

WHITE ROSE



Nathan Woolard



After being orphaned at a young age, Auri Midas has been forced to call New Washington Academy his home. His everyday life is a dull and uneventful routine, dictated by the rules of the Council. Then, Argenta Silverstein arrives. The mysterious and enchanting girl turns Auri's life upside down. However, Argenta's curiosity unearths dark secrets about the Western Union and Auri soon discovers a conspiracy that sends him on a dangerous journey...

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Chapter 1

Saturday, after lunch

New Washington Academy, Est. 2065
“Learning to serve a better tomorrow.”

That’s what the arch over the central sidewalk read. The cement path continued in both directions. One way branched out across the grassy campus to reach the various chrome buildings where the students and teachers lived and worked. The other ran past a couple more lecture halls before reaching the massive iron gates which served as the only point of entry and exit to the academy. Most people who passed under the arch on their way to their destinations didn’t pay it any mind, and those who did hadn’t much to say about it. A motto is a motto, after all. Not even the most ecstatic fanatics of the educational system got too worked up over one so sickeningly generic.

Unless, of course, Mr. Ledger was present.

He was tall, some might even say handsome. His suit was as black as his hair, and his hair was the color of charcoal. He had authority, he was given respect, and he scared the hell out of students. He knew it, and he loved it. So when he stood in inspired reverence of the school’s beautiful, government-appointed motto, he expected everyone else in sight to do the same. He typically got what he wanted, but there were still rare exceptions. They were dealt with in the usual fashion.

“Good day, Mr. Midas.”

The blonde-headed boy strolling under the arch was one of the exceptions. He looked up at the sound of the voice, not entirely surprised by the man’s sudden materialization. The

teacher had a nasty habit of appearing from the shadows with no warning.

“Hey, Mr. Ledger. It is a nice day, isn’t it?”

The teacher continued as if the boy hadn’t spoken. “Mr. Midas, I couldn’t help but notice that you didn’t pay your respects to the Council’s arch as you passed.” He glanced disdainfully at the boy’s long messy hair. “And it would do you well to brush your hair once in a while. To care so little about your slovenly appearance is disrespectful to your esteemed academy.” He continued looking the boy up and down, giving another exasperated sigh. “You didn’t even wear your jacket today!”

The boy waved his hand dismissively at the arch. “I ‘paid my respects’ this morning. Surely that’s enough. And what business of yours is it if I brush my hair or wear my uniform? I can get by well enough in jeans and a t-shirt, thank you very much. We’re not required to wear the jackets anyway, especially in the middle of April.”

“You would be if I had anything to say about it, but the school board doesn’t want you students to feel oppressed. Now do try not to be so rude,” Mr. Ledger said in his best teacher voice. “The motto should be observed at every opportunity.” He paused and a wicked grin crossed his face. “Especially by a child of your ‘parental situation’.”

The boy’s face flushed red and he clenched his fists at his sides. He knew that he could never bring himself to violence, but he did get a certain enjoyment from fantasizing about it. Fortunately, he was spared further trouble as a hand grasped his shoulder. Looking up, he saw another man smiling down on him. This man appeared to be Mr. Ledger’s polar opposite, with a kind and wrinkled face and dark brown hair that was beginning to turn gray at the roots. The boy sighed with

relief. Mr. Grimm the history teacher had come to the rescue again.

“Hello, Auri,” he said pleasantly to the boy. “And good day to you, Mr. Ledger.”

“Not now, Otto,” Mr. Ledger said. “I’m in the middle of dealing with a disrespectful student.” His face was strained, as if he was resisting the urge to say something decidedly less professional.

Mr. Grimm was undeterred. “Sorry, but I already have an appointment with our young friend.”

Mr. Ledger looked ready to fight to the death over his young victim, but his expression quickly changed to one of careful consideration. “What, sitting around in a dusty old library and shuffling through twenty-pound history books?”

“Precisely.”

Mr. Ledger could hardly keep from laughing. “That’s a far crueler punishment than anything I could come up with.”

Auri knew that was a bold-faced lie, but decided to keep his mouth shut. If he’d learned one thing in his short ten years of life, it was to never argue with Mr. Ledger. Fortunately, Mr. Grimm was always there to intervene, and had been for as long as he could remember.

Still, Auri couldn’t resist giving a quick farewell salute to Mr. Ledger as he walked away. The teacher scowled in response. Mr. Grimm also gave a good natured wave to his co-worker as he left. The man and boy walked together across the school grounds, passing the numerous chrome buildings that dotted the campus. The metal siding would likely have been blinding in the sunlight, had there been any sunlight to be reflected. However, overcast skies combined with the towering skyscrapers surrounding the campus to make sure none of that got through.

“Auri, you really have to stop getting on Mr. Ledger’s nerves like that,” Mr. Grimm said. “Nicholas is no pushover. If you push him too far, he may snap.”

Auri sighed and put his hands in his pockets. “I know. The guy just always shows up and gets me mad. I swear, one of these days...”

“Good thing for you that day is not today. I don’t think the school board would take too kindly to you assaulting one of our most valued professors.”

“Even if he is a jerk.”

“Yes, even if he is,” Mr. Grimm conceded. The two crossed the concrete courtyard to one of the chrome-plated structures, which was nearly identical to the others. This architectural style was persistent throughout the entire campus. The monotony of it all bothered Auri, though he had no idea why.

He held the door for Mr. Grimm, who thanked him as usual. They continued through the entry room, which looked remarkably imposing given its small size. The marble floor and chrome walls (big surprise) were probably responsible for this effect. Several potted plants and bonsai lined the shining walls. They passed the elevator, opting instead for the spiral staircase. Auri had often wondered why Mr. Grimm always insisted on taking the stairs when he could take a shorter and easier trip on the elevator, but he never asked. He didn’t care, honestly. He might even say he enjoyed the climb.

Eventually, the winding trail came to an end, leading the duo into a cavernous room large enough to swallow many of the other buildings on campus whole. Towering shelves stood in rows across the floor, forming several increasingly-massive squares. There were many windows, though few of them offered favorable views of anything but neighboring buildings. Everything in the room radiated grandeur, but

nothing more than the sparkling chandelier. In a twist of irony, the massive frame was the only thing in the library made of chrome. The sixteen arms each bore an electric light bulb, though this did little to illuminate the library; that job was taken by the standard florescent lights. Most dazzling of all was the hanging strands of sparkling glass which created the illusion of a crystal waterfall. The less-than-practical chandelier was obviously installed only as a classy touch and a testament to the school's wealth, yet it was still an incredible sight to behold.

Auri loved the library.

To him, nowhere else in the world was as magical. Of course, his world didn't extend past the walls of the academy, so it wasn't a tough competition. The library gave him a sense of freedom that no other place in the school offered. He felt smothered everywhere else, as if he couldn't quite be himself. That probably had to do with the government's overwhelming presence, airing nothing but self-praising programs on television and offering countless (and mandatory) classes teaching about the Council's wonderful workings and history. But in the confines of the library, he could finally relax. Books took him to faraway worlds, and when he'd been stuck in the academy for his entire life, that was something he cherished.

The librarian greeted him kindly as he passed her desk. She reminded him of Mr. Grimm; she was getting on in years, but she was kind and had a passion for literature. Auri had never even seen her outside of the library. He continued walking, skirting the larger tables in the room's center, where a scattered group of students were reading and writing. He opted instead for a smaller table just outside the inner square of shelves. Mr. Grimm stopped at one of the cases, running his finger across the books and muttering to himself.

Eventually, he decided on a thick brown volume and pulled it loose. A plume of dust billowed up as he dropped the book on the table, causing Auri to sneeze violently.

“Thank you, Professor Prehistoric,” he said sarcastically, still sputtering. “Can’t you ever pick out a book with less than thirty years of dust on it?”

“I could, but those aren’t the fun ones.” The man gave his most winning smile. “Trust me, you’ll enjoy this one.”

“So you always say,” Auri said with a dramatic sigh. “What do we have today?”

Mr. Grimm flipped the cover open, releasing more dust and instigating another round of sneezes. The first page was illustrated with a bizarre image of a man and a monster. The man was burly and muscle-bound with a scraggly beard and wispy white hair. He clutched a lightning bolt in one hand and stood poised to strike at the multi-headed serpent opposing him.

“What the heck is this supposed to be?” Auri asked with obvious confusion.

“This is Zeus,” Mr. Grimm explained, pointing to the man in the picture. “He was the king of the gods in Greek mythology. This illustration depicts him battling the Titan Typhon.”

Auri blinked a few times before responding, “Yeah, okay. I just have one question.”

“Only one?”

“For starters. Who were the Greeks?”

Mr. Grimm nodded approvingly. “A brilliant question. That is where our lesson begins.”

And so it was, just as with every other lesson. One question would lead to another and before long the table would be covered with ancient books, Auri’s notes, Mr. Grimm’s diagrams, and dust. Lots and lots of dust. Every

Saturday, every Sunday, week in and week out. More lessons meant more knowledge, and that was something Auri craved above all else. He had only one greater wish, and he'd long ago given up on that.

For where in a world of such monotony could he ever find a friend?

The dorms were in sight at the end of the sidewalk when a pair of hands grabbed Auri roughly by the shoulders. He wasn't surprised; on the contrary, he would have been suspicious if there hadn't been an ambush.

"Guess who!" The wheedling voice came from right next to his ear, as usual. Auri didn't miss a beat as he answered.

"Snow White."

There was a burst of high-pitched laughter as the hands spun Auri around to face his assailant. No surprise, it was Eneus. The boy was tall for his age, and gangly to boot. His spiked hair was an oily copper color which reminded Auri of the old pennies that Mr. Grimm had shown him. While the boy looked a little scruffy on the outside, he never did much to bother other people. Auri was the exception. He didn't know what he'd ever done to earn the older boy's spite, but Eneus had taken it upon himself to become Auri's personal torturer. This usually came in the form of a sneak attack as he walked from the library to the dormitory.

"Ah, sweet Auri," Eneus cooed in the same wheedling tone. "I never tire of your wit." He let loose another high-pitched cackle.

Auri smirked. "You sound like a hyena."

Eneus frowned. "A what?"

"A hyena," Auri repeated. "A predatory mammal from the African savanna. It's a relative of the mongoose. It's famous

for its cry, which sounds as though it is laughing. Unfortunately, all species are now extinct, but – ”

Eneus cut him off with a sneer. “Extinct? It’s useless to be so interested in anything that’s extinct. What’s gone is gone.” His expression lost most of its humor. “I just don’t get why you care to learn about these old things and places that don’t affect us anymore. That’s probably why nobody likes you.”

“You would know a thing or two about being disliked,” Auri said with a hint of a grin.

He knew instantly that he’d regret it. Eneus wasn’t exactly a rocket scientist, but he was no idiot. He grabbed Auri by the front of his shirt and yanked him forward until their faces were mere inches apart.

“Maybe so,” Eneus said, his voice growing quiet. “But at least I have that much. You?” He laughed, but it wasn’t his high-spirited hyena cackle. This was a harsher sound, short and cruel. “You have nothing. Nothing but a bunch of dusty old books and an old goat of a teacher with his head stuck in the past.”

Auri hesitated. “That’s something, right?”

“No,” Eneus said bluntly. “And you’re smart enough to realize that. You are nothing. Your parents were nothing.”

“That’s not true!” Auri was surprised by the venomous tone of his own voice.

“It is,” Eneus continued. “They fought for a lost cause, and look where it’s landed you. People don’t even see you. You’re just a part of the background, something that’s always there but never stands out.”

Auri frowned. “You notice me.”

“Feel privileged,” Eneus scoffed. “I only do it because I pity you. And because it’s fun knocking you around and throwing you in bushes.” He smiled. “The other kids actually

know me. They watch me. They fear me. And it is better to be feared than loved.”

“But it is best to be both feared *and* loved,” Auri said. “Still, quoting Machiavelli? I’m impressed. Apparently you pay a bit of attention in government class after all.”

Eneus narrowed his eyes. “It’s difficult to inspire fear and love simultaneously. I’m more than happy with just fear.”

“Maybe you don’t need love,” Auri said. “But if you’d listened to the whole lecture in class, then you’d know that it’s also important to avoid hatred. How is that going for you?” Auri waited for a sarcastic retort, but there was no reply. He’d actually silenced the bully. A smug smile crept over his face. “That’s what I thought. Glad we could have this little talk. Is my hour up, doc?”

“Sure, whatever,” Eneus said dismissively. “I’ve wasted enough of my time on you for today.”

Auri shrugged and walked on without another word. Looking back, he still saw Eneus standing in the middle of the sidewalk, breathing heavily. At one time, he’d thought he could befriend the older boy. They were both outcasts; Eneus pushed others away and no one even noticed Auri. Thinking back on their conversation, Auri decided that Eneus’s brutal honesty was probably what scared people away. The older boy not only lacked tact, but he had no sense of sympathy either.

Now more than ever, Auri felt completely alone. It was sickening to realize that Eneus was one of the closest things he had to a friend. There were a few other kids who would talk to him, but that was usually just for help in class or gossip. He had virtually no social interaction with anyone but Eneus. Sighing, he continued the trek back to the dormitory, desperately waiting for a splash of color in his lonely gray world.



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