

THE  
NIGHT  
HUNT

## PRAISE FOR ALEXANDRA CHRISTO

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“The world building is deft, and the spectacular ending is a happy one for Lira and Elian, but it will leave readers blissfully wanting more.”

—THE BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN’S BOOKS ON *TO KILL A KINGDOM*

# PROLOGUE

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Once upon a time, a man died.

Many men, actually. They're prone to it, after all, because humans are fragile things and tend to fade with the stars.

The important thing isn't really the man, but what killed him and what happened after.

That thing was a monster—which shouldn't surprise you—and her name was Atia. Which should surprise you, because not many monsters liked to have their names known to outsiders.

They preferred sounds instead. A certain creak to the floorboard, a familiar sob, or the song that carried in a scream. That was their desired infamy. And it wasn't just the monsters. Even creatures who would've considered themselves Godly had sacrificed their names for a sound.

Death, for instance, liked wind chimes. That was the noise his Heralds made. The delicate tickle of music they brought into the world before they sprang from the shadows and ferried their souls.

But Atia liked having her name known.

With names came purpose and power. People gave them like gifts: so you could be recognized and remembered.

Atia liked gifts too.

Fear was one she collected often. Her reputation drifted through the world in whispers, so she was never just a howl in the night, or the slam of a door, or the slow swallow of a dry throat.

She was Atia. The Last of the Nefas.

And the Gods did not like it.





Fear tastes like spiced honey.

It's thick and sweet as it moves across my tongue, and carries a distinctly familiar warmth once it slides down my throat and fills my empty belly.

"Atia," Sapphir says in a frantic whisper. "Are you done yet?"

I shake my head and start to hum a little sea ditty I once overheard by the docks.

Sailors like to sing, even if they should know better what kinds of creatures it attracts.

"That melody is awfully sinister," Sapphir says.

"I hope so," I tell her.

She laughs and her fangs shine under the light of the moon. "No wonder you don't have any other friends."

"I have plenty of friends," I say. "They're just all dead."

Like my parents and the rest of my kind.

Sapphir's laughter trickles over to me. "That doesn't bode well for me."

I reach out a hand to the lake below, my fingers circling ripples across the muddied water. "You're already dead, Sapphir," I remind her.

Though not in any permanent way.

Vampires have that luxury.

I sigh as the moon cascades over us, casting cool glows on the

small fishing plank that overlooks the waters of this village. Its splinters are damp enough to smell like rot. Behind us a forest of purple thorn trees lingers like a watchful audience, the branches kissing a clouded winter sky that promises snowfall come morning.

It is quiet and deserted, save for us.

“Well?” Sapphir presses. “Your kill or mine?”

I look down at the human, trembling between us.

The only fun I ever get these days is from tormenting them.

Humans who stumble from the one tavern this village of Rosegarde has to offer, or those who sail across oceans and worlds, seeking adventure.

It’s the adventure that I take. The hopes and the comforts—things I can never truly have for myself—until fear is all that remains.

And I like fear.

“I’m still feeding,” I say, as the man’s dread clings to the air.

Even seeing me in my human form, he’s scared.

The Nefas can change shapes with our whim, and while we can appear human—perfect for inconspicuous hunting—in our true form our hair is cast from moonlight, skin blue from the tears we drink, and ears receding back in golden spirals. Our great wings are made from thorn and bramble, tree-branch veined and dressed with forest leaves.

When we fly, it sounds like screaming.

Like the nightmares we steal while the sun sleeps.

Now, though, I look like any human. The only exception being my eyes, which turn white with magic when I feed.

The man sobs beneath me, and I smile.

The Nefas thrive on chaos and illusion, but for most centuries we've stuck to nightmares. It's safer to feed in the shadows.

That's what my parents always taught me.

*Fear is an easy meal to take while our prey sleeps*, my father always said. *Do nothing to draw attention and risk the wrath of the Gods.*

But I've never wanted to live my life rationed to the darkness like they did. I want to bring my illusions out into the open. Creating worlds from other people's horrors is the only way I know I'm real.

Besides, a girl needs a little fun.

"Please," the human man begs, as he is surrounded by visions of his greatest fears.

Spiders, crawling up his pant legs and down the crease of his neck.

Earth, splattered on top of him, choking into his throat as he is buried alive.

Conjuring them is like plucking flower petals. My mind reaches into his, moving about memories and sifting through dream until I get to the root of what makes him shudder.

Then I pluck them out one by one and scatter them into the world.

To him, it's as real as anything.

His hair stripes white with fear.

"You must hurry and drain him already," Sapphir says impatiently. "I want my share, Atia."

She's always a little greedy when we hunt together.

It's been three years, ever since I was fourteen and the man who smelled like ash told me to *run, run as fast as I could* from the screams of my parents.

Those years have spanned many villages and forests, but the human realm is small and closed in, just five elemental kingdoms making up the land. So my path has crossed with Sapphir's more than once.

The first time was far on the other side of the Earth Kingdom, high in the reaches of the tree mountains. What I thought was an excellent place to hide turned out to be Sapphir's preferred hunting grounds for unsuspecting campers.

She pounced down from high up in the branches with her teeth bared, leaping onto my shoulders and sending me rolling down a large hill.

I smacked my nose against a rock and the blood gushed onto my shirt like a waterfall.

Sapphir sneered and licked her lips.

Then my scent caught in the air and she wrinkled her nose.

"You're not human," she said, as if I needed reminding.

"And you're not going to live past today if you do that again," I shot back.

I may have been young, but I didn't have any fear left in me after what I saw happen to my family.

Sapphir smiled, fangs like pure white daggers that grated along her lips. She said: "Little monster, do you want to share a meal?"

So we did.

We found a group of campers who'd come to forage, and we delighted.

After we parted ways, we'd always find each other again, in new towns and new forests. It's almost like having a friend, except the only reason Sapphir hasn't tried to kill me is because it would do nothing to satiate her hunger, and the only reason I haven't fed



off her fear is because a monster's fear doesn't taste the same as a human's.

It's more like a truce than a friendship, but I treasure it all the same. Sometimes it's nice to have company in the shadows, to duet in torment.

To know that I don't always have to be alone.

"I'm hungry," Sapphir says.

Other times, like tonight, it's nothing but an irritation.

"*I know*," I tell her tightly.

She always is.

Sapphir likes to eat humans, like all vampires. And she won't simply drain their blood, as the old stories say. She eats everything but the bones.

Even their *toes*.

I shudder a little at the thought.

I don't think humans would taste very nice, all sweaty from the day with dirt under their fingernails. Especially ones like this, stinking of stale ale and someone else's perfume.

Besides, killing is a surefire way to get cursed.

There are rules for the night and the things that crawl in the shadows. There are even rules for the shadows. Monsters can wreak havoc among humans and each other, feeding on fear or sadness or blood.

But killing is forbidden.

The Gods and their Heralds put that rule into place centuries ago, after the great war, when my kind were thrown into this world. That's why most vampires just drain a little blood here and there. It keeps them under the Gods' radar.

Not Sapphir.

She knows that breaking the rules comes at a price, the magic

that binds us shattering like glass, and she doesn't care. It works in different ways for different monsters, but for Sapphir it means the youthful glow her vampirism should give her fades away. She ages rapidly, looking like a teenager one day, then a woman headed for the grave the next.

So Sapphir eats more often to quell it, the blood and hearts giving her back her youth, but after a time, the act of killing makes her age again, even quicker.

So she feeds again.

Really, I've always thought Sapphir was quite the addict.

And one day she'll wither beyond repair, her appetite not quick enough to placate the Gods' curse.

In the end, they always win.

"Are you finished now?" she presses.

The man's body is racked with silent sobs.

He's too scared to even scream.

I press my hand to his heart.

His fear thickens and I gulp down the last of its honey.

"It's okay," I promise him, twisting my voice to a lie. "It's all over now."

I turn to Sapphir.

She's crouched on the plank beside me, her stance like a wild animal ready to attack. Her long fingernails curl into the rotting wood, holding herself back the best she can.

I don't know how old she truly is, but right now Sapphir looks my age. Seventeen, with long black hair floating down her shoulders in large curls. Even so, I see the streaks of gray beginning to appear, and on her beautiful brown skin a wrinkle creases the sides of her eyes. Another dimples her chin and cuts across her cheeks.

She's aging before me.

My chest tugs.

If Sapphir were to die, I would truly be alone again.

"Have your fun," I say to her.

Sapphir's fangs grow large with her smile.

"Wait, wait." I hold up a hand and get to my feet, dusting the lake dirt from my legs. "Let me leave first. I really don't want to watch."

"It won't last long," Sapphir says.

Her eyes turn red with hunger and I quickly walk away, not waiting for what comes next.

I've never had much taste for blood. Most monsters delight in it, but I've always thought tearing people limb from limb is a little overboard.

Chaos is so much more appealing than carnage.

Bones crack behind me and the man barely has the chance to cry out before Sapphir screeches. The next sound I hear is the gurgle of his blood in her mouth.

I shake my head and resist the urge to look back.

If she doesn't hurry, the Heralds are going to catch her, and they'd love nothing more than to curse her twice over.

I wave my arm and a gateway appears in front of me.

"Better her than me," I mumble under my breath.

My gateway splinters through the forest trees, like a tear in the papers of a book making way for the lines on the next page. It glistens in bright blue light, brushing the nearest leaves from the dirt floor and clearing a path for me to approach.

Opening a gateway is as easy as breathing. A quick inhale as I picture where I want to go, and then a sigh parting my lips as I blow new worlds into view.

My father said the Nefas used to be able to hop in and out of dimensions—from the land of the Gods, to the land of the humans—until they were kicked out of Oksenya. When the Gods threw us to the mortals, they stifled our powers.

But I never lived in Oksenya to know any different. As the only Nefas to be born here, my gateways have only ever led to places within the human realm. My father always said not to worry, because Oksenya was full of boring know-it-alls, but I never believed him. I could tell that he and my mother felt trapped by the boundaries of this world.

I think that's what destroyed the others over the centuries. Destroyed their spirits, long before the Gods hunted them to their deaths.

I step toward my gate, ready to make my way home, when the sound of wind chimes fills the air.

I hear Sapphir growl and curse loudly at the interruption of her meal, but by the time I turn around, she's already scurried into a nearby brush of trees, leaving the broken body behind.

She's quick, I'll give her that.

The world creaks and I narrow my eyes.

I watch the shadows beside the dead man's feet wither. They shrink into themselves and then grow taller, coming out from the ground and up into the world.

They mold themselves into a human form.

At first it's just smoke in the shape of wings, with thin legs and long arms jutting out from black feathers. Then a body takes shape.

A face.

A boy.

*A Herald of the Gods.*

He hovers over the dead man and sighs.

*He looks young*, I think. Though I know he isn't.

His face is sharp and soft at once, high round cheekbones set against an angular jaw. He shrugs his shoulders and the feathered wings that engulfed his body shrivel into a small gold tie pin at his neck.

He's dressed all in black, with a waistcoat tight against his slim frame and an overcoat hanging from his shoulders. His hair is just as dark against his narrow, hooded eyes, which echo a muted gray. Though his skin is bright and *alive*, pale as starlight.

The only hint of color on him is from the pocket watch that hooks over the buttons of his waistcoat and hangs delicately at his side.

The Herald peers over the body, taking a moment to assess.

Then he turns to me.

"Monster of mischief," he says.

Like I've just made his day longer.

I should leave.

Turn back to my gate and disappear to the small room atop the tavern that I've called home these past weeks. The last thing I need is to give the Gods an excuse to turn on me.

Yet I stay, watching the Herald as intently as he watches me.

"Vampire?" he asks, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. "It doesn't look like your handiwork."

I don't reply.

Heralds are meddlers by trade. Not just in human affairs, but the affairs of monsters. Stupid little messengers delivering decrees and punishments, or guiding the souls of the dead into the After, thinking it makes them all-powerful because they work directly for the Gods.

There is nothing I have to say to him.

“It’s against the rules to kill humans, you know,” the Herald says, more to himself than to me. “But I guess you’ve never had a taste for rules.”

He kneels down beside what’s left of the man’s body, paying no more attention to me.

“Out you come,” he says, voice husky and almost bored. “It’s over now.”

I frown, as his words echo mine so closely.

I’d told the dead man that same thing, before he became a dead man.

The light across his body shimmers in response to the Herald, gathering in an orb at his heart. A glow of hope and a bright, bright future lost.

It expels in a firework of light, exploding into form.

The man, ghostly and translucent, looks down at what he once was.

The Herald pushes himself to his feet. He turns to me with those curious dead eyes.

“Nefas,” he says. “You should be careful of the company you keep. Another Herald might try to blame you for this. Then you’d face the Gods’ wrath as those before you have.”

At this, I laugh.

The idea of him threatening me is the funniest thing I’ve heard in years.

I tilt my chin high; his threat rolls off me like rainwater.

I won’t cower as my parents did.

“Another Nefas might kill you for suggesting that.”

The Herald’s smile is slow and cutting. “There are no other Nefas,” he says.

Like I wasn't aware.

Like I haven't spent the last three years alone, and the years before that forced to hide and bend to the shadows.

"The Gods wouldn't kill me," I challenge. "The last of a race is a precious thing."

The Herald's eyebrows lift, like he finds this amusing. If I didn't know what stiffs his kind were, I'd swear he wanted to laugh.

"Is that what you think?" he asks. The dead man's soul flickers beside him. "That you're precious? That the Gods would ever covet a monster?"

*I'm precious enough not to be killed, I think.*

After all, they let me go once before.

"Enjoy guiding your soul, cursed little messenger." I turn from him and back to my gate. "I imagine it won't be the last errand you'll have to run today."

"Enjoy your time, monster of mischief," he calls back to me. "I imagine it'll soon run out."

I ignore him. The words of a Herald have no power over me.

Whatever this shadow boy thinks, he's wrong. The Gods wouldn't turn on me when I haven't broken any rules.

My gateway flares before me, pulling me inward, and I step into it without hesitation. Without looking back at the two dead things behind me.

I let it swallow me whole and whisk me away from the night.



## SILAS

I've been dead—then a guide for the dead—for an eternity.  
Or at least it feels that way.

I wait with the dead man and regard his body.

It's not the worst I've seen.

He lies flat on the fishing plank, eyes wide and still in terror.  
His neck is red, a chunk of flesh hanging loosely from his jugular.

The vampire didn't have time to do much past killing him.

If I was any later, he would've been strewn across the ground  
in pieces.

Now that would have rocked this tiny village of Rosegarde and  
made certain the residents locked themselves in their homes for  
months, barricading their doors and stapling garlic over their  
window ledges.

They'd start selling stakes at the local store and preparing their  
pitchforks.

It's the same routine whenever a monster breaks the rules.

Humans gather; they riot. They tread carefully for as long as  
it takes for them to convince themselves they've scared away  
whatever monster dared cross into their village. And then they  
forget.

I've seen it hundreds of times.

Not just in Rosegarde, but in many places within my territory.

Each Herald has a territory. We work as messengers for the



Gods, conveying their decrees and curses to the monsters of the land. And on behalf of Thentos—the God of Death—we also guide souls to the After or the Never.

You'd think with all that interaction we'd be quite personable, but none of us work well in teams. So we broke off pieces of the world and divided them among ourselves. The mountains, the seas, the scraps of land that hover between.

All of it sectioned into tidy little territories so we can be responsible for our own monsters and messes.

What I wouldn't give to travel this world, to not be confined to one piece of land. To one kingdom. To Rosegarde and all the other tiny villages just like it that I patrol in and out of.

Existing, but never doing anything so bold as living.

I wonder if I traveled back when I was a human. I could've been an adventurer or a pirate for all I know, sailing the seas from the Fire Kingdom to the Alchemy Kingdom, pilfering from wealthy landowners who hoarded their gold and magic.

Then again, I could have also been a librarian.

I check my pocket watch and then ensure I have the obol coin, marked with the face of one of the three High Gods. The Charon's boat will be here soon, to ferry this man across the death shores and toward his afterlife, and he will require payment.

The same routine, every time.

"Must we go?" the man asks.

I've already done the hard job of explaining that he's dead, but next is trying to convince him not to be so angry about it.

Sometimes, that's easier said than done. Not all souls go peacefully. Most want to cling to their humanity. I understand the urge.

If I could remember anything about my past, I'd cling to it too.

"We must," I tell him, as firmly as I can.

I'm in no mood to bargain.

"The one with the white hair," the man says. "Every fear that sprang to my mind invaded the world when she touched me. How is that possible?"

*The Nefas.*

Monsters of mischief and illusion, devourers of fear and nightmare, so troublesome that the Gods threw them to the mortal realm over two hundred years ago and wiped their trace from every page of every story they could find.

Most of them were cursed and killed in the first decade of being sent here. I'd heard of a couple surviving, but as far as I knew, they were taken care of years ago.

I guess one slipped through the cracks.

And now she's here, in the Earth Kingdom.

In *my* territory.

It's just my luck.

"I thought her hair looked more silver" is all I say to the dead man. "And believe me, I'm not happy about her being here either."

I flip my pocket watch closed and tuck it back into my waistcoat.

All the territories in all the world and I have to get the one filled with monsters who don't follow the rules.

The water beyond us ripples, and I see the carcass of a boat come into view. It's small and unassuming, the wood rusted and burned with age. Its smoky oars slip in and out of the water on their own.

Each billow from them darkens the river, transforming it into the death currents that'll take this man's soul to where it needs to be. To where it deserves.

If a person is good, they go to the After.

If they're bad, their soul is banished to the Never.

And if they fall too close to the middle, they might just end up like me. A Herald, forced to serve the Gods.

I don't remember anything about my past, but I know this: All Heralds are humans who weren't good enough for the After or bad enough for the Never. My fate was balanced and so I am sentenced to serve until it can be swung one way or the other.

My past was taken from me. Every memory. Every ounce of pain or joy. They even took my true name.

One hundred years of service. That's how long I have to wait until I can earn the chance to move on to the After and regain my memories.

I'm only halfway through, but it feels like it's been an age. Sometimes I get a low, twisted pull in my heart that makes me think I'll be stuck this way forever.

"The girl with the white hair," the man says, as the boat docks beside us. "What is she really?"

*What is she?* I think.

She's a creature of night and shadow. A thing that wears humanity like a mask to lull her prey in close. And she does it well. I could barely see her true self flicker beyond it. Her wings, unused, shedding feathers like black snowfall as she stepped through her gateway.

The Last of the Nefas.

"She's a monster, just like all the others," I tell him. "She's not special."

I nod to the boat as it rocks gently against the riverbed, beckoning the man forward.

"It's time," I say.

I lead him onto the boat, and it steadies as soon as his feet

touch the wood, settled as it hooks onto his soul. Then I do what I always do. What I've done for so many years and what I'll have to do for so many more: I help ferry his soul across the shores and to the River of Death.

I take him to the one place I wish I could go.

Giving him the destiny I want so badly for myself.



I flick through the dead man's file from earlier, ready to add it to the Library of Souls. Which is just a fancy term for a filing cabinet in a room of blue-gray that stretches eons long.

It lies deep within the sorting zone, which is about as exciting as it sounds. At the mouth of the River of Death, it's a realm masquerading as a building. A half space caught between the dead and the living that only we can access.

And every time I come here, it looks new.

Sometimes I can't put my finger on what it is, but there's always a vague sense of change. A lantern might flicker differently, or a corridor might shape itself to the latest dead human's whim. Sometimes the floors will turn from marble to river water, slicking across my shoes.

It all sounds magical and exciting until you have to navigate the same damn corridor one hundred different ways just to put someone's file to rest.

Besides, however much this place shifts, there's no denying the gray tint it always has. Or that morbid musk I can never quite get out of my suits.

"One more down," I say.

I stamp the man's file with the word *delivered* and then light a match to char the edges closed.

It's the same routine, all day every day.

If it wasn't for my immortality, I'd probably die of boredom.

I think about filing it under *D* for *damn, I'm sick of this*, but I remember the dead man saying his name was Jared Mores, and since he was also torn apart by a vampire, I start to feel bad.

Knowing someone's name always makes it hard to have any fun in this place.

I slip the file under *M* for *Mores* and pat myself on the back for being a good little Herald who always does as he should.

*Well done, Silas. Gold star for you.*

Only when I push his drawer closed, my hand lingers. My own file is down here somewhere, lost to the endless rows.

I pull open a drawer at random and pick out a file I don't recognize, tearing the char to flick through its pages.

Would I know my own name if I came across it?

I steel myself and close my eyes, moving my hand from side to side and across the drawers until one brings an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

I open my eyes and curve my fingers around the handle, wondering if maybe—

"It's not in there," a voice says.

A figure pokes out from a nearby drawer.

The Keeper of Files.

He crawls from the cabinet, gray limbs fluid as his hands slick around the drawer to lever himself back to the floor. His suit is tinted green and bunches up over his head where no clear line draws between his neck and his chin.

He is a solid blob of a creature, no more than half my size.

A creature of riddles.

"You won't find it," he says, as I begin to walk away. His voice drifts through the room like a taunt. "At least, not in the places you'd think to look."

I turn back to him. "How do you know where I'd look?"

"Your name would be a good start," he says. "But since you can't remember it, you wouldn't think to look there."

I hold back my glare. "I guess you'd know what my real name was?"

"I'm the Keeper of Files. You're a file. Yes, yes, *I* remember."

"Don't suppose you'd tell me?" I ask, trying my luck.

The Keeper of Files tugs his lips upward in a cracked smile. "Heralds are not meant to consider their service so woefully, young boy of old worlds. That's why their memories are wiped. You are in this play now, so you must perform your lines with gusto. Yes, yes, play the part!"

I arch an eyebrow. "So that's a *no* to telling me about my past then?"

When the Keeper doesn't blink for a good minute, I realize I'd be better off talking to a brick wall.

*You're supposed to be atoning for your sins, Silas, not trying to remember them,* I remind myself.

I should be focused only on my service. Being a Herald is not about me. It's about the word and will of the Gods that must be conveyed.

*Blab, blab, blab.*

That spiel is the first memory I have: waking up in the sorting zone surrounded by thick curtains and a man in a purple suit telling me I had a sin to make amends for and that I must serve

the Gods until my fate is decided. Then he pressed a dagger into my hand and told me it would help to keep the villains at bay.

I later found out it was Thentos himself, God of Death.

On the few occasions I've spoken to other Heralds, they recall their first day as hazy. A blur of etiquette and edicts they scarcely remember the specifics of, but I remember every detail exactly.

Most of all, how every strange thing Thentos said didn't feel so strange at all. His words and instructions—even the damn suit he was wearing—felt like a dream I already had, a dozen times over.

Only of course it wasn't.

Dreams imply the possibility of waking up and I've never woken up from this.

"Since you're here, I need you to do me a favor," I say to the Keeper now, straightening my tie as if it'll straighten out my priorities. "Convey a message to the Gods. Let them know that I encountered a Nefas in the Earth Kingdom, in the village of Rosegarde. They may want to keep an eye on her. She seemed the type to cause trouble."

I almost feel jealous of that.

How fun it would be to cause a little trouble every now and again.

"You saw a Nefas?" the Keeper of Files asks.

The curiosity in his tone doesn't go amiss, but there was nothing peculiar about the monster to report beyond her existence.

Not including her arrogance, of course.

But then all monsters are arrogant. They all think they're something special when really they're just nameless creatures, whose mess I have to tidy up and whose curses I have to relay when they inevitably break the rules.

*Nameless.*

That thought makes me wonder.

Most monsters prefer distinct scratching on the forest floors or some other calling card to set them apart, but that Nefas... the way she regarded herself.

I bet she has a name.

I wonder what it tastes like.

"How impressive to escape a Nefas unharmed!" the Keeper of Files says.

I shrug. "That isn't saying much, since I can't die."

He grins. His teeth are filed to points. "Lived to tell the tale but you want me to tell it instead," he says. "I imagine the higher-ups are interested in what you have to say."

*Higher-ups?*

I almost laugh at the idea.

The High Gods who rule the blessed realm of Oksenya never leave it, and the River Gods who protect them rarely abandon their positions.

Instead, we get our messages right here in the sorting zone. Whenever the Gods have something for us to pass on, it appears in our respective pigeonholes as a small quill, with purple flower petals for feathers. Only when we put the pen to sacred parchment does the message write itself, ready for us to relay.

That's not going to change because of one little Nefas.

"If the Gods want any further information, they know where to find me," I say. "Here. As always."

The Keeper of Files clucks at my wry tone. "You'll do well to remember who you are," he says. "Yes, yes, try your best."

The seriousness in his voice almost makes me chuckle.



Remembering who I am is the one thing I can't do and this creature knows it. I'd kill to even remember my real name.

Silas is a name I saw carved on a headstone at my very first visit to a cemetery. I took it for myself to make sure I don't forget that I'm somebody to be remembered too, even if I don't know who that somebody is.

You can't forget yourself if you have a name.

A place like this swallows people up, turning them into mindless servants until their one hundred years are up.

It won't happen to me if I keep ahold of that.

*Silas. Silas. Silas.*

"Did the Nefas say anything to you?" the Keeper of Files asks.

I raise an eyebrow. "Anything like what?"

"Monsters whisper many things," The Keeper taps a nearby file drawer with a spindled finger, the sound like a ticking clock. "Betrayal and woe and curses."

Each word is punctuated by the drum of his long fingers.

"Curses," I repeat, thinking back to the encounter.

*Cursed little messenger.*

That's what the Nefas had called me. And she wasn't exactly wrong.

"Not that such things are of interest to me," the Keeper says quickly. "Not in my play. Not in my lines. My only interest is the files and nothing more."

He stretches his arms across the various drawers in a hug.

As though he didn't start this conversation in the first place.

Still, it makes me think.

Every monster who breaks the rules and takes the life of a human is cursed by the Gods. Only, the great secret that the

monsters of the world don't know—and that only we as Heralds are privy to—is that it can be broken.

The Gods' curse isn't without flaws. It has rules, as all magic must.

A counter-magic, to ensure there is always balance.

If a monster wants to break their curse, they must absorb the blood and power of three formidable beings: a vampire—to attain their chance at new life; a banshee—to claim their daunting; and a God—to regain their magic. And of course, drink from the River of Eternity, to reclaim their immortality.

*Lucky for them.*

I wish there was a hidden solution to unbind me from my fate, but for Heralds there's no such loophole.

Besides we *can't* kill.

Not even vampires or banshees. If any Herald were to try, we would be struck down in flames and erased from the world.

The Keeper of Files opens a drawer and then crawls inside.

"Why do you think you can't accept your duties like the other Heralds?" he asks, his voice muffled by the files he roots around in. "Why do you think you are strange?"

I pause at the question.

Truthfully, I'm not sure. It would be easier if I could accept my duty, but the gnawing in my heart is inescapable.

If I ever slept, it would keep me awake.

"I don't think I'm meant to be like this," I say.

"You believe the Gods made a mistake when they turned you into a Herald."

It is not a question.

"I just know that I don't belong here."

The Keeper of Files pops his head out of the drawer and

blinks for the first time. "A Herald can only be unmade by the God of Death, and memories can only be unmade by the God of Forgetting," he says.

I smirk. "Thanks, but I don't think pleading with a God for my life back will work."

"Not plead with," he answers, gaze sharpening. "Why, you could simply absorb their power to use for your own, then make or unmake yourself! What fun!"

I grimace at his cavalier suggestion of treachery.

The Keeper of Files has always had an odd sense of humor.

"Gods don't die by mortal blades," I remind him, brushing the suggestion off. "I guess I'll have to pass on trying to murder one. But thanks for the tip."

The Keeper of Files merely gestures to my belt, where my dagger is fixed. Two snakes loop around the blade, their tongues hissing at a handle shaped like wings.

My gift from Thentos when I first became a Herald.

*To keep the villains at bay.*

"Is that a mortal blade?" he asks.

His eyes do not leave mine.

I grit my teeth in place of gripping the dagger.

"I'm no killer."

He cocks his head to one side. "How would you know?"

I glower.

I don't need the reminder that my past is a mystery, or that I could have done something truly awful to deserve the hand of fate I've been dealt, but I'm a Herald now.

And Heralds can't kill, even if we wanted to.

That blade is for defense only.

*So get someone to use it for you,* a voice in my head says.

I nearly snort at the thought.

What being, monster or otherwise, would be desperate enough to help me kill a God and steal back my life?

"If treachery is rejected, then I think I'm bored," the Keeper of Files tells me, snapping me back to reality. "Don't hurt yourself overthinking. And remember, your service is appreciated. It will be for an eternity."

He leans down to whisper.

"But shhh, don't tell anyone I told you that."

I adjust my tie, making sure the winged pin that allows me to travel through the world is perfectly straight.

"There is no eternity in my contract," I correct him. "I've served fifty years and I only have another fifty until I'm free."

The Keeper of Files tilts his head, studying my neatly pressed suit. "Eternities are ever changing."

*Not mine*, I think sharply.

I won't allow it.

I could not handle another clump of seemingly indefinite years, relaying the Gods' every whim alongside so many Heralds waiting for their chance at redemption.

Unquestioning. Unliving.

*So do something about it*, that voice in my head says. *Find your loophole.*



Deep in the vein of Rosegarde, there's only ever one place that people gather come sundown.

The Covet sits on the very edge of the canals, with tree veins encasing its windows in a forest of rich orange ivy, no matter the season. The swells of music—soft violin strings bolstered by drums and brassy horns—cascade from every open crevice and cracked door. When you look straight at it on a bright day, the building could masquerade as normal, but if you catch it out of the corner of your eye, in the sketch of night, you might very well see it sway and curve.

Of course, that could be the ale talking. Or the magic.

There's rarely a difference between the two.

And for the past two months, it's become all too familiar. I've been in one place for too long and my parents taught me better.

*Keep moving*, they always said. *Never let them track you.*

Never let them see you, they meant.

And definitely don't talk to a Herald.

If my parents could've seen me the other night, they'd be furious.

*No*, I correct myself. *They'd be worried.*

Being worried was their favorite pastime.

"You're in late today," a chirpy voice says.

I look across the bar to see a young boy with deep brown skin

and light blond hair dressed, as always, in the navy robes of the Academics.

Tristan.

He wipes his robes, scowling at the ale stain on his front pocket.

"I've spent hours writing about banshees," he tells me.

He picks up a notebook that's resting on the bar and holds it up like a prize.

"I can't wait for you to hear about what I found at the library."

Tristan is always far too eager to talk, *especially* when it's about the library. He spends half his time there, when he's not spending the other half in the corner of the Covet scribbling furiously in his notebook.

I take said notebook out of Tristan's hands and try to focus.

Around us, the Covet is alive with night.

People gather everywhere: on tables and the rickety stairs that lead up to the guest rooms. Above us, the candle lanterns sway as the dancing shakes the very walls.

"How long were you waiting for me?" I ask Tristan over the noise.

"Technically I wasn't waiting, I was working," he says. "But also, two hours."

I snort a laugh and crack open the notebook's ink-soaked pages.

"You should spend less time studying monsters and more time making actual friends."

"I don't need friends when I have my books," Tristan proclaims. "And you."

I'm a little outraged. "We're not friends, Tristan."

I've been reminding him of that every day since I got here.

Then again, on the list of humans I can stand, his name is at the top. He's also the only one whose nightmares I haven't touched.

Tristan's far too amicable to be riddled with fear. I think I might actually feel guilty if I plagued him with his worst terrors.

I'm also not sure what his fears would be if I tried to find them. Buried under a mountain of books? Something tells me he'd quite enjoy that.

"So, banshees," I say, flicking through the notebook. "What did you find?"

Tristan's face lights up.

Before his parents moved to Queen Morrow of the Soil's Earth Kingdom, where scholars study nature, he lived in the Alchemy Kingdom. Their speciality is magic and monsters, and despite the move, Tristan hasn't switched studies.

"Right here," he says, pointing excitedly to a page.

There's a haggard old woman drawn in the corner, with long graying hair and a cloak that drags across the floor.

"Banshees are supposed to be old crones whose screams cause the death of innocents, right?" he answers his own question before I even have the chance to nod. "Wrong. The first mention of a banshee is of a young woman who was drowned for using dark magic. Apparently she let out howling cries that filled the village with anguish, then days later somebody would die. They thought she was cursing the village, but I think she was *warning* them."

"Is that so?"

"Don't you see? Banshees don't bring forth death," Tristan exclaims. "I think they sense it instead!"

I mumble a *bub* as though the idea is revolutionary.

Really, banshees are a mix of both legends. Forecasters of deaths and bringers of it too.

"Interesting theory" is all I say.

I push the notebook back over and Tristan pockets it with a grin.

"It won't be a theory for long," he says. "I'll prove it once I find one."

I pause to eye him curiously. "You're going banshee hunting?"

"If I'm going to write about monsters, I probably need to meet one," Tristan says.

The irony of it makes me stifle a laugh. "Good luck with that."

"I won't need luck," he tells me, ever confident. "There are monsters lurking among us, Atia. They could even be here, in this very tavern."

"Wow. How frightening."

Tristan leans in close across the bar, his eyes darting around us to make sure nobody is listening in. I can smell the garlic wards on him that all the villagers have been wearing since Sapphir's attack two nights ago.

"Did you see the traveler?" he asks in a whisper. "The man who came through here selling elixirs from the Water Kingdom?"

I stiffen.

The man at the fishing plank did mention being a trader, but I stopped listening after he started talking about phial sizes.

"Why do you ask?"

"He was killed two nights ago," Tristan says. "Throat ripped out. People are saying that it's a vampire."

"But not a banshee."

Tristan shakes his head. "Where one monster goes, another follows."

I nod. "I'm sure banshees and vampires are the best of friends."

Tristan is undeterred by my sarcasm. "How can a seer be so close-minded?"



A *seer*.

Now that's an identity that has come to bite me in the backside.

I may be able to travel from kingdom to kingdom at the wave of a gateway, but even I need a place to rest. Coin to rent a room. Some monsters might want to sleep on forest floors in the freezing rain, but I'd rather have my comforts. And in the human world, gold is given in exchange for goods.

The best goods I could think to trade for were fake futures.

In other kingdoms I've been a painter or a storyteller. Once I was even a jailer. But a traveling seer draws the least attention and the most gold, and the white of my hair lends perfectly to the lie.

People are superstitious and love nothing more than to be told they're *on the right path*.

"You're barking up the wrong tree if you want someone open," I tell Tristan. "Come to me when you want sarcasm and pessimism, or anything else that means I don't have to smile."

"But you've got a beautiful smile," Tristan says.

A sheepish blush creeps onto his cheeks and he looks down to the floor, as though he hadn't expected himself to say that.

He clears his throat and I know what he's going to ask me next.

It wouldn't be the first time.

"Did you want to go for a walk later?" He bites his lip. "We could head to the lake and watch the stars."

His fingers tap against the bar, as they always do when he's nervous.

I swallow down my sigh, feeling a pang of guilt I'm not used to.

We could head to the lake and watch the stars if Tristan wasn't human and I wasn't the kind of thing that hunted them.

If he wasn't nice and I wasn't the opposite of all things nice.

We could play out the romantic scene, skipping stones in the water.

If it were any other man or woman, Tristan's words would make their heart pound. A pretty boy asking pretty things.

But I can't see him that way.

He's too delicate—*breakable*—and there isn't a spark or hunger there. Though even if there was someone I felt that with, I would never allow myself to give in to it.

*Don't ever let them see you.*

And I never have.

Tristan told me I was pretty once, but it was only because he hasn't seen my true face.

"You don't want to go to the lake with me, Tristan."

*The last man who did didn't survive.*

Tristan doesn't press further.

He takes care not to look too disappointed.

"I'll have to stick to talking your ear off," he says, a large smile covering up any awkwardness that was there before. "Do you know how rare it is to find another scholar from the Alchemy Kingdom?"

I shrug. "I'm guessing rare."

"*Very*," he says. "As in two. You and me."

Or just him, since I've never actually been to the Alchemy Kingdom. Still, it made a convenient cover story for every time I let slip more knowledge on monsters than I should have.

*I left Alchemy once my parents died*, I told him.

A lie that stopped Tristan inquiring any more. I didn't need to tell him how they were ripped apart by Gods and how it was partly my fault.

How I'd never imagined that after every lesson they taught me

about being gentle when invading nightmares, that they could ever break the Gods' rules and kill a human.

Or how when I tried to escape that night, a strange man caught me by the wrist and I still feel his grip and smell the ash of his skin.

All Tristan needed to know was that I once had parents and now I don't.

"Are you Tristan Berrow?" someone asks.

Tristan's eyes quickly darken as they're drawn to the voice.

I turn and see a man with a collar that funnels up to his chin, a cigarette pinched between his lips.

He moves like water reeds, swaying slightly on his feet, jittering up and down as if there are things inside he can't contain. His skin is pale, and though he's short, something about him towers over Tristan.

"Where are your parents?" the stranger asks, voice scratchy.

Tristan puffs his chest out in an effort to appear bigger. "I'm managing things tonight."

The stranger blows a thick cloud of smoke into the air and Tristan immediately wafts it away.

"So grown-up."

I watch with interest.

Such a tiny speck of a man and yet his every word seems to ruffle Tristan. I can taste the sweetness of his fear. My stomach growls.

"It's time to give what you owe, thief," the man says.

Tristan's eyes grow wide with the accusation. "We've settled our debts."

"And what about your promises?"

The man steps closer and stamps his cigarette out on the bar, crushing it into the woodgrain.

“Give what you owe, or I’ll make you watch while I gut your parents.”

His words are intended for Tristan, but they hit me instead.

*Not while she’s here,* my father’s memory yells.

*She’s a child!* my mother screams, as my father’s head bounces onto the floor beside her.

The blade cuts into her heart next.

*Atia, run!*

And I did.

I ran because my wings were too small to fly, and I was sure it was fast enough until—

*Your parents’ disobedience could never be forgiven,* the ashen man had said, hand tight around my wrist. *Now take this mercy and run. Run far and as fast as you can from us.*

Something sharp and jagged splinters inside me at the memory and suddenly I am so angry it cannot be controlled.

I stand, my chair clattering violently to the floor.

Tristan and the stranger turn to me in surprise.

My heart pounds relentlessly inside my chest. When I look down at my hands, I realize they’re shaking.

“Don’t threaten him like that.”

My voice is guttural, more a growl than anything else. I haven’t thought about that day—haven’t heard my mother’s screams fill my memories and let the smell of the ashen man invade my nostrils—in years.

I haven’t let myself.

“Mind your business, girl,” the man says.

I should.

Monsters should never get involved in the business of humans, but I can’t help it.

“That’s enough,” I say, controlling my temper the best I can.

The stranger looks amused. There is no sign of fear in his eyes as he regards my human form. “Listen here, little girl—”

I thrust my palm up and straight into his face.

The stranger’s fragile nose shatters easily in my hand.

He slumps backward onto the floor, eyes bulging at the outburst. The blood leaks from him like an old pipe.

“You—you—”

“I said, *that’s enough*,” I repeat, the finality in my words unwavering.

I take another step toward him.

The stranger skitters backward.

Now there is fear in his eyes.

*I could make your worst nightmares come true, I think.*

*I could crawl into your mind and skitter through your every fear until you beg me for mercy.*

*I could drink the air as it turned black with your fear, letting it slip down my throat and across my skin like a warm blanket.*

*I could coat this building in your blood and let the Gods and their rules be damned.*

I swallow, knowing I can’t do any of that.

Not here.

Not with Tristan and the Covet’s patrons now turning to stare.

I may want to show this man my true face and watch the color drain from his cheeks, but revealing myself to an entire village of humans is just asking to be hunted.

By them and the Gods.

Better to leave Rosegarde of my own choice than be chased out.

I take in a steadying breath.

“I’m the village’s new seer,” I say, swallowing my fury. “I could

look into your mind and find every dirty secret you've ever hidden. Every body."

The stranger's eyes narrow.

"I could reveal it all to the village guards. Or to your other clients. I'm sure they'd appreciate the leverage to wipe off their debts."

The stranger's lips curl in hatred.

Perhaps he knows it's a lie and that every word I've spoken is a farce, but I can sense his worry as he mulls over what it would mean if it were true.

How I could ruin him.

"Hide behind your seer." He sneers at Tristan, dragging his sleeve across his nose to wipe the blood. "This won't end here. You know she always gets what she's owed."

*She?* I watch the stranger's retreating figure, until he rips open the street door and it slams back behind him, nearly ripping the bell from its hinges.

*Who is this mysterious she?*

"I can't believe you just did that," Tristan says.

"Would you rather I didn't?"

He gapes at me like he's not sure either way.

I shrug and pick up the chair I'd thrown to the floor. I settle back down into the rickety thing, still feeling the fire of the confrontation unsettled in my bones.

"We're good people by the way," Tristan says suddenly. "My parents and I. We're *not* thieves."

"I didn't say you were."

"You must have wondered what he meant."

"I make it a habit never to wonder about other people," I say. "They always turn out to be far less interesting than I imagine."

Tristan snorts. "You're strange, Atia. Maybe even stranger than I thought."

I quirk a brow.

"In a nice way," he says hurriedly. "Strange is better than boring."

I muse over this. "I could be boring."

"I wish you wouldn't," he says. "I'd have nobody to talk to."

"I suppose talking about monsters doesn't get you far in social circles."

"I'm not sure why," Tristan says. "We all have a bit of monster in us. But we all have a bit of something else too."

*Not me*, I think.

"What else?"

"Hope," he says confidently. The voice of someone who's never had it stolen from them. "Family. Friends. People who make us want to do better."

I swallow, a pit growing large in my stomach.

Tristan might have all that, but I don't.

The Gods took it from me long ago and it's time I left Rosegarde before I trick myself into thinking I could ever have it again.

I must disappear.

Let the people I've crossed paths with forget I ever existed.

Become a story and nothing more.



## ATIA

Despite what you might have heard, the night was not actually made for monsters.

It was made for the humans to find freedom from the harsh light of being seen. To let them loose from the restraints they'd chosen for themselves or the ones that had been put onto them.

It was made to let them be vulnerable, exposed.

That's when the monsters came.

When we claimed the night for ourselves.

*We have no choice, my father once said as I, eight years old, stared up at him. After Oksenya, this is all the Gods left for us. Just the night. Just the shadows. And we must treat those shadows well, for they keep us hidden. The human realm is our sanctuary, Atia.*

Despite its apparent beauty, when my father spoke of Oksenya, his voice was always carved from the narrows of the world, quiet and foreboding. Only when he spoke of the human realm and the memories we'd make was it filled with warmth and comfort.

That's the thing I remember most about him.

Not the large spiraled horns that were so grand and intricate they looked like mazes on his head. Riddles that had sprung from his mind to take shape for all to see.

I remember his voice and how safe it made me feel. How it made me wonder about others of our kind and if they were all so reverent.



As for my mother, I remember the way she sang in clucks and hums, a mix of sweet murmurs and clicking tongues. The melody of her, even in the way she walked around the small barn that we called home.

She fed the crowing roosters with a spring in her step that felt like a dance, and gave the horses bushels of apples that made them nuzzle into her neck like they were telling her secrets.

The farm had all manner of arias and so did my mother.

She was a song. She made me smile the way music makes the humans smile. Made me dance and laugh, the way their favorite ditties do.

Whenever she held my hand, I couldn't imagine why the Gods would wage war and kick such creatures from Oksenya. My parents never spoke of it or gave me details beyond the fact that it happened. I don't know why the Gods hated us so much to start a war, or why others of our kind would have killed humans when they were thrown to this realm.

Looking at my parents, it didn't seem possible.

Yes, we fed on nightmares. We left the farm to steal fear, but that was chaos, not carnage. Dream, not reality.

*How could it have all been a lie?*

I grit my teeth now as the moon hides behind a growing cloud, darkening the streets.

I linger in wait at the top of one of the stone staircases that connect the streets of Rosegarde. It is a village of hills and steps, with houses that connect up a mossy backdrop and canals that slip between them like delicate veins, leading to the forested lake below.

The drunks stumble through the streets, thinking carefully about whether to take the staircases or the slopes.

I watch them all.

There's a knack to hunting.

For the first year I was alone after my parents were killed, I'd hunt anyone and anything, crawling through windows to steal whatever nightmares I could. Now I prefer to be more meticulous in the hunt. Savor it. Take the time to find the perfect prey.

It's not like I'm picky. I just have rules:

Nobody younger than me.

No women alone (for they have enough fear in the days and especially the nights).

No royalty or otherwise far-too-prominent and easily missed people.

And no families.

Everyone has their tastes and I just so happened to like loners with far too much bravado. Besides, I may as well make this meal good since it will be my final one in Rosegarde, before I leave for less familiar villages and towns.

I lick my hungry lips.

The confrontation with Tristan's stranger has left me famished and the beast inside me must be fed. It must be settled.

So I watch.

It doesn't take long before I see Tristan meandering into a nearby alley.

The moon is dark and the air bites hard enough for him to pull the collar of his thin coat up high to his chin. He exhales a cold breath and holds his books close to his chest, as if protecting them from the harsh wind.

A scholar, through and through.

I smile a little.

Tristan is a strange kind of human, untouched by any horrors

the world has to hold. He studies monsters, but he knows nothing real of them.

I hope it stays that way. Let him be wide-eyed forever, speaking of myths like they are magic. Leave the shadows and its world for creatures like me to deal with.

Tristan looks up to the moon and holds his thumb out to it. Then, with a large grin, he turns on his heel and heads down the alley that leads toward the first of many canals.

It's only a moment later that I see a figure slip after him.

I pause and step forward, peering closer through the brush that hides me.

The stranger from earlier throws his cigar to the floor, the end blazing against the cobbles.

He was waiting for Tristan.

*How could he even be so sure Tristan would take this route?*

The slopes of the alleys are certainly not the quickest way to his home. They're a far more winding and scenic path.

The man stares after him.

I recognize that stare. It's the same look I've had for the past few hours—of wanting to make prey from someone.

But the only thing this hunter has done is to make himself prey to me.

*Never get involved in the business of humans, Atia.*

*That is how they trap you.*

I hear my father's scolding voice, warning me to keep my mind on my own problems and not those of mortals.

Yet as this man follows Tristan through the narrow alleyways, I follow too.



## SILAS

I approach my designated pigeonhole with a feeling of tedium. I can see the quill already, feathered with purple flower petals, practically glowing in the small space.

A message from the Gods.

Yet another decree to be ferried.

Yet another day of the same.

I close my eyes and blow out a breath as I step forward.

“That looks important.”

The Keeper of Files is sprawled across the floor at my feet, eyebrows wiggling by my toes.

I jump back. “What are you doing?”

“Napping,” he says. “You nearly stepped on me.”

“Why were you napping on the floor?”

“I was tired. Why were you walking around with your eyes closed?” He pulls himself to standing.

I exhale, knowing there’s no use in trying to reason with a creature who spends his days doing nothing but watching souls be alphabetized.

“Shouldn’t you be guarding the files or something?” I ask. “Why are you by the quills?”

“I delivered your message about the Nefas to the Gods. Yes, yes, just like you asked.” He says it with a grumble that tells me he was

not happy about it. “It seems they replied. Very quickindeed. I bet the play will be starting again! Do you have your lines ready?”

“Sometimes I think that you must be very drunk,” I say.

The Keeper looks indignant. “That’s beside the point.”

*Does any of this have a point? I think. The messages, the Gods, the repetition of my entire life.*

As I think it, the door to the file room swings open and three Heralds appear in a perfect row. Their suits are crisp black, each with the same tie pin I have that holds our wings and allows us to fly through the shadows.

Their short hair is cut to the perfect centimeter above their ears. They are copies of each other, their differences smudging away so that none of the humanity remains in their blond hair or green eyes.

They are nothing but what the Gods have made them, only the smallest shards of who they once were seem to remain.

Is that what I look like? Is it what they think of me too?

Maybe we’re all just masquerading.

“Earth Kingdom Herald,” one greets me.

*Silas*, I want to scream.

My damn name is Silas.

“Hello, Fire Kingdom Herald,” I say back. “I see you’re wearing the black suit today. Very fetching.”

The Herald doesn’t smile.

She looks down to regard her unchanging attire, the same as all the others. I don’t know why they won’t wear anything else, shifting our attire at will as I do.

Apparently, I’m the only one who wants some kind of variety in this day-to-day monotony.

"May we check our messages too?" she asks. She looks down at the Keeper. "Then I'll need to file. I had a decapitation and I would like it off my hands."

"Literally?" I ask.

"It nearly was," she says. "There was a splatter as I arrived. It could've stained my tie."

I blink. "That would've been unfortunate."

"I have spares," she says. "It wouldn't have mattered."

"Except to the human."

The Herald rolls her eyes. "Everything matters to them."

As though we were not once *them*.

"And to the monsters," one of the others says.

An Alchemy Kingdom Herald, whose voice is as deep as a cavern. He polishes his tie pin with his sleeve.

"They are all sentimental. I've heard the rumblings," he says. "Up in arms about missing monsters. I ferried a soul today and a lykai was there waiting. It begged me to look into its lost mate and *ask the Gods* if they knew anything. As though we relay messages for just anyone."

"Let us pretend we care about their petty messages," the Fire Kingdom Herald says. "Let us pretend less monsters is a bad thing."

"Let us congratulate whoever is stealing them away," the Alchemy Kingdom Herald agrees with a hint of a laugh.

It doesn't quite reach his lips. A Herald could never do something as human as smile.

My brows knit together.

I hadn't heard any whispers about missing monsters, but I suppose you have to actually talk to other Heralds to be in the know.

I'd really rather not.

"I suppose I should return to the files then," the Keeper says to me.

He grumbles at the end to our conversation and slinks toward the door to retreat back to the library.

"Do not ask me for help with your lost head," he intones over his shoulder. "I am a busy thing, yes, yes. And I have helped you enough."

"I'm actually quite busy too," I say, trying to dismiss myself from the other Heralds.

But they have already brushed past me and begun heading toward their pigeonholes.

I wasn't joking when I said we weren't team players. Most prefer to be alone. Maybe that's how they were in life too. Silent and unblinking in the face of decapitation, unless it were to stain their suits.

Maybe that's what I was like.

I take the quill from the pigeonhole.

*Who were you, Silas?* I ask myself. *A coward or a killer? An adventurer or a giant drip?*

I grab a nearby piece of parchment and put the quill to it, letting the pen come alive in my hand. The ink scribbles quickly, scratching its message in cursive across the page.

I lean in closer, reading it twice over to ensure I'm not mistaken, but there it is, clear as day.

The Gods' latest command.

I don't expect to smile, but I do.



It's late when I find myself at the Rosegarde lake, on the small fishing plank where the scent of the Nefas still lingers.

I reach out a hand to touch the air where she opened her gateway. It still feels warm with her magic and the promise of death that follows her.

It's a scent I know well.

I can smell it, smell *her*, still hiding in this village somewhere. The remnants of her power are like the last waves of a storm, and there's enough of it left to linger that I could find her easily if I wanted.

I could track her through this village in a heartbeat.

*Are you sure this is a good idea, Silas?* I ask myself. *Are you sure this is right?*

"No," I say out loud.

But I do it anyway.

I close my fist around the warm air, trapping a shard of her magic in my palm.

*I'm coming, little monster.*