

THE SEVENTH TIER

BOOK ONE OF TIERFALL

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CHAPTER I



Amis bent low over the worktable, one eye narrowed against the wavering lampglow as he tried to seat the tiny brass tooth-wheel into its proper groove. The mechanism lay scattered in neat disorder before him: a mainspring barrel no larger than a walnut, a cluster of hand-filed gears, and the polished silver faceplate of what Guy de Chauillac had grandly called one of his *newer improvements to civilized life*.

Most civilized people, Amis suspected, would have preferred roads that did not turn to mud in winter or a solution to the ever-present odor of chamber pots. But Guy, in one of his periodic fevers of invention, had instead devoted the better part of three months to making a portable clock so delicately small that it could easily ride in a gentleman's pocket.

"It will change everything! One shall only need to wind the mainspring twice a day! Only twice!" Guy had declared.

Amis, who had so far broken three pins, cracked two jewels, and eroded a great deal of his patience, was less certain. He eased the wheel down with a pair of tweezers, tongue pressed to the corner of his mouth in concentration. The little piece hovered, trembled—

A violent pounding rattled one of the entrances.

Amis flinched.

The wheel sprang from the tweezers, struck the rim of the faceplate with a bright metallic tick, and vanished into the surrounding dark.

He froze.

For one dreadful instant he could only stare at the empty tweezers.

Shit.

More pounding shook the door, louder this time, accompanied by the crash of thunder and the pelting hiss of hail against the roof tiles.

"Amis! *Aperi ianuam!*" Open the door.

Guy's voice, sharp even through the storm.

Amis closed his eyes.

Of course.

Of course it would be now.

The man had been gone for how many days now?

He set the tweezers down with great care, as if the mock calm might somehow persuade the escaped piece to return of its own accord.

"I promise I'm not angry with you. I won't smash you with this hammer here," he muttered as he set to feeling blindly about the clutter of folios and instruments.

The pounding came again.

"Hurry up, boy! This is not the time to dally!"

Amis abandoned the search. Seeing his breath plume pale in the cold room, he snatched up his lamp and hurried from the worktable, leaving behind the half-dissected timepiece and the missing brass tooth-wheel somewhere in Tartarus for all he knew.

He pulled a scratchy wool blanket over his broad shoulders and made for the stairs. Cascading shadows revealed disjointed glimpses of a stately, if disorganized, living space as he descended.

"It's freezing!" came the discordant yell from below.

Amis's young yet rather unathletic physique, born of a life spent in books and not in labor, protested the exertion immediately.

What was that? Two flights of stairs and I'm already breathing. Impressive, you loaf.

Another muffled shout interrupted his self-chastisement.

That's coming from the back door. Unusual, thought Amis, then quickly purged himself of the idea; after years of tutelage under Guy he had learned that the only unusual occurrence was usual.

Amis took a breath and grasped the wrought-iron latch. His blanket slipped from his shoulders and dropped forgotten to the floor as he hauled the heavy engraved oak door open against the storm.

There, standing in the freezing deluge, was his master, Guy de Chauliac, with a body slung over his shoulders like some macabre parody of a cloak.

“Quit your gawking, boy, and clear the table!”

That snapped Amis away from any thought of timepieces. This was not the first time his master had brought a body home in the middle of the night. While the study of anatomy was no longer outright forbidden by the Church, it was still frowned upon by polite society, especially when fresh cadavers were involved. The clandestine journey in the storm explained that much.

It did not explain the urgency in Guy’s voice.

Surpassing the momentary shock, Amis hurried to the adjoining room, searching for a sturdy surface large enough to accommodate what looked to be a fully grown man. Sweeping the nearest heavy table clear, he sent a flurry of loose papers into the air and, with a wince, heard the unmistakable crash of an inkwell somewhere in the dark.

“Steady, boy. Hold his head steady,” Guy instructed as he shifted the body down with surprising care.

If caution is required, the man is alive. Trauma to the spine, perhaps?

Amis promptly latched onto the thought and moved in to help. Together they lowered the limp form onto the table. The flickering lamp cast a sinister, ever-shifting light over the corpse-like figure as Guy tore open the front of a thin leather doublet, revealing a bruised and battered chest. Near the left ribcage sat what at first glance looked an almost innocuous contusion, except it leaked a small bead of blood black as tar in the lamplight, which then crawled down the man’s side as the body was shifted.

“The pulse. Where I showed you. Is there one?” Guy asked impatiently.

“I-I’m not...”

Guy was not known for his patience. “Hand me the monaural.”

“I didn’t feel a pulse. I’m sur—”

“The monaural!”

Amis snatched up the indicated cylinder and passed it to his master’s impatient hands. Guy shook the thing once, listening for damage, then placed one end upon the man’s bare chest and the other to his own ear. The thunder seemed to fade then, as if the weather itself were holding its breath for the result.

Amis saw his master clearly in the lamp’s weak glow. Guy was in the twilight of his years, with deep creases etched into his forehead and graying hair matted damply against his brow before disappearing into a hastily tied queue. Yet if his flesh had begun to yield, his eyes had not. Sharp gray irises ringed with ocean-blue still burned with purpose.

Guy moved the monaural from the second intercostal space to the fifth, probing for the faintest sign of life. Mouthing something under his breath, he suddenly straightened.

“There’s still time. Yes, there’s time.” He turned on Amis. “You. Wait here and watch him.”

“Watch him? You speak as though he’s going somewhere.”

Guy ignored the remark and vanished into the adjoining room with surprising speed for a man forever complaining of brittle bones. Amis had long suspected that Guy used his age only when a menial task needed doing.

The door slammed behind him. The rush of air stole the lamp’s flame, dropping the room into blackness.

For a brief and humiliating instant, the deep animal fear that inhabits all men seized Amis by the throat. Then his conscious mind caught up.

The lamp.

Following the telltale fish-oil stink, Amis felt for the bronze lamp top and immediately jerked his fingers away when they touched the hot metal. Usually the hearth would still hold some life in it, but tonight the fire had gone to stubborn coals. Amis resorted once more to flint.

Beyond the oak door came the sound of Guy rummaging, muttering, cursing, then moving farther off. How far, Amis could not tell. Guy’s house sprawled more than such a residence had any right to, with side chambers, cellars, and

old tunnels beneath the city that his master treated as though they were his own private hallways.

By the time Amis coaxed the lamp back to life, only stale silence accompanied him. He turned slowly, careful not to disturb the weak flame. Then froze.

Two points of fire reflected toward him. Amis's heart stopped. The man's head had turned. He was facing him.

Amis stumbled backward and collided with the oaken cupboard behind him, nearly upending the lamp. The corpse—or what Amis had until that moment believed to be a corpse—remained indifferent, continuing to brood in the flowing shadows, those terrible eyes fixed his way.

Amis stood perfectly still. The hail battered the roof. The lamp creaked.

After an incalculable moment, Amis exhaled shakily and forced himself to think. Had the man always been facing this way?

Amis took one cautious step forward, then another. The glare resolved. Not flame. Reflection.

Looking into those eyes, Amis noticed the faint gray clouding over the iris. He had seen that before often enough. A body gone perhaps two hours.

"He is dead," Amis whispered. Then, firmer, as if he might dispel his own fear: "This man is dead."

The oak door burst open so violently that Amis nearly sent the lamp flying in his hand.

Guy strode in carrying an armful of odd instruments, his expression fixed with grim purpose.

"Bring me the light, you foolish child! Did you watch him?"

Already the old physician was at the man's head, pulling back lids, prying open the ever-stiffening jaw, prodding at the tongue with such proximity that Amis wondered if Guy intended to count each pore.

Then, without warning, Guy placed one hand over the man's mouth and sharply struck upward with the other.

Crunch.

The jaw snapped shut with a report that made Amis flinch.

“Get water, boy!”

Amis only stared.

“Water!”

That jolted him loose. Amis rushed to the basin, filled a clay cup with shaking hands, and brought it back. Guy took it, opened the now slightly uneven jaw, and thrust the cup into place.

“Tip the head.”

Amis obeyed. *What in the hells are we doing?*

The water disappeared past the man’s lips.

Nothing happened.

Then the body convulsed.

A horrible rattling gasp tore from the man like wind through dead reeds. His chest rose. His left arm shot up and clamped around Guy’s throat.

Amis recoiled in horror.

“*Venit ad Anemoi!*” the man gasped, sightless eyes flicking wildly.

Guy strained against the grip. “You are safe,” he wheezed. “You are safe.”

The grip loosened. The arm dropped. The man’s eyes closed.

He lay still again.

“Help me turn him,” Guy said, as though this sort of thing happened every evening. “Left side.”

Still half convinced the stranger would lash out, Amis hesitantly obeyed. Together they turned the man as carefully as they could.

“The puncture collapsed the lung,” Guy muttered. “Why do we turn him so?”

“So the contralateral side is less likely affected,” Amis answered automatically.

Guy grunted approval.

They worked quickly after that. The wound was cleaned with strong liquor, bandaged, and the stranger settled as gently as circumstances allowed. Guy even placed Amis’s discarded blanket over him. Only when the man had been made as stable as his master could manage did Guy motion Amis into the inner parlor.

The room was the warm heart of the house: a broad hearth, a heavy mahogany table, two elegant klismoi, the whole of it lit in orange and gold by old wealth and

old taste. Guy sank into one chair with a decanter of amber liquor and a pipe, suddenly looking not old exactly, but tired in some deeper way.

"Help me with the fire," he said. "We have much to discuss, and I suspect neither of us will be sleeping again tonight."

His master packed the harsh western leaf the merchants called tobacco into the pipe—a costly vice drawn from beyond the sunset sea—and drew deep upon it, then let loose a procession of gray-black rings that drifted toward the ceiling.

Only then did Guy point with the pipe to the remaining chair. "Sit."

Amis obeyed, though the richly embroidered cushion did little to comfort him under that unrelenting stare.

"How long have you been here, Amis?" Guy asked after a drink.

The question startled him by its irrelevance. "Well...since my first real memory, sir. Twelve years at least, since you brought me in. Six of those assisting you at the Sorbonne."

"Yes," said Guy, not looking at him. "The University of Paris. Three centuries of educating fools. You would think, after so many, we might have learned to produce better."

He took another drink.

"Twelve years is a frightfully long time to remain in one place; would you agree?"

Amis's stomach tightened. Was this it, then? Had he finally frayed his usefulness?

"I wouldn't know where else to go," he answered honestly, and hated the weakness in the admission.

Guy laughed once, short and dry. "No, my boy, I am not dismissing you. I am merely expressing my growing distaste for the stagnant turn our lives have taken."

Another sip.

"And so I have decided, irreversibly, that it is in our best interest to leave this place."

"Because of that half-sodden corpse in the study?" Amis blurted, resentment sharpening his voice before he could stop it.

“How very astute.” Guy’s expression cooled. “And since you have so graciously provided the turn in our conversation, I should mention said corpse.”

He leaned back. “While you were mistaking the living for the dead—which I grant you is an all-too-common occurrence, especially among the pupils of a certain rector—I was retrieving a treatment for a particularly unpleasant paralytic.”

He let the words settle. “A paralytic,” he continued, “which, I might add, is exceedingly communicable.”

That cleaned the defiance from Amis’s face all at once.

“Fortunately,” said Guy, producing two black bean-shaped objects from his sleeve, “we have these.”

Without preamble, he swallowed one.

“What sort of paralytic?” Amis asked, alarm rising despite himself. “I’ve never heard of a contagious—”

“Well, if you wish to avoid firsthand experience, I would propose taking this.” Guy dropped the second bead into the remaining liquor and slid the decanter across the table.

Amis caught it before it tipped.

The bead sat in the amber liquid like some poisonous insect.

“You can’t expect me to finish the rest of this.”

Guy shrugged. “Two years ago you were begging me to let you taste the stuff. Funny how things change. Believe me when I tell you, boy: you do not want to sample the remedy bare.”

As emphasis, he spat into the fire and made a face.

Not wishing to contemplate the alternatives, Amis upended the flask and nearly lost it at once. By some unforeseen act of will he managed to keep drinking until the bead touched his tongue and vanished. Heat rushed up his face almost immediately, accompanied by a metallic tang.

“Good,” said Guy. “Now pack your necessities for travel.”

“Travel to where?” Amis coughed.

Guy drew once more upon the pipe. “That, my boy, is up to the dead.”

Amis sat by the fire for some time after his master had returned to the stranger. Though the abrupt redirection of his life weighed heavily on him, the liquor weighed heavier still. The room swam as if mirroring the upheaval in his mind.

At length he found himself upstairs, only half remembering Guy's final shout from below.

"Oh, and if you do fall asleep, expect vivid dreams. Side effects."

Amis scarcely had the strength to wonder what that meant.

Guy had told him to pack light. That ruled out the chest. So Amis chose a leather rucksack with several clever inner pockets and filled it with what seemed most likely to keep a man alive: flint, a water skin, spare underclothes, sturdy waxed boots, plain outerwear that would not stand out, dried sausage, a brick of aged cheese.

He scarcely remembered doing it.

When at last he had done what he could, he fell heavily onto the bed half-dressed and was swallowed at once by sleep.

CHAPTER 2



At the edge of the lamplight, a longcase clock struck one, chiming a solitary call through the converted refectory room.

There, in the darkened corner of the old manor chamber, Guy de Chauillac sat watching the man who had undoubtedly emerged to ruin his life. Brooding over the conundrum, he took another pull from his pipe, the embers briefly casting a cruel radiance across his gaze. Though he sat over his wounded charge like any well-intentioned doctor, closer inspection would have revealed that not a hint of concern in those glowing eyes.

“So soon,” Guy murmured under his breath. “Too soon.”

It had been over an hour since he had last heard his apprentice stumbling about above him. He had given him enough alcohol to knock out a small horse. Amis would sleep deeply for several hours yet.

Guy looked to the bonds he had secured around the man’s wrists and ankles. Standing, he produced a small cylindrical tube capped by what looked to be a needle at one end and a plunger at the other. He crossed the room without hurry, taking in the quiet of his study as though savoring its order one final time. Then, in a swift and practiced motion, he brought the device down over the man’s heart and depressed the plunger.

Guy took a quick step back and waited for the inevitable reaction.

Which manifested as...nothing.

Slightly puzzled, Guy looked down at the device in his hand.

Guabbbh!

The man choked in air and arched off the table, sightless eyes flaring open as he grasped wildly for anything. Finding his limbs secured, he resorted to scanning the room for whatever threatened him.

“Who are you?” commanded Guy.

“My eyes, I can’t see, where am I, my men, did we make it, who are you?” the man responded in rapid Latin. His speech grew more controlled with each passing word, and though his body was reduced to little more than bruises and exhaustion, an undeniable strength still resonated in his voice.

“Regrettably, you did not technically make it,” remarked Guy.

White, sightless sclera darted toward the sound of Guy’s voice.

“Where are my men?” the stranger demanded, allowing a touch of menace to enter the question.

Ignoring the implied threat, Guy continued. “As to whom you are speaking. Here, I am known as Guy de Chauliac—inventor, surgeon, apothecary, and Primus Pilus of the Twelfth Legion; retired, of course, these past fifteen years. If the fashions and the language have not yet told you, you are very far from home.”

The milky eyes fixed on him with unnerving intensity. Then the man answered. “I am Tribune Fiore, and if you speak truth, your rank marks you as an honorable man. Thus, you will understand my inability to speak further, other than to inquire where I am and why I am here.”

“Considering the manner of your arrival, I believe I have some idea of why you are here. But which side, I wonder,” mused Guy.

Not waiting for an answer, he pressed on. “And as for your men...they are dead.”

The muscles in Fiore’s arms strained against the bonds. A tremor passed through his body; one that was not wholly from weakness.

“But not by my hand,” Guy said quickly. “Your ship nearly did not make it across La Manche—or what the legionaries here call Oceanus Britannicus. Your men did not survive the landing. And technically,” Guy added, with a trace of dark amusement, “neither did you. Your heart ceased to beat for some time. You, my friend, were dead.”

Fiore's body slowly relaxed. He let his head settle back down against the table, his blank stare aimed toward the smoke-darkened ceiling. "If your story is true," he said, "you are not from here."

"Ha. And neither are you a Parisian, I suspect. So now that we have moved beyond the obscenely evident, I shall ask a question. I will grant you one opportunity to answer. If you fail to give me what I seek, I will end you here, in my study, and then go upstairs and sleep rather soundly, I believe."

"I am not at liberty to disc—"

"Shhhh," interrupted Guy. "I have not yet posed the question."

His captive strained his jaw, producing an audible click where Guy had so recently "rearranged" it. A necessary trade, in order to administer the life-saving capsule.

"I can think of only one circumstance that would bring you here," Guy said, pacing a slow circle about the table. "And believe me when I say I am still of the mind to rid the world of your presence regardless."

He took another draw from his pipe.

"Now, the garb you and your unfortunate companions were wearing tells me that I am meant to trust you. Though any fool, to my knowledge, could have acquired such attire."

Guy saw it then—the immediate easing of Fiore's frame at the mention of the uniform—and struck to the heart of the matter. The words he was about to speak were words he had sworn never to utter aloud again. Not here. Not on this world. Not to another man.

"That leaves a singular option for you. Tell me..." He laid the pointed end of the fire poker against Fiore's throat, willing the threat into the cold iron. "The authentication protocol."

Fiore showed no fear, only the faintest flicker of surprise. Then he spoke. "No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience."

If Guy's captive had still possessed working sight, he would have seen a man battling some imperceptible daemon within himself. A snarl marred Guy's face as the fire poker trembled over Fiore's neck. Closing his eyes and shaking his head

once, Guy flung the poker aside. It struck the hardened oak of the back entrance with a violent clang.

Then, with reluctance, he answered the phrase he had prayed never to speak again. "Fortitude is the guard and support of the other virtues."

The longcase clock struck twice, and not a breath could be heard in the stillness.

Slowly, but with growing certainty, Guy moved to untie his unsolicited guest.

"I more or less expected this," he said as he worked at the last knot. "I gave the other two their rites before bringing you here. I would have committed more time to it, but alas, there was none."

"How did you find us? We lost all communications," Fiore asked, flexing life back into his wrists.

"I have been here a long while; I have my connections," Guy replied.

Fiore's eyebrow went up at that, but he still pushed himself upright on the table and nodded, as much in gratitude as courtesy, toward the sound of Guy's voice.

"We were supposed to connect with a man by the name of Ajax. I'm guessing that's you," Fiore said.

Guy paused at the mention of the name. "Another man. Another tier. Continue with Guy, if you please."

"Where is your charge?" Fiore asked, tension finally breaking into his voice.

"Thoroughly drugged, I believe," Guy quipped.

Fiore's eyebrow lifted.

"He is safe," Guy said, allowing some of the exasperation he felt to tinge the answer. "And what calamity brings you here, with three of the Guard? It could not be a small th—"

"Eighty," Fiore interrupted. "Not including supporting staff, which number another dozen. A fully staffed century. Most did not survive the landing."

Guy absently collapsed back into his chair.

"My men broke off from the main century along with six other groups of three in order to locate you."

"So many," Guy whispered, running a hand through his thinning hair.

“Yes. So you likely know what I am about to say next.” Fiore’s voice flattened. “Gaius Marius Julii is dead.”

Not hearing a response, he continued. “We suspect—no, we know for certain—that foul play was involved. The timing was suspect enough, even before the return of the devourer.”

“So you are here to take him away.” Guy’s voice had gone hollow. “That means the rest of the immediate line...”

He did not need to finish the question. The silence that followed confirmed his fear.

Another concern then came violently to the front of Guy’s mind. “The balance,” he said. “It has already been some time—a fortnight at least? With that number, you must depart at once. You must take him, and I will deal with the fallout.”

“Primus, if I may call you such, the individuals responsible for our current state have somehow tracked us here.” Fiore’s head dipped slightly in humiliation. “Measures were taken to elude pursuit, but somehow...” He hesitated. “This is still difficult for me to appreciate fully. However, I must tell you this: it has been over four months since the Seventh Century arrived. Other than my men, I have not been in contact with any legionary from the Seventh in months.”

“Where?” asked Guy, his whole body suddenly feeling as if it were encased in sand. “Where did you last see the Seventh?”

“We established camp in Northern Provincial Germania. My men split from the main body and began the search a half week’s march north from what you would call Antonius’s Wall in Britannia. The natives were...hostile.”

The longcase struck three mournful notes as Fiore continued. “The last I spoke with the Seventh, they were holding with primitive means in accordance with the balance. However, as you know, our ship—the *Anemoi*—was never intended to reside so long.”

“Why not simply leave? Find better ground, wait in the atmos—”

“Sabotage,” Fiore interjected. “It is also the reason, we suspect, why we were unable to communicate directly. For all I know, we are alone.”

Sitting back in his chair, Guy contemplated the few options Fortuna had dealt him. The hail gave its first signs of retreat, lessening its hypnotic assault against the clay shingles overhead.

Ever decisive, Guy shifted forward in his chair and looked to his unwanted guest with something that was not quite hope, not quite madness, but nearer both than either man might have liked.

“They do not call me Primus here without due cause. No, my friend, I do not believe we will stand alone. Though I will not lie to you: You could not have chosen a worse place, and I fear much time has already been lost. We have a great deal to accomplish.”

A wicked expression flashed across his face. “Tell me: have you ever heard of a politician who would take to bribes?”