

Stripe

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For Valerie Wise,
Thanks for being the Nanna to us all.

“The truth is that life is hard and dangerous; that he who seeks his own happiness does not find it; that he who seeks peace will find strife; that truth is only for the brave; that life is only for the one who is not afraid to die.”

— Joyce Cary

Discovery

The day Giles discovered evidence of strife in Othilia, he started digging for answers, clawing in a blind fury. When he finally peered into the deep and realised he was unearthing a grave, the only thing he proved was that the demon spice *always* claimed its victims. One way or another.

It was midsummer. A gentle breeze combed the lanky grass, keeping the humidity at bay. The ranchers were out in their fields; all proprietors were open for business; and the baron’s copper mine was astir. It was business as usual in Othilia, and the gem between the rocks continued to glimmer.

Giles had spent the better part of an hour out by the Enki River, treading water in a basin that was spared from the sulphuric taint of the copper mine upstream. He’d been whittling away his brief respite from the office after a morning cataloguing a backlog of requisite forms due to Lee’s abrupt absence. He was already twenty minutes late getting back to his post by the time he got out of the water and opted to stroll the embankment, but he knew he could probably loiter for another hour without any repercussions. He was 2IC after all, and he could

chalk up any number of personal expeditions onto the payroll, so long as his Chief Commander didn't find out. Or Baron Wordsworth.

He beamed as he walked the sodden bank, his understanding of distance and time gone astray. His navy blue uniform—complete with sharp grey trimmings and a fine collar-medallion that signified his rank, as well as a freshly picked rose pinned to his jacket pocket—was damp under his arms and all the way down his legs. He didn't mind. In the lazy breeze it felt cool against his skin.

When he stumbled upon the old camp, he wasn't sure how far he'd wandered. He could still hear the mechanical hubbub of the copper mine, which drifted down the river like flotsam, so he knew he couldn't have been more than forty or fifty minutes from Cujo's Crossing.

There wasn't much to it. In fact, the camp was quite unremarkable, nothing more than a shallow den scooped out of the loose sediment with a vague covering of dead foliage. There was a blackened pit in the centre and the evidence of charred leaves and twigs, as well as some dark shards. A quick search of the den also revealed a generous stash of empty bottles with torn labels half-buried in the muck.

Giles grinned. He knew well enough what this place was, both he and Miles had shared a similar secret some fifteen years ago. So long as no-one was getting hurt, and providing the young rascals kept their inebriated entourage as far from Othilia as possible, he felt perfectly content to turn a blind eye ...

Until a discarded pouch snagged his eye and reeled him in.

The fabric was thick, impermeable. The pouch was stained with mud and the drawstring was missing. The original contents, however, had been preserved, totalling a smidgen of dusty brown powder, enough to fill a teaspoon. In terms of sugar or salt, it wasn't more than a pinch you could use to sweeten your tea or add flavour to a batch of boiled vegetables, but once Giles identified the true nature of this dark powder, his perception quickly changed: There was enough residue of the demon spice here to send half-a-dozen grown men into an illicit delirium of heinous memories and jagged visions.

Giles frowned, then uttered a curse. He hoped the demon spice had scarred their minds. He hoped it had summoned irrevocable horrors that stopped them from sleeping at night, because the curious little bastards deserved nothing less. They needed to suffer, yet no matter what happened, he feared nothing could prevent the inevitable addiction. Strife was like a gored fishing hook, and the desire never went away, not without doing a lot of damage. Withdrawal was not an easy process, and it could often destroy the victim's body quicker than the addiction itself. The youths were undoubtedly suffering, but not in the way Giles wished.

Worse still, Giles now feared there was a much larger source of strife somewhere in Othilia, somewhere in *his* town. If that was true, he had to find it and he had to eradicate it. He could not let the demon spice wrap its ugly fingers around Othilia and strangle the life he loved. He would treat it like a malignant cancer, and if that meant cutting off an infected limb to save the rest of the body, he would be more than willing to release the guillotine.

He pocketed the remnants of strife and rushed back to Othilia.

Dissension.

There had been no official law enforcement in Othilia for fifteen years, not since a dispute between Baron Wordsworth's nephew and the Othilia Sheriff's Department, which flared into a lengthy tribunal and consummated with the Barony Seat withdrawing all funding and authority from the town, effectively relinquishing Othilia to the baron's definitive rule. Giles had still been too young to shave at the time, so he was well aware that much of the story he'd gathered in the years since was biased, the details skewed in the favour of House Wordsworth. Giles would have bet coin and collateral on the fact, but with bribes aplenty and a forked tongue to match, the baron had crippled the powers that be. These days the Othilia Sheriff's Department was nothing but a vague memory.

Following the Barony Seat's withdrawal from his fief, Baron Michael Callahan Wordsworth seized the opportunity to establish Guardian Force, his own personal vigilante group. The old Sheriff's Department was adopted as the organisation's headquarters, and in addition to providing for all lawful matters in town, they also heeded the responsibility of all general upkeep and maintenance, such as the intermediate management of staging and restocking procedures, which was performed out of the abandoned church. Guardian Force now numbered thirteen in all, spearheaded by Chief Commander Virgil Decinta. Above all else, they kept the town cohesive and safe.

Giles was proud to be Second-in-Command.

'Afternoon, Virgil,' Giles said. He was short of breath. The cuffs of his uniform were crinkled and smothered with dirt from his mad dash back to the office.

The Chief Commander gawked up from the mountain of paperwork, which flooded the old desk. He blinked, nodded lamely, then rested his weathered face on his palm. 'I honestly don't know how Heston does this. He's got no discernible organisation, no clear filing system that I can make heads or tails of, yet I've never heard a single complaint since he took over shipments.' He snatched up one of the loose registers. 'Here. Look at this. Your brother wants a quart-pallet of antibiotic arken root. Now am I supposed to declare this order as a medical request, or do I submit it under the general store, then make a cross-reference for the medicinal inventory?'

'Just put it under the general store itinerary. I think the medicinal declaration only applies to independent orders.'

Virgil nodded. He leaned across the room and dropped the shipment receipt into the designated tray. 'How is it you know what you're doing and I'm ripping my nails off trying to climb out of this well we've fallen into?'

'What makes you think I know what I'm doing? I've been guessing all day.'

Virgil smiled. He walked around the desk and gripped Giles' shoulder. 'I don't care what you're doing or how you're doing it, just keep it up.' His voice was rustic and confident, very much grandfatherly in tone. It bespoke truth and wisdom; it encouraged belief in all those who heard it.

He motioned to leave and Giles caught his arm, holding him back. 'What's wrong?'

'I found something I think you should see.' Giles detailed his midday expedition along the banks of the Enki River, and revealed the pouch he'd recovered from the abandoned camp. He offered it to his Chief Commander. 'I think we have a problem.'

Virgil examined the remnants of the demon spice drug and frowned. 'I appreciate you bringing this to my attention, Giles, but please don't get ahead of yourself. I've done this for fifteen years, and I have never found any evidence of strife in all that time, not a trace. There's been a little bit of green weed here and there, but nothing so malevolent as strife. These kids probably smuggled it from a hawker out of town.' His eyes narrowed. Deep wrinkles unfurled along his leathery skin. 'Unless you have evidence to suggest otherwise?'

Giles straightened. 'I don't have any evidence, no.'

'Good.'

'I don't think we should just ignore it.'

'If you start stressing about every loose thread, soon enough everything will fall apart. You don't have the mandate for this.'

'Okay. We assume it's not our problem,' Giles said. 'But what if it is?'

Virgil frowned again. He discarded the dirty pouch on the cluttered desk. 'I don't want you to start a panic.' There was a sudden sternness about him. He was still grandfatherly, but far from patient. 'You found some drugs, not a body.'

'And what if next time I find a body?' Giles growled.

Virgil ignored the comment. 'A handful of young'uns probably felt a bit too adventurous, that's all. No one was hurt, there would have been a report, and if they were willing to leave this much behind, I'm fairly sure they won't be doing it again anytime soon.'

'Damn it, Virgil. I'm not worried about the damn kids! What if someone's producing the demon spice in Othilia?'

'No.' Virgil made a sweeping motion with his hand. He wasn't having it. He didn't even stop to think about it. 'Do you know how much effort is required to produce strife? The investment is exorbitant. If someone was taking the time to manufacture a worthwhile profit, it's not an operation that would just slip under our noses. We aren't talking about a single stalk of green weed in some goodwife's pot plant, you would need an entire farm for this stuff.'

'I'm not convinced.'

'I don't care,' Virgil snapped. 'You have work to do, so get it done. This is *not* an open investigation, and this stays between us. Do you understand?'

Giles averted his eyes. He said nothing, and Virgil did not press him for a response. An order had been spoken. Giles was expected to follow through without commentary.

Virgil slipped out of the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Giles spent the rest of the day casually glancing through the voluminous paperwork, never actually putting his nose to the grindstone. He thought long and hard about the supposed origin of the demon spice. He couldn't throw away the idea that somehow, somewhere in Othilia, there was a dark man reeling in those

weeds from the world below. Despite whatever his Chief Commander had insisted, he wasn't going to let it go. He just couldn't.

At the end of the day, the rose pinned to his pocket had wilted. By the time two blood-petals fluttered to the floor like dried autumn leaves, he knew it was time to go home. He left the office in its cataclysmic state, not all too dissimilar to when he had come back at midday. He scrawled the initials GD on the sign-out sheet and left to spend the evening with the two most precious things in his entire world.

Endearment.

Giles lived in the southern annex of the old Wordsworth Manor, the oldest surviving structure in Othilia since the waterwheel was washed away. It was erected alongside an ancient willow tree, which cast a spiderweb shadow in the morning light. Salvaged stone made up much of the monolith, and lattice brimming with tough ferns enveloped every towering wall, all the way to the ceramic roof.

A first impression might have had you believe that Giles was affluent, perhaps the nephew of a rich lord from the south, or the beneficiary of some estranged fortune. The truth was far removed. There was nothing royal about his blood. His annual retainer would have scarcely eclipsed that of a common tinker, and the only thing he had inherited from his parents was a respected name. Rather, he rented the annex from the baron for a pittance, who'd offered it to Giles and his family for his servitude to Guardian Force.

The rest of the manor, meanwhile, was under the tenancy of Iman Lazuli, who—if you didn't already know—was the executive manager of Wordsworth Mining Co., prime co-ordinator for all local operations, chief negotiator and liaisons officer, and the second wealthiest man in Othilia. Giles didn't think too highly of him. Oh, he appeared nice enough, sure. He was charismatic, generous when he needed to be, but Lazuli was also what Giles called "an empty eggshell". Harmless to most, useful to few, yet when it all boiled down, Lazuli was nothing more than a hollow man who hadn't matured quite right. In layman's terms, Lazuli was a bleeding idiot.

As for Baron Wordsworth, he now lived in an ornate villa atop the bluffs on the east side of town.

Giles stood on the porch. He unpinned the wilted rose from his jacket pocket, looked at the crinkled petals for a time, then tossed it into the night. He breathed heavily. Once, twice, thrice. He cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders, worked his jaw. He stepped through the door and was immediately ambushed by a bouncing girl no taller than his waist. She sprang up from the floor and threw herself at her father, locking her arms around his stomach and vowing to never let go.

Giles beamed. 'Oh! Correct me if I'm wrong, starshine, but I'm getting the impression that you missed me,' he said as he ruffled her raven-dark hair. 'Is this true?'

'I always miss you, daddy!'

He rested a palm against her soft cheek, which still bore an essence of baby fat, and then the deepest and most profound flutter of affection took his face hostage. He grinned wildly and planted a kiss just below her left eye. She was Aurora Jeannette Dawson-Deschain, his only daughter and child; his candle burning in the night. He cherished her, more than anything, and his glistening eyes told more than words ever could. They were the eyes of a man who knew the meaning of love. They were the eyes of a man who knew the meaning of life.

He asked of her day, and she was quick to relay the events that had comprised the past twelve hours of her life, most of which had been spent at the schoolhouse.

'We learned about oliphants!' Aurora tossed her arms into the air excitedly, perhaps emulating the titanic trunk of one of the sea-skinned beasts. 'Mrs Birk says maybe we might take a trip to Calla Lily and see the tinker who comes down from the north! His oliphant isn't as big as the ones across the sea. It would still be awesome to see one.'

'It would be *very* awesome,' Giles admitted.

'Do you think I could ride one?'

Giles cocked his head, his expression shaded with fatherly concern. 'No promises there, starshine.'

Aurora pouted. 'Mother said the same thing.'

Giles laughed. 'Mother knows best! We need to get you on a horse before you try an oliphant, my dear.' He thought about this and quickly reconsidered. 'Actually, I think an auroch might be best.' Yes, definitely an auroch. Anything else might try to gallop off and toss his daughter's skull into a tree.

'Auroch's smell.'

Giles laughed again. 'I don't think an oliphant will smell much better.' He gave her another kiss and they continued to speak of nothing particular at all. It was the way Giles liked it.

Eventually, he moved on into the kitchen where he found his flower. He drifted across the floor with a feather gait and rounded on her. He nibbled at the nape of her neck as he eased her body into his arms, and when their lips finally met they loitered as a single unit for almost half-a-minute. Clementine Dawson was the most beautiful woman in Othilia, if not the entire barony and everything else beyond. She had a heart-shaped face, with deep blue eyes that sparkled like two sunlit ponds. Her flowing hair was the colour of gold, and her sleek figure was etched at perfect angles, an unmistakable hourglass. Most men once considered her the essence of desire, and while some suitors still clutched to false hope, her heart belonged to Giles. For that he called himself the luckiest man in the world.

How you ask? How did this robust, yet unremarkable vigilante find his way into the arms of an earthly goddess? Did he obsessively court her with flowers and trinkets, you wonder? Did he tease her expectations until she yielded to his charm? No. He just told her the only thing a woman ever needs to know:

I will always tell you the truth. You can trust me.

And she had.

'How was your day, sweetheart?'

He didn't hesitate. 'I'm so stressed I'm surprised I'm not seeing red. Lee took the day off and left us inundated.' He wouldn't burden her with word of the demon

spice drug. Not yet. 'Me and Virgil didn't know what we were doing. I felt like pulling my hair out.'

'I guess it's lucky for you I like bald men.' She combed a finger through his thick mop of hair. She twisted and pulled one tendril, teasing it.

'Oh really?'

She nodded. 'Tell me the truth. Would you rather be bored? You're always the first to admit it, there's not a lot for you to do in this town.' She let go of his hair and it shrunk sluggishly back into place.

'I was stressed *and* bored, Clem.'

She leaned in and kissed the corner of his mouth. 'Why don't you go down to the Heron? Have yourself a drink or two, let your thoughts and woes drift for a while. You deserve it. The roast won't be ready for another hour.'

Giles shook his head, didn't even consider it. 'Nah. I was going to try and find that book about the purple oliphant, I know we have it somewhere. You know the one, right?'

'Of course I know it, it was one of my mother's favourite stories. It should be on the top shelf of the linen closet, as well as a few of your others.'

Giles nodded, smiled.

'You're a good father.' She paused. The slightest hint of a frown marred her face. 'Don't you dare promise her a ride on one of those damn beasts though.'

'Don't worry, I already broke her heart.'

She smiled broadly, and it was as if two cherries were trapped under her cheeks. 'I love you, Giles.'

'I love you back.'

Giles went to fish out their small but diverse collection of books, then sat in his favourite chair beside the dormant fireplace when he ensnared his daughter in a spellbinding tale of adventure and moralistic parables. They managed four chapters of *The Purple Oliphant* before Clementine called them to dinner, and once the lamb was reduced to a gnawed bone, the trio spent an hour in casual conversation. Giles read a few more chapters before his daughter started to drowse, and once she was tucked under her blankets, Giles and Clementine retired to their own room.

They made love for almost an hour before they, too, lulled. They cradled one another, shared some pointless pillow talk, and a short time later they were gone.

Assistance.

The next day Lee Heston was half-an-hour late to the office. As soon as he sauntered inside, offering some offhand salutations to his early morning colleagues, Giles immediately ushered him back to his chaotic workstation and had to resist locking the door to prevent him from ever leaving again.

With Lee back, Giles found that his schedule was relatively open. He decided to try his luck and offered to go out and complete an integrity report of Cujo's Crossing. It would be mundane work, better suited for one of the grunts like

Tennyson or Vashe, but it would allow him the opportunity to perform a little surreptitious investigation at his leisure.

Virgil took the bait without query or remark. Giles left the office promptly and after a quick scan of the old ironwood bridge—kicking at the wood as if he was inspecting a second-hand cart for sale—he looped around to the General Store to seek council with his brother.

Miles Deschain was the owner and proprietor of the Othilia General Store. He was the older of the two, each of them the spit out of their mother's mouth and often mistaken for twins despite a two year age gap. They had grown up in a small cottage on the outskirts of town, until a firestorm took their home and the rest of their kin in a single, sizzling deluge. There hadn't been much left for the Deschain brothers after that black day, only each other, but that had proved to be enough.

'So you do still know I exist.' Miles leaned over the cluttered counter. His brows peaked.

Giles shrugged and summoned a taciturn grin. 'I guess I was busy.'

Miles rolled his eyes and relinquished a smile. They clasped hands briefly, then abandoned formalities and embraced each other in a strong hug.

'It's really good to see you,' Miles said.

'You're always welcome to drop by the office, you know? It's a five minute walk.'

'I've tried,' Miles said with a defiant inflection. 'You're never there!'

'I like the fresh air.' He jabbed a finger at his brother. 'You should try it once in a while. You're stuck in this cave all day, I'm surprised your lungs aren't full of mildew.'

'We can't all earn a living from pointless busywork, my dear Giles. Some of us actually have to work for our dues.'

'Yeah, I'm sure you're really struggling,' Giles said. He pulled a mocking grin. 'It must be a real burden to own a horse, your house and your business, you destitute son of a bitch.'

Miles laughed.

They bickered back-and-forth for a short while, juggling petty insults as if they were still kids. Eventually, Miles offered to close the store for an hour so they could have a hot meal together at The Heron's Blessing.

'Are you sure you can afford it?'

'I'll manage,' Miles scoffed. 'I might have to eat out of cans for the next week, but I don't get to see you very often.'

They tottered on over to the pub where they both ordered a beef pie and a pint to match their thirsts. They spoke of many things in their short time together, including idle matters and personal revelations, but the exact nature of their palaver will remain their own. It is not for us to know all, and the words two brothers share when their only concern is for the company of their fellow kin should seldom travel far. Even if we picked at the plant and pruned back all the way to the roots, would any of us truly understand much of what we uncovered? Know only that they smiled, and laughed, and had a jolly good time, which ultimately lasted a little bit longer than either intended.

It wasn't until they were back at the rear entrance of the General Store, and their voices had started to wind down into parting baritones, when Giles finally swung the axe he'd been holding above his head.

'I'm not supposed to tell you this.'

'Then you probably shouldn't.'

Giles frowned. 'I would say this is strictly confidential, but it's not even under investigation. Virgil refuses to let me open the door on this one, and if he finds out I've been snooping about, he'll probably hang me by my toes.'

'Giles. Please. Don't do this.'

Giles ignored him. 'Yesterday I found evidence of strife.'

'The demon spice?' His voice was dry, his nerves slightly frayed.

Giles nodded. 'Someone is either selling or producing the trash in Othilia.'

'Where did you find it?'

'I uncovered a campsite out by the Enki River. I think some kids were trying to be daring.'

'You're sure it was strife?'

'It was,' Giles said, biting his lip. 'I'll never forget the pungent stench.'

Miles nodded. 'Fair enough. So why are you telling me?'

'I have to tell someone.'

'Are you accusing me?'

Giles threw up his hands in a defensive pose. 'No! God's burning flesh, Miles, you made me read from the damned *Adjamah* every single night, even when we didn't have a roof over our heads, the last thing I'm expecting from you is a clandestine drug farm. I just thought, I don't know, you might have heard something?'

'I would have told you if I'd heard something,' Miles said. 'You know that.'

'I suppose I do.' Giles looked dismayed. He started to sway and performed a half-turn, gripping his hips. 'We have a stowaway in this town. I know we do, I can smell them, I just don't know the first place to look. I was hoping you might have some ideas, something to kick me off.'

'I'm a merchant not a sleuth.'

'You're also the commercial cortex of this town,' Giles said.

Miles fumbled in his pocket for his keys. 'I don't know what I'm supposed to tell you.' He fished his keys out and jingled them about, fidgeting. 'I haven't seen anything suspicious. I wouldn't know what to look for.' He found the right key and jammed it in the lock. He stopped and suddenly whacked his palm against the door. 'Dammit, Giles! Why are you doing this to me? Why are you telling me this?'

'Because you're the only one I can trust.'

Miles stared at him. 'Why doesn't Virgil want you to open this door?'

Giles shrugged. He opened his mouth dejectedly. No words came out. He slapped his legs and grunted.

'It's not him is it?'

'Virgil?' Giles scoffed. 'No, not him. He might be a lone wolf, but he isn't like that. He's lawful.'

Miles cracked the lock, and the brief grind of old metal filled their ears. He pushed open the door, revealing a large storage chamber packed to the rafters with enough dry goods and products to last one man fifty winters. He leaned an arm against the doorframe, like a statue poised in perpetual thought. He said: 'So why can't you trust him?'

‘He doesn’t want to cause a panic. He thinks the weedfinger might be from Calla Lily, or somewhere else. He won’t open an investigation without any hard evidence to the contrary, which I don’t have. And like I said, he’ll hang me by my toes if I start snooping behind his back.’

‘Have you stopped to think he might be right?’ The words came out somewhat harsher than Miles had intended.

‘I’m not taking that risk.’

Miles sighed. ‘I think it might be in your best interest to let this one go with the wind, little brother. At least for now. Right now you’re like a man who found a hammer but you don’t have a nail to hit. You can’t just go around hitting anything and everything.’

‘It’s not like that,’ Giles said. ‘It’s not. This is about purity, about keeping our town clean.’ He lowered his voice an octave and snarled. ‘I’m not letting my daughter grow up on tainted soil.’

‘I can’t fault you for that. You have a good heart, Giles, I just don’t want you to get hurt. You’re my brother, and I love you.’

‘Nothing is going to happen,’ Giles said, his eyes wide, his expression fortified. ‘All I need is for you to help point a finger in the right direction. I need to know where I can look.’

Miles cocked his head. He couldn’t abide his brother’s unflappable determination, though he knew he didn’t have the words to talk him from this path. Giles was going to march forward whether there be tide or storm or fire in his way, and rather than watch his little brother brave the unknown alone, Miles figured he might as well hold out his hand and offer his support.

‘Assuming the absolute worst scenario,’ Miles said, ‘if there is someone in Othilia with a secret garden of raw anbus weed, they would have to be covering their tracks with the utmost vigilance. They would need to be someone with resources, someone with connections, someone with enough foresight to plan against a potential insurrection. This means they aren’t going to slip up so easily. You won’t be able to go right for the source, you will have to seek an outlier.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘They’re going to need supplies, right? Last I checked, Guardian Force inspects all imports and exports passing through Othilia.’ He held out his hand. ‘Correct me if I’m wrong?’

‘Yes,’ Giles said. ‘Vashe Martin. He’s our inspector.’

‘Then talk to him. As I see it, there’s only two ways it can be. Either Vashe is an ignoramus who wouldn’t see an epidemic if the streets were strewn with flesh, or he’s covering for the farm. If you really want to follow my finger, Vashe is where you start looking.’

Obligation.

Vashe Martin was a well-adjusted, well-educated young man. His elders often said he had his head screwed on the right way, and if that wasn’t a communal

approbation, nothing was. He could read and write Lúthic better than most, and he had a particular flair with numbers, a trait the Chief Commander often abused whenever the covenant man was due. He even boasted a novice understanding of the Freyan tongue, which had proved an invaluable resource with a foreign tinker some years back, and had actually been the catalyst for his induction to Guardian Force. Sure, he had his guilty pleasures, too. He was a frequent punter at *The Heron's Blessing*, risking exorbitant sums on precarious wagers, and he spent much of his spare time courting the free women of Othilia—as well as some of the married ones—luring them with his magnetic eyes and undying charm. However, he was not obtuse. If there was a job to be done, he did as was required.

And that made him the prime suspect in Giles Deschain's undisclosed crusade.

The days tickled by. Giles waited and watched, his baleful eyes like those of a carrion eater. He was already convinced of the young man's guilt, there was not a crumb of doubt in his mind. He figured all he had to do was wait until Vashe revealed his bright, red hands. Then Othilia would be cleansed of the demon spice before the first leaves started to fall.

Of course, it didn't prove to be so easy. The longer Giles watched, the more he started to doubt himself. When a fire sparked in the southern arc of the town, claiming a dozen houses before anyone rightly knew what was going on, Vashe had been one of the first on the scene, spinning a bucket brigade out of all abled hands and saving a hundred houses from certain destruction. Giles knew these weren't exactly the actions of a man who was dancing with the devil.

Once the heat started to drift, Giles grew a trifle tempestuous and his impatience quickly took the better of him. He decided to take a more direct approach, scouring Lee's records for the next significant inbound delivery, which he discovered was en route to Josef Deas, the local carpenter. He didn't believe Deas was actually capable of orchestrating an underground farm, not with all his other obligations, but excusing Miles, the carpenter was the most frequent importer of static materials in all of Othilia. His imports would therefore provide an excellent blanket for the raw materials required to manufacture and harvest the demon spice drug, providing there was someone to siphon out the more questionable items before the pallet arrived at its designated location.

Someone like Vashe.

One sultry afternoon, Giles relieved Vashe of his duties to probe the inbound wagonload of materials. He was about halfway through, still enduring the startled quips from the chauffeur, who kept insisting that this invasion was not the proper protocol, when the Chief Commander burst out of the old Sheriff's Office and stormed on over. He wore an incandescent frown that could have fried flowers, and he was on a headlong course for his 2IC. He was a man ignited and about to explode.

'Burn God's flesh and boil his blood! What do you think you're doing, Giles?'

Giles almost leapt out of his skin. 'Vashe said he didn't feel so well. I told him to take the afternoon off to rest.'

'Really? Because I just spoke with Vashe, and he's fine. He says you came to him and *ordered* him to take the rest of the afternoon off, and he wanted to know if he had done anything amiss.' The Chief Commander scanned the pallet, which was bestrewed all around, as if a spoiled child had torn into all of his birthday

goodies prematurely. He made a low raspy noise, almost like a growl. 'This isn't your department, Giles.'

'With all due respect, Virgil, I know what I'm doing here. I'm capable of conducting a basic inspection.'

'Do you think I'm an idiot?' Virgil said. 'You're not as stealthy as you think you are. I've been watching you. I know what you're doing, and you're going to stop, right now. This door is closed, and you haven't found a single scrap of evidence worthy of a mandate to open it. You're just trying to find a glitch in the system for the sake of exploiting it, not to make everything better. If you wanted a most exciting position, you should have joined a wayfaring troupe, but while you're a part of this company, you will adhere to our responsibilities. We protect this town, we do not try to tear it apart.'

By this time, a small crowd of onlookers had been drawn to the fray, including Vashe Martin, Lee Heston and all the other members of the Force, poking their heads out of the office. Even Miles was accounted for, his arms crossed, his expression disdainful.

'You're walking on the edge of a knife, Giles. I don't care if you're my Second, if you want to remain with this company, you're going to start acting the part. Do you understand me?'

'Yeah. Sure.' Giles pursed his lips. He peered over Virgil's shoulder and briefly scanned the surrounding throng. His ears started to burn when he saw the ostensible dissatisfaction on his brother's face.

'Are you in or are you out?' Virgil sounded exhausted, drained of his ire. He was now simply annoyed. 'I need the full support of this team. I can't have you undermining my decisions. I need you to be where I tell you to be.' Then, in a whisper: 'Don't go looking for a stowaway, or else you're bound to sabotage something.'

Giles gave up a leaden sigh. He nodded. 'It won't happen again.'
It was a lie.

Conflict.

'Tell me what's wrong.'

Giles blinked. 'What makes you think something is wrong?'

'I always know.'

Clementine was curled up beside him, her legs hooked around his own, her breasts hugging his torso. She nestled her head over his heart and listened to the fluttering beat, which pulsed through his skin and into her own. It was not long before she caught the abnormality.

She propped her chin up on his chest and looked at him with the dazzling gems she had inherited as eyes. Her hair parted in a messy tangle, which made her all the more alluring. 'Tell me,' she pleaded.

She tip-toed two of her fingers up one of his arms. Giles felt an immediate unfurling of tension, like a flower under the light of dawn.

'Giles. Please.'

'There was ... an incident today.'

'What kind of incident?'

'Don't worry. It was nothing serious. No one got hurt.'

Clementine didn't speak. She watched her husband-to-be, waited for him to crack. He could never resist her incisive stare for very long.

Giles shook his head ever so slightly. 'I'm worried. I think something is going on, something no one else can see, but if it had teeth it would have bitten us all by now. No one believes me.' He found his free hand enveloped in the sheets, tugging and twisting. 'I can't prove it.'

'So prove it,' Clementine said. 'Make them believe you. That's what you do best. You make people believe.'

'It's not that easy.'

'Sure it is.'

'There's rules—'

'Break them.'

Giles swallowed. 'Some rules can't be broken.'

'You don't believe that.' She rested her head on his heart again and listened to the rhythmic drum beating away. The anomalous flutter was still there, though it had calmed to a slightly agitated beat.

'Some rules *shouldn't* be broken.' Giles looked up at the ceiling. He wasn't actually registering the rough plaster and pale paint. He was looking *through* the ceiling, through the night, through the starlit void and everything else beyond. Through size and through time, searching for that single crux that would disseminate truth. 'There are consequences, and if I fall ... If I try and I don't find what I'm looking for ... I don't know what to do, flower. I really don't.'

'Do you think there is something wrong?'

'I do.'

She lifted her head and pressed her palm against his heart, fingers splayed. 'What about in here?'

Giles nodded.

'Your heart always speaks the truth, sweetheart. You've always followed it and it always takes you to the right place. If you really, truly believe there is something wrong, then you do what you need to do, even if it means breaking a few rules. You won't be remiss. I'll always stand by you. I trust you.'

Giles didn't need to be told twice. His doubts were cast aside, his impotence rectified. He knew what he had to do no matter the consequences.

He had to make them burn, whomever they were.

Execution.

Winter came to Othilia sooner than anyone anticipated that year, and it was white, thick, cold. The network of rudimentary roads was clogged by the pearly flow, and the town's farmlands transformed into desolate fields, with all the

ranchers turned indoors to wait out the storm. Even Josef Deas packed up his supplies and migrated to the south until mid-winter cleared. Only Wordsworth Mining Co. and Guardian Force—the two nuclei of Othilia—maintained a sense of normality, though the copper mine only ran at half-capacity, while most of Guardian Force was temporarily reassigned to standby status. The Chief Commander and Giles Deschain remained on the permanent roster, but the sombre hours and the long days itched away at them, and their patience quickly waned.

It was an overcast morning. A crypt-cold drizzle had frozen the cogs in the great clock and the day seemed to be lasting forever. Virgil, Giles, Lee Heston and Vashe Martin lulled in the old Sheriff's Office, attempting to entertain themselves. The Chief Commander perused an old newspaper, its pages threadbare and read-through at least half-a-dozen times now. Vashe sat cross-legged by the crackling fire, shuffling through all manner of card games with himself. Lee was out back in the archive room, while Giles busied himself with one of the old, slightly charred books he'd found alongside *The Purple Oliphant*. Today he was reading *Half a Halfling*, another of Patricia Lockhall's spellbinding tales, and he was loving every minute of it.

At about an hour past midday, Giles turned the last page.

He had to close his eyes to ward off a bubble of tears. He'd known what was coming, but an extra twenty years had earned him a more profound understanding of celestial resumption, and the final few paragraphs tugged mercilessly at his heartstrings. He rubbed the edges of his eyes, held his hands there until the sensation passed. Once he thought he had control, he breathed a very solicitous sigh, attempting to expel his wild emotions.

'I'm going for lunch,' Giles declared. He had no intention of letting himself rot for the remainder of the day. He'd slog his way through the white rivers, have a quick bite to eat with Clementine, and grab another book for the long drawl of the afternoon.

Virgil lowered the creased newspaper, nodded. 'Sure.'

'When do you want me back?'

Virgil craned his neck to see the clock. It was 12:55. He shrugged. 'Why don't you have the rest of the day off? If we need you, we'll come get you.'

Giles dared not question his good fortune. He made for the door as quick as he could, lest the Chief Commander change his mind, and once he was outside, he scuttled through the snow, bound for his homestead to spend an entire afternoon with the girls he loved.

Only that's not what happened.

Giles made it halfway home before raw instinct rooted him to the earth. He couldn't bring himself to go the rest of the way, not while Vashe was stuck at the office (and would remain there until dusk). There would never be a better time to prove the young man's guilt.

Giles let the storm in his soul take over and crossed over into the western edge of Othilia.

Vashe Martin lived on his lonesome in a quaint, brick veneer lodge. The lodge and the land it sat on were his own, purportedly brought and paid for with an healthy inheritance, and it had even been recently renovated to include a towering

stone fireplace and a long patio dressed with ferns. All things considered, Vashe Martin had done quite well for himself, perhaps a little too well. After all, Selim Martin had been little more than a tree logger from Petra, and did chopping up bark truly offer such rewards? The inheritance had also been split between two sons and an estranged daughter, the latter unknown by all until Selim's Will was unveiled. Giles was skeptical. The more he considered Vashe's state of being—as well as his prolific habits at The Heron's Blessing—the more he believed the only rational explanation for the young man's fortune was if he had dipped his hands underground. There was motive enough.

Now all Giles needed to do was prove it.

A blanket of mist settled in the valley as he traversed the town, and once he arrived at the lodge, it offered the perfect camouflage for his lawfully questionable escapade. He tried the doors first. All of them were locked. Next he attempted to pry open the windows. Only one of them would budge, opening to a crack that a spider would have struggled to squeeze through. It seemed the way inside was barred and he might have given up, if not for one of the many things he'd learned during his time with Guardian Force: Namely, that locks and keys only provided the illusion of security. They offered peace of mind, nothing more. If someone wanted to get inside, a little brass, steel or nickel silver was never going to stop them. The determined would always find a way.

When the lodge was renovated, the high-maintenance thatched roof was abandoned for ceramic tiles, which inadvertently offered Giles a vulnerable access point. By conventional design, only every third row was secured to the wooden chassis, with the rest of the ruddy-coloured tiles simply slipped into place. All he had to do was scamper up onto the roof, slide a few tiles aside, and then he was in the roof space, atop the insulation, and half-an-inch from all of Vashe's worldly possessions and darkest secrets.

He might as well have been invited inside.

Giles shimmied across the rafters until he found the hatchway. It opened eight feet above a hallway, and with no ladder or rope, he had to lower himself unaided. He landed on his feet and the tendons in his heels seared, felt as if they'd torn apart. A sharp pain shot up the back of his legs, as if someone had taken a knife and slit his calf muscles into two neat slabs of meat. A faint yelp escaped his mouth. He threw himself against the wall and took deep, husky breaths, waiting for the pain to mellow.

Once he could walk again he started his search, albeit with a hitch in his gait. For about ten minutes he weaved through the small residence without seeking anything particular. He was just ... looking, feeling. He spent a good deal of time admiring the grandiloquent fireplace, which he initially assumed to be carved from proper marble—the polished gleam of the mantle enthralling in the dim light—but a closer inspection revealed it to be a clever imitation. Hanging above the mantle was a pastel portrait of the Martin family (sans the estranged daughter), and it added to the illusion of eloquence, a sentiment that permeated the entire lodge.

He looped through the house three times before he began a more intrusive inspection. He began opening every drawer, sneaking a peak behind every picture, peering into every crevasse. He would leave no stone unturned; he would expose every nook and cranny. The truth was here, and he would find it.

For over an hour he searched. The afternoon began to ebb into a milky darkness, and as the shadows grew long and all-consuming, Giles had to light one of the candles he'd found. Under the flicker of a flare, he endured, and five minutes later he found it. It was sealed in a nondescript wooden box about the size of a tinderbox, obscured at the back of the pantry and hidden within the thick allure of a hundred herbs and spices. Giles popped the lid open and revealed a cache of the malicious brown powder, at least 500 grams of it, as pure as he could have ever imagined. He'd been right all along. All he had to do was follow his gut.

I'm going to watch you burn.

He snapped the lid and confiscated the box. He marched back through the house, into the hallway. He stood beneath the exposed hole in the ceiling and was midway through wondering how he was going to lift himself back up into the overhead crawlspace when a lock cranked. A moment later, a chilled bar of wind slammed into Giles from behind and he turned to see Vashe standing in the open doorway.

'Giles?' Vashe's tone wasn't skeptical. He was more bemused if anything. 'What are you doing? Why are you in my house?'

'Close the door.' This was not how Giles had anticipated the hour of truth. He'd hoped to have the support of his Chief Commander as well as half of Guardian Force by the time he was ready to throw any hard accusations at Vashe. Everything was impromptu now. He was off the beaten path and he'd have to find his own way from here. 'We have a lot to talk about.'

Giles revealed the small box. Fear rushed over Vashe. You could almost see the thousand stumbling excuses flashing through his mind, each of them screaming pathos. He closed the door and held out his hand, pleading for the rational conduct two men ought to share. 'Okay. We can talk. Do you want to sit down, or—'

'I want you to tell me why you're carrying enough strife to kill a man.'

Vashe said nothing. He looked at his feet to hide the twinkle in his eye.

'Do you know how long I've been looking for you?'

No answer.

'Did you know I was looking for you?'

'I knew you were looking for something. We all did. None of us knew what it was, and the Chief wouldn't tell us. He told us to mind our own business.' He frowned, though he looked more disappointed with himself than anything else. 'You were both hunting me down weren't you? Closing in on me?'

Giles pointedly ignored the question. 'How long has this been going on for?' His voice was stressed, totally unforgiving.

'Since my father died.'

Giles nodded. His suspicions, as it turned out, appeared to be on the mark. He placed the container of spice on a nearby stand, beside a porcelain oliphant. 'I thought as much.' He sighed heavily. 'It's over, mate. You're done.' A pause. 'You never did know when to walk away from the table, did you?'

Giles lunged. Vashe tried to twist away, but Giles caught him by the wrist and forced Vashe up against the wall.

'I'm sorry, okay! I'm sorry! This wasn't what I wanted.'

'You chose this.' Giles tightened his grip.

Vashe felt his skin burn, as if he was over an open flame.

‘How many?’

‘I just wanted to escape!’ Vashe pleaded.

‘*How many?*’ Giles growled. His voice was rough and callous. His face was malignant. ‘Answer the question!’

‘I don’t know what you—’

Giles drilled the front of Vashe’s head into the wall and the plaster collapsed around his skull. The impact shattered the cartilage of Vashe’s nose, turning it into a mound of gore. When Giles pulled him back, a lip of plaster caught on Vashe’s skin and opened a gash across his forehead. Blood showered down his pretty face, and for an instant his eyes rolled back into his head. He was dazed, so Giles slammed him up against the front door, holding him upright by the flesh of his neck.

‘I want your numbers. I want names,’ Giles bellowed, spraying stray spittle everywhere. ‘I want to know everyone who has ever so much as sniffed your fucking demon powder.’

Vashe tried to shake his head. Giles punched him in the ribs. Vashe felt one or two of his bones collapse, and he threw his head to the side and gasped desperately. He tried to speak. The closest he came was a dribble of blood and phlegm, which spilled out of his mouth in a long drool.

Giles ushered him into the rumpus room, forcing him to his knees before the fireplace. He gave a firm order for Vashe to remain where he was, then shot into the kitchen to retrieve the largest knife he could find and a length of rope he’d remembered seeing in the supply cabinet.

Vashe tried to speak again. He coughed, hocked another load of red phlegm onto the floor, then managed the common tongue. ‘You’re making a mistake.’ He rested his head against the mantle, which imprinted a patch of bright ichor on the glistening surface. He tried to say more but his words caught in his throat when he saw Giles brandishing twelve inches of sharpened steel. Then he started to cry.

Giles laid out the length of rope and used the knife to cut a strip for a wrist brace. He came down behind Vashe, and as he reached for the young man’s hands, a slick mop of hair—with a few scraps of plaster still caught between the dirty brown strands—smacked into his jaw and pushed him back onto his ass.

Vashe twisted around quicker than lightening. He hurled himself on top of Giles, his eyes bulging. Vashe knew he had to react immediately. It was instinct. He knew the only way out of the lion’s den was to fight the beast, or he’d be dragged right back in and chewed upon some more. Vashe did what any one would have done: What he thought was right.

He fell right on top of the butcher’s knife. The blade perforated his skin, like a hot knife through butter, then tore right through his guts and came out the other side. His burning skin atrophied, like a hot pan doused in water, and a pale swathe enveloped his entire body. His eyes broke at the edges, and his face reverted to that bemused expression he’d borne upon entering the lodge. He tasted copper, as if he’d taken a swig of water right out of the Enki River.

Giles didn’t even flinch. He pushed his victim aside and stood up, casting a shadow over the most vile man in Othilia. This was a man who’d solicited morality

for the sake of a profit. Giles didn't even pity him. He held out the knife, which dripped casually. He hoped Vashe was suffering.

'You did this to yourself.' His voice was soft, fragile. 'I hope Meloch pisses in your skull.'

Giles let go of the hilt and the knife clattered on the floor with an acute sense of finality.

Meanwhile, Vashe was coughing, choking on his own disgorged entrails. He was struggling to hold on, and he knew the rope was about to snap. He managed to crane his neck around. His bright eyes, two shades of solemn grey, cut across the room and bored right into Giles. They were pleading, for help, for forgiveness. For innocence.

'I didn't...'

Giles turned as rigid as stone.

'I never did ... never sold it.' He shook his head weakly. 'No one.'

'What?'

'No one else. It was mine.' He gurgled, coughed. A splatter of blood ejected from his maw like a burst of ruddy fountain water. 'After my father, I needed something to stop it. The pain ... it wouldn't go away.' He started to cry again.

Giles couldn't speak. All of his veins, his nerves, his arteries, everything froze in an instant, as if he'd been thrown into the waters of a glacier. He stared at the jagged hole in Vashe's stomach, where a coil of intestine drooped out of its meaty cage. His bottom lip quivered. He'd just murdered an innocent young man. A stupid young man—a misguided young man—but an innocent young man all the same. He'd made a mistake.

Before he could swoop down and try to save a life, the incandescence of oblivion pulled one entire existence in on itself, and then Vashe Martin was dead.

Deterioration.

Giles was never indicted for the murder of Vashe Martin.

The official investigation—as reported in a series of articles published in *The Othilia Outlook* and *The Calla Lilly Courier*—concluded that the youngest member of Guardian Force perished in an out-of-control house fire, which consumed his palatial lodge on the night of the 85th of Frigus, 736 NA, prompting both local newspapers to print a special Fire Safety Edition. A memorial was held once the snow cleared, and a small monument was erected at the site of the burnt-out lodge, where Vashe's remains—which amounted to a bag of charred bones—were laid to rest. Baron Callahan Wordsworth both funded and hosted the event, offering much esteem for his fallen vigilante. He ensured the hundreds of guests who came out to pay their respects that Vashe Martin would be remembered as nothing less than a charming, well-respected man who loved the small things in life.

While Othilia mourned the tragic loss, Giles could hardly live with the guilt. He'd set the lodge to burn himself once he realised he'd slaughtered an innocent

man, and the fire eradicated all evidence of a struggle. He left the box of strife to burn as well. He had no intentions of prosecuting Vashe posthumously, not for the crime of possession. The young man had already paid the price with his life, and that was more than his due.

Giles had made a mistake. He'd unbalanced the scales and it preyed upon his consciousness, twisting and torturing his soul. Every night was an exercise in purgatory as he relived the merciless execution of an innocent man, horrific images of gored flesh and unhorsed viscera flashing before his eyes and scarring his retinae. He always woke drenched in sweat, then lay there distraught, a prisoner to his own madness, until dawn's rosy fingers reached in to break his paralysis.

The days did not fare much better. He walked in a daze, lived as a shadow. He was stricken with a sorrow that would not abate. As the year went on, his dedication to Guardian Force deteriorated. Virgil understood—or at least he thought he did—and gave his 2IC fair time to mourn, temporarily dismissing Giles from all of his regular duties.

'He's having a hard time coping with Vashe's death,' Virgil said to Lee once the suspension forms were signed, stamped and lodged.

'I didn't think he was too close with Little Vashey.'

'I think it was because of his parents.'

Lee raised an eyebrow.

'They died in a fire,' Virgil revealed. 'A firestorm actually, some years ago now.'

'Oh. I remember.'

'You see what I mean? I don't know the technical term for it. It's like a childhood fear burnt into the nodes of the brain, something like that.' Virgil tapped the side of his head. 'A moment of great agony can come back to haunt a perfectly normal man later in life if a similar scenario presents itself. It's nothing he can control. We just need to give him time.'

'I suppose so.'

Virgil jabbed a finger in Lee's direction. 'In the meanwhile, I need you to pull his weight until he can walk on two feet again.'

Lee sighed. 'I'd rather not.'

'You don't have a choice.'

'Virgil, I'm quite happy with my current responsibilities,' Lee said defiantly. 'I don't want to be your right hand man. I'd rather be behind the desk.'

'For fuck sakes, Lee!' Virgil said, his temper flaring. 'I'm essentially down two men since Giles started sleepwalking. You're the best I've got.' He paused, breathed deeply, flexed his fingers. 'I need your help.'

Lee frowned. 'Or we can tell Giles he's not the only one with baggage, and the way to recover from a fall is to get right back on the horse. None of us expected Vashe to fall off the planet. We were all shocked, but shit happens and you just have to clean it up and keep going on.'

'I'm not negotiating with you.' He continued to flex his fingers, then braced his head and began to rub. 'Giles... He feels guilty, okay? He feels he's to blame for Vashe's death.'

'Why?'

'He accused him of something.'

Lee held out his hands, demanding some kind of elucidation. 'What did he accuse him of?'

Virgil stopped rubbing his head and lowered his hands. 'Giles thought someone was producing strife in Othilia. He thought Vashe had something to do with it.'

Lee's eyes almost popped out of his head. 'Strife? Why the hell would he think that?'

'It doesn't really matter now, does it?' Virgil scowled. 'Vashe is dead and Giles is lost. Do we have an understanding, or do you want to go bury yourself into the sun as well?'

Lee nodded, resigned to his fate. 'It's okay, Virgil. I'll help.'

Once all of Giles' responsibilities were revoked, he loitered around his homestead, waiting for his fractured thoughts to knead themselves back together. He read occasionally. Mostly he just stared out at the old willow, his face like a stone slate, and it wasn't long before he started looking for his answers at the bottom of the glass.

He began to frequent *The Heron's Blessing*, seeking to soothe the transcendental pain by battering his liver and flooding his brain. Once in a while, if he'd thrown enough gold at the barkeep, he'd stumble home and all sense would deteriorate into an inebriated coma, free of those possessive nightmares. It was the only sound sleep he managed.

Sham'Enel came and Sham'Enel passed. A new year was born, and soon Clementine started to worry about her husband-to-be. Her golden hair seemed far less radiant, and her pond-blue eyes were dim, as if shrouded in a grey mist. At first she tried to support him, turning a blind eye on his degenerating state, perfectly confident he would bounce back with the remedy of time. The last thing she wanted to do was twist his arm and make an enemy out of herself. It wasn't until their coffers started to dwindle, and she had to seek a small loan from her brother-in-law to pay the groceries, that she convinced herself Giles needed help. She knew she needed to bring him back, or else he'd wander too far and never return.

But she couldn't do it alone.

Emero was still young, and the roots of humidity had just barely breached the realms of comfort, when Clementine rallied the combined forces of Miles Deschain and Chief Commander Virgil Decinta to ambush their fallen paragon and lead him back to the light. They caught him one afternoon before his daily odyssey to *The Heron's Blessing*, dragged him to the seldom-used town hall and barred the doors. He would not leave the hall of stone until all were satisfied of a complete restitution.

Giles was not happy.

'What—What is this?' He tried to stand and the Chief Commander pushed him back onto the pew none-too-lightly. Giles scowled. He looked around the hall and saw his flower. His grimace melted in an instant, subsumed by grief. 'Clem?' Then he saw his brother standing off to the side, arms folded, face sombre. 'Miles? What are you all doing?'

'We're saving you,' Virgil said placatingly, 'because you can't seem to save yourself.'

'What are you talking about?'

‘Don’t play coy. You know you’re not yourself. You know this isn’t healthy.’

‘Virgil, I—’

‘You had to grieve, and we all understand that. There were things going on.’ He gave Giles a knowing look.

Giles found it distasteful.

‘What happened to Vashe was an accident. It happened, there’s nothing we can do about it. You might be sad, I get it. You blame yourself. Okay. There comes a time when you have to stop and look around. The world is still spinning, and it’s not going to slow down for you, and sooner or later if you don’t start running along with it, you’re going to be crushed. It’s time. You have to get back up.’

Giles stared at Virgil. He didn’t speak.

Virgil lowered his shoulders and gestured to Clementine. He stepped away, holding his hips, cursing silently.

‘Giles.’ Clementine sat down and took his hand. ‘Sweetheart, this has to stop. Vashe’s death was a cruel twist of fate. It is sad. We all shed tears. Vashe is gone though, and we’re still here. You’re still here.’

His heart was beating wildly, as if he’d just sprinted from one side of town to the other. He thought it was going to explode in his chest and put one final, explicatory remark on the whole affair. ‘It’s not that simple,’ he said. ‘It’s not right.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

His breathing became jagged. A thousand knives speared his gut. He had to turn away from her, lest he blurt out everything and seal his fate.

‘You remember the fire.’ It was Miles this time, still standing against the wall. His voice resounded in the stone crypt. He was sincere, almost remorseful, like an old bottle sealed long ago and finally beginning to leak. ‘For a long time I thought you had forgotten. I hoped you had forgotten. You never spoke about it, and I never tried to ask. I thought ignorance would be bliss, and I now realise the fault in my logic. I should have tried to help you, to comfort you. I should have told you it was all right to grieve, and maybe the nightmares of that storm wouldn’t have been so bad—for both of us I mean. I am sorry for that, Giles. I truly am.’

Giles tried to shake his head. He couldn’t, and his voice was equally inoperable.

Miles shifted. His downcast eyes shimmered and his tone dropped. ‘Do you remember the day we saw the flames in the far distance? And the smoke, the black smoke. It filled the horizon. We were at the river, and you were the first to see the orange glow. It came right out of hell. You wanted to run home and warn mum and dad. I said no. I said if there was a threat, they would be warned. I said we would be better off waiting.’ He paused and breathed deeply, closing his eyes. ‘I was wrong. Four hours later we found out they were dead. They didn’t even see the fire coming.’

Giles blinked. Two drops of pellucid liquid broiled over his lashes and streamed down his face.

‘I don’t know if we could have saved them,’ Miles said. He shrugged regretfully. ‘I know I should have listened to you. I am so sorry.’

‘I never blamed you,’ Giles said, his voice croaking.

Miles looked up and now the tears were salient. ‘So why do you blame yourself now? This has to stop, little brother. You’re not only hurting yourself, you’re hurting everyone who loves you. You’re hurting your family.’

'None of us blame you,' Clementine said. 'You don't need to keep blaming yourself.'

Virgil gripped the back of one of the pews, peered down at his 2IC. 'I need you, Giles. Not this Giles. The one you were before. I need that man of honour, defects and all, because you're the best damn hope I've got in this town. Lee is none too pleased with his new position either.'

Giles said nothing.

'Do you feel guilty because you accused him? Do you think if you never found that stash then Vashe would still be here today?'

One word. 'Yes.' It was strained, weak, unreliable.

Virgil straightened. 'That's bullshit, and you can take that to the Barony Court and swear it on the *Adjamah*. Vashe hopped too many bleeding logs on the fire and burned away, it had nothing to do with you. He's dead, and we're still here, and I need you.'

'Everything dies, Giles. By fire or water, everything dies,' Miles interjected, paraphrasing the *Eru Adjamah* itself. 'And there is nothing we can do to stop it. We just have to learn to live with it.'

'Your daughter, she misses you,' Clementine said. She ran a finger along his arm, drawing a peculiar pattern with her defined fingernails. 'I miss you.'

Giles covered his face and wept. He hiccuped and snorted and spluttered. It was at least a good minute before he could face any of them again.

Sin rotted the soul, Giles remembered that much of the *Eru Adjamah*. Like a decaying tooth trapped in its cloister, preying upon the body and the mind. Until it was pulled free, the misery never went away.

Giles had murdered an innocent man. He had slaughtered him in cold blood, like a butcher bringing his cleaver down on a squealing pig. This wasn't a single tooth with a hole in it. This was an infection that threatened to crack every last one of those white tombstones. How was he supposed to move on? He couldn't tell them the truth, his actions were ineffable, but to live with this evil capped within had already proved insurmountable. His hands were covered with blood, and no matter how many times he tried the stains would not wash away. He'd been too hasty. He'd chased an ephemeral rabbit into a hole and now he couldn't get back out. He was, as his father once said, up shit creek and he'd left his paddle at port.

No one had the slightest idea what he'd done. They all believed he was lamenting for the death of a man he had despised. They all believed he could come back from this dark place with nothing more than a few comforting remarks and a pledge of alleviation. They were wrong. Oh, so wrong.

And yet maybe—just maybe—there was another way. It was something the *Adjamah* would never condone, as veritable sins could only be cured by Shamael's penitent hand. The *Adjamah*, however, was not the only book. There was also a lionhearted halfling somewhere out there who had taught him more about life than a dusty tome ever could. The end was not the end, and while the winding road was abound with many trials that could crush a man, if you can make it back to where you began then you have a chance to start all over again.

He could come back, all he had to do was try, but he wouldn't do it for himself. He would do it for the people he loved. He would do it for Clementine and Aurora. He would do it for Miles. He would even do it for his Chief Commander. Most

importantly, however, he would do it for his fallen brother-in-arms, a man who had also been a prisoner of his own demons, just like Giles; he would do it for Vashe Martin.

There was just one caveat.

Giles nodded. 'Okay.' He tried to smile at Clementine. It was weak, but it was there. 'Okay.'

Clementine embraced him, kissed his face and neck several times. 'I missed you,' she whispered in his ear.

'Do you still trust me?'

She pulled back and looked into him, deep into him, filling him with a warmth he hadn't felt in weeks. 'More than I ever have before.'

Giles smiled.

'Good to hear,' Virgil said.

'I do have one condition.'

The Chief Commander stiffened, as if a chobo had waddled over his grave. 'Yes?' he said, his voice weary.

'I've made some mistakes, maybe a lot. Nothing is going to take that away, but I need the chance to try and fix this. I need to—We need to find out where that strife came from.'

'Giles, this isn't the time.'

'This is the only time. I blamed Vashe. I was wrong to do so. I... If there is anything I can do for his memory, it will be to find the truth.'

'We've been over this, Giles. There is no proof.'

'Yes, there is.'

Virgil looked like a disgruntled parent, ready to lash out at a misbegotten child who wouldn't learn their lesson. 'What do you want me to do? I can't run a search through every single house in Othilia, the baron would have my ass for a trophy, and you don't have any leads to go on. There's nothing we can do until you find some conclusive evidence.'

'Just let me handle it,' Giles said, pleading. 'Please. If you want me to come back then I need to do this.'

Virgil knew he was in no position to deny the request—he was the one who'd begged Giles to come back. He nodded a single time and held up a thick finger. 'All right. It's on your back, just don't do anything stupid. And you keep me in the loop, you pass everything on to me. Do we have an understanding?'

'I wouldn't have it any other way, Virgil.'

Revelation.

Giles made his return to Guardian Force the following day, flaunting a fresh rose pinned to his jacket pocket. Lee rejoiced, smacked a large kiss on his cheek, and the two newest recruits introduced themselves. There was Trash, who was about the same age as Giles, and Daniel Miller, a scarecrow of a kid freshly out of utero. The Chief Commander had prepared a fruit basket for him, with a card

signed by all of his colleagues and scrawled with various motivational treatise, such as “*Glad to have you back on the Team!!!*” and “*Keep moving forward, Giles! We’re in this together*” and one curious excerpt from the *Eru Adjamah*, written in his brother’s unmistakable calligraphy: “*Remember, there is no beginning or ending, there is only progress.*” He appreciated the gesture, and while it didn’t help to banish the guilt, it gave him a cause to keep on fighting.

It didn’t take long for the once wearisome routine to return, though Giles was back on the horse, and he seemed content, distilled. Alas, every now and then his furtive figure could be spied at The Heron’s Blessing, throwing back a pint or two to sooth the rot that pained him. The act didn’t help much, but whenever he spotted Vashe sprawled in the corner of a lonely room, butchered and bloodied, it was the only way he knew how to pry his eyes from the rueful visage.

As the first anniversary of his acrimonious discovery approached, Giles busied himself attempting to locate the hidden source. The Chief Commander had been very clear: Giles was not allowed to be intrusive, which meant he couldn’t encroach upon private property, or even peer into a roadside flowerbed; and under no circumstances was he to reveal his investigation to anyone. For a time, Giles had been willing to oblige, though his patience was never going to last forever.

He tried desperately to find an anomaly. He scoured the town records. He mapped all of the vacant houses in Othilia; he even established a rudimentary grid scheme to search the surrounding woodland. It all proved futile. He found nothing. Incensed, Giles began walking the streets at twilight, searching for any abnormal happenings, such as a disreputable merchant lurking in the shadows, or perhaps a clandestine figure who might reveal a concealed doorway. He did indeed come across a few questionable folk, and even arrested a man for possession of an illegal relic, but none of them smelled of the demon spice.

Then, suddenly, the clouds finally parted. By complete happenstance, he found what he was looking for.

It was a moonless evening. Giles had just signed off, somewhat belated due to a missing child, which had turned out to be nothing more than a disgruntled divorcee attempting to enact some semblance of revenge on his former wife. The investigation had ended with the ex-husband being charged a hefty fine for misappropriation of the town’s resources, and he was also refused custody of the child. Everyone agreed he got off relatively light; Virgil had been so infuriated by the wild chobo chase, he had to be talked out of locking the ex-husband behind bars.

Giles left the office and crossed the road with a brisk step, narrowly avoiding an outbound horse-and-cart. The cart trundled down the cobblestones on broken suspensions, and the cornucopia of personal effects—fastened with a dozen ropes tied in messy knots—leaned precariously to one side, threatening to spill all over the thoroughfare at the first sharp angle. The familiar, yet peripheral driver spared Giles a curt wave, and Giles returned the two-and-a-half-finger gesture.

He was passing by the smithy, now shuttered for the evening, when he caught the stray kernel of a nearby conversation. If he’d waited for the horse-and-cart to pass instead of skipping ahead, or if his step had been more lively under the sinking sun, he would have missed it.

And then maybe things would have been different.

‘...stock up some drinks and spend the night down at the camp.’

Giles whipped out his hand and caught the nearby lamppost. His face froze under the flickering kerosene. His chest tightened, as if someone had tied a rope around him and was pulling. He reeled back slowly, approaching the laneway between the smithy and the jewellers, keeping to the shadows. He peered down the laneway, where two youths loitered by the smithy’s side door. One of them was the smith’s apprentice, still donning his dirty apron, and the other was Daniel Miller, the scarecrow kid.

Giles frowned.

The smith’s apprentice tugged at his apron. ‘I don’t know. I’m tired. I don’t really feel up for it.’

‘Ah, don’t pike.’ Daniel punched the smith’s apprentice flippantly. ‘I already told the others you would come. It’ll suck without you. I can only put up with Dorian’s crap if you’re there too, otherwise I might slog him one. And I already asked Madeline. She’s in.’ He paused. He might have winked, but the dark blue of early evening obscured the finer details of his face. ‘I’m not promising to keep my hands off her if you don’t show.’

‘Touch her and I’ll kick your ass.’

‘Why take the risk? Come on, buddy. What do you say?’

‘Go screw yourself. I’m tired.’

Daniel said nothing. He rocked his body slowly, cradling the silence until it became unnerving.

‘Okay. Fine. Whatever.’ The smith’s apprentice tossed his hands into the air.

Daniel cheered delightedly.

‘I’ll come for an hour or so. Not all night.’

They prattled on for a time, assembling a detailed index of grog and some appropriate snacks, then bumped each other’s fist and parted ways.

Giles waited at the mouth of the laneway. He counted the crunching steps, measured the closing distance, shifted out into the open as the kid reached the exit. He tilted his head, offered a resenting smirk. A volatile confidence infected him, and all the walls came tumbling down again; all the chains that held him snapped and set him free. Nothing would stop him now.

‘You have no idea what kind of trouble you’re in.’

‘Wha—’ Daniel flinched, took a sharp step backwards. ‘Giles? What— Why? What did I do?’

‘Don’t be a puck.’

Daniel glared. ‘It’s not against the law to have a few drinks,’ he said with an air of spiteful conviction.

‘There is no law in Othilia *except* what Guardian Force makes of it. And right now I’m behind the fucking helm.’ He shoved Daniel’s shoulder, and they were swallowed by the darkness. ‘How long have you been using that campsite?’

‘Why? What does it matter?’

‘Answer the question, scarecrow.’

Daniel didn’t seem perturbed by the epithet. He must have gotten it a lot—he *really* did look like a scarecrow. ‘A few years, I guess. Maybe two, three?’

It was more than enough evidence for Giles. He pounced upon Daniel, tackled him to the ground. He held one side of his face flush against the dirt, and trapped the kid's arms with his free hand and a well-placed knee.

'Don't call for help. Don't say anything stupid. Don't say *anything* unless I ask of it first, or I'll break both of your arms. Then I'll take a little stroll down to your camp and arrest every single one of your friends. *Then* I'll cut you from Guardian Force and charge you with instigating a roadhouse without a license. **Then** you'll spend the next five years hauling rocks in a quarry somewhere. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes. Yes. Sure. Crystal.' Daniel's voice was little more than a squeal. 'Whatever you want to know.' He then added (his tone arbitrarily defiant): 'I don't think you could find it though.'

Giles ground his knee against Daniel's arm, like a mortar and pestle. A pitiful yelp leapt from Daniel's throat.

'Shut up,' Giles scowled. 'I know exactly where it is. On the east bank of the Enki River, about forty minutes down from Cujo's Crossing. Yeah, I've been there, you son of a bitch. Stop acting like you have something to bargain with here. I will spill your guts if I have to, so cut the shit. Just answer my questions. Who gave you the strife?'

'What?'

Giles released Daniel's head then belted him in the square of his back, just starboard of the spinal cord. 'Next time I won't miss.' He cupped Daniel's face again, forced him back against the dirt. 'Who gave it to you?'

'No, no, I really don't know what you're talking about!'

Giles growled. 'Then allow me to refresh your memory.' His voice was little more than a whisper. 'It looks like spice. It has a sharp smell, kind of like pepper, only sweeter. It's one of the most dangerous substances in the world and the wrong dosage can kill a man.' He rested a fraction more of his weight against Daniel's arms. Daniel responded with a strained gasp, which came from deep, deep inside of him. 'And you and your friends were stupid enough to sample some. Is any of this sounding familiar yet?'

'I didn't use any. I swear. It was Dorian's idea—'

'I don't care which of you values your life to that of a toothpick. I want to know who gave it to you.'

Daniel was starting to whimper. His words were heavy in his throat. 'I never saw the guy. Dorian arranged the transaction. He never said who. We just picked the stuff up from a drop-point.'

'Where was the drop-point?'

'In the old graveyard. One of the headstones—'

'Which one?'

'I don't remember!' Daniel cried out. 'It was like two years ago. I'm sorry. I don't know! Please let me go, Giles. I promise it won't happen again. I'll make sure of it, just don't tell the Chief. Please!'

Giles considered holding him for a while longer, trying to squeeze out whatever else might be swimming around in there. He decided against it. He figured he knew enough, and he let the kid go free.

As Daniel hobbled away, he rattled off a solemn pact to never speak a word of their encounter to anyone, not even to the Chief Commander. He also added that he wouldn't be attending the gathering at the Enki River campsite that evening after all. Apparently he didn't feel in such a fine fettle anymore.

Termination.

Giles hurried around the old church and passed through the tall iron gate, into the antiquarian graveyard.

It was a large, sealed courtyard, surrounded by a crumbling bulwark on every side. There were too many tombstones, erected in tight, haphazard patterns, more than a few tiered disrespectfully on top of one another. Giles' own parents were in there somewhere, both of their coffins squeezed into a single plot, but without marker or epitaph though, they were effectively lost, swallowed by the golgotha like so many others. He'd never tried looking for them, didn't believe knowing where his parents shared in eternal, tellurian slumber would make living with their deaths any easier. He had his memories of them, and that was enough.

Giles trawled the jagged rows. He didn't have a concrete understanding of what he was looking for or what he expected to find. There were many plots in the graveyard with a hollowed groove for the placement of flowers or ornaments, a commonplace feature that could be easily manipulated into a clandestine drop-point, but there were too many. Unless Giles got down on his knees and sniffed about every slab of cold stone, he'd never find the right one. Many plots were also distorted and in varying degrees of deterioration, which allowed for hundreds, if not thousands of admirable recesses. He might as well have been looking for a needle in a haystack.

As Giles searched, his attention waned, and he started browsing the vast index of names and commemorations to those who were dead. He wondered idly if any of those decaying bodies appreciated the often lavish expenses erected in their wake. Of course, the intention was to immortalise the memory of those who were gone, but no matter the cost, or the materials, or the craftsmanship, the memorials always decayed. All Giles had to do was look at the forgotten graves, which might have been remembered for a generation or two, and were now chipped and cracked. First the spirit, then the flesh, then the memory. All things returned to dust, so why did anyone ever bother with the exorbitant overhead?

It was a sombre hour as he walked among the dead. The light slowly flashed away and a splash of blood stained the sky. Then the curtain fell and all was dark.

He was wandering the wealthy epicentre—spurning the ostentatious statues, which were weathered, cracked and fragmented from years of neglect—when an abhorrent squeal from caustic hinges stopped him in his tracks. It sent gooseflesh marching up and down his arms, caused his heart to skip a beat. He dropped to a crouching position, smacked his knee on a concrete outcrop and had to suppress a moan of anguish. He grabbed his throbbing knee as if trying to keep the pain from leaking out.

Biting his lip, Giles scanned the forest of shadows and spotted a lone, shambling figure. Giles frowned. Someone appeared to have come out of the old Wordsworth crypt and was now leaving the graveyard. The crypt was supposed to be sealed, the burial chambers filled to the brim like the rest of the graveyard. No one should have been able to get down there.

Once the figure vanished, Giles hurried for the crypt, ignoring the pulse of pain from his knee.

The entrance chamber was built from simple stone and cordoned off by an old iron gate. The structure had definitely seen better days. The fine edges had crumbled away, and spiderweb fissures sullied every surface. Loose stones littered the earth, the sinuous remnants of a swan—which once flew above the entrance—discernible amid the rubble.

The gate stood ajar. A chain and thick padlock hung lackadaisically between the bars. Giles inspected the padlock, pulled at the horseshoe bar, peered into the keyhole. There didn't appear to be any forced entry, save perhaps from a fugitive with a knack for lock-picking.

This was it. He was putting his last copper vult on the table and praying for double-six. He had no mandate to venture into this crypt. If anyone caught him it would all be over. He would be permanently stripped of his position within Guardian Force, then delivered to Baron Callahan Wordsworth, who would confiscate his last coin without even blinking. If he found something though... If those dice clicked together and landed on four rows of three... If he was right, then everything he had sacrificed might not have been in vain.

And then he could watch as the baron skinned the bloody weedfinger alive.

Giles entered the crypt. He went down two flights of stairs, passed under a crumbling archway and through a canvas film, then stepped into the largest strife lab operating in the Western Hemisphere. He never would have believed it himself had he not seen it with his own eyes. This house of the dead had been converted into a rigorous production facility, stripping the core annex down to nothing more than dirt and stone, replacing the old tombs with long tables of sheet-metal, which stretched the entire length of the chamber. On each table stood high mountains of raw strife, enough to send the entire Barony Seat of Mamre into a cohesive coma. A grown man could have literally buried himself in it.

Deep tunnels were carved into the walls, burrowing out beneath the town like the roots of an ancient tree, or the tubes of a giant worm. Each of these—at least seven, so far as Giles could see in the dull light—were tall enough to walk through, providing one ducked their head, and they were wide enough to swing a cat. The anbus weed no doubt blossomed in those tunnels—the deep, dark plant that played host to the savage bulbs, which would be ground down into the demon spice. There was no way of knowing how long each tunnel continued, they might have covered the entire township and beyond.

Giles realised he was trembling, and his weeping knee struggled to hold him upright. His brows were saturated, his teeth chattered. He couldn't fathom the discovery. After all this time, he'd finally found what he was looking for. He'd been right all along. He'd found it, hidden beneath the mosaic of a million dry bones.

He stepped forward, his footfalls light and prudent. He took due care to avoid disturbing the surplus of strife washed across the stone floor like rusty sand. He

meandered, charting no clear course through the facility. He was stunned, and he kept resisting the urge to yank his own ear, fearing his final discovery would turn out to be nothing more than a dream.

He eventually chanced upon a shallow recess in the deteriorated wall, where a kerosene lantern hung from the low-drawn ceiling above a messy workstation. Four large ledgers sat atop one another. Writing instruments were strewn everywhere. A filing tray was messy and over-filled, eerily familiar to the one back at the office.

He seized one of the ledgers and opened it to a page marked with a folded piece of heavily crinkled paper. His eyes popped as he scanned the page. He could suddenly hear his own pulse throbbing inside his head, pumping away violently. The ledger was a logbook for every client the facility served, including their names—most of which Giles assumed were pseudonyms—locations, the volume of their orders, and the cost of each individual shipment. There were clients from all over the world, as far as Freya, even one in Jelúton, a small island on the edge of nowhere. The weed had infested the whole world; the entire foundation of Minéa was at the mercy of the demon spice.

It all begged the big question that had plagued Giles for so very long: How were they doing it?

Giles turned his attention to the large crinkled sheet, which had been used as a bookmark. He unfolded it several times, revealing a map of the entire Valkuran Kingdom. Each of the five core baronies were shown in sketched detail, important locales marked accordingly, such as each Barony Seat, major roads, and the general topography of the eastern seaboard. The map had another feature too, something Giles had never seen before, something mysterious. It was like an overlay of geometrical patterns, accompanied with various notations, which seemed to create tangential routes across the landscape, cutting straight through thickets of trees and high mountain ranges. Each line was marked with a number, and occasionally they converged in a junction of sorts, only to then split off in new directions. Sometimes they also terminated suddenly, as shown with a large cross along an intended path, and at others a circle classified some unknown meaning. Giles couldn't make heads or tails of it, not until he flipped the map around and read the notation scrawled on the back:

tunnels - V.K. sector (Updated 32.3.735)

inspect line #9-09 (near orion glades) possibly partial cave in

#8-01 fixed - tunnel cleared + reinforce

what about #4-04? need to contact Searls

#6-13 — second inspection says all good. maybe send another just to be sure?

Realisation struck like a flash of lightning: They were smuggling the demon spice out of Othilia via some underground network! The wiring in his head glowed a vibrant yellow as the pieces finally connected, and jubilation soared through his veins. He had to stop himself from doing a little dance on the spot. It all seemed so obvious now. Whoever sat behind the curtain was not employing a complicated (and wholly unreliable) host of merchants and inspectors, each of whom would need to have been paid a relevant, back-hand bribe. A part of Giles had never truly

believed that such a feat could be accomplished, there had just been no other rational explanation at the time.

So they had burrowed underground. They sought solitude and shelter in the underdark, where neither sight nor sound could deter them as they spread their irrevocable poison. All of a sudden, Giles didn't feel so happy anymore. In fact he felt quite sick, light-headed, as if he was about to throw up.

He folded the map into a tight square and stuffed it into his pocket behind the fragile rose, which shed a single petal that fell on the desk.

Abruptly, the timeworn screech of that rusty gate rushed through the catacombs. For an instant, Giles found himself panicking, casting about for a place to hide—but only for an instant. There were shadows aplenty that would have concealed his figure. The undersides of the workstations would have sufficed, and the cramped space beneath the nearby desk might have taken him if he assumed the foetal position. He could have even dissolved into one of the immeasurable tunnels, crouching in the pungent air until it was safe to leave again. There was ample opportunity to retreat into the darkness, preserving the element of surprise until he had Virgil and the rest of Guardian Force by his side.

Instead, he rooted himself to the floor. He felt as if he was being ripped in two, but he refused to flee. He was tired. He wanted this to be over. He had lived with blood on his hands long enough.

He reached out and lifted the kerosene lantern from its hook above the desk. He held it out before him and strolled into one of the aisles, the sickly light lashing out all over the mountains of demon spice. Strife, he knew, was inflammable to a fault. It burned quicker than paper and spread faster than germs in a town gathering. He wanted to be as close as he could to plugging the entire operation once this shadow of a man cast back the curtains and stepped into the crypt. One spark and the entire facility would become an igneous extravaganza, a bonfire worth more than any one made had a right to spare.

And Giles would not hesitate.

The curtains rustled and exploded inwards. The staunch figure of Lee Heston melted from the shadows. He came to an immediate standstill when he saw Giles, assuming a posture of intense caution. He cocked his eyes, feigning amusement, but his ire couldn't have been more plain. 'I was wondering how long it would take you to figure it out.'

Giles was stunned. He blinked several times and craned his neck from side-to-side in slow beats, as if attempting to adjust his vision and reveal the true perpetrator. Surely the darkness and those malleable shadows had deluded him. It couldn't be Lee, it just couldn't. There were a hundred others he would suspect before an otherwise hardworking, pragmatic introvert, including the Chief Commander himself. Yet there he was, standing in the flesh, refusing to evolve into someone more foul.

'You.' Giles scowled. 'All this time it was you.'

Under the low glow of kerosene, Giles could just make out a five o'clock shadow, and the slight fatigue that marred Lee's face like a handful of soot. It was something he'd never quite noticed until now, and Giles suddenly realised how presumptuous he'd been this past year. The answer had been there all along, he just hadn't been looking in the right place.

'I'm sorry you have to find out this way, Giles. There are a thousand other ways I would have rathered you know. I was considering bringing you in on this a lot earlier,' Lee shrugged. 'Until I realised you wanted to hang me.'

'How long have you known I was looking for you?'

Lee started to prowl. He moved steadily across the dusty stones, slipped into one of the adjacent aisles. 'Long enough.' He grinned, exposing the tips of his fangs. 'How did you know?'

'You don't get to find out.'

Lee's grin faulted. He nodded to himself. 'Fair enough. I have no intention to harm you, Giles. I want us to be calm, compassionate, comprehensible gentlemen. We live in a civilised world, and for now I want to preserve that. There has been a lot of investment in this operation, and I'm not about to risk it to try and taunt you just because you were doing your job.' He stopped across from Giles and gesticulated with his hands, motioning to the stairs. 'Come with me and we can find a place to talk. And rationalise.'

'And how much money are you willing to spill to keep my mouth shut?'

Lee laughed. 'What's your price?'

'What's yours? At what point do you decide it would be far safer and more cost-effective for you to slit my throat, tie some stones to my feet, and toss me into the Enki River?'

Lee said nothing, though the edge of a frown creeped onto his face.

'I'm not here to preserve anything. I'm here to end this.'

'That's not going to happen.'

'What kind of person are you? Do you have any idea what this stuff does to people?' Giles waved a hand across the tomb, over the mountains of strife. Another petal fell from his chest. 'It takes away their essence. They wither and they die. It decays the soul and casts you into a living nightmare.'

'Alcohol does the same thing, I believe that's why they call it rotgut.'

'It's not the same.'

Lee shrugged. 'I don't coerce anyone. All I do is provide my clients with what they ask for, and believe me when I say this, if strife was suddenly abolished from the market, there would be no deficit of alternatives. You can tear this place apart, but you won't be saving anyone. They made their choice long before your noble crusade. Nothing you do is going to change who people really are. It's not about an addiction to illegal narcotics. It's about weakness. Those who use strife are weak. They are not people you want to help, Giles. They aren't like you or me. They're worthless, and so long as I'm in control, I might as well collect a contribution. If you try to put an end to this operation, all you're going to accomplish is making a lot of people upset.'

'Clients?' Giles scoffed. 'Is that what you call your prey?'

'We have a very professional profile. We do not associate with people on the streets, our clients have both wealth and power. There is a lot of documentation involved in the process.' He said this as if proud of the fact. 'Please, sit with me, Giles. I have no qualms with you. I don't want to be hostile. I want us to talk, and I want us to come to an agreement, and then I want us both to walk out of this room as satisfied acquaintances.' He held out his hands and smiled. It was a

warm smile, almost trustworthy. ‘Whatever you want, it’s yours. Does that sound fair?’

Giles held his breath. His gaze was distant, lost in another time and place. He never really considered Lee’s offer—he never would have been able to live with himself. He just allowed himself a moment to imagine another reality; one where Clementine could have a wedding to rival a queen; one where his daughter could have everything an honest child needs and deserves. One he would never know.

Giles blinked. Then he snapped. ‘Not in my town, you son of a bitch.’

He launched the lantern across the chamber. The old Wordsworth Crypt became a molten core, and one of the great evils of the world burned away in righteous fire.

Lee screamed. It was an abominable noise, nothing that should have come out of a human mouth. He tried to stop the flames, knocking over one of the workstations to isolate the stream of fire. It was a fruitless effort. The flames dripped to the dusty floor and spread. The fervour—the hunger—was undeniable, unstoppable.

Within a minute the facility was lost.

Giles fled from the mayhem, scooting up the cracked stairs as the inferno roared from below. He came out of the rusty gate as the crypt started to glow, and as he looked over his shoulder—the ache in his knee completely forgotten—he thought it looked like the maw of hell, as if the flames that devoured his childhood had returned for one last feast.

He hopped over the low-cut graves and clamoured around some of the taller ones. He tripped on the edge of a grave, twisted one of his toes, and lost his balance. He wavered like a sailor on a pulpit and slammed into the wall of the church, bruising his shoulder. He paused there briefly, panting like a mutt as all conscious and unconscious thought alike thundered away. Whenever he tried to find himself and think about what he was supposed to do next, his head burned as if his skull had shrunk. Only one name was consistent amid the storm: Virgil.

He *needed* Virgil.

He took a deep breath, glanced one more time at the burning crypt, then he was off, pirouetting out of the graveyard. He hurried back to the old Sheriff’s Office, but the Chief Commander had already gone home for the night. Only Trash and Orwell were present, and he wouldn’t have trusted either with his pocket change.

He stormed into the filing room, ignoring the aroused concerns of his colleagues. He flipped the desk, and hundreds of documents and shipment receipts spilled all over the floor and scattered to every corner of the room. Underneath the desk was a short sword, trussed out of sight. Giles hurried to remove it. He could have raided the old church and found a more suitable weapon for the occasion—perhaps a crossbow, or one of the few forbidden relics they had in storage—he didn’t have a set of keys though, nor the time to break inside.

He slipped out of the office and ran across Othilia as fast as his legs would take him, his muscles popping, tendons stretching. There were more than a few curious glances thrown in his direction as he slid through the evening gloom. A dog yapped at him, skeptical of his hurried pace, and a goodwife screamed and fled

back into her house, abandoning the cook pot she'd been emptying when she saw the long flash of silver gripped in his hands.

He was almost out of breath when he made it to the Chief Commander's house, a double-level villa on the southern tip of Othilia, not too far from the charred skeleton of Giles' childhood home. He started hammering the door, and when there was no immediate response, he wailed out for Virgil, crying into the night.

Seconds the length of millenniums passed, and the door opened, revealing a weathered face and a disdainful glare. The Chief Commander was not impressed.

'Giles, what the—'

'You have to come with me. Right now. I found it.'

Virgil's powerful eyes mushroomed and his forehead creased. 'Where?'

'The crypt.' Giles was heaving, trying to kick his lungs back into gear. His face was drenched, his uniform covered in creeping wet patches. He'd come almost three leagues in under ten minutes, and he honestly believed he was about to pass out. 'The graveyard. The Wordsworth... The old Wordsworth tomb.' He paused, took in a particularly deep breath, coughed. 'It was Lee.'

'Heston? God's burning flesh, you better not be yanking on this pole without a bite, Giles.'

'It's real. I saw it.' He gasped. 'I burned it.'

'You did what?' Virgil's tone could have cracked the night sky like a hammer on tiles. 'You were supposed to come to me!'

'I didn't have a choice.'

Virgil stepped out onto the patio. He was tensing, and he made a visible effort not to ram his fist into something, anything. He gripped the railing and stared out across a town of shadows. Already a dark column of smoke had sketched itself across the stars, the thick tendrils riding a gentle breeze into the night.

'Shit,' Virgil said.

'We have to get back. We don't have a lot of time.'

'No.' Virgil thrust a finger at Giles. He hesitated, ruminated, wondered if he was going to have to hang his 2IC, then suddenly mellowed. 'I'll go. I'll get Lee. You're going home.'

'Virgil, I'm coming with you.'

'No. You've done enough damage. For once you're going to do as you're told, and we're going to finish this up my way.' Virgil held out his hand and Giles relinquished the weapon. 'Maybe I can salvage this before we all find ourselves staring up at an oliphant's ass with our mouths wide open. If Lee is pissed enough, it's going to be a lot better if he sees me before he sees you. Go home, have something to eat. I'll come get you when I need you.'

Conviction.

Giles never saw Virgil again.

He hurried back to the manor, his legs now burning, igniting with every step. He was exhausted by the time he got home, his flesh flacid, his clothes wet through.

As soon as he was inside, he locked the door and called out for Clementine, his voice quavering and hoarse. He was going to tell her everything. He wouldn't hold anything back. If he was going to survive tonight, he needed someone to know the truth—the whole truth—and there was no-one he trusted more than the woman of his dreams.

She didn't call back.

Giles called out for her again and stepped into the living room. His daughter surprised him, pouncing upon him, and he flinched as she threw her arms around him.

'Oh! Starshine.' His voice was slightly distracted, distant. 'How are you?'

'Pretty good.' Aurora wrinkled her nose and recoiled. 'You smell!'

He nodded. For his daughter's sake, he donned a smile, though it took all his effort not to burst into tears. 'I better wash down, or else I won't be allowed in your room. Isn't that right?'

Aurora nodded sternly. She might have been a solicitor in court, and she folded her arms to compliment the image. 'You know the rules!'

Giles kissed her forehead and rustled her hair.

He passed into the kitchen. He caught scent of the shepherd's pie baking in the oven before he entered, and expected to find Clementine pottering around, lost in her own personal revelry. She wasn't there. He didn't find her upstairs either, so he hurried back to the lounge room and probed his daughter.

'Mum said she needed some tomatoes.'

The tomatoes would be for sauce. His daughter didn't eat anything if it wasn't drowned in tomato sauce, and on any other night, he might have sardonically chastised her juvenile proclivity to always ruin a good meal. Not tonight though. There was nothing sardonic about tonight.

'Where did she go?'

His daughter did respond, but Giles never heard what she said. The only voice that registered in his ears was the rigid, apocalyptic one, which swelled against the house like the gust of a rampant storm.

'Giles! I know you're in there, and I'm only going to ask you this once: Come outside. We have a few things we need to talk about.'

Giles backed up against the wall. He started breathing in short, desperate gulps. His heart raced in his chest. His eyes glistened. He felt utterly hopeless, and yet his daughter had returned to her pastel colouring-in, totally oblivious of the ropes looped around their heads.

He called back: 'What kind of things?'

'Why don't you come out here so I can show you?'

Giles sidled up to the window behind his favourite chair and peered through the lace curtains. What he saw caused his stomach to melt.

Clementine was outside, dressed in her cooking apron. She was kneeling in the dirt, and a long, sharp blade hovered at her neck.

Lee stared at the shadow in the window. His face was passive, not a single muscle betrayed his intention. He was totally cavalier. 'I don't want to do this.'

Giles tried to speak but words failed him.

'She doesn't have to be hurt; none of this is her fault. All you need to do is come outside and take her place. It's that simple.'

'You can't do this.' Giles' skin had turned ghostly pale, the colour of morning milk. He gripped the wall so hard the wallpaper tore beneath his fingers. 'You can't.'

'You just destroyed some very valuable merchandise. There are a lot of people who are going to want someone to blame once they find out what you did. You are in no position to tell me what I can't do.'

'You can't get away from this,' Giles stammered. 'You won't.'

Lee scowled, which only emphasised the black smudges of ash that marred his face. 'Nothing is going to happen to me.' He held the blade even closer to Clementine's neck, a nail's length from her flesh. 'But something will happen to her. Or you can come outside and stop this.'

'Virgil knows!'

'I'm not afraid of Virgil.'

'He's coming for you. You can't get away with this.'

'This isn't parley!' Lee growled. 'You know what I want, and you've got one minute to come outside, or this comes to an end.'

Giles placed his hand against the window. Frost emanated out from his pores and glowed on the glass. 'You don't have to do this. Just let her go. Just put the sword away.'

'The time for bargaining has past. You know what you have to do.'

Giles pulled back from the window. He whirled around on the spot, searching for a way out, reefing at his hair with lunatic aggression.

Aurora glanced up at her father, her expression quizzical. 'What's going on, daddy?'

'Nothing.' He hopped back to the window and started to weep. 'Don't worry, starshine. Keep colouring.'

'Do you want her blood on your hands?' Lee said.

'Please, Lee. Let her go. She's done nothing wrong.'

'Then come outside.'

'I can't do that,' Giles said. His emotions were a blur. He knew how this would end if he stepped out that door. 'You'll do it to me.'

Lee nodded a single time. He was bleak, unperturbed. Either way, he'd still find a way to sleep at night.

Giles could see the tempest in Lee's eyes, the furious desire for blood. He didn't doubt that everything Lee said was true. Once rumour of the facilities destruction worked its way up the grapevine, Lee would have quite a chore trying to save his own head from ending up on a pike. Giles forfeiting his own life wouldn't change anything. The demon spice was gone and an incalculable investment had burned away. Giles wasn't foolish. He knew Lee wasn't going to hand him over to his investors for some kind of retribution. No, this was a personal campaign of raw, human desire. Lee just wanted to spill the blood of the man who had crossed him before someone came hunting for his head.

But could Lee really do it? Could he actually swing that sword? Giles had known the man for most of his life, and for some reason, which remained all too unclear as he stood against the glass, he didn't believe Lee could cut down an innocent woman for the sake of vengeance. Virgil? Maybe. The Chief Commander's

bloodlust was at least palpable, providing he was tickled the right way. Lee? Giles couldn't see an executioner in him. It all had to be a bluff. Had to be.

'Twenty seconds.'

'No.'

Lee said nothing. He stared with wintry eyes, didn't even blink.

'You can't do this.'

'You're wrong.'

Giles swallowed, sniffed. 'No. I'm not. I know you. I know what you're capable of and you can't do this. I'm not afraid of you. You're not going to hurt her, and I'm not coming out of this house.'

'Ten seconds.'

Giles was scared. The woeful fire in his gut burned and burned and burned. The beat in his head was now intolerable, and his legs were gelatinous.

He forced himself to look across the garden and hold the woman who would be his wife in his sights. He would not tear his gaze away again, not even against her desperate, pleading countenance that threatened to destroy him.

'I will always tell you the truth,' he said, whispering against the glass. 'You can trust me, Clementine. You can. You can trust me.'

And then his time was up.

Lee was stoic for a moment, then his posture teetered and his grip on the sword ebbed. His focus shifted. His eyes became two wandering orbs as he sought desperately to strengthen his resolve.

A gush of stale air spilled out of Giles. He smiled, almost screamed with relief. He'd won. He'd called Lee's bluff and the son of a bitch had backed down. He nodded to Clementine, and she returned the gesture. They knew they were going to be all right.

Suddenly, Lee scowled. His posture stiffened and he shook his head slowly, then uttered three plaintive words that would haunt Giles for the rest of his days. 'You fucking coward.'

He swung the blade. Clementine's neck slit open, her carotid artery severed with a single, flush stroke. The blade came halfway through her neck and stuck. Lee pulled it out with a rough jerk, ripping her oesophagus to shreds. He raised the sword and came down again. This time he finished the deed, splitting the spinal cord and silencing the electrical current of her panicked thoughts, now and forever. Her head toppled from her shoulders and rolled into the grass. Her body fell the other way, smacking the ground with a conclusive thump, squirting ropes of disinterred blood from the bloody stump of her neck.

Giles staggered. He felt as if someone had struck him with a hammer. He stepped back from the window, his motions slow, delayed, as if he was bogged by the currents of a dream. His stomach broiled. His heart caught in his throat, like if he'd swallowed an oversized almond. The world as he knew it shattered around him, and he fell through the gaping threshold, into the wilderness of delirium.

He had lied to her. He had betrayed her. He had lost her. It was all over.

He did not notice when Lee broke away from Clementine's corpse. The violent rapping on the door was also drowned out by the distressed thumping of his own broken heart. He would not have even recognised Lee's cruel, bloodied face once

he was finally caught, and the flash of sharpened steel would have been nothing more than a rogue flare of light before the emptiness of oblivion stole him away.

He fell against the wall and edged to the floor, his legs finally failing him.

‘Daddy, I think someone is at the door.’

It was only when Giles felt his daughter’s soulstone voice that he came back, rising suddenly to the surface, as if coming out of the deep ocean seconds before water filled his lungs. He awoke, gasped. He blinked, and the visage of his tiny, vulnerable daughter became his only rational concern. He was quickly aware of the coarse splintering of wood, and before he even knew what he was doing, he had recoiled off the wall and seized his daughter. He darted into the kitchen, ignoring Aurora’s barrage of questions, most of which concerned why her father thought it was necessary to interrupt her pastel masterpiece.

He kicked the door to the cellar open and ducked into the darkness, fleeing beneath the manor as if he trod on hot coals. He had to put a hand on his daughter’s mouth to cut her voice when they emerged on the other side. He told her, a little too fiercely, to be quiet, and she toed the line like the good girl she was.

Divergence.

Giles rapped on the door until his knuckles brightened with apoplectic spots. He then switched to a fist and hammered away. By the time Miles finally answered, Giles had resorted to thrusting his foot against the door and crying out in a broken voice.

‘I heard you the first time!’ Miles snapped. He was dressed in a nightgown and wore a pair of half-moon reading glasses, which added ten years to his complexion.

Giles didn’t wait to be berated further. He hurled himself (and his daughter) inside, wedging past his brother.

Now that he was in the light, Miles didn’t need to look twice to notice the disheveled state of his brother or the fatigue that plagued him. He assumed an attitude of stark consternation. ‘What happened?’ Miles glanced outside, expecting Clementine, but there was only darkness and stillness. He closed the door, flipped the lock back into place, followed his brother into the parlour. ‘Giles, what’s going on?’ He noticed the red fractures in the whites of his brother’s eyes, which exacerbated the flush of exertion. ‘You look like you ran all the way here.’

‘I did.’

Miles frowned. He demanded to know exactly what had happened, no stone unturned.

‘I made a mistake.’ His voice was weary, almost distorted. ‘I didn’t think he would do it. I thought she would be okay.’

Miles grabbed his brother, held their faces together. ‘Giles. You need to tell me what happened.’

Over the next few minutes, Miles was able to scrape together enough of his brother's discordant story, and while he tried to maintain a sense of crisp confidence, he was stricken with fear. He asked if they both wanted a drink, and when he came back with a coffee for Giles and a warm milk for Aurora, his niece was curled up asleep and Giles was planted in the seat by the window, peering out and scanning the dark for any anomalies.

He sat the coffee down in front of Giles. His brother made no move to drink. Miles started to sip from the milk himself.

'What are we going to do?'

Giles shook his head.

'You said Virgil knows about him?'

'Yes.'

'Okay. This is all going to be...' He choked, thinking of Clementine. Her sweet face. Her innocence. Her youth. Gone. 'We can stay here. We can barricade the doors and—'

'No. I need to get out of here.'

Miles frowned. 'You're not going after him.'

'He wants me,' Giles said. 'He wants my head.'

'He's not going to get it,' Miles declared

'As long as I'm here, Aurora is leverage against me. She's in danger.'

'We will be safe here. Your daughter will be safe here. Let Virgil finish this.'

Giles nodded. 'He will. I know he will.' He blinked, reeled his eyes from the empty night. He finally blew on the coffee and slurped up a hot dribble, then tapped it back on the table and didn't touch it again. 'But if he doesn't, I don't want to be anywhere near my daughter. Right now, I can't guarantee her safety. I have to go.'

'And what are you going to do about Aurora? She needs you.'

'No. You're going to take her.'

Miles almost swallowed his tongue. He shook his head in short, wild gyrations. 'No. No. You have a right. You're her father. You have to—'

'I gave up whatever rights I had when I killed her mother,' Giles growled, his voice coarse, near-broken. He looked at his sleeping daughter and wanted to cry. He might have let the tears wallow and spill over if he hadn't already started to decay.

Miles was quiet.

'You have to protect her,' Giles said.

'Giles, you're my brother. It does not matter what happened, it wasn't your fault. I will stand by you. I will help you. We can do this together, just don't run away. You're not the bad guy.'

'I killed Vashe Martin.'

Miles choked again. He turned his head from side-to-side, the muscles behind his mask stirring furiously as he attempted to rationalise. He couldn't do it. His words were lost, and for the first time ever, he looked at his brother as if he was a stranger.

'It was an accident,' Giles said. 'I thought he was one of them.'

'I don't know what you want me to say.'

'I want you to say you're going to keep my daughter safe.'

'You know I will,' Miles grunted. He was savage and sorrow; struggling between condemnation and absolution. He wanted to help this man, he wanted to hold out his hand and lead him back to the light, but there was also an irrefutable desire to send him far away and never lay eyes on him again. Miles was a man of faith, true and through, and he knew a man with darkness in his heart.

'Good,' Giles said.

'And what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to run,' Giles said. 'And I'm going to hope my shadow never catches me.'

Culmination.

Iman Lazuli found Clementine's body while it was still warm.

He'd come to investigate the recent raucous at the southern annex of the manor, assuming the Deschains had had a rare domestic dispute. They'd never so much as raised their voices at each other before though, and once Lazuli heard the crunching, splintering echo of some violent assault, he did his job as an amicable neighbour to make sure everyone was safe. When he found the body—only the body, no-one ever did find her head—he screamed, alarming nearby townsfolk and drawing a small crowd out of the night.

Once a few more bystanders glanced upon the butchered corpse, a maelstrom of hysteria began churning through the town. Rumours went rampant, mutating as they spread, amalgamating with news of the fire at the old graveyard, and the number of a victims and perpetrators only grew with the telling. Once Baron Callahan Wordsworth was finally notified, apparently half of Guardian Force was dead and most of the town proper had been burnt to the ground.

Lee knew as soon as he lobbed off the woman's head that he'd have to skulk along the edge of the knife, and the longer he stayed in Othilia, the closer he'd teeter to the scimitar-like tip. His stratagem was now temporary. Nothing was concrete. He didn't even care about finding Giles—as far as Lee was concerned, the prying bastard had learned his lesson.

There was some small part of him that feared retaliation. Perhaps Giles would try to rally Guardian Force against him; to hunt him down before he dissolved into the night; to retrieve him dead or alive. It was only a *small* part of him though. If Giles was any kind of father, the only thing he would be concerned about for the immediate future was safeguarding his daughter. Lee was confident he'd be relatively safe for an hour or two, providing he played his cards right. There was ample opportunity to tie off a few loose ends.

He made his way back to the office, adhering to the way of shadows. He was elusive, his gait vigilant. If he had to, he would strike down any man (or woman) who got in his way. The only thing Lee wanted to do now was survive, and he would do so at any cost.

He emerged from the tight alcove behind the apothecary, crossed the road and entered the office. He held his sword up at an angle to protect his flesh, though he

met no aggression, and he lowered the weapon when he entered the overturned filing room. The Chief Commander was sitting alone, waiting, resting a short sword on his knees—the one that had always been stashed under the desk.

‘Hello, Virgil.’

‘I think we have a problem,’ Virgil said. He tapped the blade with one finger at a time, as if tinkering with piano keys.

‘Anything I can do to help?’

Virgil looked up at Lee and tensed. He was livid.

Lee sighed. ‘Giles told you, didn’t he?’ He jabbed the tip of his sword into the wooden floor. He offered up a concise chuckle. ‘What do you want me to say? Do you want me to apologise? Plead for forgiveness? Innocence? Acquittal? What?’

‘I want you to burn in hell.’

Lee grinned. ‘You didn’t think it would be me, did you?’

‘No.’ Virgil flexed his fingers, and a quick succession of popping sounds filled the room. He got to his feet amid the carnage, and the two men faced each other. ‘I expected better from you.’

‘And what happens now?’ Lee stabbed at the floor aimlessly. ‘I’m not here to come quietly, just so you know.’

Virgil lifted his sword, pointed the swift blade of honest death at the scoundrel before him. ‘I was hoping to do this like gentleman.’ He put his free hand to his belt, within easy reach of his knife, just in case.

Lee recognised the journeyman posture, saw the evidence of military training in the way Virgil held himself, but his skill was rusty, unreliable. The Chief Commander might have once donned steel and chanted the *Song of Eagles* in an exhibition of power and strength, but he’d lived many years without diligence since he last held a sword. Still, Lee wanted to disarm him as quickly as possible. He knew a blunt knife could still cut if waved the right way.

He would need to surprise Virgil, to do something distracting and unexpected. It was the only way he’d get close enough to knock the sword out of his hands. What could he do though?

‘I like you, Virgil. You know that, right?’

‘Shut up.’ Virgil took a step closer.

Lee sighed. ‘If you do this, it doesn’t end well. Not for you, not for anyone. Everyone suffers.’

‘I’m not afraid of you.’

Lee’s eyes darkened. He snarled. ‘Well you should be.’

Abruptly, Lee threw his sword across the room, launched it pirouetting at the Chief Commander. It was the only thing he could think to do, and it was enough. Virgil had been expecting a fight, had waited for Lee to launch forward, swinging his sword in savage arcs; had prepared to fell his foe in a virtuous struggle of steel-on-steel. Any other man might have accepted the challenge and died with a seed of honour in their soul, but Lee valued the air in his lungs higher than some age-old principles of integrity or morality. He would do *anything* he needed to do to survive, and weaselling his way out of a fair fight was the very least of his sins.

Virgil wavered, swung his sword awkwardly and clipped the spinning blade out of the air. He was discomposed, hadn’t expected the attack, and before he had a chance to recoup, Lee was on top of him. Virgil’s wrist burned as Lee clamped

down and twisted. They staggered, collided with the wall, and Virgil lost his grip on the sword, which clinked on the floor, forgotten. Virgil hurried for his knife, unsheathed it. Before he could bring it up, Lee was wrestling for possession of it, reefing this way and that, the two of them grunting like animals. Lee tried to knee Virgil's crotch and grind his balls against the wall. Virgil sensed the imminent danger and thrust them both, tumbling them into one of the filing cabinets. There was a deep, metallic clang. Virgil's grip faltered. Lee seized his opportunity and chewed on the Chief Commander's hand, ripping away flesh and swimming through the blood until his teeth were scraping on bare bone.

Virgil screamed. A blur of disputing voices tore at his mind; two conflicting notions of instinct that equally guaranteed his survival. One encouraged him to keep a hold on the knife, and the other insisted he had to let it go. Eventually, the agony of his mutilated hand grew too much for him to bear, and he pulled away, earning him a brief respite before Lee brought the knife down on his head and concluded the internal debate. The knife went straight into his skull, the blade swallowed all the way to the hilt. His body didn't even offer a final jerk, it just died, like a candle flame snuffed in the night.

Lee fell back on the chair. He'd sat on this chair for most of his life over the last six years, archiving countless registers and receipts. He laced his hands together and lowered his head. His breathing was tired, guttural. The splatter of Virgil's blood stained his lips like berry juice, and it dripped from the point of his chin.

He took solace in the fact that Guardian Force was now scattered like a deck of cards, all the royal ranks flicked into the fireplace. Even if the group managed to salvage itself, they wouldn't be coming after Lee anytime soon.

He tore off a strip from the Chief Commander's sleeve and wiped his face clean. He proceeded to raid the dead man's corpse, pocketing an expensive flip lighter and a salubrious money purse to aid in his escape. He sat again to consider his best route out of the town, sketching a map on the back of one of the strewn export forms, when Baron Callahan Wordsworth stormed into the office, his seasoned countenance irksome and unforgiving.

Lee glanced up and nodded curtly. 'Hello, Michael.'

The baron's gaze flicked around the room, assessing the carnage. 'Burn God's flesh and boil His blood, what happened down here?' He glowered at the sprawled body and the dagger wedged in its head like a faucet. 'Who is that?'

Lee blinked. 'Virgil.' He returned to sketching his intended route as if he'd revealed nothing more than a roach under his boot.

The baron was not so blasé. 'Virgil? As in Virgil Decinta? As in Chief Commander of Guardian Force Virgil, that Virgil?'

'That's him.'

'I want an explanation. Now!'

'Calm down, Michael.'

'How dare you speak to me—'

'Why are you even here?' Lee spat.

'I followed the whispers on the wind. They're kind of hard to ignore right now, and they lit the way brighter than a Sham'Enel bonfire.'

'Maybe you should have closed your window.'

‘Don’t be coy with me!’ A vein popped on the baron’s forehead and there was fire in his eyes. ‘What happened?’

Lee sighed. He folded his impromptu map and rubbed his eyelids, which suddenly felt as heavy as ingots. ‘Do you really want to know? Okay. Fine.’ He slapped his thighs and grinned at the baron. ‘Earlier this evening a little rat discovered our operation and decimated it. As a result, several people are now dead, and by morning, if either of us are still in this town, we’re probably going to be the quarry of the largest manhunt since William Fydûr.’

‘You let the rat get away?’

Lee scowled. ‘I didn’t *let* him do anything.’

The baron bared his perfect teeth and seemed ready to utter every curse known to him. ‘You didn’t think to go after him?’

Lee got to his feet, became suddenly more formidable, brushing the baron’s prestige aside like wilted crops. ‘Of course I went after him. I threatened to cut off his wife’s head and the coward still didn’t stop running!’

‘Who was it?’

‘Deschain. Virgil’s 2IC.’

The baron screwed up his eyes as he formed a mental picture to match the name. ‘Deschain.’ He tasted the name and blinked. ‘The young man? The one who rents the south annex of my father’s manor?’

Lee said nothing.

‘That’s a real shame,’ the baron said, somewhat earnest in his conviction. ‘I liked him.’ He nodded, conferred with himself for the span of some seconds, then snapped his fingers decisively. ‘Okay. We’re going to start again.’

Lee raised his eyebrows. ‘I don’t think you appreciate our position, Michael.’

‘You said Deschain ran. Where did he go?’

‘I don’t know. He could be halfway to Calla Lily right now.’

‘Exactly. Why would an innocent man run? All we have to do is put out a public APB, citing Deschain as the perpetrator of this incident. The rest of this town will follow our lead. If he comes back, he’ll be silenced, either by us or one of his neighbours wishing to fill their coffers with a generous reward. If he decides to keep running, it’s none of our concern, and if he tries to convict us with a third party, it’s his word against mine. We can salvage this.’

‘He may not be the only one who knows. There could be others, his brother for example. If there’s enough of a front, they won’t be willing to acquit you without some substantial evidence to the contrary.’

The baron smiled. ‘They’re peons. They’ll believe whatever I tell them to believe.’

‘And the rest of Guardian Force? What if they know something?’

‘Then we wipe the slate clean and we start again.’

Lee was already shaking his head. ‘No. You think these people are weaker than they actually are. They’re not just ants under your boot, and even if they were, enough ants could kill a man.’

‘We’re not debating our operations, Lee. I’m telling you what we’re going to do.’

‘You can do whatever you want,’ Lee announced. He stepped nearer to the baron, close enough so they could have tasted each other’s breath with a lick of their tongue. ‘I’m done. I made a lot of money, and I’m content. Now I’m going to

disappear, and I strongly recommend you follow me into the darkness. It's time to pull out.'

'You don't get to walk away from this.'

'Watch me.'

A moment later, Michael Callahan Wordsworth, Baron of Othilia, and confederate of one of the largest inherited fortunes in the entire Kingdom of Valkura, was struggling to breathe as his larynx collapsed. He flailed, clawing at the hand around his neck, but his senescent limbs could offer no reprisal, and his face turned a seashore blue before all that he was leaked out of his ears and into the night.

The baron was dead, as was the Chief Commander. By the time their bodies were discovered just before the stroke of midnight, both Giles Deschain and Lee Heston had fled from Othilia, and within the short space of a year, both became black memories from a day of death.

Resumption.

It was Sham'Enel Eve. The midmorning light over Mamre, Barony Seat of Canaan, was fresh and jubilant. The tepid warmth had woken the city early, and a bustling throng of vendors, consumers, tourists, and a copious horde of frolicking children filled the streets and transformed the canals into a logjam of boats, pressed so tightly together one could have technically embodied the divine and walked atop running water. It was perhaps the busiest day of the year, and Giles Deschain felt it as hard as anyone.

He was a relatively new face in Mamre. He'd come as a vagrant and quickly earned himself an oft-loathed position, unloading the early morning shipments before dawn's first light. He was quiet and profound, never tardy, always willing to stay back and perform some overtime, and he frequently opted to forego the egg carton of tabac breaks sponsored by his fellow workers. Most saw him as eccentric—a recluse of sorts, disconnected from reality—but those few who came close enough to look into his eyes could see the gloom that had consumed this man; the darkness that had swallowed his soul. Those enlightened few dared not ask him any questions, for they feared the answers he might speak.

He stayed back for almost four hours before he was allowed to leave. Giles and two others had just finished unloading the hull of their final vessel, and a prodigious stockpile of fireworks was now being distributed throughout the city. He punched his sign off card with drowsy gesticulations, then meandered away without offering as little as a word of good will to his co-workers.

He made off along one of the many subservient canals. He walked for about ten minutes before he stopped at a corner where two bridges intersected, forming an open courtyard with spots of synthetic greenery. An outdoor café had been established here, with over two dozen tables spread out under the sun, each with an ostentatious pattern weaved into the metalwork. Giles had eaten breakfast here almost every morning since his arrival in Mamre, and the owners—who spoke with

thick Freyan accents—had become well acquainted with him, even if he still didn't care to ask of their names.

'Good morning, friend. Late shift, was it?'

Giles nodded.

'Then I hope you have a good sleep today! Do you want the usual? Double strength latte?'

Giles nodded again.

'With egg and bacon?'

Giles nodded once more. He handed over the money and didn't ask for his change.

'Thank you, my friend. It shouldn't be too long.'

Giles walked across the courtyard to take his seat. He stopped short when he saw a nondescript man sitting in his regular spot, reading the morning newspaper. There were far more people here by this time of morning than he was usually accustomed to, and he knew he shouldn't have expected his seat by the canal's edge to remain vacant for over half the morning. He searched the courtyard and found another seat across the way.

'You're welcome to sit with me. I'm alone.'

Giles looked at the man reading the newspaper. 'No. It's okay.'

'I don't bite.' As if to contradict this, the man smiled, exposing two rows of finely polished teeth.

Giles shook his head and started to back away.

The man frowned. 'Take a seat, Giles.'

Giles felt his pulse quicken. 'Who are you?' He tried to remember the face, but there was nothing particularly notable behind the clean complexion and crystal blue eyes.

'Take a seat and I'll tell you. I'm not here to hurt you.'

'So why are you here?'

'To finally meet you. And to make you an offer.' The man leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. 'Now, please, take a seat.'

Giles did so.

'I'm aware you don't read the papers.'

Giles didn't bother to ask why this man was aware of such a minute detail. He knew enough of the world to know he wouldn't get an answer. 'If they printed more than fear and violence there might actually be something to read.'

The man smiled and nodded. 'An excellent point. Regardless, I took the liberty of purchasing today's issue. There's something in there I would very much like you to see.' He passed the newspaper across the table. 'Turn to page 22, please.'

Giles did as he was instructed. The interior headline for a rather large article read as follows:

SHERIFF'S OFFICE RE-ESTABLISHED IN OTHILIA

Below that, at the bottom of the page, a secondary headline for a brief column announced:

GUARDIAN FORCE

OFFICIALLY DISBANDED

Giles lowered the newspaper. He put a hand across his mouth to prevent the bottled tsunami of twisted emotions from leaking out. 'What do you think you're doing?' Giles growled at the enigmatic figure before him. His profile was monstrous by now, and he'd already lured the scrutiny of a few curious bystanders. 'Who the hell are you?'

'I just thought you might like some closure.'

'Are you with Lee then? Are you here to finish it?'

'No. Lee Heston has not been seen for quite some time. He's a wanted man in all of the Eastern Baronies. Although, he is also a very smart man, and I don't believe he will be found unless he desires as much. I doubt he would show himself to you. He'd consider it too much of a risk.'

Giles was very near to tears. 'Then why are you here?'

The man came forward and occupied a formal attitude, holding his hands together and speaking with a powerful baritone. 'I represent a very powerful entity who aims to do nothing less than keep the threads of our world from unravelling. When I first heard about the incident in Othilia, I was, needless to say, quite intrigued. The journalists, as always, only reported half of the story, enough to earn a generous paycheque without exerting themselves all too much. I decided to do a little follow-up investigation of my own. Sure enough, after some prodding around in the right places, I had the full story. Your brother provided to be a well of unsought intel.'

Red rage flashed across Giles' face. Tears welled in his eyes. 'You better not have touched him.'

'I'm not a monster, Giles. I wanted nothing more than the truth, and I found what I was looking for.'

'And what was that?'

'You.'

Giles said nothing.

'You were the catalyst to the collapse of Guardian Force. You also inadvertently caused the bankruptcy of House Wordsworth and all their assets. I knew you weren't just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew there was a story to the tragedy that befell Othilia that fateful night, and I knew you weren't the bad guy. Your brother told me everything.' The man leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'You uncovered and stopped one of the largest strife farms in the world, and no one in this city even knows your name.'

Giles shrugged. 'You do.'

'I do, and you may not believe this, but I consider you a very valuable asset. That's why I've had someone following you and reporting to me for the past 17 days.'

'Excuse me?'

'He's right over there.' He pointed across the canal.

Giles followed the finger. Sure enough, in the tight channel between two buildings, Giles saw a man clad in black. It was only a glimpse though, and as soon as he blinked the dark figure vanished, as if it had been nothing more than a mote floating in his retinae. He swallowed hard and wondered how he could have

possibly been trailed for almost two weeks without ever suspecting a thing. It didn't seem plausible.

'Do not be afraid. You're in no danger. In fact, you've probably never been safer.'
'I'd sure like to believe that.'

The man smiled, then fell back into his formal proceedings. 'Guardian Force was an intuitive concept. Honourable. Valiant. What Baron Wordsworth attempted to create was a self-reliant and self-governing system that any town with a sense of disconnection from the outside world could appreciate. Unfortunately, it was constructed on a lie, as I'm sure you're aware of, and the management and upkeep of this system was virtually non-existent.'

'We did the best we could,' Giles said defensively.

'Of course. You were a very versatile man, Giles, and everything you did was for the best interest of every hardworking man and woman in Othilia.'

Giles leaned on his hand. His voice croaked when he spoke: 'And I still failed.' He laughed despite himself.

'All you needed was a little help, someone to stand alongside you. I'm here to offer that to you.'

'You're a little too late.'

'It's never too late. Othilia might be beyond resolve, but there will be others who will need your help. The threads that hold our world together are not fixed, and the tighter any one man pulls, the closer they come to unravelling. If you come with me, you're going to have the opportunity to help people, and bit by bit, you're going to keep our world safe and strong.'

'And if I don't come you'll ... what? Silence me? Roll me up in a carpet and toss me in the drink?'

The man shook his head and smiled. 'No. You will, however, always wonder what would have happened if you had taken my hand.'

Giles looked down at his hands. They were covered in a layer of dust, but all he saw was blood. Blood that would never wash away no matter how hard he scrubbed. Did resumption exist? There was a time when he thought he knew the answer. Now he was not so sure, but he was willing to find out.

He looked up. 'Do you have a name?'

'You can call me Hershel.'

Hershel held out his hand, and Giles shook it tentatively.

'And what exactly is it I will be doing for you, Hershel?'

Hershel smiled. 'Whatever comes next.'

