

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

The Phantom

By Aidan Mason



It was three o'clock when the first incident occurred. Two students, Hanzo and Ihor, were standing under a row of light fixtures when a terrible scratching noise filled the theater. Then, without warning, they fell, tearing off the wall with a loud scratch.

"Look out!" Helena Kiner, the daughter of a weapons master, shouted. Without hesitation, the two boys jumped out of the way as the lights crashed to the ground, crushing a robot underneath them in the process.

"Holy shit!" Hanzo shouted, jumping back up, fists at ready.

"I knew it. I knew it," Ihor muttered to himself, as Hanzo began waving his fists around, looking for anything to punch or fight. "Everytime I'm in this godforsaken theater, something goes wrong..."

"H-h-hey!" Jorani shouted, pointing towards the balcony above the stage. "T-t-there's someone...someone up there!"

Instantly, the sound of loud footsteps rang out, as the unseen person ran across the balcony. That alerted everyone, even the two kids including the two kids who ran out of the back rooms hastily shoving their clothes on, loudly announcing they hadn't been doing anything. One of the younger boys grabbed a couple pencils and began to fling them towards the direction that Jorani was pointing at. That did exactly nothing, with the pencils falling to the floor with a pathetic click.

In a minute, it was all over, with sparking lights all over the floor, and an entire theater in disarray, without anyone having any idea what happened. And that was the moment that Mr. Shevochenko walked in.

It only took the school news team thirty minutes to find out what had happened, and within three hours, the site had the story plastered right on the front of the homepage. UNKNOWN VANDAL BREAKS THEATER LIGHTS; NO SUSPECTS.

“This isn’t good,” Shevochenko muttered, walking around the family home, Ihor watching him as he paced.

“So, what are we going to do, Dad?” Ihor asked.

“We keep going, obviously,” Shevochenko said. “I started this production and I’m going to finish it.”

Ihor gave a bit of a sigh internally. He knew that his father was stubborn, but internally, he was hoping that somehow, he’d be able to get out of this. But it seemed that reality won again against his dreams.

“I’ll look around,” Ihor said. “See if I can find anything out.”

Shevochenko nodded. “That’s a good start, my boy. A good start.”

“Nope. Haven’t seen a thing,” Kalingkata said the next day, after Ihor had asked her if she had any knowledge about the mysterious figure.

“Nor I,” her brother, Talinata, replied.

“Huh,” Ihor said, somewhat dejectedly. Sure, he wanted out of the theater program, but having a masked vigilante spreading havoc wasn't something anyone really wanted, least of all him.

“Although,” Kalingkata said, a mischievous look coming over her face. “I could hack the cameras for you, see if I could find anything.”

“Kalingkata....” Talinata said, his voice slightly on edge. “That's going to be risky.”

“And?”

“I'm not saying don't do it, but let's take it slow. Hacking the cameras would be a lot more serious than anything we've done.”

“You don't have to do it,” Ihor said. “But if you could, that would be amazing.”

“I'm not saying that we won't do it,” Talinata said. “I'm definitely doing it; it just might take a bit of time.”

“Anything helps,” Ihor said. Giving the two a nod, he began to walk away, looking for someone else to interview.

As he walked towards the band room, he spotted Charlie Parker, who was flipping a red pen between his light skinned fingers. He was the resident ‘shifty student you don’t want to run into in an alley’; his brown eyes had a sharp look to them, a look that gave Ihor chills. It was a look that not only suggested danger, but also...knowledge. Knowledge that Charlie had, but no one else did.

Shaking, Ihor hurriedly walked away, Charlie watching him all the while.

It didn’t take long for there to be a second strike. Just two days after the first, and on the cusp of the weekend, three students were rehearsing on the stage, Shevchenko watching from the audience, when the set collapsed. Wood and nails flew

everywhere as the three actors dove out of the way, one of the bolts barely missing a girl's face.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Shevochenko shouted, running up towards the stage. As he ran up the stairs, a dark figure jumped out of the shadows, a white mask covering their whole face, and ran off the stage, brushing past the teacher and running down past the seats.

“Stop him!” Helena shouted, as the masked vigilante shoved a student out of the way, jumping over a row of seats to get towards the door. With a yell, Ihor, who had been talking with a couple freshmen about the **previous** incident, ran towards the figure, only to get a punch straight in the face. A loud cracking sounded throughout the theater, as Ihor fell to the ground with his nose broken.

Without hesitation, the masked figure raced away, their cape trailing behind them as Hanzo began to run after him, screaming obscenities and curses.

As the senior ran into the hallway, the two footsteps getting more and more faint, Ihor stepped out of the wings. As he observed the chaos, he noticed a book on the floor. A book with a very familiar cover...

Grabbing it, Ihor held it up to his face, and noticed that it was the cover to *The Phantom of the Opera*, a book from a very, very long time ago. A book that just so happened to feature a masked terror interrupting a theater's rehearsals.

"So, a 'Phantom' of our own, eh?" he muttered. Flipping through, he saw markings all over the pages, written in a sloppy, desperate style with a dark red pen. It was the rantings of a lunatic, talking of fingers and monsters and a strange void. It only got more and more erratic as he flipped through the final pages.

Flipping to the last page, he saw three words scratched into the sheet, in a strange and erratic way.

Make it stop, it said.

“Stay put, you coward!” Hanzo shouted, as the figure ducked into the changing rooms, slamming the door behind them. Hanzo instantly grabbed the door to fling it open, only to hear the click of the lock.

“Damn it,” he muttered. “I’m gonna kill you, you slimy bastard!”

As Hanzo tried to jig the door open, he could hear the sounds of a struggle inside the room. Someone let out a shout, which only made Hanzo more furious. He was supposed to be the strongest kid in the school, not some random vigilante!

Finally, he flung the door open, the lock broken beyond repair. What he saw, however, only made him more furious. The mysterious figure was gone, and the only person there was Helena’s brother, weightlifter Maquois Kiner, who was holding a broken bit of the figure’s cloak.

“I tried to stop him, but he got away!” Maquois said.

Hanzo scowled. “Why didn’t you stop him then, you wimp!?”

“Hey, who are you calling a wimp, screwball?” Maquois replied. “I could break your nose while high off my balls on seven different variations of crack.”

The two boys stared at each other, both not willing to back down. Only the sound of the incoming janitor unlocked the two’s gaze, the sound of an old woman with a broom breaking the silence.

As Hanzo stormed out, he caught Charlie out of the corner of his eye. Instantly, Hanzo scowled, even more than he was already. Hanzo didn’t like most people, but he especially hated Charlie. Somehow, the sophomore was impossible to read, and extremely hard to get a rise out of. Not only that, he was the only one to successfully beat Hanzo in a fight, and Hanzo had never lived it down.

Grunting, Hanzo brushed past Charlie and stormed back to the theater. The disruption was costing him time in the spotlight, time that he couldn't afford to lose.

Charlie simply watched as Hanzo stormed off.

"I'm sorry Mr. Shevochenko, but if you can't get rid of this so-called....'Phantom', then your program needs to shut down for the safety of the students and the community as a whole," Mr Mori said, his cold steely eyes staring Shevochenko down as he slammed down the tablet. MASKED 'PHANTOM' ATTACKS AGAIN, NEARLY KILLS STUDENT.

"Wha....what? How? Why? This isn't my fault!" Shevochenko replied. Instantly, he started cursing internally. He knew this was coming. He had two days to prepare for this meeting, and yet, this was the best he could do?

"Yes, I understand that. However, the safety of the students is of my utmost concern and the

concern of the school board. Given how you haven't been able to get this Phantom out, it's a fundamentally unsafe situation."

"Then get me someone to help out! Get the military involved or something!"

Mori sighed. "Mr. Shevochenko, you should know as well as I do that there is no way that we could get any member of the military to do this. They're needed for things that are truly important, not a vandal."

"But if it's just a vandal, why do we need to shut down the program?"

"Because this vandal is doing dangerous things. Please, Mr. Shevochenko, put aside your tunnel vision and look at the bigger picture there."

Muttering under his breath, Shevochenko tried his hardest not to explode. Mori's logic was clearly flawed; if it was dangerous, even if it was just a vandal, why wouldn't there be a need to get

protection? But he knew that he couldn't push the matter much further.

“Can we at least get a day? A day to solve this?”

Mori sighed. “Very well,” he said. “ONE. DAY”

“Thank you,” Shevochenko said, standing up to leave. “Asshole,” he thought to himself.

Ihor was sitting in his homeroom, his brain still processing an interview he'd done with Hanzo before the day started. He'd thought that it would be meaningful (Hanzo should have been able to see the Phantom better than the other students since he'd been the closest), but it had given him exactly nothing. Not only was he uncooperative, with the vocabulary of a caveman, but the only thing he'd learned at all was that Charlie really pissed Hanzo off.

Things were simply, shit. He only had a day to solve this, his father was balls-off-the-wall stressed, and all he had was a book, three words, and Charlie Kiner.

“*Charlie...*” Ihor thought to himself, spotting the man himself sitting a few desks away. Something about that kid was off in the first place, but the fact that he kept cropping up was odd.

Occupied by his theories, Ihor flicked through the book again. The red words were still sprayed across the pages, their meaning just as meaningless as ever. Putting his hand on his face, he accidentally brushed up against his nose, flaring up the pain. A couple drops of dark red blood fell down on his desk.

Red. The word came into Ihor’s mind and stuck there. *Red.* What did it mean? He saw red everyday, why was it staying inside his head?

Red. Red in the book. Red blood on the table from his nose. Red on the shirts of the two who always disappeared in the back of the theater and made very obvious grunting and moaning noises. Red in the pen in Charlie’s hand. Red pen.

“*That’s it!*” Ihor thought to himself. It had to be Charlie. Who else was mysterious enough, skilled

enough, to do this? He wasn't in theater in the first place, so he wouldn't be constrained by emotion or

"No, it's the only possibility," Ihor thought to himself. This had to be it. Otherwise, he'd watch his father lose everything that had been worked on for the past few months, and no matter how much Ihor hated being in that goddamn theater, he didn't want to see that. Taking a deep breath, he began to stand up...just before Kalingkata grabbed his shoulder.

"Hey, Ihor," she said. "I've got it."

"Huh?"

"The camera tapes. Talinata and I got them this morning, around a month's worth."

"Really?!" Ihor said, sitting back down excitedly. This could be it. If Charlie was caught on camera changing into the Phantom, it would be the exact confirmation that Ihor needed.

"Yep. Got them right here."

“Wait, hold on,” Ihor said nervously, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Aren’t you scared of Mrs. Ichinose hearing us?”

“Not a chance,” Kalingkata replied, motioning to the front. “Talinata’s distracting her.”

Taking a glance towards the front, Ihor could see that she was telling the truth. Talinata was holding up his holopad, showing the teacher something that Ihor couldn’t quite make out. Whatever it was, she was blushing furiously.

“Wait, what’s he showing her?”

“Not sure, to be honest. I just asked him to come up with a distraction that would catch her off guard. Now, hurry, take it!”

Coming back to the present, Ihor grabbed the tapes and nodded. Just in time too, as Mrs. Ichinose had dismissed Talinata and was taking roll.

Nodding when she got to his name, he discreetly put the first set of tapes into his tablet. As they loaded

up, he ran through thousands of possible scenarios in his head, all to do with capturing Charlie.

All of which were put out of his head the instant they started playing.

“Hey, thanks for dropping this off,” Helena said, as Maquois gave her the last bits of her costume. The two siblings had met in the costume closet, so Helena could easily put on her costume without anyone noticing that she’d accidentally forgotten to bring said bits earlier in the day.

“No problem,” he said. “Hey, you alright?”

“Oh, huh?” Helena said, noticing that she was shaking. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just nervous, that’s all.”

“About the Phantom?”

Helena nodded. “The attacks have been getting worse and worse. I’m not exactly looking forward to what’s coming next. Especially given that some of Dad’s storage has gone missing.”

“That’s understandable,” Maquois said. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

“See you later,” Helena said. “Hey, by the way, did you ever find your copy of *Phantom of the Opera*?”

Maquois hesitated for a second. “Not yet,” he said. “And given the circumstances, I don’t think now would be the best time to find it in the first place.”

“You’re probably right,” Ihor said, walking in with a cutting knife from the techie department in his hands. “After all, it would be in rather bad taste for the Phantom to have *The Phantom of the Opera*.

“Huh?” Helena said, turning to Maquois. What the hell was Ihor talking about? She looked towards her brother, hoping to find some sort of answer in his eyes. However, all she found was a strange look in his eyes. A look of determination, of...insanity.

Grabbing his shirt, Maquois tore it off with a yell, revealing the Phantom’s all black outfit. Without

hesitation, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife much bigger than Ihor's in the other.

“Holy shit!” Ihor shouted, dropping his cutting knife as Maquois threw on his mask. Maquois took instant advantage of this, shoving Ihor back into a row of costumes, and running out the door.

Bursting through the wood, Maquois was instantly greeted with around fifteen or twenty students, all carrying some kind of makeshift weapon. Standing in front of them all was Shevochenko, holding a plasma pistol. Now it was Maquois' turn to drop his knife.

“It's over, Maquois,” he said.

Maquois merely laughed, reaching into his pocket. “Is it?! Is it!!!! I think not!”

“Really? You wanna try me?” Hanzo said threateningly, brandishing a broken piece of wood.

“I have a detonator I stole from my father, you fools!” he shouted, thrusting it out into the open.

“One click, and I can blow the ceiling, making everything collapse! Just like the book! And then,

maybe, I can get this all out of my head! Get it all out of my head! Get out of my head!"

His eyes were darting all over the place, and for a moment, it seemed like he was completely out of it. Indeed, he almost dropped the detonator as he rambled, only barely managing to hold on.

But then, just as suddenly, Maquois snapped back to reality. A dark grin spread across his face as his finger moved closer and closer...only for Charlie to tackle him to the ground. Grabbing Maquois' mask, Charlie tore it off his fellow student's face and smashed back down, the force hard enough to break Maquois' nose and the mask.

It was all over in a few seconds. The crowd watched in shock, as did Ihor and Helena, who had only just come out of the dressing storage. Even Shevochenko had a surprised look on his face. The only one that wasn't quite so happy was Hanzo, who was absolutely furious at Charlie stealing his thunder.

“H-h-how?” Jorani asked, nervously clutching a dictionary with pencils stuck in it.

“I pay attention,” Charlie said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, this is your problem, not mine.”

With that, Charlie left the room, leaving behind a bloody Maquois and a bunch of theater kids that had not one iota of an idea what to do.

It was Helena that broke the silence, kneeling down towards her brother. Instantly, Maquois teared up.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice on the edge of breaking. “I’ve failed you, Helena. I’ve failed you.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why, Maquois? You’ve always been the dependable one. Why did you do this?”

“I’ve...I’ve been having strange dreams,” he said, tears dripping down his eyes. “I saw...a strange creature...in a void of blue and purple...it’s...oh god, it’s monstrous!”

“In what ways?”

“It’s...it’s human, but it isn’t! It has fingers on a necklace, and it’s standing next to me! It calls itself Booog, oh god, that name! And I can’t run away, cause it’s standing beside me. That’s why I did this, cause it’s the only way to take back control of everything...”

That was when Maquois fully broke down, with tears and snot streaming down his face.

“Wh...why didn’t you tell me?” Helena said, embracing her brother.

“I couldn’t,” Maquois said. “That would make me weak. And I have to be that brother for you.”

“Oh, Maquois,” Helena said, hugging him tightly. “Thank you for all you’ve done, but I’m older now. I can fight for myself. You don’t have to be the strong one. It’s okay for you to be open, to be emotional. And that doesn’t make you weak! It just means you’re human.”

More tears ensued as the two embraced, everyone else merely watching. Some were just as distraught as the two siblings, while others were relieved. For Ihor, he had...mixed emotions. On one hand, he was glad that all this shit was over now. Having Maquois get his nose broken just like Maquois had broken his didn't hurt either. But on the other hand, he would have to find some other way to get out of the theater now.

"At the very least, Dad's happy," Ihor thought to himself, looking at his father's relieved face.

"So. You actually did it," Mori muttered, flicking through his tablet. PHANTOM FOUND; CAUSE OF TERROR MENTAL BREAKDOWN, the headline read.

Mori wasn't exactly keen on losing, but he'd look even worse if he tried to stop this now. So, in this case, he'd take the loss this time.

"I wonder which play they're doing now," he thought to himself, flicking down through the article.

And would you look at that, it was there, on the very last sentence of the page.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he said.