was over, so only one other student was present to see him take the teacher's podium.

Tsetseg was a quiet girl. One of those people who was mildly frightened of everything. It would have been reductive to say she was Bashrat's only friend, and vice versa. Unfortunately, 'reductive' was not the same thing as 'false'.

Still, at least his act of philanthropy wasn't going to be completely wasted. Before he brought his find to wider society, he was allowing this brief window for the students of Academy 27 to bear witness to it. If Tsetseg was the only one with the sufficient taste, intelligence, and good manners to heed his summons, well, that was everyone else's problem.

It kind of was his problem too, though, on an immediate level.

“I had a whole speech ready,” he declared, powerfully, “but it feels dumb to do it if it’s just you.”

She smiled. “I’ll listen.”

“I know you will! I just mean, you know, it’s just my friend Tsetseg. You don’t give a speech to one person. That’s called talking.”

“Do you want to wait a few more minutes?”

“No,” said Bashrat, and then checked the clock anyway. It was four fifteen, the exact time he had stipulated. He knew a certain percentage of attendees always arrived late, but that percentage was unlikely to be close to one hundred. “Let’s just get going. The sooner I get this done, the sooner I can...”

He trailed off. Two sets of footsteps were echoing down the corridor. For a moment, he worried that his momentous event was about to be invaded by exactly the kind of student he did not invite.

Instead, he was pleasantly surprised when Kalingkata appeared in the doorframe.

He knew her boring, mortal name was Sang Mi, but he also knew that Kalingkata was a moniker she had chosen for herself, and Bashrat respected anything like that. There were a lot of titles he wished he could get other people to call him, mostly just alternatives to 'Bashrat' or 'what was the weird kid's name again?' or 'hey, loser!'.

Behind her, as ever, was her twin brother Sang Eun. Bashrat knew he had a cool hacker name too, but didn't know what it was, and the only time he had asked, Sang Eun had kinda cringed and muttered something about not playing a lot of multiplayer games anyway, which was one of several interactions Bashrat unwillingly revisited over and over again at 1 AM. Sang Mi was Kalingkata and Sang Eun was apparently Sang Eun.

Bashrat grinned eagerly. "Aha! Great to have you join us!"

"Thanks!" Kalingkata returned it. "I don't get that enough. People should always say that when I enter a room."

Sang Eun loosed a quiet, brotherly sigh.

“But to be honest with you,” she continued, “we just heard voices and wondered who was back here.”

From under the podium came the sound of Bashrat’s foot abruptly ending its tapping. Of course. He did his best to disguise his irritation - he had to take what he could get. “Well, please, come in! Your timing is perfect, we were just about to get started. Sit anywhere you want.”

Sang Eun hesitated, unclear on what exactly they had wandered into. But when his sister hoisted herself onto one of the front row desks, swinging her legs, he relented and claimed the next chair over. Tsetseg, who had taken the desk furthest from the door, completed the set. Bashrat would have preferred a packed classroom to a single half-filled row, but maybe this was better. A quietly dignified moment witnessed by a select few.

He had immediately forgotten his speech.

It had fled his brain, apparently unneeded, and now they were all looking at him. Lacking other options, he went with a classic. "Aliens," he said, "exist."

"Oh," murmured Sang Eun. "Not sure what else I was expecting, here." Kalingkata elbowed him gently.

"Aliens exist," said Bashrat, a bit more forcefully, "and first contact is only a matter of time. That's just a mathematical fact. But when will it happen? Chances are, in thousands of years they'll be picking through the irradiated remains of our dead civilisations-"

"Woof," mused Kalingkata, philosophically.

"-or they could, like, show up next week. But what if," he said, and now he had remembered a cool part of the speech and his foot was at full pelt, "they've already passed through? What if I could show you proof?"

From a properly primed audience, this should have been a moment of delicious suspense. From three people who had already heard Bashrat rave about several false leads, the reactions were limited to polite interest from Tsetseg and Kalingkata and polite disinterest from Sang Eun.

This time would be different. Without wasting another moment, Bashrat produced his proof.

It was a cardboard box, containing his household's thickest bath towel. He set it down sideways on a desk he had prepared and carefully pulled the box away, until only the towel remained. He had to admit, his low-tech solution was working better than he could've hoped. It did a great job of blocking both the light and the sound.

But now the moment had arrived. With a dramatic flourish worthy of a magician, Bashrat whisked the towel away and revealed his prize.

It earned the reaction he knew it deserved: awed silence. Three new sets of eyes reflected that

distinctive purple glow. Oh, how they'd all thank him later! He was magnanimously giving them a front row seat to history.

In this case, history looked like an orb. There were metallic parts on either side, like the north and south of a globe, complete with what seemed like either end of a metal rod that pierced through the center to come out the other side. Mostly, though, it looked like opaque purple glass. He had done his best to clean it, and while one or two of the scuff marks had proven to be stubborn, he knew he had brought out the beauty of its simple design.

Before any of them could speak - Kalingkata had her mouth open first - it revealed its most striking feature. It sounded a chime, dull but powerful, and the soft light it was emitting intensified to match. Bashrat relished the wordless noise of surprise his audience made.

"Yeah," he said, milking this for absolutely everything it was worth, "I know."

“Woah...” Kalingkata blinked at it, eyes wide.
“Where’d you find this, dude?”

“Oh, I’m always on the lookout for new finds. Yesterday, my patience was finally rewarded. It’s just a matter of staying determined and getting lucky,” said Bashrat, smoothly rolling out the answer he had prepared six times in the mirror to cover for the truth, namely, ‘in a dump’.

“Uh,” said Sang Eun, “what are we looking at? Exactly?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? I have plenty of theories, but I imagine it’s probably just a simple probe. A sphere is an ideal shape for traversing the frictionless void of space, while these two... nodes... on either side? Clearly, those are transmitting information back,” said Bashrat, making sure this next part landed with appropriate weight, “to the interstellar empire that sent it out.”

“That’s...!” It wasn’t hard to render Tsetseg speechless, but Bashrat still took it as a victory. “I mean... wow!”

“Yeah...” Kalingkata leaned closer, studying it intently. “I gotta hand it to you, man, whatever it is... It sure is something. Are you gonna get it checked out?”

“I can’t just keep it at school, can I? I’ve been putting a lot of thought into who I can trust with this discovery. Not many options, frankly, so I suppose I’ll go the simple route and inform the government... but if they erase me from the history books, well, you guys will know the truth!”

She accepted this with a nod, her eyes still caught on that purple glow. Tsetseg was similarly transfixed. Bashrat knew he had to savor this relatively quiet moment, before the whirlwind of celebrity talk shows and/or government blacksites. Here was something that had so often eluded him. Here was validation.

There was only one dark cloud, and his name was Sang Eun. Apparently.

His expression was more reserved, which was nothing new, but it gave Bashrat the impression that he was troubled by something. When he took out his phone, Bashrat protectively stood in front of his orb. “No photography! ...Please. I can understand the impulse, but...”

He trailed off. Sang Eun wasn't using his camera. Instead, he was looking something up. He frowned intently at the screen, occasionally glancing up at the orb. Comparing.

“What?” Bashrat felt a tension creeping over him. “This is a brand new discovery. You couldn't possibly have seen this before.”

“Not in person,” he conceded, his eyes still on his phone. “But...”

“But what?”

“Bashrat, have you ever watched footage of space combat?”

“Of course I have. Who hasn’t?” Gongen was sandwiched between two different breeds of capitalist dog; the self-righteous Earth government on one side and the more honest, but more unpredictable, Mavericks further out. Most citizens had at minimum seen battles via the news media, and some took a deeper interest in the tactics or technology or patriotic violence. Bashrat definitely approached it from one of those normal and common perspectives, not as an exercise in mentally comparing his planet’s defenses against hypothetical alien armaments.

“Have you ever seen an anti-ship depth charge?”

He shook his head impatiently, unwilling to see how this could relate to anything. Sang Eun laid his phone on the table and pushed it forward. Kalingkata looked over, and Tsetseg craned her neck, unsure whether she should leave her seat for a better view.

“I know it’s blurry. But I’ve... heard... these things are pretty new, so this is the best footage I could find.

Considering the blast radius on these things," he said darkly, "you don't wanna get too close."

The screen was indeed pretty fuzzy. It depicted a squadron of Gongen's navy, their movements disciplined and orderly, engaging a gaggle of Maverick ships that weaved around them almost playfully. It looked like some skirmish over some deep space mine. Probably filmed by a civilian on the scene, explaining the footage's poor angle and low quality.

The Maverick vessels had impressive grace, avoiding most of the navy's fire, and eventually they zipped off unscathed. But it looked like a retreat. As nimble as they were, they had been slowly hemmed in. Their opponents had fought the battle as two groups, one trying (and failing) to match the Maverick's movements as the others lay down an ever-expanding cloud, which slowly filled the surrounding space.

It was hard to tell, but this cloud seemed to be made up of small, purple orbs.

Bashrat scoffed. "Right. So the probe looks like one of these things. Whatever. It's coincidence."

"I..."

"Or - no. Not coincidence. They only use these depth whatevers in space combat, right? Clearly," he said, thrusting a hand at the orb, "this thing is even more advanced than we thought-"

The orb chimed, as though in agreement.

"-and it found one of those things, and, like - mimicked its appearance. It's still alien."

"That's, uh..."

Sang Eun trailed off in the face of Bashrat's glare. Unfortunately, they outnumbered him. "...kind of a leap," finished his sister. "We know depth charges are a real thing. Not to burst your bubble, man, but everything else you said... Can you prove it came from space?"

"No," said Bashrat. "Which means I'm right."

"Come again?" she said, flatly.

“Again: if this came out of a ship while it was fighting up in space, how come I found it in the garb-in the neighborhood? If it fell from the sky, it would’ve just bounced off the dome. QED.”

Bashrat had no idea what ‘QED’ was supposed to mean, but he knew it made him sound smart. It was vital that he maintained his cool. If he couldn’t convince his classmates of his find, what hope had he of getting the respect he was owed from Gongen’s government?

The twins looked unconvinced, but Bashrat relaxed a little when Tsetseg cleared her throat. He would need to remember to thank her in his memoirs. She always had his back, no matter how much time he spent ranting about-

“I think they might be right...?”

Bashrat’s foot wasn’t tapping any more.

Tsetseg wasn’t having a great time either. One person paying attention to her was her social limit. Now she had three pairs of eyes on her, one of them

tinged with betrayal. “It’s just, um... My dad was telling me the other day that other scavengers don’t always look after their, um, their...”

“Hoards,” suggested Bashrat, impatiently.

“Their, uh, hoards can be seized if they don’t follow correct procedure. Sometimes, the government takes custody of everything, but that’s only if it looks important and they get caught by an official. He said a lot of the time, stuff from outside the dome can wind up in-”

At this juncture, Tsetseg remembered that, while she knew exactly where Bashrat conducted his searches of alien artifacts, this was privileged information not to be revealed in front of cool gamer girl classmates.

“-places,” she finished, a touch lamely. “Where they could be found. By you.”

“That might have been it,” said Kalingkata, before Bashrat could object. “This thing falls from space to crash in the desert, and some careless scavenger

brings it into Takumi's dome. They lose track of it, and now it's here."

"So what you're saying," scoffed Bashrat, "is that the cool thing I found, and wrapped in a towel, and brought into school, is a huge bomb."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a couple of seconds.

Then the bomb ticked, and they all screamed.

"Guys! Guys, please!" Sang Eun - who had managed to scream the least - fought to make himself heard. "Don't panic! Bashrat is right."

"Of course I'm right!" he yelled, calmly. "...Which part?"

"We should assume it only landed recently, and only got picked up and brought into the dome recently. But even then, you said you found this yesterday. You kept it overnight, for god's sake, and it hasn't gone off yet. It might be completely inert."

“Th-that would be great,” said Tsetseg, “but if that’s true, why does it-?”

The bomb ticked.

Tsetseg squeaked, abandoning the sentence for Kalingkata to pick up. “Yeah, no. It’s definitely doing that more frequently. And if it was a dud, it wouldn’t be doing it at all.”

“Agreed,” said her brother. “We have some time, it’s just not clear how long.”

“But it could be, like, three seconds.”

“I guess we can’t rule it out-”

“So we have to assume it is three seconds.”

Tsetseg made a noise like a mouse getting stepped on very slowly.

“It’s not a bomb,” said Bashrat, so determined to regain control that he ignored his own screaming. “It’s a probe from an interstellar empire, and it’s perfectly safe!”

Kalingkata met his gaze. “Dude, even if it was a probe-”

The bomb ticked. Tsetseg groaned, as though seasick.

“-and it’s not! But even if it was, couldn’t it still be dangerous? It could have some kind of funky radiation, for one thing. And you keep calling it an ‘empire’! That doesn’t sound safe either!!”

Bashrat’s arms did the thing. He had done a good job fending it off so far, but the compulsion grew too strong and needed to be sated. After a moment of pressing the backs of his hands against his eyes, he told himself, he would have an amazing idea. He would regain control of this situation, somehow, and this would all just be an amusing footnote. Something he could chat about in the interviews he would one day give as the solar system’s foremost authority on alien life.

“Okay,” he said, even though he was still in the dark in more than one sense. He had to take charge,

even if his arms weren't responding yet and he also had no idea where this next sentence would go.

"There's clearly only-"

His hands moved away just in time for him to see Tsetseg grab the bomb.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the twins, anxiety in stereo, but they couldn't stop her and neither could he. With her face scrunched up tight, she wrapped her arms around the bomb, which ticked.

"What are you doing?!" he screamed. She was already running for the door.

"She's right!" Kalingkata leapt to her feet. "First priority is to get it away from here! The school's still full of students!"

"Shaking it is dangerous!" protested Sang Eun, right behind her. "Tsetseg! Put it down!"

For a terrible moment, Bashrat was left in an empty math classroom. Then he managed to get his dumb, short, thoroughly unathletic legs moving.

“Give me back my b- my probe!!”

The bomb, because it was a bomb, did not go off.

Bombs didn't go off all the time. Every day, the vast majority of schools were not swallowed up by explosions. As much as he disliked his classes, Bashrat was forced to admit this was better than the alternative.

Order had prevailed. His boring, empty life was back to normal.

A nice lady named Kaguya had come by, thankfully bypassing the local police who were quite possibly contacted first. The entire basketball team had watched, with something approaching professional respect, as the quiet Mongolian girl all of them vaguely recognized came screaming out of

the main school building and hucked something over the outer wall.

Coach Jo had swiftly reprimanded her, and the three equally panicked students who had come in her wake. She was well-used to shouting down the protests of teenagers, but had to admit that pleas for her and the team to evacuate the school, maybe the whole city block, was a new form of backtalk.

But the bomb did not go off. Technician Au Kaguya came by, calm but suspiciously prompt. Working directly for the AI running the entirety of planetary infrastructure was probably good for punctuality.

With the help of two high-end drones, she examined and contained the bomb. They whisked it away somewhere while she stayed behind to conduct a series of quick and quiet interviews. She was not forthcoming about what the object actually was, but they extrapolated what they needed to

know from her assurances that it had already been rendered mostly (mostly.) inert.

Of course, that could have been an insidious, barefaced lie from a shadowy government operative meant to rob a free-thinking citizen of his incredible find. But Bashrat was too demoralized to really believe that. A mental reflex with no real weight.

It was over. He had dared to believe in his dreams, and now, they were crushed. In other words, an average Tuesday.

After everything that happened, what did he even have to show for it? Well, aside from the knowledge that his best friend, despite appearances, had both an ability to act decisively under pressure and a surprisingly good throwing arm. And how Kalingkata and Sang Eun... well, they weren't quite friends now, but they hadn't completely written him off as a dangerous idiot either, despite good reason to. And how Kaguya, having taken pity on him, had decided to handle the whole affair with discretion, on the condition that Bashrat and the others do the same.

The staff and much, much more importantly the student body wouldn't know too much about his blunder. Bashrat could continue to show his face at the school, which he had not blown up.

Aside from all that stuff, what was he even left with? No alien technology, and an assured place on some government watchlist, Shocho storing his details down in a directory marked 'Terrorists, Accidental'. Life was so unfair.

He was going to keep the next artifact to himself.