

PROLOGUE

It was dark in the tunnels when Wendelmar fled, running as fast as his legs would take him. Or, at least, what remained of his legs. He could hear the wind howling on the other side of the wall; freedom seemed just centimetres from him as he navigated each turn from memory, having studied the layout before coming to the house upon his master's tasking. A tasking that would have made him a hero, had he not failed.

Each movement was agony. His eyes narrowed and his mouth formed a permanent knot as his body reacted to each jarring step that pounded the hard wooden ground below him. The opening that he had found so easily from the outside only a few hours ago now seemed much further away, obscured in the darkness of the night, as if to taunt him further.

Occasionally, he would rest against the wall, every part of his body pleading for him to stop, his mind encouraging him to continue despite his wounds. *I must get home*, he would think, before urging his body to shamble further along the tunnel.

After what felt like an eternity, the chill of the outside wind brushed his few remaining whiskers. The cool breeze wrapped itself around his body and embraced him as he followed its touch, caressing his few patches of remaining skin.

The moving air brought attention to the wet spots on his face and body.

Is it water? Or is it blood? he thought. *I mustn't stop to find out.*

As he rounded the last corner, running against the wind, his heart stuttered. The faint light of the glowing moon pierced through an opening up ahead, like a beacon in the night. Unable to restrain himself, Wendelmar began to cry tears of joy. He felt as though an immense weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Upon entering the tunnel, he had not known whether his injuries would mean his end within the abyss-like darkness, and as he stumbled out into the cool night air, elation began to dull some of the pains in his limbs. With newfound vigour, he decided that he was not going to die this night.

He limped his way out of the opening and slowed to a stop on the roof's edge, surveying the land before him. It was a stark contrast to the view from earlier, before the sun had finished its long journey from one side of the sky to the other. He recalled seeing several manicured hedges surrounding a well-kept lawn. Beyond the hedges, there were trees as tall as buildings, and taller still, spotting the landscape all the way to the horizon, upon which stood rolling hills and dipping valleys that broke the line between land and sky.

The sights that he remembered stretching out beyond the house were now hidden beneath the dark blanket of night. Small reflections of moonlight danced and gleamed from the distant stream, which cut through the land, and flowed towards his home.

After he had allowed himself a moment to compose his mind and body, he gently wiped the tears from his eyes, careful not to aggravate the hypersensitive patches of skin that now covered his face, and felt around for the vine he had used to climb the walls of the house.

Sudden movement appeared and disappeared within the depths of the night. He froze in place, scanning the distance, moving only his eyes to avoid detection.

It appeared again. This time, he locked onto it and noticed a bright light drawing closer, which flashed as it moved between the valleys and trees. He remained like a statue in the shadows, watching and

waiting while the light turned towards the house, splitting into two beams.

The beams seemed to float, creeping their way around unseen obstacles, getting larger and brighter as they steadily approached the house. The crackle of gravel filled the silent air. Wendelmar kept his body as rigid as he could manage, his muscles stiffening and cramping, though he willed himself not to falter, fearing that the slightest movement could reveal him in all his vulnerability.

Just as his body began to shudder in protest, the lights came to a stop, pointing towards the house, and basking the previously unseen hedge in a piercing cone of light.

It was silent for a moment, and Wendelmar gently released a raspy breath upon realising that he had been holding it in. His ears remained standing at attention, listening for the slightest sign of movement, when suddenly the lights turned off, and everything was dark once more, save for the two red spots that had burnt into his retinas.

There was a *thud*, quickly followed by a second, which echoed from within the darkness where the lights had been, and then muffled voices. Wendelmar blinked frantically, trying to clear the spots from his vision. The voices spoke quietly for a little while, one man and one woman, from what he could make out, before a third and final *thud* rang through the valley and the voices ceased. The only sound that remained was quiet, crunching footsteps on the gravel, making their way towards the house.

Wendelmar turned his head, angling his ears to keep silently following the footsteps. As they got nearer, the steps changed from the crunching of gravel to the hollow sound of concrete.

A cold sweat enveloped Wendelmar when the footsteps tapped the solid ground directly below him. He knelt down and grasped the ledge with his hands and feet, careful to not falter, as even the slightest sound now would surely reveal his position.

Metal ground against wood, and a sliver of light filled the courtyard. Two elongated shadows, undoubtedly human, stepped into the

house. One appeared to be carrying something in its arms, and while Wendelmar strained his eyes to try and identify the unusual shape, the sliver of light grew thinner, until the door clicked shut. The courtyard was once again quiet, save for the muffled conversation coming from behind the door.

This is my chance, he thought, grabbing the vine he had seen in the light from the front door and scrambling down it as quickly as he could, taking care not to fall, which would surely mean his end.

He reached the bottom of the vine, dropping the last few centimetres onto the gravel. The jagged edges of the small rocks caused him to shriek, but he threw his disfigured hands up and wrapped them tightly around his mouth to stop the worst of the sound from coming out.

After regaining his composure, he began to stagger towards the wall of hedges opposite the doors. The image of the small gap in the branches he had travelled through earlier, which would lead him back towards the stream, was now burning in his mind, acting as a compass through the dark. He stood on his two hind legs, his arms outstretched to maintain his balance, as he tiptoed his way through the gravel. It was agony to be sure, and extremely slow going, but limiting the pain to only two of his limbs would ensure that his arms remained refreshed for their upcoming trial. That could mean the difference between his survival and his death.

The grass couldn't have come quickly enough. The cool, soft blades immediately sent waves of relief upwards through his feet, beginning to soothe the cuts and burns on their soles and up his legs. For a moment, he lay down in the grass. The euphoric feeling that the cool caress of the wind and the damp touch of the grass provided him could not be explained in words, and for the duration, his mind quietened, and he felt no fear.

The moon was almost directly above Wendelmar now. Its faint glow distorted the world and made the tall hedge before him resemble an endless wall of hands reaching out towards him, beckoning for him to

remain with them forever, but he could not. He had to get home. He needed to survive.

Groaning, he pulled himself back to his feet. His body felt slightly refreshed, and he had conjured newfound motivation, certain that he would make it back to his family at all costs.

Without much effort at all, he pushed his way through the small gap in the hedge. The valley now stretched out in front of him, and it seemed far larger than when he had peered down onto it from the roof of the house. The stream at the bottom of the valley looked like a silver serpent in the night; it wriggled its way from left to right, the wind caused small ripples on its surface, and when the light caught those ripples, it appeared as though it were covered in scales, and very much alive.

Wendelmar shuddered at the thought of a serpent so large, and with only the slightest hesitation, took off towards the base of the valley. He tried to slow himself as he approached the stream, but his footing gave way. He rolled headfirst down the last few metres of grass, coming to a sudden stop on the bank, his hands splayed out wide beside him to support his fall. His head came to a sudden stop, hovering just above the mirror-like surface.

His breathing stopped once more as he peered at the stranger reflected in the water just below him. He had not seen his body properly since he'd been injured, and what was revealed in the haunting moonlight caused pained shivers to run from the tip of his snout to the end of his tail.

The first change that caught his eye was his distorted whiskers. He had previously flaunted a thick tuft of whiskers on either side of his nose, an impressive feat indeed for such a young Malum. All that remained now were several short and charred hairs, hanging limply from his cheeks, which were certainly nothing to be proud of. Had he not already been partnered for life and started his family, he would surely have feared that this would scare off prospective mates, and ensure his life was spent in painful isolation.

He got to his feet and stood further over the water, inspecting the rest of his body. The silvery hair that had covered it was gone. His body was as bald as his nose, weeping in places from the severe burns he had received earlier in the night, when he had been thrown into the piercing tongues of flame. His tail, once of formidable length and strength, was now nothing but a stump. It made him think of a tree that had just been cut down, once so full of life, now nothing more than an inconvenience and an eyesore.

Wendelmar fell to his bottom. Tears began filling his burnt eyelids, as he held his head and wept silently. His mind filled with the thought of returning home to a family that might not even recognise him, and his stomach felt sick.

After a short time pondering how he would reveal himself to his family and what they might think of him, Wendelmar pulled himself to his feet and shook off his shame, at least for now. He focused on only one thing, which was that he wanted to live, and to do that, he needed to be strong.

Inspecting the tunnel in the rock wall to his right, he pictured his home, Mundus, an indeterminate distance downstream from where he now stood. The journey here in the daylight had been a long trek across the land, but fate seemed to agree with Wendelmar's will to survive, and for his return journey, he would have to do nothing more than walk into the stream, where he would be carried gently home.

He waded into the depths of the stream. Each step sent chills deep into his flesh, but gradually, his body adjusted and found the temperature of the water to be quite refreshing. Once he was able to, he lay on his back, gently waving his arms and legs alongside him, and he allowed the current to pull his body towards home.

He stared at the moon. Its large, round surface always inspired his imagination, and he smiled, thinking of how it was always changing, new marks seemingly appearing from nowhere, yet everybody still recognised it as the moon. This filled him with hope that his family

would still recognise him, despite the grotesque appearance he now lived with.

The white orb of the moon disappeared from view for a few seconds as Wendelmar floated under the rock wall, which passed over him like a silent giant in the night.

He was completely at ease for the first time since he had left home that very morning. The water made his body feel just as it did before the attack; it felt relaxed, it felt whole, it felt like him. Whether it was the sheer exhaustion, the pain catching up to him, or the relaxing setting he now found himself in, he couldn't be sure, but he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep, just as his body drifted further from danger and closer to the safety of his home.

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'Wake up!'

A bucket of water, alongside the unfamiliar stern voice, shocked Wendelmar back to consciousness. He coughed up the water that had lodged itself in his throat and rubbed his eyes as they adjusted to the light.

'Wh... Where am I?' he asked, feeling hard ground under him, and not the stream of water that he was expecting to still be floating down.

He could hear someone on either side of him, but the one to his left spoke first.

'You're home, Wendelmar. We found you in the stream in the early light of dawn and pulled you out. We debated leaving you, as from all appearances you looked to be dead.'

Wendelmar turned to the voice, and his eyes began to focus on the figure before him. It was indeed one of the guards from his home. The shield and spear were the familiar design of his master's army.

The other guard on his right spoke next, with a bitter tone to his voice. 'Well,' he said, snickering, 'it's your home for now, assuming

you completed your mission. Guess we'll just have to wait and see what the master has to say.'

A lump formed in Wendelmar's throat. He knew the time was almost upon him and his master would soon learn of his failure. He had tried his best, and that was all he could have done. In his heart, he hoped that his master would pity his new deformities, but he was not naïve.

He shrugged off the cruel statement as just a jealous comment from the guard. There were indeed many people whose jealousy had grown after Wendelmar was chosen to complete the master's vital mission. It was not something he had any memory of volunteering for; in fact, the days leading up to the attempted assassination appeared as nothing more than a blur in his mind. He wondered if, perhaps, there were higher powers at play, but who was he to question his fate?

Pulling himself to his feet, he was rudely reminded of the pain throughout his body. His mind instantly flashed with images of the night prior and the events leading him home. It seemed almost unbelievable, and he wondered if other Malum would accuse him of exaggerating his adventure so to win favour.

After a quick survey of his surroundings, Wendelmar realised that he was indeed in Mundus, but not somewhere he had spent much time before. He was inside the throne room. It was still very early in the morning, so the room was only dimly lit by the climbing sun, which had begun to penetrate the small holes in the side walls. Faint shafts reached down to the compressed dirt floor, like lines of rain falling from the clouds.

At the far end of the room hung the balcony from where his master and king, Azul, often addressed the subjects that entered his chamber. A large sheet of tattered fabric flowed from the ceiling above the balcony in an attempt to conceal whatever lay behind it. The king hadn't been seen outside of this room for quite some time, since his rise to power and crowning, a terrifying ceremony that had trapped many a Rat King within these walls.

Wendelmar's eyes fixed upon the curtain as he noticed it moving

in places, an indication that the king would be appearing soon. The guard on his right, who addressed him with more bitterness than the one on his left, spoke first.

‘The king will be here soon; he ordered that you be brought here first. You know how important this mission was to him.’ He fidgeted where he stood, speaking more softly as he did so. ‘To all of Mundus.’

With what little energy remained in Wendelmar’s body, he pulled a chair from a nearby table and sat, waiting for his master to arrive, wondering what would happen to him when he announced his failure. The faces of his children and wife lingered in his mind as the tortuous silence continued.

Wendelmar dozed off again, and one of the guards nudged him. The touch on his burnt skin caused him to jump awake, and he stood at attention as the curtain rose slowly, just enough for the king to walk out to the ledge, lowering again before the shadowy mound behind him could come into full detail.

Azul was a large Malum, twice the size of any other in their home. His face was scarred on one side; the scar ran from his neck all the way up to the middle of his head, tracing a path through his right eye, which was now nothing more than a milky orb. His unsettling grin was a permanent feature on his face. Atop his head was an extremely small golden crown, simple to some, but everything for this Malum king.

Azul’s eyes traced Wendelmar’s figure from head to toe. The grin on his face shrunk slightly.

‘Well?’ The deep, booming voice penetrated Wendelmar’s very being as it echoed through the hall. ‘Did you complete your mission? Did you kill the girl?’

Drool started to pool in the gaps between his teeth. He leaned over the balcony, his black eyes piercing into Wendelmar.

‘My king...’ Wendelmar fell to his knees, focusing on the ground as he spoke of his failure. ‘I went to the house as you ordered. The girl was there, alone, as you said she would be, and I attacked her from the darkness...’

‘And?’ Long, silvery trails began to fall from Azul’s fetid mouth as he leaned further over the balcony.

‘...My king.’ Wendelmar’s voice faltered slightly as he braced every muscle in his body and mind. ‘She defended herself well. She brandished a weapon of steel and cast me into a fire as I jumped at her for the kill.’

Azul turned sharply away, his back now facing Wendelmar, his shoulder muscles tensing.

‘And how is it that you survived, Wendelmar? Fire would have consumed you in mere seconds.’

Wendelmar could sense the anger radiating from his master. He chose his next words carefully, hoping not to aggravate Azul.

‘It was by the same hand that cast me into the flames, my king. The girl cared for me as she addressed my failure, before freeing me into the night.’ His voice shook and his stare bored deeper into the ground, trying to avoid his master’s imposing figure.

There was silence for a long time before Wendelmar spoke again.

‘Please, my king. The pain fills my body, and I only wish to see my family.’

At this, Azul sneered, snapping back around with such ferocity that globules of hot saliva flung themselves around the room and splashed onto the compressed dirt floor. ‘Failures do not get to see their families, Wendelmar. This you should know.’

A pit began to form in Wendelmar’s throat, and he forced himself to speak through it.

‘Have mercy, my king, I beg you.’

Azul stared down at Wendelmar for a long while, which felt like an eternity to the cowering and wounded Malum. A sneer began to spread across Azul’s cracked lips, before he addressed his audience with a disturbing level of pride.

‘I think I shall tell them you are dead and you brought great shame upon them. Meanwhile, you can rot in the dungeon and think on your failure until I feel you are worthy of being put out of your misery.’

Azul stormed off and pushed his way back through the curtain, which rippled from floor to ceiling as he disappeared into it.

Wendelmar jumped to his feet once more and screamed after his master. 'King Azul! Please, I beg of you, tell my family I am alive! Let them see me!'

At this, Azul ferociously rushed back through the curtain and threw himself at the balcony ledge, signalling to his guards with a wave of his hand, who threw Wendelmar to the ground, right at the base of the balcony.

'You dare call me by my name?' Azul screamed, as saliva dripped on Wendelmar from above. 'Your family would be disgusted at the very sight of you. Anyone would. My guards are going to make sure that nobody can ever see the monster you have become. It won't even be possible for you to see your own reflection ever again; this is the only mercy I will afford you.'

Azul nodded to the guards, who stepped forward and picked up Wendelmar by the arms, dragging him off to the side of the hall, into a purposely dark tunnel that led to the sprawling dungeons below.

'Please, my king, please!' Wendelmar screamed, as Azul once again shoved through the curtain. Out of pure desperation, Wendelmar turned his attention to the guards. 'Please! You must let me go!'

The guards ignored his pleas for help and, after a short time, came to a stop at the furthest end of the dungeon. They turned a key in an ancient lock and threw open the door to the cell. The hallways were faintly lit by tiny peepholes in the roof; however, no light penetrated the blackness within the cell. It was true dark.

The guards threw Wendelmar in, quickly pulling the door shut and sealing him into his living tomb.

'Now nobody will ever have to see such a hideous monster,' one of the guards said, before they locked the door and marched back down the hallway.

'AZUL! LET ME GO! AZUUUUUL!'

Wendelmar's cries reverberated in the dungeon as he fell to the

cold, hard ground, not able to see even his nose in front of him. He screamed until his throat was bloody and each cough triggered sharp pains throughout his body. He wept to himself, silently accepting his failure and thinking of his family, and of the girl who was compassionate enough to save him, even though he had tried to kill her at the order of his cruel master, the wicked king, Azul.