

MAGE
EMERGENCE

Christopher George

Emergence

/ ɪˈmɜːdʒ(ə)ns/

- the process of becoming visible after being concealed.
- the process of coming into existence or prominence.

PROLOGUE

And so we come to the end. It is fitting that my ending takes place where I began. It is also perhaps fitting that I am surrounded by the ruins of the city in which I was born. This is my legacy. I leave behind me only waste and desolation. Those who come after me will not remember my name fondly. Any friends and family who still remain behind will not even know I have passed. There will be no one to mourn my name when I am gone. Yet, I am content. This is as it should be.

My name is Devon Wills and I am going to die very soon. I can feel it in my bones. I can taste it in the very air around me. With each passing moment I become more certain that I will not survive the night. Even as I kill more of those sent to end me, I know it is simply a matter of time. I have already dispatched three teams of soldiers who sought to kill me, but it will not be such as those that will be my downfall - it will be my former master. I glance down at my watch uncertainly. It's past time. He is late.

My former master is Victor Whittlesea and he is never unintentionally late.

I grip the mobile phone in my pocket nervously as I glance across the city. I'm not looking at the city as it is now, with its fallen towers and burning streets. I'm not seeing the scavengers hiding in bolt holes and sewers. Their fates don't interest me. I look past the gangs and marauders who have taken control of the streets since all order had fallen. No, I'm looking at the city as it had once been.

God knows it hasn't been perfect -- we've had homelessness and graffiti, vandalism and muggings in the past -- but it was better than this. It had worked. It deserves better than this. I remember shopping with my father at a small supermarket that was now a pile of rubble. I had eaten at a restaurant that has since been gutted and opened to the elements.

I had probably ridden the exact tram car that was now smashed and lying abandoned in the middle of the street.

I don't care to see the people on the street below now, as they fight and kill each other. I know in my heart that many are just victims of circumstance and they aren't truly responsible for their actions, but it doesn't really make much difference at the end of the day. A starving man killing another for tinned fruit is still just as damaged as a psychopath who kills for pleasure. The damage is still done and there is no coming back. I know all too well the damage done by being forced to commit murder. I have killed many times and I will kill again, once more at least.

I still see those who have fallen before me when I close my eyes. I hear their death screams and I remember the light as it left their eyes. Yes, there is truly no coming back from inflicting death. I am broken, but I am not unusual in that. Everyone in the city below me is broken in one way or another. I wonder how many new damaged souls have been created as our 'war' intensifies across the globe. It had begun so simply and has spiralled out of control so quickly.

Our kind spread like wildfire across the globe as we turned upon each other in righteous fury. We fought each other in an attempt to prove our dominance over one another and we had dragged the rest of the world along with us.

I had chosen to stand against my kind. I saw them as nothing more than a cancer on the face of world that needed purging. We were the evil. We were the ones who had started all this. Our quest for power had brought the old world down. I knew the hypocrisy of my statement, as amongst my peers I was the most responsible, but that just meant I had to be the one to do something. Many of my kind had fallen to me, but there were always more. As the war expanded across Europe and then into the United States I realised I could no longer work alone. The collateral damage was too much. This war needed to end.

What had started as a conventional war had twisted into something new, something more dangerous - a mage war. In a conventional war, the winner is usually determined by who has the better tech. A mage war winner is determined by one simple factor – power. Whichever side has the more powerful mages wins.

That didn't matter to me though. With every fallen mage on both sides, my objectives would be furthered. The death of my kind would relieve the shackles held around the world's throat. This war would pass, and people would recover, and the countries and economies would regrow. Soon the world would return to the old ways and it would be as

if our kind never existed. I was a fool. It had taken me far too long to see this simple truth: the old world was gone. In the end I was forced to come to the same conclusion as everyone else. There simply wasn't enough left to save. Our war had changed everything.

Only one true relic remains from the old world: my former master. And I am going to remedy that tonight.

Victor is here; he has been for some time now. He isn't hiding from me. He is far too sure of himself for that. So why does he delay? I am here, alone and unarmed. Well, at least as unarmed as our kind can be. Why hasn't he struck me down yet? I'm sure it's not through a lack of motivation. He's already tried to kill me before.

He had almost been successful, too, on several occasions. Instead he had left me crippled and broken. Only my magic prevented my injuries from seriously handicapping me. I had used Mana to make myself powerful once again. I had used it to keep myself mobile. I had used it because I had no other choice. Without my powers I was as feeble as a child, barely able to walk or hold myself upright, but with them I was unstoppable.

Victor and I are probably the last two most powerful practitioners of our art left. Once he deals with me he will have free reign and stand supreme. His domination will be complete and he will rule over the remains of our planet with a tyrannical fist. The problem is, should I survive, my rule won't be any less brutal. I've already proved I am capable of acts no less savage than his. My evil is just as pronounced as his. It doesn't really matter who wins – our future is fucked either way.

I don't much like my chances of survival, but I am going to fight anyway. Why? Because I have no choice – this conflict needs to end. I know it and so does Victor. All he has to do is come and finish me off. And here I am, standing on a building rooftop in plain sight. Surely this opportunity is too much to pass up? So why isn't he here? I check my watch again.

“Victor!” I call out, using my Mana to amplify my voice. “Come out and finish this. It is time!”

My voice would have been heard across every inch of this city. He would have heard me, but more so he would have felt the Mana surge across the city as I amplified my voice. I can still see the shockwave caused by my Mana passing over the smouldering rubble of once-familiar buildings and across the beloved landmarks of my childhood now falling into ruins.

The loud explosion of sound that usually precedes a teleport spell brings me spinning around to face my old master. It is time. I casually clip the loose battery on my mobile phone into place and close the lid. I carefully flick the phone on, never once taking my eyes from my adversary. The familiar electronic jingle notifies me that it has finished loading and then I drop it into the rubble beneath me as I step forward and look at my upcoming death squarely in the eyes. I grip my fingers into fists to steady my nerves. I will not flinch in the face of it. I am ready.

This is how it ends. It is fitting. Let me now tell you how this begins.

CHAPTER ONE

My eyes flared as the sound of rockets firing overhead blocked out all other noise. I shuddered involuntarily as debris of dust and ash washed over me like a wave of seawater on a beach. I gritted the dirt beneath my fists as I pulled myself back onto my feet and drew upon my powers. The sound of gunfire echoed across my shield as I made my way across the battlefield. I vaguely heard the screams of the dying as I wade through the rubble, but I ignored them. I didn't turn to look at them, I didn't need to see them. I knew they were there and there were too many to count. They either fell because I was unable to protect them or they fell because they chose to stand against me. Either way, they meant nothing to me now.

I made my way into the abandoned building at the other end of the field. The bullets on my shield were nothing more than a steady stream of noise. With a wave of my hand I brought the doors barring my entrance to the ground, their fall echoing through the remains of the gutted building. The building shuddered as the doors hit the marbled floor and dust fell from its ancient ceiling. The building at some point must have been a church; it had the look of a place of sacred worship, but now it was nothing more than a barricade to those who would stop me.

I ignored the terrified shouts and further volleys of rifle fire that ricocheted off my shield. I was way past the point where conventional weapons could harm me. Only one thing gave me pause, and that was the figure on the far side of the church crouched behind the overturned altar.

With a snarl I tore the pews from the floor and sent them smashing out towards the back of the church. The wooden benches did nothing to those huddled behind the altar, but

they ended the others who weren't so lucky to be behind solid cover. A vortex of splintered wood and furniture cascaded out in every direction as my Mana tore the place apart.

The Mana signature of the figure on the other side of the church flared in response to my assault. From the look of the flare, the figure was a powerful member of my former order. I couldn't see the figure properly through the shadow and the dust in the room, but the shield surrounding it was impressive. It was a problem though; I'd broken through stronger shields.

I didn't give the mage a chance to strike first. I reached out with both hands and tore the altar from the ground. It was heavy marble; only another mage could have turned it on its side. With a contemptuous flick of my wrists I sent the altar flying backwards, slamming into the crowd it was supposed to be protecting.

They didn't stand a chance. The soldiers using the altar as firing cover were immediately killed as the several hundred tonne table tore through them. The loud explosion of air and flash of Mana indicated that the weight had been sufficient to bring my opponent's shield down.

The altar had smashed into pieces by the impact and covered a wide area of the church floor. Two large chunks of marble lay over the body of the fallen mage, but I had to be sure. I couldn't leave anyone behind – I'd made that mistake before. It was better to be sure, better to make certain they were dead. I needed to see the Mana fade from their body as their life left them.

I hurled the crumbling marble away as I surveyed my handiwork. The body of the mage lay crumpled on his stomach. No, that wasn't right, my opponent wasn't a man. She was a woman -- but the gender of my enemy made little difference. In Mana potential, women were just as powerful as men. I couldn't make out any more details as dust and rubble covered most of the slender woman.

I gazed down on her body. She was obviously dead; her Mana had long since faded. There was no need to look at her face, but morbid curiosity got the better of me. With shaking hands I pulled her over onto her back. I gritted my teeth as I noticed her hair was reddish brown. My breath caught in my throat as her face rolled over into view.

Renee.

My scream echoed throughout my skull and I awoke in a fit of panic and sweat. I had had the dream again. I rubbed layers of grime and sweat from my face as I surveyed my

surroundings. It took me longer than it should have to realise where I was. The room around me was utilitarian and bleak. I was in an underground bunker. This room was designed to sleep twelve soldiers, but due to my privilege I was currently its only occupant.

I was grateful for this small mercy. I wouldn't have wanted any to witness my sleep. As far as the others were concerned, I didn't need sleep, I didn't need air -- hell, I didn't even need food. I needed this illusion to be maintained. If they learned I was just as clueless and directionless as they were, they would turn on me in an instant.

I pulled myself up from my bed, using my arms to support my weight. I cursed the numbness in my legs that meant this was a necessity, but there was nothing I could do about that. I glanced briefly at the clock. It's flashing digits told me that it was 3:00am. It was too early to get up. It didn't matter much though, I had no intention to returning to sleep. I pulled my feet from the bed and gently rested them on the floor.

I grimaced slightly at the painful sensation of setting my feet on the solid concrete. It was a bittersweet pain. It meant I wasn't totally paralysed, but I wasn't getting any better either. I grunted as I activated the Mana that would restore my motility. Using my Mana to support my actions had once been a huge drain, but I had quickly learned to compensate. I would never be an athlete or be able to move spryly, but I could move around without being dependent upon others, and that was all that really mattered.

I sighed as I used my powers to pull myself to my feet and willed my legs to make me walk. The walking was an unnecessary affectation. I didn't need to make myself walk; I could have simply glided across the floor like a ghost, but I didn't want that. I didn't want anything that would make me seem weak. I could walk, I wasn't crippled. I was strong. No one could say otherwise. I wouldn't allow anyone to see otherwise.

I pushed the door to the bathroom open and blinked as the lights flickered on. This bathroom was again meant to serve a dozen soldiers; again it served only me. I moved over to one of the sinks and ran some water over my face. I gazed into the mirror with disdain. I needed a haircut and shave, but again these civilities didn't really matter much in this time either. Most of my soldiers sported similar growth. No, it was my scars that bore my attention. My face was calloused and cracked, sporting ugly scars that ran the length of my features. My skull had been fractured and broken in my final fight with my former master and I bore the marks of this defeat for all to see. I ran my fingers across the length of one scar. It wasn't such cosmetic damage such as these scars that worried me; it was the internal – the psychological. The dreams were happening more regularly.

It wasn't always the same dream, but it always ended the same way. I pulled my enemy over and it was Renee. It was always Renee. The thought sent shivers down my spine. Every time I was called into action I wondered if this would be the time that it happened for real, that this would be the time I would be forced to stand against her.

I had fought in over forty battles with my kind, and the thought I would have to face Renee terrified me every time. I hadn't seen her for six years, since I had left her in Paris to rescue my sister. Looking back, I wonder if she had seen the future, if she had somehow known what fate awaited us. She had claimed she was going off the grid, hiding out from our kind as much as the real world. I hoped she had managed to hide herself deep. I hoped she was well enough hidden that I would never find her. God I hoped she was safe. I was aware of the hypocrisy of my philosophy, and it tore me apart. Our kind must die. I knew this for a fact, but not Renee. Dear god, not Renee. I couldn't do that.

I grimaced as I looked at my haggard figure. The fear in my eyes was almost tangible in my reflection. I clenched my fists into the metal frame of the washbasin. I hated the fear reflected in my features. I loathed the fact that I should feel this way. I was more powerful than I had ever been, and yet my fear hadn't subsided. I could perform feats that even two years ago would have humbled all but the most accomplished of my kind, and still I feared. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. How strong would I need to be before the fear left me? How many would I need to bend to my will before I finally conquered my own demons? What did I have to do to defeat this fear?

The truth of the matter was that I simply didn't know and I was starting to believe I would never know. I wasn't sure anymore that I would even recognise myself without the fear in my eyes. It was the only feature that remained within me that bore any resemblance to who I had been. I didn't recognise the cracked and scarred face, nor my hardened and bitter eyes. Even my voice had turned into a harsh rasping whisper. I would be all but unrecognisable to those who had known me as a child. But the fear, yes that was mine. In that fear I could finally see myself. I had nothing left of myself but my fear. Where had things gone so wrong?

I closed my eyes and moved away from the mirror. My reflection contained no answers, merely condemnation, and I had had enough of that. I had a whole world for that - a broken, desolate and destroyed world. A small tremor shook through my arms and I gripped my hands around the basin until it passed. They were happening more often now. I

wasn't sure if the tremors were a product of my injuries or something else, but they were becoming more common.

In my last fight with Victor, he had completely destroyed me, including fracturing my skull, caving in my chest, and breaking almost all the bones in my arms and legs. Three scars ran across the left side of my face where my head had been crushed. The doctors had told me I was lucky to be alive, but I didn't feel lucky. No, I felt that Victor had intentionally left me alive to suffer. He had humbled me intentionally, knowing exactly how far he could hurt me without killing me. The only thing I couldn't figure out was why he had left me alive. That scared me. It made no sense. He should have killed me.

Another tremor shook my hand as the fear set in again. They only came upon me when I relived my battle in Melbourne. My memories of the event were sketchy at best. I mostly just remembered the pain. Had I been left for dead to suffer for my sin of daring to think myself Victor's equal? I had no idea. I had been a fool. I was nothing more than a bug to him then, and he had swatted me with righteous fury. He had shown me just how much more I had to learn. He hadn't just defeated me - he had destroyed me.

I had thought that defeating Marcus meant that Victor, too, would fall beneath me. I should have known better. After all, even Marcus had determined he would need six of our kind to defeat his former master. What arrogance to think I would be sufficient where six had failed? It took several minutes until the fit passed. I turned away and left my reflection of my fears in the mirror. It would be there waiting for me when I returned. I knew this, it always was.

* * * * *

“Report,” I ordered crisply as I stormed into the command centre. Soldiers on either side of me stood to attention as I brushed past them. I could see them glance nervously as they saw my feet glide over the floor without seeming to move. I ignored them. My senior officer glanced up at my entrance without drawing to attention or saluting. That was fine. I never expected such displays from my subordinates. I was no soldier and had no need for such ceremony. They did what I asked them, that was enough.

“Scouts report an increase of activity in sector twelve,” he grunted with a wry grin. Marcellus had been my senior officer now for five years. He had served me well and had been promoted when my last senior officer had been killed in action. I hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but Marcellus had proved competent and loyal. He did the job well.

“I thought we had previously cleared that area,” I rumbled.

“We thought we had,” Marcellus commented. “There must have been bunkers or an underground complex we missed.”

“How many?” I grunted, indicating the insurgents.

“Preliminary reports indicate only a few,” Marcellus responded quickly.

“Any mages?”

“Our scouts returned, didn’t they?” Marcellus grinned.

I nodded grimly.

We had been chasing this group for approximately six months now. When the mage wars had broken out, small splinter groups of insurgents had seen their chance to grab power. Most allied or were quickly dominated by mages and turned into local muscle. This particular group was working with Killian Voll. He led the largest contingent of enemy mages and was probably just as responsible as I for this whole war. I had been chasing him for six years, and he had managed to elude me completely. He had been one of the more outspoken mages towards the start of the war, but I hadn’t heard anything from him in years. It was possible he was already dead. He could have easily been dispatched in any number of mage battles in the last few years, but I didn’t think so. Killian was the most probable leader of our enemies, and I doubted that he’d simply disappear into the night. I actually had no idea how many of my kind remained. We didn’t exactly claim credit when we killed one of our own. It was merely something that needed to be done.

Eventually the fighting coalesced into two sides as the fighting intensified. Some, like myself and others that worked for allied forces, did so because we were attempting to bring about peace. I knew such concepts as peace was a lie. That we couldn’t have peace until our kind were swept from the world, but I couldn’t do that alone, at least not yet, so I worked with other mages. Our foes banded together because they had no choice, but there wasn’t any real loyalty among them. They would turn on each other if the opportunity arose. It was as if we as a collective species had gone insane. We no longer considered ourselves human and we had turned on each other and torn each other to pieces. It was

sickening. I had seen mages in the midst of savage battles with each other only to gang up and turn on me when I arrived, as I was the more powerful threat. We were truly sick and we no longer deserved our place on the planet. This was a fact and it was a goal I was going to realise.

It wouldn't be easy. As we had turned on each other, greater and greater feats of Mana were required to overcome our foes. The victors of each fight became more powerful through contests, and the survivors were very powerful indeed. Each battle led to an increase in power, each victory led to a new threshold of control that could then be turned upon the next target. At first the battles had been fairly containable; however, this had quickly spiralled out of control. The last mage I had fought had been able to bring down buildings with a wave of his fist. When we fought now, countless others paid the price. As most of the fighting took place in cities, our battles were claiming many thousands of casualties each time we met, and yet the fighting continued. It would keep going, until there was only one side left and even then, I suspected we would simply turn on each other. I knew I would.

I had heard no word of my former master in this time, but I assumed he was in hiding. His plans had been smashed to pieces by Marcus Devereaux. The mad man who had started all this, although to be fair I don't think he had envisioned this hell hole of a world as the outcome. He had simply attempted to overthrow Victor and set himself up in his place. He could not have seen that others of our kind would use the conflict as an opportunity for themselves. He had been a fool, and we had all payed the price. Fool though he was, he could have perhaps prevented this; unfortunately I had killed Marcus in the same battle he had attempted to destroy Victor.

With Victor discredited, Marcus and the Primea dead, there was no one able to reign in the more destructive instincts of our kind. I cannot imagine the carnage that had been wrought the first six months of our war. I had been horribly injured in my fight with Victor and had been moved to a safe location. I had been spared the massacre of our kind as the old and weak had been hunted down and destroyed by the strong. I had been protected from the predations of our kind on the world. I had seen video clips of atrocities performed by mages who had lost their humanity. Many claimed to be gods. But when gods fight, it is the common man who suffers.

I was now tearing across what had once been rural United States searching for my kind with the intention of bringing them to justice. This was a fool's errand; I no longer

sought to capture them. There was no point - anyone capable of being captured wasn't a problem. The directive of my orders aside, I never captured anything anyway. That wouldn't serve my purposes.

The fighting here was long over, but the damage was done. The land war that preceded us was the first to be fought on American soil since the Civil War and it had torn the country a new one. I didn't much care for the land war and at one point I thought it likely we were going to lose. They had swept us out of Europe, across the Atlantic and across the States. Yes, we were losing, but somehow we didn't. Our enemies must have overstretched their reach because they crumbled about a year ago. We began to push back on all fronts and we reclaimed lost territory. What remained was nothing more than a mop-up job. The enemy soldiers weren't much of a problem. No, the real problem was my kind. Although the war was all but over, we didn't exactly follow the rules, and unchecked they could cause chaos. The real problem was finding enemy Mages before they found us.

Marcellus would return with his report once this next den of insurgents was cleaned out. We had perfected this technique through years of practise. The team would go in. I would remain behind. Should a mage be present, I would be brought in to deal with them. Should a mage attempt to flee the site, I would stop them. Marcellus knew his team was nothing more than bait for the wolf, but as bait goes he was very crafty and cunning bait. He wouldn't be caught easily; he knew the risks and knew when the odds weren't in his favour. That was why he had survived for so long. All I had to do was wait and see what quarry my bait caught.

* * * * *

“It was just a small group this time,” Marcellus reported back, “mostly non-combatants.”

This was becoming more common every time the team went out. Large portions of society had been displaced during the invasion. Cities seemed to be the preferred sites for mage battles and this made them horribly unsafe for everyone else. As the population was displaced from the urban centres, they swarmed out into rural areas. Farms and small towns were ill-equipped to deal with the influx of people and had quickly fallen prey to chaos.

Small communities turned into armed camps as they fought to keep control of their land and property. Riots and even small mundane battles had been fought over control of resources that up until recently would have been worth little. Those who remained in the cities fared no better. Order collapsed pretty quickly as looting and rioting spread throughout the cities and people were pushed out into the suburbs and outskirts of each city.

Marcellus's report was unnecessary. I had used my powers to observe the team in their mission. I knew exactly what they had encountered and how they had progressed, but I didn't want them to know this. They didn't need to know the extent of my powers. Their mission had gone exactly as planned, but I wasn't surprised - this wasn't the first time we had done this. We would send scouts out to stir up any resistance; should we find something, a more prepared team would be sent in to nullify matters. The only people in any serious danger were the scouts; we had about a two to three ratio of fatalities. Unfortunately there was no other way -- if I used my powers to search an area there was a very good chance they would be spotted by enemy mages and a direct fight would ensue and people would die anyway.

I trailed my finger along a scar on the left side of my face as I pondered what to do next. I had had high hopes that we would have stirred up mage activity in this mission. We had been following the activities of a mage known as Gregory Tibus, who had been considered a senior compatriot of Voll. I had hoped that finding Tibus would lead us to Voll. But this looked like a another dead end.

Tibus was Greek born. I hadn't heard much of him from before the uprising. I had heard that he had allied himself with Victor, but that had obviously changed. Most mages seemed to be out for themselves now, trying to carve up the world into little kingdoms of power, especially now that the fighting had died down. In some ways the fighting between our kind was more vicious than it had ever been.

“What's next?” Marcellus grunted. “This was obviously a waste.”

I inwardly cursed. Marcellus was right. Our scouts had found nothing and I concluded that no mages had been present in the sector. Unfortunately, in this instance I was wrong. I didn't find out about the mistake until several seconds later, until the distinctive sound of a teleportation brought me spinning around in surprise. I hadn't sensed a thread large enough to contain a mage anywhere in the vicinity. It was unusually bold of someone to teleport in like this. If I had caught the teleportation thread mid-stream, I could have easily scrambled

the incoming mage, scattering them across a wide area. My shield sprang around me as I expected a mage to launch an attack directly at me. But it was only a small box that had been teleported into the room. It didn't look dangerous, but I knew it for what it was. It was a bomb.

I cursed inwardly. This gave me two options. I could remove the bomb before it detonated, or I could follow the scry thread that had left it here. I only had a few seconds before the thread would dissipate to the point that I could no longer track it.

I chose the second option.

I closed my eyes and sent out my own scry thread. It was indeed a fortunate day for me. I had been quick enough to see the disappearing scry thread as it arched across the horizon. Scry threads are normally difficult to see, but this one had been constructed by a poorly educated mage. It was sloppy and that made it all the easier to track.

My own thread trailed along after it, following it back to its owner. I had no idea if the other mage knew he was leading me back to his base. It took several more seconds before a loud explosion of sound and pressure hit me. My shield absorbed the impact easily, and I had become disciplined enough not to let something as trivial as an explosion distract me from my arts. The scry thread led me past sector twelve and my heart sank as I realised where the thread was heading.

New Haven.

New Haven was a settlement that had sprung up after the main war had spread further south. It was mostly made up of refugees who had fled from the intense fighting to the east in cities such as Chicago and New York. They had had a hard journey as they crossed the great American wasteland. Untold thousands would have died on the journey, with enemy forces on their tails. They had been told Seattle was still standing and in our control. While this was true, cities just weren't safe anymore. Dozens of small camps were set up in the national parks on the east coast as people fled the cities.

New Haven had so far managed to elude becoming a target, but it had really only been a matter of time. A lot of people had moved there after their homes and lives had burned down around them. It was usually small groups of insurgents who took control of these camps, trying to scavenge or steal any medical or relief supplies these settlements received. It wasn't usually our enemies though.

I gritted my teeth as I realised these people would probably go through it all again. We would not be able to displace this mage without massive collateral damage. I didn't dare go close enough to the settlement to determine which mage had decided it was time for me to die. Knowing where he was would be enough for further action to be taken. Unlike his thread, my scry thread was well formed and would be difficult to track. They would never know I had followed them. I would send a team of soldiers in later and I would be leading them. This of course assumed that anyone had survived the bombing. I blinked as my thread disappeared across the horizon and back to my body.

I immediately coughed as I glanced around my command centre. It had been completely devastated. Marcellus was attempting to free someone from under a chunk of concrete that had fallen from the roof. I quickly counted at least five dead and numerous wounded. Marcellus didn't seem to be that badly burned, but others hadn't fared so well. With a flick of my wrist I raised the slab of concrete to allow Marcellus to free the fallen soldier. Marcellus glanced at me with a strange look of both thanks and anger. He knew I could have prevented this and had chosen not to. Removing the slab had done little; the soldier was already dead, probably killed instantly in the blast.

“Did you find him?” Marcellus breathed out as he let the soldier fall to the ground.

I nodded briefly. “Let's make sure he pays due price for this.”

“Teleporting bombs.” Marcellus sighed. “That's a new one.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Clean up this mess,” I ordered curtly.

“Yes, sir.”

I didn't wait around to see if he followed my orders. I didn't particularly want to be around for the clean-up either. Four men had died because of my decision to pursue the Mana thread, and there were those amongst my men who knew I could have prevented it. There would be bloody payment required for this. I may have been partly culpable in allowing this to happen, but I wasn't the one responsible.

Marcellus reported that the command centre had been restored several hours later. I ordered him to assemble a team. We would need to move fast if we were to catch this mage before they fled. I hadn't seen any follow up scry threads, but had they attempted to survey the results of their bombing they would have known it was largely unsuccessful. They would either continue to attack or flee. Either way, we needed to move fast. We were running out of time.

Marcellus assembled the team in record time. I had a feeling there had been many volunteers to make this mage suffer for their actions. I marched out into the clearing where the small number of soldiers had assembled.

“All accounted for,” Marcellus reported crisply. I nodded briefly as I glanced at the soldiers in front of me.

“Gentlemen, our target is New Haven.”

“Civilian settlement?” One of the soldiers cocked his head.

“Civilian settlement hiding a mage,” I corrected. “That will be the end of the discussion from this point. Those of you who have worked with me before, you know the drill. Those of you who haven’t, try to stay out of my way.”

* * * * *

New Haven was approximately three hours’ drive north from our position. The roads in this area had long been cleared of debris, but I could see the burnt out husks of cars and trucks as they lay upon the roadside. The war hadn’t really ever claimed this area of land, although there had been sporadic outbreaks of fighting. This area was supposed to have been cleared of enemy troops. It was infuriating, but understandable. Teleportation gave mages the ability to move far quicker and further than conventional troops. In some ways, small groups of insurgents were far more dangerous than regular corps.

I didn’t really understand what I was doing here. I should be on the front line where I would be more useful. Why Command had me chasing down small pockets of resistance far within our own borders was beyond me. Conventional combat tactics had already failed us; why the hell were we still trying to use them? Perhaps it would have been better to just deal with the problem myself, but that would make me no better than any of the mages who had joined our enemies. We were fighting this war in the wrong way, but those in a position of power didn’t seem to realise it. It had already almost cost us the war. I didn’t exactly understand why we hadn’t already lost. It looked almost certain two years ago.

I was reminded briefly of General Hanagan. He had been an American general at the beginning of the outbreak, and had thought he could contain the threat with troops. He had

been wrong; he had chosen to escalate with the threat of bombing. I sympathised with him a little; he had been completely outmatched by our kind, something that he hadn't understood at the time. I often wonder if he realised how stupid he had been at the end? My sympathy for the man only went so far though. Chicago was now a smouldering nuclear wasteland thanks to him. He had learned from his mistakes eventually, but by then it had been too late. With a good portion of his forces either destroyed or defected, he had been routed and eventually killed before anyone could extricate him. It had taken us a long time to recover from that defeat. He had thought the threat of nuclear bombing would keep his enemies in check. He was a fool. Nuclear power wasn't going to win this war -- both sides seemed to realise that. In fact, Chicago had proved that our nuclear arsenal would simply become a liability. I didn't know if Hanagan had thought nukes were a good idea or if one of the mages had acquired one somehow. In the end it didn't matter much. A good many people had died who didn't need to, and the fallout from the incident had the military scrambling to destroy or secure its nuclear arsenal.

Most of the Eastern American continent was now a battleground, or had been at one point. The massive invasion of troops led by mages had swept across the country, and the American military was spread too thinly throughout other theatres to do much about it. It looked at one point like they were going to wipe us completely off the continent. That didn't happen, but our forces were pushed further west every day; we simply didn't have the numbers of mages that our opponents seemed to have. As they tore across the landscape, they left nothing but burned cities and towns behind them. We were powerless to stop them. I still don't understand how we managed to resist them, and I don't know why it looks like we are now winning.

The countryside here actually looked relatively intact, if you discounted the odd burnt out vehicle on the side of the road, or ignored the occasional burnt out farm house. I knew this wouldn't last; as we got closer to New Haven the landscape would change. The scars of our battles would become more visible.

I let only my body travel with the convoy, my mind had no need to. I could have been in New Haven in the blink of an eye. I did, however, scout out the path for the vehicles using my powers. It was a good thing that I did too. Someone had anticipated an attack and had laid an ambush.

The ambush was simple enough: a burnt out bus had been pushed across the road to prevent thoroughfare and a small group of soldiers were lying in wait. It was almost like

they knew when we were coming. It was possible that they did. I had to assume that my mage counterpart was also scouting ahead.

The enemy soldiers looked more like kids than military; they had either been forced into insurgency or simply had a taste for chaos. Either way it didn't change things. They were in my way. As I scouted about, it didn't take long to notice the rocket launcher they had, along with enough armament and ammo to take out a small army. They were definitely well supplied. I vaguely wondered where they were getting their equipment from. I would have to investigate that later, but for now their armament could be used against them.

A grenade tossed into a box of rockets brought a quick end to their ambush. They hadn't even known anything was wrong until one of their own grenades seemed to jump by its own volition into an ammunition case and pull out its own pin. The explosion rocked from the ammo box like wildfire, consuming the enemy instantly. There were no survivors. With a contemptuous flick I sent the blocked bus sliding out of the way. If it weren't for the small plume of smoke from the explosion, my soldiers never would have known an ambush had been planned here.

I quickly found and dispatched two more groups that had been lying in wait. The last group appeared to be attempting a hasty retreat. Someone knew we were coming and were trying to protect their troops. Their foreknowledge hadn't saved them.

When we arrived at New Haven, we found it had been completely locked down. This wasn't unexpected. What had been unexpected was the twelve people tied to stakes at the gates of the settlement. It didn't take too long to figure out their strategy. Hostage negotiation.

I wasn't surprised when a Mana thread snaked out from the settlement and found me. I identified it long before it reached me and concluded its intention. A soft voice whispered in my ear through the thread. A Whisper thread, rudimentary magic – nothing special.

My opponent wished to discuss terms.

“You see what lies before you. I will execute these people and it will be on your head. Leave now or these people will suffer for your intrusion.”

I wasn't sure if my opponent could hear me or not. The whisper thread he had used could be sufficiently augmented to include hearing, but it required skilful manipulation of the technique. Nothing I had seen so far indicated that he had learned sufficient skills for

such a feat. His displays so far had all been about raw power. It was probably safer to assume he couldn't hear me. It didn't matter in the long run anyway. I had no intention of negotiating with him. The people tied to the stakes were already dead, I would bet my life on it. Fortunately I didn't have to gamble. My opponent knew that normally I would need to scry to inspect the hostages. I also assumed that should I attempt to scry across the field, I would be met with resistance. He had been counting on it. The moment I attempted to scry, I would probably receive another threat of the hostages' deaths.

Fortunately I had other options. I hadn't been idle with my studies since the war had begun, and I, like my master, had turned my studies into a very dark area. I used my powers to enhance my eyesight tenfold, allowing me to see details clearly from a distance. I could make out the creases on their clothes and the lack of movement that would normally be associated with death. There was no movement. If my observational skills were wrong, then the Mana reinforced my conviction. There was no doubt, these people were already dead. They had most likely been killed through asphyxiation and they had been killed recently - their bodies were still warm. This was more than just a warning to me. They had been killed as both a threat to keep us away and as a warning to those who remained inside. There were people inside who weren't happy about the new inhabitants. This was a bluff and a good one. Unfortunately it would fail. They couldn't possibly have known I would be able to see through it from this distance.

I nodded to Marcellus. I wasn't sure if he had heard our opponent's voice earlier. Our opponent could have simply wished for only me to hear his voice. Marcellus nodded back. He had identified their targets. We had done this dozens of times before. Keep the mages focused on me, keep the soldiers busy while my team took aim. A sniper shot would take out enemy soldiers while I dealt with the real threat.

I began walking towards the gates slowly, as if I had all the time in the world. I let the Mana rise up in me with every step, letting it flow through me in a display of raw power. I amplified it, enhanced it, and let it emanate from me like a lightning storm.

"You're killing them," the voice whispered in my ear. He was referring of course to his 'hostages'. I ignored him. I wondered how long it would take until he realised this wasn't going to work.

I knew that once I had reached a suitable distance, the sharpshooters within my squad would deal with whoever had been foolish enough to remain in sight. This should keep any stray gunfire from me. I wasn't worried about the gunfire. They would have to hit me with

something akin of a howitzer to even dent my shield, but keeping the defenders busy would keep them focused on what I was about to do and not my soldiers.

With my enhanced vision I could have torn the gates off the walls at any point, but I wanted to be closer. I could also have teleported into the compound at any point -- again I didn't want to. I needed to minimise damage to the facility and any non-combatants inside, and to do that I needed them to keep their focus on me.

“Stop! Now!” the voice demanded again in my ear. I could hear the panic in his words. “Don't make me stop you!”

He was bluffing. What could he do? Any attempt to teleport out wouldn't end well, an attack would be clearly seen, and I would have time to prepare an adequate defence. He would attack me eventually and then I would counterattack and he would fall. That was exactly what I wanted. Keep the fight outside of the inhabited areas - less collateral damage.

He let me get further than I had thought he would before he launched his attack. The tell-tale flare of Mana caused me to involuntarily flinch and I waited for the inevitable impact against my shield. It took several seconds before I realised I hadn't been his target. A column of Mana rose from the settlement and into the sky. The power being expended was mindboggling. I gazed in wonder at the sheer force being expended into the sky. A haze of Mana issued out from the burst as it impacted its target, and tendrils of lightning flashed as the Mana merged with the atmosphere. Clouds heavy with Mana were forming. The display was impressive. I wondered vaguely where he had learned to do this. This required skill, more skill than he had displayed so far. As the clouds expanded across the settlement, they grew darker with Mana each passing moment.

It had all happened within seconds. Impressive though it was, I still didn't see the reason for all this effort. Fear crept into my mind as I pondered the possible ramifications. From this distance I couldn't exactly study the configuration of frequency of the Mana being used, and that worried me. An unknown threat was one that could possibly finish me. Perhaps he had lured me into my death? I didn't have to wait long before the threat was made clear. The clouds burst open once they could contain no more Mana. The oxygen in the sky mixed with the Mana heavy-particles and caught fire. My enemy had set the sky on fire.

As the first droplets fell on my shield, I knew that this wasn't normal fire. This was Mana fire. Not quite as powerful as the supercharged Mana that I used to power a Mana

Nova thread, but equally dangerous. My shield could probably withstand the downpour, but my surroundings wouldn't and my soldiers definitely couldn't.

As I looked around, I saw the grass had already caught fire and thick black smoke emanated in every direction. This changed things. I ordered my soldiers back. The Mana fire hadn't reached them yet, but it would. It was expanding exponentially. The soldiers needed to leave; they would not be able to survive long under these conditions. I received a terse reply from Marcellus that he would pull his troops back to a safe distance. I vaguely wondered how far a safe distance was as the temperature increased. It didn't take long before I needed to modulate my shield to withstand the heat, but I didn't want to completely reconfigure my shield -- I had seen too many fall through that mistake. Fortunately I didn't have to completely change my shield. It wouldn't tax my reserves too much to simply increase the flow of Mana and reinforce my defences. I smiled as the heat immediately disappeared. I was standing in a firestorm completely unharmed and completely safe. Even so, it wouldn't be smart to stay there as eventually I would become unable to power a shield of this strength. I mentally applauded my opponent; it had been some time since I had been forced to actively focus on shielding myself. This put a time limit on events. The smart thing to do would be to teleport out, but I couldn't do that. My opponent would be waiting for such a thing. I really only had one option, and that was to make my way into New Haven and deal with my opponent before my strength gave out.

I moved on. I didn't bother simulating walking -- that was a luxury I could no longer afford. I glided across the landscape as a ghost passing easily across this hell scorched earth. Embers and flame were cast in all directions as my movement displaced the air in the inferno. I didn't seek the safe path; I simply took the most direct path through the fires to the settlement.

New Haven hadn't fared any better than the surrounding grounds -- the fires had struck it as well. The buildings in the centre of the settlement were already aflame and the walls, largely made out of wood, had almost crumbled into the flames. I imagined that the shanty town that had made up the majority of the settlement was already nothing more than ash and charred wood.

I couldn't see my opponent through the fog of ash and smoke, but I could see his Mana signature. He was doing as I was: waiting it out. I could hear the screams of people within the settlement, but there was nothing I could do to save them. Even If I attempted to disrupt the effect in the sky above, it was too far spread out for me to completely stop it.

The fire storm had been a very effective way of keeping me at a distance. No one in their right mind would have attempted to pass deeper into this hell. But I was too powerful to be cowed by such a display. I could endure this punishment easily and would eagerly do so than let my quarry escape. For all the destruction it had caused, the Mana storm had merely delayed the inevitable. We were at a stalemate, neither of us would teleport while the other waited – that would invite a messy death. And so we waited each other out as I crept closer to the blaze.

It must have taken me ten minutes to reach the charred remains of the gates of New Haven, but my eyes never left my opponent's Mana signature. Any change, any rise towards teleportation would result in instant death. His Mana levels never wavered. He knew as I did that escape wasn't an option. As I got closer, I could see his shield through the smog. It wasn't impressive in itself, but it was modulated against fire. This mage wasn't totally without skill.

With a shield like that it would not be taxing himself too much to maintain his shield despite the hellfire he had created. If I could see him, then he could also see me and I wasn't going to give him the option of first strike. No, this needed to be over, and over quickly. I used my powers to launch myself into the air, the motion showering fire rain in every direction as I flew at him. As I got closer I could see my opponent appeared to a teenage boy, no more than sixteen at most. As a mage he was more dangerous than any adult, and judging from the inferno he had unleashed on New Haven he was definitely not a weak mage, he was simply inexperienced. That would be his undoing.

There was no subtlety in my attack: it was brutal and direct. I impacted his shield as hard as I could and sent him flying into a flaming wall. The building promptly collapsed on him as the impact tore out its weakened supports. This wasn't going to be a challenging fight. His shield had held, but only barely. It hadn't been modulated to cope with physical damage, and he was weak. I had no idea if he had expended most of his power in the firestorm or if he was merely lacking in power. I had to assume the former. He wouldn't have lasted this long during the mage wars if he was actually this weak. I was disappointed. My opponent had been right to try to keep me at a distance. He had known that once the true mage fight started, it would be over quickly.

I saw him rise from the ruins of the building and attempt to draw his powers against me, but it was too late. Several threads lashed against him as I attempted to overpower his shield. The secondary impacts whiplashed against him and he was thrown to his knees

again. He tried in vain to again draw his powers to protect himself, but again he was too slow. I was on him in fury as the fire rained down upon us. The heat and fury of my strikes must have played havoc across his shield, and I knew it wouldn't be long before it failed. In vain he tried to counterattack, but I ignored the attack and let it smash against my shield.

I turned on him again in fury. His shield held for several strikes more before it cracked. It must have been terrifying as the liquid fire poured across the surface of his shield. He must have felt the heat first creeping through the gaps in his defence, and then terror as it seeped inside. He wouldn't have suffered long, although he deserved to. This settlement had been sufficient to house and maintain over ten thousand refugees. A lot of people had died here. My opponent deserved to be amongst them.

I telekinetically pulled him to his feet by his neck and brought him to me. I needed to know who he was. Was this Tibus? Would he now lead me to Voll? His eyes widened with surprise as I filled in the gaps in his defence and protected him from the doom of his own making. I dragged him before me so I could see his face. I cursed savagely as I let my shield retract. It wasn't Tibus. I didn't know who this was. He was therefore of no use to me, and he was too dangerous to leave alive. I threw him to the ground behind me as I searched for others. I heard the tell-tale crack of a shield collapsing and a strangled scream as it finally failed completely. He got what he deserved. He died in the firestorm he had created. I suppose there was a lesson in that. It was a pity he wasn't the only one who had paid for his lesson.

The fire lasted for three days before subsiding. The inferno caused by the torrential fires ravaged the land for kilometres in every direction. There had been very few survivors, and the land would be scarred by this for a very long time. It was a fitting tribute to the arrogance of our kind: his for causing this conflagration and mine for allowing it.

* * * * *

The sudden effect of a massive firestorm in a very cold region had played havoc with the weather, and had been felt in kilometres in every direction. The weather would probably be chaotic for weeks to come.

There were pitifully few survivors from the attack. Only those who had managed to hide in stone buildings had survived, and there were not many of those. Had I not removed them from the inferno, they too would have eventually been consumed. I had torn through the settlement with mechanical precision as I located survivors and teleported them into the waiting arms of Marcellus and his men. Most would arrive nauseated by the act of teleportation, but they would arrive alive.

Our team wasn't really equipped to deal with refugees, so we brought in adequate supplies from our base. These people wouldn't be set free yet. Not until I learned what I needed to know. This had been prompted by a deliberate attack upon me and my men. Had the mage who had died in New Haven been responsible, or had he been working with others? Would this lead to me Tibus? Had Tibus been here, or had this been the act of a renegade mage? It had been appropriate to let the young mage die in the flames, but I could extract the necessary information from others just as easily. Once they were well enough to travel we moved the dozen or so people who had survived the fall of New Haven back to our camp. For the moment at least they would be safe, so we could question them.

It was a curious mix of women, children and men who had been extracted from the fire's wrath. I wasn't concerned about another mage being amongst them; my presence in close proximity would have inevitably caused them to reveal themselves as their Mana sought to protect them. No, these were simple men, women and children whose lives had been turned upside down by me and my kind. I owed them a few days of comfort and protection before I sent them back out into the wild.

I questioned each survivor personally, but wasn't surprised to find that most knew nothing. I had almost given up hope when I found the answers I had been looking for. The older man had obviously been through some rough times. He had lost most of one arm and had visible scars on his face and neck. This wasn't the first time he had had his home taken from him.

There was no indication that he was different from the others. He acted much the same as the rest of the survivors. He didn't look me directly in the eyes. No one ever did. The enlarged irises of my kind were intimidating reminders that we were different. Most people didn't even like being in the same room as one of us. He too looked uncomfortable in my presence. I would have been suspicious if he had not been nervous. And yet there *was* something about him that was different, something elusive. I couldn't put my finger on it.

“How long were you at New Haven?” I opened my interrogation with simple questions.

“Six months,” he muttered, and I realised what was different about him. He wasn’t afraid of me. In spite of myself I was curious.

“When did the mage arrive?” I continued.

“Three weeks.”

I wondered if I would get anything but two-word answers from him.

“Did you know his name?”

The man shook his head.

“Did you ever see this mage with him?” I gestured towards a dossier photo we had of Gregory Tibus.

The man looked over at the photo and shrugged. “Maybe, don’t like to look.”

“So there was more than one mage?” I prompted.

He nodded again. This was useful information, but I wasn’t sure how I was going to use it just yet. There didn’t seem to be any way to trace the other mage now that New Haven was a smoking hole in the ground. As enticing as this was, it was still a dead end for now. This would need to be investigated later. I wondered briefly what quarry a new search would reveal. There was only one more thing that this man could help me with, and for that I needed privacy.

“That will be all,” I ordered the guard who had led him in. The man in the seat rose, but I waved him down. “Just a few seconds more.” I nodded as we waited for the guard to leave.

I waited for several seconds more as I readied myself. This would need to be done carefully. If I pushed too hard I would lose an opportunity I didn’t want to lose. The silence was obviously beginning to unnerve him. It was time to act.

“When did you lose your arm?” I opened gently.

“Four years or so,” he grunted again. Back to his usual small responses.

“How?”

“Building fell on me in Chicago.”

He had been in Chicago and had gotten out before the city had fallen. That explained his stoic demeanour to my presence. A lot of mages had fought in Chicago before it had fallen.

“You seem to have recovered well from the injury,” I continued.

This line of questioning wasn't making him any less nervous.

“What's your name?” I inquired, quickly switching my tact.

“David,” he grunted.

“Well, David. How would you like your arm back?” I whispered softly.

I don't think he heard me at first. It took several seconds before his face registered that I had spoken. The look on his face said it all. He didn't believe me, that much was sure, but he had also seen what we were capable of and knew I might not be simply lying. I could see him calculating behind his eyes. What did I have to gain by lying? Why would I offer this? Why him? I could almost see a hundred questions buzzing through his head.

“You can do that?” he queried. For the first time he looked at me directly. I could see the hope in his eyes. If I could restore his arm -- and from everything he knew about mages he had no reason to doubt me -- he would be able to fend for himself in this bitch of a world.

“I can try.” I didn't tell him that I hadn't been able to successfully perform the technique yet. He didn't need to know that he wasn't the first I had approached with such an offer, and that others hadn't survived the process.

He also didn't need to know my own interests in the technique. If I could heal him, then I could heal myself. Victor had done it. He had healed me from a gunshot wound when I had been shot by Marcus. I remembered the feat well enough. It could be done. It had taken me much searching to find the books I had stolen from my old master. It had taken me even longer to build up the courage to use them, to overcome my ethical and moral objections to the learning contained within those tomes.

I had had to do horrible, evil acts to gain the knowledge necessary for this feat. I was determined that the prices I had paid wouldn't be wasted. Using this knowledge I would finally unlock the secrets that have eluded me; I would be able to heal myself and become whole again. But I wasn't going to practise on myself.

All I needed was patients and time. There was a word for what I was about to do to this man: Necromancy.