

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

Selfie Stick

By Matthew Sychantha



Khamphout felt his body fall backwards with gravity, and closed his eyes. His expression was calm, but focused. The wind rushed around him with a playful tickle on his nerves, whispering sweet distractions against his concentration. He kept his body limp, counting inside his head for the exact moment that gravity would line him up wi-

There! He grabbed the streetlight he had been standing on moments earlier and used his falling momentum to swing along the curve of the hanging lamp. In an instant a smile crept across his face and he felt his equilibrium shift. His body was launched in a ragdoll-like fashion into the air high above the paved ground of the alleyway below.

He looked over at his friend Nivanh and shouted, “Now” gazing a triumphant grin that was all in his eyes. As she aimed and shot the signal from the anti-grav remote to pause his momentum, he fidgeted with his pockets to get his phone. It was stuffed deep, and he found himself tucking his body trying to dig it out. Damned skinny jeans. They were going to be the death of him.

“No, don-” Nivanh cried out. Khamphout’s fidgeting had caused the signal to miss him, and he felt his momentum shift again. Now he really was falling. First things first, he got the phone out of his pocket and clutched it. His father was liable to do more damage than the fall would if he cracked another screen.

Nivanh ran to him, arms out to try and catch him. She was nowhere near close enough to close the gap, but she was still one to try. Khamphout really liked that about her, even if she hated that about herself.

Enough admiration, now he needed to focus. He tucked his body in and tried to get a forward roll going. In mid air. Even if he didn’t shift the momentum, if he could kick his legs out as he hit the ground, he could at least dissipate the forces.

God, applied physics. The things we go through to Meme something.

And Khamphout was half right. He wasn’t rolling when he hit the ground, but he was able to uncoil himself and kick out his legs to dissipate the force. On the other half, he hadn’t worked out what to do with his head. Luckily Nivanh was there to catch it. See? Sometimes it is worth trying, he said in a look. She pulled her hands away and let his head hit the concrete, albeit softer.

Khamphout was grinning as he stood up and brushed himself off, checking for injuries. “The schnozz scratcher is going to be proud of my literal application of physics on that one. You know what she’s always saying ‘take your lessons in your heart and out of the classroom?’”

Nivanh sighed. “I would estimate with around 80% certainty she would not approve of your methods.”

“You’re 100% right. I should’ve kept the phone in my shirt and worn longer sleeves. That would have made sure my body was in the right position.”

There was no arguing with him when he was proud of his failures; but with their adrenaline pumping like this they truly felt alive. After all, it’s much harder to cheat death the natural way.

Khamphout grabbed Nivanh's shoulder quickly and yanked her to the ground into a bowing position. In front of them, a group of monks in burnt orange robes passed in a single file line before them, chanting prayers for peace in a tumultuous time. No doubt on their way to temple for something.

Khamphout looked at her after they left, grinning.

"Do you think we could negotiate a better afterlife in a 2-for-the-price-of-1 sort of deal?"

Nivanh grabbed the back of his head with one arm and ground her knuckles into his forehead with the other hand.

The next day in school, Khamphout was balancing his chair on two legs with his feet on the desk in front of him. Which was actually sort of a marvel in and of itself considering the feet on his chair were actually magnetically sealed inside a small track made to stop him from lifting the legs for keeping it held to the floor. No one quite knew how he managed that either.

Khamphout shoved Ryan's face away, looking at the legs of his chair for a hint of how he'd done that.

"C'mon man, balancing is hard enough without the force of you breathing down my neck. Ain't they got chairs on Earth? Or do they make you stand all day?"

"Not many chairs on Earth defy the laws of gravity. Or logic. Or-"

Li Xiu happened to be passing by to chime in. "Khamphout is too dumb to understand the laws of anything. You can't tell him something won't work, things just will because he's ignorant enough to make nature bend around his ego."

"You're just jealous that nature likes my ego better."

Li Xiu turned around to confront him when Nivanh finally stood up. "Li Xiu, can you show me how you got the solution to the homework last night?"

She really was some kind of guardian. Khamphout was 100% sure Nivanh had done last night's homework a week ago and definitely had it right; but Li Xiu would never turn down the chance to brag about her own intelligence to her peers.

He looked over at Ryan, still gawking but a few feet away now. Realizing he tried to play it more casual.

"What'd you do after school yesterday?"

"Oh you know, hung around. Bowed before some monks. Boring things."

"Man, how come your boring things are only ever half the story?"

"Because second hand stories are seconds from the action. You have to live life instead of listening about it."

This again. Ryan might actually be tempted to hang outside of school with Khamphout one day if his inscrutable nature lived up to his vibe. His mother might kill him for it though. Or the hang might kill him. Either way, it'd be quite a way to go.

“All I’m saying is life happens out there. We’re in here, learning about how other people live life. Don’t you ever just want more? Don’t you ever think “A little trial and error wouldn’t hurt sometimes”? You can’t plan and prepare for everything, the unexpected will happen.”

“Well put, Mr. Methanit. But there’s a far gap between ‘rolling with the unexpected’ and ‘just go with it because I clearly don’t know what I am doing’ Could you please put your chair down so we can start class?” asked Mrs. Ichinose.

“Oh, and I need to see you after class.”

“Homework again?”

“After class,” she said sternly this time.

Of course he didn’t have today’s homework either, so that’ll get added onto the pile; he thought to himself.

After class the students filed out and Ichinose closed the door, calmly pulled out a good 10 or so papers from her desk and arranged them facing Khamphout, then sat down.

“Do you know what these are?” she asked, gesturing the disciplinarian aid out of the room.

Khamphout shrugged and leaned in. “Wife’s latest drafts?”

She grabbed him by the collar from her seated position and put his nose into the papers.

“These are your test results, buddy. Do you know the only reason you don’t have perfect scores? Immature doodling in the middle of your answers. You are barely scraping average on your results and are smart enough to rival Nivanh. Your classwork is sometimes done immaculately done, and sometimes not done at all!”

She paused to take a breath, and finally let go of his shirt.

“You’re not stupid. I do not know why you let people believe you are stupid. That’s what is so frustrating about you, Khamphout. I see what goes on inside your head, always another scheme or plan to stroke your ego that’s more exciting than learning the foundation. Well, one day you’re going to find out what happens when there’s no foundation under you- you’ll fall. And what will you do then?”

Khamphout smirked. “Curl into a ball and try to dissipate the force of gravity under me as I land.”

Ichinose smirked, and let out a small laugh. She grabbed her grade book and prepared to work.

“One question, and you can go. No warning this time.”

Khamphout put his hands behind his head. No warning on his record? Alright I can do that.

“How many trailing 0s are there in the number 5?”

Kamphout smirked immediately, but made a gesture like he was counting on his fingers for a second.

“1 trailing 0.”

“Wonderful, Mr. Methanit. You’ve gotten a perfect score on your homework for last night,” she said checking off the box for him. “And as a result I don’t have to issue a warning for missing your homework.”

He approached the door, looked back and grinned. “Whatever saves you the paperwork. Don’t work too hard, Mrs. Ichinose!” as he opened it.

She opened her mouth to speak, but a student walking down the hall had already grabbed his wrist and pulled him away into the wild river of student traffic in the halls.

The disciplinarian aid walked back into the room.

“You sure about that kid?”

Megumi let her hair down finally. It was her prep period, and she had a few moments to herself.

“Kids like him are like sculpting porridge. Sometimes you have to wait until all the hot air gets let out before you can start to shape it.”

“What if something goes wrong before that happens?”

Megumi looked at a picture on her desk of herself and her wife ziplining far outside Gongen, long before they were married. The zipline’s endpoint? They had no idea at the time, but evidently it ended at the desk she was now inhabiting.

“Then he splashes like hot porridge would and in the end, will eventually become sculptable.”

After school, Khamphout and Nivanh were at it again in the alleyway. This time Khamphout was in an untucked dress shirt to cover his lanky frame and hold his phone in his sleeve.

Nivanh piped up. “I still don’t understand what you think this will accomplish. Anyone can jetpack around the city-”

“Exactly, anyone can jetpack around the city. Nobody pauses. Nobody sees it from the sky like I do. When people see what this city looks like just... from above? It’s different. People jetpack

'to' places, they don't get up there to see what things really look like. It's a beautiful thing, having a snap shot of life going on below- regular people getting bread, going on dates, thinking, breathing-"

"Never pegged you as a romantic, Khamphout" said Li Xiu, who had been following them since they left school.

Khamphout tried to ignore her. Nivanh couldn't help herself and turned her head. Khamphout sighed. She had attention, they weren't getting rid of Li Xiu today.

"Why are you following us?"

"I had a question for Nivanh, and was surprised to realize she was hanging out with YOU, Khamphout."

Nivanh winced. "What was your question for me?"

"Why did you ask for help this morning? You're not one to need help like that."

Li Xiu's eyes widened.

"But now it makes sense! I see, so-"

Khamphout finally turned around and confronted her.

"What exactly do you see?"

That was the first time Khamphout had ever looked her directly in the eyes. It was actually the first time anyone had looked her directly in the eyes in a while; most people seemed to look off to the side when they talked to her. She suddenly found herself at a loss for words.

Khamphout rubbed the area between his eyebrows and closed his eyes. "Whatever. Just don't get in the way when I take the picture."

Li Xiu began digging through her bag. "I can help! I have this great camera my father got me on a recent trip, and it shoots gr-"

Khamphout ignored her and handed Nivanh the anti-gravity remote before approaching the streetlight and beginning to climb up it.

As he approached the top, he tuned back into his surroundings again.

"I'm in position!" called out Li Xiu from a fire escape above, pointing a camera at him.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT THERE?" called out a voice from inside the building, the fire escape's owner.

Li Xiu teetered, startled by this sudden voice yelling at her.

Khamphout knew immediately what was about to happen. "NIVANH! THE REMOTE!"

Li Xiu fell over the edge, and Nivanh tried to zap her with the anti-gravity signal to catch her.

“Her fall pattern is too erratic! I can’t-”

“Time it to a change in momentum! 3...2...”

Khamphout cleanly leapt off the lamp post, no swing this time, and on the upward gain of his jump, caught her. The added fraction of a second was all Nivanh needed. She caught him with the signal and the two of them ended up frozen in mid air, above the streets. He looked at her in his arms.

“You ok? No twists or whiplash?”

Li Xiu blushed and looked away.

“I’m fine! But... thanks.”

She snuck a peek at him, and even now his face was aimed at the sun, eyes closed as if he was just basking in it’s warmth. It reminded her of an old Superman comic she had seen once at the library. For a few moments, they hung there in the sky, frozen with the world below moving.

She took the camera in her hand and stretched out her arm, taking a selfie of the two of them with the city below. In the background there was a man walking his old dog, petting it; the dog couldn’t see well but recognized the man’s touch with love. In another corner there was a couple gazing longingly into eachother’s eyes, one facing away from the camera. Li Xiu didn’t know it at the time, but the concealed person was Mrs. Ichinose. Finally in a car was her father, yelling about something to someone over his car phone. Reflecting, Li Xiu would never ask him what exactly it was about. At the end of the day, it was just a magical still of the life imbued into the very fabric of Takumi. So many stories people knew nothing about, day in and day out.

When they got back safely to the ground Khamphout set Li Xiu on her feet and looked away.

“I’d like that picture for my social feed.” he said without looking at her, just putting his hand out.

Li Xiu thought about it for a second before replying. “Nah. I don’t think the world should know I’m hanging around with the dumbest kid in school.” she said before tucking it away. She looked at him and smiled.

He looked back and grinned. “Suit yourself.” From there his expression changed back, aloof and impenetrable. Li Xiu would wonder if she missed an opportunity at that moment when she would reflect later.

Nivanh finally approached them worried, and hugged Khamphout.

“Are you okay? Are both of you okay?”

Khamphout rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, but nobody ever warned me of what a dead stop to a free fall would do to your neck.”

Nivanh looked at him in disbelief, “do people really need to tell you what happens when your body in motion hits a dead stop? Sometimes I wonder if Li Xiu is right- Hey, where’d she go?”

Khamphout looked around, thinking he caught a shadow before being yanked to the ground by Nivanh. The monks were walking by again in a single file line, and by the time they raised their head again there wasn’t a trace of Li Xiu anywhere.

Li Xiu had disappeared into the busy city streets away from the alley, never telling a soul of what Khamphout was doing. She often would look at that picture and try to pick out more and more details she had missed. It helped ironically keep her a little more grounded.

And for what it’s worth, Khamphout never again managed to stick himself in the air to get that selfie.

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