

## Better Angels

The door was open, and the fire was out. The room stank of whiskey and vomit, and Stafford Martin was desperately ill.

As if the fever wasn't enough, there had to be this terrible wind. It barreled through the doorway and swept across the floorboards, sneaking up the counter and running its fingers along the row of empty bottles. *Tinkle tinkle. Tinkle tinkle.*

Stafford leaned his head back against the counter. Discordant piano chords filled the gaps between the shrieking wind. The enchanted notes were sad. Why did they have to be sad? He had enough already, with this fever and this wind. He rolled onto his side, pulling his legs to his chest, trapping his head between the counter and his shoulder.

"Won't you shut the door?" Stafford croaked.

Horace rose from his chair by the dead fireplace and shut the door, buttressing it this time with a couple of moth-eaten chairs.

"How's the town?" Stafford moaned into the crook of one arm.

"Empty," Horace said.

How strange Horace looked sideways. Stafford blinked slowly as he considered the image of the bravest person he knew. He looked taller, bigger, the sleeves of his uniform rolled up despite the chill. General Wharton used to do that, roll up his sleeves. Stafford thought Horace looked very much like General Wharton. Same strong chin. Same dark eyes that always seemed to be focused on you. No stubble on the cheeks, but that was just Horace. Even when nothing mattered anymore, Horace would have his shave.

“Stafford.” Horace sounded serious. But Stafford felt his mind begin to sink back into the tangle of feverish dreams. Piano chords chipped away at his consciousness. *Ding a ling a di a ding a ling.*

“Stafford!”

Horace was shaking his arm, slapping his cheeks, breathing all over him. Stafford lurched back and smacked his head on the counter.

“Easy, Stafford, easy.”

“What do you want?” Stafford’s tongue felt a brick in his mouth, making his speech sluggish. His head pounded.

“I saw a soul outside.”

“No, you didn’t,” Stafford mumbled.

“Yes, I did.”

“One of ours?”

Horace paused. “I don’t know.”

“...huh?”

“I mean, I didn’t see a body.”

“It was just floating...”

“A blue star just floating by the stocks.”

“So someone died in the stocks.”

“And there was someone else to take him out and carry him off? We’re the only ones left alive in this town, Stafford!”

“You don’t know that,” Stafford said, kneading his forehead.

“Yes, I do.”

“The raid...they’ll be back.”

Horace’s response dipped out of Stafford’s focus, momentarily replaced by the piano’s despondent *ding a ling a ling a diddy diddy ling*.

“I’m awake, I’m awake, get your hand off.”

Horace’s classical brows were drawn together with professional concern. Always the soldier, Horace. Always the man to raise his hand.

“How long have you been foggy, Stafford?”

“I don’t know, could have been four days. The run out of the Locust Nest is what did me in. Damn radishes.”

“The raid was two days ago,” Horace said. “Wharton promised he’d send word back by nightfall yesterday. I’m not at fault here. I specifically said Gilligan’s Pub. We’ll be at the pub until we hear from you and he looked me in the eye and...and he thanked me.”

“You blame me, don’t you? For being sick. I know I’d blame me.”

Horace looked toward the window. “I don’t blame you, Stafford. I don’t want to blame anybody. Wharton gave me responsibility, just not the kind I expected. Protect the Soulcatcher. It’s an honorable position.”

“Honorable,” Stafford laughed, regretting it instantly. Laughing was akin to someone driving a wood splitter into his head. “Protecting the celestial garbage boy.” He looked down at his chest, at his ornamental vest. Tiny vials, no larger than thimbles, were tied onto the red velvet. Rows and rows of them, from the neck to the hem. A dozen vials stretching from one collarbone to the other were filled with a swirling, cloudy liquid. Most were sapphire blue, but some were scarlet. One gray. They were the souls of the men who died in battle. It was Stafford’s job to collect them, to stoop over the mutilated bodies and trap the souls in his vials for eventual

release into a holy pool. Soulcatching was as old as the first man; it was as natural to see a widow cupping her deceased husband's soul in her hands from the window of their cottage as it was to see a baby born. It was something you did because your parents did. And in wartime, Soulcatchers were spoken of in the same breath as the bugle boys.

“Wharton used to speak about honor,” Horace said. “It was before the Locust Nest when everyone was fresh and excited. I remember Davy had cooked his beef stew and us nobodies were standing just inside the fire's light, listening to Wharton and the lieutenants talk.” Horace shifted his feet, raised his head, and let slip a vague smile. “Gentlemen, all my life I mistook honor for vanity.”

“Is that supposed to be an impression?” Stafford said from his place on the floor.

“Gentlemen! All my life I mistook honor for vanity.”

“Better.”

“You know the way Wharton got when he was passionate about something? His posture, you know, it's tense, like he'll snap in two if he doesn't get out what he wants to say. So he leans toward the fire and says, ‘I saw something today that changed my mind. Honor is knowing who you are and never wavering. Honor is listening but not yielding. Fighting without anger... able to say no with a curtsy or a bow.’”

“What made him change his mind?”

“I don't know. He never said.”

“Fine, Horace. It's all good and well for you to fight without anger but what does honor look like for me? I'm dying. And I'm cold. And there are too many meaningless souls floating outside for me to bother with. Go, Horace. I release you. Find your honor.”

They listened to the piano for a while. The piano and the wind battling the window.

“*Are* souls meaningless?”

“Please don’t preach to me,” Stafford said weakly. His eyelids felt heavy. The pounding in his head continued unabated.

“I wasn’t going to. I’m just asking.”

“What do you think, Horace?”

“I think it’s your duty as Soulcatcher to stand up and take our brothers’ souls to the monastery like you were tasked with doing.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Look at me! I’ve been on the floor of this pub for four days listening to an enchanted piano. If I try to walk, I think I’ll die.”

“You should have been a thespian, Stafford.”

“You’re right. I should have.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Soulcatcher sound more interesting?”

“I wasn’t one before the war. I was a child, like everyone else I knew. I suppose I thought Soulcatching would be...more important to the function of the army. Souls *are* meaningless, Horace. You place them in the holy pool and they dissipate and everyone is supposed to feel happy that their son or daughter or mother or brother is going to live eternal. Anyway, this is stupid. Let me die in peace.”

“You’re not going to die,” Horace said. There was conviction in his voice. He had used the same tone days earlier when discussing the chances of the raid party’s successful return.

“You’re coming with me.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, yes, you are.” Horace took Stafford beneath the arms and tried to pull him up. Stafford remained limp, but Horace was strong as a bear. He found himself pinned against the pub counter, Horace’s face inches from his own.

“Look. If you don’t do your duty, I can’t do mine. No one cares whether you believe in your job, they only want you to see it through. Preferably with excellence. Do that, do that, Stafford, and I promise I’ll get you out of this town alive.”

“Is that a threat?” Stafford asked, cracking a smile.

Horace grunted a couple times in the approximation of a laugh. “Yeah, I’ll kill you if you don’t come outside.”

“Well then. I suppose I have no choice.” Mustering strength he did not have, Stafford pushed himself away from the counter and took his first steps in days. They were stuttering, unbalanced steps, but he continued to take them, one after the other until he was at the door where Horace was pushing aside the furniture.

Suddenly the door was open again, and the wind nearly blew Stafford off his feet. He turned and took one last look at Gilligan’s Pub: the enchanted piano playing sadness all by itself, the row of empty whiskey bottles, the boar’s head on the wall, the armchairs strewn across the bearskin rug. Possibly the only safe place in twenty miles. And he had the gall to leave it behind.

“Follow me,” Horace said.

Together, they left the pub. Standing on the stoop, Stafford saw what war had done to the town.

Janley's Port was the town's official name. But everyone called it the Briar Patch. Not for any remarkable landscape or native animal, for Janley's Port was a sailing town, or used to be. The only animals were the residents who shelled out gold and silver to buccaneers whose job it was to jump any ship that dared sail the strait between their nation and the enemy. That was why the town was called the Briar Patch. No one passed through without permission from the Captains—a group of corrupt sea captains who had handed the keys of Janley's Port to the enemy.

The Captains seemed to have finally met the keeper of their hearts. They were the first bodies Stafford saw. Their necks were tied to the bough of a sycamore across the road. Five of them all in a row. The wind brushed its fingers along the soles of their boots. Like the whiskey bottles inside the pub.

*Tinkle tinkle. Tinkle tinkle.*

The enemy had done its job well from the very beginning because the souls that floated above the Captain's bowed heads were black as coal.

"There's the soul I mentioned before," Horace said, pointing to the side of the road. There were the stocks, and there was the soul, as blue and pure as a baby bird's wing. Stafford shuffled down the pub steps, fighting the wind that blew open his overcoat and rattled the many empty vials tied to his chest. His breathing grew harsher from the exertion, worsening his congestion. He dragged in air through his mouth, never minding the rattle deep in his chest. The stocks swam into his vision. Stafford fell upon the wooden posts, turning his head to keep the floating soul in view. Meaningless as it was, he couldn't deny its beauty. Surrounded by such desolation, a bright spot of light was a reminder of something better. It was an illusionary something, but who was he

to theologize? Stafford freed a vial from his vest. With practiced hands, he cupped the soul in his left hand while bringing the vial's mouth close with his right. As soon as the soul made contact with the glass rim, it slipped easily into the vial. He reattached the vial to the vest without giving it a second glance.

"I can see them everywhere." Horace was walking slowly up the street, taking in the smashed doorways, broken windows, splintered carts, tattered clothes, scattered coins, and everything else that was so clearly missing.

"Horace," Stafford called weakly, sliding off the stock beams, no longer able to keep himself upright. Horace turned immediately and rushed to his side.

"Get up, Stafford. There are souls everywhere. Bright blue ones. Good men died here. Right here in town while we slept in the pub." Horace looked truly heartbroken. "The enemy must have countered the raid and pushed us back into town. Wharton was here. He needed my help, and I was sleeping."

"Don't be ridiculous. You don't know that." Stafford licked his lips, holding onto Horace's shoulder for support. "These souls have been here since we took the Briar Patch four days ago. I never had time to catch them before I got sick."

"Let that be the truth," Horace said. "I couldn't bear it otherwise."

"Well, until we know for sure, you can bear a little of my weight." Stafford swallowed, winced, shook his head to clear it, winced again, and blinked rapidly to blot out the gray mist that had invaded the edges of his vision.

How many souls? They glowed in the windows like dying candles. Hung about the streets like fireflies. Lay in the shadows of buildings like the eyes of watchful predators. But there wasn't a body in sight.



“Have you seen anything like this before?” Horace asked, leading Stafford up the road.

“Souls without bodies?”

“Never,” Stafford said. But there are stories, you know. Remember what Blake said a fortnight ago? About the one who dines on the souls of men?”

“Souleaters,” Horace said. “Blake spoke of another. Different from souleaters or radishes. With his words, he painted a portrait in my head. A creature more powerful than any witch or wizard. More powerful even than the warlocks of old.”

“You’re not talking about...”

“The Fallen King. The Red Ghost. However you think of him.”

“You think he’s come across the sea?”

“Now’s the perfect time. First, he poisoned our land. Then he poisoned our people. Now he’s stripped us of our souls and come to take us away.”

“Now who’s the thespian? I had no idea someone with your military ambition could speak so poetically.”

“A wrinkle in my suit, I’m afraid. Some things are too mysterious to speak plainly about.”

Stafford spread the arm that wasn’t clutching Horace’s shoulder. “Here we are, the last men in the world, destined to wonder what comes next.”

“Easy enough to answer,” Horace said and pointed to a crimson soul floating by the corner of the barber surgeon’s house. The red light reflected onto the cobblestones.

“This fellow had a hard life,” Stafford remarked, loosening another vial from his vest.

“Aye,” Horace said. “It’s your job to take him to a better place.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Stafford cupped the soul into the vial.

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

Stafford tied the vial right below his right collarbone, a smirk playing across his face.

Horace started to amend his response when he was interrupted by shallow panting—faint but recognizably human—a ways down the alley separating the barber surgeon’s house from a dilapidated home.

“What *is* that?” Stafford cried, his vision splitting into two as fear intruded his feverish mind. The alley seemed to be tilting to the right, as if they were on a ship. Tilting...the monster in the alley growing ever nearer. He lost his grip on Horace’s arm and slumped to the cobblestones. He needed to breathe. In...out...In...out. Was that his mind playing tricks or was the monster’s breathing consistent with his own? A phlegmy inhale, exhale. Ah. There it was. Emerging from the shadows, ready to kill. Knowing they had only seconds, Stafford reached for the nearest weapon at hand—a loose cobblestone. His vision still split, he cocked back his arm.

“Wait, Stafford, stop!” Horace grabbed his arm. “It’s General Wharton.”

Stafford lowered the stone. He stuck his dizzied head forward into the gloom. *Oh my days*, he thought. *Oh my glorious days*.

There stood Sir Peter Wharton, though his stance might be better described as a stoop. It was definitely Wharton, though. Square head, full beard, sunken eyes, and a figure that seemed to recede into his gold-buttoned general’s uniform. But his mouth...it hung open like someone either very sick or very deranged. Or worse, like someone possessed. Wharton was panting like a dog. Drool coated his bottom lip and hung off his beard in silvery strands. His eyes, normally so warm and intelligent, contained nothing to suggest he recognized his two subordinates.

“Your Excellency?” Horace managed in a choked voice.

Nothing from Wharton except the stuffy breathing.

“General? Sir Peter!”

Stafford struggled to his feet. “He’s bewitched, can’t you tell?”

Wharton suddenly lurched toward Stafford, swiping at his chest. Stafford stumbled backward. “Are you crazy, Horace, do something!”

“I can’t attack a general.”

“He’s not a general anymore, he’s a radish. He’s one of them now.”

“No, he’s not,” Horace said.

Wharton lunged again. This time his sweeping arm made contact with Stafford’s vest, brushing the soul vials.

“Look at him! He’s an animal. There’s nothing inside his head.”

Horace had never looked so vulnerable. Indecisiveness was written all over his face as he grappled with the truth about the greatest leader this land had ever known.

Wharton lashed out with a bout of sudden speed, grabbing the back of Stafford’s neck and pulling him in. Stafford’s head collided with Wharton’s square chin and he dropped to the ground. Wharton was on him at once, running his hands wildly over his vest.

“Horace!” Stafford croaked.

An awful tearing sound as Wharton ripped one of the vials free. Stafford looked at it with a mixture of amazement and horror. Pinched between two fingers, Wharton held the vial of the crimson soul. He seemed to be transfixed by the swirling red mist, his gaunt face warped into an expression of...was that longing?

Stafford was aware of Horace’s looming shadow a split second before the hand-wrapped stone crashed into Wharton’s head. The former general slumped over the Soulcatcher’s body.

The crimson vial rolled out of his curled hand, onto the road. Stafford and Horace both looked at it. Then at each other.

“A radish,” Horace said, disbelieving. “Whatever the enemy did to the foreigners, he’s now doing to our people.”

“And that’s...what, separating them from their souls?”

“Or killing them, bringing them back empty.”

“The Red Ghost,” Stafford said.

“Has to be,” Horace said.

The two of them observed Wharton’s prostate body for several long moments. He wasn’t dead, just unconscious.

“Look there,” Horace said, pointing to Wharton’s tattered cloak. “In the pocket. There’s a letter.”

Against Stafford’s wishes, Horace retrieved the letter and the crimson vial, which he handed over to Stafford.

“What do you think about this?” Stafford raised the vial. “He was obviously trying to get at it.”

“That’s his *soul*. Of course he was.”

“That’s all that’s wrong with him, you think? The Red Ghost hasn’t, I don’t know, possessed him? Had him bewitched?”

“I know as much as you,” Horace huffed. He unraveled Wharton’s letter. Stafford watched as his face grew progressively paler.

“What? What does it say?”

Horace handed Stafford the letter before standing up and declaring, “We need to get to the monastery. Catch as many souls as you can on the way, but no more diversions. We can make it before sundown.”

Stafford read the letter as he shuffled down a road he did not want to go down. He read it in Wharton’s voice, as if the general was peering over his shoulder, whispering in his ear the words he must have written in a period of transcendent lucidity.

*Dear Fran,*

*My name is Peter Arthur Wharton. You know me as the man who murdered your father and subjected you and your family to prison for the remainder of the war. If you are able and willing, pay me the great courtesy of reading what I have to say with an open mind and an open heart.*

*I will not attempt to excuse my actions save for this: I did what I did out for the survival of my country, however misguided my thinking.*

*When I talked to you on that horrible day, you told me what kind of life you led beyond our sea. The enemy makes a cruel master, and the fact you had to adopt the roles of informants as a means of escape only speaks to the level of tyranny you experienced.*

*Through this writing, I hope to communicate my absolute remorse. Your father was an honorable man. I mean that in every sense. He chose to bring his family out of an evil land when so many were resigned to their fates, and even pleased in the activity evil brings. He built a*

*home here and called it good. When I came to his doorstep, my mind pervaded with careless confidence, I saw only the man who refused me entry. I was a man ready for war, sparing nary a thought to those in my path. But those days have long since departed, for the realities of war have turned me sober.*

*Tomorrow I go off to battle. I doubt I will return. Allow me, then, to relieve myself of this burden. That I may declare myself a penitent man, and thus cleanse my soul before I die. Forgive me, Fran. I wish you well.*

*Peter*

The road to the monastery was scattered with souls. Stafford collected as many as he could, untying and retying the vials with trembling fingers.

“What if I die, Horace? What will my soul look like?”

Horace walked alongside him, not paying attention to much of anything. “You’re not going to die, Stafford.”

“How can you be so sure? How do you know the Red Ghost won’t fall from the sky this minute and devour the both of us? Who will be there to rescue *our* souls, eh? If they’re so important.”

“General Wharton was the best man I knew, and look where death left him. A crimson soul, Stafford. He was not a happy man.”

“Do you have to be happy to be good?”

“That’s a question for the monks.”

Stafford shook his head. “They’re probably dead too. I figure the monastery will be just as empty as the pub.”

“Then you put the souls in the pool yourself.”

“Then what?”

Horace kicked a rock down the road. “I don’t know.”

The deeper into the Briar Patch they went, the more radishes they saw. Like General Wharton, the former soldiers roamed the streets, batting at floating souls like cats would a ball of yarn. Stafford drew his cloak around his vest, obscuring the vials from view.

“If it really was the Red Ghost that raised their bodies, you would think he’d do something with them,” Stafford said.

“I bet he’s waiting for something,” Horace said.

“What, for *us*?”

“I wasn’t going to say that, but now that you mention it, the stories never have the Red Ghost coexisting peacefully with Soulcatchers.” Horace gave him a serious look. “You’re trying to save what he seeks to destroy. There’s some conflict of interest there.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Stafford rubbed the back of his mouth with his hand. He didn’t know how much longer he could go on like this. Every muscle aching, every thought laced with a hint of feverish dreaming. And now the fear. Plunged straight to his heart.

“Talk me through it again,” Stafford wheezed, once again feeling his limbs begin to weaken. “What do I do when we get to the monastery?”

“It’s not complicated, Stafford. There will be a dais, and beyond the dais, there is the holy room with the holy pools where you will place the souls.”

Stafford coughed into his arm. “I open the vials first, right?” he asked, eyes running, nose streaming.

“Yes, of course. Damn it, Stafford, you’re acting like you’ve never done this before.”

Stafford flicked his nose. “I’m dying. My brain is turning to sludge.”

“You’re going to have to take responsibility for this. These are people’s eternities we’re talking so blithely about.”

“Yeah, okay, but...what if *he*’s there.”

“The Red Ghost,” Horace said soberly.

“Yeah.”

“Then we deal with him.”

“*I* see.”

Horace stopped walking and turned to face him. In the brief moment of silence, Stafford heard the crashing of the waves and the cries of gulls for the first time.

“There are two types of fear. Fear that you’ll encounter something you aren’t prepared to face, and fear that you’ll encounter something you aren’t willing to face. Concern yourself with the latter.”

“What about you?”

“Hmm?”

“What aren’t you willing to face?”

As Horace was prepping an answer, arranging his face this way and that, Stafford realized something about his formal protector. Horace wasn’t half as smart as he thought he was. He hadn’t the slightest idea what he was talking about. Stafford found this revelation pleasing. But he also found the notion of someone as idealistic as Horace trying to pass along wisdom curated



from twenty rich years of life experience deeply encouraging. It meant they hadn't given up hope. Hadn't lost themselves in the surrounding bleakness. It meant there may still be some life to be lived before it was over for good.

"I suppose," Horace said hesitantly. "I suppose it's dishonor that I'm afraid of. Not standing by what you know to be true when the times demand it of you."

"You're afraid you'll encounter dishonor in a monastery? I think you're safe there."

Horace smiled. It might even be genuine. "I suppose so."

Half a mile later, they came to the end of the town's winding road. The cobblestones gave way to sand and scree as the land sloped dramatically downward to the shore.

There was the monastery, pinched in between archaic formations of black rock. It took the place of a lighthouse out there on the little peninsula. But there was no light to be seen emanating from its crumbling arches and stained glass windows. Like the rest of town, it appeared utterly abandoned.

Stafford and Horace picked their way down the loose shale. Twice, Stafford was bowled over by vicious wind gusts, and twice Horace helped him up with a patience that underlied his desire for companionship in a land growing more hostile by the second.

At the base of the hill, littered about the monastery's courtyard, were effigies of the most barbaric nature. Hastily constructed things that defiled the land on which they stood. Stafford limped past a raised post at least six feet tall with a sailor's navy head wrap twirled around the top. Blood had soaked into the wood in streaks and smears. Flies buzzed around the wrap like bees near their hive. Other creations included skulls, brains, and miscellaneous organs stuck

randomly on bundles of sticks built up to life-size. Remains of sailor clothes stuck to the wooden crosses.

The formidable stench did nothing to help Stafford's already unsettled stomach. He stuck his nose inside his shirt and hobbled through the courtyard as fast as he could, Horace right behind.

The entrance itself was smaller than Stafford would have expected for such an important building. Just a plain oak door reinforced with bronze plates. What surprised him more, however, was that it stood wide open.

"We aren't going in," Stafford said, staring straight into the black hole. "We just aren't."

"We must," Horace said. He took the lead, stepping into the shadows.

"Horace?"

In an echoey voice: "It's an open cathedral, Stafford. Undoubtedly, like every other monastery you've ever visited."

*Doom and gloom*, Stafford thought, walking in.

There was not a single candle to illuminate the way forward. From the outside light, Stafford saw the vague shapes of spectacular chandeliers hanging from the arched ceiling. There were pews and there was a processional walkway. All of it would have been quite grandiose in the proper light. But as it was, Stafford found himself staring at his feet as they crossed the dusty tiles, carrying him deeper into the unknown.

Stafford felt his presence several seconds before he saw him. An irrational dread, seeping into his bones. As if he had only so many breaths left to take before something awful would be required of him.

And then Stafford saw him.

The Red Ghost, the Fallen King...the Enemy. Although the deity was seated in the cathedral's apse many aisles down from where Stafford stood, and in relative gloom, Stafford's vision warped so that the Red Ghost appeared to be within arm's length. Every detail presented itself. From the white lace that rested atop the altar to the creature that lounged upon it.

The Red Ghost was not a man, nor was it clearly human. Its entire body was swathed in crimson silk, leaving only a shadow of a face exposed. A shadow, and nothing more save for the eyes. Bright green pinpricks of light pierced Stafford's mind. One moment he felt like fainting, the next he felt totally calm.

"Stafford Martin and Horace Sloan." The Red Ghost's voice echoed shrilly in their eardrums. It shook its hands free of the long sleeves and spread them in an odd display of benevolence. "A Soulcatcher and his protector come at last to the refuge of souls."

Horace spoke when Stafford could not.

"We must deliver these souls to the holy pool. Will you let us pass?"

The Red Ghost swung its legs over the side of the altar and rose to its full height, which surpassed the most intimidating knights. Its hands disappeared back into the depths of its crimson robes. The Red Ghost tilted its body forward, wafting a scent of rotten fruit into the boys' faces.

"Such a request requires suitable payment."

"Fine," Horace said. "What do you want?"

"Your souls."

Horace pressed his lips together.

The Red Ghost laughed. It sounded like someone rhythmically cracking walnuts. “Don’t act so surprised! This is the day when the world becomes mine, and I would be remiss not to include you both in my ranks.”

Stafford finally found his tongue. “You demon!”

The twin pinpricks of green light focused on him. “Why so tough, Stafford Martin? I know you’re dying inside. But you know what? I could make all that pain go away right now.”

“You’d take my soul...is what you mean.”

“No soul, no pain,” The Red Ghost said with a smile in its voice. “Only purpose.”

“What purpose,” Horace asked sharply.

“*My* purpose. And what could sound better to two brave men like yourselves than bringing the world under your thumb? You would be my lip and my lash. In my army, you won’t have to worry about anything. Ever again.”

“Is that what General Wharton has become?” Horace sounded horrified. “Part of your army?”

“Oh, it’s not so bad. Your food supply will expand. You’ll be able to eat anything. Anyone. Indeed, you’ll find that all your natural desires will be easily satiated. There is no disease in my army, no sores or blisters on long marches. Cold will not affect you, nor will fear. In my army, there is nothing you’ll find quite so satisfying as following my commands and relishing in my rewards.”

“Where is this army?” Stafford scoffed, proud of how brave he sounded. “We walked clear across town and only saw Wharton and a few other stragglers.”

The shadows that dwelt inside the Red Ghost's cowl shifted and stretched. The pinprick eyes gleamed yellow-in-green. Slowly, it raised an arm sheathed in crimson and raised a deathly pale finger in front of the cowl where its lips should be. "Listen."

*Listen to what?* Stafford heard only his own labored breathing and the shifting of Horace's boots against the slick tiles.

*"Listen!"*

*Listen to w—*

*Oh my days. They're here. Right here in the monastery.*

Faint echoes from below. *Bum bum. Bum bum bum.* A shuffling, tapping, growling wrapped into one.

"In the crypts," the Red Ghost said, enunciating heavily. "In the galleries. Along the aisles. They all wait for my command."

"Defiler," Horace whispered.

"My enemies are here too," the Red Ghost said. "You may have seen them on your way inside. Pity I was not yet here to raise them. Hopeless in life, hopeless in death. I could have been their savior."

"Let us pass!" Horace said. He took a step onto the raised platform.

"Why?" The Red Ghost demanded, somehow standing taller, truly *looming*.

"It's our job. Then we'll leave and never come back here again."

The Red Ghost ran its hooded gaze along Stafford's vest. "What a burden. Let me take it from you."

Stafford hesitated. *Would you? And finish this whole business?* But he said nothing aloud, drawing his confidence from Horace who, with his chin raised and feet planted in the ground, looked every bit the military officer.

“Let us do our duty,” Horace said. “We are not heroes or princes or apprenticed to any great wizard. We are no threat to you.”

“If I grant your request, I would have to believe that a quarter of my army wouldn’t disappear the moment your souls touched the holy water. Since I do not believe it, indeed I have full faith in the contrary, I cannot do what you ask. But I grow weary of this talk. Give me the souls or I will take yours.”

Horace’s head lowered, but his eyes flicked upwards to connect with Stafford’s. A silent message passed between them. Stafford’s eyes widened, and he shook his head ever so slightly. No use. A fire had ignited inside Horace. In his mind, he was General Wharton, about to raid the Briar Patch with low chances of survival and high doses of honor and glory and courage. Horace, the man unwilling to face dishonor at any turn, drove his foot into the marble step and launched himself at the Red Ghost.

Stafford knew his part. Knew Horace expected him to run to the holy pool while the Red Ghost was momentarily distracted. A simple act. One Stafford was unable to accomplish. He set one foot on the platform step before he felt all the muscles in his leg give way to both fatigue and horror.

The Red Ghost hadn’t let Horace so much as touch him. A spasm of its little finger, and Horace was lying prostrate on the floor. The Red Ghost approached him slowly. From the depths of his robes, it drew a scimitar. The blade was obsidian; it sparkled even in the darkness.

Stafford told himself to move, told himself to help Horace or get to the pool or, perhaps best of all, to run as far away from here as he possibly could. His body rejected all those commands. Strewn across the apse's steps like a pile of laundry, Stafford watched as the Red Ghost drove the scimitar into Horace's unprotected back.

A mist invaded Stafford's vision. Nothing was clear except for the lifeblood pouring onto the tile floor. The longer he watched it spread, the blurrier the view became until the redness sparkled and cubed and shot off in a million directions.

But there was a brighter light. As Stafford moved his gaze back across Horace's body, he saw the soul rising from the chest. It was a deep, ocean blue, and it lit up the cathedral with its glorious rays. Through his tears, the light refracted a hundred times over. Stafford rose and walked forward in a daze. He stopped in front of the body, letting the light consume him. Then he reached out with both hands and wrapped them around Horace's soul.

"Such a beautiful thing, is it not?" It took Stafford a few moments to register the Red Ghost's voice.

"W-what?"

"What you hold in your hand. Nothing like it in the world."

"I don't understand."

"What else about you demands such slavish commitment to purity? I see the kind of human you are, Stafford Martin. Unmotivated and unsatisfied, trapped in lethargy, all because of what you hold in your hand."

Stafford did not look up. He pretended the voice was coming from somewhere deep inside his head as he let the soul's blue light wash over him.

“Yes.” The voice was louder, nearer. “Soon I will raise Horace Sloan as I did your general and a thousand others. The freshly killed always make the best soldiers. But every army needs a Soulcatcher, isn’t that right? Or in my case, a Soul Eater.”

Stafford was shaking all over and couldn’t stop. He felt hot and cold at once. The Red Ghost’s words alternated soft and loud.

“You *are* dying, Stafford Martin. What do you have to save you? A meaningless tradition? Nay, I think not. But you have me. *I* can fix you. With me, you won’t have to lift so much as a finger for anything you find disruptive. As a Soul Eater, you will be more alive than you’ve felt all these years. Just relinquish your humanity. That painful, painful burden of humanity.”

*Painful, painful burden.* Like a hymn to Stafford’s ears.

“Give it up...escape from your soul. There is pleasure to be found.”

*Painful, painful burden.*

*Ding a ling a di a ding a ling.*

*Pleasure to be found. Pleasure to be found!*

*He chose to bring his family out of an evil land when so many were resigned to their fates, and even pleased in the activity evil brings. He built a home here and called it good.*

Stafford looked upon Horace’s soul and saw it for the first time. This was the result of Horace’s sacrifice. Every courageous act, every encouraging word, was wrapped up in this drop of beautiful light. *He called it good.*

Then Stafford looked down at his chest. At his vest. At the hundreds of vials shimmering with the light of souls. He fell to his knees.

“Get up!” The Red Ghost snapped. “Get up! I can take away your pain!”



Stafford began fiddling with the vials' strings, working intricate knots with trembling fingers.

"Stop, I command you!"

Stafford grabbed fistfuls of vials and yanked them free. Only then did he look up. Appearing twice its original size, the Red Ghost had its scimitar drawn and was coming toward him with quick, lethal strides.

"That I may declare myself a penitent man," Stafford said, and he dropped the vials. The glass exploded upon impact with the cathedral's marble tiles. Souls of all shades drifted up in front of Stafford, forming a barrier between him and the Red Ghost. Like fireflies, the souls drifted. They passed across the Red Ghost's shroud and illuminated what lay inside. But there were only shadows. The cowl was as empty as the whiskey bottles back at Gilligan's Pub. Empty, drained, devoid of substance. Stafford reached through the wall of souls and took the scimitar from the Red Ghost as easily as one could take a toy from a baby. Without hesitation, he thrust the blade into the enemy's chest.

A desperate gasp, a sucking inhalation of air from the cowl's depths. Then the crimson robe folded in upon itself before bursting into a thousand pieces of loose fabric. For a few moments, the fabric intermingled with the drifting souls. Stafford wondered if he was hallucinating again, so odd was the sensation of standing alone in a cathedral with the light of a hundred souls flashing off fluttering crimson silk on a stage of veritable darkness.

The spell broke when the last piece of fabric settled onto the marble. Numb with shock and sorrow, Stafford walked up the apse steps. The souls streamed after him, covering his body like a bridal train. He looked over his shoulder and smiled.

The holy pool lay beyond the candlesticks and enshrined tomb of the monastery Father, through a curtain that separated the apse from a backroom. The pool was no larger than a bathtub, but it sparkled something beautiful, casting aquamarine wrinkles on the purple cloth that formed the low ceiling. Handful by handful, Stafford transported the souls into the pool. A slight push in the right direction was all they needed. They were drawn to the water and soon covered its surface. Like celestial lily pads. Stafford stood back and watched the colors fade from each one of them until they were pure white. There was a sudden moment of brilliant light before that too faded, and the souls rose to the cloth ceiling and disappeared.

His duty done at last, Stafford returned to the top of the apse steps. He looked out upon the aisles, the galleries, the naves, and the windows. There were no more ominous noises from below, and Horace's body was gone.

Stafford lowered himself onto the top step. He did not know whether to laugh or cry. He supposed he would do a lot of both in the days to come, as he searched and struggled for a new life. No war. No Horace.

*Do you have to be happy to be good?*

Stafford thought not.

