

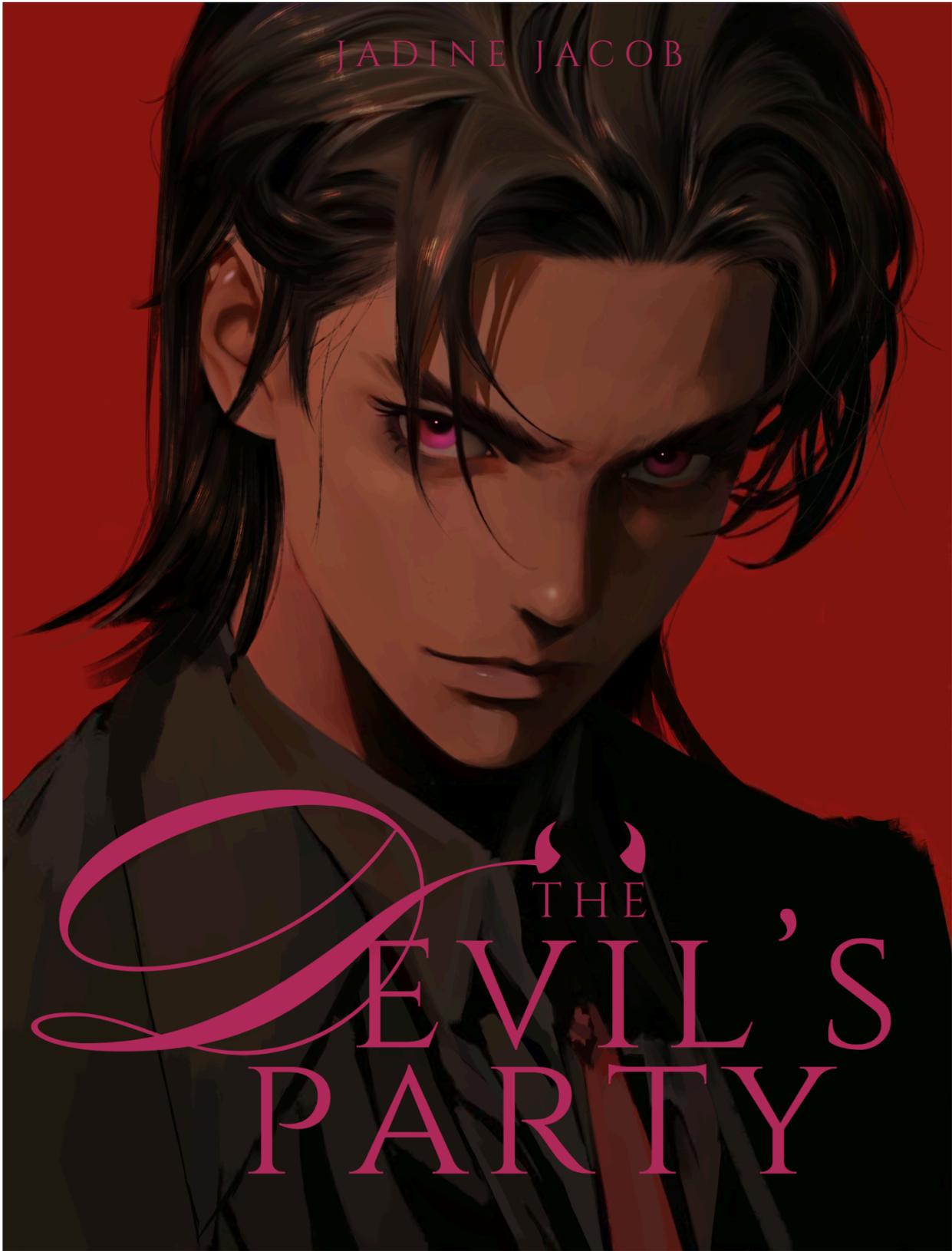
# THE DEVIL'S PARTY

In the fractured metropolis of Melwall, power flows through veins of metal known as *Chords*—a miraculous alloy that reshaped humanity, and corrupted it.

Caine Midas Deubel, born a Junker and bastard son of the city's Grand Mayor, rises from the ashes of an orphanage he once burned to escape. Haunted by survival and reborn through synthetic flesh, Caine grows to believe that compassion is the greatest weakness of civilisation and that peace is only possible through control.

Determined to shatter Melwall's hierarchy—the Highborns who rule, the Wardens who enforce, and the Junkers who suffer—he forms The Devil's Party, a movement of fugitives, dissidents, and zealots who will burn the world clean to rebuild it. In this metropolis, fear is freedom, sacrifice is justice, and mercy is corruption.

But as his revolution turns into an empire, Caine discovers that his war against power has made him its purest form. In the end, the man who sought to free Melwall becomes the reason it kneels.



# 1

***Nobody knows that the Devil*** was born within the fortified, iron embrace of Melwall.

Beneath a sky choked with soot and steam, where airships clawed heavenward from scaffolds of reinforced steel and scavenged metals, and carriages—powered by hissing pistons—with their metal-feathered stallions along cobbled veins of the city, there is a place far removed from the vigilant gaze of Chord-infused Wardens.

Beyond the boulevard that cleaved the districts, in streets where the lamps burned dimmer and the smoke lingered longer, there lay an unnamed woman—her body ravaged by every opiate the city could summon, poisoned by the full weight of all it had to give.

This metropolis reeked with a stench scarcely imaginable to modern men and women. Naturally, the foulest was thickest in Melwall's underbelly—the pit of the city's thieves, beggars, vagrants, and addicts; and, nowhere in all of Cogmont did that stench fester more grotesquely than in the underbelly's fish market.

With dirtied legs bursting with jutting bones, lips scavenging fetid, black sludge, and polluted with an ache of every epidemic the metropolis had to offer, the woman's eyes lured her to the safety of a dumpster. There, she wasted no time, leaned against a rusted metal pipe jutting from the wall where she stood in a deep squat, and gave birth.

This was her fourth birth. She had delivered them all here, beside the dumpster, and all had been stillbirths, or semi-stillbirths. It would have been much the same today, but Caine Midas Deubel chose differently.

He was disturbingly small in scale—no larger than a bundle of spoiled catch discarded at dawn; his skin mottled in greys and purples, stretched thin over bone like meat left too long upon a hook. Any fisherman, glancing only briefly, might have mistaken him for something dredged from the harbour rather than delivered from a womb. His already cracked and swollen lips trembled in a permanent contortion, as though rehearsing a cry the body had no strength to complete. What emerged instead were faint, broken sounds—small, airless “ees” and damp “mhms”.

His fingers curled inward at unnatural angles, joints stiff and accusatory, nails already blackened as though they had tasted the city before he had. A sour stench clung to him—bile, iron, the thick sweetness of meconium—mingling with the rank perfume of fish and salt that never truly left the Underbelly. The cord between them hung too thick, too knotted, and its vein still trembled with a faint and uneven insistence.

But Caine was alive, and that was the only certainty the Underbelly could offer.

Blood pooled and gathered beneath her in slow, unceremonious spreads. It slicked her thighs, congealed in the cracks of stone, mingled with the refuse that had long ago ceased to offend anyone's sensibilities. She retched until there was nothing left but a dry convulsion of ribs and throat. This was her fourth time—fourth proof that her body was more corridor than sanctuary—and whatever small mercy had remained inside her was gutted with the final severing of the cord.

She cut it herself.

The blade was not clean. Neither was the act. Regrettably, it was the only thread that tethered the infant to her—biological, burdensome, indisputable. When it fell away, so too did the last obligation her body could sustain.

She dragged herself—inch by trembling inch—toward the narrow alley behind the fish market, where scales glittered like dead coins and silver-bellied carcasses lay upon splintered boards, already surrendering to rot. She chose the darkest recess she could find, beneath overturned crates slick with brine and blood, and lowered herself beside them as though arranging her own remains among the refuse.

She believed no one would see her there.

Or him.

The fish market had not yet finished breathing when the sound came—wet and wrong—a soft rupture against stone beneath the stalls. It was not the clean cry of an infant, but a tearing inhale, as though lungs long unused had been forced open by indignation rather than instinct.

In the shadow of overturned crates, among scales and entrails and the slow drip of gutter water, Caine drew his first breath.

"...What's that?" Someone muttered.

"There's a babe down there!"

"The mother! She's there!"

By sheer accident, or maybe divine mischief, the alley began to fill.

The fishmongers were the first to notice the sound. Then the boys who carried crates. Then the women who sorted scales into baskets.

The woman lay against the stone, scarcely conscious, her blood spreading in shallow rivulets that crept toward the gutter. When she stirred, it was not to rise, but to clutch uselessly at the air as if the city itself might be persuaded to soften.

No one offered to help.

The first shove was tentative—a rough boot against her thigh.

When she was commanded to lift herself, she did not.

The second came harder. Then several others.

By the time the Wardens appeared at the mouth of the alley, boots striking in rhythm against wet stone, the matter had largely resolved itself.

They did not ask who had begun it.

Caine opened his eyes for the first time to the sight of his mother's death and understood nothing of it—only that the world had learned how to end before it learned how to begin.

They said he was lucky and that the city had spared him, but it wouldn't be any better than the trenches of the Underbelly nor the putrid spots by the fish markets, the sickness that rotted the gutters, the fevers that stripped bone from skin, the kind of hunger that drove children to gnaw at wood—all this evil and unforgivable state of the planet's creation was never enough to kill the body of the Devil.

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A hundred years after the discovery of *Chords*, a revolutionary metallic alloy extracted from the centre of the planet, powerful cities with powerful names were quick to utilise its materials. Alone, it was remarkable. Machinery began blustering technology so grotesquely advanced it had forgotten the humility of origin; weapons were forged with the rotten configuration of a force so great, bodies strewn across the concrete of the metropolis.

Chords, in its rawest form, was an anomaly of the planet's own marrow: a deep-glowing metal mined from the planet's axial fissures, where gravity warped and time coiled sluggishly. At its centre, each fragment bore a *core*, a pulsing mineral lattice that responded to electromagnetic fields. To anyone's understanding, it acted just like an intricate nervous system, and it was truly an inert brilliance. But alloyed—fused at a molecular level with copper, carbon, bio-silicon, even traces of human calcium—it seemed to change. It remembered forms. It obeyed frequencies, and it became interactive. The metal could be turned to pulse; to flex, to conduct the way wires conduct current. And soon enough, the upper-classes of Melwall—the Highborns at the High Spires and the East Quarter—began to hunger no longer just for survival, but for *distinction*.

Cheekbones were recast in lattice-light alloys, joints reworked with zero-friction pivots, ribs interwoven with silver-throated Chords to support corsets of pressure-regulated skin.

Caine hadn't predicted the metal's influence would reach so far, nor that it would permeate every layer of society; though, as the government grew stronger, the protests louder, and the balance of power more weakened, the realisation of the importance of this metal set on his prediction of what he would come to call: "The Drift."

At twelve thirty-one past midnight, he was standing at its edge.

At three hundred metres, a concealed ring of capacitors fired between the converging avenues of the East Quarter plaza and its surrounding mid-rise towers, pouring their stored force into a lattice of ignition wires—each one hand-soldered and wax-sealed against moisture. A *bang* and a breath later, twelve initiators discharged in unison, each setting off its charge—formed about a hollow sphere of reinforced iron.

The charges were carefully shaped to focus their destructive force inward. Their copper-lined cones collapsed as though it had obeyed some cruel design. All that wrath converged upon a single, perfect point; then, with the sound of a god's breath drawn in reverse, the east of the manour folded like drenched parchment: stone, steel, and ceramic surrendered in a slow and solemn implosion.

The opening left behind was clean and tall enough for a man to walk through—wide enough to bring hell behind him.

Caine crossed the marble floor. His boots struck shattered tile and darkened fragments, with the sound returning oddly in the broken space, as though it had nowhere else to settle.

Behind him, a light fixture hung from its cord and swayed slightly. It creaked at regular intervals. Along the floor, where the blast had caught the edge of a curtain, a thin line of flame persisted. It neither spread nor rose.

A Highborn knelt at the centre of the room.

Caine did not speak. There was no need.

The man's robe was cut from a heavy, lustrous weave, the kind that held its colour—even under ash and blood. Along the hem ran a narrow line of gold-thread work, interrupted where the fabric had torn. His collar sat high at the throat, stiff enough that it did not bend when he lowered his head. His breathing came fast and shallow.

At the corner, his family stood against the far wall—a woman, a daughter, two sons—beneath a section of marble untouched by the blast. Light from the chandeliers reached them evenly and showed their faces pale. They did not speak. They knew who he was. They had believed themselves insulated. Not here. Not beneath their own chandeliers.

Caine stepped forward.

His wife spoke first. "*P.lette*,"<sup>1</sup> but the word broke in her mouth. She swallowed and tried again. "*Plette*," she said. "Don't do this. We didn't do anything!"

That was a lie. She just did not know it.

One step. Then, another.

Dust blew in from the breach, carried by a wind that moaned through the shattered wall and curled around Caine like a ghost; his coat stirred with it—just slightly—as he drew the pistol from his back pocket.

It was black—matte, sleek, and angular—its veins of dull orange light pulsing faintly along the barrel and grip, a quiet heartbeat of something not entirely human. There was no visible magazine, no hammer, no safety; the pistol simply *hummed*.

"Do you even know who my husband is?"

Caine stopped.

He looked at her for the first time. Just for a moment and just long enough for her to feel it. Then, softly—almost politely—he answered.

"I do."

Her husband finally raised his head. "*Plette*," his voice was coarse. "The children—"

The pistol charged with a soft whine—a quick build-up, high-pitched, then suddenly flat. At the barrel, a small point of light flared—a tiny sun birthing death.

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<sup>1</sup> A formal plea meaning "please."

One click.

*Bang!*

No thunder. No recoil. Just a sharp creak of pressure, followed by the strange slicing *snap* of Chord energy as it carved through the man's cranial vault.

The body rocked once, almost as though uncertain of its own gravity, then folded with a tender thud. Smoke curled upward from the cauterised wound; thin, ghostly, smelling of iron and burnt salt.

Silence was the first ringing noise in Caine's ear. Then came the sound—small, trembling—of the little girl's whimper. Then, the boy's knees buckled; a strangled noise escaped him, something between a sob and an unruly gasp. Their mother tried to scream but only managed a choking hiss and it was her eyes that quaked, wide and glassy, that had reflected the fading glow of that impossible sun.

Caine lowered the pistol. The air still shivered around it.

She looked up at Caine. Not pleading. Not accusing. Just looking. Trying to understand him, or name him, or maybe just memorise his face so she could remember what this moment *felt* like—what it cost. And then she whispered something. A single word. Too soft to hear. Not repeated.

*Daevel.*<sup>2</sup>

Caine didn't ask her to say it again.

He didn't need to.

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<sup>2</sup> Devil.