

Nightshade City

HILARY
WAGNER



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Summary: Eleven years after the cruel Killdeer took over the Catacombs far beneath the human's Trillium City, Juniper Belancourt, assisted by Vincent and Victor Nightshade, leads a maverick band of rats to escape and establish their own city.

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*To my husband,
Eric*





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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS FOR MY husband, Eric, the man who dared me to write this story! He put up with my craziness and found his way through the early drafts, giving brilliant insight along with unwavering love and support. There would be no *Nightshade City* without him.

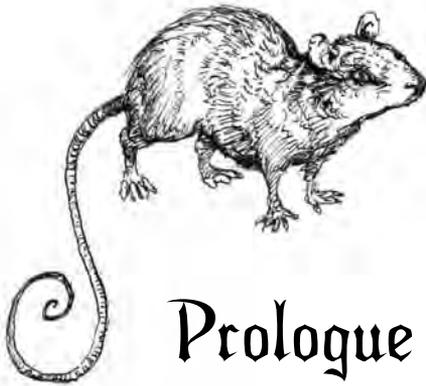
This book was inspired by my son, Vincent—my smart, funny, and strong-minded boy, who is the essence of Vincent Nightshade, and by his sister, Nomi, my clever little girl, who was with me the entire time I wrote *Nightshade City*, born the week the novel was finished.

I am forever grateful to Marietta Zacker and Nancy Gallt. Marietta and Nancy stood behind this book and were absolutely vital in making it happen. From day one, Marietta has championed my writing; she has been nothing short of an inspiration. I could not ask for a better agent or friend and do not know what I'd do without her to keep me sane!

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Last, but by no means least, this book is for Craig Virden. He called me on a Tuesday, forever changing my life. He took a chance on my book, and he took a chance on me. Without a doubt, a small part of his spirit dwells within the corridors of *Nightshade City*, burning brightly for one and all to see.





Prologue

JUNIPER SLEPT like the dead, his infant son curled next to him, murmuring peacefully. The boy's miniature tail and feet were snugly tucked under Juniper's dense winter fur. The fire smoldered softly, infusing the room with a warm caramel glow, the ideal setting for a midday nap. Juniper had earned his rest. The battle was over, and for the first time in a long time, life underground was calm.

A noise interrupted Juniper's sleep—a dull scraping against the planking of his chamber door. "Who is it?" he called out. Juniper sluggishly looked up from the rocking chair, hoping that the anonymous knocker would go away and that his much-needed nap could continue. He listened for a reply; no answer. It appeared that the stranger at the door had given up. Letting his muscles once again relax, Juniper settled back into his slumber, his substantial arm cradling the tiny boy.

A low, raspy voice whispered, "Juniper. Juniper, wake up."

Juniper half opened his eye and for a second time looked towards the door, now a bit bothered. “Whoever is there, please come back tomorrow. I’ll be more than happy to talk to you first thing in the morning. I promise you will have my undivided attention.” He waited for a response; again no answer. The stranger had gone. “Thank the Saints,” Juniper said. The room was silent, apart from the baby, who squeaked softly as Juniper shifted in the chair and once again drifted off.

“Juniper!” railed the voice, jolting him from his tranquil state. Juniper bolted from his chair, and plucking up his son, he reached into the fire pit for the hot poker, but it had vanished. He looked frantically for a weapon, quickly grabbing a knife off the table. Trying to follow the voice, he blindly swung the dull blade into the shadows.

There was a crash. Juniper jerked around. His leather satchel had been ripped from its hook and had fallen to the hard dirt floor, its contents sprawled everywhere. Unable to see in the hidden corners, he spun wildly in a confused circle. He hollered angrily into the dark. “Come out! Come out and face me, coward! I *know* why you’ve come!”

Finding a match, Juniper swiftly lit the wall torches, illuminating all things unseen, and still clutching his sleeping boy, he scoured the room.

No one was there.



CHAPTER ONE

The Catacombs

THE TWO BLACK RATS kept running. The Nightshade brothers coiled swiftly around a dimly lit corner as a tenpenny nail grazed Vincent's ear. It only nicked the tip but burned like hot coal. He shook his head, ignoring the searing sting, and kept running. Major Lithgo and two senior lieutenants thundered behind them, leaving a cloud of powdered earth in their wake.

As they galloped through the dark winding corridors of the Catacombs, Vincent wondered how High Major Lithgo could move so swiftly. He could actually hear the stout major's ample belly skidding through the dirt. Even through his panic, Vincent couldn't help but find this amazing. Belly or not, Major Lithgo grunted madly at their heels, intent on catching them.

"Another!" said Lithgo, commanding a soldier to hurl a second tenpenny.

“Catacomb Hall,” huffed Vincent to his brother, “father’s corridor behind Ellington’s.”

“Agreed,” said Victor. The tenpenny impaled the dirt wall, just missing Victor’s flank, as they took a sudden turn.

The Nightshades deftly took a sharp left, knocking an old toothless rat to the ground, his bag of candlenuts tossed into the air and scattered about the corridor. A lieutenant promptly stumbled over a nut, forcing the other soldier and Major Lithgo to skid violently through the dirt, landing atop one another in a muddled heap of tails, claws, and ears.

Lithgo scrambled to his feet and peered down the empty corridor. Nothing but gloom; no sign of the Nightshades. “They’re gone! They could be anywhere by now!” Picking up a candlenut, he whipped it at the old rat’s head, who cowered and shook, blocking his face from the blow. Lithgo growled contemptuously, “Useless old one, I should kill you for interfering with Kill Army business! I’m within my rights if I so please!” He stomped the ground like an overgrown child, kicking dirt at his lieutenants. “We should have finished off the last of the Nightshade Clan long ago—when we had the chance!”

Lithgo dropped to the ground, grunting loudly. His chest felt as if it might burst, and vomit rose in his throat. The soldiers stood silent as he gathered himself.

The old rat left his candlenuts and softly scuttled out of sight, hiding a shriveled grin. He was dumbfounded that he was alive.

Lamenting his large dinner, Lithgo leaned against the wall for support as sweat trickled down his thick russet brow and steam wafted from his now-filthy coat. The two young lieutenants stood without a sound, waiting for the major’s orders. All that could be heard in the dusky corridor was Lithgo’s weighty breathing.

* * *

The Nightshade brothers kept up their fevered pace, racing side by side through the Catacombs, their limbs ablaze. Lithgo and his soldiers were gone from both sight and sound, but that meant little. Deep beneath the congested metropolis of Trillium City, the Catacombs went on for miles, a swarming maze of hollowed dirt corridors. Kill Army soldiers could be hiding anywhere within its bleary depths.

Vincent and Victor reached Catacomb Hall, the epicenter of the Catacombs, an expansive public square. After long hours of drinking at the Ministry-run pubs, the only rats about were a few inebriated males, still on the prowl for female company. Stumbling about the cobbles in a stupor, they paid the brothers no mind.

The pair made their way to Ellington's Tavern, a decrepit old pub at the end of the horseshoe-shaped Catacomb Hall. Behind the tavern, hidden by trash and rusted signs, was an abandoned corridor. The brothers quickly squeezed under the debris, pulling themselves up into the arcane hole, which stank of toadstools and insect leavings.

Their father, Julius Nightshade, had taken Vincent there as a child and had met with assorted rats in the hidden passageway. Vincent didn't know what the meetings were about; he just remembered that the voices were always hushed and deadly serious. "Run as fast as you can," he told Victor. "Don't stop until we've hit Topside, all right?" Victor grunted in response, heaving his tired body up the steep tunnel.

The brothers' gait did not slow, and they panted harder as they neared the city's surface. With each stride, Vincent grew more troubled. Once they were Topside, they'd be able to disappear into Trillium's confused labyrinth of alleys and sewers, finally free from the grips of the Kill Army but still facing great danger. Rats were not welcome in the world of the Topsiders—the world of the humans—but Vincent and Victor could not risk one more second in the

Catacombs. Their guardian had died, making them wards of High Minister Killdeer's Kill Army. It was the Kill Army's right to take them, and Major Lithgo had come to collect them.

Glancing Victor's way, Vincent smiled confidently at his brother. Victor need not be worried about the Topsiders just yet. That would come soon enough.

They heard a sharp yelp as they clambered up toward the surface. One of them had stepped on an earthworm. The neglected corridor was overrun with them.

Lazily picking a scrap of roast hen off his distended stomach, Killdeer idly flicked the oily meat across his den. The mammoth rat slumped down further in his silver-chalice throne, only his limbs, potbelly, and snout visible to an onlooker. He had been the self-appointed High Minister of the Catacombs for eleven long years. Life had become unexciting and mundane.

Staring blankly at the ceiling of his den, Killdeer rolled his eyes in absolute boredom, crudely scratching his huge abdomen. His legs draped over his silver throne like mounds of heavy velvet, leaving his immense feet hanging over the side like two dead gray rabbits.

Massively built, Killdeer resembled more of an overfed house cat than a rat. Trillium's unusual rats were known for their extraordinary size, but Killdeer's proportions had grown considerably in recent years. The indolent Minister delegated most of his duties to Billycan, his second-in-command, which left the High Minister with nothing much to do but indulge his vices: eating, drinking, sleeping, and mating.

Incredibly, despite his ever-widening waistline and at times questionable hygiene, Killdeer proved entrancing to females. His smoky gray coat shimmered. His slanted eyes, black as pitch, gleamed like

polished onyx. Pointed white teeth glistened in a smarmy smile that oozed confidence and dripped charisma. Catacomb females pursued him, drawn to his power and intrigued by his rogue nature. Eager females fought to be chosen by the great High Minister.

He wore a heavy silver medallion around his neck. It had belonged to the Mighty Trilok, the original High Minister of the Catacombs and, if not for fear of losing their tongues, most rats would say the only true High Minister. Killdeer had taken over during the Bloody Coup, the conquest that changed the course of the Catacomb rats' history. Enraged and humiliated by his banishment years before, Killdeer ambushed the Minister, assaulting the aging Trilok with primordial fury, slashing his jugular and tearing off his silver pendant, proclaiming himself the new High Minister.

With lucky timing, he seized control during Trillium's Great Flood, using it as cover for murder, snuffing out Trilok's key defenders—the leaders of the Trilok Loyalists—claiming they had drowned. Most of the adult Catacomb rats had been searching for food Topside in Trillium City when the flood struck. Water levels reached the rooftops, and while the resilient rats treaded the muddy water for days, many perished, leaving scores of young rats orphaned in the Combs. Killdeer then artfully solidified his position by creating the Kill Army. Rounding up the stray children of the Catacombs, he and his faction sent males to the Kill Army and females to its kitchens.

Killdeer reached into the bedding of his throne and pulled out his bottle of Oshi berry wine. Predictably, the bottle was empty. "Texi!" he yelled. "Texi, come here!" His voice thundered down the halls of his den. "My Oshi is empty again!" Moments later, he heard his half sister scurrying down the hall.

Despite Killdeer's obvious foul temper, Texi arrived cheerful but out of breath. "Yes, Killdeer?" she asked, panting. Texi came into the world dull of mind, utterly devoid of trickery. She easily forgave her older brother his sins, unlike the rest of her sisters, who hated him with every shred of their beings, secretly wishing him an agonizing death at every opportunity.

"Where is my Oshi, Texi?" he asked crossly.

Texi spoke in a high-pitched, childlike voice. "It should be where it always is. I replaced the bottle while you were sleeping."

"Well, it's empty." He sneered at her, waving the bottle scornfully.

She grew confused, her face crumpling as she thought about the day's events. "I do remember swapping it for the empty one. Perhaps you forgot you drank it?" Texi suddenly gasped and covered her mouth, realizing what she'd said. Even Texi knew never to question Killdeer. Only Billycan could get away with that.

Killdeer flung the bottle against a wall, shattering it. He bounded off his throne and pounced on Texi, grabbing her by the throat and pinning her to the wall. Her tiny feet dangled above the ground like small fish flopping in distress. Killdeer glared viciously at his half sister, poking her in the face with his huge snout. She could smell his sour breath. It reeked of Oshi and sardines. "Are you questioning me, cherished sister?" Killdeer snarled, pressing his face into hers. "Is it you who commands the Catacombs? Are you the new High Duchess? Should I bow down to you?" Spittle dripped from Killdeer's teeth onto Texi's ginger fur.

She tried to break his gaze, but he locked her head in place as he tightened his hold. "No, Killdeer," she said. She began to shake. "You are right. I am mistaken." Texi tried not to sob. "I'm very sorry."

He kept his face pressed to hers and lowered his voice to a controlled rumble. "Understand, dear sister, the only reason I allow you

to live another day is because you're feeble-minded. You are dense, and I pity you. Any of your sisters would be long since dead."

He released her from his grasp, dropping her carelessly to the ground. He squalled at the top of his lungs as white froth spewed from his mouth. "Now, get my Oshi!" Texi picked herself up and darted out of the den. Tears streamed down her face. In her foolish heart, she knew she'd replaced the bottle. Killdeer knew it too, but tormenting her amused him.

The growing pressure between Killdeer's ears intensified. He let out a moan and climbed back onto his throne. He rolled on his side and pulled his wine-stained bedding over his aching head.

Vincent and Victor Nightshade finally reached Topside—the city of Trillium. They sprang up through the hole like bullets. Victor, unable to stop, slid across the boggy grass, drenched with autumn rain, and skidded through a puddle onto the sidewalk. Vincent quickly grabbed him by the tail and wrenched him back onto the grass, just before a chubby-cheeked Topsider could squash him under her rain boot.

"Of all the terrible luck," said Vincent, taking in their surroundings.

It was Halloween night. There were small Topsiders everywhere, clad in colorful costumes and painted faces, roaming the streets for Pennies-or-Pranking, stuffing as much candy as would fit into their pillowcases and buckets. The older children raced from door to door, their fathers chasing them down with umbrellas, while the little ones clenched their mothers tightly with one hand and their sweets with the other.

Vincent helped his brother back to his feet. "Steady, now," he said. "The Topsiders are too busy running after their children and trying to

stay dry. They won't notice us in the dark." Victor nervously inspected the swarm of Topsiders invading the nighttime streets, so big compared to them. They sat in silence, not certain what course to take. The wind picked up. The rain pounded their licorice coats.

Looking from one side of the street to the other, Vincent regarded the colossal brownstones that lined it like brick sentinels. He noticed a particularly oversized one directly across from them. Two granite gargoyles loomed on its roof. They glared down at him with a look of disapproval.

The front door of the brownstone opened, casting an ocher glow. A red-haired Topsider, clearly female, stepped out and greeted her neighbors with a bowl of candy. She handed the bowl to the children, who greedily rooted through it like a pack of country buzzards as she settled against the doorway and chatted with their parents.

Victor started to shiver, soaked to the bone. Sitting up on his narrow haunches, he clenched his spindly tail for security, a habit he'd clung to since he was a baby. "We should have just gone into the army," he said miserably. "We'd be warm and have food. Can't we just go back?"

Vincent grabbed his brother by the shoulders. "No," he said firmly. "We fled a Kill Army High Major. Do you know what that means?"

"No," said Victor.

"It means we can *never* go back. Fleeing the army is treason. If they ever catch us, we'll pay with our lives."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Listen to me," said Vincent. "The night of the flood, when the waves pulled us away from Mother and Father, I promised them I'd take care of you, and haven't I always done that?"

"Yes," said Victor softly.

“We’ve always held out hope that our family survived the flood, swept away by the water, far from home, but I think we both know better—our family is dead, all of them. I know you were too little to remember much of Father, but he would *never* want us to be in that army. Do you really want to be run day and night by rats like Major Lithgo? Forced to bully citizens, serving rats that murdered High Minister Trilok, the ones who made our city the wretched place it is now?”

“No,” replied Victor.

“All right, then,” said Vincent. “We’ve survived for eleven years in the Catacombs, taking better care of ourselves than old Missus Cromwell ever could, but now we need to do more than just survive. Our lives need to mean something. This is our chance! Major Lithgo coming for us was a sign. I know it. Father firmly believed in fate. He said Killdeer’s sins would return to haunt him, whether in this world or the next. He told me the only way to change our fate is to change our lives. Only *we* can do that, Victor, no one else—then we’ll find our true fate, just like Father said. Do you understand?”

Victor nodded silently. The two hadn’t eaten in days. Vincent watched his brother’s ribs tremble under his wet raven coat. “Victor,” he said with authority, “pay attention. I know you’re cold, but I need you to listen to me. You see that open door across the way?” He pointed to the brownstone. “You see it—the one with the Topsiders talking under the awning?” Victor nodded stiffly. “We are going to make our way inside it. Topsiders or not, the house will be warm and dry.”

“What if there’s a cat or dog inside?”

“We are soaked to the skin, and thus clean. Our dismal circumstances are of benefit, at least for tonight. It will be several hours before any creature can detect us. By that time we’ll be long gone.” Vincent grinned at his brother.

Victor trembled in response, too frozen to return the smile. “All

right, then, let's go," he muttered, teeth chattering. He let go of his tail and wiped his eyes.

The Nightshade brothers glided across the darkened street and up the concrete stairs of the brownstone, right past the Topsiders. The rats slipped into the house unseen, quickly disappearing behind a white pillar.

Vincent sniffed the air for beasts. He smelled nothing more than houseplants, not the smoky, peppered smell of dogs, nor the briny, pickled odor of cat. *Dumb luck*, he thought. "All clear," he whispered to Victor. "Follow me." The brothers skirted along the edge of the wall, their black nails clicking across the checkerboard tile.

They came to a closed door. Emaciated from days without food, they easily wriggled under it. The room was some sort of art studio, complete with easels, canvases, and a desk, barely visible under the extensive assortment of paint tubes, bottles, and brushes. The studio, covered with a fine layer of dust, had clearly gone unused for some time. It was an ideal hiding place for the night.

A streetlight shone through the window, reflecting in Vincent's green eyes, turning them a gauzy white. Victor shook the water from his coat and headed under a leather wing chair in a dark corner. Without warning, Vincent grabbed him, jerking him back. Victor looked at his brother, bewildered. Vincent stared, perplexed by something in the corner.

"What is it?" asked Victor.

"It's a rat hole." Sniffing, Vincent caught a rat's scent, one that seemed familiar to him. It quickly faded. He smelled nothing.

Billycan ambled down the corridor of Sector 337, leering broadly. His red eyes flashed against the flickering torchlight, making the towering snow-white rat appear more maniacal than usual. He swung

his beloved billy club as he raucously called for the High Ministry's weekly Stipend. "Billycan thinks you should be more generous to your Ministry! Don't try my patience. Billycan wants the Stipend paid now!"

Billycan served his Ministry well, holding the dual title of High Collector of Stipend and Commander of the Kill Army. He was dangerously clever and wicked to his core. His depravity and sadistic persecution of Catacomb rats were legendary. They claimed Billycan was possessed—supernatural even. The old ones told how he once drove a rat to stab himself, mesmerizing him with his eyes. The rat lived through the ordeal, claiming that Billycan's eyes glowed like galvanized rubies, two glass bulbs filled with a red vapory substance, commanding him to take his useless life.

The few rats that had dared to challenge the High Collector were either dead or missing their tongues, his favorite form of torture. He had a raised, black scar running across his face—the result of one such challenge during the Bloody Coup. The thick gash trailed from the corner of his left eye, continued over his long snout, and finally tapered off at the opposite corner of his mouth. Billycan didn't mind the scar; in fact, he giggled every time he thought about his opponent's grisly fate. A Trilok Loyalist had briefly gotten the upper hand, but not for long. Left bleeding, the fearless rat lay dying, one eye splattered against the corridor's dirt wall.

Rumors circulated through the Combs regarding Billycan's damaged brain. Everyone knew he had served as a lab rat at the Top-sider pharmaceutical company, the infamous Prince Laboratories. He alone survived the torturous experiments. No other white rats existed in the Catacombs, or in all of Trillium for that matter. Since his liberation from the lab, he'd never seen another of his kind. Other than Billycan, the albinos were gone forever.

The Catacomb subjects assumed that the drugs given to him in the Topsider lab had eaten away part of his brain, leaving only the corrupt portions intact. Years of inbreeding, forced on the rats by the lab personnel, combined with the mind-altering injections, were most likely the culprits, but gossip concerning the roots of Billycan's wickedness propagated throughout the Combs.

The Topsiders' testing had caused Billycan's spine to grow coiled and elongated, making his neck and angled jaw jut out far in front of his body. His milky coat ended at the base of his extended tail, which trailed behind him like a hairless garden snake, revealing flaky skin that was a powdery, encrusted white, more reptilian than vermin.

Cursed with a nagging and insatiable hunger, no matter how much he gorged and gobbled, Billycan could not keep weight on his bones, giving him a lean, cadaverous look, like that of a half-stuffed scarecrow.

Stipends were collected weekly—one from each Catacomb rat. Stipends consisted of items useful to the Ministry—food, weapons, tools. Food had to be edible. Attempting to disguise compost as Stipend incurred a fatal consequence. Once, a desperate young rat tried to palm off a rotting pear as Stipend. Billycan chained him to a post in the center of Catacomb Hall, leaving him to die of hunger for all subjects to see. The boy's parents wailed as their son took his final breath.

"Stipends for Killdeer!" shouted Billycan. "Stipends for Killdeer! Everyone to their doors! Quickly, quickly—do not test Billycan's patience." With a piercing pitch, his voice blasted through the corridors. "Billycan's time will not be wasted. Have them ready. Billycan does not like to wait!" The Collector sauntered down the corridor, followed by three hulking lieutenants and his Kill Army aide Senior Lieutenant Carn, all four pushing rusty wheelbarrows in single file.

Billycan, with his hollow chest pushed out, looked like an underfed rooster. He wore a crimson and navy blue sash, Kill Army colors, made specifically for his lanky frame by the High Mistress of the Robes. It looked fitting across his broad yet exceedingly lean chest. As he strolled, he swung his billy club from side to side, banging it on Catacomb doors and scratching it against the flimsy planking with an eerie resonance. The Ministry subjects knew the Stipend routine. Don't speak unless spoken to, have all items ready, and above all, don't look the High Collector in the eyes.

"Billycan waits for no one!" he snapped, hammering his club on another door. A sheepish gray rat opened the door, her eyes fixed to the floor as she timidly put her family's Stipend in a wheelbarrow. "Quickly, quickly, my dear! Billycan need not use his club today if you hasten your step. Good, good—mark her off the list, Lieutenant Carn."

Carn marked her clan's number off the register. He nodded his head at the girl. "Thank you, miss," he said quietly.

Billycan cocked his head and glared at Carn. "Thank her for what, lieutenant? She owes Stipend, and Stipend she shall pay. We do not thank our subjects for giving what they rightfully owe. Is Billycan understood?"

The coffee-colored Lieutenant looked vacantly at Billycan. "Yes, Commander," was all he said.

Billycan shook his head. "I swear, Lieutenant Carn, all these years serving Billycan and you still need correcting—useless, entirely useless. Off you go," said Billycan, shoving the girl out of the way.

Billycan and his soldiers made their way to the next set of doors, marked with sloppy whitewashed numbers, indicating the clan that dwelled inside. He stopped at door number 73. Billycan regarded the number coolly. He cracked his stiff jaw, scowling. Time now for some personal business for High Minister Killdeer. He disagreed with

his assignment, but if nothing else, the pale rawboned rat's loyalty remained steadfast, at least when it came to Killdeer.

Clover was preparing the fire pit for an early dinner when she heard a slow, methodical scratching against her door. She hadn't heard Billycan calling down the corridor. Immediately recognizing the sound of his billy club against the wood slats, she sprang up towards the door.

"Get out of sight," she whispered. A tall, cloaked figure rose from the table and concealed itself in the shadows. "Stay back and stay covered. He only wants Stipend. I'll be back promptly."

She gathered herself, swallowed hard, and opened the door.

"My, my, running late today, aren't we, Miss Clover?" said Billycan, his voice acidic.

Clover kept her eyes to the ground and put her items into a wheelbarrow. "I'm sorry, High Collector. I'm making dinner. Lost in my recipe, I did not hear your call. It won't happen again," she said.

"Very well, very well. Billycan is sure it *won't* happen again. Mark her off the list, Lieutenant Carn," barked Billycan. Carn silently marked her off the list and stepped back in line with the other soldiers. "I have more pressing matters today, my dear—more pressing indeed." Billycan reached into a wheelbarrow and retrieved a stiff scroll. He unrolled the discolored paper, signed at the bottom with Killdeer's three-pronged mark.

Clover eyed the parchment and backed into her quarters. She prayed to the Saints for the Collector to move on. *Please*, she thought, *let the scroll be for another.*

"Not so hasty, little one," said Billycan. He beckoned her back, curling a gnarled claw. "Billycan has something to share with you." He gave a broad grin of yellowed teeth. "Something I think you'll be rather delighted with." He poked his mangled snout into her room.

Clover tried to block him, but he lurched over her like an oversized ivory sickle, examining her small quarters.

“Where is your guardian?”

“He’s hunting Topside, High Collector.”

He carelessly pushed her out of his way and stepped into her quarters with his scaly, hairless feet. “Pity, pity,” said Billycan. He had spotted the hidden rat, whose feet were simply too large to conceal. “Billycan wants to know who that is, in the back.” He pointed a spiny digit at the shrouded rat. “Who is that hiding shamelessly in the corner? Billycan would like to know, and he would like to know now.” Clover stood speechless.

Billycan’s blood began to pump as he imagined a potential conspiracy in his midst. Her clan could not be trusted. Abruptly swooping down to her level, he displayed his barbed, yellow teeth in a crooked scowl. “Now, for the last time, girl, who and why is this brazen rat hiding in your quarters?” His eyes bulged and his torso heaved. “Out with it!” he hollered.

Her heart thumped in her elfin-sized chest. Through her young life, Clover had told many tales to the Ministry, just not with Billycan towering over her, his teeth dripping with icy drool. A thought finally came. “I give you my word, High Collector, he is *not* hiding. This is my grandfather, my guardian, Timeron. He is stricken with plague, unsightly to behold, and highly contagious. The disease has left him ravaged—disfigured. Like you, grandfather is a proud rat, not wishing anyone to see him in such a dreadful state. I told you he was Topside so that you wouldn’t look at him—to save what pride he has left—to keep *you* from catching it. I fear he will soon be at rest with the Saints, but as my late father always said, the living must do just that—live.”

As much as Billycan wished otherwise, her explanation sounded

reasonable. He composed himself. “Yes, they must indeed live, as must Billycan,” he said. He took a step backward, wondering what ghastly deformities awaited under the mucky shroud. He resisted his urge to check.

Billycan held up the scroll for Clover to see. “Well, young Clover, it seems my purpose is quite a fortunate one for you. As your guardian will soon be meeting his maker, by right it’s off to the Kill Army kitchens with you.” He tapped on the scroll. “This saves you from that abysmal fate—at least for a time.” He quickly changed his voice to a more official one. “Billycan has a sacred decree in his possession that he and only he can make official. It must be read to the Chosen One and read now, as mandated by the High Ministry.”

On occasion, Clover had contemplated this day, but with the thousands of females the High Minister had to choose from, she had never really considered herself a likely candidate. She had grossly underestimated herself.

She was quite lovely, with smooth cocoa skin, and light fur, buff in color and downy soft, more suited for a snow hare than a rat. She had a short, rounded nose and a sculpted, refined muzzle. Eyes the color of citrine offered up varied hues of yellowy brilliance, round and open. Despite her beauty, she had an approachable sweetness, modest and shy.

Clover had been educated in secret, since school was strictly reserved for males by the Ministry. Well aware of the evils of the Catacombs, Clover did not dream of the High Minister like the other females. She thought Killdeer a swine, a fleshy pig masquerading in the pelt of a rat.

Billycan stretched out the rigid parchment. Clover knew the general substance of the edict. She had witnessed a reading as a child and remembered the excitement that whirled around the Chosen One. She had exclaimed innocently to her mother, “I want to be a Chosen

One when I grow up. I will be with Killdeer!” Without hesitation, her horrified mother yanked her by the arm and pulled her forcefully down a dark passageway. She explained to Clover exactly what a Chosen One embodied and what her so-called duties to Killdeer would involve.

From that day on, Clover’s worried parents decided to teach her along with their boys. After their death, taken by the second wave of the Great Flood, her uncle continued the practice. The power of wisdom far outweighed Killdeer’s law against the schooling of females.

Billycan cleared his throat and stretched his bristly chin from side to side. He stood rigid in military stance. “Gather round, one and all!” His shrill voice bounced down the corridors as he beat his billy club against Clover’s doorframe and slapped his serpentine tail against the ground. “The High Ministry of the Catacombs is here to announce an official decree, signed and certified by the High Minister himself, the beloved Killdeer. Quickly, quickly, gather round!”

Placing a skeletal paw decisively on Clover’s diminutive shoulder, Billycan pressed his nails into her skin, his prickly claws pinching like thorns. He had a dour feeling about the girl, but continued with his duty.

Rats ran to the scene, surrounding Clover and Billycan, anxious to hear the decree. Lieutenant Carn directed the onlookers, giving the High Collector space. With the crowd now thick, Billycan began. “I, Billycan, High Collector of Stipend and Commander of the Kill Army, hereby declare Clover Belancort a Chosen One, anointed by Killdeer, High Minister of the Catacombs. Upon consummation of this union, Clover and her family will be released of all Stipend for one year. Upon discovery of offspring believed to be the progeny of the High Minister, the Belancort Clan will be released from Stipend for the duration of Clover Belancort’s life.”

He turned and addressed Clover. "This is a great honor bestowed upon you, Clover Belancort. Along with this honor, Killdeer sends his wishes of hope, prosperity, and safekeeping for you and the entirety of the Belancort Clan." He eyed the grandfather. "What little there is left of it, that is." Billycan chuckled inside as Clover trembled under his grasp. "Do you, Clover Belancort, accept your title as Chosen One, as decreed by myself and the High Minister?" Billycan smiled wryly at the crowd, who looked blankly at Clover's stone face, waiting for her answer.

Clover fought her visceral reaction to rip away from Billycan and run for her life, but if she ran, it would be straight to her death. The growing crowd of rats gasped and gawked, awaiting her reply. Clover turned frantically towards her quarters, her eyes darting in all directions in search of the veiled rat. She struggled to move under Billycan's grip, trying in vain to get the rat in her sights.

"The silly girl is so very excited she can't stop fidgeting," said Billycan. He looked at the crowd with a bogus grin as he firmly pressed down on her shoulder. "I believe we can accept her enthusiasm as a 'yes!'" The crowd laughed awkwardly, still waiting to hear her reply.

Playing to the mob, Billycan looked down at Clover with an air of concern. "Oh, Billycan sees what your fuss and muss is about, poor little dear." He leered at Clover with a patronizing grin. "You would like permission from your poor ailing grandfather. What a respectful youngster you are. More of the Catacomb youth would benefit from your example. Look, everyone," he said, motioning to Clover's quarters, "our little Chosen One wants approval from her ill grandpapa." The crowd moved closer to the door, trying to see the sickly old one, resting against the back wall. Billycan called into the room. "Well, good Grandfather Timeron, do you endorse this union? Is the High Minister an acceptable match for your humble granddaughter?"

Clover's eyes widened in panic. She spoke smartly. "You'll have to excuse him, Collector. His speech has been destroyed by his malady. His throat is malformed, corroded by disease. He is mute."

"Of no matter," said Billycan. He toyed with her cruelly. "He can give us a motion, a wave of his crippled paw, perhaps a nod of his stately chin. That will do."

The masked rat steadily leaned forward, revealing a long, blackened snout with grizzled whiskers peeking out from his grimy cloak. The ominous figure held up a cragged paw, the color of tar, with thick purplish claws. Bushy, unkempt fur poked out from the edges of his sleeve. With a shaky digit, he pointed to the decree, still dangling from Billycan's bony fist. The old rat's head swiveled towards Clover. With a feeble nod, he confirmed his approval.

"He agrees!" shouted Billycan in an exaggerated ballyhoo tenor.

Applause filled the Catacombs. Well-wishers gathered round Clover, hugging and kissing her. Lieutenant Carn stepped in front of her, pushing them back. Clover felt sick. Her eyes drifted down a desolate corridor, oblivious to the noise exploding around her. She finally looked up. Carn was staring at her. They exchanged glances, but he quickly turned back to the crowd.

Bending down, Billycan got as close to her ear as physically possible, his paw still clutching her shoulder. The blood rushed to Clover's head as the cold from his mouth hit her ear. His voice purred with satisfaction, a smug whisper. "Clover, my dear, Billycan is speaking to you now. Listen to me and listen well. You will be summoned in the customary fortnight. Billycan must insist you keep yourself safe at home. There is no need for you to be outside your quarters. The Catacombs can be such a very *lethal* place. Billycan would hate to have something gruesome happen to such a pretty, unblemished face. I suggest you stay here and tend to your grandfather like a good little

girl, but don't get too close—no, no. Billycan can't risk you catching that nasty plague. Then what would be the point of even keeping you alive? In that case, it would be much more merciful to simply end your life. As you said yourself, the living must do just that—live." Clover didn't need to respond. His threats were clear.

Billycan pulled up to a standing position, blanching his voice to suit the crowd. "Now, run along, dear—scamper back inside." He patted her head, feigning affection, before finally releasing her. "The High Minister would not want his precious Chosen One running about the Catacombs catching cold, now, would he? All right, then, good rats of the Catacombs, all is said and done. Billycan wants everyone back to their business. Miss Clover needs her dinner."

He waved the remaining rats away with a spindly arm. The rats headed back down their corridors, gossiping about the news. Billycan brusquely thrust Clover inside her quarters and shut the door behind her. Famished, he reached into a wheelbarrow and swiped a large chunk of dried pork, his favorite, promptly shredding it with his teeth.

Public spectacles made his normal hunger pangs intensify. He rarely took food from the weekly Stipend collection, but his emotions overwhelmed him, especially his annoyance with Killdeer. He thought the Belancort girl untrustworthy, a foolish choice for a mate. "The daughter of Barcus Belancort, filthy Trilok Loyalist," he mumbled as he chewed. "He may be dead, but his treacherous blood still runs through her veins." He growled angrily as he choked down the scrap of hog. "Lieutenant Carn, go with the others and finish the Stipend route."

Carn did not move; instead he looked intently at Clover's door. "What are you staring at?" demanded Billycan. He jabbed Carn in the spine with his billy club. "Forever dawdling. On with your duties, boy!"

"Yes, Commander," said Carn. He trotted down the corridor, caught up with the others, and vanished into the dark.

Alone, Billycan stood outside Clover's door. *What an odd young person*, he thought. It was obvious to him that Clover wanted nothing to do with her new title and station. He leaned on the wall across from her chambers and stared at the whitewashed number 73 splashed across the rotting wood. *This one must be watched closely.*

Strolling back down the corridor to Killdeer's den, he used a tarnished nail to scrape out a stray morsel of pig that had the audacity to get stuck between two of his yellowed teeth.

"How could you give your blessing? How could you, Uncle?" muttered Clover. She looked at her uncle dismally.

Juniper Belancort leaped off the ground and shook himself furiously, freeing his body from the sweaty black shroud. He walked towards the front door, stretching his muscles, which were sore from sitting so still. He listened intently. He heard nothing.

Juniper's looks were far from conventional. His coat matched that of Oshi wine, a rich mahogany. The broad-shouldered rat resembled a dog, with the strong, square muzzle of a Topside pinscher and the wiry fur of a terrier. Wide and open, his face resembled his niece's but was overtly masculine. He wore a weathered leather patch over one eye, which had been wounded long ago. His face was marred with deep scars, partially hidden under his purplish fur. Despite his wounds, his features were kind, even pleasant to regard.

Juniper had hoped this day would never come. He shook his head at the irony of the situation. Of all the females in the Catacombs, *his* little niece took favor with Killdeer. He should have known it would be only a matter of time; she possessed a beauty other rats could only dream of. It made him wish he could take her beauty away, if only for the time being.

"Clover," said Juniper, "I agreed so Billycan wouldn't drag you

by your tail to Catacomb Hall and remove your very tongue while the good rats of the Catacombs watched you bleed to death on the cobblestone floor. Did you think Billycan would take no for an answer? Did you? I agreed to this farce of a union lest we both be executed. Had I another choice, surely I would have taken it. All we have left in this world is each other.”

Juniper had been sneaking into the Combs, pretending to be her grandfather, Timeron, staying covered in his shroud, allowing himself to be seen only on rare occasions, but seen all the same. If it was found out that Clover was without a proper guardian, she’d lose her home and be forced into servitude in the Kill Army kitchen and barracks. The orphan girls were treated cruelly and always in constant peril. The young female population of the Catacombs dwindled at a rapid rate. Food in the Combs was a problem, and the kitchen girls could barely survive on the meager scraps the High Cook spared them. Clover did not belong there; no child did.

Juniper took Clover’s small face in his paws. Billycan had terrified her. “No one in the Ministry thinks me alive, and for now it needs to stay that way, or all our plans will be for nothing. I *will* get you out of here. I need a little more time. Our hidden city is growing at a massive rate. Killdeer has no idea how many rats have already defected. We are bringing back the days of Trilok. I will soon bring you to a new home where you will never have to be afraid of Billycan, Killdeer, or anyone ever again. I promise it on my brother’s—your brave father’s—soul. Barcus is cheering us on from beyond. The Saints are on our side, little one.” He smiled tenderly. “Clover, they aren’t coming to collect you for a fortnight. That buys us some valuable time. I will be back in a week, well before the Ministry comes to claim you. I must meet with Oard and the Council. The Ministry will be watching you carefully, so we need to devise an escape route. As hard as it may seem, you must

act as though nothing has changed, especially around anyone from the Ministry—Billycan in particular.”

Juniper held his ear to the door as he shrouded himself once more so that only the tip of his snout was visible. He would make his way back through the west end of the Combs through Catacomb Hall. Behind a tavern, a forgotten corridor led Topside on the way to Juniper’s covert city. It was once a secret meeting place for key members of Trilok’s Ministry, who worked to make certain there were no conspirators in the Catacombs and Killdeer and other banished rats were kept out. The corridor was now run by the earthworms. With no place left to hide from the Kill Army majors, who tortured them for wagering and amusement, the earthworms had made the corridor their home. It was their last refuge.

Oard, leader of the earthworms, allowed Juniper and his rats the use of their corridor and his tribe’s services in the clandestine battle against Killdeer. In exchange, the worms would be given their own habitat in the new city. The tribe neared extinction in the dry, failing dirt of the Catacombs, but Juniper’s secret city had fresh, healthy soil, and the earthworms would thrive and multiply there.

Making sure not to disturb the position of his cloak, Juniper placed a shabby leather satchel across his chest, the strap barely holding on to the worn-out bag. He kissed his niece on the cheek and gently patted her head, tousling her soft fur. He looked into her eyes. *Warm marigold, same as her late father’s*, he thought. “Clover, you *must* do as I say. Act normal. Be the strong rat I know you to be. We will survive this. A week, then I’ll be back to collect you. I promise with my life.”

“Well?” asked Killdeer indifferently, sliding further down in his throne.

Billycan entered the den, tossing the rolled-up decree on a table.

“She of course complied. I do find her a strange little thing. Billycan thinks she may be up to something—she and that wretched grandfather, Timeron, who is apparently riddled with the plague. There is something not quite right with him. Either the reaper is afoot as she claims, or he’s scheming with the child. In his repulsive state, Billycan did not dare verify his affliction.”

Killdeer grunted. “You worry too much. There is no conspiracy within the Belancort Clan—that past is long since dead and buried. All that’s left is one girl and a sickly old one—Barcus, the wife, and sons, all in their graves.” He snickered. “The second wave of the flood took care of them—and *you* took care of that bedeviling brother. Your years in the lab have made you paranoid, a good quality in many ways, but maddening none the less.”

Billycan *knew* something was not right. Clover’s intellect well exceeded that of the typical dithering female. She possessed some quality that set her apart from the other young ones. Billycan sensed something masked about her, something concealed from him other than fear, a controlled demeanor that went far deeper than simple fright. “You may be right, Minister, but given the Belancort history, it does make one wonder if, in this instance, my paranoia is warranted. I suppose it’s of no matter now.” The Collector’s mood darkened. “We have bigger issues to attend to, I’m afraid. Minister, there has been talk. The soldiers have informed me they hear murmurs of sedition. Just last night, a group of majors encountered a drunken rat in Catacomb Hall blathering on about liberation from the High Ministry. He claimed to know about a faction of rebels, insurrectionists. He kept spewing about the days of Trilok and how he would be avenged. The majors pegged him for an unruly tippler and thrashed him to pulp, but later went to High Major Schnauss and reported the inci-

dent. Schnauss went back to take the rat in for questioning. He had disappeared.”

“So,” said Killdeer, “because a drunken lout with a loose tongue crawled away from the scene, I’m to believe we rule a city of traitors?”

Billycan scratched between his front teeth, still trying to release the stuck strand of pork. “Drunk or not, Billycan thinks this rat may have been telling the truth. High Major Lithgo informed me today that several clans from his sector have gone missing. He called upon our best trackers, but they have found nothing, no evidence of where they’ve fled. This is hardly paranoia. These are real defectors, and defectors lead to revolt, and then to full-scale revolution. Billycan does not need to tell you what that means. We must wrangle these rats back to the Combs and punish the fugitives accordingly.”

Killdeer sat up in his throne, miffed with Billycan and his grim hypothesis. “How many families do we have living in the Catacombs—over a thousand, I would presume? You expect me to believe that we have a confirmed rebellion because a few have gone astray?” Killdeer pulled his great tail out from under him, slapping it against the side of his throne. “These truant families, from Lithgo’s sector, eh? You are aware that our rats frequently go Topside in groups—security in numbers, I suppose. Couldn’t a cluster from his sector have been snuffed out by Topsiders’ toxins, traps, or perhaps been drowned in a burlap sack? It’s happened before, and it will happen again. Our dim subjects have grown too careless Topside, more worried about their bellies than their necks. The Topsiders will forever attempt to lure us to our deaths, poisoning our blood and snapping our bones like matchsticks. That is why our subjects stay here, rather than up there—it’s far more fatal.”

“I suspect all that’s possible, Minister, but there is one flaw with

your theory—these rats were not signed out by our guards, the only way for them to leave the Combs. In other words, they’ve simply vanished.”

Killdeer’s face reddened as his blood pressure rose. He dug impatiently into the bedding of his throne, found his bottle, and chugged half its contents. “Make the proclamation for the Grand Speech. We’ll have it early if you’re so worried, on Rest Day, tomorrow at midnight. Have all the troops present. Our majors have grown lax and slack-jawed. It’s about time we reminded our sulking subjects that living in the Catacombs is a privilege. It is by no means a right.” Killdeer took another swig while his chest swelled with a forthcoming outburst. Billycan muttered to himself, not wanting to deal with Killdeer’s brewing tantrum. Killdeer was proving more useless with each passing year, becoming more of a figurehead and less of a Minister. Killdeer continued to issue orders. “I want the Belancort girl in attendance at the Grand Speech and well turned out, as she will be standing by my side. She will be pleased to know she does not need to wait a fortnight to see me.”

“Oh, yes, Minister, I’m sure the dear lass will be delighted,” said Billycan. He smiled gleefully at the thought of breaking the news to her. His chalky skin prickled in anticipation.

“I haven’t made myself visible of late. My subjects’ memories have dulled.” Killdeer grinned slyly. “With the girl next to me, a member of the Belancort Clan, a family of Trilok Loyalists—before they all died, that is—my subjects will once again warm to me. Have all your majors announce the Grand Speech to their sectors.”

“Very well, Minister. I will go to the Belancort quarters myself. I would like to find out more about this grandfather, Timeron. There is something about him—”

Killdeer grunted. “Investigate all you desire, but just get it done.”

The Minister jumped from his throne, landing on the floor with a heavy thud. He stomped out of the room, bellowing down the hall for Texi to get his bath ready.

Billycan stood alone in the den, scratching his pearly chin. He studied his reflection in Killdeer's silver throne, running a digit over his black scar. "Timeron, who are you? Why do you smell of deceit?" he asked, as if his mirror image might answer. Billycan seemed to be acquainted with the old rat's scent, but he could not place it. Perhaps it was the looming stench of death.

Be it an omen, good or bad, the two Nightshade brothers ventured into the hole they had uncovered in the Topsiders' brownstone. Their options were few, and this seemed a serendipitous course, perhaps a sign from the Saints, and if not a sign from above, at the very least somewhere to go. The trudge down seemed endless; the tunnel's angle severe. After some time, the ground started to flatten and the corridor widened. They found themselves entering an open space with a cavernous dirt ceiling, a rotunda of sorts. They stood in one of three arched entryways, all equidistant from one another.

Vincent whispered to his brother. "I smell that rat again. The scent is so familiar. The same one I picked up in the Topsiders' house. Why can't I pinpoint it? Something about it reminds me of father." Proud of his scent detection, Vincent ruffled at his inability to identify the rat. Julius had always told his son that he had a talent for the craft, and even now Vincent didn't want to disappoint him. "I know this rat. Who is he?"

"Whoever he is, he's in desperate need of a thorough cleaning," Víctor said. He crinkled his nose at the heady odor. "Smells like mugwort."

They looked around them. The space could hold at least a

thousand rats, maybe more. It reminded Vincent of Catacomb Hall. During Trilok's reign, all the clans would gather there for events and holidays. The children would play, and the adults would dance. Vincent remembered his mother and father dancing as he ran wild with his siblings, laughing till it hurt.

Ordinary rats lived for only a handful of years, four or five at most. Catacombs rats lived decades upon decades, just like Topsiders. The extended years were thought to be a gift from the Saints, but Vincent had sometimes wondered if they might be a curse. Why should one have to live so long surrounded by misery and constant disappointment? He used to think it unjust, but now with their newfound freedom, maybe they could find some form of happiness. Even if they died as a result, at least they'd die free.

Etched deep into the wall, a marking accompanied each of the three passageways. "What is that symbol?" said Victor, pointing to one. They walked across the center of the rotunda and examined the emblem. It consisted of three jagged prongs, connecting at a pointed base.

Victor's insides twisted in dread. "Isn't that Killdeer's mark?" Shaking, he instinctively backed away.

"It is," said Vincent. Acid rose in his belly as he realized where the Topside hole had led them. He kept his composure for Victor's sake. "I don't know this place. I've never been here before, but I'm afraid we're back where we started. We're back in the Catacombs."

Vincent reached up and touched the mark, tracing Killdeer's crude insignia with his claw. The Minister had sentenced many a youth to death for offenses substantially less serious than dodging the Kill Army. Vincent could only imagine what their penalty would be.

He heard a loud, whiplike crack. Everything went black.