

A . C . H O B B S

THIS
SILENT
CITY



COUNTERPOISE
PRESS

THIS SILENT CITY

Text copyright © 2026 by A.C. Hobbs

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any names, places, characters and incidents are the products of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or establishments is solely coincidental.

First published in the United States in January 2024 by Counterpoise Press

Identifiers:

Hardback ISBN (978-1-962846-07-3) | Paperback ISBN (978-1-962846-06-6) | E-book ISBN (978-1-962846-08-0)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

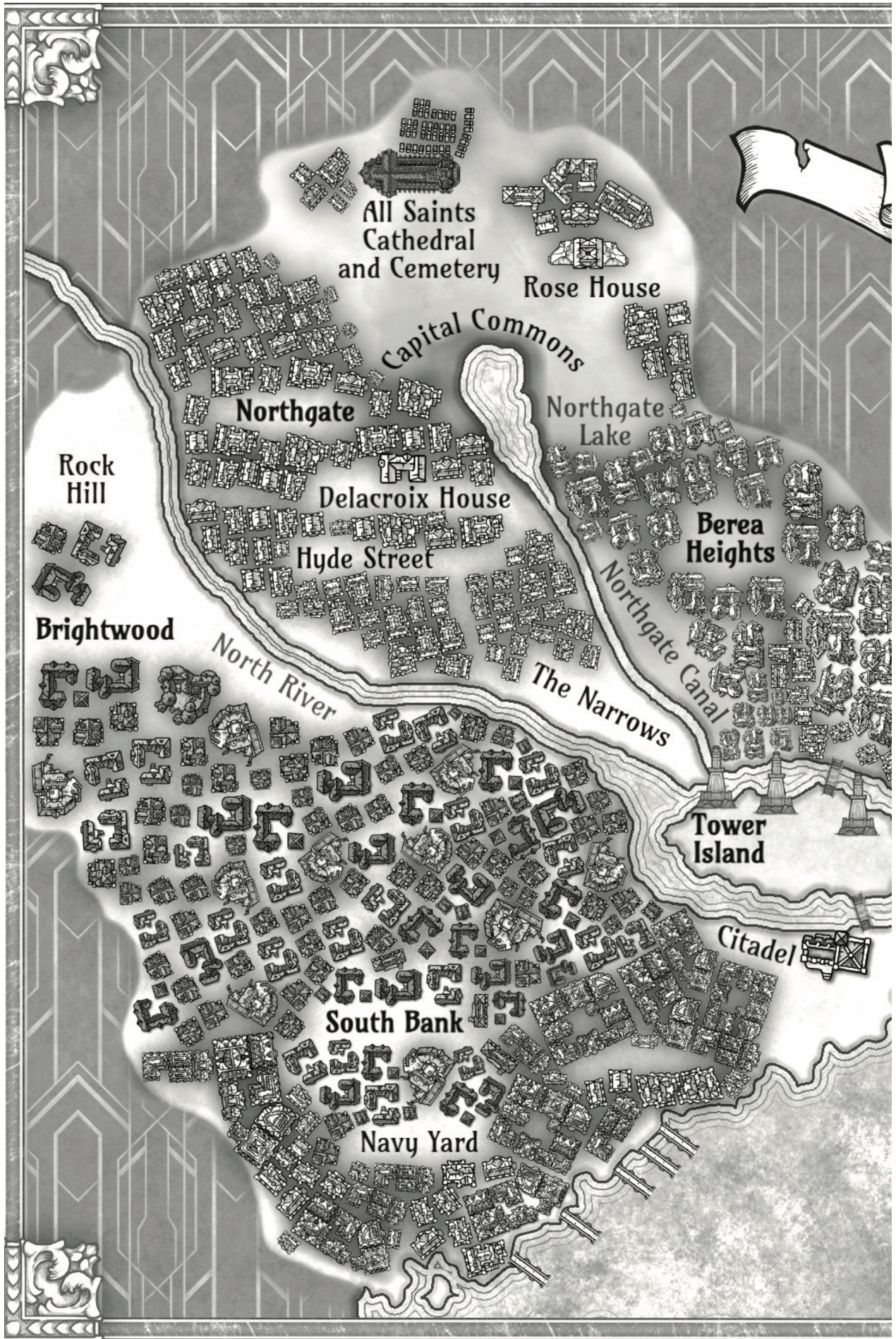
To find out more about Counterpoise Press visit www.counterpoisepress.com

To find out more about A.C. Hobbs visit www.achobbsauthor.com

For Laura Beth.

*Thank you for growing up and through it all with me... and for never growing
away.*

May everyone have a ride-or-die who defends them in rooms they aren't in.



Capital of the
LEAGUE OF NATIONS



Central City

Iron Yards

Central Station

Incubus
x Lair

Old Towne

Eastcity River

The Gullet

Eastgate

THE EVENTS OF BOOK ONE

In the Capital of the United League of Nations, vampire politician Demetrius Raske uncovers a grisly crime: the body of a young woman drained of blood. Demetrius fears the murder will derail legislation he is fighting to pass that will grant vampires equal rights to humans. As tensions rise between humans and vampires, memories of a vampire civil war—one that escalated into a world war twenty years earlier—continue to negatively impact the humans' opinion of vampires.

Determined to stop the vampire killer before his bill collapses, Demetrius calls in a favor from a red-eyed gangster known as the Devil of Eastgate. The Devil, Hades Cronus, is more than a mere criminal. His ability to wield a magical scythe allows him to command fire and shadows, heal himself, and hear the voices of the dead. Hades agrees to hunt the murderer in exchange for political intelligence. Unbeknownst to Demetrius, Hades had already been searching for the vampire killer.

Meanwhile, Gabriella Rose, a journalist and the daughter of a senator, begins investigating the murders and questions Demetrius. Her scrutiny draws the attention of Hades and his lieutenant, Harriet Gale. As the investigation unfolds, the murderer strikes again, killing a young girl. The atrocity enrages League Defense Minister Edwin Gunfort, who uses the crime to push for the expulsion of vampires from the League.

Hades uncovers a new horror in Eastgate: thralls—poisoned humans enslaved to the vampire killer's will. Around the same time, Demetrius's uncle

Xavier Raske, a Valhallan nobleman, arrives unexpectedly in the Capital with warnings of unrest in the homeland.

During a party at the Rose family home, a bomb explodes, killing Gabriella's family and Xavier. Gabriella herself dies in the blast, but Hades revives her using his magic, awakening new powers, including the ability to turn invisible. Driven by grief and a hunger for vengeance, Gabriella agrees to infiltrate a League Defense Department outpost.

Demetrius receives a letter from someone claiming to be Xavier. The sender provides Xavier's signet ring, proof he survived the bombing, and accuses Hades of being the true murderer behind the killings in the Capital. Enraged and shaken, Demetrius confronts Hades, who reveals the truth: Xavier planted the bomb that destroyed the Rose home. Hades fought Xavier in the aftermath and left him for dead. Demetrius is left uncertain who to trust.

Gabriella infiltrates the outpost and learns about Operation Black Chapel, a covert operation from the Valhallan civil war. Harriet also steals weapons from the outpost, further complicating Gabriella's trust in Hades.

Back in the Capital, Demetrius and Hades rush to Eastgate after another murder is discovered. At the scene, the vampire killer has scrawled a bloody symbol of a scythe. The timing of the murder and the fact that Demetrius and Hades were together when it occurred prove Hades is not the culprit, as the letter from "Xavier" claimed. They follow the murderer, where they confront an army of thralls led by the vampire killer. The killer is revealed to be Xavier Raske, horribly scarred but alive. Xavier reveals his desire to claim Hades' scythe. Hades destroys the thralls in a brutal display of power, but Demetrius is injured by Xavier, who escapes. Hades allows Demetrius to drink his blood to heal him.

In the aftermath, Demetrius wrestles with the truth of his uncle's betrayal but resolves to continue fighting for peace between humans and vampires. Gabriella confronts Hades about his lies and manipulation. As proof of his sincerity, he finally tells her everything he knows about Xavier. Hades offers her a choice: to flee and begin a new life, or to stay and pursue vengeance. He warns her that revenge is a lonely road—but promises she will not walk it alone. Gabriella chooses vengeance.

PART ONE

Don't ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash.

Arsonist's Lullaby, Hozier



She was feeling the pressure of the world outside, and she wanted to see him
and feel his presence beside her and be reassured she was doing the right thing
after all.

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

CHAPTER 1

26 FEBRUARY 1925

EASTGATE

MOONLIGHT BLED over a field of white crosses. Their poles aimed crisply heavenward in miniature mimicry of the soldiers whose bones they guarded. Capital gravediggers had carved narrow plots, so close that the pine coffins surely touched beneath that hard earth. Packed—just as those boys had been packed in their barracks and in the bellies of the ships that had carried them into war-torn Europa. Only the United League Army could achieve such indifference, even in death.

A woman wandered the trail bisecting the cemetery. A fur-lined manteau, blacker than the surrounding gloom, enveloped her figure. A wide-brimmed fedora obscured her face. Despite the uneven terrain, her stride carved a steady path between the grave rows.

Moonlight painted the adjacent chapel shades of silver and coal. The steeple's shadow stretched like an accusatory finger over the little crosses. *Look*, it whispered. *Look what was done to us. Just look.*

Grace Chapel Soldiers' Cemetery hovered between Eastgate and Old Towne. The memorial grounds housed soldiers unclaimed by relatives either indifferent, dead themselves, or too poor to afford a proper funeral. These were poor boys of the city, expendable to the Black Tower generals. They'd escaped Eastgate's sooty streets, bound for glory in the name of League sovereignty, only to be chewed up and spit back out where they'd begun. Now they were forever trapped in Eastgate.

The woman stepped off the path. Her buckle heels left no mark on the

earth, frozen hard and cruel in winter's death grip. As she passed between the crosses, she wondered who she was stepping on, if it was anyone she'd known. Saints knew she'd patched and stitched and grasped the bloody hands of enough broken boys. In another life, she'd cauterized severed limbs and stuffed guts back into bodies already putrefying.

Twenty graves deep, she stopped before a marker. It was indistinguishable from its neighbors. Years of smog and rain had stained the cross so that black now streaked its beams like vile tears.

The woman knelt, heedless of her cloak dragging. Her gloved fingers brushed the base of the cross. Brass glinted through grime: a name plate, pitted by rain and time. Its inscription read simply: *Hector Corson, d. 1912. Sergeant, United League Army. Blood War.*

The woman peeled an encrusted leaf from the nameplate, then produced a single rose from the depths of her cloak. Its petals glowed scarlet against the night. She balanced the stem on the arms of the grave marker and murmured, "Hello, old friend."

Her voice was languorous as a summer breeze through coastal forests, weighty with American inflection. She sank to her knees. A stick poked through her stocking, but she paid it no mind.

Her voice thickened as she whispered, "Hello, my love."

She bowed her head, perhaps in pain, perhaps in prayer, and fell silent for several moments. A shaky breath crystallized in the air before her. Then she raised her face to the starlight.

The night defined her smooth cheekbones and cupid's bow mouth. Her skin was polished, warm brown, pearl-dust makeup radiant against that rich hue. Curled lashes obscured charcoal eyes, currently red-rimmed and glistening. She sniffed and wiped her nose on the back of her glove.

"You know . . ." she said, "it took years for me to accept that you would never walk out of that damn forest. That you'd never come home."

Her fingers hovered over the rose as though to caress a face long gone.

"I still can't believe you're gone." Her hand dropped to her lap. "Some days—most days really—it's easy to forget. To move on, I suppose. But then he'll smile that crooked way you had. Or say my name just so and I—" Her voice cracked. A single tear glistened on her cheek.

"Shit." The curse trembled on a ragged breath. She swiped at her eyes. The dark irises flashed as grief hardened into anger. "What am I doing?" She stood without dusting the dried grass from her knees. "Nothing here but dirt," she spat. Turning on her heel, she strode from the cemetery.

The scarlet rose, forgotten, tumbled to the ground.

CHAPTER 2

26 FEBRUARY 1925

CAPITAL COMMONS PARK

WINTER HAD DESCENDED upon the Capital. A cloak of glistening white transformed Capital Commons Park into a picturesque wonderland. Snow drenched the tree canopy. It clumped on ornamental fountains and draped the statues like ermine shawls.

But what appeared fluffy and welcoming by day became treacherous by night. The snow glowed with a phosphorescent ice-crust. In the park's maple grove, shadows stretched long. Branches moaned. Scratching and creaking, they rattled like arthritic bones.

A crisp track of boot prints marred the park road. A man in a heavy wool overcoat walked alone beneath the trees. Snow dusted his shoulders and the brim of his dove-gray fedora. The rabbit-felt hat shimmered against his raven hair; its navy-blue ribbon accentuated his icy-blue eyes and a face colder and paler than the snowfall.

Beneath a noonday sun, a vampire might walk unnoticed. But a crisp moon revealed a vampire's inhumanity. Too quiet, too cold, too sharp-featured, too graceful.

Demetrius Raske paused at the edge of the maple grove. Here, the path opened into the park proper, a wide lawn bisected by the Northgate Canal, opaque with ice. Like crude paper cutouts, lampposts cast orange parallelograms across the path. The bleak light illuminated the canal and the spectral white flanks of the Bridge of Angels. Demetrius could just make out the shadow of wings stretching above the water.

His face hardened. His vampiric eyes smoldered like two blue lanterns, piercing the dark. He had not entered Commons Park since that chilly October morning when Annie Delacroix's body was discovered.

A twig snapped behind him.

Demetrius whirled, but the path wound empty through the trees. Releasing a ghostly breath, he walked toward the bridge. His boots slipped on ice-coated stone. He scabbled for the bridge rail, just catching himself before falling.

Ahead, a cloaked figure stood alone, overlooking the water. A voluminous hood concealed their face, but a skirt peeked through the folds of their cloak.

Demetrius removed his hat. "I worried you might not come."

"Demetrius!"

The woman breathed his name upon the air, a billowing ghost between them. Lamplight slithered over her face as she turned. The yellow beams cast her features into sharp relief, highlighting her cheekbones and the bow of her lips. Dark circles smudged her eyes. Grief had aged Katrina Delacroix, but still she was beautiful. Within her velvet hood, her skin glowed like tarnished ivory.

She crossed the bridge in two strides. Demetrius caught her in a hard embrace. A ragged gasp escaped her as she buried her face in his coat.

"Oh, Demetrius," the woman sobbed. She struggled to say more, but a muffled sob shook her entire body.

Demetrius bowed his head over hers. "There, there," he muttered nonsensically. "I'm here. I'm—" But he found himself unable to repeat platitudes. He raised his eyes to the night sky, a desperate expression twisting his handsome face. He closed his eyes.

Indifferent snowflakes drifted as the woman quietly wept, held tight in a vampire's cold arms.

After several moments, Demetrius stepped back. Fishing into his pocket, he produced a gold-trimmed handkerchief and offered it to her. She accepted wordlessly.

"Pardon me, I-I shouldn't have . . ." She began to stammer an apology but Demetrius interrupted by stepping forward to cup her face in his hands. Her green eyes sparkled. Gently, Demetrius wiped away a tear escaping her lashes.

"You never have to apologize to me, Katrina," he said softly. "You know that."

Katrina's smile shook as she pressed a hand to his. "*Merci*," she whispered, then continued in French: "*It's been a long time since you've held me so, Demetrius Raske.*"

He arched an eyebrow before replying in Valhallan: "*And I shouldn't be now.*"

Years ago, this had been their little game: conversing in their own native tongues, challenging each other's proficiency. A memory flashed through Demetrius' mind: Katrina Delacroix lying naked in his bed, red hair pouring down her milky-white back. He had once known the precise number of freckles on her chest, every fleck of gold in her forest-green eyes. Once, those memories would have ignited a pilot light in his core. Now, they stirred only the pleasant warmth of fondness past. Years filled the rift between them. *Well*, Demetrius thought resignedly, *our affair had never been destined for longevity*. Their relationship had been a brief, ill-conceived tryst, pursued when he'd been young and fresh-faced from the Citadel.

With a bittersweet but tender smile, Demetrius released her. "Why did you bring me here, Kat?"

She wiped her eyes with his handkerchief. "I confess I almost didn't come. Perhaps it was foolish to contact you."

Demetrius waited, sensing she had more to say.

"I remember well all that you did . . . for the investigation." Her voice trembled but did not break. "I know that you found the—the place where it happened. Where he . . ." She pressed the handkerchief to her mouth.

Demetrius' heart twisted. Katrina's breath hitched with a stifled sob. After a moment, she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose.

"I knew you would come if I asked." Twin tear-trails glistened on her cheeks. "I know *you*, Demetrius Raske. You're a gentleman to a fault. So I know you won't be offended by what I must ask. Despite all that has passed between us. I know you'll help me."

Wariness crept into Demetrius' heart.

Inwardly, he cursed himself for his skepticism. *I'm not the boy you remember, Katrina*. Fire, bullets, blood—too much had transpired, transforming him as pressure transformed steel.

"I need your help," Katrina said. As she spoke, she glanced over her shoulder. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Gustave . . . he has not returned home. For weeks. I need your help finding him."

Demetrius winced. He had feared something of this nature. "Katrina . . ." he began but she held up her hands, the handkerchief a flag of truce.

"I know it's bold to ask this, especially of you," she insisted. "But you're the only person I trust in this godforsaken city."

Half-turning away, Demetrius ran a hand over his face. "Katrina, I don't know where Gustave is. Even if I did—"

Katrina spoke over him: "If Gustave doesn't report to Tower White within the week, he will be *impeached*."

Desperation sharpened the angles of her face. She'd lost weight since her daughter's death, her body robbed of any feminine softness. She appeared chiseled as stone.

Demetrius chose his words carefully, rendering his voice as gentle as possible without slipping into condescension. "Have you considered that impeachment might be for the best? He's clearly unable to discharge the duties of his office, Katrina."

Katrina hissed a breath. "Unable? My husband is one of the greatest senators to hold the title! Who do you think negotiated the French Navy's allegiance? Who do you think convinced our president to back your father's first term?" Demetrius opened his mouth, but Katrina's reprimand snapped between them. "And what do you think will happen to your precious Equality Bill if my husband loses his position?"

Demetrius held up both hands. "Katrina, I—"

"You will be left with no allies!" she all but shouted. Her eyes sparkled with tears and righteous anger.

"I-I didn't realize you cared about the bill," stammered Demetrius. "Not after what happened."

Pink tinged her cheeks. "Of course I care! A madman killed my little girl. I do not lay his crime at the feet of all vampires. Surely you know that?"

A ringing silence fell between them, broken only by the creaking of ice below the bridge.

Demetrius swallowed. Heat burned his cheeks. Haltingly, he nodded. "I can try, Kat. I'll look for Gustave. But I don't know what I'll be able to accomplish."

"Perhaps I can help with that," a sudden voice interjected, as dark and reverberant as the night surrounding them.

Katrina gasped. Demetrius jumped, one hand flying to the gun inside his coat. Both whirled to find a man standing on the bridge, a mere ten feet away. A black greatcoat accentuated his height. A snap brim fedora obscured his features, save for the ember glow of a cigarette. For a brief moment, red flared where his eyes should have been, like a predator's vision in the dark—a flash so quick it could easily have been imagined.

Katrina recoiled, but Demetrius' grip on his pistol eased.

"It's all right." Demetrius braced her with one hand. "I know him." Even so, he couldn't quite keep the anger from his voice as he glared over Katrina's head at the interloper.

"Who is this?" Katrina's eyes darted between the stranger and Demetrius. She'd caught that subtle note of irritation in his tone.

Through gritted teeth, Demetrius said, "This is Hades Cronus. Lord

Chronicler of the Defense Department.” His eyes bored into Hades as he spoke. Their usual cornflower-blue color had hardened with icicle anger. “A business associate of mine.”

“Lord Chronicler?” Katrina’s brow furrowed. “I’ve never heard this title.”

“Few have.” Hades’ baritone resonated as he stalked closer.

Demetrius, suddenly conscious of his hand on Katrina’s waist, stepped back.

Katrina eyed Hades up and down, then said archly, “Sir, I am unaccustomed to conversing with strange men in the dark—Oh!” Her reprimand died in a gasp.

Hades had removed his fedora.

Streetlight imparted a cadaverous pallor to his olive-hued skin. His angular cheekbones cast sharp shadows, like the contoured planes of a skull. Set into sockets deep and dark, his eyes glowed: two brilliant crimson beams.

A chill tingled Demetrius’ spine. Somehow, despite years of acquaintance, he had never acclimated to Hades’ strange eye color. *Rare indeed for a human to scare a vampire in the dark*, he thought. To Katrina, Hades’ ghastly appearance might appear a carnivalesque trick of the night, but Demetrius well knew the power that lurked beneath this man’s skin. A power that stretched credulity. That could level buildings and vaporize bodies with one fiery flash.

Demetrius had witnessed that power, mere weeks ago. It had taken days to purge the bitter odor of smoke from his hair.

Hades flipped his fedora back onto his head and the grim spell was broken.

Katrina closed her gaping mouth. Her throat muscles flexed as she swallowed. Sensing the need to salvage a deteriorating situation, Demetrius stepped forward.

“Lord Cronus assisted in the Central Station murder case.” After a pause, he added, “And in your daughter’s.”

At the mention of Annie Delacroix, memories surfaced unbidden in Demetrius’ mind. A warehouse drenched in darkness, long-limbed shadows writhing . . . and one small white form, lank hair falling like a greasy curtain over horrible eyes. Sightless, pupilless eyes.

A muscle in Demetrius’ jaw spasmed. He could never explain Hades’ full involvement in Annie Delacroix’s murder case. How he had magically assisted with locating the crime scene. How he’d stepped past Demetrius, eyes black and aim steady, and put down her thrall with an executioner’s bullet.

Nausea flared in Demetrius’ stomach. No, Katrina must never know her daughter’s true fate. Let her mother imagine clinical things: Hades crunching data points or scouring crime scenes with dusting powder. Demetrius could never divulge the truth of what really happened that foggy winter night.

Shame oozed through him at the subterfuge.

Katrina released a measured breath. “Well then . . . Lord Cronus, you have my thanks. For the efforts of the Defense Department. Such as they were.” She shot a look at Demetrius, her anger palpable, and gathered the train of her cloak. “I should leave.”

“Were you satisfied with the results?” Hades’ blunt question stopped her.

“Excuse me?”

“You complimented the efforts of the Defense Department. Were you satisfied with the results? After all, the Defense Minister failed to apprehend your daughter’s killer.”

Katrina’s lips flattened. “I’m well aware of that, I assure you.”

Hades held up two gloved fingers. “In a span of mere weeks, two people were killed by the same man. Olivia Duncan and your daughter. Then, not even a month later, the same individual slaughtered the Rose family.”

“Why are you telling me what I already know?” she demanded.

Unhurried, Hades rested his hands in his pockets. “Because, madam, I’m well aware of your recent efforts. And your reason for summoning the good-hearted, if brash, Mr. Raske here.”

Katrina drew herself up. Her eyes flashed in the dark. “I’m sure I don’t know what—”

“*Je sais ce que vous avez fait.*” Hades’ crisp French cut through her protest.

Katrina straightened. The glare she fired at Demetrius was so fierce he felt the trust between them melt. “I’ve had quite enough,” she snapped.

“Katrina,” Demetrius implored. “Wait!”

But Hades spoke again: “*Je peux vous aider.*”

Katrina stopped. She and Demetrius both blinked at Hades. Katrina recovered first.

“And how do you plan to *help*?” she said. “As you say, your department has done precious little for my family. So forgive me, monsieur, if I don’t believe you.”

Hades’ voice softened. “You’ll never catch him on your own, Katrina.”

That one word—*him*—snagged and held the grieving mother in place. “What did you say?”

Her question emerged a whisper. The hunger burning in her eyes squeezed Demetrius’ heart. A single nugget of information about her daughter’s murder caught her in its claws and held tight.

Hades advanced one step closer. “I know that you’ve been performing your husband’s duties. Taking his meetings at home. Signing his name. Staving off his

inevitable impeachment.” His voice dropped. “Forging the signature of a senator is a serious offense, Madame Delacroix.”

Before Demetrius could intervene, Katrina closed the distance between them. With both hands, she snatched Hades’ overcoat.

“You said *he*.” Her voice shattered. “Do you know who killed her? Do you know who killed my Annaleigh?”

Hades’ face hardened into marble.

Demetrius looked away. Back turned, he pressed a hand to his mouth. Saints almighty, he could not listen to this. He could not listen to Hades manipulate this bereaved woman and twist her grief into a tool for the Company’s machinations.

Or so he told himself. Deep down, beneath layers of sallow shame, another reason lurked. He could not bear the wicked truth. That his own uncle—his power-mad uncle—had murdered and enthralled a little girl. God, what would Katrina think of him then?

You should’ve told her the truth yourself, he realized. Disgust roiled in his gut. *You should’ve told her the moment you saw her tonight*. Instead, he’d led Katrina to the Chronicler. Despite all they had been through, Demetrius wasn’t sure if he trusted Hades with truth.

“Katrina.” Demetrius blurted her name before he could stop himself.

She turned with some surprise. Beyond her, Hades watched with composed interest as Demetrius grasped Katrina’s hands. She searched his face, her lower lip puckering in confusion. Saints, her hands were so pale and small against his black gloves.

Demetrius swallowed and forced out: “We—that is, *I* know who killed Annie. I’ve known for about two weeks now.”

Katrina’s face slackened into blank shock. “Wh-what? You knew?”

“A few weeks ago, Hades and I tracked him through Eastgate. He had killed again. Horribly.” His throat grew parched at the memory of the blood-spattered walls of the Bazaar brothel. “We followed him deep into the Gullet. And we . . . we . . .”

But he could not finish the sentence. He could not recount what had occurred in that dilapidated stockyard. The fog and the thralls, dozens of them, their swaying, emaciated bodies puppeted by Xavier Raske’s preternatural abilities. And little Annaleigh Delacroix, the worst of them all, Xavier’s masterstroke.

“But who was he?” Katrina asked. Tears brimmed on her eyelashes. “Demetrius, who killed my little girl? Tell me his name.”

Demetrius gaped like a fish pulled from a river. The words formed in his throat, but guilt crushed his ability to speak them.

Tears spilled over Katrina's cheeks. "Demetrius, *his name*. I beg you."

"An incubus." Katrina turned with a jerk as Hades seamlessly filled the silence. "A vampire magician. He didn't reveal his name. We would've uncovered more, but Demetrius was injured. In the chaos, the incubus escaped."

Demetrius gaped at the gangster. He barely schooled his face before Katrina whirled back to him. Reading her alarm, he said quickly, "I'm fine now."

Over Katrina's head, he met Hades' stare. The gangster gave a subtle warning shake of the head. *No names*, Demetrius read in that piercing red glare.

Katrina made a sputtering noise. She brimmed with frantic energy. "But why haven't you notified the police? If he's still at large, he might kill again!"

Hades caught her shoulders as she rushed forward, close enough to bump his chest. Holding her at bay, Hades explained, "Because the Defense Minister is uninterested in justice."

"What?" Katrina blinked as she struggled to grasp his words.

To his credit, Hades spoke gently. "Gunfort has no intention of avenging your daughter's death. He's just using her as a tool. To garner public sympathy. And seize control of Valhalla."

Katrina paled. Hands over her chest, she shook her head as if to clear it. "What? Why?"

The crimson eyes flickered to Demetrius. *Be gentle with her*, Demetrius' pointed glare warned.

Hades' response was crafted. "That's what we're trying to determine."

Katrina caught the silent exchange. Her eyes narrowed. "We?"

Demetrius answered before Hades could. "Hades and I are partners in this."

Katrina gazed between them. Her cheeks glistened from crying, but her scowl was resolute. "If we cannot trust Gunfort, then . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Gunfort is playing a long game. And we must stay one step ahead of him," said Hades. "Otherwise, his war games will shatter the League. And thousands of deaths will follow your daughter's."

A dark spark flashed in Katrina's eyes. Her mouth hardened. She spat something in French faster than Demetrius could understand. Although, he did catch one word: *guerre*. War.

She faced Hades with the grim resolution of a duelist. "What do you want from me, monsieur?"

Hades considered the bricks beneath their feet. Below, the frozen river crawled. Ice moaned as the water shifted its rigid bulk. When he spoke, his words were low.

"I need eyes and ears within the Capital."

Katrina's brow knit. With a cynical laugh, she motioned toward Demetrius. "Surely Mr. Raske would be better suited?"

"I don't need eyes in Tower White. I need them in homes."

Katrina drew back. "You're asking me to spy upon the senators' *families*? Their wives?"

"I'm merely asking you to listen," corrected Hades. "And relay to me what you hear."

Katrina remained unconvinced. "What good are conversations held at ladies' luncheons? I assure you world peace is not foremost in these women's minds."

Hades scoffed. "I needn't convince you of the influence a woman exerts over her husband."

Katrina leveled a shrewd glare at Hades. The scrutiny in her green eyes rivaled his own otherworldly gaze. "*Êtes-vous marié, monsieur?*"

Hades stilled. One hand fidgeted in his pocket. Clearing his throat, he pulled out his cigarettes. A match flared in the dark; the smell of tobacco sizzled upon the bitter air. He flicked the spent match over the bridge. Like a falling star, it sparked then disappeared.

Through a haze of smoke, Hades shook his head and answered: "No, I am not."

Katrina made a noncommittal noise. "Outmaneuvering Edwin Gunfort will demand considerable effort." Glaring sideways at Demetrius, she added matter-of-factly, "You don't have many allies among the senators. Not with Philip Rose dead."

Neither man contradicted her.

"And my husband . . ." With a bracing sigh, she waved a hand. "He is plagued by ghosts and booze. So it falls to me then." She nodded with grim resignation. "You wish for me to influence the wives' opinions. And through them, the senators." She crossed her arms. "I assume our impressive French Navy has nothing to do with this conversation?"

Demetrius hid his smile. Behind her traditional manners and fine clothes, Madame Delacroix's sharp mind outpaced her husband's. Truly, she should've been France's senator.

She regarded Demetrius with twisted lips. "Such interesting company you keep, Demetrius. I did not expect such of you."

Unsure whether to take this as an insult or compliment, Demetrius ducked his head.

"I cannot stay much longer. My family will want me." She frowned at Hades. "And in return? What can you do for me, Lord Cronus?" Somehow, her impeccable French accent twisted his title into an insult.

Hades did not waver. "I know how and where your husband wastes his time. I'll return him to you by the end of the week."

Katrina's eyebrows shot to her hairline. "And how could you possibly do that?"

Hades chuckled, a dry dirty sound. "You'd be surprised what I can do, madam."

Demetrius touched Katrina's elbow. "You don't have to agree," he whispered. He felt Hades' glare snap his way, but ignored it. "I'll help you personally, whatever you decide. Even if you decline this offer."

Katrina held his gaze, biting the corner of her lip. Demetrius caught the gesture and barely checked his smile. He'd forgotten that habit of hers: chewing her bottom lip in thought. A disarmingly youthful trait in a woman so refined.

"This *incubus* . . ." She struggled over the unfamiliar word. "Is he still in the city?"

"No," said Demetrius. "We believe he fled for the mainland. Hades put the fear of the Holy Saints in him, I'd say." He shot the man a sideways glance.

Hades added, "I have contacts in Calais, New York, and Amsterdam. They've been alerted to keep an eye on the ports."

"But you could find him?" Katrina pressed. "And bring him to justice?"

Hades growled, "I'll drag him to it."

"Very well then," said Katrina. She extended a gloved hand. "You have yourself a deal, monsieur. Help my husband and I will be your eyes and ears."



TIRES CRUNCHED ON ICE AS A BLACK CAB EASED AWAY FROM Commons Park. Its headlights cast warbling yellow beams across the snow. Seconds before, Hades had summoned the vehicle with an ear-splitting whistle through two pinched fingers. Demetrius and Katrina had shared a glance at this Eastgate method of hailing a cabbie, rarely heard on the rarefied plains of the Capital Commons. Demetrius hadn't even expected any drivers to be available at this hour.

After bundling Katrina into its backseat, Demetrius gave her address to the driver. Now, as he watched the car disappear around a bend in the park road, weariness descended upon him, heavy as his own coat.

"You never cease to surprise me, Raske," a husky growl issued over his shoulder.

Saints, not now, Demetrius moaned inwardly. He turned to find Hades

regarding him with crossed arms and an amused smirk. Demetrius' glare held a warning.

"I'd prefer if Alice did not know about this meeting," he said.

"No," drawled Hades. A smile curled through his words. "I suppose not."

Demetrius bristled. "Jesus, Hades! What do you want me to say? Katrina and I were intimate. Years ago. I was fresh out of university, I—Saints, there's nothing between us now. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

Hades laughed. "Unclench your bloomers, Demetrius. I don't judge men's vices. I merely sell them."

Demetrius braced one foot against the curb. "Or exploit them."

Hades' grin broadened. "That too."

Reaching into his coat pocket, Demetrius narrowed his eyes. "Speaking of vices . . . It might interest you to read Katrina's letter. The one requesting tonight's rendezvous. I noticed a curious detail . . ."

He unfolded a small envelope and passed its contents to Hades. The gangster tilted the paper to the streetlight for easier viewing. Demetrius watched Hades' face as he read.

"At the end, Katrina mentions that Annie's grave was vandalized," said Demetrius after a moment's silence. "The family was notified three weeks ago. Her tombstone had been smashed beyond repair. The earth turned."

Hades did not look up from the letter.

Demetrius' voice grew hoarse. "The gravekeeper assured the family the casket had not been disturbed. Although we both know that's a lie."

Hades' mouth tightened. Demetrius caught the subtle shake of his head, a muttered *Saints*. Even the gangster was disturbed by the implications contained in Katrina's letter. Demetrius shuddered, imagining the enthralled child, clawing her way through gravel and grime to join her master.

My uncle. The thought chilled Demetrius' bones. But he shoved the horror away.

He pointed at the letter. "You can probably imagine how devastating that news was to a bereaved mother. But. . . interestingly enough when she went to order a new tombstone, she discovered a replacement had already been commissioned. By an anonymous benefactor, the warden said." Here, he peered beneath the brim of Hades' fedora. "A life-sized statue of a child. A little girl, chasing butterflies. Katrina said the artist must have referenced a photograph of Annie. He'd even captured that blue hair ribbon she always wore."

Hades grunted and passed the letter back to Demetrius. "How nice."

"Yes," said Demetrius. A knowing gleam shimmered in his eye. "It was *nice*. Uncharacteristically so. A monument like that must have cost a small fortune."

Hades leveled a glare at the vampire, but Demetrius laughed. He smacked the envelope against Hades' shoulder. "I'll keep your dirty secrets, Boss, if you keep mine. How's that for a deal?"

Hades' red eyes glinted. "You'd dare strike another one with me? Brave lad."

Smile undeterred, Demetrius chose to ignore this jab. "I do have one more question."

Hades made an impatient noise but waited.

Demetrius' smile faded. "That night. In Eastgate. Did you . . . speak into my mind?"

Silence stretched after this question. The night rumbled with distant car horns, the city's incessant, grinding heartbeat.

Hades' mouth quirked. "Whatever made you think a thing like that, Raske?"

Demetrius flushed. He recalled that fog-cloaked night in the city's slums. When he, Hades, and Alice had been staring into the abyssal, hateful eyes of a maddened thrall. Words had floated into Demetrius' mind, in an ash-and-gravel voice he knew too well: *Trust me. Please.*

In the heat of the moment, with his blood pounding and fear squeezing his throat, he must have imagined Hades' voice speaking among his thoughts. Embarrassment bolted through Demetrius' core. Saints, he sounded like a buffoon.

"Never mind," he muttered. Bracing his collar against the chill, Demetrius jerked his head toward the city. "I should get back home."

He had taken a mere two strides when—

You could learn a little confidence, Raske. Hades' voice tolled in his mind.

Demetrius stumbled. A cry burst from his throat: "What the hell?"

He whirled at the sound of laughter.

Hades threw his head back, guffawing with an abandon Demetrius had never witnessed in the man. The vampire gaped, torn between anger, disbelief, and humor. The latter won out. A shaky grin overtook his features.

"Holy saints," Demetrius gasped. "Have you always been able to do that?"

"No," answered Hades as he regained control of himself.

"Can you speak to other people?" pressed Demetrius, curiosity piqued now.

"I don't know. Eastgate was the first time I've ever done it." In the gloom, Hades' eyes glowed crimson. "You know as much as I do."

Demetrius' eyes bulged. "My God, if I had that ability, I'd be dying to know! Can you speak to others? Harriet? Or Gabriella? Or—" Suddenly paling, he asked, "Saints, you can't . . . *read* my mind, can you?"

“Jesus, no,” snapped Hades. “Nor do I want to. I have enough in my own head to worry about.”

“But—” Demetrius started, only to have Hades grasp his shoulder. Despite being shorter than Demetrius, Hades bodily steered the vampire toward town.

“Whatever your questions, lad, surely they can wait ’til morning,” said Hades. “Your girl’s waiting on you, and I for one still have a long night of work ahead.”

Demetrius bit back the questions brimming onto his tongue. “Fine,” he grumbled. “But don’t expect me to let this go.”

“When have you ever let anything go, Raske?” growled Hades, but his twisted smile was affectionate.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men walked into the snow-swirled night.