

Prologue - Wilfred

Wilfred dreamt a black and baleful dream. It was the same one he'd been having for the past eight months, but this one was no less terrifying than the first time. The fires and the screams were as vivid as they were on the day it truly happened. The nightmarish smoke filled his nose and the stench of burning flesh made his skin crawl just as it had every night before. As the straw and lumber pieces of the roof came crashing down around him, Wilfred awoke with a shriek and remembered gratefully that he was still in the library. As he raised his head, he got a glimpse of his master, still hard at work, peering down at a large opened book.

“Does the night frighten you, Wilfred?” Darrien Arlay murmured without lifting his head.

“No your Eminence.” He apologized shrilly, his throat not quite working. “Pardon me, your Eminence, I must have dozed off.” Darrien laughed a simple, spry laugh. As he did, his head jostled and his long, black hair bounced in the candle light and took on an apricot hue.

“It appears so.” He paused and uttered more softly, “Was it your parents again, Wilfred?”

He took a jagged breath, “Yes, your Eminence.”

Darrien looked up with deep golden eyes, and spoke in a tone as smooth and calm as a trickling stream, “I’m sorry that you are still plagued by your nightmares. A boy of twelve has a right to be. But, alas, we must continue our work.”

“As you say, your Eminence,” he piped in his low born accent.

In truth, Wilfred was not keen to get back to work after his dream. He wished he could forget the screams and moans of his parents. *But Darrien says we must face our grievances head on, like a blacksmith’s hammer pounding on an anvil. Only then can we grow stronger and finally move past what has happened to us,* he thought to himself.

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Wilfred sat up straighter, and his uneven wooden chair clacked against the stone floor. The night was rank with the smell of parchment and rot. Some of the manuscripts in the library were over a thousand years old, *or at least that's what Darrien had said*. Even though he had only been in the Grand Tilnar studying as a Subextris for the past eight months, *they should call it what it is; a glorified apprentice and errand boy*. The Tilnar's figures of authority had taught him to read and write. He never thought he'd become an apprentice of the Tilnar, but that is where Wilfred's life had brought him. Just as he settled his posture, a gust of wind freed one of the shutters on the far side of the library. The wind howled into the room like a waterfall into a stream. It warned of an impending storm far off in the distance. The wind also brought with it the salt kissed scent of Cemephor bay, about twenty miles to the north. It mixed in with Darrien Arlay's gentle scent of lavender and incense. The black wooden shutter hammered with malevolent glee on the outer walls of the Grand Tilnar.

Wilfred arose silently so that his master didn't break his concentration. He began to hobble over to the window. *Confounded leg*, he thought to himself. Ever since the fire and the falling roof debris he had walked with a hobble. His right leg became mangled. If it was one thing Wilfred hated, it was not being able to walk like he used to. He was more dismayed since the injury had ruined his dreams of going into the Imperial Army, and possibility of becoming a Knight. Even still, he liked to practice with swords. Wilfred crossed the modest library slowly and drew the shutter closed. Darrien had not flinched at all. The white and silver lined Garrlinei's Robes the middle-aged man wore were folded neatly along the back of his chair, and his light brown tunic and shabby umber pants were all he sported now. His long and methodical face, which Wilfred knew like a son knew a father, was not cunning and lively like it usually was. This hour, it was warped and squinted. The bridge of his pale,

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white nose had more wrinkles than a raisin in the sun. His deep golden eyes were scanning and darting, searching with purpose...for something.

Even after eight months Wilfred still felt like a stranger in this place. He mused that he could walk through the halls, waving a torch and screaming at the top of his lungs, and people would pay him no mind. That is, of course unless they needed him to do their dirty work. How many evenings had he spent scraping the floors, dusting shelves, and moving books or assorted sacks from one place to another? These were the chores he hated. It was all especially hard given his hobble. In fact, Wilfred realized he hated most of it. The endless reading, the quiet, the senselessness of it all. But there was one thing he liked, or rather one person that kept him returning day after day: Darrien Arlay.

Even though he yearned for his home, he felt at peace when Darrien was near. Darrien was a kind and dutiful master to Wilfred. He was glad that he was serving as Darrien's apprentice and not another's. Especially given that Darrien was a Garrlinei, a man who elects the next High Vitreyum, who is in charge of the Tilnar, the state religion of the Aldperium. Darrien was not any ordinary Garrlinei: he was more clever than all the rest, and more kind, too. In addition, he was a Magnate, a descendant of the conquerors of Aldomir, and the brother of a Duke. He was truly an ideal candidate to be the next High Vitreyum. Wilfred was honored to serve a man as noble and pious as Darrien.

"Now Wilfred, get back to searching. We must find the artifact as soon as we possibly can," Garrlinei Arlay muttered gutturally.

"Of course, your Eminence." Wilfred replied hurriedly.

He read for a few more hours and peered at page upon page of musty old books. Most were dingy, covered in holes from worms. Some were bound in sheepskin that stank of wet rot, and others were made of parchment so brittle. the slightest jolt would tear them in twain. The words in most of

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the ancient books were written in lavish script and black ink. The more Wilfred tried to read, the more the words became jumbled and smudged. His light hazel eyes glazed over, and he put his hands in his matted light brown hair. Sleep had eluded him for nearly three nights, as Darrien had made him search every evening for an artifact. That was all Darrien had ever told him, *search for the word artifact, you'll know it when you see it*. Wilfred grew frustrated as he had not seen any mention of it. His frustration was not enough to keep him awake. His youthful face began to slump and falter. He felt the void of sleep approaching him, and he laid his head down to rest once more, figuring that Garrlinei Arlay could not be too mad at him for taking a quick break, he had, after all, gotten almost no sleep helping his master for the past three nights.

What felt like several minutes passed, and Wilfred felt a hand on his pale, skinny arm. It jostled him and the brown robe with a white cowl which hung on his shoulders. Wilfred sat up and rubbed the dust out of his eyes. He heard no more virulent sounds from the night and figured the storm had passed. He got a fuzzy image of his master's face. The image grew clearer and he could see that his searching eyes, and scrunched up nose were gone. They had been replaced with a face of acceptance, and wide knowing eyes which spoke truth. He looked neither happy nor sad.

"I've found it." He said in utter disbelief. Wilfred looked down at the table, and noted a map of the Known World of Erridus. Many sprawling lines were drawn over the document and a dark inky point was set down in Aerafell across the Crescent Sea.

"Congratulations, your Eminence." Wilfred stuttered hesitantly.

"Although I've found this artifact, I've discovered a larger truth as well." Wilfred could have sworn his mentor's face grew pale as snow, and he noticed droplets of sweat beaming down his forehead.

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“Come now, quickly. I must speak with the High Vitreyum.” The Garrlinei arose and began to put on his neatly folded white robes. Before he could finish, Wilfred interjected,

“Surely, he is to be sleeping so late. At his age, he might like not to be disturbed.”

Darrien plunged his arm into the long and droopy sleeves. He absently fixed his appearance with gentle but rapid motions of his hands, lacing buttons, and moving the locks of his hair into a more orderly formation.

“Trust me, he’ll want to hear this, regardless of the hour.” Darrien grabbed the map, and handed a few books to Wilfred. He walked cautiously to the small wooden door which opened the library. The tall cases of books and thick scrolls danced with excitement when he removed a torch from the library wall. His master began to walk up the spiral staircase which led up and out of the room. The steps were so narrow and stoney Wilfred feared Darrien’s long robe might cause him to trip. Wilfred followed hesitantly. He held onto the map and manuscripts in one hand like a mother holding her children, and held onto any stones he could grab with the other hand, fearing he too may fall because of his leg.

The soft footfalls of their leather shoes echoed in the small stepped chamber, making it sound like an entire regiment of the Imperial Army was walking up with them. The pair finally reached the main hall of the Grand Tilnar.

His Eminence, the Garrlinei, was a tall man, but he was dwarfed by the vast main hall. He looked about the size of a mouse scampering across the diamond patterned granite floors. Wilfred hobbled after Darrien, passing the pairs of ornate columns and intricate stained glass windows on the left with no time to admire their bright colored motifs. On the other side of the elaborate hall, were yellow banners bearing the silver lacey four pointed symbol of the Tilnar upon them. Wilfred thought it odd that there were no guards in the main hall, even at this late hour, as they walked. He

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and Darrien were halfway to the end of the long corridor, and could see the red stained door to the living quarters of the High Vitreyum.

They passed by the stone entryway to the sermonary on their right. The dull light of the Ever-Flame, the massive brazier which adorned every Tilnar's sermonary, was so far away on the altar that it appeared like a firefly in the night. Wilfred struggled to keep up. He wanted so much to ask Darrien exactly what he had learned about this mysterious artifact, but the Garrlinei's face was stern and rigid, with eyes focused with the resolve of a king. Wilfred could tell he did not want to be spoken to. He suddenly felt an uneasiness fall over him as Darrien halted in his tracks, clapping a hand on Wilfred's chest to stop him too. His heartbeat soared, and his jaw snapped shut.

"What's wrong, your eminence?" Wilfred croaked quietly. Darrien glanced back, and Wilfred did the same. They could see a lone guard in silver colored armor in the distance wearing his helmet. The Holy Guard was patrolling as they often did. Darrien quietly began moving once again, and pushed Wilfred along in silence, not saying a word. They climbed yet another staircase leading up to High Vitreyum's chambers. Wilfred heard the guard behind them take a right, not following them anymore. As they reached the top, Darrien pushed Wilfred into a closet quickly, trying not to make a sound.

Darrien whispered "That was no guard."

Wilfred began to open his mouth. Darrien shot his Subextris a look with those brilliant golden eyes of his, and Wilfred remained silent.

"How do you know?" Wilfred whispered.

"They always patrol in pairs or threes." Then it dawned on Wilfred that his master was right.

"He may be here to harm his Holiness. Take the other stairs down, and get some guards. I will stay by his Holiness' door. Leave the books, we'll come back for them later."

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Wilfred and Darrien gave each other a wordless nod, and Darrien exited first, taking a left to the chambers of His Holiness. Sensing that the parchment he held in his hand could be important, Wilfred folded up the map Darrien had drawn and stuffed it in his pocket. Wilfred started right towards the guards' chambers. He shambled down the steps faster than he had walked in the past eight months. He panted heavily knowing the High Vitreyum's life may be in danger. He moved through the corridors and down to the guards' chamber in the bowels of the Grand Tilnar. In the dimly lit hall outside the chamber, three men sat in their polished grey armor. Wilfred sighed as he recognized them: Sir Diff, Sir Plym, and Sir Sten. They waited outside the chambers drinking and playing games as they usually did on their evening shifts.

“Oy, lookie here boys, it's little old Wilfred.” Sir Diff Rydell scoffed. His grey beard was matted with dried alcohol, and his beaten face was bloated from all the drinking.

“Come back to play with swords again? Watch that you don't get cut, or break your other leg.” Sir Plym Plynrose stuck his steel blade out at Wilfred, and laughed as he sheathed it again, his black hair and portly jowled face swinging jauntily as he did.

“His Holiness is in danger. Come, quickly.” Wilfred said.

“His Holiness is in danger, quick somebody let's go get the old fart some slippers so he doesn't feel the cold floor on his feet.” Sir Sten joked. The three burst out laughing.

“This is serious,” Wilfred pleaded. “Garrlinei Arlay thinks someone may be trying to kill him.” Their faces grew stern for a moment, and their eyes more focused. Then, they looked at each other and laughed heartily. Spittle flew out of their puffy lips.

“Is there anyone else on patrol right now?” Wilfred's eyes darted around desperately. “Where is Sir Willem Morrdane?”

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“How should I know? As far as I'm concerned everyone else is asleep.” Sir Diff said as he took another swig from his pouch. Wilfred instinctively knew the other guards who might take him seriously would take too long to get dressed. These three drunken fools were his only hope. Wilfred struggled, trying to think of a better way to convince them, as time was growing short. Desperately, Wilfred exclaimed;

“Think what His Holiness will give the three of you for saving his life. Perhaps he'll convince the Emperor to give you all Lordships, or gold, or food.”

The word food caught Sir Sten's inebriated attention. “I could really go for some mutton.” He said. The other two arose, and reached for their swords.

“Alright if you'll shut your damn mouth, we'll go up and check on His Oldliness.” Sir Diff scoffed. They grabbed Sten Maramill, stumbled through the dark corridor, moved out of it and took the path Wilfred had taken upstairs. They reached the end of the hall to the High Vitreyum's chambers, and Wilfred saw the white gleam of Darrien's robe far off in the distance. As the guards and Wilfred got closer to the chamber, they could hear what sounded like clanking armor moving up another staircase.

The lone guard Wilfred and Darrien had witnessed previously entered the hallway and started towards where Darrien Arlay stood. Wilfred and the drunken guards were now looking at the polished back of the figure's armor.

“Oy, you there, what's your name?” Sir Diff called out.

The figure paused and slowly turned around to face them. The guards approached the armor suited person. Wilfred trailed behind them. Firelight danced and flickered creating shadows along the long corridor.

“Take off your helm.” Sir Diff demanded, all traces of his inebriation were gone now.

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They met near the middle of the hallway. Wilfred's legs began to quake. His eyes grew watery and he felt his heart turn to stone as it sank into his stomach. The figure was now only a few paces away. Wilfred shivered involuntarily, *can these three drunkards really protect me?*

“Are you soft in the head? I said take it off. Or I'll take it off for you.” Diff grew angry now, and unsheathed his sword. He shoved the polished steel blade under the space in between the helmet and the body of the metal suit. With a drunken but deft flick of the wrist, the sword suddenly freed the helmet and it clanged loudly as it hit the ground, bouncing and rolling. Wilfred stood lack-jawed and baffled by what he saw. He felt the terror in his heart bubbled in his throat. Inside the armor was a figure clad in a golden cloak. The face was blackened by black shadows that seemed to dance around the maw of the cowl.

The silhouetted figure began to unbuckle the straps of his armor in a flash of leather gloves. Each piece of the armor fell noisily to the ground as he did. Wilfred had never seen any man move so quickly. By the time the armor was unhinged the other two Knights had drawn their swords in defense and crouched down, getting ready to strike. Though they were still drunk, they seemed to sober as they got ready to fight. The figure stood there wearing only a golden cloak. A gloved hand reached into the robe and pulled out a knife. The long hilt was black, and ornate. Even in the dim torchlight, the young Subextris could tell that the Knife was Melridium from the pale silver-green color. Melridium had been forged by the Ancients long ago. It was said to be sharp enough to cut through solid stone, and never dulled. It was very rare. The only reason Wilfred knew it existed was because he'd read about it in an old book a few weeks ago. Wilfred realized he was holding his breath, and slowly released it.

The figure slid its leg towards Sir Diff at lightning speed, tripping him and sending his sword clattering to the floor. Diff lay prone on his back and held up his hands to protect himself. The figure

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twirled the blade downward with lightning speed. The knife slashed clean through Sir Diff's supple pink flesh as if it weren't even there. Wilfred gasped and leaped backwards as the figure turned his attention to Sir Sten and Sir Plym. The figure pushed them back into another corridor. Swords and daggers flew and clashed. Wilfred turned as fast as his good leg would allow, and hobbled past the fighting to Darrien Arlay.

Darrien met him midway through the hall. Wilfred turned back to see blood oozing from the corridor over the grey granite floors turning them red. The golden figure was running towards the Garrlinei and the Subextris now. The assassin moved with such grace it almost seemed as though he didn't touch the ground. Darrien grabbed his apprentice's shoulders and shouted at him,

"Run!" Wilfred stood unable to move, paralyzed by fear. "Run!" Darrien commanded again louder. Wilfred lunged awkwardly down the hall. He tried to sprint with all his might to reach the High Vitreyum's door, but he could only muster the speed of a light jog. He prayed incoherently in his head desperately to Garros and any of the other three gods that would hear him, *please help, protect, save all of us, I'm not ready to die*. He could feel his lungs squeezing and rasping for air. He turned back for a split second to look at Darrien. Wilfred let out a squeak,

"Master" he gasped, but he realized he was too late.

The golden cloaked figure grabbed Darrien Arlay's shoulder. Garrlinei Arlay was unable to move or fight back as he was thrown violently to the ground. The figure kicked him viciously in the abdomen with his booted heel flashing. Darrien had no weapons and no way to defend himself, so he tried to swing a kick from the ground at his opponent. But the golden cowl merely jumped over him and to the other side so that his back was now to Wilfred. His master became obscured by the mysterious silhouette. In a flash of white robe Darrien sprang to his feet, and attempted to punch the

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figure. His fist lobbed through the air hitting nothing as the shadowy creature dodged it with ease, ducking underneath, and bringing his Melridium knife to Darrien's gut.

Darrien fell to the ground as blood poured from his pierced stomach. The gash was a long one, Wilfred could see. The man wrapped in golden cloth paused, produced a small piece of fabric from the drooped sleeves, and gently cleaned his blade. As his prey lay there writhing. Wilfred looked on horrified, and welled up with sadness and grief. His legs buckled under the enormity of his feelings. Wilfred fell to his knee and began to gasp in a silent scream.

He watched in frozen terror as his friend's blood puddled. Garrlinei Arlay's hands covered his robe as if trying to stop the bleeding, but to no avail. His robes were more red than white now, and they continued to become more impure with every waning moment. Darrien's motions slowed as he began to accept his fate. His melancholy eyes met Wilfred's down the hallway, and they remained, staring at him, unmoving, and lifeless. And then they closed. The Subextris let out a quivering breath, unaware that he had been holding it and cowered against the cold stone wall, wondering if the yellow cloaked figure would now come for him. But, in fact, the assassin seemed to have forgotten him.

The fearsome robe-clad figure knelt down, his back to Wilfred, at the still form of Darrien Arlay, taking special care not to get his own cloak dirty in the pool of blood. The assassin put his shrouded gloved hands over the now dead Darrien Arlay. Wilfred wondered what he could be doing. He was frozen in place fear and morbid fascination. But then the body of Wilfred's master writhed and wriggled with unnatural movement. It continued to shake and shudder for a few moments. Wilfred felt his heart soar with new hope that perhaps his master had survived after all. The assassin then took his hands off the body and Darrien was still once more. Darrien's face slumped and fell unnaturally into itself. The body lost all form and shape until it was a pile of dust on the ground. The

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ashen powder wafted and spun into the air as if buoyed by an unseen draft. The blood too turned to dust, and the room was once more clean as if nothing had happened.

The golden robed figure now slowly arose and stood for a moment unmoving. He twitched his neck to the right, and then the left, and then removed his hood and turned laboriously to face Wilfred. Wilfred's reality crumpled in around itself. His heart thudded in his ears like the sound of a comet hitting the earth. He blinked his eyes, not believing what he was seeing, for surely it was impossible. Wilfred was not looking at the face of the killer but rather the face of Darrien Arlay.

The figure moved with inhuman speed towards him. He knew he had to escape. He hobbled, trying desperately to outrun whatever this thing was, but to no avail. The ominous, yellow cowl and the creature inside of it finally reached Wilfred. The gentle scent of incense and lavender no longer were present when he looked at the face of his master. He stared into the eyes of his companion who had just turned to ash. He gazed at them for a moment, seeing that the love and compassion that were once there were gone. They had been replaced by anger and hate.

Wilfred's fist shot out in self-defense as he tried to punch the man much in the same way that Darrien had. He found he had no breath with which to scream, destroying all chances that someone would miraculously come to his aid. Even if he had possessed a strong lung full of air, a hand clamped over his mouth and nose like a vice, preventing precious air from entering. Wilfred struggled, knowing his very life depended on it. He frantically looked up to the ceiling and began to pray to Garros in his head, *forgive me Garros. Allow me to be reborn and find joy in my next life on Erridus...* His lungs convulsed from the lack of air, and his prayer was cut short. His vision began to tunnel. Just as the black edges crept forward to his eyes, the hand loosened its grip and he gasped for a lifesaving breath. He looked up at the man who appeared like Darrien Arlay, his master, his friend, and then down again to the man's other hand in which rested a stone. The stone was orange with

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flecks of dark red and brown. It appeared to have the texture of rough sanded glass and the shape of an oval. It fit in the man's hand but was slightly larger than his palm.

Wilfred's mind clouded with fear, and he looked at the stone with bewilderment not realizing that the man before him had closed his eyes. The gloved hand crushed the strange stone with ease, and Wilfred saw a brilliant flash of orange light. The light was brighter than anything he had ever seen. His eyes squeezed shut involuntarily and he winced in pain as the light seemed to shoot straight into his brain. It appeared to wash away the feelings of anger and sorrow he was encumbered with. Then the light stopped, and Wilfred could feel his body being picked up and placed over the shoulder of the thing that had killed his master. In a split second everything went black, and Wilfred could feel himself slipping away. Whether he was headed to death or to unconsciousness, he did not know. Wilfred's body fell limp as the golden robed figure carried him off.