

# DEAD STOP

A Tale of Alexia Ciannor



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**A**fter the liberation of Corvis from Vinter Raelthorne and his skorne allies, Alexia Ciannor relinquished the Witchfire to her uncle, Prelate Pandor Dumas, and the Church of Morrow. The prelate immediately contacted the Order of Illumination and arranged for the sword to be sent south and locked away in the Sancteum. To ensure the Witchfire would not fall into the wrong hands, the Order dispatched four Illuminated Ones to escort the sword—securely stowed in an armored carriage—on the long road between Corvis and Caspia.

### 604 AR, Glaceus 15th, the King's Road, ten miles south of Corvis

Imos Decklan checked the load in his scattergun again, ensuring the mass of iron pellets was tamped down firmly in the heavy brass barrel and that the powder cartridge seated in the breach had not gotten damp from the winter chill. He inspected the firing pin to make sure the release mechanism was tightly wound, the pin sharp, and the small hole in the barrel where the pin would pierce the powder charge was free from obstruction. Finally, he brought the weapon up to his shoulder and stared down the length of the barrel, using the small bead sight on the flaring muzzle to take aim at a snow-shrouded tree on the side of the icy road. Imos set the scattergun on his lap, a slight, satisfied smile on his lips pulling at the burn scars that covered the left side of his face.

“Still working?” Vanin asked, his voice tinged with amusement. “That’s the third time you’ve inspected that thing in the last mile.” Vanin sat beside Imos on the wide, flat bench that jutted from the front of the armored carriage where Vanin served as driver and Imos as gunner. Vanin held long leather reins tightly in one gloved hand, guiding the two massive draft horses pulling the wagon with the effortless skill of one long at the task. The coach master was twenty years Imos’ senior, but still in his mid-forties. His lined face and lank, shoulder-length gray hair spoke of a hard life and many years of experience.

Imos smiled sheepishly at Vanin and patted the scattergun in his lap. “Well, I’ve had my eye on this one for quite a while,” he said. “My old pistol wasn’t exactly suited for carriage work. A working man needs the best tools for the job, right?” Imos had bought the scattergun from one of the better gunsmiths right before they’d left Corvis, spending nearly two months’ pay—laboriously saved over the last year—to obtain the weapon. Now that he had it, he found himself so enamored with the scattergun he could barely keep his hands off it.

“You’ll get no argument from me, lad,” Vanin replied. “I’ve been driving these carriages from Corvis to Caspia for the last twenty years, and having a scattergunner on

the bench beside you makes a man feel a bit more secure in the wild places.”

Imos nodded and cast his eyes beyond the two plodding draft horses. Two men rode ahead of them on stout warhorses; each was heavily armed and wore a leather great coat over a mail byrnie. Two more men, armed and armored similarly to the first pair, rode behind the carriage. “I doubt I’ll have much chance to use it, though.” Imos said. “What fool would be brazen enough to attack an armored carriage guarded by four Illuminated Ones?”

Vanin shook his head and smiled. “Only youth and inexperience craves violence on the road. I’ve had my fill of such things from this very seat. A nice, quiet jaunt to Caspia suits me just fine. I could stand it to be a touch warmer, though.” He pulled his heavy fur cloak closer about his shoulders and shivered. The middle of winter was not an ideal time to drive a carriage, but it was Vanin’s carriage—and no one took the reins but him.

“What do you think is in that chest back there?” Imos asked, lowering his voice and jerking his head back toward the carriage hold behind them, where the remaining two members of Vanin’s crew sat guarding a massive iron chest. The chest was festooned with the sigils of Morrow, several of his ascendants, and many that Imos had never seen before. The chest radiated a bizarre chill, and he and the rest of the crew had taken great pains not to touch it with their bare hands when loading it into the carriage.

Vanin chuckled. “Lad, I’ve run a successful business for two decades largely because I don’t ask my clients who or what they put in my carriages. Our job is to get cargo from here to there with as little fuss as possible. You’d do well to remember that.”

“Have you ever made a run for the Order of Illumination?” Imos asked as he stared at the backs of the two Illuminated Ones riding ahead of them. He knew little of the Order beyond what was commonly known: they served the Church of Morrow by rooting out blasphemous magic. Their agents and foot soldiers were called Illuminated Ones, dangerous men and women trained to battle infernalists, necromancers, and others who used black magic.

“No. This is the first time,” Vanin frowned. “I’ll admit, the Order’s not one to hire outsiders.”

“They have their own guards, soldiers, and transport, right?” Imos asked. “Why’d they choose us to carry whatever’s in that chest?”

“Because I run an honest and reliable outfit, boy,” Vanin replied sharply, his use of the word “boy” heralding his