

Lords of Trillium

THE NIGHTSHADE CHRONICLES

BOOK I

Nightshade City

BOOK II

The White Assassin

BOOK III

Lords of Trillium

BOOK III OF THE NIGHTSHADE CHRONICLES

Lords of Trillium

HILARY
WAGNER



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*For Eric, Vincent, and Nomi,
my three favorite rats*

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CHAPTER ONE

Hallowtide

AS THE SKY DARKENED, Juniper and Vincent tightened their grip on the bus's undercarriage. It lurched forward, rolling into downtown Trillium. Juniper, eager to be free of the heavy fumes, inhaled a long breath as the bus picked up speed. Of late, teams of rats had gone missing. Several Hunter rats who'd set out to find food for the growing city had not returned. At first everyone blamed it on chance. Perhaps the team of Hunters got caught in a trap, run over as they slipped across a street, electrocuted by a live wire—after all, hazards Topside were endless—but when two more teams of rats vanished, Juniper and the Council knew that there was nothing random about the disappearances. The Nightshade rats were being targeted.

Juniper could not imagine anyone who might harbor hatred for his citizens. He thought of Killdeer, but he and his regime were long gone. There were the dock rats, but they never cared about others' comings and goings unless it interfered

with their profitable theft of food from the many cargo ships that docked on the shores of Hellgate Sea. Moreover, his Hunters were well trained. They knew to stay far away from the toughened dock rats, a hard-bitten crew with little pity for any creature, rat or otherwise. There were a few rats who chose to dwell in Trillium, but what would be their gain? Dogs rarely bothered them, and cats mostly steered clear, knowing full well that their chances against a sturdy Trillium rat were slim to none. So who, then? He could only surmise the Topsiders were behind it, but why? Since the dawn of the Catacombs, rats had had little need to live Topside, and those who did stayed hidden or dwelled in places where most self-respecting humans rarely traveled.

He looked over at Vincent. The wind picked up, ruffling his black fur. Fall had swept in quickly, a damp, unforgiving cold. Nightshade City's food supply was stocked for the moment, but that would change quickly if the number of Hunters kept dwindling. Rats in Nightshade could come and go as they pleased. Juniper didn't want to ban that, but if any more rats went missing, he'd be forced to.

The bus idled at its next stop. Juniper and Vincent dropped to the asphalt. Under a leaden cloud of exhaust, they dashed from behind a tire and vanished into the alley behind the Brimstone Building, which sat in the center of Trillium City. They would search every alley if need be to find the lost citizens. As members of the Council, they had taken an oath. It was their sworn duty.

Hastening around the corner, they slid under a Dumpster, watching for enemies. "Topher's group always starts their hunt here," whispered Vincent. "They spread out through the city in teams." Cautiously, he stepped out from under the Dumpster

and surveyed their surroundings: nothing but rubbish and gray puddles—not even the slightest scent of rat.

Sitting down, Juniper opened his tattered rucksack. It had been with him since before Killdeer took over the Catacombs. Maddy had made it for him all those years ago. He retrieved a thin silver tag. He felt the clean edges of the metal disk, the number 111 etched on its face. It was his brother's tag from his time in the lab. He wondered about him often, hoping Billycan had stayed . . . good. They'd given him the cure for the horrible, mind-altering drugs forced upon him in the Topsiders' lab, but still Juniper had doubts. What if its effects were fleeting? Cures sometimes wore off. But no matter what the truth was, Juniper wished his brother were with him now. If any rat could sniff out the lost Hunters it would be Billycan. Admittedly he'd been cruel and merciless, but he *had* commanded an army for over a decade and was a masterful tactician, expert in tracking and pursuit. If anyone could find the Hunters it would be Billycan . . . if only Juniper could find *him*.

"Do you really think he could help us locate them?" asked Vincent as Juniper put the tag back into his satchel.

Heavy footsteps sounded above their heads. Whatever was lurking on top of the Dumpster was far larger than any cat. They readied their claws.

Vincent's nose twitched. *A raccoon*, he mouthed.

As if the creature had heard him, a rangy raccoon screeched and wailed, hissing down at them from his Dumpster perch. He had several questionable-looking apples in his thick black paws, holding them protectively against his chest.

"We don't want trouble," said Juniper evenly. "We're looking for some friends, who've gone missing, I'm afraid."

Juniper might not have wanted trouble, but the raccoon



seemed to be of a different mind-set. Raccoons were highly territorial and could be irrational. The disheveled raccoon raged at them, screaming on in a jumbled language rats likened to gibberish. He pulled his arm back, launching one of his rotten apples at them.

Vincent and Juniper fled in opposite directions. The apple slammed into the wall behind Vincent, bursting into a slimy green pulp on the bricks and spattering runny chunks all over him.

Wiping his face, Vincent growled angrily. He headed straight for the Dumpster, the raccoon's bravado fading as he caught Vincent's infuriated expression. Muttering, Vincent picked up a sizable rock. "I hate raccoons."

He ran.

Lungs burning, he stole through the musty corridors—a mad fiend. He hid his ghastly goods in corners, near doorways,

nailing them to walls, even stringing them up from the ceilings. He slapped his tail against the dirt wall, delighted with the sheer wickedness of it all, eager to give each and every resident the fright they deserved . . . for it was *that* time again. With a cunning grin, he glanced down a corridor. It was late. Most had turned in for the night. All the better, he thought. It was no fun working someone into a lather in the middle of the day, now was it?

He laughed softly. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he'd be here, in this moment, in *this* place! Something had driven him to come here, though, an urge he could not explain. As instinctively as birds migrate south for winter or spiders spin their intricate webs, he'd landed here as if he'd known the way all along. Though he'd arrived only a year ago, he was already in command. Once again the masses seemed to gravitate to him. He marveled at his influence. What made so many follow *him*, of all rats?

He snorted. After all that had transpired, he'd been looking for a life of solitude, but here he was running a kingdom. Once, he'd relished his power, but now . . .

Someone was coming! As the footsteps drew closer, he ducked into a corner, making sure his snaky tail and long feet were hidden from view. Oh, this was going to be good. He was really going to petrify this rat, whoever the unlucky soul was. He sniffed the air. It was a male. Billycan grinned, barely able to keep still, a fire burning inside him that he hadn't felt in some time. The sheer terror might just kill the poor fellow.

"It's hard to imagine the Topsiders ever thought highly of us," said Clover, standing over an open journal. "It seems they've *always* hated us, trying to eradicate us with their traps and

poisons. I mean, we moved underground in the first place to get away from *them*."

Last year Oleander and Carn, later joined by Clover, Vincent, and the rest of the young Council members, had begun retrieving all the journals and letters from the swamp. The books and papers had been left by the Trillium scientists who had lived there. Members of Dresden's colony of bats had been helping transport the journals back to Nightshade. Clover and Vincent pored over them, enthralled.

Vincent scratched behind his ear, finding a small piece of apple skin he'd missed while cleaning himself after his earlier altercation with the raccoon. "Well, Juniper seems to think they're not all so bad. I remember . . . the little boy in the brownstone. That night changed our lives. Without his help, I don't know how things would have turned out."

"True," said Clover, "but I wonder how he feels about us now . . . four years older."

Vincent smiled. "Well . . . it's been four years for me as well, and I still think *he's* all right."

"When I read some of these entries about the founders of Trillium City, it's hard to believe humans could be anything *but* cruel." Clover walked over to another journal and glowered at the open pages. "Did you read this one?" She pointed an accusing claw at the entry. "It says here Trillium's founders legalized something called 'ratting.' They used us for sport at their public houses—setting us loose in makeshift fighting rings so dogs could tear us apart! The dog who killed the most of us was proclaimed the winner—lining his master's pockets in the process."

"Yes, it's all very upsetting," said Vincent, "but . . . did you read the *entire* journal?" He gave her a shrewd grin.

"Well, no . . . not yet," Clover replied.

Vincent flipped through the journal to one of the very last pages. He pointed to the center paragraph. "Read."

Clover eyed the page skeptically. Suddenly she leaned in close. She read the last few sentences out loud. "A small group of angry citizens protested outside City Hall for days, claiming the sport to be inhumane not only to the rats, but the dogs as well, owing to the fact that on frequent occasions Trillium rats would collectively go after a dog, maiming it before a single rat could be harmed. Once again, Trillium rats have proved that they are not only strong, but clever. Rather than scatter and risk dying separately, united they were able to defeat the dog.'" She looked up at Vincent. "Some of the Topsiders actually *tried* to stop these fights, thinking them unjust?"

Vincent nodded. "It wasn't only the scientists who moved to the swamp who were on our side. Some Topsiders thought *all* creatures should have the same right to live that humans do."

"Do you think any Topsiders still feel that way?"

"Well, those Topsiders—the ones who broke into the lab and freed Billycan and the others—they seemed to feel we were worth something . . . and that wasn't all that long ago." He stared vacantly at the heavy door that led back to the Catacombs. "Animal rights activists, that's what they're called. I read some of them won't even eat meat. Can you imagine that? So I guess there are some who still feel it's not right to kill living creatures of any kind—even rats."

"Do you think the Topsiders—the humans—are the ones targeting us?"

"I'm not sure. What if there's some unseen enemy out there, someone who hates us even more than humans?" Vincent thought about who could hate them so much. He glanced down at his leg, never the same since that night in the Catacombs when Billycan freed him from the heavy silver chalice, Killdeer's former throne,

that had fallen on him. After his broken bone finally healed he was left with a slight limp, and when the weather was foul, which was often in Trillium, his knee would ache.

"How is your leg feeling?"

Vincent shrugged.

"Have you changed your mind about Billycan after all that's happened? I mean, he saved your life that night. He saved all our lives. His change for the better . . . it was *real*, don't you think?"

Vincent let out a long breath and took a seat on the edge of a stack of journals. "I'm thankful to be alive." He smiled. "To be here with *you*. But it still doesn't wipe away what he did—to my family and so many others."

"Of course not," said Clover. "I just wonder how much blame you can put on someone who was under the control of something else. Those stories about his supernatural powers, his ability to possess rats, force them under his control. It turns out *he* was the one who was possessed. *He* was the one under the control of that terrible drug from the Topsiders' lab."

"I *know* you're right," Vincent finally said. "I suppose it feels like I'm betraying my family's memory by being even a little understanding of what happened to him. As though I'm saying their deaths meant nothing."

"No one thinks that," she replied softly. "Your family wouldn't think that." Clover took Vincent's chin in her paw and held it gently, forcing him to look her in the eyes. "Vincent, what would your father do? What would Julius Nightshade do?"

Vincent smiled wanly at her. "He'd forgive him."

"In the name of the Saints!" roared Juniper, just dodging a silver dagger as it whizzed by his snout.