

THE  
NIGHT  
HUNT

ALSO BY ALEXANDRA CHRISTO

THE HUNDRED KINGDOMS NOVELS

*To Kill a Kingdom*

*Princess of Souls*

THE CROOKED DUOLOGY

*Into the Crooked Place*

*City of Spells*

# THE NIGHT HUNT

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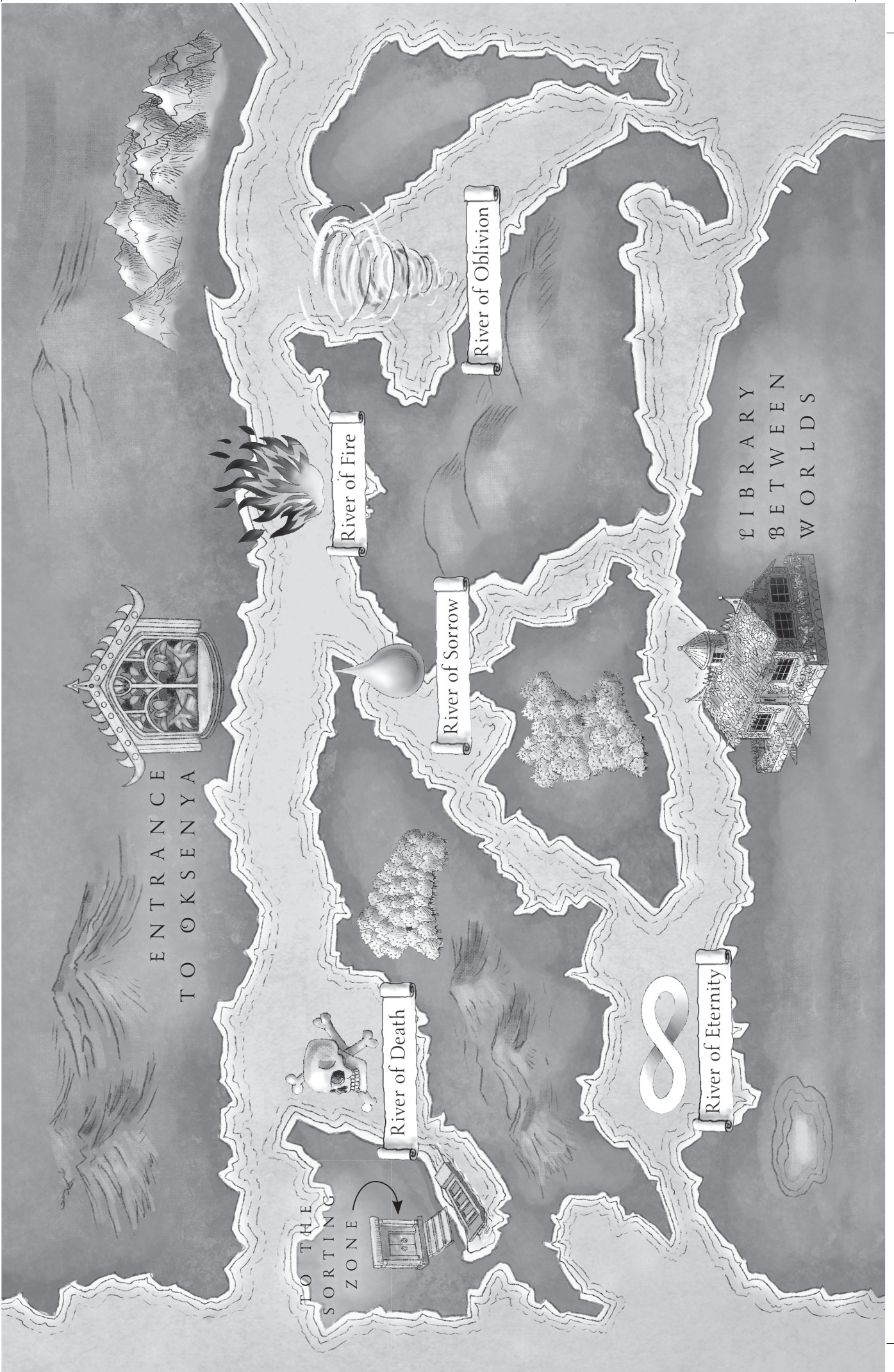
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FOR DANIEL,  
FOR ALWAYS TAKING ON THE WORLD'S  
GODS AND MONSTERS  
BY MY SIDE





ENTRANCE  
TO OKSENYA

TO THE  
SORTING  
ZONE

River of Death

River of Sorrow

River of Fire

River of Oblivion

River of Eternity

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# 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 singing, 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 a cool glow 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 dreams 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 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 the God of Eternity was killed and my kind were banished to 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 them to the mortals, they stifled their powers.

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

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.

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 on his chest.

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.