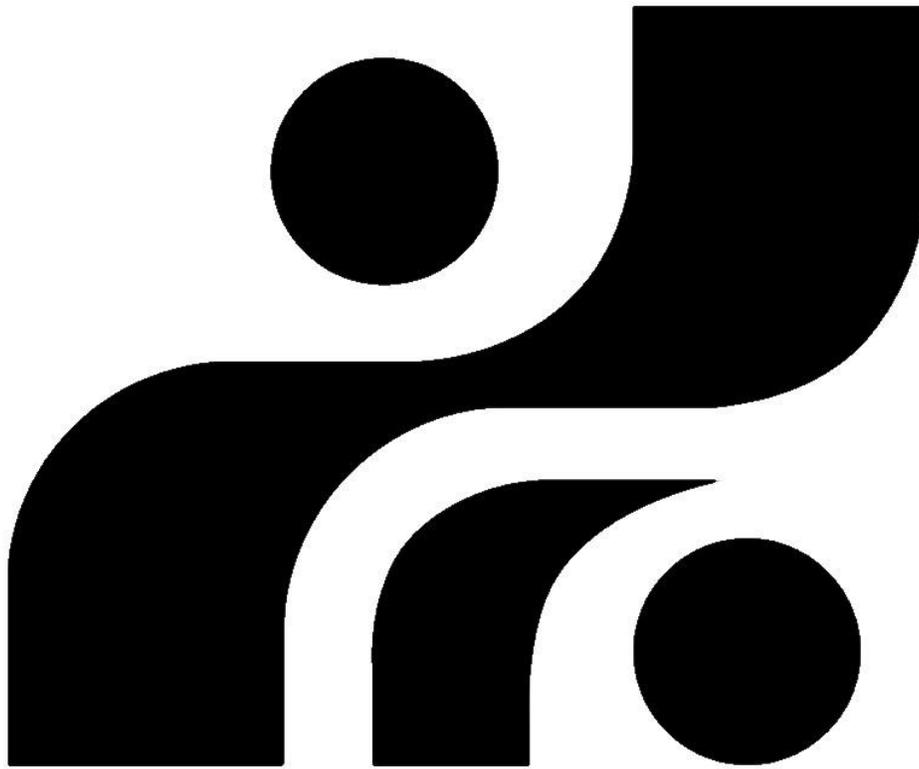


TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG



Kippli Darnell Should Read the Room



By James Wylder



"You can't really expect to make people stop yelling about war by throwing a dinner party, sir..."

Howard Martin sighed, Kippli Darnell was talented in his own way as a diplomat, but he still didn't understand the job.

"You're young, I get that, but you need to learn not everything is grand gestures. History doesn't always change in a moment, sometimes it's a long series of ups and downs. If you get the chance to push things up, you go for it."

Kippli nodded, but the frown plastered on his face showed he wasn't convinced, "If you say so, sir."

He nudged his junior, "Maybe you're just getting jealous everyone wants to talk to Yumi." Howard had been joking, but the way Kippli went red showed he'd actually hit the nail on the head. He held back letting out a second sigh, oh to be a young man and have such ridiculous worries. Earth and Mars were teetering on the edge of an incline they would slide down together into war, and Mr. Darnell was just coming to terms with his wife being noticed again now that she wasn't hobbling around from her injuries or covering her face to hide the wide straight scar that went across both cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Well, it shouldn't be his job, but he knew how to work people. That's why he was the head diplomat after all. He slapped Kippli on the back warmly, "Come on kid, she's glancing over at you half the time. The woman clearly loves you, she's doing exactly what a diplomat's spouse is supposed to do and keeping the boring people busy. Isn't that right, Mary?"

The third diplomat in their party, Mary Spruce, did not feign levity, "I wouldn't know sir, I'm not married." He'd have to teach Kippli how to not pout, and Mary how to play along. Alas.

There was a chime, and on the other side of the room, past all the white-draped round dinner tables, a security detail came through the door, examined the room, and then the guest of honor came in as the herald at the door loudly announced him: Sato Shintaro, the President's son, followed by his ever-present bodyguard Hotaru.

"Well damn, I guess the rumors the President's health is still declining have more weight to them than I thought," Mary grumbled. "They'd RSVP'd for the man himself."

"They always RSVP for the President and send Shintaro instead these days," Howard said coolly. "You'll get used to it."

It took him a while to work his way over to them, stopping to talk to every smiling face like a good politician, but eventually he got to the hosts.

"Ambassador Martin, it's always a pleasure. Ambassador Darnell, a pleasure as well, I'm glad to see Yumi is feeling well enough to be out and about. Son with the grandparents?"

Howard was always impressed with Shintaro's ability to either remember details about every person he met, or alternately cram a briefing ahead of every event. He'd mastered the skill to an incredible degree for a man so young.

Hotaru hung back behind him expressionless. He gave her a smile. She didn't budge a muscle.

"Yes!" Kippli replied, "It's nice to have a little time to go out on our own now and then."

He looked at Mary, "And I don't believe we've been introduced. Sato Shintaro."

She gave him a customary bow, and then they shook hands, "Mary Spruce. I'm the newest diplomat here. I hope to get well acquainted with the planet."

Howard noticed a bead of sweat on Mary's temple. She had wiped her palm on her pant leg before shaking hands. He'd read her file, she'd worked as an attaché to the president of iCom, so she'd met plenty of rich and powerful before. Still, it was a whole new planet, and her first time meeting a Marsian official, so he'd excuse it.

"And how are you liking Gongen so far, Ambassador Spruce?"

"I am liking Mars just fine, sir," she replied.

Martin grimaced, the Marsians renaming their planet and people Gongen was still a point of contention after all this time.

For all the dinner was supposed to bring people together, the cracks were still popping through.

Shintaro wasn't phased though, he kept up that pleasant smile, "If you haven't tried the local bathhouses, I'd recommend them. You'd be surprised just how relaxing they can be."

So he'd noticed her sweating too.

"Thank you sir, I'll take that under advisement."

The President's son moved on, they'd have their real discussion after he made his rounds, and Howard turned to Mary, "I know you're ex-military, but you need to start learning to relax at these events. Just take a deep breath."

"Yes, sir."

"And drop the sir."

She adjusted the collar of her knee-length green and white jacket (the Earther fashion these days) and nodded, "I'm going to step out for some air if you don't mind."

He smiled, "I think that's a good idea. Don't worry about tonight, just take it as a trial run."

She put on a fleeting smile before turning and heading for the balcony.

* * *

"So, make new friends? That Earther girl looked cute."

"Ha. Ha," he rubbed the bridge of his nose, "That's our new junior, she's... been assigned to us."

"I got that impression. The one you mentioned driving you up the wall?"

He nodded, "One and the same."

"I tried talking to her when we got in, she was... touchy."

"She's ex military, not necessarily a bad thing, but it feels like they threw her in here just to keep tabs on us, frankly she doesn't have a bright future as a diplomat."

"What tipped you off, her inability to talk to people, or her inability to read the room?"

He laughed, "I'll keep her around just so you tease her about that and not me."

"I'm sure I'll fit it in somewhere."

The host of the evening stepped forward, and brought the room to attention. It was the ambitious Ito Ryuu, a man whose motivations Kippli hadn't entirely grasped yet, but whom he was certain had his eyes on the presidency of the planet. A fierce nationalist, sure, but one who seemed to not be easy to pigeon hole with that descriptor either. Beside him was an older woman wearing an Au Dai.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, and honored guests, I know you're all anxious to see the main event. But if I might say a few words--the future of Gongen in our solar system is one with an uncertain path, but one for which we must be sure on the direction we will guide it on. Tensions are flaring, and our security is more important than ever. Who can protect Gongen, but the Gongen? The idea that we can rely on outside help when danger comes to our own citizens is a folly, and our soldiers in the Self-Defense Force need every advantage they can get. And that is why I'm proud to announce the latest in monomolecular blades, a mass production model based on the work of master blademaker Ming Hu Tran."

The woman bowed, and there was much applause. Kippli didn't applaud, this wasn't the kind of thing an Earther ambassador should ever be applauding, but he did give it his full attention until he noticed someone awkwardly sidling up beside him.

"Great party huh?" Kippli looked up to see a young Marsian lady—perhaps in her late teens?—who was so clearly faking her confidence in being here that it was, in a certain way, charming. Was she the daughter of one of the officials here? Probably. She didn't want to be here, that was for certain.

"Oh, sure. I suppose so, if you have a certain sensibility," he replied with what he hoped was a sense of camaraderie.

The girl nodded, "Love that war profiteering, and stuff like that. Really enjoy the prospect of imminent mass death for no good reason."

He frowned, "Are you... being sarcastic?"

"Sorry, I don't get to speak English a lot. Yeah, that was sarcasm." She gestured over at the sword. "Kind of a blunt force way of showing off that they don't want to give peace a chance."

He sighed, "It's certainly not what I was hoping to see, especially not from Ito Ryuu... who might you be again?"

"Oh right," she extended a hand. "Kalingkata. I'm a criminal hacker with the space mafia."

He took her hand, awkwardly, and shook it. "Is that also sarcasm?"

"Who knows? Who are you?"

"Kippli Darnell, ambassador to Mars from the CGC. I'm here with Howard Martin from the Earth Mission to Gongen, and my own junior ambassador Mary Spruce. And my wife, of course."

She blinked, "Oh shit, I mean, uh, oh... gosh. Wow. So there are important people here."

"...Did you sneak in?"

"Not at all, I got announced at the door and everything. My name is 'and guest'." She glanced over to see a line of guests who were taking turns giving the sword they'd brought for demonstration a few swings, then asking the old man questions about it.

"Well at least you're not boring. And it's good to see not everyone is being a warhawk about all of this."

Before he knew it Yumi had slid in next to him, smiling at Kalingkata. She really was too good at sneaking up on him. "Who might this be?" The girl glanced at the scar on Yumi's face, everyone did that, but thankfully had enough tact not to linger on that detail and move her gaze up to her eyes.

"Kalingkata. I'm just some girl."

"Yumi Darnell, I'm Ambassador Darnell's wife."

"Pleasure, so my boss, who I am here with--"

"--From the space mafia?"

"Right, exactly. She wanted me to check on the item she put up for display here. Any idea where I'd go to make sure it's ready?"

Yumi mouthed, "Space Mafia?" at her husband who whispered something back Kalingkata couldn't hear.

"Below us is where all the items being showcased for the guests are located. I take it by 'space mafia' you were being funny about saying 'arms dealer' then?"

She winked, "You got it." Kippli had watched this girl's cover story shift multiple times in the tiny amount of time he'd known her. He wasn't sure whether to call her out on this, or just keep playing along. And he hesitated, as he often did, and because of that he didn't get an answer.

Because that was when the explosions started. Yumi rushed forward, catching Kalingkata deftly as she began to tumble from the shaking. The girl looked up breathlessly from the rescue—not everyone in the room was so lucky. Many had fallen over, and a rush to leave the venue began immediately. Kalingkata, wasting no time, extracted herself from Yumi and with a mock casualness said: "You guys should go, I have work in the morning."

There wasn't a chance to go after her. She disappeared into the chaotic crowd, moving further into the room. He reached for Yumi, and she grabbed his hand as the throng swarmed around them. At least they hadn't been separated.

"What's going on?" Yumi said.

"I don't know, but we need to get out of here."

Yumi stopped, and pointed. The girl he'd been talking to was standing on top of the display the sword had been on, lowering into the floor. Was she performing a robbery? Was she in danger? It didn't matter, Yumi was already springing into action, shoving her way through to Sato who was trying his best to direct the crowd as he straggled behind her.

"--below us!" he heard as he finally caught up.

"What makes you so sure?" Sato replied.

"If I was trying to sabotage this, that's where I'd be!"

He opened his mouth, shut it, and nodded. "Hotaru," he said to his bodyguard, "go now. We'll follow." The woman nodded, and bolted. Kippli found himself caught up in following, as Yumi and Sato ran after her. He worried Yumi's leg would give out. They barreled out of the hall, through an ornate hallway, and then down a service stairway Shintaro seemed to know by heart, where they could see an open doorway that they charged towards--the scene inside was a mess.

The girl was in the back, standing by a hole in the wall that had clearly been the earlier explosion. There were other explosives in the room too--but something had gone wrong and they hadn't gone off, a small blessing there. The girl looked like she was about to jump out of the hole in the building, which was a skyscraper. This was concerning.

What was also concerning however was that Hotaru was in the middle of a fierce grapple with an opponent who Kippli immediately recognized, and began to curse up a storm over as soon as he did.

It was Mary Spruce.

The brawl was fierce, Mary threw Hotaru down, only for her to turn the fall into a roll, and kick back up while activating her jetpack to rush her again.

Yumi yelled something at the girl which Kippli couldn't hear over the noise. The girl didn't seem to hear either. She jumped. Yumi sprung into action, and as Mary and

Hotaru fell once again into a fierce grapple, trying desperately to take each other's weapons, she grabbed a display rifle from where it had fallen on the floor. Of course it wasn't loaded, but she was reacting without thinking.

Once she'd realized this, she continued reacting without thinking and hurled the rifle at Mary's leg--it slammed into the back of her knee, her leg folding, and Hotaru used the sudden loss of balance to disarm her, and drop her into a hold.

She squirmed and screamed on the ground.

"What the hell," was all Kippli could think to say. And then he ran towards the hole in the wall. He didn't know what he expected to see. The girl hanging from the ledge? A faint pinprick of red on the ground below?

What he did see was a surprise. The girl had been caught in a floating net, attached to a hover bike. He let out a relieved sigh. Well, she may have actually been a thief and a spy, but she was far too young to die. That's why he was here after all, it was a good reminder.

All these warhawks. This whole stupid banquet showing off weapons of war for the older generations to force the younger ones to use to kill and be killed. He wasn't supposed to let them win. Shintaro's voice broke him from his reverie, a grimace on his face.

"Ambassador Darnell, I think it would be best if we agreed nothing happened here."

He blinked, "I'm sorry?"

"There wasn't an incident. There are no explosives."

"DAMN YOU, YOU'RE ALL INSOLENT LITTLE CHILDREN!" Mary screamed.

The pieces came together in his head. He nodded. "It's unfortunate, but I believe Mary Spruce's drunken conduct tonight may require me to quietly send her back to Earth."

Shintaro gave a bow, "I'm glad we have an understanding."

"...What about...?" he gestured at the damage, the bombs.

"I'll handle it, don't worry about it."

Kippli nodded, and staggered over to Mary. It was all so... confusing. She scowled up at him.

"Mary... why? Just... Why?"

She spat, trying to reach him but it falling short in front of his shoes. “Because this is what we’re supposed to be doing! The Marsians need to be taught a lesson. They’re not going to understand until we put them back in their place.”

“You want a war?”

“Of course I do! You should too, Ambassador.”

“Think of the children who would die... the innocent people. I have a young son here, Mary.”

“And he’ll thrive as part of the Central Governance Corporation’s glorious future.”

Shintaro stared down at her, impassively. “The fate of Gongen isn’t yours to decide.”

She took a breath, steadying herself, then spoke firmly, never breaking eye contact with him. “You think you have any leg to stand on? Mars once belonged to Earth, and will always belong to Earth. You don’t get to choose your own name, or choose the way your own foot takes a step forward. You’ve become so drunk on your illusion of independence, you’ve forgotten who your masters are. The CGC is going to remind you who is in charge, whose soil this is, and I don’t give a single damn how many innocents get bombed to a pulp in the meanwhile. Think of the children? They’ll die in the bonfire like the rest of you traitors.”

Shintaro didn’t react. “Thank you for your opinion. I’ll keep that in mind. Hotaru?”

She grabbed Mary by the hair, and slammed her forehead into the floor in one precise movement. Kipli cringed.

He looked at Kipli, “Take care of your own now, if you would.”

* * *

Kipli Darnell’s new assistant barely talked. It wasn’t as though she wasn’t well knowledgeable about her position; along with a previous diplomatic internship she had a full on degree in Marsian Studies. She just didn’t seem to have a lot to say. She followed his orders pretty precisely, took notes perfectly, and didn’t make herself known. He was 100% certain that she was another spy, but at least this time they’d sent someone who wasn’t going to cause her masters more trouble than she was worth.

"I did finish running the check on the girl you met, one Kalingkata," his new aide began as they sat in the lobby of Sato Shintaro's office. "Quite the interesting character. She actually fell on our radar last year it seems."

"Is she--"

"Alive? Yes. She's been attending school." She handed him a padd, which had a brief dossier on her. Student at Academy 27 in Takumi, associated with several Mavericks. Grandparents were dissidents. Then several pages of completely redacted text.

"Well that's curious."

"I thought you might think so."

He sighed, and set the padd down. "Curious but not useful. I feel like I just stepped for a moment into a whole other life, and then just as quickly stepped out of it again. I'll probably never encounter--sorry I'm rambling now."

"You're fine sir," she said, tapping the right side of her head by the eye with her curled fingers.

"Feeling alright?"

She tensed for a moment, "Fine, sir. My right eye is prosthetic, I lost it fighting pirates in the rings of Saturn. First and last tour out. When I came back I thought I might try my hand at something a little more peaceful so I went back to school. Now I'm here."

"You should get it serviced if it's bothering you," he said in a voice that might have sounded a little paternal.

She screwed her lips up for a moment, "I don't want anyone to think I'm a Maverick, sir."

He sighed, "I'll have someone come into the office for you. And drop the 'sir' already. What's your name again?"

"Catinka. Catinka Barow, from Hamburgplex."

"Well, I look forward too--"

"Ambassador Darnell?" The secretary called. "Master Sato will see you now."

Finally. Annoying timing, but finally. He rose up. "You won't be allowed to come in with me I'm afraid," Darnell told her. "Try to get to know the secretary and the staff while you wait. Those are more important connections than you might think."

The young woman nodded, and turned around to go do just that. Maybe she'd stick around, maybe she wouldn't. Things would be difficult either way.

Entering into Sato Shintaro's office he found the man buttoning a shirt up as a floating bot sprayed him with de-scenter.

"I apologize for my appearance; I just finished a workout."

Kippli waved away the apology, "No, I should be thanking you for making time for me in your busy schedule."

The formalities out of the way, Sato went right into it. "I understand Mary Spruce has been reprimanded and sent back to Earth."

Ambassador Darnell nodded, "It's unfortunate she caused such trouble getting intoxicated during a crisis. The vague implication that she accidentally had a hand in the explosion due to her intoxication probably helped."

Sato slid into his seat. "Of course, no one believes your report."

"Probably not."

"I did my end of the work. As far as anyone is aware, it really was just an accidental explosion. I found a man willing to take the fall for it, and relocated him with the same job down in Hozin."

Perfect. Kippli wasn't keen on the way that Sato Shintaro had been given the reins his father the actual president Sato Satoshi should be guiding, but he was good at his job. He let out a sigh of relief. Crisis averted. Well... "...Master Sato, if I might?"

He gave a curious look and nodded.

"How many more crises like this can we avoid?"

Sato gave him a sad smile. "As many as it takes, or as many as we can. We can only keep trying."

"And when we run out?"

The President's son sighed, "Read the room Ambassador Darnell. The answer to that question seems to be either despair or joy for most people."

"And which camp do you fall into?"

Sato got up and walked to the window. He looked out at Kazuki, and after a time Kippli thought he might never reply. Then finally, he looked into the Ambassador's reflection in the window and give his reply.

"Hope," he said.

* * *

Mary Spruce opened her eyes. The room was silver and green, with white support beams. She was sitting in a chair, but she could tell it could be lowered into a bed for medical procedures. She tried to move, and found before she looked down to confirm it that there were restraints around her wrists and ankles. She tried a few of the normal tricks to get out of them, but whoever had designed them had worked around each one, and doing so only continued to make her more uncomfortable.

"You're quite tenacious, aren't you?"

It was a man's voice. She tried to turn her head to see him, but it was no use.

"I like tenacious people. That's a compliment, mind you. But there's also a problem with them."

He finally came into view. She couldn't place the face, she was great with faces too. But he seemed familiar.

"The name is Jylan Rathe. You're currently at CISyn headquarters. Do you know what that means?"

She stopped struggling. "...You don't need to bring my family into this, please. I'll tell you anything you want to know. But there isn't much, the whole bomb plot was my idea, and I can give you the list of the sellers I--"

He shook his head. It stopped her dead cold. She knew about CISyn. Had been in the army long enough to know not to say anything if someone just happened to get mysteriously reassigned. Her pulse raced. She tried to steady it, but she struggled. She thought of her parents, her siblings, back in Atlantaplex. Her pulse raced faster.

"Please, Ms. Spruce. No need to be so ragged and weary. I want to offer you a job, actually."

She gulped, and found she couldn't not, so replied. "What sort of--I mean, yes sir."

He smiled. "There's only one problem of course. For this job to work, I'm afraid we can't have Mary Spruce running around. Too many pesky memories."

The chair began to turn into a table. Her mouth was forcibly shut. "But I have complete confidence you'll be whoever I want you to be."

From the Publisher's Desk:

After a long wait, we're happy to finally present you the "Side-B" story to "Kalingkata Has a Bad Night Out" we promised back when that story came out. A lot changed in the world since then: we came out with the first volume in "The Battle of Phobos" saga, we successfully launched the first WARSONG spin off with the surprise hit Academy 27 (a series none of us saw coming!), and announced that Arcbeatle Press would be putting out even more WARSONG content for the WARS Roleplaying Game with our newly acquired tabletop gaming branch, Shotgun Angel Games.

And now, WARSONG: Stretti, the second part of the Phobos saga, is on the horizon. How time flies, huh?

We've got a lot of exciting things on the way: the other two Phobos books, more original WARSONG stories, new RPG content, and a second season of Academy 27! We hope you'll join us, and spread the word.

Oh, and if you haven't already, grab the first Phobos book. Or heck, get one for a friend! With Stretti on the horizon, its time to get reading:

[Click Here to Grab WARSONG: Preludes!](#)

-James Wylder

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