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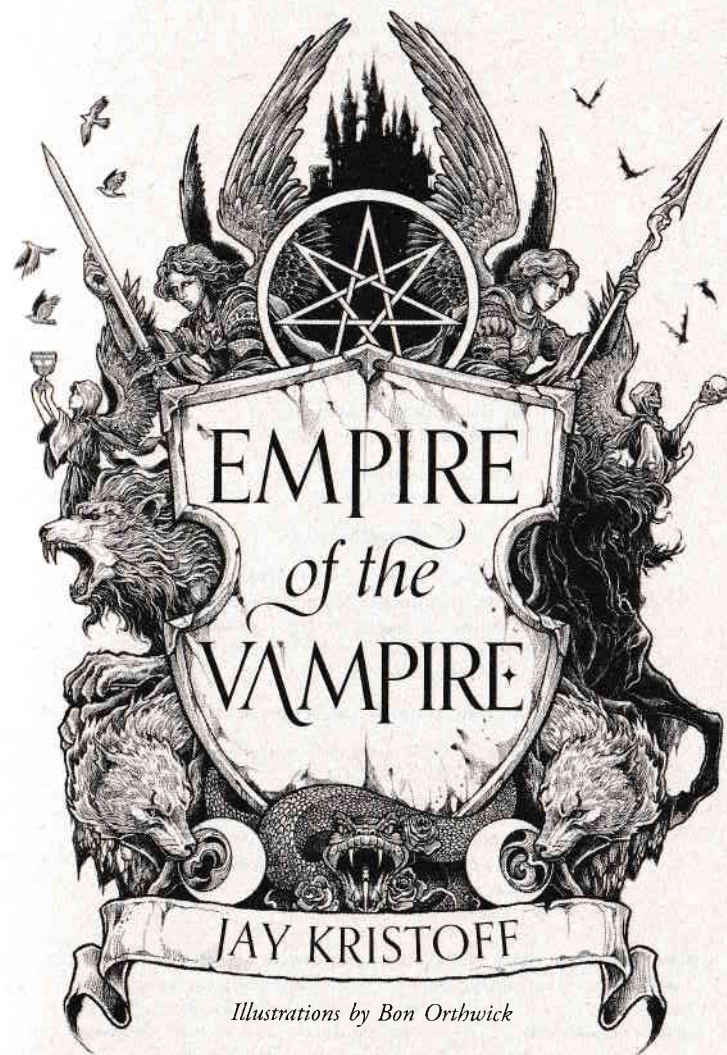
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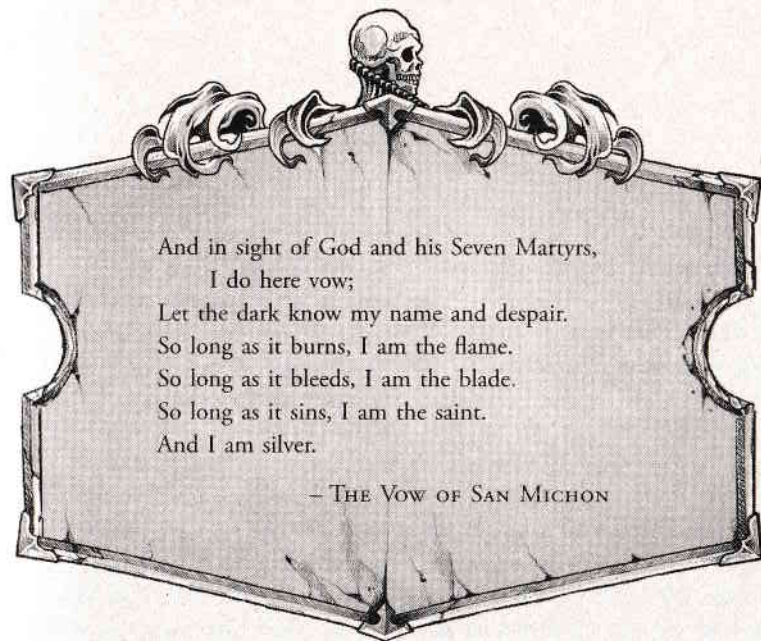


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And in sight of God and his Seven Martyrs,
I do here vow;
Let the dark know my name and despair.
So long as it burns, I am the flame.
So long as it bleeds, I am the blade.
So long as it sins, I am the saint.
And I am silver.

— THE VOW OF SAN MICHON

ASK ME NOT if God exists, but why he's such a prick.

Even the greatest of fools can't deny the existence of evil. We dwell in its shadow every day. The best of us rise above it, the worst of us swallow it whole, but we all of us wade hip-deep through it, every moment of our lives. Curses and blessings fall on the cruel and just alike. For every prayer heeded, ten thousand go unanswered. And saints suffer alongside the sinners, prey for monsters spat straight from the belly of hell.

But if there is a hell, mustn't there also be a heaven?

And if there is a heaven, then can't we ask it why?

Because if the Almighty is willing to put an end to all this wickedness, but somehow unable to do so, then he's not as almighty as the priests would have you believe. If he's both willing and able to put paid to it all, how can this evil exist in the first place? And if he's neither willing nor able to lay it to rest, then he's no god at all.

The only possibility remaining is that he can stop it. He simply chooses not to.

The children snatched from parents' arms. The endless plains of unmarked graves. The deathless Dead who hunt us in the light of a blackened sun.

We are prey now, mon ami.

We are food.

And he never lifted a fucking finger to stop it.

He could have.

He just didn't.

Do you ever wonder what we did, to make him hate us so?

SUNSET

IT WAS THE twenty-seventh year of daysdeath in the realm of the Forever King, and his murderer was waiting to die.

The killer stood watch at a thin window, impatient for his end to arrive. Tattooed hands were clasped at his back, stained with dried blood and ashes pale as starlight. His room stood high in the reaches of a lonely tower, kissed by sleepless mountain winds. The door was iron-clad, heavy, locked like a secret. From his vantage, the killer watched the sun sink towards an unearned rest and wondered how hell might taste.

The cobbles in the courtyard below promised him a short flight into a dreamless dark. But the window was too narrow to squeeze through, and his jailers had left nothing else to see him off to sleep. Just straw to lie on and a bucket to shit in and a view of the frail sunset to serve as torture 'til the real torture arrived. He wore a heavy coat, old boots, leather britches stained by long roads and soot. His pale skin was damp with sweat, but his breath hung chill in the air, and no fire burned in the hearth behind him. The coldbloods wouldn't risk a flame, even in their prison cells.

They'd be coming for him soon.

The château below him was waking now. Monsters rising from beds of cold earth and slipping on the façade that they were something close to human. The air outside was thick with the hymn of bats' wings. Thrall soldiers clad in dark steel patrolled the battlements below, twin wolves and twin moons emblazoned on black cloaks. The killer's lip curled as he watched them; men standing guard where no dog would abase itself.

The sky above was dark as sin.

The horizon, red as his lady's lips the last time he kissed her.

He ran one thumb across his fingers, the letters inked below his knuckles. 'Patience,' he whispered.

'May I come in?'

The killer didn't let himself flinch – he knew the coldblood would've relished that. Instead, he kept staring out the window at the broken knuckles of the mountains beyond, capped by ash-grey snow. He could feel the thing standing behind him now, its gaze roaming the back of his neck. He knew what it wanted, why it was here. Hoping it'd be quick and knowing, deep down, that they'd savour every scream.

He finally turned, feeling fire swell inside him at the sight of it. The anger was an old friend, welcome and warm. Making him forget the ache in his veins, the tug of his scars, the years on his bones. Looking at the monster before him, he felt positively young again. Borne towards forever on the wings of a pure and perfect hate.

'Good evening, Chevalier,' the coldblood said.

It had been only a boy when it died. Fifteen or sixteen, perhaps, still possessed of that slim androgyny found on manhood's cusp. But God only knew how old it was, really. A hint of colour graced its cheeks, large brown eyes framed by thick golden locks, a tiny curl arranged artfully on its brow. Its skin was poreless and alabaster pale, but its lips were obscenely red, the whites of its eyes flushed just the same. Fresh fed.

If the killer didn't know better, he'd have said it looked almost alive.

Its frockcoat was dark velvet, embroidered with golden curlicues. A mantle of raven's feathers was draped over its shoulders, the collar upturned like a row of glossy black blades. The crest of its bloodline was stitched at its breast; twin wolves rampant against the twin moons. Dark britches, a silken cravat and stockings, and polished shoes completed the portrait. A monster, wearing an aristocrat's skin.

It stood in the centre of his cell, though the door was still locked like a secret. A thick book was pressed between its bone-white palms, and its voice was lullaby sweet.

'I am Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Her Grace Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

The killer said nothing.

'You are Gabriel de León, Last of the Silversaints.'

Still, the killer named Gabriel made not a sound. The thing's eyes burned like candlelight in the silence; the air felt sticky-black and lush. It seemed for a moment that Gabriel stood at the edge of a cliff, and that only the cold press of those ruby lips to his throat might save him. He felt his skin prickling, an involuntary stirring of his blood as he imagined it. The want of moth for flame, begging to burn.

'May I come in?' the monster repeated.

'You're already in, coldblood,' Gabriel replied.

The thing glanced below Gabriel's belt and gifted him a knowing smile.

'It is always polite to ask, Chevalier.'

It snapped its fingers, and the iron-clad door swung wide. A pretty thrall in a long black dress and corset slipped inside. Her gown was a crushed velvet damask, wasp-waisted, a choker of dark lace about her throat. Her long red hair was bound into braids, looped across her eyes like chains of burnished copper. She was perhaps mid-thirty, old as Gabriel was. Old enough to be the monster's mother, if it had been just an ordinary boy and she just an ordinary woman. But she carried a leather armchair as heavy as she was, eyes downturned as she placed it effortlessly at the coldblood's side.

The monster's gaze didn't stray from Gabriel. Nor his from it.

The woman brought in another armchair and a small oaken table. Placing the chair beside Gabriel, the table between, she stood with hands clasped like a prioress at prayer.

Gabriel could see scars at her throat now; telltale punctures under that choker she wore. He felt contempt, crawling on his skin. She'd carried the chair as if it weighed nothing, but standing now in the coldblood's presence, the woman was almost breathless, her pale bosom heaving above her corset like a maiden on her wedding night.

'Merci,' Jean-François of the Blood Chastain said.

'I am your servant, Master,' the woman murmured.

'Leave us now, love.'

The thrall met the monster's eyes. She ran slow fingertips up the arc of her breast to the milk-white curve of her neck and—

'Soon,' the coldblood said.

The woman's lips parted. Gabriel could see her pulse quickening at the thought.

'Your will be done, Master,' she whispered.

And without even a glance to Gabriel, she curtsied and slipped from the room, leaving the killer alone with the monster.

'Shall we sit?' it asked.

'I'll die standing, if it's all the same,' Gabriel replied.

'I am not here to kill you, Chevalier.'

'Then what do you want, coldblood?'

The dark whispered. The monster moved without seeming to move at all; one moment standing beside the armchair, the next, seated upon it. Gabriel watched it brush an imaginary speck of dust from its frockcoat's

brocade, place its book upon its lap. It was the smallest display of power – a demonstration of potency to warn him against any acts of desperate courage. But Gabriel de León had been killing this thing's kind since he was sixteen years old, and he knew full well when he was outmatched.

He was unarmed. Three nights tired. Starving and surrounded and sweating with withdrawal. He heard Greyhand's voice echoing across the years, the tread of his old master's silver-heeled boots upon the flagstones of San Michon.

Law the First: The dead cannot kill the Dead.

'You must be thirsty.'

The monster produced a crystal flask from within its coat, dim light glittering on the facets. Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

'It is only water, Chevalier. Drink.'

Gabriel knew this game; kindness offered as a prelude to temptation. Still, his tongue felt like sandpaper against his teeth. And though no water could truly quench the thirst inside him, he snatched the flask from the monster's ghost-pale hand, poured a swig into his palm. Crystal clear. Scentless. Not a trace of blood.

He drank, ashamed at his relief, but still shaking out every drop. To the part of him that was human, that water was sweeter than any wine or woman he'd ever tasted.

'Please.' The coldblood's eyes were sharp as broken glass. 'Sit.'

Gabriel remained where he stood.

'Sit,' it commanded.

Gabriel felt the monster's will pressed upon him, those dark eyes swelling in his vision until they were all he could see. There was a sweetness to it. The lure of bloom to bumblebee, the taste of bare young petals damp with dew. Again, Gabriel felt his blood stir southwards. But again, he heard Greyhand's voice in his mind.

Law the Second: Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.

And so, Gabriel stayed where he stood. Standing tall on colt's legs. The ghost of a smile graced the monster's lips. Tapered fingertips smoothed a golden curl back from those bloody chocolat eyes, drummed on the book in its lap.

'Impressive,' it said.

'Would that I could say the same,' Gabriel replied.

'Have a care, Chevalier. You may hurt my feelings.'

'*The Dead feel as beasts, look as men, die as devils.*'

'Ah.' The coldblood smiled, a hint of razors at the edge. 'Law the Fourth.'

Gabriel tried to hide his surprise, but he still felt his belly roll.

'Oui,' the coldblood nodded. 'I am familiar with the principles of your Order, de León. Those who do not learn from the past suffer the future. And as you might imagine, future nights hold quite an interest for the undying.'

'Give me back my sword, leech. I'll teach you how undying you really are.'

'How quaint.' The monster studied its long fingernails. 'A threat.'

'A vow.'

'*And in sight of God and his Seven Martyrs,*' the monster quoted, '*I do here vow; Let the dark know my name and despair. So long as it burns, I am the flame. So long as it bleeds, I am the blade. So long as it sins, I am the saint. And I am silver.*'

Gabriel felt a wave of soft and poisonous nostalgia. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he'd last heard those words, ringing in the stained-glass light of San Michon. A prayer for vengeance and violence. A promise to a god who'd never truly listened. But to hear them repeated in a place like this, from the lips of one of *them* . . .

'For the love of the Almighty, sit,' the coldblood sighed. 'Before you fall.'

Gabriel could feel the monster's will pressing on him, all light in the room now gathered in its eyes. He could almost hear its whisper, teeth tickling his ear, promising sleep after the longest road, cool water to wash the blood from his hands, and a warm, quiet dark to make him forget the shape of all he'd given and lost.

But he thought of his lady's face. The colour of her lips the last time he kissed her.

And he stood.

'What do you want, coldblood?'

The last breath of sunset had fled the sky, the scent of long-dead leaves kissed Gabriel's tongue. The want had arrived in earnest, and the need was on its way. The thirst traced cold fingers up his spine, spread black wings about his shoulders. How long had it been since he smoked? Two days? Three?

God in heaven, he'd kill his own fucking mother for a taste . . .

'As I told you,' the coldblood replied, 'I am Her Grace's historian. Keeper of her lineage and master of her library. Fabién Voss is dead, thanks to your tender ministrations. Now that the other Courts of the Blood have begun bending the knee, my mistress has turned her mind towards preservation. And so, before the Last Silversaint dies, before all knowledge of your Order

is swept into an unmarked grave, my pale Empress Margot has, in her infinite generosity, offered opportunity for you to speak.'

Jean-François smiled with wine-stain lips.

'She wishes to hear your story, Chevalier.'

'Your kind never really hold the knack for jesting, do you?' Gabriel asked. 'You leave it in the dirt the night you die. Along with whatever passed for your fucking soul.'

'Why would I jest, de León?'

'Animals often sport with their food.'

'If my Empress wished sport, they would hear your screams all the way to Alerthe.'

'How quaint.' Gabriel studied his broken fingernails. 'A threat.'

The monster inclined its head. 'Touché.'

'Why would I waste my last hours on earth telling a story nobody on earth gives a shit about? I'm no one to you. Nothing.'

'Oh, come.' The thing raised one eyebrow. 'The Black Lion? The man who survived the crimson snows of Augustin? Who burned a thousand kith to ashes and pressed the Mad Blade to the throat of the Forever King himself?' Jean-François tutted like a school madam with an unruly student. 'You were the greatest of your Order. The only one who yet lives. Those oh so broad shoulders are ill-suited for the mantle of modesty, Chevalier.'

Gabriel watched the coldblood stalking between lies and flattery like a wolf on the pin-bright scent of blood. All the while, he pondered the question of what it truly wanted, and why he wasn't already dead. And finally . . .

'This is about the Grail,' Gabriel realized.

The monster's face was so still, it actually seemed carved of marble. But Gabriel supposed he saw a ripple in that dark stare.

'The Grail is destroyed,' it replied. 'What care we for the cup now?'

Gabriel tilted his head and spoke by rote:

'From holy cup comes holy light;

'The faithful hand sets world aright.

'And in the Seven Martyrs' sight,

'Mere man shall end this endless night.'

A cold chuckle rang on bare stone walls. 'I am a chronicler, de León. History is of interest to me, not mythology. Save your callow superstitions for the cattle.'

'You're lying, coldblood. *Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.* And if you believe for one moment that I'll betray . . .'

His voice faded, then failed entirely. Though the monster never seemed to move at all, it now held one hand outstretched. And there, on the snow-white plane of its upturned palm, lay a glass phial of reddish-brown dust. Like a powder of chocolat and crushed rose petals. The temptation he'd known was coming.

'A gift,' the monster said, removing the stopper.

Gabriel could smell the powdered blood from where he stood. Thick and rich and copper sweet. His skin tingled at the scent. His lips parted in a sigh.

He knew what the monsters wanted. He knew one taste would only make him thirsty for more. Still, he heard himself speak as if from far away. And if all the years and all the blood had not long ago broken his heart, it surely would have broken then.

'I lost my pipe . . . In the Charbourg, I . . .'

The coldblood produced a fine bone pipe from within its frockcoat, placed it and the phial on the small table. And glowering, it gestured to the chair opposite.

'Sit.'

And finally, wretch that he was, Gabriel de León obeyed.

'Help yourself, Chevalier.'

The pipe was in his hand before he knew it, and he poured a helping of the sticky powder into the bowl, trembling so fiercely he almost dropped his prize. The coldblood's eyes were fixed upon Gabriel's hands as he worked; the scars and calluses and beautiful tattoos. A wreath of skulls was inked atop the silversaint's right hand, a weave of roses upon his left. The word PATIENCE was etched across his fingers below his knuckles. The ink was dark against his pale skin, edged with a metallic sheen.

The silversaint tossed a lock of long black hair from his eyes as he patted his coat, his leather britches. But of course, they'd taken his flintbox away.

'I need a flame. A lantern.'

'You need.'

With agonizing slowness, the coldblood steepled slender fingers at its lips. There was nothing and no one else in all the world then. Just the pair of them, killer and monster, and that lead-laden pipe in Gabriel's shaking hands.

'Let us speak then of need, Silversaint. The whys matter not. The means, neither. My Empress demands the telling of your tale. So, we may sit as gentry while you indulge your sordid little addiction, or we may retire to

rooms in the depths of this château where even devils fear to tread. Either way, my Empress Margot shall have her tale. The only question is whether you sigh or scream it.'

It had him. Now that the pipe was in his hand, he'd already fallen.

Homesick for hell, and dreading to return.

'Give me the fucking flame, coldblood.'

Jean-François of the Blood Chastain snapped his fingers again, and the cell door creaked wide. The same thrall woman waited outside, a lantern with a long glass chimney in her hands. She was just a silhouette against the light: black dress, black corset, black choker. She could have been Gabriel's daughter then. His mother, his wife – it made no difference at all. All that mattered was the flame she carried.

Gabriel was tense as two bowstrings, dimly aware of the coldblood's discomfort in the fire's presence, the silk-soft hiss of its breath over sharp teeth. But he cared for nothing now, save that flame and the darkling magik to follow, blood to powder to smoke to bliss.

'Bring it here,' he told the woman. 'Quickly, now.'

She placed the lamp on the table, and for the first time met his eyes. And her pale blue stare spoke to him without her ever speaking a word.

And you think me slave?

He didn't care. Not a breath. Expert hands trimming the wick, raising the flame to the perfect height, the oil's scent threading the air. He could feel the heat against the tower's chill, holding the pipe's bowl the perfect distance to render the powder to vapour. His belly thrilled as it began: that sublime alchemy, that dark chymistrie. The powdered blood bubbling now, colour melting to scent, the aroma of hollyroot and copper. And Gabriel pressed his lips to that pipe with more passion than he'd ever kissed a lover and . . . oh sweet God in heaven, breathed it down.

The blinding fire of it, filling his lungs. The roiling heaven of it, flooding his mind. Crystallizing, disintegrating, he drew that bloody vapour into his chest and felt his heart thrashing against his ribs like a bird in a bower of bones, his cock straining against his leather britches, and the face of God Himself just another bowlful away.

He looked up into the thrall's eyes and saw she was an angel given earthly form. He wanted to kiss her, drink her, die inside her, sweeping her into his arms, brushing his lips along her skin as his teeth stirred in his gums, feeling the promise thudding just below the arc of her jaw, the hammerblow beat of her pulse against his tongue, alive, *alive*—

'Chevalier.'

Gabriel opened his eyes.

He was on his knees beside the table, the lamp throwing a shaking shadow beneath him. He'd no inkling how much time had passed. The woman was gone, as if she'd never been.

He could hear the wind outside, one voice and dozens; whispering secrets along the shingles and howling curses in the eaves and shushing his name through the boughs of black and naked trees. He could count every sliver of straw on the floor, feel every hair on his body standing tall, smell old dust and new death, the roads he'd walked on the soles of his boots. Every sense was as sharp as a blade, broken and bloodied in his tattooed hands.

'Who . . .'

Gabriel shook his head, grasping at words like handfuls of syrup. The whites of his eyes had turned red as murder. He looked at the phial, now back in the monster's palm.

'Whose blood . . . is that?'

'My blessed dame,' the monster replied. 'My dark mother and pale mistress, Margot Chastain, First and Last of her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

The coldblood was looking at the lantern's flame with a soft, wistful hatred. A skull-pale moth had surfaced from some dank corner of the cell, flitting now about the light. Porcelain-pale fingers closed over the phial, obscuring it from view.

'But not one more drop of her shall be yours until your tale is mine. So speak it, and as though to a child. Presume the ones who shall read it, aeons from now, know nothing of this place. For these words I commit now to parchment shall last so long as this undying empire does. And this chronicle shall be the only immortality you will ever know.'

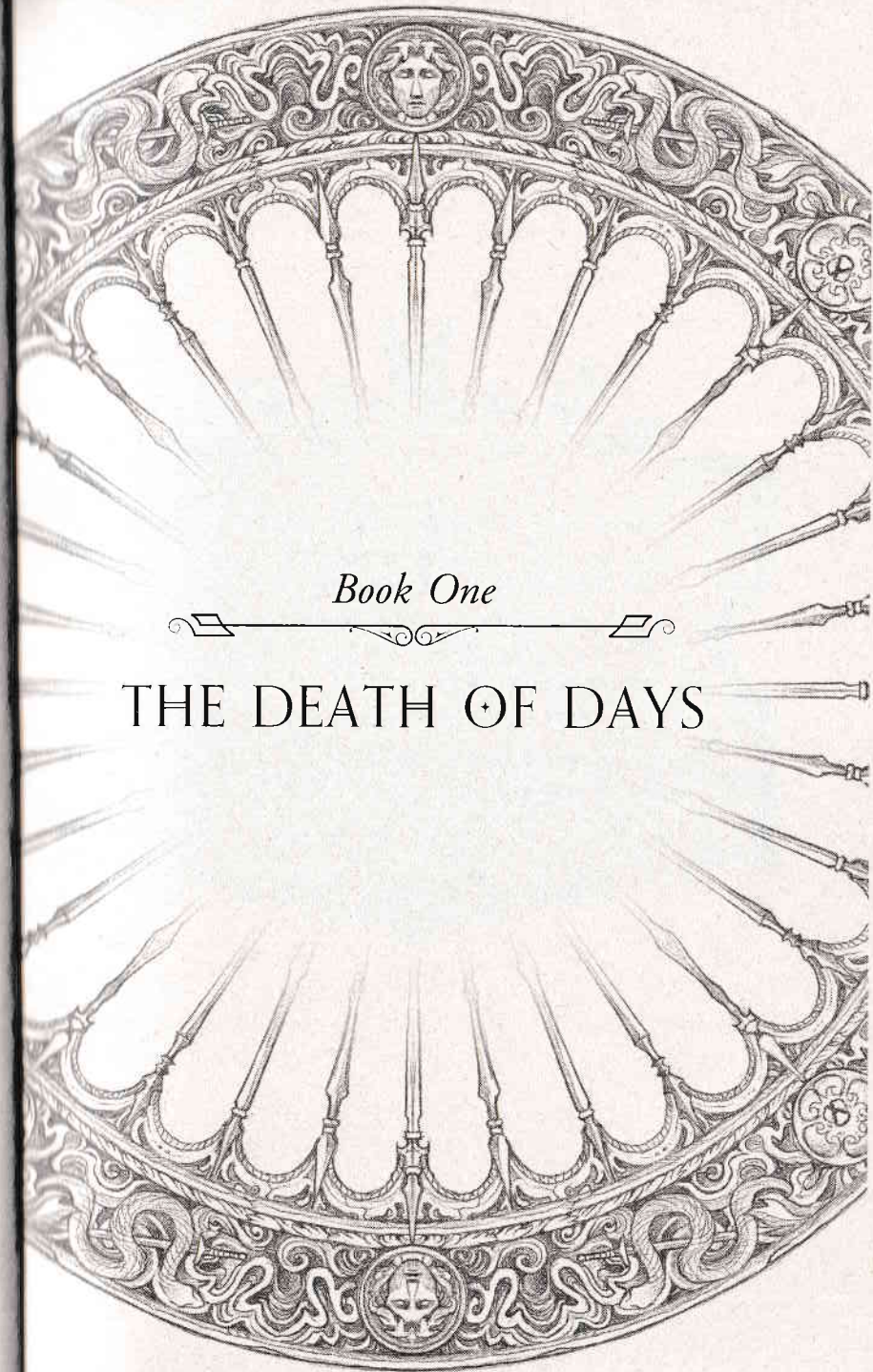
From his coat, the coldblood produced a wooden case carved with two wolves, two moons. He drew a long quill from within, black as the row of feathers about his throat, placing a small bottle upon the armrest of his chair. Dipping quill to ink, Jean-François looked up with dark and expectant eyes.

Gabriel drew a deep breath, the taste of red smoke on his lips.

'Begin,' the vampire said.

LBRIS

We know
books



Book One

THE DEATH OF DAYS

♦ I ♦

OF APPLES AND TREES

'IT ALL STARTED with a rabbit hole,' Gabriel said.

The Last Silversaint stared into that flickering lantern flame as if into faces long dead. A hint of red smoke still bruised the air, and he could hear each thread in the lantern's wick burning to a different tune. The years passed between then and now seemed only minutes to his mind, alight with rushing bloodhymn.

'It strikes me as funny,' he sighed, 'looking back on it all. There's a pile of ash behind me so high it could touch the sky. Cathedrals in flames and cities in ruins and graves overflowing with the pious and wicked, and that's where it truly began.' He shook his head in wonder. 'Just a little hole in the ground.'

'People will remember it different, of course. The soothsingers will harp about the Prophecy, and the priests will bleat on about the Almighty's plan. But I never met a minstrel who wasn't a liar, coldblood. Nor a holy man who wasn't a cunt.'

'Ostensibly, *you* are a holy man, Silversaint,' Jean-François said.

Gabriel de León met the monster's gaze, smiling faintly.

'Night was a good two hours off when God decided to piss in my porridge. The locals had torn down the bridge over the Keff, so I'd been forced south to the ford near Dhahaeth. It was rough country, but Justice had—'

'Hold, Chevalier.' Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain raised one hand, placed the quill between the pages. 'This will not do.'

Gabriel blinked. 'No?'

'No,' the vampire replied. 'I told you, this is the tale of who you are. How all this came to pass. Histories do not begin halfway. Histories begin at the beginning.'

'You want to know about the Grail. A rabbit hole is where that tale begins.'

'As I said, I record this story for those who will live long after you are food for worms. Begin gently.' Jean-François waved one slender hand. 'I was born. I grew up . . .'

'I was born in a mud puddle named Lorson. Raised the son of a blacksmith. Eldest of three. I was no one special.'

The vampire looked him over, boots to brow. 'We both know *that* is untrue.'

'The things you *know* about me, coldblood? Well, if you scraped them all together and squeezed them dry, they could almost add up to a fucking thimbleful.'

The thing called Jean-François affected a small yawn. 'Teach me, then. Your parents. Were they pious folk?'

Gabriel opened his mouth for a rebuke. But the words died on his lips as he looked at the book in Jean-François's lap. He realized the coldblood wasn't only writing down his every word, he was also sketching; using that preternatural speed to trace a few lines between every breath. Gabriel saw the lines coalescing into an image now; a man in three-quarter profile. Haunted grey eyes. Broad shoulders and long hair, black as midnight. A chiselled jaw dusted with fine stubble and streaked with dried blood. Two scars were carved beneath his right eye, one long, the other short, almost like falling tears. It was a face Gabriel knew as well as his own.

Because, of course, it *was* his own.

'A fine likeness,' he said.

'Merci,' the monster murmured.

'Do you draw portraits for the other leeches, too? It must be tricky to remember what you look like after a while, if even a mirror won't profane itself with your reflection.'

'You waste your venom on me, Chevalier. If venom this water be.'

Gabriel stared at the vampire, running a fingertip across his lip. In the grip of the bloodhymn – that rushing, pulsing gift from the pipe he'd smoked – every sensation was amplified a thousandfold. The potency of centuries within his veins.

He could feel the strength it gifted him, the courage that walked hand in hand with that strength; a courage that had borne him through the hell of Augustin, through the spires of the Charbourg and the ranks of the Endless Legion. And though he knew that it would fade all too soon, for now, Gabriel de León was utterly fearless.

