

# Prologue

“Curse your seeds and branches,” swore the Archer as he got up from the ground and noticed another thumb-sized hole had appeared in his worn, grey tunic. “Damn it, when all of this is over, I will personally cut half of you down myself!” he promised aloud as he continued farther into the thick forest. The tangled roots, well hidden beneath the layers of fallen leaves, seemed determined to slow his progress by tackling his workbooks, twisting themselves around his ankles as he went. It was bad enough his squad had to move camp every week or two, being stuck on this scouting mission was exactly the wrong thing for him.

“Independent scouting mission, a rather simple task! Yeah, right!” Hodder mumbled as he made his way through the branches that kept on slapping him whenever they got the chance. It was around late autumn, the leaves were already taking on darker colours and the forest seemed to be ideal for sneaking around unnoticed, although this did not seem to be the case for him.

“Take this map and scout for the Ghost Hills,” Kremen had ordered him three days ago. “We will wait for your report before we proceed.” This was his very first independent mission, brought about largely by the rather peculiar disappearance of their regular scout; he never returned from his previous assignment and had to be written off. They had been deep within unknown territory for quite a while, so it was essential they moved slowly, and carefully.

“Am I to do this alone?” Hodder asked, like the fool he obviously was.

“Of course. Is it too much to ask? Or maybe it's beyond your capability, just like everything else,” Kremen replied, causing the rest of the unit to giggle.

“Nah, he's just too afraid to walk all by himself through the big, scary forest,” said Dimen, one of his so-called friends, “he might trip over something and break his girly, little neck.”

“Or maybe an owl might mistake him for a mouse by some misfortune and eat him alive,” mocked Piomaz, another of his so-called friends. This too caused the entire unit to chuckle. Clearly destined for the task, he had little choice but to take the damn map, along with his damn bow, his damn quiver loaded with his damn arrows, and proceed into the damn forest. Not that the arrows would do him any good, since he couldn't see farther than ten metres ahead of him, due to the thick curtain of leaves, but in addition, Hodder was proven to be the worst Archer in the entire unit, a unit that consisted entirely of Archers. Talk about bad luck!

Between all of them, he had the worst possible equipment. He wore a used, brown outfit, covered with dark-green smudges for camouflage purposes. Well placed cloth bands tightened his bow, slightly bent and disfigured from extensive use over the years by the previous owner. His worn-out boots were made from the cheapest leather, which caused them to leak heavily, the permanent saturation forcing him to develop a strange walk by curving his legs outwards in an attempt to avoid getting wet, even when the ground was completely dry.

“Why did it have to be me? Why?!” Hodder said aloud for the millionth time, as he made an effort to free his, now ripped, cloak from the branch on which it had become ensnared. What was once an intact piece of cloth had been gradually transformed into something resembling a shredded flag that had overstayed its welcome on top of a long-abandoned fort. He continued to fight his way through the forest, still eager to complete the task at hand. He needed to find the damned hills, and nothing would deter him from reaching them. He could barely manage to find

his way through the thick forest, so he began to wonder how his entire regiment could fit through after him. He struggled to orientate himself properly and, soon enough, realized why as he turned around to check his progress. His footprints were slowly disappearing from the ground; the resilient grass kept slowly rising up behind him, masking all signs of movement.

“It's just a short training regime. After that it's all about the adventure, gold, women, anything your heart desires.” Those were the words of his old master, Wick, at the very beginning of his improvised Archer training. As if Hodder had any other option but to improvise. Choices dry up once you waste all your gold recklessly, especially when you're not good enough to make up for it by your casual occupation. No, the only thing left for him to do was grab the most convenient weapon he could find and join the most accessible military formation he could come upon, and hope for the best. He chose the bow, deciding to become an Archer, since their training was definitely the shortest and their overall supply the cheapest. Well, that 'short improvised training' had begun about three and a half years ago and was still going on. During that time, not much had changed, except for Wick's sudden death, which only Hodder seemed to have noticed. Perhaps his training would never end, since training implies progressive change and improvement of one's abilities. However, that was simply not happening.

Unfit and clumsy, somewhat naive as well, even Hodder wasn't foolhardy enough to fail in the realisation that armies aren't trained for planting flowers and tending orchards. No, armies are trained for carnage, with the intention of waging war in order to spill another's blood, and all in the interests of someone high above the commoners reach. To kill, or be killed, in the name of someone who doesn't even know you exist as a man. To march only as soldiers whose sole purpose is to blindly follow orders. That really scared him, more than he wanted to admit... even to himself. He didn't know who was paying for his seemingly endless training, nor did he know whose food he was eating. He had no clue who his ultimate master was, or what was the exact cause he was fighting for. Most especially, he didn't know why they had to move the damn camp so damn often. But somehow, he was aware that he was taking part in something ominous, and it was a terrifying thought.

All of a sudden, behind a large juniper berry, a green glade showed up where common sense dictated one shouldn't exist. The area was covered vastly with high grass, a small rabbit hopped alongside a gentle running stream and colourful butterflies glided through the air. It seemed like a random piece of paradise, but then...

“Oh crap,” Hodder whispered as he tightened the string of his bow and prepared his first arrow. He lowered his body as close to the ground as humanly possible without lying down. Someone was kneeling by the stream, in the distance, leaning for water with their thin hands. From such a distance, he could only make out a small brown figure. Hodder used his *Camouflage* to become invisible by shrouding himself within the shadow, slowly beginning to sneak up on his target, exactly in the way old Wick had taught him. At first glance it appeared to be merely a peasant girl, who posed no threat at all. Hodder immediately regretted using such an advanced skill for such a trivial reason. He would need serious preparation and focus in order to execute that skill again, and it would be quite surprising if it were to work as flawlessly as it just had.

Nevertheless, Hodder continued sneaking up on the girl, just to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. Obviously, he wasn't sneaking well enough because just as the girl was about to come into a moderate range of his bow, he stepped on a bunch of dry leaves and made a sound that utterly shattered the silence. The girl suddenly stood up, covered her brow with her silky hood and took a wand from within the grass, a weapon that Hodder failed to notice. To his amazement, the girl began to float above the ground as soon as the wand came into her clasp. In that moment, he realised he may have made a mistake that could easily cost him his life.



“I see you!” she said in a slightly muffled voice as she waved her wand in his general direction, forcing his Camouflage cloud away, showing him out into the open air. Hodder was shocked, it was as though the wind had decided to heed her command and disperse his defense.

“Same side!” he screamed as he hit the ground, avoiding an attack he somehow knew was coming his way. It was a narrow escape, the lightning hit the ground right next to his head, leaving a serious scorch mark.

“You shouldn't be here. All the other Archers are far south and south-east of the river,” she calmly scolded him, recognising the crest on his chest, featuring two black dragonheads nestling beneath the flame of darkness. Hodder saw her for what she really was, her hair was raven black and she had dark brown eyes that were perfectly matched to her dark outfit, which was held together in places by buckles and belts. Her wand was of the same charcoal colour, with a black crystal embedded into its tip. Her brown, silky, hood completely covered her brow, and was decorated with several black pearls and a couple of red and blue ribbons. It seemed as though she was attempting to conceal something, Hodder thought he noticed some sort of tattoo or inscription on her forehead.

She couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old and appeared to be as innocent and defenseless as any other little girl would be. However, she was a Manser, part of a newly made army, just like him, and possibly one of its youngest members. Hodder could almost smell the stench of death upon her, and the foul, dark essence of her soul corrupting the surrounding area. Her eyes were pointed at him through a gaze of ultimate evil, a gaze of a dark hunter narrowing down on its prey. Nevertheless...

“I was ordered to scout the Ghost Hills.” He spoke rigidly as he slowly got up from the ground, picking up his bow as he did so. Hodder had a burning hatred for Mansers, due to all the stories he had heard about them. According to what he had been told, Mansers were so wicked and dishonourable that the very ground denied them the right to walk upon it, forcing them to float above it. Supposedly, the more victims a particular Manser killed, the more intensively the ground would repulse him. This girl was hovering above the ground by only a couple of centimetres, meaning she hadn't spread too much corruption thus far. Old Wick had many particular words of wisdom regarding the Mansers, however, there were certain details that were repeated more often than others. Particularly that Rangers were the only combat profession properly specialized to handle them... and Hodder fancied himself a Ranger.

“Someone tricked you, the Ghost Hills are on a completely different continent. In case you hadn't noticed, there's nothing but forests and creeks around for as far as the eye can see,” she replied without taking her eyes off him. Her voice was as cold as a river spring on a winter's day.

“Kremen wouldn't do that. He has no sense of humour whatsoever,” Hodder impulsively spat back in denial. He had no reason to listen to her and assumed every single word her lips let loose was just a filthy lie, but still, he seemed curious as he leaned on his bow, acting all tired. Actually, he was weighing up his options carefully, debating whether to attack her or to try to use his *Camouflage* in attempt to run away. She was steadfastly pointing her wand at him, so if he were to try to attack her, he wouldn't even get a single arrow out of his quiver before being burned alive.

“Kremen. Your superior I presume?” The girl gazed into his eyes in an utterly unpleasant way and Hodder could almost feel her corruption upon him. Suddenly, she had forced her way into his mind and began reading him aloud like an open book. “As far as I can tell, you are the worst Archer in your unit, probably in the entire regiment, and you never thought, even for a second,

they wouldn't eventually want to get rid of you? For such a simple feat, having a sense of humour is irrelevant," she said completely without emotion.

"How..." was the only word he could muster as he was left completely speechless.

"If you are to proceed down this stream, you will reach my brothers and sisters in a matter of hours. Even if they spare you by some chance, our master will definitely kill you, especially if you get close enough to the main enclave," she replied quietly, still piercing his mind with that damned look of hers. She was gazing at his forehead intently, as if there were a hole waiting there for her to misuse at will. It made Hodder feel considerably uncomfortable, a part of him wanted to revolt, another wanted to flee, and yet another wanted to see this thing through.

"Huh? What master?" Hodder asked, utterly confused.

"Your master, and mine as well, the one leading this army. Those who stumble upon his secrets die in the most horrible ways imaginable and right now, as well as anyone who doubt his abilities," she replied. Hodder couldn't help but think he heard a slight sound of sorrow in her young voice. More to the point, her story sounded like a confession more than anything else, and this only added to his confusion.

"You're such a liar, just like the rest of your kind!" he spat before tightening his bow, seemingly catching her off-guard, quickly summoning his *Silencer* on his arrow. It was his ultimate weapon and probably the only reason he had been accepted into the army. All it takes is just one hit; just a scratch with such an infused arrow and the little girl would become utterly helpless, unable to control her energy to fight back. Just a little brat he could easily strangle. He could already taste his victory, he could imagine his return to camp with the ultimate spoils, her Manser outfit as definitive proof of his abilities. He would no longer be considered the weakest link and anyone and everyone would give him the utmost respect, since nobody would be able to question his story. He had already begun imagining several colourful scenarios to narrate to his friends once he made his victorious return to camp. It would be the greatest day of his life!

"Go back the way you came," she calmly replied. "If you continue further this way, your end will be quick and painful, if you are lucky. Otherwise, it will be slow and extremely painful if you're not."

Hodder thought about this for a moment, but only for a moment, since he had no time at hand to spare. The bright glow of the skill he had summoned began zipping back and forth from the tip of his arrow to the edges of his bowstring as the shot slowly began losing power.

"You little deserter!" he yelled as he let loose his arrow. Instantly, the girl triggered her *Blink* and disappeared in a trail of black fog. His arrow missed and hit the ground, a shot wasted. Before he could even reach for his next arrow, his opposition shroud materialized behind him and he could already feel the smoothness of her wand in the worst possible way. She was choking him by willpower alone!

"Since you'll die either way, I will forget this inconvenience," the little girl said. Then, she permanently disappeared into her cloud of darkness, leaving Hodder desperately trying to catch his breath. His throat was burning from the inside, out.

After what seemed to be an eternity of desperate rolling around on the grass, Hodder finally gathered up the strength to get up onto his knees and look around properly. She was gone; the damn little deserter was definitely gone! Hodder instantly felt an extreme urge for vengeance but, wisely, decided not to pursue it. If the stories about Mansers were true, and he had no particular reason to doubt them, she could have killed him with ease, without a trace of remorse

or compassion. Still, she was very kind and polite for a Manser, even whilst talking in such a simple but firm way, with a slight trace of arrogance for flavour. Actually, she acted and sounded a lot kinder than most of his so-called friends, too kind to be considered an enemy.

“Everything she’d said was a lie! But what if it wasn’t?” he said to himself, whilst rubbing his bruised neck, unmistakable proof of his shameful defeat. “Yes, it was a lie, every single word of it, a filthy lie. She’s a deserter!”

Maybe she just wanted to slow him down for some reason, to prevent him from accomplishing his mission in time, at least that’s what he thought, since he had the sincere feeling, Kremen would never pull such a cruel joke on him. He shook his head several times, pulled up his bow, and slowly headed down the stream in the exact direction in which the girl had advised him not to go.

To his great surprise, it turned out the girl was lying after all. Her brothers and sisters were camped just outside of the forest, much closer than he’d thought.

“Same...” was the only thing he was able to say before his voice turned into a scream and his bow fell out of his broken fingers. At the same time, a strong blow from behind broke his knees and he lost his footing, falling back and landing in the mud. As he was falling, he heard laughter coming from all sides. Utterly merciless, the laughter was cutting its way into his mind, pulling whatever little conscience he supposedly had, and then shredding his thoughts into bits and pieces, whilst leaving him completely immobilized.

It was the Mansers, several dozens of them managed to get a jump on him. Before he could even react, he was already sinking into the shallow mud. Several Mansers swung hard in his direction; pushing him downwards with such force that it felt like someone had decided to bring the entire world down upon his head. Soon enough, the pressure began to build to such an extent that his blood gradually began forcing its way out through every single orifice on his head. Mostly his eyes were affected, completely blinding him. At the same time, he could feel the warm mud seeping into his ears as he sank; he was now half-way down into it.

Finally, the Mansers took their time and prepared for the last, ultimate attack. They summoned the final blow, bringing down eternal darkness upon the makeshift Ranger as his final thought escaped from his mind.

*“I guess I was lucky in the end...”* he thought as he lay dying in the mud. *“The pain wasn’t so extreme after all.”*

## Chapter 01 - Recommendation -

A sharp sound awoke him from his light sleep. He slowly lifted his head and straightened his back before pulling the curtains slightly aside to allow himself a proper look out of the window.

“Early dawn,” he mumbled as he got out of bed in his usual slow manner. Then, after stretching a little, he reached for his grey school uniform, placed upon the second-upper shelf, putting it on in a couple of well-rehearsed moves. He approached the window again and flung open the curtains completely. “Right on time,” he sighed with relief as he left the room.

He trod lightly as he went to the front door and carefully took hold of the handle. He then opened it without making the slightest of sounds. Right outside, he saw his mother taking her usual morning nap beneath her well-nurtured grapevines. Still being careful not to make a sound, he slipped farther outside and disappeared onto the other side of the yard, reaching for the small gate in the fence and heading out on the street.

He had been waiting for this day quite a while for and it was obvious. He walked down the middle of the street with such joy that he was almost hopping along as he went. It was safe to say that any schoolboy of his age would have felt the same way, having finally reached the last day of his elementary education; the moment when this seemingly eternal chore was finally coming to an end. However, unlike most children, he was fully aware of his education being much more than that. Having grown up with no other family than his mother, he had experienced a somewhat difficult life, the kind of life other children tended to be shielded from during most of their childhood. Unlike the rest of his generation, he'd had to mature long before his time and leave many of those casual innocent things behind. When the time came for him to start attending Elementary School, his mother bravely decided to take on a major risk and move into the Macaterran capital. He was well aware of the burden she carried, and he helped her to shoulder the responsibility as much as he could, trying to take on some of her work whenever he got the chance. He took his duties very seriously and head on, maybe even too seriously for someone his age. That final day of elementary education was a crucial moment for him, a moment when he would begin his life on his own, with future plans of repaying his mother for everything she had provided over the years.

He eventually left the alleys and made his way to one of the main streets of Asurtha. From there, he proceeded down to the south region of the city, towards the Elementary School. As usual, he came across other students heading in the same direction, some of them walked in pairs, others walked in small packs, but he was the one who always walked alone. After all, he spent most of his time either studying or working, so he barely had any time for making friends. He had considered it a curse and a blessing at the same time: a curse because he had to endure everything alone and a blessing because he never had to justify anything to anyone. The strangest thing was the fact that he wasn't sad about it. It was, more or less, the way of life he'd got used to. In the end, if destiny had already decided to strand him on a lonesome path, why fight it?

The Elementary School was far to the south on the very outskirts of the city. At first, it was situated in the Main Square, just like all the other important institutions. However, considering how the numbers of elementary students had steadily increased over the years, a new and much larger education complex, more suitable for future expansions, needed to be built. The main problem was that the only setting, suitable to accommodate those needs, was located on a

minor plain about two kilometres south of its initial position. It happened to be deep within the forest, so the students now had quite a distance to cover on a daily basis. Still, there was some relief to be had, especially during the summer, when the road to school would be completely sheltered from the scorching sun by the thick canopies. During those warm months, the sunlight barely managed to reach the pavement, therefore heat wasn't so much of an issue.

In the Elementary Complex, the school was naturally the dominant building, being three stories high. In fact, its imposing elevation meant it towered above most of the canopies and provided an impressive view of the surrounding area. To its left, stood several smaller buildings, one of them serving as a library. It was a boring grey building that, to the minds of many of the students, seemed more like a juvenile detention facility than a place of learning. Right next to it stood the cantina, which was large enough to accommodate almost a quarter of the entire school population at once. The most attractive construction, however, was the café complex, facing the right side of the school, on the opposite side to the library and the cantina. The café complex was twice as large as both places combined, and always attracted the most attention.

Usually, the front yard was roomy enough for everyone, but today was one of those days as the area ended up being overcrowded. The crowd was almost the same size as the one that had gathered the year before, consisting of nothing but graduates accompanied by their parents and friends. Out of all those faces, he didn't recognize even one, and he didn't even care. In fact, throughout his school years, other than during his classes, where he barely spent any time with anyone, there was nobody familiar to talk to at all. Nobody treat him as a friend, or a nuisance.

He stood on the very edge of the yard, alone within the crowd. His mother wasn't able to make it on time, even though she had promised to, but he wasn't angry about it, as he perfectly understood that it wasn't her fault. She'd probably been held up by some urgent business, and he was certain she would drop by when she had sorted it out.

The large bell, just above the main entrance, swung to the left, then to the right, releasing an echoing bang over the place, causing the turning chatter of a thousand voices to simmer into a mild commotion. The large doors sprung open and the headmaster stepped outside. He was dressed in a grey ceremonial suit, a kind only the finest aristocracy could possibly afford. Then, after a cough or two, to clear his throat and demand attention, he opened his mouth and unleashed his powerful voice.

"It's graduation time!" he said with authority.

The huge crowd standing in front of him suddenly began spreading apart as the students rushed ahead. Some of them were polite enough to gently nudge their way through the crowd, others had already stepped-up their game and enlisted the help of kicking and punching as a means of progress. He, however, calmly decided to sit down on one of the larger stones on the very edge of the yard and wait. The main door clearly wasn't wide enough to let all the students through at once, but that didn't stop them from forcing their way inside. The commotion provided quite a show for anybody standing on the sidelines.

He waited patiently until things settled down before slowly standing up and approaching the door. It was far less hassle when there was nobody else pushing around.

"You don't seem to be in much of a hurry?" said the old man with surprise.

"Well, the school isn't going anywhere," he replied politely with a smile. Other than himself, who else could take his spot in the classroom? Or handle his graduation documents? He made his way inside, and heard the doors slam shut behind him, leaving all chatter and commotion from the crowd far behind. The old man went to one side and he went to the other.

He made his way down the main hallway, heading towards the staircase at the very end. He didn't pay too much attention to the pictures and portraits hanging on the walls. Each one of those was all too familiar, and so he just kept on walking. He strolled across the blue carpet and then took his first step on the stairway and began his climb. As he ascended, each one of his steps mildly echoed through the silence, but when he finally reached the third floor, something else broke the silence... something very irritating. All the background noise he now heard was coming from each and every classroom on that floor. Behind every door there were twenty or more students screaming away like there was no tomorrow. He made his way to the very last door, finally having reached his destination.

The very second he opened the door; his eardrums began begging for mercy. The noise was barely tolerable, some students were shouting, and others were screaming, it was utter chaos. All the desks were already occupied, except for the one directly in front of the teacher. Yes, the teacher was already sitting behind his large desk and had already distributed some of the envelopes containing graduation testimonies and certificates.

Other students were claiming their envelopes one by one, moving back and forth along the classroom, and so it seemed he was left out of the loop. As he glanced around the classroom, trying to figure out how many envelopes remained to be handled, he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder and turned around almost instantly. The teacher didn't say anything, rather just gave him a white envelope and smiled. Apathy instantly turned to cheer.

"I guess it's time for the Recommendations," said the teacher after he had delivered the very last testimony and pulled out the bottom drawer of his desk. He placed the empty folder aside and put his hand beneath the table, where he pulled out a bunch of smaller, blue envelopes. "This shouldn't take long," he concluded.

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Ever since history had made its transition into written form, and even before that, warfare was the crucial part of any thriving society, ensuring not only survival to the collective, but also much prestige to those serve that cause better than others. Asurtha might have been one of the most peaceful places in the known world, but that didn't prevent it from being host to several elite schools specializing in combat classes. The Gymnasium was, without a doubt, the most popular of them all, providing advanced education for forging Warriors and Archers. The Arcanium was the second school of choice and dedicated to Mages, while the third and, definitely, least popular elite school, was the Amphorium.

Recommendations were invented and implemented several centuries ago. They were identified as the ideal tool for directing the students towards the most suitable combat classes and professions. It quickly became a valued document on a worldwide scale, since elite military training was always appreciated and well educated fighters always proved to be infinitely more reliable than common rabble. The Recommendation was a unique document, not only in the sense that it was given to both serfs and aristocrats alike. No, the unique feature of the Recommendation was the fact that some military schools considered it nothing more than a mere guideline, while most elite schools, like the Asurtian ones, claimed it to be absolutely vital. In Asurtha, one could not attend an elite military school without having the proper Recommendation for it.

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Now that the students had calmed down a bit, it was time for the very first Recommendation to be delivered. As soon as the first student took hold of his envelope and sat back on his seat, a small crowd instantly gathered around him, and that would generally happen every time an envelope left the teacher's desk. Some students would tear the envelope open immediately, revealing the contents so they could proudly brag about it, while others, quietly took the envelopes back to their seats and politely opened them. However, there was another group, although in the absolute minority, who considered themselves hard-core, and they decided to shove their envelopes into their pockets and downright refuse to open them, as if they weren't in the least bit interested about their content.

Tensions were rising with every passing envelope, and then finally, he got his Recommendation. He received it in much the same way as he had his testimony: without much noise and with a teacher's smile. He carefully removed the greasy red stamp from the envelope and pulled out a paper twice the size of the blue thing, then slowly began reading it.

*Elementary School  
"Nathan Orvenia"  
Asurtha - Macaterra*

*Recommendation*  
*Nicholas Reynes*

*Congratulations on your preliminary education graduation. In accordance with all the skills and abilities you have displayed so far, we have come to a conclusion that it would be most suitable for you to choose the following combat class, if you decide to pursue further military education.*

*Prelate*

*signature  
Oliver Grant*

*Asurtha  
16-05-1675*

The word “Prelate” was the very first thing that caught his eye. In utter reflex, he flipped the paper upside down and slammed it onto the desk, so nobody could see it. Only then did he realize he’d actually made a public announcement with such an action, so everybody knew exactly what he was trying to hide.

As a combat class, the Prelates were considered the most illogical choice by many commoners, especially those seeking adventure and glory. Ever since children began roleplaying and inventing their little make-believe battles, most of them immediately chose the way of the Warrior; placing themselves in the roll of mighty close-combat fighters, wielding axes and swords for offense while also using shields for defense. Others would improvise with poorly made bows and arrows, placing themselves in the role of sneaky Archers lurking in the shadows. The most imaginative of them imitated the moves of Mages, tossing around mud and water, as if they were applying elemental control, but nobody ever imitated the way of the Prelate. As the absolute minority, the Prelates were always imagined as a cowardly combat class, hiding behind other fighters while using their abilities to push everybody else into harm’s way. Barely anyone knew what their true abilities were, simply because all the other combat classes were that much more dominant. There wasn't a single interesting story or legend involving the Prelates, and that fact alone was more than enough for most students to avoid them like the plague. Truth be told, some of the details regarding Prelates were briefly covered during one of the late semesters, but it was a very unpopular subject, which was further substantiated by the absolutely miserable grades.

He froze up and blankly stared at the piece of paper on his desk, while that cursed word kept swirling in his mind. For the past couple of years, ever since puberty had kicked in and his mental potential had begun surfacing, he realized he was different from the rest. His realization soon became obvious to his teachers, and with a little bit of proper tutoring, he began discovering his abilities. The very first thing he learned was how to perform simple feats of telekinesis. The other, much more intensive ability, became known not long afterwards, when he became able to spontaneously raise his body temperature, enabling him to fight off his illnesses in record time. Whenever he would feel sick, he would simply force his body to heat up and, after about half an hour, all of his problems were sweated away. As time moved on, he became convinced these abilities were tightly linked to Mages, therefore he spent countless hours learning about them, even trying to trigger them by performing certain moves when nobody was looking. He became obsessed with becoming a Mage that nothing else would cut it, especially not the Prelate.

“Are you awake?” the teacher spoke, startling him and pulling him back to reality. He came to his senses and quickly realized he was sitting in complete silence, everybody else had already left. He took a deep breath and tried to answer, but couldn't, tears quickly began streaming down his face and he swiftly wiped them away. He couldn't say anything, and so he just dropped his hand over his papers and shoved them away.

One quick glance was all it took for the teacher to figure out the source of the problem. Nick was expecting some kind of a lecture, but was surprised when he lifted his head and saw those elderly eyes carefully observing him. There was no grudge on the old man's face; there was nothing but a fixed and a pleasant smile.

“I was an active Prelate,” said the teacher after taking a deep breath.

The student’s blurred vision immediately became as clear as day, he was utterly shocked. According to his overall behaviour and his infinite knowledge of all combat classes, not to mention his constitution, the teacher to be an elderly Archer or a Mage, more than anything else. In fact, he was the one who had taught him the mild telekinesis ability, so he definitely had to be a Mage. For most students, he was the ultimate ideal; someone to look up to and admire,

someone to always pay attention to. It wouldn't be surprising that such a man would be familiar with things involving Prelates, but for such a man being an actual Prelate... well, that was a bit too hard to believe...

“True heroes get to carry the glory, but true Prelates get to carry the heroes.” he whispered as if passing along a closely guarded secret.

That sentence alone had more impact on Nick than all the stories he had heard up until that point combined. A man such as him simply had to be trusted; everything he said was to be considered an absolute truth without exception, that old face radiated with such trust and knowledge that every single word he said was completely pure of doubt. Encouraged by the response, Nick slowly took his documents and finally managed to get up from his seat. Just before he closed the door and left his classroom for the very last time, he turned around with a smile on his face and nodded in gratitude of the support.

His elementary education was finally over, and now he had a completely new destiny unravelling before his eyes. As he was leisurely walking down the forest path, all alone again, he slowly began questioning all those stories depicting the Prelates in such an irrelevant way. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be some proof of their virtues and impact on history, how else could they have survived as a combat class in the first place? They were depicted as the most underrated of them, not deserving of the slightest attention, but the mere fact there was an Amphorium in Asurtha, the very capital of the republic, claimed otherwise.

He hastily decided his next major objective would be to head to the farthest part of the city and inspect the Amphorium, but right now, more than anything, he wanted to get back home and share his experience with his mother. He was probably the only one in his class who had got such a recommendation and that might have been yet another clear sign of his new, unique destiny. Along the way, he decided to take a couple of shortcuts in order to avoid any crowds, to avoid anyone who could stall him even for a moment. He could already imagine his mother reading his graduation documents, the smile on her face and the pride in her voice.

Sadly, his mood took a turn for the worse the very moment he heard a large blast coming from the direction of his suburbs. A powerful rush of wind made its way across the streets, blowing over like a brief storm. As the wind dissipated, a large cloud of thick smoke began rising in the distance, generally the same one that would appear during mid-summer when entire forests would spontaneously catch fire. However, there were no forests whatsoever in that direction, only buildings. Fearing the worst, he tightly folded his documents and secured them in his inner pockets, then ran for home, heading towards the smoke.

Absolute panic was spreading from the suburbs; everyone was heading in the opposite direction, leaving chaos and mayhem in their wake. Those who were tackled and fell to the ground would quickly pick themselves up, only to keep running away, leaving behind whatever they might have dropped. Screaming parents carried smaller children in their arms, while the older children were forcefully pulled along like oversized ragdolls. Nick stood his ground and waited for the stampede to run past him, several people in the crowd managed to graze him, but not enough to throw him off or discourage him.

As the crowd disappeared into the distance, suddenly an entire squad of city guards rushed out from one of the minor alleys. Fully geared in their official uniforms, grey Asurthan outfits, ready for combat, they rushed in the very the direction everyone else was running from. He could clearly see that half of them were carrying swords on their belts and shields on their backs. Those were the Warriors no doubt. The other half of the squad had a quiver over their left shoulder and a bow over their right. Those were definitely the Archers. As soon as they managed

to clear a notable distance from him, he began to follow, but they were running at a steady pace he couldn't keep up with, and lost sight of them eventually.

The city streets were barren, doors and windows now left wide open, leaving an abundance of merchandise and equipment lying all over the place. The only sounds stirring in the distance were the roars of fires up ahead, and the screams of the panicking crowd behind. Everything in the streets was ripe for the taking without a single witness around, but that wasn't the very thing on his mind. No, he kept running for home in short sprints, slowing down just enough to catch his breath every so often, just so he could keep on running.

The very moment he made his first step off the main street and into his suburb, it seemed he had walked into one of his own nightmares. The image became so much more vivid when he realized more than half of the houses, on both sides of the alley, were burning. The fire was leaping from one roof to the other, slowly making its way towards him, appearing to be approaching almost as if it were a living creature. His entire body was screaming to run but he was unable to move, and, although the fire was still quite a distance away, he could feel the first drops of sweat slowly making their way down his face. He could feel the heat gradually building up.

From one of the houses to his right, a vast flame forced its way out into the open with such ultimate force that it blew apart one of the windows on the top floor, throwing one of the guards from great a height, straight down to solid pavement. The Warrior bounced off the ground like a brick, leaving a bloody stain at the point of impact, he landed on his back and died on the spot. Not long afterwards, the front door on that same house swung open and a panicked Archer ran outside. Then, just a fraction of a moment later, the entire house went up in flames. From every possible opening, a giant flame forced its way outwards. The front door was forced away with such power that it slammed into the Archer and threw him out of the front yard onto the street. He came to land just about ten meters from the very spot on which Nick stood on. The half-scorched guard tried to stand up but instantly fell to the ground, his broken left leg giving way from under him. Then, with several painful grunts, he endeavoured to crawl away from the house, attempting to flee from the horror which was about to escape out into the open.

In the very same way as it happened in his nightmares, after the giant burst of flames and several random screams, a woman walked out of the half-demolished house. Her outfit was unique but also very familiar to Nick. It was a light brown gown with a flaming bird painted on the left side of her chest. She was unscathed by the fire, her face and entire body were intact, it was as if the fire itself was afraid to approach her and decided to keep a small but steady distance. She made her way towards the first guard, the dead Warrior, while the second guard tried to clear as much distance as he possibly could. She leaned over the dead body and stretched her arm over his head. The corpse began turning slowly into shadow, then into smoke, which she devoured through her mouth and nose as if she was inhaling vapours. She fully absorbed her victim, leaving nothing more than just a burned uniform and a pool of dry blood as evidence.



The other guard, desperately trying to escape, managed to crawl to the middle of the street as she now focused her attention on him. Her outstretched arm flailed in his direction as her face took on a sinister expression. Then, she stretched her fingers as she executed a specific move, causing the guard to instantly begin screaming and rolling around on the pavement in excruciating pain. He was screaming as if he were burning alive and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. His skin colour was transformed as it went from pale orange to blood red, and it wasn't long before he began suffocating. At this point he began instinctively clawing at his own neck using his nails, his desperation spurred him frantically enough to force blood to pour from his arteries in his quest for catching breath. Finally, the woman lost her patience as she approached and showed him a shred of mercy. She completely tightened her mental grip, silencing him forever.

She then devoured him in much the same way she had done the previous guard, absorbing his body and leaving just his burned rags in the dirt.

Nick's heart came to a near halt as his nightmare that had repeated itself so many times was being realized right before his eyes. He knew exactly what was going to happen next: the woman was going to turn on him, point her finger in his general direction, and turn each muscle in his body numb. He would be left completely helpless and, soon enough, everything would turn to darkness. The only exception this time was that he wouldn't be waking up in the comfort of his own bed. If there were ever a perfect moment to run away, this was it, but his body refused to obey yet again, and so he remained frozen on the spot like a statue.

"I like that look of yours!" sighed the woman gracefully, after she had finished absorbing her latest victim. She wasn't turning in his direction and that was quite frightening in itself, but what was even more frightening was the fact that events might be taking a turn for the worse.

"W... w... what?" he said, barely managing to squeeze a single word from his mouth.

"You have your mother's eyes." She spoke with sweetness of tone as if she were talking down upon her own child. She wasn't polite enough to look at him, instead setting her gaze to the opposite side, perhaps sensing the approach of something else in the distance. Her comments left him completely baffled. His mouth moved but no air was exhaled and there was not a single word that escaped his lips.

She suddenly turned towards the house on his left, pointed her fingers towards it, and squeezed her hand. As she did so, the flame in that particular house grew rapidly to twice its size, causing half of the house to disintegrate like it was made of paper. Then, she forcefully waved her arm and the other half of the house crumbled as well. Soon, the flames engulfed the next house in line, and the trail continued to blaze away towards the opposite end of the street.

"You must have sensed your potential by now..." she continued in a calm voice that suddenly became somewhat more appealing to listen to. This new tone seemed to build up a weird sense of trust and appreciation with every passing moment. His frightened heart slowly began beating again, waking up the rest of his body as his sense of horror gave way to mere confusion. He could clearly see the darkness radiating from her body, tangling and corrupting the immediate vicinity, removing even the slightest glimpse of courage from all around. She commanded a great deal of respect... and when she turned around and gazed directly into his eyes, she pierced him with her vision.

Her eyes were a remarkable sight, so innocently pure, yet so cursed and forsaken at the same time. Her entire appearance suddenly became attractive, nearly irresistible, forcing him to

make his first insecure step forward, followed by another, and then another. Her entire frame became a powerful beacon, pulling him slowly closer. It was as if his body had suddenly developed a will of its own and had decided to walk ahead, in spite of his mind desperately screaming otherwise.

“You should embrace you destiny,” she said, smiling as she made her first steps towards him, rapidly closing the distance. “With my help, you could...”

She never got the chance to finish her sentence. Her last words were replaced by a heavy grunt as she felt something cold pierce her body from behind and travel right through her. It broke the charm and Nick stopped just five steps away from her. The woman placed her hand to cover the wound that had appeared in her chest, shaking and moaning in pain. It was quite clear that a solid arrow had impaled her chest, there was now a pale glow coming from a small crystal embedded on the very tip of it, and her blood was slowly dripping over it. Nick stood completely still as the woman tried to take deep breaths and move her hand towards him. She managed to take just one more step before a grey flash appeared behind her and the second arrow forced its way straight through her left leg, forcing her down onto her knees.

Blood was now severely gushing from her mouth as she tried to get up again, barely managing to expand her lungs to catch her breath for the last time, before the third arrow caught up with her and pierced its way straight through her heart. Her eyes opened as wide as they could before her body fell flat onto the ground. She died instantly. At the same time, the flames in the houses began to diminish, the fires dying along with her.

Beyond the farthest trail of smoke, from such a distance that it could barely be seen, something new was approaching. At first, Nick suspected it to be an even more horrifying creation than the one that had just died before his eyes. Soon enough, he recognized the man slowly approaching. It was Caesar, whose once long and messy hair was now tied in a ponytail so as not to obscure his vision. Military outfit had replaced his everyday rags, and he had a leather quiver on his back with four crystal arrows in it. He was also holding a military-issue bow, the kind only elite Rangers had the privilege of using. A man who had always seemed to be nothing more than a bum, often seen wandering the suburbs aimlessly, was in fact an elite soldier in disguise.

A smile surfaced on Nick's face, but there was nothing happy about the response coming his way. Instead of a friendly greeting, the soldier quickly drew another one of his crystal arrows and powered up his shot, summoning a grey burst of energy similar to the one that just killed the cursed woman.

“Don't move, dammit!” the soldier yelled as he began approaching step by step, steadily maintaining his tightened bow, ready to release the shot at any given moment. He wasn't pointing the arrow towards the chest, oh no, he was doing things on a very professional level, aiming straight for the head. Nick was confused again, and very afraid that even the slightest wrong move would force the shot.

Caesar approached him to such a small distance that even a complete idiot could make the mark. He glanced at the boy for a moment, leaning his head from left to right, perhaps looking for some particular pattern or something in his face, or maybe in his eyes, anything to verify whether his character had changed or not. Then he finally loosened his bow and cancelled the summoned shot, returning the crystal arrow back into the quiver.

“Untainted,” he sighed with immense relief, as a crashing sound on the left side of the street roared in the distance, sounding as though an avalanche had hit nearby. Several houses had simultaneously crumbled into a smoking ruin.

“Where’s my mother?” Nick dared to ask as they both approached the body of the cursed woman. Caesar gingerly pulled his arrows from the corpse, wiped the blood and inspected the crystal tips. One of the tips was shattered and the arrow permanently damaged but the soldier returned it to his quiver regardless.

“You won't find her anywhere,” he replied quietly, still focused on the tools of his trade. “She was the first one to fall.” He stood up but kept staring at the cadaver in front of him, not having the strength to look the boy in the eye. “If you know what's good for you, you'll forget what you saw today.” Then he simply turned around and walked away, disappearing behind one of the houses in the distance, never to be seen again.

As Caesar's last steps echoed in the distance, the lifeless body of the woman began to slowly fade away, instantly reminding Nick of the stories about the souls that fulfil their destiny on the mortal world and gain their right to begin the proper afterlife. He read about it long ago, but he never expected to witness it first hand, a human body gradually losing its integrity and fading away to nothing. Finally, the corpse completely disappeared, leaving just a small pile of clothing and metal embellishments where it had once stood. She vanished in almost the same way as both of the guards she had absorbed, but unlike those two, there was no grey smoke or the like, she just vanished into thin air.

His heart was pounding hard and loud as he finally found the strength to move again. He ran down the street to reach his home, only to find several piles of rubble where, what had once been the most beautiful house in the suburb, had stood. The house had crumbled down to its very foundations; the scorching heat had even melted the metal fence far off in the backyard. He made his way through the ruins, looking for anything he could salvage, but there was barely anything left. He was still able to prevent himself from crying, convincing himself that maybe not all was as hopeless as it seemed. Perhaps his mother was so busy today that she'd remained in the city up until now. It was the perfect excuse not to believe Caesar's story.

Just like the rest of the house, his room was completely gone, it seemed as though nothing was capable of surviving the flames. His bed was reduced to a still smoking metal frame, his large closet was nowhere to be found, all of his books were ash and dust, and even the shelves themselves were gone. Still, there was something that managed to resist the heat, a small wooden locker was still standing, seriously damaged but still there, so he grabbed the lower of the two handles and tried to open it, not being too surprised as the handle broke off instantly. Somehow, he managed to open the damn thing and succeeded in finding several copper and silver coins, still warm to the touch, deep within the ashes. He was planning to use them to buy his mother a birthday gift; her birthday was less than a month away.

He thought about waiting for his neighbours to return in order to help him scavenge through the rest of the ruins, but he felt a sudden urge to check the backyard. Where once a mighty grapevine had stood, there was now nothing, the entire garden had dried up and turned to dust. Even the tool shed had fallen victim to the scorching blaze, although, it was still standing, as if the flames had suddenly decided to spare it at the very end. The front door was still in one piece, so he pulled the handle and walked inside. Most of the things were still situated in their appropriate places, it seemed the fire had only managed to scrape the roof, opening a few holes for a little of sunshine to enter this forever shady section of his world, before moving on. He took a couple of steps further inside before having the feeling that he had stepped on something.

He looked down and instantly recognized the blue piece of silk; it was a piece of the dress his mother had been wearing earlier that morning.

It seemed Caesar was right after all, her faith was no different than those of the guards, and the cursed woman must have absorbed her. Slowly coming to that realization, he was about to start crying as he took the silk into his hands, but then something else caught his attention. There was a small hole between two of the planks in the floor, something he had never seen before. He dropped down onto his knees, pushed two of his fingers into the hole and pulled as hard as he could, lifting the planks and revealing a hidden stash. There was a small jewellery box hidden inside, covered in cobwebs and dust, seemingly undisturbed for an eternity. The box was engraved with an unusual symbol on top of it, quite unlike anything he had ever seen before, a decorative cross with wings upon it. There was no key in the lock, but that didn't stop him from getting inside it. Rattled and enraged, he first tried to force his way into the box, only to immediately give up and slam it to the ground as hard as he possibly could. The hinges gave way and the box broke in two immediately.

The hidden treasure was even more mystifying than the box containing it. Inside was a silver necklace carved with an identical symbol to that which he had seen on the top of the box, with a bright diamond in the very centre. Other than his mere life savings, this was the only thing he managed to salvage from the ruins that day.

He had no family left whatsoever, neither did he have anyone to live with, and so he had absolutely nobody to rely on. Still, somehow, he remained calm. He picked up his only remaining belongings, and slowly began walking in the only direction that was left. His major objective, now his only goal, was to find the Amphorium, in the hope it would provide enough comfort for the time being.

## Chapter 02

### - Stepmother -

She sat in front of the entrance and observed the forest. The days were still warm, and the leaves still hadn't begun changing their colours towards their dryer shades. The weather was calm and the late afternoon Sun was shining upon the beautiful landscape as brightly as many times before, but Valiria didn't enjoy the view. She had seen too many winters in her time to be moved by the beauties of a single summer day and, besides, she had much more pressing matters to worry about than the weather announcing the end of the summer.

"Where is he?" she mumbled. "Is hunting really that hard?" Suddenly, she could wait no longer; she stood up and went for her cloak and weapons, but stopped just short of reaching them. "You fool," she said aloud, completely unaware she was talking to herself. "The forest is vast, even if you know where he went, it would take you more than a week to track him down. That's why you chose to hide here, you imbecile." She didn't feel the urge to return to her old spot, and so made her way deeper into her hideout instead.

What would happen if she were to find him? He would only laugh in her crazy old face, that's what would happen. She could almost imagine him, her student with his catch in hand, mocking her. He would definitely question her lack of faith, perhaps even the value of the knowledge she was trying to impart to him. Valiria could almost hear his voice, it was as if he was standing right in front of her, speaking the very words she didn't want to hear.

"I'm not going to look for him! It's better for him to lay dead in a gutter than to laugh at me!" she concluded and resumed inspecting the permanent shelter she had made on her own an eternity ago. Two small, interconnected rooms with two hearthstones were more than enough to fulfil her needs. The front room served as the dining area, kitchen and entryway. Pots and pans were hanging from the ceiling riddled with iron hooks and metal prongs embedded in solid stone. Her worn cloak hung from a hook by the arch, which led to the second room; a room that served as the bedroom and the storage room. Her staff and wand were also hooked on their holders close to her cloak, always within reach.

The most notable object in the room was the table in the very middle, carved by fire and ice from a single piece of wood. A pair of matching chairs with low backrests accompanied it. She was proud of these pieces of furniture; they were her own handy-work. She kept looking around, trying to force her attention elsewhere, to forget about the absence of her apprentice.

A rather pointless effort...

Above the small smouldering flame stood a sturdy iron cauldron her apprentice had brought her so long ago from the nearby city, thus passing her first trial. He hadn't killed a man yet, not using pure mental power anyway, so he was still able to move amongst the populous, but he had to be careful. Even the briefest exposure was enough to fall victim to the rabble.

Valiria turned her gaze to the right corner of the room to where his belongs were stored, the only things he could claim as his own. There was the old blue shirt of a Mage, casually tossed over the basket holding a small, almost child-sized wand which he had used to reach her. She knew what else was inside that basket, but decided to peek in anyway. The top half of a broken staff gleamed under the setting light of the Sun. She stroked the old rugged stick and stared at the blue crystal. It was rough, just like the boy who had once used it.

Reminiscing made her smile. She contemplated the boy he once was, barely seventeen, casting elemental attacks against her; attacks she deflected with incredible ease. She remembered how easy it had been to disarm him, to destroy his staff. She recalled the fear in his innocent black eyes when he had realized her attacks couldn't be stopped. Immense was his surprise when she threw him her spare wand, and gave him a fighting chance. Her mind became almost liquid as her memory flooded with nostalgia, twisting and turning as it wrung every soaking drop from the glorious encounter - his hope, his astonishment as he unlocked his hidden potential and attempted to use it against her for the very first time, his shock and disbelief when he realized who and what she was, and his obedience as he knelt to the ground upon realizing that his new destiny had begun.

All of this had happened just over three years ago, during which time she had managed to teach him more than any school could have done in a lifetime. His eyes had changed, the cracks in his mental armour had been sealed, and Valiria was very pleased to see he'd now begun reading her and bruising her own mental armour during their training. The boy belonged to her completely, she had become the only person he could trust; the only reason was that he simply had nowhere else to go, just like her.

A sudden crackling of fallen leaves and the sound of footsteps right outside her hideout startled her. She quickly dropped the broken staff, took her combat belt and strapped it around her narrow hips, turning towards the entrance. It was him, dressed in a worn Mage outfit she had given him that very morning. In one hand he was carrying a rabbit and two partridges, and in the other a green staff. He was smiling, although his black hair seemed sweaty, and his suit dusty with a splattering of dried blood. Valiria frowned and gazed outside, over his shoulder.

"Where have you been? You should have returned hours ago?" she yelled as soon as he entered the hideout, her tone as strict as ever. "I ordered you to return as soon as possible." The apprentice's smile disappeared in an instant, only to be replaced with an expression of shame. He immediately left his staff in its designated spot and his catch on the ground. He was well aware that things were about to take the turn for the worse.

"I'm sorry," he uttered after a short pause, his embarrassed gaze directed towards the ground. He looked like a small child awaiting parental punishment, more than likely a beating with the rod, but Valiria had ceased using the rod long ago, simply because it was too humiliating a punishment. Besides, she knew much better and innovative ways to mould him into shape.

"Are you sorry because you didn't obey, or because you practised elemental control?" she immediately asked, reading his thoughts as always.

"I'm sorry for both." he replied quietly as Valiria spied a small crack in his mental armour, most likely caused by the anger he was now directing at himself. "We've been practising these useless moves for two months now, I was afraid that... I lost my sense..." he tried to come up with a proper excuse, but it was pointless.

"Draw your weapon and fight!" she ordered him, grabbing her own wand in order to punish him for his disobedience and show him just how pointless his elemental control was. He will be going to bed seriously bruised tonight, that was for sure!

He looked up for the very first time since he'd come back, and she felt a reflection of fear in his eyes again, followed by a dark stain on his soul. This was quite understandable, since she was perhaps the only one able to overpower him and kill him with ease. Still, he tried to hide it just as she had instructed him to do. She'd taught him to be courageous as fear was only a weakness that could be properly negated by willpower and concentration.



"I don't want to fight you, mistress. You are the only one who can teach me everything I need to know," he said dismally, showing her his empty palms in the hope of avoiding the upcoming clash. His wand was still secured in its sheath on his back, hidden beneath his coat, the exact same way she'd strapped it onto him that very morning.

"You must be punished! You endangered us both with your carelessness. Do you realize how guilty you are for such an irresponsible act?" she asked sternly, piercing his mind, searching for new gaps in his mental armour. There were now a handful of them present: one shallow crack was directly related to his fear and another caused by sadness at not being able to send word to a girl he'd left behind when his training began. There was also one major crack, caused by anger alone, anger directed towards her, his mistress. However, they were all slowly closing, thanks to his long and laborious training. Eventually, he would overpower all his emotions and suppress them one by one, subdue them to his will and use them to his benefit.

"I don't want to fight. Please..." he repeated, but this time he deliberately failed to finish his sentence, and Valiria only then realized he had been subtly reading her this entire time.

"What did I tell you about fighting? You shouldn't rejoice it, but should never avoid it either!" she yelled even more strictly. "And this is one of the fights you cannot evade. This will be a trial. If you fail me, I will kill you and replace you, you won't be the first nor the last to die by my hand!"

"Then begin," her pupil said tensely. There was a slight tremble in his voice as his hand went for his weapon but stopped when it finally reached it. Valiria read his fear once again, now even stronger than before.

She swiftly swung her wand upwards, summoning two barriers on her sides for protection from his oncoming attacks, then, she pointed it directly at him, smiling in satisfaction when her attack shattered her apprentice's only barrier and sent him flying outside.

He was still weaker than she was, but not by a lot...

### Chapter 03

- Second home -

Asurtha is a rather vast city, and not just for those forced to live out their lives in it. Since he never walked off the beaten path from home to the Elementary School, most of the city appeared larger and scarier than it actually was. To make things even worse, while stumbling along the unknown alleyways, Nick had wasted what little daylight was left upon that cursed day. Night was slowly gaining on him and he wasn't even aware of it. All the streets began to look alike, and although it appeared he hadn't made any notable progress, he still kept on walking, hoping that the Amphorium would eventually appear behind the next corner, or the corner after that. Occasional bystanders weren't paying too much attention to him; in their eyes, he was just another filthy little punk wandering around in search of a convenient corner in which to burrow.

The only lead he had was the fact that the Amphorium was situated on the opposite end of the city, so he assumed that every step further from his starting point meant one step closer to his destination. That idea was the only thing that kept him going, but that alone clearly wasn't enough.

Exhaustion began to take its toll and was seriously slowing him down, he barely had the strength to keep his eyes open. The bright lamps on both sides of the street slowly began to take on shapes of white smudges, his blurred vision now caused the buildings on both sides to come together and form incredibly high walls. The street slowly began resembling a dark tunnel that was closing in with every subsequent step. Finally, his eyes were sealed shut, he didn't have the strength to open them again, and so he plummeted onto the ground with full force, and stayed down.

He was unaware of time and events passing him by. There was nothing but the darkness and the dead silence that emanated from the place where all things began and all the things eventually ended. Eventually, his ominous state began to pass and the eternal shroud gave way before the blinding light. It was now that the objects in the surrounding area began taking shape, the unbearable silence ultimately turning into a spectrum of random whispers as he finally managed to regain consciousness.

He was now laying comfortably in one of the white hospital beds, in a sterile white room the size of his former classroom. He felt an immense cold all over his body and so he decided to remove his light blanket, only to immediately pull it back at the very moment he realized he was completely naked. He looked around the room, trying to find his school outfit or anything else to wear, but there was nothing but white and more white all around. He tried lifting his head higher than before, but suddenly a surge of pain in his back forced him down onto the pillow. He was experiencing the full weight of his body in the worst way imaginable. The only thing he was able to achieve was to barely manage to turn on his side and face the window, and take a breather.

He aimlessly stared through the window glass for hours, looking directly at the green canopy. It appeared his room was slightly elevated, maybe on a higher floor of a building. He desperately tried to figure out what had happened to him, but too many pieces of the puzzle were missing. Primarily, what was that cursed woman looking for in the suburbs, and why did she demolish the place in such a way? What was the reason behind such an attack? Why was Caesar keeping up his stupid act all that time, and was he actually waiting for that particular encounter? What was the point of it all? Those were only some of the questions causing nothing but further headache the

more he kept on thinking about them... a serious headache, much pain in his heart, and a sour taste in his throat...

What about those last few words, the words of the cursed woman who died right before his eyes? Was he the one she was looking for?

Maybe... probably... certainly... definitely...

The only door in the room slowly creaked open and his heart skipped a beat as his thoughts quickly gave way to fear. He felt completely helpless and vulnerable. A couple of light steps echoed through the room. It seems someone had stopped just behind his back, next to his bed. He could almost feel a high figure leaning over his body, but he didn't have the strength or the courage to turn around and check whom it was.

"Are you awake?" asked the calm female voice, which eased his fears, but only for a moment.

"Where am I?" Nick spoke back with a question of his own, barely able to talk. He didn't turn his head to look at her, not because he wouldn't, but because he couldn't. He finally managed to place his body into a comfortable enough position to avoid most of the pain.

"You're in the Amphorium," replied the woman in a smooth voice as she slowly a couple of steps backwards. "We found you lying unconscious in one of the nearby alleys, carrying Prelate documents. Do you remember anything?"

"Only the flames..." he mumbled painfully.

The woman finally stepped out from between the beds and approached the window, walking into his line of sight. Her lovely face had the expression of devoted care and infinite compassion, but there was still something terrifying about her.

"It's a miracle you managed to survive. You've been in this bed for almost a month." Her voice seemed soothing as she slowly began to talk, but Nick could almost recognize the similarities between her voice and the voice of the cursed woman. Perhaps it was just due to the similar way she was talking to him, facing the opposite direction and seemingly talking from above. She took hold of the window and opened it as wide as it would go, allowing the morning wind to pull the stale air out of the room.

"I just want to get out of here!" he yelled all of a sudden, forcefully trying to get out of his bed, screaming as the pain stopped him halfway up. The pain was unbearable; he could almost feel his body falling apart. He felt like he was stuck between two giant rocks and couldn't move up or down, not even the slightest. He took short, quick breaths as the woman quickly turned around to help, slowly returning him back to bed. Somehow, her actions barely caused him any pain at all.

"Sometimes the scars are harder to bare than the wounds they came from," she whispered as she placed her thin palm right over his stomach. Through the thin blanket, he could feel how cold her hand was, but that quickly changed when she effortlessly summoned a pale blue glow. The contact point became intensively hot and somehow that eliminated most of his pain, leaving only a slight tingling sensation behind. "You should definitely rest," she said after she straightened her back and slowly began walking towards the door, going out the same way as she came in, with light echoing steps.

Well, there wasn't much else he could have done anyway. As the door shut again, he sighed, but the silence didn't last.

Closed doors can isolate many things, but sound isn't one of them, and since there was a wide hallway without any background noise on the other side, most of the sounds could easily slip through the cracks. With a little bit of extra effort, he managed to turn towards the door, to silence his breath and pay close attention. He immediately identified three different voices speaking on the other side; the first voice clearly belonged to the woman that just left his room, the second voice felt familiar but he couldn't remember where from, while the third voice was male and completely unfamiliar. He understood some of the words, but not enough to make sense of the entire conversation. Still, he definitely knew the conversation was about him, because he recognized the use of his surname.

The doorknob slowly moved downwards, but the door did not immediately open. With several final words, the female voice disappeared, leaving only the two male voices to round up the conversation. Then came the final sentence - the only one he managed to hear and understand in its entirety.

“We'll see what my friend has to say...”

Friend? Nick never had any reliable friends. Despite the fact he knew half of his generation, he considered all of them to be nothing more than mere acquaintances. Eventually, everyone who came close enough had abused his trust for personal interests; he'd experienced it way too many times and had decided never to lightly trust anyone ever again. His 'friends' only hung out with him when they had something to gain, but at this current moment, in this current state, what could anyone possible have to gain from him?

“How are you holding up?” asked his old teacher, Rampart, as he made his way into the room and sat down on the nearby bed. He had brought along a large package. A familiar face brought a sincere smile on his face, but nothing more than that. Nick didn't reply, he just nodded his head in acknowledgement. Another sincere smile found its way to the surface, but his eyes couldn't take hold of the cheerful mood, and so he lowered his glaze. “Do you remember anything?”

There was no answer. His young eyes didn't look up, but his head did respond, now shaking in negation. Of course he could remember it, all of it, every single damn detail, but the mere thought of trying to talk about it forced his heart to break, his throat to stiffen and his eyes to fill with tears. The only thing left to do was to suppress it all, and the most obvious giveaway were his deep sighs, steadily lining up one after the other.

“So... now what?” he said as he finally managed to speak, barely holding his tears back. There was no future for him, not anymore, everything he considered vital was destroyed; everything was gone. There was nothing left except the thirst to discover why it had happened.

“We're working on it, that's why I came.” The old teacher pleasantly surprised him. “If you don't mind, you'll be under the care of my nephew, Robert. He lives right next door.” He pointed through the window, directing Nick's gaze towards the very first house on the other side of the yard, just on the opposite side of the tree he had been staring at for such a long time.

At first, Nick was happy to realize he had at least one true friend after all, someone who sincerely cared about him. Despite this realization, his happiness was quickly replaced with something else: a sensation of inconvenience. He had a weird and unpleasant feeling, tightly linked with the possibility that he had just become a sudden burden to someone who probably never asked for one. He knew the old Rampart had sincere intentions, but then again...

“Do I have to go?” he asked with a sad voice.

“Of course you don't have to, but you need a home, and someone to look out for you.” Rampart smiled and stood up, tapped the boy lightly on his shoulder, and went for the door, leaving his package behind. As he was about to leave the room, he turned around and ended the conversation like a true friend, by saying, “I'll be around if you ever need me.”

The impatient patient didn't take long to take hold of the package and open it up, pleasantly surprised by its contents. He found his little jewel box, completely restored. Its hinges were changed and there was a new key in the lock. He opened it and found something even more surprising inside; it was full of silver coins, and after he tipped it out, he discovered his unusual diamond necklace on the very bottom. Other than his precious jewel box, the package contained a new school outfit, tightly packed and conveniently folded as if it had just been handed out of storage. His documents were also there, conveniently placed inside the pocket of his new shirt.

Overflowing with confidence, he got up as soon as he'd managed to open his eyes, just before noon the next day. His first surprise of the day came when he experienced a complete lack of pain as he managed to step out of his bed. He jumped onto his own two feet, and then had a little stretch, all without even a single painful grunt or moan. The second surprise was the fact his grey and blue school outfit was exactly his size, everything was a perfect fit, even the crude leather boots.

The third surprise awaited outside. Having finished dressing, he took hold of his jewel box and left his hospital room, walking down the main Amphorium hallway for the very first time. The hallway was tidy and completely empty, but his steps didn't echo the way he expected them to, due to a wide carpet covering the entire floor. He had no idea where he was going, he was just walking straight ahead without thinking, and then at the very spot where the two hallways intersected, he bumped into something. The impact sent him flying backwards, his back making full contact with the floor. He had no idea what hit him, but whatever it was, sent him flying back with ease. It was almost as if he'd slammed directly into a solid wall appearing out of nowhere.

“You sure are a lost cause!” said a female voice, sarcastically. A strong hand lifted him from the floor. It was hard to believe that a woman could have such a tight grip and such strength.

“Pretty much...,” he admitted calmly, realizing it was his fault the collision happened.

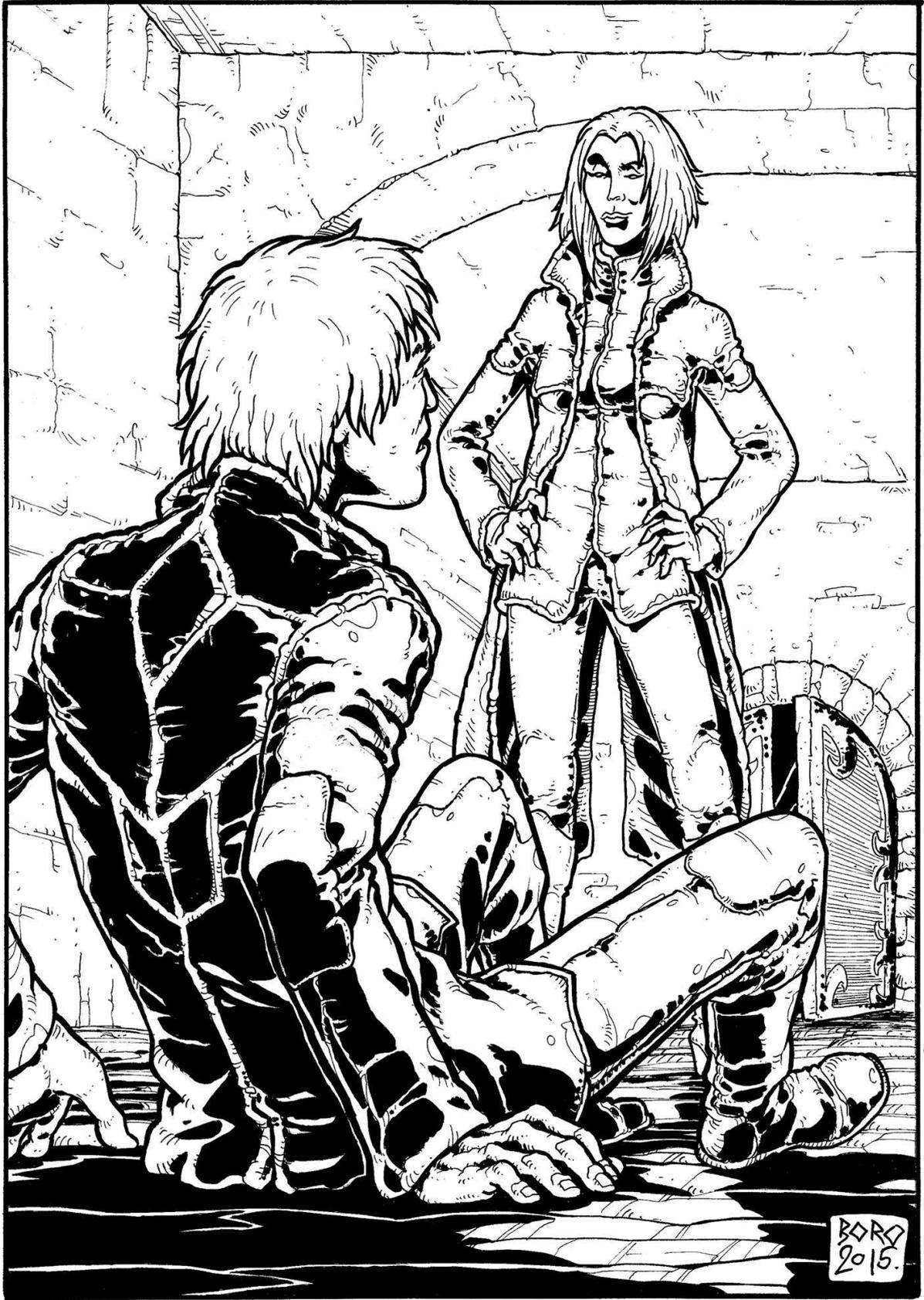
“Doesn't matter, Rookie,” she replied in an exactly same tone of voice.

“Rookie!” he spat back, taking serious offense.

“You don't have any labels on your suit, and you shouldn't even be here. Beginner classes haven't begun yet,” she explained.

“Oh, right.” His anger melted in an instant. “To tell you the truth, I just left the hospital room.”

“So you're the one I'm going to have to put up with for the rest of my life?” she said as she turned aside and muttered in the same unpleasant voice as before. She then sighed heavily and turned to face him once again. “Don't look at me like that, my uncle told us the news only this morning,” she explained, moving her gaze up and down, then up and down again, probably assessing him.



“You're Rampart as well?” he asked, slightly surprised.

“Unfortunately, yes.” She frowned, nodding her head. “I'm Robert's daughter. Don't worry, we won't be getting married at dawn!” she immediately concluded and began laughing aloud.

He found himself dumbfounded as she offered him a hand. Her behaviour was unlike anything he had ever encountered before, especially among the opposite gender, seemingly both friendly and hostile at the same time. It would have left him rather confused if it wasn't for her ridiculous laughter pointing out the obvious. Sheer sarcasm emerged from something that certainly appeared to be an onslaught just waiting to happen.

“Without names we definitely won't.” He smiled and extended his hand. “I'm Nick.”

“Victoria,” she said, introducing herself as she squeezed his hand with extreme force; a force he just wasn't able to handle.

Her name suited her perfectly, according to his brief assessment, she certainly did have a victorious appearance, as beautiful as she was dangerous and her appearance seemed to completely match her attitude. Her hair was as black as night, eyes also black and seemingly always vicious, always threatening. She was exactly his height but she appeared to be stronger, no doubt much stronger than the average woman. According to her stance, she appeared capable of snapping his head from his shoulders without breaking a sweat, but he couldn't assess the rest of her body since she was wearing the advanced Prelate uniform, which included a dark grey coat covering most of her body. It started from the neck and ended all the way below the knees, matched with tight boots on her feet very similar to his own and more than likely the same size too.

“So, you were heading to pick me up?” he asked, slightly waving his hand in an attempt to restore the blood circulation that had been cut off by her overpowering grip.

“I was planning to drop by my dad, but since you decided to conveniently jump on me, we can go together,” she replied with a wide grin on her face, making her first step in the direction she was originally heading before bumping into each other. He turned around without saying a word and walked beside her.

They walked past his hospital room, down the stairs and along another hallway that connected several large classrooms. Nick really appreciated the silence as he made his way down the grey corridor. The Amphorium appeared to be a much more serious institution than his Elementary School had been. There were no paintings on the walls. In fact, there wasn't anything on the walls at all except the grey façade. The only things that stood out in the hallways were the symmetrically distributed white pillars. The entire Amphorium appeared to be of a symmetrical structure, something he immensely appreciated. For some reason, he had an affection for symmetrical things, they always seemed to be much more harmonious than others were.

Victoria reached for the door on her right, after getting some way along the middle of the hallway, and immediately walked into the classroom. Her father was standing in the middle of the room, holding a class of about twenty Prelates. His appearance was very similar to the old teacher Nick was so used to, with only a single difference: he was half his age. There were no desks and no chairs in the classroom, the only things intended for sitting on were the small benches distributed along the edges of the room. Although, the students weren't sitting on them, they were sitting on the floor instead, forming a closed circle around the teacher whilst two of them

stood in the middle. They were clearly demonstrating something. As soon as they noticed the newcomers, several students moved aside and gave Rampart enough room to walk past them.

“I wasn't expecting you this early.” He pleasantly smiled as he approached them, extending his hand to Nick. “I'm Robert.” The very moment he spoke, the classroom became full of minor background noise, emanating from the students now left unattended.

“Nick,” he politely replied and shook his hand. Robert's grip was much looser than Victoria's, but it was still more than Nick could handle. “So, what class is this?” he curiously asked, trying not to think about his aching hand.

“Advanced unarmed combat, third semester. Feel free to drop in and show us a move or two.” He grinned mildly, daring him to step in front of the bunch of clearly older students and demonstrate something he had clearly never had the chance to study.

“Maybe some other time,” he managed to slip out of the situation. “I'm still experiencing some pain in my back.” He concluded as he leaned back.

“Do rest your spine, you will certainly need it.” Robert nodded as he smiled again. “Vicky will take you home, I will join you later.” He said his goodbyes and turned back to his students. Almost immediately two of the closest moved apart again, allowing him to step back into their circle, quickly moving back into place to close it again.

“You got scared,” Victoria mumbled as they were making their way down the hallway again, however, she didn't say it quietly enough or maybe that was her intention in the first place. She had obviously wanted to be heard.

“Maybe just a little bit,” he admitted. “But my back still hurts.”

“How old are you anyway to have such serious spine problems?” she ridiculed.

“Just over eighteen,” he replied with a mildly repulsed voice, although he already managed to figure out she was clearly toying with him the same way as she did before.

“Well gramps, I'm three years older than you, yet you don't hear me complaining.” She prolonged her sarcasm, something she seemed to be very good at.

Their house was close-by, just like the old Rampart said, right next to the Amphorium. Sharing the same backyard, their house was just behind the tree Nick was staring at from his hospital room. It was an average two-story building, just enough to house a small family. It was as white and monotone as the rest of the houses down the street, and only then did Nick realize the true pattern of Asurtha. On both sides of the main street, almost every house looked alike, each one of them had a small front yard and a small backyard, their main doors all staring directly at the main street and linked to it via small brick pathway.

Their house had only five rooms on the ground floor, including the short hallway, which also served as the entryway. There was a wooden door on the opposite side of the hallway, it lead to the bathroom and was the only other obstacle on this floor. Instead of doors, wooden archways separated rooms, so one could freely move from one to the other. The storage room and the staircase were on the left, while the largest room, serving as the kitchen and the living room combined, was on the right. Victoria quickly and routinely jumped out of her boots and on to the brown carpet, heading towards the kitchen barefoot. He didn't follow her, but rather decided to officially form his first impression of his new home by slowly walking into the living room section and gazing upon the many paintings covering most of the walls.

Other than being a combat teacher, Robert Rampart was obviously a very passionate artist. Many of these paintings and sketches were in black-and-white, although extremely detailed, depicting numerous interesting scenes, it was as if Robert had managed to trap a single moment of time within each one of those frames. Nick paid close attention to several pictures depicting a young Victoria standing in something what appeared to be an active combat stance, maybe even an attack. Nick had immense respect towards gifted painters, since painting definitely wasn't a talent of his.

"I had to act like a statue over the course of two hours for that one." She suddenly appeared behind him, holding a sandwich in hand and speaking with her mouth full, just like a true host should. "I had to put up with cramps and aches in my hands and feet for two days afterwards." Nick smiled, realizing that the pose in which the little girl is holding something what appears to be a child-sized gauntlet does look quite natural and spontaneous, but would be extremely tiresome were a person to be forced to stand still in such a way for more than two minutes, let alone two hours.

"I'll take your word for it," he nodded.

"Enough about me, what's your life story?" she jumped on the nearest couch, pointing him towards the other one to sit down as well. He took off his jacket, threw it on top of the couch and sat himself down, leaving his documents and his jewel box on the tiny glass table in-between them. He immediately laid back and took a deep breath.

Victoria was pretty interested in his jewel box but seemed to politely refuse to acknowledge it. She leaned over the table and opened up his documents instead. "Prelate," was the very first word escaping her mouth in a whisper.

"I was surprised at first, maybe a bit disappointed too." Nick nodded his head while gazing at the ceiling.

"How come?!" she hissed, clearly showing the first sign of discomfort.

"I was expecting to be nominated as a Mage since I already know some of their skills," he tried to explain as he slowly lowered his head and met her gaze.

"You're such a fool!" she responded in pure anger, as she appeared ready to shred his papers apart. It was more than obvious; Victoria despised even the mere mention of Mages, despite the fact that Prelates and Mages were probably one of the two most closely related combat classes. "Why Mage?" she asked after swallowing much of her rage sensibly. Nick could already feel burdened by her furious gaze.

"Observe..." He pointed his finger towards his jewel box, which was clearly out of his reach, preparing to use one of the only skills he had managed to master so far. After a moment or two, without any direct contact and without serious effort, the jewel box began moving all over the glass table like some kind of an invisible hand was toying with it, finally approaching Nick so he could grab it.

"Bah... Telekinesis... Headless chickens can master that one, let alone Mages. What else can you do?" she asked rudely, unpleasantly surprising him by recognizing the skill, but even more so by not acting even a little bit surprised herself.

"The only other thing I can do is to overheat my body." He shrugged his shoulders.

“You mean you can heat up your body to ease your aches?” she immediately replied. It was obvious she knew exactly what it was.

“Yes, that one,” he confirmed.

“That's spontaneous regeneration, it's not a Mage skill but a Prelate one, and just like a true beginner, you're doing it wrong,” she explained in a disagreeable tone of voice, clearly offended by his ignorance. At the same time, her eyes were full of pride, she was clearly more than happy to use any chance she could get to slice his pride down a notch or two. “Instead of sweating, it causes a sensation of cold when properly used, not to mention doing its work in a matter of seconds, not minutes. But we'll talk about that some other time, let me show you your room before I get on with my classes.”

She'd made three or four steps from her couch when Nick managed to hear her whisper sneaking its way through the air, something along the lines of, “*I've had enough of your life story anyway...*” She seemed tense and moody, almost begging for an argument, but since she had finally turned her back, he didn't feel the urge to respond and prolong the conversation, clearly realizing it would be best to leave the sensitive subject aside as quickly as possible. They moved up the staircase and on to the first floor, she walked into the very first room on the right, just about dozen squares in size. A humble little room with nothing more than two small closets and one bed. It might have been insufficient to most people, but Nick was pleasantly smiling away as he went in after her. For him, that was more than adequate.

“One more thing,” she added just before her disinterested slamming of the door, “beginner classes will commence next week, but you won't be attending until you are told otherwise. For now, just rest.”

He carefully distributed his belongings into one of the closets right next the door and laid down on the bed, very pleased and very disappointed at the same time. His satisfaction and great joy came from the fact he still had someone to live with, someone to provide sincere advice and proper guidance and, once again, he had a place to call ‘home’, as well as someone he might eventually end up calling ‘family’.

His disappointment, on the other hand, was quite troublesome, and it was the very thing that dominated his mood. He couldn't figure out why Victoria was acting so unpleasantly almost the entire time; behaving like he's just a tedious guest she has to put up with until he finally packs his bags and vacates the premises. What if her attitude never changes? What if her attitude forces her father and her uncle to re-think their decision? Then what? Those were only some of the questions with no definitive answer in sight...