

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG — Academy 27 —

Mania and Snow

By James Wylder



It had been a long time since her mother had done her hair. Part of Sang Mi wanted to tell her not to bother, no one would be looking at her anyway and she didn't particularly care what she looked like. But she knew she wouldn't say that, because this was a rare time where she just had time with her mother as her daughter, the walls that her exhaustion from work usually put between them pulled down.

"Have you been taking better care of your hair? You're usually so... absentminded with it."

"Li Xiu has been nagging me about it at our Roleplaying sessions so I've been paying more attention to it so she'd shut up," she said honestly.

"Well, regardless of your reasoning it's a lot easier to work with than usual." She worked in silence for a little before having another thought. "I'm... glad you and your brother are getting out of the apartment more these days. For so long you were just coming home, finishing your homework, and then playing video games till you went to sleep."

"I mean, we still do that..."

"...But you have friends again, I'm just happy to see it."

"We always had friends at school, mom..."

"There's a difference between friendships that end at a doorway and those that don't."

Sang Mi couldn't really argue with that, though she felt an impulse to. "I guess you have a point," she admitted, and then yelped as her mom tugged her hair into place. "Mom!"

"Hush, it'll be worth it, trust me. Even grandma will be impressed." Examining her head from every angle awkwardly, her mom smiled and handed her a mirror. She'd given her a surprisingly elaborate braided bun that gave off a gentle elegance.

Did she look good? Yes. Was this look worth all the effort and hair tugging that had been involved? No. But it was done and as much as she wanted to be a little shit about it, it was Christmas. "...Yeah it looks great mom."

She leaned down and kissed her temple, "Of course it does, my daughter's just so beautiful it's easy."

"Quit it mom..." she mumbled, her cheeks getting red.

"Now let's get to the living room, your father should be ready soon, and our guests could be here any minute."

"Right, let me just get my shoes on..."

The pair stepped out of the bedroom into the living room, and Sang Mi's twin brother Sang Eun and the eldest brother Min Jun both looked surprised. "You don't look like a slob?!" Sang Eun said, flabbergasted.

She socked him in the arm. "You're supposed to say I'm pretty, dumbass!"

"He is right though," the eldest child said. "You look presentable."

She sighed and turned to her mom, "You hear that mom, your hard work was 'presentable'."

Min Jun frowned, "I mean you look very pretty thanks to mother's hard work."

"Thanks!" she said with some sardonicism.

"Get along, kids," their mom said with the distinct air of being too tired for this today.

"Sorry, mom," they said together.

The door to their parent's bedroom opened, and their father came out wearing his nicest suit. He'd slept in, which was a nice luxury for him, but he still looked tired. That didn't stop him from putting on a big smile for all of them, "Look at all of you, I should have dressed up more."

"Dad!" They shot up and gathered around him, and he took turns admiring each of them and throwing out compliments; Min Jun managed to keep his stoicism through it all despite clearly wanting the attention. He ended his entrance by walking up to their mom and giving her a long kiss.

"Alright, are we ready to go?" he asked.

"Not quite--"

The doorbell rang, and Sang Eun pulled out his phone to see who was there on the camera, "Ah, speak of the devil."

"Not on Christmas," his sister tested.

"Oh hush."

It opened to reveal a trio, two of which were together, the third of which radiated "I just ran into them on the way" in her uncomfortable demeanor.

"Mom, dad, this is our friend Ryan Wilson, and his mom--"

"Anne Wilson," she said, extending a hand, which each of their parents shook.

"I'm Hei Ran, and this is my husband Kwang Sun. It's a pleasure to meet both of you. I hear you work with Feed the Stars? We used your resources when the twins here were born."

Anne, who was still 'Ryan's mom' in the twin's heads, smiled, "I'm glad we were able to help, though I wasn't here for that of course."

"Either way," Kwang Sun said, "we're glad to have you on Gongen. Now who is this young lady?"

The third person stepped forward and bowed, "Geraldine McGraw, I'm not a classmate of the twins, but I am their friend. It's a pleasure to meet... you."

She and their mom made eye contact, and Sang Mi and her twin did the same because it was obvious that they knew each other from the same place. The twins had met Geraldine by sneaking into Colocog, the nearby colony of ‘Mavericks’ from the lawless parts of space, which they'd learned how to do by tailing their mom and watching how she snuck into the colony as part of her job as a jetpack courier. Luckily, their mom didn't miss a beat.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she politely lied.

"Thank you for having me."

Their mom turned her gaze on them, and Sang Mi tried to do her best innocent look but she knew it was futile.

"We're going to head to mass first, and then do Christmas Dinner when we return. Grandma will be coming too after mass, the Assisted Living Center said they'll send her over by autocar so hopefully she'll be in a good mood when she gets here. We actually rented an Asuka just for the occasion to watch the kitchen while we're out." All eyes peered around the small divider that separated the living room from the kitchen, where the Geisha-bot was stirring a pot with one hand while checking how the rehydration of a dried compressed food packet was going with the other.

They all bundled up, and headed back out the door. The night was chill, and Sang Mi blew her breath out a few times as hard as she could to watch the dragon smoke billowing out of her.

"Be serious," Min Jun scolded.

"Make me," she replied.

"Kids," their mom sighed.

Anne Wilson decided to cut the tension, "So, anything we should know going in? Back on Earth we were Lutheran, but it doesn't look like there's a lot of options for that here."

"There's a Lutheran Church in Kazuki, but that obviously doesn't really help you much," their dad added.

Deciding to be actually helpful, Sang Mi chimed in, "For the Christmas service it's mostly what you'd expect: sit when people sit, stand when people stand, sing along to the lyrics on your pew padd. The only thing you really need to be aware of is you stay silent during the propaganda portion, and neither acknowledge it nor speak over it. Just pretend you're taking a ten minute nap."

"...Propaganda portion?" Ryan said, baffled.

Min Jun took his chance to look smart, "The president and the Holy Father of Gongen will both give speeches broadcast via holofeed to all the Catholic Churches across Gongen. Holy Father Amakusa will probably give a very long speech, while the President will give a very short but pointed one."

The rest of the Jhe family all nodded. "A good summation, Min Jun," their dad agreed.

Geraldine frowned, "That doesn't seem very cash money of him."

"No uh, it is not..." Kwang Sun paused, "very... cash money."

Sang Eun patted him on the shoulder. "It's fine, don't push it."

"It'll probably be Amakusa's final Christmas speech," Sang Mi noted.

"Why's that?" Geraldine asked.

"It's basically a public secret, but I know it for certain," Min Jun said seriously. "The Holy Father will be lucky to make it to Easter, and even that seems unlikely."

"How do you know?" the Maverick questioned.

Hei Ran put a gentle hand on Geraldine's shoulder, "Our son Min Jun is an intern with the Tenryu party now as part of his University education. When he graduates, he'll be going into government."

Ryan and his mother exchanged a look. Sang Mi could tell it was surprising to them. She was sure she'd get grilled by Ryan later on all the annoying details.

The group stomped up the snow-dusted steps, and made their way through the big oak doors at the top.

"Welcome to St. Martha's, it's not the big Cathedral in Cheonsa central, but it's our local parish," Sang Mi introduced. The building was architecturally a bit odd, as it tried to mirror the smooth minimalism the Atarashi Hajmari and Tenryu Party were so fond of with the shape and structure of an old style steepled church. The end result looked something like a video game model that had rendered without its textures, with wide slats of single-colored building material. Sang Mi didn't like the look of it.

"It's... kind of..." Ryan mumbled.

"Beautiful?" Sang Mi said.

"You don't really think that, do you?" he replied.

"Does it matter, it's our church. I'm allowed to think it's ugly, to you it's beautiful. That's just how these things work."

He looked a little put off, but he accepted her declaration.

The inside of the church was much prettier than the outside.

While clearly different than Ryan was familiar with, there were enough familiar things that he felt at home. There were the stations of the cross, big stained-glass windows, and a large stone statue of St. Martha taming the Tarrasque.

Geraldine stopped with him in front of it. "It's interesting, isn't it."

"...It's sure stylized. I'm pretty sure she didn't have a robe like that."

"Or the cross shaped staff."

Sang Mi tapped Ryan on the shoulder. "We sat down over there, you see where our coats are?" They followed her finger to a pew where a bunch of spread-out coats marked most of it for them, and where an Anne Wilson appeared to be taking a cat nap. "We're going to talk to a lot of the church people, which I'm sure would bore you out of your minds, so if you want to look around, now's your chance. Just meet back at the pew when they start making announcements."

They gave a thumbs up together, which inspired a mutual smirk as Sang Mi ran off to talk to a family who Sang Eun was already embroiled in a fierce session of listening and nodding intently with.

"So you're Christian too then?" Geraldine asked.

He nodded, hands in his coat pockets. "I take it you're not?"

She shrugged. "I'm not really anything. No strong feelings any way you slice it. Religion wasn't really something I dealt with when I was growing up. Just... absent."

They started a loop around the west wall of the church, stopping to look at the artwork as they went past.

"I see. Well, what was your family like?"

"Best forgotten," she replied quickly.

"Gotcha."

They stared at a painting. "What's going on in this one?"

Ryan laughed, and then put his face into a blank mask as he realized she wasn't messing around. "You really don't know?"

She shook her head, "I wasn't kidding when I said religion just wasn't a thing for me."

"Right, right..." he laughed again despite himself. "You know, we really need to keep youth pastors away from you, they would have a field day if they heard what you just told me."

"I've met some overenthusiastic preachers before. They didn't really tell me much other than to turn away from sin and be saved or whatever. Wasn't a very gripping message."

"I'll put in a word to the public relations committee for a change of advertising."

That actually got her to laugh, which made him smile.

"So really, what's happening?"

"Oh, Judas, Jesus' best friend, is betraying him to the Roman authorities so they can put him on trial and execute him."

Geraldine nodded. "You can never trust people who trust cops. Judas sounds like a snitch."

"Wow, you have... an interesting perspective!" They kept going, with Ryan explaining the story as Geraldine nodded along, with occasional worrisome interjections.

"So this is where they whipped Jesus--"

"Yeah, fricking sucks. I feel for the guy. I bet they didn't even have nice ointment back then."

"Jesus Christ!?"

An old lady glared over at him. "...is our lord and savior... etcetera..." Ryan ushered Geraldine onwards.

But overall, the telling went pretty well and Geraldine peppered him with questions he largely hadn't considered as they sat down back in the pew, as the announcement that mass was about to begin came over the PA.

Sang Mi slid in next to them, "Have an okay time?"

"Yeah, I learned a lot from Ryan," Geraldine said.

"Good!" Sang Mi said.

"And also gave me a good reminder about why snitches get stitches."

"...What?"

There wasn't time to explain, as they all rose, and pulled up the pew pads from their holders to sing along with the lyrics to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" which everyone but Geraldine already knew, though for the Wilsons not in Korean. Readings were done, which once again were only new to Geraldine, who also had to be instructed to sit, stand, and kneel.

Both Ryan and Geraldine were surprised to see that one of the readers was Sang Mi, who they both were confused did something so traditional, and stared at her a little slackjawed as she told a story from the gospel of Luke.

But finally, it was time for the sermon, which meant that it was time for what they'd been warned of.

The priest introduced a segment, and then all of the congregation settled in, eyes forward, already prepared to be bored.

The Holy Father of Gongen appeared, his skin sallow, his priestly robes incredibly large for him, possibly hiding medical equipment, and started a boisterous speech about the Christmas season, and

the importance of their adherence to the laws of Gongen society. But he quickly got out of breath, and much quieter. It was obvious he wasn't in good health.

"The old generation is fading out," Sang Eun whispered. "I don't think it'll be long till they they've all slipped away."

"Shh!" Hei Ran said.

After a grueling half hour, the Holy Father wrapped things up, clearly leaving his sermon half finished with a slapped-on ending. Then the hologram changed to another old man. Healthier, certainly, but . . . he didn't look well either. It was President Sato, who had been in office so long it felt like no one else ever had been. He wore a sharp suit, and was seated on the edge of his desk, adding a false air of this being a casual speech from just another citizen of Gongen.

"Good evening, Catholics of Gongen. As your president, it has been my pleasure to join you every year for this important holiday in your religion. While we might not share the same beliefs, it's that diversity of belief that has given us the insight that has pushed our great society to the heights we have reached. But this year especially, the unity of our people is more important than ever. Christmas is a time for families and friends to come together in harmony, and that is a spirit I hope to take with us into this new year. As your president, I will always remember that we are all citizens of Gongen, working together towards a glorious and happy future. I hope you remember this as well. So, let myself and the entire Tenryu Party and Atarashi Hajimari wish you and your families merry Christmas."

Everyone seemed taken aback by this, and there was a lot of whispering and mumbling.

"What is it?" Ryan asked, well, anyone.

Sang Eun answered first. "There's something up we don't know about. The Christmas addresses are never so... friendly."

"There's probably been a setback in negotiations with Earth," Sang Mi muttered.

"Don't say things like that," her mother scolded. "It's Christmas, we should try to keep in good spirits."

The children all nodded, but Ryan and Geraldine could both tell they all knew too much to believe it.

* * *

The walk back was a bit more serious, but Mr. Jhe broke the tension by telling incredibly bad dad jokes.

"Did anyone ever test your mettle since you got to Gongen?" he asked Geraldine.

She shook her head, and he tapped her metal arm twice. "Hmn, the metal seems good to me!"

They all groaned.

The mood rose greatly when they stepped back into the apartment though: the Asuka had done its work dutifully, and the food was hot and ready as soon as they had gotten their coats off.

"Did my mother arrive yet?" Mrs. Jhe asked the bot.

It shook its head. "I'm afraid not, ma'am."

"Mom, let's dig in already while it's hot!" Sang Mi said, tugging on her sleeve.

"The Asuka can keep it warm for a little. Go entertain Ryan, I need to check on something."

Sang Mi scrunched her forehead up, but nodded. "Go call your boyfriend or whatever, I won't tell."

Her mother sighed. "Could you please not, Sang Mi?"

"What, I'm just being funny?"

"Not... not right now, please. Go talk to Ryan."

"What about JackB--I mean Geraldine?"

Her mother pointed, and it was clear that her dad and her were having an incredibly good time talking about the mechanisms inside her cybernetic arm.

Entertaining the transfer student it was.

Ryan was looking at the pictures and holos on the wall, so Sang Mi sidled up by him. "That's my grandma and grandpa. You'll be meeting grandma later, whenever the assisted living center sends her over. They're running late."

He looked at them: they were a happy couple, with a baby girl and a little boy. "I take it your grandpa..."

"He died a long time ago." She looked up at him. "I guess you don't really know why we're all in Cheonsa dome, huh?"

He shrugged, "Isn't it just cause this is like... the Korean district?"

She shook her head. "You really think with three top performing kids, and two talented folks like my parents, Shocho wouldn't have already shuffled us off to a different city to optimize production or whatever?"

That did make sense, at least from how Gongen was supposed to work, so Ryan nodded. "But Academy 27 is a top school."

She shook her head. "It's not supposed to be a top school. It became one on accident, and under normal circumstances, things would keep getting shuffled until things were back in the proper order. The best students at Academy 1, the second best at 2, and so forth. But we're not here because of

things like that. Sure, lots of people have moved here because of the school, but we're poorer than other parts of Takumi for a reason. The cruelty is the point."

"I don't follow."

Sang Mi gestured back at the holo of the family. "That's my mom's dad, Kim Ji Ho. He tried to start a political movement, a political party to rival the Tenryu party."

Ryan looked at the man's smiling face. "Was it pro-CGC? Wanting to make Gongen more capitalist?"

"The opposite. He thought the Tenryu party wasn't Marxist enough."

"Oh."

She ran her fingers through the light, breaking the image up. "It didn't do anything. The party got broken up by moles from the inside. His brother was found beaten to death in the street. And he was arrested on trumped up charges, and thrown in prison." She lowered her hand. "He never left."

Ryan's shocked face moved rapidly, but the mouth formed no words, just the starts of them failing into lip shapes.

"It's okay, you don't need to apologize or tell me how bad it was. We're still living it. This is generational punishment. My parents, and their children, us, still bear the burden of defying the Tenryu party. They're making an example of us. So when we do well in school, when we succeed and keep Academy 27 doing well... we're not just making our families proud, but our ancestors too. Every frustrated glance from an official, every red-faced school board member, they're all little victories. Grandma survived on her own, and raised my mom and her brother, then after my uncle was crushed in a loading machine accident, or so they say, raised only mom. I think a lot of the other kids don't understand how me and Talinata keep our grades so good, what they don't get is that we feel more pressure than anyone. All three of the kids have been top performers, even if me and Sang Eun can't hold a candle to Min Jun. We have to be that way. Because we can't let anyone down."

He stared at her, and as it dragged on she began to wonder if she should break the silence, but thankfully he did in the middle of her running through her third bad ice-breaker in her head.

"I thought you said your brother was trying to become a Tenryu Party member?"

She nodded. "What of it?"

"Isn't that like... joining the enemy?"

She frowned at him. "Victory doesn't always mean winning, Ryan. Victory can just mean survival. That another generation can carry on what you believed. Don't you dare belittle Min Jun when he-

"I'm not, I just don't... I don't understand."

"We're all very proud of Min Jun," she said. "He's the best of us. A stick in the mud, for sure, but he's never forgotten who he is, and who we are."

"...Even after everything the Tenryu Party did to your family? How can you be okay with that?"

She straightened her back, and looked him in the eyes. "There's only one political party on Gongen. What do you want him to do, die? Would it make Grandma happy to see him die? She's already lost in the past. And are you blaming every person on Earth who hasn't tried to make a rival to the CGC in their spare time so that CISyn could make them all go to a nice farm in the countryside where they can run around all day and never be seen again?"

Ryan held his hands up in front of his chest. "Whoa. Whoa. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to touch a nerve or anything."

She just nodded again. "It's whatever. When grandma gets here you'll get why I'm frustrated. She's so annoying."

Ryan shuffled his feet awkwardly, but Sang Mi just kept going. "My grandma is still living in the past. She never got over grandpa passing and just... lives in the misery of everything that was taken from her. It's pathetic. She's critical of everything I do, always says I'm too fat or too skinny, I'm not mad she's late, it might be nice if she just doesn't come."

Ryan frowned. "I'm sorry, I don't really know what to say."

"Forget it, you don't need to say anything. Let's just go see how everyone else is doing."

When they did, Sang Mi saw her mother had gone over toward the wall, her phone pressed hard against her ear.

"Who's calling?"

"Shh!" her mom said.

"Oh come on mom, who's on the call?"

Her mom's shoulders were tense. She couldn't see her facial expression.

"It's not your new boyfriend or any--"

"SHUT UP, SANG MI."

Sang Mi did shut up. She couldn't remember the last time her mother had yelled at her. She stood, dumbfounded until her mother put a hand up to her face, and made a sharp noise.

"...Mom?"

"...It's mom--your grandmother. She uh... she's in the hospital."

The color drained from Sang Mi's face. "What do you mean she's in the hospital?"

"The driver went to pick her up and um... found her on the floor. They took her to Cheonsa General."

This wasn't real. This was Christmas. Everything she'd just said... "Is... is she going to be okay?"

Her mother made a whimpering sound through her hand. "We need to hurry over there if we want to make it in time."

She didn't know what to do. She knew she was supposed to move but she didn't. Just stood there, dumbly, staring at her mother as she tried to hold in her sobs.

"...Could you call an autocar, Sang Mi?"

"R-right..." she hurried over to her phone, and did just that.

"What's going on?" Sang Eun said coming in on the two of them.

Her mother couldn't stomach saying it again, so she explained it this time.

"...I'll tell the Wilsons and JackBox the night is over."

They hurried to outrace the end.

* * *

"...Kim Joo Mi, please. I'm Jhe Hei Ran, her daughter. These are her grandkids, this is my husband."

The five of them stood together. Sang Mi's hair was still in the elaborate hairdo her mother had given her earlier that evening. She'd been disrespectful about it but now it felt like a horror if Grandma couldn't see it.

The woman at the desk looked through the records, and instructed them to go through the door to the left and into room 4B. They did just that. But there was no hospital bed in there.

Her mother sat down, her hands clenched around her purse. They shook gently. Should she go comfort her? Tell her it would be okay? Hug her? She hesitated. She didn't feel like she deserved to. Didn't know if it was right to. Maybe it was better to give her mother space.

The door opened, and a doctor stepped in. "Are you the Jhe family? Would you please sit down?" The rest of them obliged. The doctor sat down himself, and the sound of the fans moving air above them felt deafening in the silence. He clasped his hands together, and looked at them with a calm respectful face. "I'm afraid that Kim Joo Mi didn't make it."

The dam broke for her mother, the tears burst forth. Sang Mi felt helpless against it. She clasped her hands on her lap and looked down.

She was really gone.

* * *

Their parents were taking care of the official tasks when Sang Eun went to look for his sister. She'd wandered off, and he was starting to get worried. She wasn't replying to her phone. First he looked in the obvious places in the hospital, but soon he wandered outside into the cold dark. Once he got past the front of the building he saw a lone figure standing against the wall of the hospital, her face and forearm pressed against it.

He approached. She glanced his way, but said nothing.

"Hey," he said.

"Go back inside, Sang Eun."

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be, no one needs to worry about me."

"You know that's not true."

"Of course it's true!" she faced him, red faced. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Talinata. I'm useless. I'm a bad daughter, and a worse granddaughter--no I'm not even that anymore. I'm worthless. Grandma didn't even get to see my hair--the last things I said about her were cruel. I can't help mom, I just keep... I keep hesitating. I just stay out of it. I always stay out of it. I'm a coward--and don't you say otherwise, it's true! I'm a selfish child. I only ever think of me me me--everyone expected me to be something more than I've ended up. But when it comes down to it I can't do anything. I let mom down, I let grandma down, and there's nothing I'll ever be able to do to fix it. She's dead. And I... I..." the tears began to pour down. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry grandma... I'm sorry..."

She fell into his embrace, and he held his sister as she wailed into his chest. He waited as she sobbed, and thrashed, and wailed. He waited till the sobs became tears, and the tears became a puffy red mask. He didn't have a tissue, so he just wiped her face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Th-that's your dress shirt. You'll get it dirty."

"I don't care, you're more important than my stupid shirt."

"Maybe..."

"Sang Mi. Sang Mi, look at me. Hey. Look up."

She obliged finally.

"You're my twin sister--"

--I know that--"

--and I love you, there's no one else on this planet I'd do more for. And I know it was the same for grandma. I know that she loved you."

"Yeah, and I repaid that by being a selfish brat every time I saw her. A rude selfish little bitch."

He didn't disagree with her, or shake his head. She'd expected it. "So what if you were? Don't you think that they knew that? Grandma loved you for being you. She fussed over you every time she saw you."

"And I repaid that with--"

"She was proud of you. Because you never caved in. Because you were selfish. Because you were rude. Because you never shut up and said stupid stuff. You absolute idiot--Sang Mi, Grandma loved you--mom loves, I love you--because you're the girl you are. They never wanted you to be this perfect daughter you've invented, or they would have scolded you all the time, yelled at you, punished you for all your bullshit. They wanted your bullshit!"

Sang Mi gave a laughing sob. "When you say it like that it's funny."

He smiled a little. "I guess it is."

The two of them laughed together, until the laughter turned once again to tears, and their arms went back around each other. One cluster of warmth in that cold night full of shadows.

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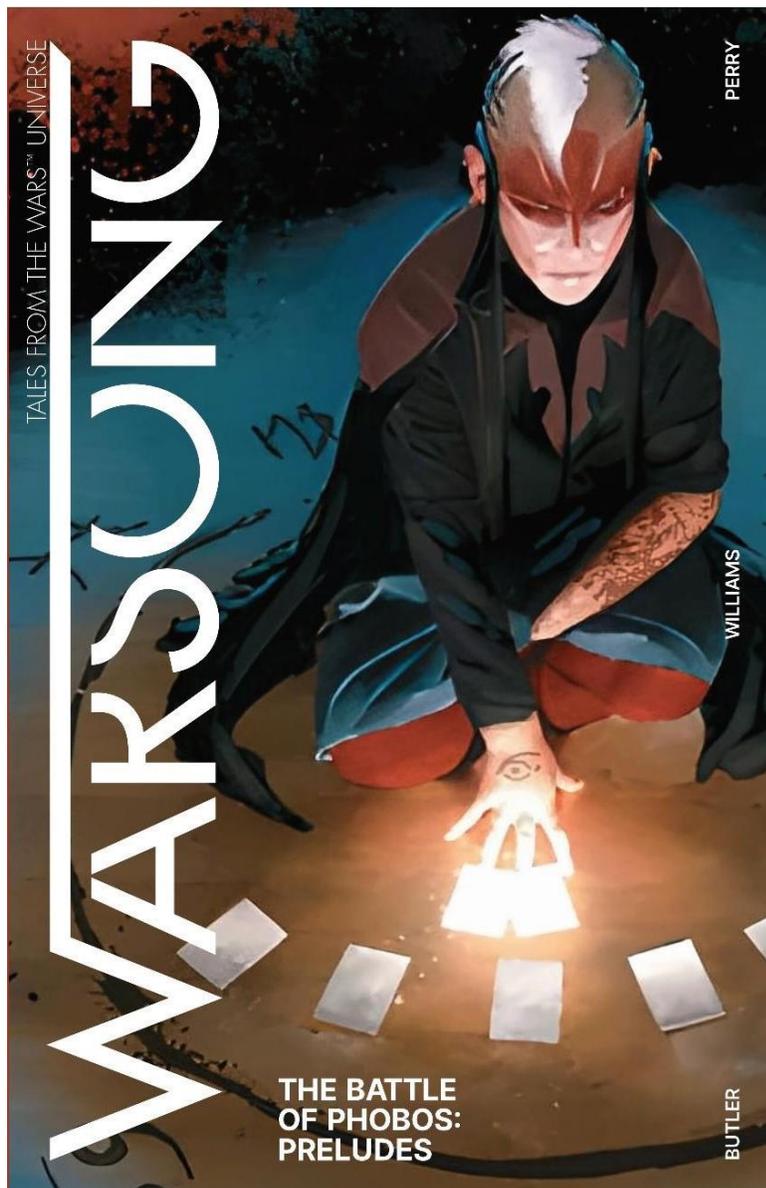
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