Blue Moon Rising

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Summary

In a twist of fate, James Lake Junior disappeared mere days after his tenth birthday. His body was never found.

Five years later, Atlas is a normal teenage boy, who just happens to work for a murderous secretive organization of shape-changing trolls. It's not so bad though. The healthcare is free at least.

Until he finds a magical amulet.

This must be some sort of mistake. Atlas can't be the Trollhunter. Merlin was insane. He worked for the Janus Order for Pale Lady's sake. What was that stupid wizard thinking?

Suffice to say, things get...interesting.

(Updates every other Friday.)
Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I'm back with a new series! I've really been wanting to write an AU of an AU this series with the same characters for awhile. This will follow the series more closely than my other fics and will be a long fanfic. I honestly don't know how many chapters are going to be in this one. Big thanks to my Beta Reader Ash. You can find them on tumblr at https://ashtheunitato.tumblr.com/. I'll be releasing more chapters soon enough. I've got about 10k or so words already written and will release periodically.

If you have any questions about this series I would be happy to answer them. Reviews and kudos are always appreciated.
Chapter Summary

Atlas is just a normal teenage boy, who just happens to work for a murderous secretive organization of shape-changing trolls. It's not so bad though. The healthcare is free at least.

The morning sun peaked up from the edges of the city, another sleepless night coming to a close.

Sunrises in Arcadia really were the best. Not that he had been anywhere else. Traveling outside of the town's perimeters was forbidden. It had been a quiet watch for the teen, which was rare, considering the company he kept.

It was chance that he stumbled on the scene. Normally he was inside by this point, away from prying human eyes, however something made him stray from his usual routine.

Perhaps it was boredom. After all, Atlas had little to do at the Janus Order outside of his regular duties. He could have trained, he supposed, but that would mean getting beaten within an inch of his life (changelings did not pull their punches) and he was already smacked around enough in his daily life.

So, when he came upon the fight between Bular and the Trollhunter in the canals, suffice to say, he got a little sidetracked.

He felt for the Trollhunter, he really did. Bular was a monster in every sense of the word. Even now, nearly six years later, he still shuddered in fear whenever he crossed paths with the troll. It was no surprise to anyone at the Order that when Bular showed up, Atlas was out.

Still, the Trollhunter held his own, better really.
“Yield, Kanjigar.”

“A Trollhunter never yields.”

Atlas resisted the urge to roll his eyes, because in all honestly, who said that in real life?

Wait. Scratch that. The image of his mentor came to mind.

Pulling out his snack, the boy watched in open curiosity as the fight continued. The leaves kept him hidden from view of the trolls thankfully. Not that they would have noticed. Both trolls were completely engrossed with killing each other.

Atlas had to hand it to the Trollhunter. He was a formidable fighter, able to match most of his blows with the larger troll's. Still, matching was not winning.

Bular kicked the other away, the Trollhunter’s sword ripped from his grasp, sliding underneath the morning light. Atlas winced when the Trollhunter went for it, his hand burned by the sunlight. That had to have hurt.

His fingers itched to help, to throw the poor troll some sort of bone, but he knew it would be all for not.

The Trollhunter would probably have baulked at his offer anyways. Atlas frowned, looking down at his smaller claws. He was just some changeling’s bastard, the unfortunate offspring of a human and changeling. As a hybrid, he was useless. At best, he would simply be a minor distraction, another reason for Gunmar’s son to kill him. At worst, he would be killed before he even entered the battlefield. While fast, he was considerably weaker, lacking the monstrous strength, durability, and access to magic that other trolls had.

As the sun rose, so too did the battle, with the Trollhunter running up the canal to the underside of Arcadia Bridge, Bular trailing close behind.

As entertaining as the battle was, it looked like it was coming to a close, as was the window of time before Atlas had to return home. The sun was getting mighty high in the sky, which meant he had duties to attend to soon enough.
He bit into his meal, the apple crisp and sweet. If he were an optimist, he would be cheering this “Kanjigar” on. It wasn’t often someone could go toe-to-toe with Bular. He seemed like a courageous fellow, someone Atlas could have admired on a good day.

But today was not a good day.

Instead, he felt sadness for the troll. Bular knew his surroundings better than the Trollhunter did and would take advantage of any opportunity before him. The Trollhunter had lost the moment he exited the underground in search for the monster.

His thoughts soon proved true. Bular cornered Kanjigar to the edge of the bridge, forcing half the other’s face into the sun. This would not be pretty.

“It’s me or the sun.” Bular said. “Either way, you’re doomed.”

To Atlas’ surprise, the Trollhunter did not yield. Instead, he said, “No. The amulet will find a champion. We will stop you and your master. I may end, but the fight will not.”

And then he threw himself off the bridge.

Atlas lurched forward on instinct, then caught himself by grabbing onto one of the tree branches. There was nothing he could do. He watched, stomach rolling as the troll fell, turning into rock in record time. The sound of stone cracking and breaking apart against the bottom of the canal nearly made Atlas vomit.

Not even Kanjigar could defeat Bular.

He shook his head and turned away.

Atlas pitied the poor fool that amulet chose as its next victim.
Sneaking out was easy; sneaking back in was the hard part.

Especially when your minder was Nomura.

The walk home had been far less exciting than the morning’s previous affair. The tunnels to the Janus Order were complex, but Atlas knew them like the back of his hand these days. He’d snuck in through one of the unguarded passages and headed for the kitchen.

Gable, the head (and only) cook at the Order, had grumbled at the sight of him. Atlas ignored the changeling, instead focusing his energy on his task.

He scrambled to make a nice light breakfast; some toast with butter and jam with a side of fresh oatmeal sprinkled with cinnamon and brown sugar. It was not his best work. Still perfectly edible, but certainly not up to Atlas’ standards (which, in all honesty, were higher than most). He only hoped Stricklander was too busy to notice.

Too bad he forgot about Nomura.

She caught him in the hallway to Stricklander’s office, her gaze unreadable, yet penetrating.

Nomura immediately blocked his path.

“You’re late,” she said, arms crossed over her chest.

His shoulders rose instinctively. He looked down, embarrassed. “Sorry, I got distracted.”

She began to walk ahead of him, her heels clicking against the floor. “Stricklander has been looking for you.”

He matched her pace. “What for?”
“Bular was approached by the Trollhunter during the night.”

“Oh really?” Atlas said, his voice a little too high.

Her eyes swept over him, searching. “What do you know?”

“Only what I’ve seen.”

“Which is?”

He put a finger to his lip playfully. “That’s classified information, Nomura. What will you do for me?”

Admittedly, that was probably not the best thing to answer back with.

She moved quick, her arm underneath his neck, slowly tightening like the hold of a anaconda. As much of a warrior as Atlas liked to think of himself, he was pretty much defenseless against Nomura, troll form or not. The woman knew his weak points to a tee. He struggled to keep his tray upright, the orange juice perched precariously at the edge.

“What’s Rule Number Three, brat?”

He gagged, “Don’t fuck with Nomura. Please don’t kill me.”

“Are you going to tell me then?”

“Okay, okay,” he gave in, face turning red. “Just...need...air.”

Loosening her arms, he stepped away, giving himself time to breath. She tapped her foot impatiently.
He opened his mouth to ask ‘what the hell, Nomura’ but closed it. Now was not the time.

Normally, the Changeling would have smirked at his reply and smacked him upside the head, not try and put him in a choke hold.

If she was this on edge right now, then something must have happened.

Something big.

“Well?” She asked.

“I may or may not have watched some of the fight between the Trollhunter and Bular.”

“Some?”

“Okay, like all of it,” he admitted.

“Stricklander will kill you if he finds out,” she pointed out, checking her nails. “You were supposed to be back before dawn.”

He opened one of the doors for her, leaning his back against it. “Which is why Stricklander isn’t going to find out about that part.”

“What is Stricklander not going to find out about?” A British voice echoed from beyond the door.

He straightened up as the man of the hour appeared.

Ah oh.

He shook his head at Nomura. Please don’t tell him, he silently tried to tell her through his wide eyes.
Nomura paused, as if considering it, then smirked. “Atlas was out past his curfew,” she said.

His mentor, tall and imposing, looked down at the teen, clearly unimpressed, but thankfully not angry. Yet.

“It was an accident,” Atlas confessed. “It won’t happen again.”

“That’s what you always say,” Stricklander said, face deadpan. “What was it this time?”

“Well, you see—” he began, only for Nomura to talk over him.

“He was watching the fight between Bular and the Trollhunter.”

Stricklander clicked his pen.

“And was that an ‘accident’ as well, young Atlas?”

“It wasn’t on purpose...” he muttered under his breath.

His mentor sighed, then waved his hand at Nomura, “You can go now, Nomura. I'll deal with him.”

The woman nodded, smacking the kid on the back as she left. “You’re in trouble.” She said in a sing-song voice.

Atlas slowly mouthed the words 'traitor.'

The door shut behind, leaving the two of them alone.

Stricklander’s office was spacious, one of the bigger rooms at the Order. Atlas walked over to his
desk, setting the food down, then swerved around to sit in the smaller chair on the other side. He knew the procedure. They all did.

The wait was the worst. Stricklander took a sampling of Atlas’ prepared breakfast, first biting into the toast, then taking a sip of the glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Using a spoon, he daintily scooped up a bit of the oatmeal and blew on it, not once, not twice, but three times, before finally putting it into his mouth. He rounded the desk towards Atlas, then leaned back against the desk in a poised manner.

The man relaxed, his expression fond. Finally, he said, “You know you don’t have to make me breakfast every day, young Atlas.”

“I know, but you enjoy it.”

Stricklander smiled, “That I do.”

“Does this mean—”

He gestured at the boy with his pen. “But this doesn’t excuse what you did. What have I told you about going off on your own without my permission?”

Atlas rolled his shoulders, ears lowering in guilt. “That I shouldn’t do it?”

“Precisely,” he sighed. “You put not only yourself, but the rest of our kind, in jeopardy when you do not follow orders. What if another troll saw you? What if a human did?”

“Sir, I was caref—”

“I’m not finished. Watching the fight between the Trollhunter and Bular was foolish. End of story.”

Atlas rubbed his arm absentmindedly, back hunched. “I know.”

“Your punishment will be decided at a later time at my discretion, is that understood?”
He nodded, quietly remarking, “Understood, sir.”

The Changeling bent slightly forward, hands brought together in a steeple. “Now, report. What did you see?”

Atlas sat up straighter as he gave his account. “I arrived at the canals between approximately zero four hundred and zero five hundred hours. I stayed out of sight in the tree line above. Bular fought the Trollhunter right below Arcadia Bridge. He cornered the Trollhunter on the bridge, however the Trollhunter sacrificed himself to the sun.”

“I see,” he commented, taking another drink of his orange juice. “What of the amulet?”

“If I’m right, it is still within the Trollhunter’s remains, sir.”

Stricklander stood, moving around the desk to the boy. “Someone will need to retrieve it then.”

“Let me do it, sir,” pleaded Atlas.

He gave the boy a bemused look. “You? During the day? Absurd.”

“I’ll be careful,” he assured. “I’ll use the sewer tunnels. No one will see me, I promise.”

Stricklander folded his arms behind his back, examining Atlas. “This won’t subtract from your punishment, young Atlas.”

He nodded. “I know, sir. Let me do it.”

“Why?”

The teen clenched his hands into fists. “I-I want to do more for the Order. Everyone else is doing their part and here I am doing nothing.”
“You’re not doing nothing, young Atlas. You’re my faithful assistant.”

“That’s just it, sir. The others, they don’t accept me like you do. I want to show that I’m useful, that I’m not some stupid useless half-human.”

Stricklander stillled, moving closer to the teen. His hands rose from their position and came down upon Atlas' shoulders. “You...is that how you think of yourself?”

Atlas shrugged, looking away. “What else should I think?”

“Young Atlas, you are a valued member of the Janus Order and nothing anyone says will change that. Our Lady would be honored to have you as one of her followers if she saw you half as much as the way I do.”

“Then let me do this, sir,” he said. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Stricklander brushed Atlas' bangs away with his index. “Alright. Fine. I expect you back at the base as soon as possible however. Is that understood?”

He grinned, nearly jumping out of his seat. “Perfectly.”

Yes! Atlas almost pumped his fist. It was rare for Stricklander to give the teen tasks outside of his daily mundane ones, like feeding the goblins or polishing the man’s ancient sword collection. It warmed the boy’s heart that the man trusted him so. With luck, he would be back within the hour, amulet in hand.

Perhaps the changelings would think better of him. Maybe even Bular would lay off trying to knock his head off as much.

Too bad Atlas had terrible luck.
Becoming: Part 1 (II)

Chapter Summary

Getting the amulet was supposed to be a simple mission. Unfortunately, Atlas did not anticipate a human interrupting his plans.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I'm back with a new chapter! Big thanks to my beta reader Ash again. I hope you enjoy this new chapter. Should release the next one in a couple days, along with another chapter for The Twilight Hour. Thank you for all the reviews and kudos! I live off of them. Seriously. They make my day.

In spite of his insistence that he would take the tunnels, Atlas chose a different direction. The sewers irritated his nose and, truthfully, were just plain disgusting. Humans were rancid creatures. His shortcut was just as barren of humans as the tunnels were, a small backroad paved with trees and hills, stretching all the way to his intended destination.

He leapt from tree to tree, claws scraping against the bark. The hood of his cloak kept falling off, causing him to have to pause and readjust it every minute or two. Not that it mattered. Humans rarely looked up. He would be fine.

Flipping off the tree to the ground perfectly (okay, that was a lie, he stumbled and stubbed one of his toes), he slid down the side of the canal, heading toward the recently deceased Trollhunter’s remains.

Just a simple grab it and go mission, nothing more, nothing less. Atlas crouched to the ground, digging through the rubble.
The hairs on the back of his neck rose as if electrocuted. His entire body seized up. The name carried meaning, but the teen did not know why.

Atlas froze, scanning the area, “Who said that? Show yourselves.”

His ears twitched as the sound of tires drew closer.

Shit. Frantically, he scanned the area for a spot to hide.

He leaped back from the rubble, running up canal wall to the bridge. Concealing himself behind one of the columns, he waited, watching, all the while trying to calm down. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

Why did that name bother him so much? It was like an itch he couldn’t scratch. He knew that name, somehow.

It didn’t matter. Atlas had a job to do.

“Whoa!” A human came barreling down the side of the channel.

It was a boy around his age, give or take a year. Atlas watched, brows coming together. He looked familiar.

Atlas leaned away from the column and drew closer to the edge, spying on the other.

The human boy drove down the canal like a bullet then went halfway up the other side, only to ride down again and crash his bike. Atlas snorted, then covered his mouth. The teen panted, wiping away sweat from his forehead as he settled down next to the rocks, unintentionally sitting on the Trollhunter’s face.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” The human hit himself upside the head. “Ugh. Should have accepted the
tardy. Well, I’m never doing that again.”

The rocks below the boy began to roll, causing the teen to yelp. Atlas stood up from his crouching position as a shining blue light came into view.

Atlas wasn’t alone; the human noticed as well, mouth open in awe as he dusted off the residue and held it up to the light.

“Whoa. What’s this?” His fingers tapped against the dial.

JAMES LAKE

Both teens screamed. Atlas lost his footing, slipping atop the beam and banging his horn against the metal, the screech it produced so loud it broke his cover.

Immediately, the human looked behind and above at the source of the other voice, squinting at Atlas.

Oh crap, Atlas thought, frozen in fear.

His limbs refused to move. The voice had boomed within his ears, leaving them ringing.

Why was the amulet calling for this “James Lake”? Was this normal?

Ugh. He knew he should have paid more attention during his lessons under Stricklander. But changeling history was so long and convoluted.

The human took a step forward “Jim?” he took another step. “Jim? Is that you?”

Atlas clutched the sides of his hood closer.

No, he wasn’t Jim. He was Atlas. Why would the human call him that?
The human was mistaken.

A migraine began to form behind his eyes. Probably dehydration, he reasoned. The pain intensified as the boy came closer, calling him that name over and over again.

A human had seen him. This was bad. This was very bad. His feet began to move, up the underside of the bridge to the canal’s edge. Below, the human had broken out into a run, his little legs moving as fast as they could to reach him.

“Jim! Is that you? Please, just tell me!” The boy began to run after him. “Who are you? I need to know!”

Atlas needed to get away, fast. The tunnels were closer to the boy than to Atlas, which only left the way he came from.

The human was already half-way up the canal. It would be too late for him, however, as Atlas was already gone, melting into the trees like a ghost.

He watched silently as the boy searched, crying out for this “Jim”.

It was strange. Atlas watched as the other combed through the trees, fighting through bushes in search of him. It would be all for not. Atlas knew every hiding space in Arcadia from top to bottom. It was a fool's errand.

Tears began to well up in the human’s eyes. He sank to the ground, hands clutching the grass.

Atlas should have told him off. He wasn’t this Jim or James. He should have taken the damn amulet from the human’s grubby hands and gone back to the Order. Hell, if he were Nomura, he probably would have killed the boy.

But he didn’t.
Instead, he hid in the darkness and wondered why he felt so damn guilty.

A bell sang in the distance.

“What the—?” The boy lifted his head, “Oh no, school! Nana’s going to kill me if I’m late again!”

The boy looked down at the amulet in his hand for a long moment, then stuffed it in his backpack, shuffling back to where his bike was, presumably.

He stopped one last time to look over his shoulder, then jumped down the slopped wall into the canal.

The instant his footsteps disappeared, Atlas stepped out from behind the leaves. Hand on his chest, he half-walked, half-stumbled to clearing.

He failed. Miserably.

A human had seen him. The same human who now, because of Atlas, held the Amulet of Daylight.

He groaned.

Stricklander was going to kill him if he found out.

*If he found out,* his mind supplied.

Atlas looked back towards the direction of the boy.
“The Peloponnesian War was actually three wars fought between Athens and Sparta.” Stricklander said to his class.

Atlas listened from above, hanging onto one of the metal pipes. The school’s interior workings were a tight fit for a regular troll, but to him, it was more than enough to move about.

It wasn’t the first time he’d snuck into the high school, however those times were during the night. Daytime was a whole ‘nother story.

Still, he was in dangerous territory. He should have waited until night like a good little changeling, instead of tracking the boy straight to the school.

But Atlas had never been a good changeling.

“The first war is known as the Archimedean War. Type that into your search engines. A-R-C-H-I-M-D-I-A-N.”

He could hear Stricklander stepping right below him, calm and controlled in its movements.

The pipe he held onto creaked.

Atlas held in a curse. He switched to a larger pipe. He looked back at the one he was formerly holding onto and gulped. It was bent, not enough to break it thankfully, but certainly enough to be noticeable.

His mentor paused mid-step.

Inwardly, he began to pray to every single god he could think of, hoping against all hope that he didn’t go crashing through the roof into the classroom.

The larger pipe held.

Oh thank Pale Lady.
Stricklander continued his stroll around the students below, hopefully none the wiser.

He wiped the bead of sweat from his lip. Safe, for now, he thought.

“Mr. Domzalski, would you agree?”

“Huh?”

Atlas perked up. It was the boy from earlier.

“With Herodotus’ opinion on his tactics of war, as I’ve described.”

“Oh, uh, absolutely, Mr. Strickler, sir.”

“Excellent. Which tactic’s specifically?”

“The, uh ones that won, sir?”

The class laughed just as the bell rang. A stampede of feet met Atlas’ ears.

Stricklander took a few steps, then stopped.

“Tobias, may I have a word?”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

“You’re normally attentive in class. Is something on your mind?”
“Sorry, sir, I guess I just got distracted. I thought I saw . . . an old friend, but he ran off on me.”

Stricklander clicked his pen. “I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure it was a misunderstanding.”

The human sighed, “I hope so.”

“Feel free to drop by my office if you ever need to talk. I’m always happy to listen to one of my students.”

“Thanks, Mr. Strickler.”

Atlas listened as the boy left the room. The space fell quiet. Shoulders loosening, he swung his feet over the pipe to one of the stronger beams that held the building together.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Safe.

“Atlas, I know you’re there. Meet me in my office in ten.”

Crap.

It wasn’t his first time in the man’s school office, but it was certainly his first to be scolded in it.

Closing the blinds, Stricklander lifted and moved one of the ceiling pieces.

Above, Atlas smiled sheepishly. “Funny, story—”
“You directly disobeyed my orders,” Stricklander said, voice stern. “You ask to be treated like the other changelings and yet you do something like this? In the daytime no less! You are such a child! Honestly. Do I need to take away your privileges again?”

He jumped down, hitting the floor with a sharp thunk. “It’s not like that, sir. Someone took the amulet!”

Stricklander squinted, lips drawn into a thin line. “Who?”

“The human-boy you were talking to earlier. I . . . I saw him take the amulet from the canals.”

“You’re certain of this?”

“Positive.”

Stricklander rounded on the boy, eyes glowing. “Did he see you?”

“N-No, not at all,” he lied, face straight.

His mentor took out his pen, waving it in the air. “This could be good for us, if we play our cards right. And you’re certain the amulet has not found it’s champion, yet?”

**James Lake.** The words still echoed through his mind.

Atlas gulped, answering, “Not that I know of, sir.”

“The boy should be in P.E. by now. My next class starts soon. I trust you can find his locker?”

“Of course. Anything you ask.”

Stricklander sighed. “Such loyalty. Sometimes, I don’t know what I did to deserve it. If only the
others were like you, young Atlas.”

“Thank you.” Atlas said, then asked, “Sir, may I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

Atlas scratched his left arm, his mind traveling back to what happened earlier. “What does the Amulet of Daylight *do* exactly?”

“Do? Haven’t you been paying attention to my lessons?”

“Could you refresh my memory, maybe?” He asked, looking away. “I mean, I know it gives a troll some magical armor and stuff and supposedly if we find it we can get Gunmar back from the Darklands, but what else does it do?”

Like, does it speak? As in, does it call out for people, specifically people named James Lake?

The man crossed his arms. “There is so little we know about troll lore, young Atlas.” Stricklander admitted. “Only what we find on our own. Our libraries hold but a scant sliver of what lies underneath our very feet. The rest of trollkind fears and hates us. They would rather die than allow us any access to our histories. It is why we crafted our own. Still, even I, one of the older members of our Order, has very little knowledge about the amulet’s secrets. We have tried and failed countless times to acquire it, but still it alludes us. That is why this job is very important, my child. We need that amulet.”

Atlas nodded, the weight of his responsibility all the more crushing. What if the human gave the amulet to someone else? What if he sold it before Atlas could get to it? What if—

“Atlas,” Stricklander approached, pen directly above the boy’s chest.

His mentor lifted an eyebrow, scanning Atlas face, then used his pen to direct his head from left to right. “You look exhausted. When was the last time you’ve slept?”

Hesitating, Atlas pondered over the question, then replied, “A couple days, I guess?”
“Is it that nightmare again?”

Atlas chuckled dryly. “Isn’t it always?”

The Men in White Coats standing over him, screams echoing through the hallways. And drowning. Always drowning.

Stricklander must have noticed his discomfort, his hand brushing against his back as guided him to the window. “Now, I think I know what has you so distraught, Atlas.”

“You do?” Atlas’ eyes widened.

Did he figure it out? Had Atlas truly been so transparent? He always was a terrible liar.

“It’s like I told you yesterday, you have a lot on your shoulders. Too much, in my opinion, for someone your age.”

He lifted Atlas’ chin with the pen so that they were eye-to-eye. Though Atlas was already tall for his age, Stricklander still had several inches on him. “And I think this opportunity—”

“Getting the amulet?”

“I think it’s causing you anxiety.” His mentor patted his back. “I know you want to be more useful to the Order, but it’s as a great poet once wrote, ‘Do what’s good for you, or you’re not good for anybody.’ The others will accept you in time. It’s only been a few years. Be patient. Remember: you’ve proven yourself to be a changeling, Atlas, and no matter how much human blood you have, it won’t change that you’ll always be one of us.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” Stricklander drew away, his warm smile replaced with the cool impersonal one he wore around others. “Now, go and find me the amulet. We shan’t let it fall into the wrong hands.”
Ugh. He pinched his nose in disgust. Humans were disgusting. Worse than goblins. While not blessed with the heightened senses of his brethren, Atlas had more than enough to catch wind of the locker room’s odorous nature.

The lockers themselves were easy to get into, if tedious. Breaking the locks would raise suspicion, so he did the next best thing: decoding them. Who knew that one day Nomura’s lessons would actually come in handy? Twirling the lock’s dial around, he listened for the different tone as it hit certain numbers.

It took him twelve tries before he got the right one, the familiar backpack coming into view.

He smiled in triumph, rummaging through the bag until his fingers touched cold metal. Immediately, an electrical shock ran through his arm, causing him to retract the limb and drop the amulet. It rolled around on the floor, landing face up, as if taunting him.

This was it. Lifting it up to the light, he looked it over in awe. It was beautiful, if a little underwhelming. Perhaps he was expecting a little more—

JAMES LAKE.

“Gah!” He dropped it, the piece clattering against the ground. He bent down, gesturing angrily at the object “Stop! Just...Stop saying that.”

His fingers snatched the amulet off the ground.

A shadow skirted behind him.

Atlas jumped, looking around. His ears twitched erratically, his heart rate surging. A flash of fear ran through him. How had he not heard that? Who had snuck up behind him?
Was it this mysterious *James Lake*? Had he been following Atlas around all this time?

Dropping the bag to the floor, he turned toward the showers. Hood pulled close to his face, he peeked around the corner to the room, all the while clenching the amulet in his right hand. Hazy fog blanketed the area. He squinted, about to take a step forward then—

Clang! Atlas jumped in response.

He swerved around.

“It’s you! The guy from the bridge! I *knew* I wasn’t crazy!” It was same human from earlier. “Hey, that’s the amulet I found. What are you doing with it?”

“You...you don’t know what you’re dealing with.” He stammered, pushing past the boy. “Keep out of it if you know what’s good for you.”

“Oh no you don’t,” the boy said, grabbing his cloak. “I found it. Finders-keepers.”

Atlas yanked the material back, “Stop it.”

Another sharp tug revealed his face, horns and all. Atlas immediately threw the hood back up.

“Whoa. Are those real?” The teen asked, gesturing to his less than human features.

“Do you mind!” Atlas growled. His face flushed, though out of fear, anger or simply embarrassment he couldn’t say; perhaps it was a mixture of all three.

**JAMES LAKE.**

Atlas chucked the amulet to the ground, shrieking, “Will you shut up?”
“It spoke! And it said his name again.” The human picked it up off the ground, cradling it. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” Atlas snatched it out of the boy’s hands. “Forget you ever saw this, or me, human.”

“Toby.” He said, hands on his hips. Though fearful, he stood his ground, which Atlas could at least begrudgingly admire.

Still. Atlas narrowed his eyes. The name sounded familiar. “Right. Toby. It’s better if you keep quiet about this thing.”

“What’s it do?”

Atlas held out the glowing amulet. Strange, he thought. The words had changed. What was once in Trollspeak was now in English.

Curious. He didn’t recall any of his lessons including that part.

“It’s a very dangerous object that I have to return to Stric—strictly classified members of my Order.”

"What's the Order?"

"That's classified."

Unfortunately for Atlas, his words only made the human more interested. Toby grinned, gushing, “Ah man, a super-secret organization. That. Is. Awesome. Sauce.”

“Yes, well, I must get going—”

Toby came forward, pulling on his cloak again. Atlas sighed, his hand brushing back his bangs.
“What is it, human?”

“It said my friend’s name. Do you think maybe it’s connected to him?”

Atlas paused. Why did the Amulet continuously call out for this human? What made this James Lake so special?

It was possible—no.

Could the Trollhunter be a human?

Impossible. The amulet had always chosen a troll since the dawn of its creation. Why change now?

The school bell resounded. Suddenly, the door to the locker room swung right open. Human chatter echoed through the area.

Atlas’ pulse skyrocketed. Frantically, he looked for a place to hide. “Toby, I need your help. The humans, if they see me...”

Toby folded his arms, looking at him with displeasure. “Oh, so you want my help now, is that it? After stealing the amulet from me?”

He clenched his teeth together. “Please. I’m begging you. Listen, if you help me with this,” Atlas bit down on his lower lip, “I’ll help you find your friend. Deal?”

Straightaway, he regretted his words.

Toby practically glowed with happiness. “Really? You promise?”

“Yes,” he said. “Now, I need you to cause some sort of distraction, perhaps you can talk with the other humans or block them so that I can es—”
An alarm reverberated in the room, sprinklers turning on in quick succession.

“Done,” Toby stated, removing his hand from the fire alarm. "Now, come on. I've got the perfect idea!"

Atlas shook his head, unsure of whether to laugh or cry.

This day just got better and better, didn’t it?
“You cannot be serious,” Atlas remarked, disgusted by the disguise laid out on the bench. “I’ll look ridiculous.”

“Ah, come on, it’s not so bad.” Toby picked up the mascot head. “The Mole is awesome sauce. And, I mean, it’s not like you can go around dressed like that.”

He looked down at his own outfit. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You stand out too much, dude.” Toby pointed out. “You look like you’re about to go into battle or something. Not that the badass black armor isn’t totally sweet. Like seriously, are those daggers real? Oh, sorry, went on a tangent there. You just need to be a little less of this.” Toby motioned to Atlas’s entire body.
His nose crinkled. “You just gestured to all of me.”

“Exactly! What? Don’t look at me like that. Listen, you only gotta be in the mascot uniform for a few minutes, dude. You said you wanted to get back to the sewers, right? Well, we need to get through the schoolyard first.” Toby threw him a thumbs up. “After that, you’re home free.”

Atlas sighed, “I suppose you’re right.”

Grumbling, the teen pulled on the body of the costume, zipping up the front. He prayed Stricklander never found out about this. Or Nomura—Atlas suppressed a shudder. She would never let him live this down if she found out. Toby lifted the head and put it over the Atlas' own. It was snug and smelled of human sweat and body odor, but it covered him.

Toby gestured his thumb towards the door. “We better hurry. Coach will kill us if he finds out we’re borrowing this.”

“Stealing. We’re stealing, Toby.”

The boy stopped walking. “Hey,” he started, looking up at him. “You know my name, but I never caught yours.”

“That’s because it's a secret.”

“Ah, come on, dude. I swear I won’t tell anyone.” Toby remarked. “Besides, you said you were gonna help me find my friend, right? We’re partners now.”

He flicked his tongue against his front teeth, uncertainty flooding him. The human—Toby—was strange. Though he had been scared before, the boy was now looking at him with expectant eyes, not a single speck of disgust or distrust within them. Perhaps he’d been wrong about humans. Maybe there was some good in their species after all.

Atlas bit the inside of his cheek.

Dare he trust this small human with such information?
Well, he reasoned, *it's not like I have any social media accounts to speak of.* And who would believe the boy if he decided to blow his cover?

“All,Atlas,” he finally relinquished.

“That’s a cool name.” said Toby. “Very Greeky.”

“This is only between us, you understand.” He instructed Toby. “If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.” Toby laughed, then paled. “Wait...seriously?”

Atlas smirked, pushing his back against the door.

Outside, teachers were gathering students into groups of twenty, if that. School had technically ended, so many of the humans were already on their way home, causing arguments to break out between the faculty and parents.

Atlas stiffened when he caught sight of his mentor, joking with a group of students and teachers. Stricklander was well-versed in human body language, his stance welcoming and open.

Toby walked quietly behind him, unlocking his bike while Atlas stood guard.

The color drained out of his face when the changeling’s gaze suddenly flickered over to his own. Was he on to Atlas?

No. His interest turned to another. Atlas let out the breath he’d been holding in. Toby’s disguise held, for now at least.

Toby began to move his bike around the corner. Atlas followed. Taking a sharp left, his shoulders loosened; he was no longer in the man’s field of vision. He was safe again.
This area of the school was much emptier, lockers lining the walls. There were a few students here and there, but not nearly as much as before. His attention fell on two particular humans, a large blond standing over a smaller, black-haired teen. The taller one had a menacing smile, his stance hostile, while the smaller human backed away in terror, dropping a few books along the way.

_Just walk away_, Atlas told himself. _Let the humans figure it out themselves. It has nothing to do with you._

In front of their watchful eyes, the larger human chuckling as he picked the smaller up by his collar and stuffed him into one of the lockers.


“And the rest of you let him do this?” Atlas questioned dryly.

“If Psycho Steve’s terrorizing him, he’s not terrorizing _me._” Toby commented. “Let’s go before he notices _us._”

Atlas clenched his jaw.

Logically, he understood Toby’s reasoning. The human did not want to draw attention to himself (and by extension, Atlas himself).

Emotionally, however, was a different story.

It didn’t matter if one was a troll, human or changeling; bullies were a constant and no one did anything about it. Atlas spent many a time the object of some changeling’s scorn, be it due to his closeness to their leader, or his unlucky origins. As a child, he’d put up with it. As he grew into himself however, he learned to fight back—not directly of course, but by using their own ways against them. Smack Atlas in the hallway? He’d serve it back twice as hard during their “fitness examinations”, a fancy word for the changelings’ so-called fight club.

While smaller and weaker than most, Atlas learned to fight dirty and fast, even spitting in his opponents’ faces if it meant he could get a leg up on them.
Atlas’ nostrils flared, pupils dilating. His mind flashed to his first fight; Bular beating him to a bloody pulp, the taste of fear and blood on his tongue. Even now, a long red scar decorated his stomach, ‘complimented’ by smaller marks from his so-called brethren.

He stepped forward. Toby, noticing the boy’s change in direction, started hissing softly, “Atlas? Atlas! No!”

“Okay, one more time, dweeb-face.” The boy—Psycho Steve—sneered. “Tell me about these ‘creatures’ and maybe I’ll let you out.”

“Or, you can let him out right now.” Atlas suggested dryly. “I mean, you know, that would be the humane thing to do.”

“Humane would be—” The human started to say as turned around, then with stepped back a tad in surprise, not counting on the other’s height.

Though short in comparison to other changelings, he definitely had a few inches on this Psycho Steve and that was more than enough to make the human more cautious. The costume’s added height didn’t hurt either.

“Who the hell are you?” Steve asked, balling his hands into fists.

“Someone who thinks you should stop this,” Atlas said, crossing his arms. “As in, right now.”

“Ha! Screw off, loser,” Steve retorted, slamming a fist into the locker behind him. “So, where were we? You were telling me about those monsters you saw this morning, with fangs and—” He hit the locker a second time. “What did you say?”

The boy yelled, “T-they had stone for skin! At the canal near Arcadia Bridge.”

Atlas inhaled a sharp breath.

A human had seen the battle. This was bad. Very bad. He needed to report this to Stricklander. What if there were others besides Atlas and the boy who had seen the fight? It would not bode well for the
Janus Order if a video or photo came out from the incident.

If humanity discovered them—

It would be catastrophic for changelings everywhere.

“Stone for skin? Man Eli, you’re hilarious. Maybe you should get your glasses checked. Hey, how about you let me do that for you?” Chuckled Steve.

Atlas stifled a growl, putting another foot forward. “Look, human, Psycho Steve was it? Seriously, just let him out. This is childish.”

“What did you call me?” The human said, face reddening. He moved to grab the front of Atlas’ disguise, but the other side-stepped. “Or you’ll do what, Mole-boy?”

Atlas cracked his jaw from side to side. This was getting on his last nerves. He peeled the humans fingers off of his outfit easily, then lightly pushed him away. Apparently, he put a little too much force in the action, because the human hit the locker behind him with a loud bang, opening the locker with the trapped boy on accident.

Other students in the area (including the bully’s two friends) began to chant, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

“Just let him out, human. That’s I’m asking.”

Unfortunately, Atlas merely made the human angrier. “You! You asking for a beating, Mole? I will wreck you! Let’s go!”

A door slammed open. Walking out, a large muscular human called out to the group. “Palchuk, what the hell is going on over here? Why aren’t you out front with the rest of the team?”

Steve jerked up, rubbing the back of his neck. “Uh, sorry, sir. I got distracted.”

“Practice doesn’t stop because of a fire drill, Palchuk.”
He gestured with his thumb, reopening the locker containing the small human. “I was, uh, helping Eli, here.”

“H-hi, Coach!” Eli answered.

“He was stuck in the locker.” He gave the boy’s head a little nuggie. “Ha, ha. Silly Eli.”

The large man hollered, “Get in here! Now! You and I are going to have a talk.”

Sticking his finger into Atlas’ chest, Steve whispered, “Friday, at noon. You and me.”

As the blond walked away, he made a minute hand gesture with his index finger. “Tick-tock. Tick.”

Atlas rolled his eyes. Was everyone in Arcadia obsessed with being overly dramatic?

He watched as the human named Eli struggled to pull himself out of the locker. Feeling generous, he grabbed the boy under each forearm and picked him up and put him on his feet.

“Thank you,” Eli said, looking up at him in awe.


He threw out his hand. “My name is Eli. And you are?”

Atlas looked down at the gesture, unsure of how to respond. He could see Toby at the outermost edges of the costume’s line of vision, watching them converse.

“I’m A—” Shoot. His eyes widened. Shit, shit, shit. What should he answer with? “Ah, James...Lake?”
Toby dropped his bike then threw Atlas a cross-look, his lips drawn into a thin line. Still, the other teen did not comment on Atlas using his missing friend’s name. “Yep. This is my best buddy, Jimbo. He’s uh, new to the school. Trying out for that mascot position. He’s even got the costume! Super passionate about mascotng, this dude.”

“Yes, very passionate.” Atlas agreed.

“Oh, cool,” Eli stammered, looking down at his shoes. “You know, for some reason, your name sounds familiar.”

“Oh,” Atlas started, turning his head to Toby.

“He lived here a long time ago. Went to live with his dad in, uh, Vermont? Canadia? Right, Jim? You’ve been living it up in the Great White North, eh? Eating all that maple syrup and moose burgers, right? Eh?”

“Uh, yes.” Atlas remarked, then added, “Eh.”

Eli smiled, nodding vigorously. “Well, it was nice to meet you. See you around.”

The moment the boy left, Toby punched him in the arm.

“Ow,” Atlas said, though more out of surprise than any actual pain.

Toby stuck his finger in Atlas’ face, frustration in his brow. “I can’t believe you used my best friend’s name. That was low, dude.”

“It was all I could think of,” he confessed.

The human sighed, shoulders dropping. “It’s...ugh, it’s okay, I guess. Sorry, it’s kind of a hard subject for me to talk about.”

Atlas picked up the human’s bike, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “No, I shouldn’t have
said it. You were right. I apologize.”

“It’s cool, dude. What’s done is done.” The boy said, accepting the bike. “Besides, you’re going to help me find him, right?”

He laughed nervously, “Yeah, of course.”

His stomach dropped, suddenly remembering his duty.

Toby had no idea who or what Atlas truly was. It was nice, to be treated like an equal, even if he was a human.

Guilt bubbled up in his throat. The moment he gave the amulet to Stricklander it would be over for humanity, Toby included.

It was inevitable.

Atlas shouldn’t feel anything. Humanity had already destroyed much of the world. Why should he care about what happened to their kind?

He should feel proud, excited even. Finally, after so long, he would be able to make his mentor and father-figure proud. Nomura will be ecstatic for him. The others would finally welcome him with open arms.

And yet, for some reason, he wanted to throw up.

Atlas said his goodbyes to the human at the entrance to the tunnels, waving as the boy disappeared up the slope to his home.
Pulling off the mascot head, he pulled back his sweaty bangs, relishing the cool breeze. He zipped off the rest of the costume with much gusto, nearly gagging at how human he smelled. It would take several showers to get the odor off of him.

He folded the outfit and stuffed both it and the head inside a small, rarely used tunnel high above the waterline. It was unlikely to rain tonight, but better safe than sorry. At some point, he would have to return the stolen property to the school.

Today had been an adventure. He had finally retrieved the Amulet of Daylight and met his first human. He also, in a moment of stupidity, made a deal with that same human.

Which brought him back to the item in his pocket. Atlas reached inside, feeling the cold biting metal of the amulet. Atlas turned a rounded corner down one of the wider tunnels, looking around to make sure no one was around. Once the coast was clear, he drew the device out, examining the mysterious object.


No response.

Atlas scratched his cheek and sighed, “And now I’m talking to an inanimate magical object. Smart, Atlas. Real smart.”

Why was this James Lake so important? Why had the amulet said his name?

Could a human really be a Trollhunter?


He was pretty sure the Amulet of Daylight was made for those of trollish blood, since it was literally crafted to protect other trolls against Gumm-Gumms. Why now bring a human into it?
Lazily, Atlas swung it back and forth in the air. “Come on, you stupid piece of junk. Talk again, or I’m giving you up to the Order.”

Something thumped down behind him.

Atlas jumped back in alarm, tripping and falling into some runoff water. His armor clanged against the cement.

Six glowing eyes stared down, blinking owlishly.

“Now!”

Two large arms grabbed him from behind, lifting the teen up.

Atlas growled, kicking at the unknown beast, however it was to no avail. As his vision adjusted, so too did his earlier suspicions.

He’d been followed.

Of course! Back in the showers. Humans couldn’t move that fast or that quietly.

But trolls could.

“Oh, wonderful! We’ve found you. Quick, we need to take him back to Trollmarket, before Bular discovers us.” The shorter one remarked. “Greeting, young changeling! I am Blinkous Galadrigal, but you may call me Blinky. Now, Master Atlas was it? Or is it Master Jim?”

“Let me go!” He growled. “I’ll kill you!”

“Oh, Master Jim Atlas, I’d rather you not.” The six-eyed Troll said, two hands entangled together. “You would be without a trainer and let’s face it, you are going to need a lot of help as the next
“Hi,” the troll holding him said.

Atlas screamed angrily, wiggling about.

“It’s AAARRRGGHH!!! Not AHHH!!!” The large one said, then showed him three fingers. “You miss. Three Rs.”

Atlas yelled again, his claws desperately trying to find some sort of weakness in the other’s stone skin.

“Hmm.” Blinky said, a hand beneath his chin.

“He says ‘Ahhh’ a lot.” AAARRRGGHH!!! shook him like a rag doll. “Broken?”

“It’s more of a yelp, I believe.” Blinky reasoned. “A changeling greeting, perhaps. Though, he doesn’t look very trollish.”

Four arms began studying his body, two across his face and the others onto his restricted hands and feet. The one called Blinky’s eyes perked up with interest.

“Let’s see now. Skin is firm and solid, yet I detect cartilage underneath, much like a human’s. How fascinating. And AAARRRGGHH!!!, look at this. Neither yellow or green sclera nor red or slit pupils. I’ve never seen a Changeling without them. Rather unusual blue eyes. There aren’t many Trolls with this color either.” A finger tapped on Atlas’ lower fangs. “His tusks are prominent, but small, rather like a child’s.”

Atlas gulped, shuddering at with the troll’s pushiness.

“His hearing organs are pointed and long like a troll’s. Ah. Now this is quite a curiosity.” His hands stopped examining Atlas’ ears, ascending to his horns. “Fascinating! The skin changes to what I believe is monazite.” He tapped on them. “Quite solid too. I haven’t seen someone with these kind of horns since we were back in the Old World. You’re quite lucky, young man. These kinds of horns
are quite sturdy, though I’m sure you already know that. Oh, and look here! His little claws match!”

His face paled, he started to shiver. “S-stop it. Please.”

Blinky lifted his hands away immediately. “Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry. That was terribly intrusive of me. I should have asked for permission. You see, I’m a scholar so sometimes I get carried away.”


“Yes, my dear friend is right.” The Troll bowed low. “My deepest apologies, Master Jim-Atlas. I’ve no excuse. I disrespected your bodily autonomy and that was wrong of me. My deepest apologies.”

Atlas looked between the two Trolls. “So . . . does that mean you’ll let me go?”

The Troll laughed, “Oh, heavens no! And let you take the amulet straight to Bular?”

His brows knitted in a sharp V, body stiffening at the remark.

Blinky brought his hands together, clearing his voice. “Master Jim-Atlas, you have been chosen.”

He threw the two a look of complete puzzlement.

Surely they didn’t mean him? And Jim-Atlas? What was up with that?

AAARRRGGHH!!! cocked his head to the side. “Blinky, looks confused.”

Atlas yelped as the large Troll moved him higher off the ground. “Stop it, you overgrown rock!”

“Uh, AAARRRGGHH!!!, my good fellow, would you mind?” Blinky asked. “We need a moment of some solemnity.”
AAARRRGHH!!! tilted his head to the side. “Hmm? ‘Solembily’?”

“It means serious and dignified.”

“Hmm.” The large one sounded it out, “Dig-oo-nified.”

“P-P-Put me down, please.” Atlas asked, not enjoying the lack of ground beneath his feet.

“Oh, my apologies. AAARRRGHH!!!, if you would.”

“Sorry” AAARRRGHH!!! said, settling him back down to the tunnel floor, his grip loosening to cover the boy’s shoulders. Atlas moved around a bit to test the larger’s grip, but the bigger troll's hold was firm and unyielding. Atlas would need to think of a way around this.

“Now, where was I?” Blinky said.


“Yes, Thank you.” Blinky said, coming closer to the two. “Master Jim-Atlas you have been chosen. It is a great honor amongst our kind. The Amulet of Daylight challenges you to cast off your previous ways and ascend to the most sacred of offices of trollkind.”

“You’re crazy. You’re both crazy,” Atlas said, shaking his head. “And stop calling me that. My name is just Atlas. Atlas.”

Not Jim. This was all a case of mistaken identity.

AAARRRGHH!!! furrowed his brow in confusion. “Orifices? What orifices?”

“Offices,” Blinky corrected, ignoring Atlas, which irked him further. “It means responsibility. As you already know, a vast civilization of trolls lurking beneath your very feet, hidden from view.”

He’d heard of it. What changeling hadn’t? An entire metropolis of trolls directly underneath Arcadia. It was why the Janus Order built their main base here after all. He wondered if the Heartstone was truly as beautiful and grand as they said? If the roads were truly lined with precious gemstones and the water was as pristine as the crystalline structures that formed the city.

No changeling had ever seen it and lived to tell the tale, at least as far as Atlas knew. Stricklander used to tell him stories as a child about the place, about how once Gunmar returned that they would conquer Trollmarket and claim it and the rest of the world as their own.

“Oh, good. You know of us then.” Blinky said excitedly. “And it is now your charge to protect them. For you, Master Atlas, are the Trollhunter.”

“No, no I can’t be.” Atlas argued. “I’m Atlas. You’ve got it all wrong. I’m not this Jim or whatever. James Lake: he’s the guy you want. Not me.”

“If I were not there, I might have believed you,” Blinky remarked.

“You were spying on me?”

“No, not on you, exactly. I was watching Kanjigar.” The Troll paused, mouth forming a deep frown. “He was a dear friend of ours.”


Atlas looked away, “I’m sorry. About your friend. Bular is a monster.”

“Indeed,” Blinky said, giving the boy an interested look. “But what’s done is done. Now, I saw the amulet react to your touch several times today, Master Atlas. You recognized the name, this James Lake, did you not?”
“How did you know—” Atlas gripped his head, panic setting in. “Stop it. No, you’re wrong. I can’t be. There must be some sort of mistake. You’re lying. You have to be. You just have to be.”

Blinky put a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I know this is very difficult to process. However time is of the essence. This honor is yours to accept.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! leaned down, giving Atlas his chance. He jackknifed down and twisted out of AAARRRGGGHH!!!’s reach, straight underneath his legs. Blinky tried to grab for him but Atlas was faster. He jumped, using the mossy back of the larger troll as a spring board to a higher tunnel.

Instead of going after him however, they merely watched him, barely moving a muscle.

Blinky put all four arms behind his back, a somber expression on his face. “So, what say you, young changeling?”

“I-I don’t know.” Atlas said. “But you’re wrong. I can’t be the Trollhunter.”

Blinky regarded the floor, shoulders lowering. “So you will give the Amulet to Bular then, I take it?”

“I...No. I don’t know.” He admitted.

“You must make a decision soon, Master Atlas. It chose you for a reason.”

Atlas clenched his teeth, arms wrapped around his body. “I-I need to go.”

He started to run down the tunnel, trying to ignore the incoming storm of thoughts developing in his mind.

So even more people knew about the fight than he expected. Damn. And they were trolls from Trollmarket. What was he going to do? Atlas clutched the amulet so tightly his knuckles cracked.

Blinky’s voice echoed in the distance, to Atlas’ dismay. “Great Gronka Morka, what are we doing to do? A changeling child is going to be our next Trollhunter. What was Merlin thinking?”
“Wait and hope.” AAAARRRGHH answered.

“Yes, but for how long?”

How long indeed.

Atlas glanced down at the amulet. He wanted—no, *needed* to know. Taking a sharp turn, he headed down a familiar tunnel, one that led in the opposite direction of the Order.

This was all a big misunderstanding.

It just had to be.
Becoming: Part 1 (IV)

Chapter Summary

Atlas expected the amulet to take another Trollhunter at some point, he just wasn't expecting it to be him.

Crap.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I'm back with the last part of Becoming: Part 1. This was really fun to write. I should have the next part out in a few days. I'll also be including more characters' povs in this as well. Thank you for all of the reviews and kudos! They give me such joy. Please enjoy this chapter.

Twilight approached, moving steadily forward like a Spanish armada, relentlessly swallowing up the blue sky in a mass of swirling pinks and purples. Street lights began to flicker on down below, like fireflies in an open field. There was no place like it. A world of nature surrounded by cityscape.

It was his favorite viewpoint, up above the little valley he called home.

Ever since Stricklander allowed him to roam topside he’d come here, this little secluded meadow the one place he could call his.

As a child, he pretended he was king of this little green spot. Atlas smiled at the memory. Mostly he’d played alone, but a handful of times Stricklander or Nomura had joined him in some fashion, either as “faithful advisor” in Stricklander or an “enemy queen” in Nomura. It was one of the few times his mentor allowed him to act his age. Sadly, as he grew older their visits with him to the meadow lessened; they were too busy with things above the teen’s clearance level.

His mind wandered back to what his mentor said earlier. One of us. His nose crinkled at the hypocrisy. If Atlas was one of them, he would know what the hell they were doing instead of being kept in the dark all the time. He hated that he was always the last to know things, an afterthought of the Janus Order.
Granted, he understood that, as one of the youngest members of the Changelings’ organization, he was the lowest on the totem pole, but come on, even freaking Gable knew about the Order’s activities more than he did. The freaking fry cook. Shouldn’t he, as Stricklander’s assistant, be privy to such things?

It was frustrating.

Was Atlas so important to Changelings, his mentor—his father figure—as he had said? Or was Atlas merely the man’s ‘loyal pet’, as Otto and the other Changelings so liked to say?

Was he even a true Changeling at all?

His hands came to his face, feeling out his odd features. He knew he didn’t look as Trollish as his brethren; the blue Troll’s description was spot on. Even if he was accepted by Stricklander (and to a certain extent, Nomura), there would always be his physical appearance that separated them.

He was stuck between two races and unable to fit into either.

Secretly, he desperately wished he could transform like the other Changelings. Stricklander reasoned that whatever happened to him as a child must have caused some sort of mental blockage. Atlas had tried and failed to bring about his old memories many a time, but whatever damage that existed there appeared to be permanent. Whenever he tried to push past he would only receive a headache in return and a migraine if he spent to much time on it.

His phone buzzed, snapping him out of his thoughts. He didn’t need to check to know who it was. Stricklander must be expecting him.

The Amulet glared up at him, its glow reflecting off his armor. His fingers traced over its edges, its power calling to the teen. Was this how the device was with everyone?

Or only the Trollhunter?

“Only one way to find out,” he whispered.
He picked his feet up from the ridge, rising to his full height. The wind twisted around him. Leaves rustled in their trees.

“For the Glory of Merlin,” he read, “Daylight is mine to command.”

His worst fears were confirmed.

Electricity crackled in the air as the air pressure around him dropped, making his ears pop. Dogs howled in the distance. The wind roared, so hard that the boy took a step back, his hood falling from his head.

The Amulet appeared to glow even brighter, producing a radiant orb of blue energy. Slack-jawed, he watched as it floated downward, sinking into his chest. Immediately, a warm blast of heat flooded his body, stretching all the way to his hands and feet.

More spheres of light entered his body, filling him with more warmth until he felt like he was boiling. It wasn’t painful though, merely strange, an uncomfortable sort of hotness, like putting one’s hand to the fire for a little too long or stepping into a steaming Jacuzzi. Every inch of him tingled. His face felt odd, almost tight, as if he were wearing a second skin.

Then, suddenly, the ground beneath his feet disappeared. He rose, transfixed as the energy danced around him. The spheres circled his body, erupting into brilliant sparks. Inwardly, his heart burst into giddy childish awe. This was the magic he learned about as a child, listening to his mentor read from one his collection of myths.

Even though he felt like he was burning up inside, Atlas felt at peace with himself, as if nothing else mattered, as if he could go one-on-one with anyone.

Silver metal encircled his body, attaching to his limbs and torso. Just as suddenly as he rose, he fell to back to earth, hitting the ground with a thunk in his oversized armor. As if the Amulet read his mind, the silver pieces shrank to his body, resizing itself to his measurements.

Atlas curled his fingers, marveling at the luminous metal encasing them.
“Holy crap,” he muttered, amazed at transformation. It wasn’t done yet though, as more spheres left the device—now encased near his heart—and floated down to his dominant hand. Out of his palm, a brilliant large sword formed, reforming itself into a smaller shape for a person of his size.

Atlas grinned like an idiot, twirling the blade around. Power sang in his blood. He felt as if he were about to burst with all the confidence and excitement within him.

This was amazing. Absolutely fantastic. Not even Bular could stop him.

Then he brought the sword up to his face and openly gasped.

His face.

It changed.

Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, the teen brought the sword closer to examine the changes. What in the world happened? His left hand touched his face, his tusks gone and facial features different, morphed into what he now saw before him. The long elfin ears he had for as long as he could remember were now small and rounded. He took a step and wobbled a bit, suddenly noticing the change of his gait. The weight of his horns had vanished, leaving him off-kilter. He looked down at his feet, their size smaller and more compact than what he was used to. In fact, everything was smaller—he lost more than half a foot of height.

He was human.

Atlas marveled at the transformation. The Amulet had altered him completely.

*James Lake,* his inner voice whispered, *that’s who you are. You’re James Lake.*

He sunk the blade into the ground, leaning on it for support as the reality of what just happened hit him.

For so long he had wondered who he was from before. Who wouldn’t? His entire past had been taken from him, wiped clean by those human bastards in the lab.
But now he had a name and face, something that tied him to this world.

Atlas nearly sobbed, struggling to contain the water developing in his eyes. He could be a true Changeling now. No longer was he stuck in one form. He could be useful to his father. He could be accepted.

Except.

Except, James Lake was the Trollhunter.

The same Trollhunter who fought Gumm-gumms and, by association, Changelings.

He descended to his knees, the day’s events weighing him down.

*I’m a terrible Changeling,* he thought in horror. Not only had he revealed himself to a human, but he had completely failed on his *first* official mission.

If he revealed this to the Order he either be forced to relinquish the Amulet to free Gunmar, or else would be killed on sight. Neither of those options seemed very appealing.

Atlas had just become Enemy Number One to the very people he served. Bular wouldn’t hesitate to kill the boy now.

He wrapped his arms around himself, staring straight down at the grass.

This was *officially* the worst day ever.
Stricklander sauntered through the canal, not even flinching when Bular appeared behind him.

“It’s been taken by someone.” Stricklander remarked, glancing down at his phone as if bored. “You failed, Bular. You let it go, when you should have stayed to keep watch. Your father will be most displeased with you.”

Bular roared (like a toddler with a temper tantrum, Stricklander thought) and shot the Changeling a most unfavorable look. “Do not mock me, Impure! Whoever holds the Amulet of Merlin, I shall destroy him, crush him beneath my fists, just as I have done with every single one of them. The next one will not escape me.”

“Worry not, you brute.” He said, “I’ve a lead. A human has taken it. My assistant is on it as we speak.”

Or, he was. The boy had yet to respond to his texts. A troubling thought.

“You gave the task to the Abomination?” Bular growled. “Ha! I think it will be you father will be displeased with, Impure.”

“We shall see, Bular.” Stricklander remarked, not bothering to lift his gaze to the Troll. “We shall see.”

After Bular had stomped back to his den, the Changeling rang the teen. It took a few tries until he finally picked up.

“Hello?” A decidedly not Atlas voice answered.

Stricklander looked down the number to make sure it was correct, then put the phone back to his ear, “Who is this?”

It was far too boyish to be the halfling’s, whose own voice was deeper and raspier.

The person on the other line paused for a few seconds, then replied, “Oh, ah... Jim, apparently, I guess.”
He silently mouthed the word, brows furrowed as he tried to think. He didn’t know any Changelings named Jim. Was it a nickname perhaps? “Where did you find my son’s phone, Jim?”

“Your son?” Jim asked in surprise.

*Not a Changeling then,* he surmised. A human—teenager considering the awkward flux of his vocal chords.

“Yes, my son,” he confirmed, tapping his foot. Though he did not call the boy as such (as if the others needed more ammo to use against him), he’d thought of the Changeling orphan as his own. Not that the human needed to know.

This did not bode well. What was Atlas doing without his cell? Honestly, that boy.

“Oh, it was . . .” Jim stopped for a moment before saying, “At Arcadia High. I found it in the locker-room.”

“Ah, are you a student there, Jim?” Of course. No wonder his little protégé hadn’t answered. He was probably searching the school for it. “Wonderful. It’s me, Mr. Strickler, the AP World History teacher. Would you be a dear and drop my son’s phone off at my office tomorrow morning? I would greatly appreciate it.”

“. . . Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you, Jim.”

“You’re welcome, Strick—Mr. Strickler, sir.”

He ended the call, stuffing the phone back into his pocket.

*Young Atlas is fine,* he reasoned, *he’s fifteen. Surely, he can’t get into too much trouble.*
But what if something had gotten to him? Atlas was a smart lad, but that was it, he was only a lad, a boy barely grown. To the Changelings, he was practically a babe, which was one of the reasons he’d never permitted the teen out of Arcadia, let alone on any Order missions. They were much too dangerous for a greenling like him. Perhaps in a few years, the man would allow the boy to participate, but only under his strict observation.

Stricklander pulled out his pen, twisting it as he began to pace back and forth.

Foolish. He’d given the boy too much responsibility and freedom and now, like Icarus, he’d burned himself in some fashion. Probably sulking off in those meadows. The Changeling’s forehead puckered. The moment the boy got home he would have to be punished, both as an example to his brethren and for his own good.

Restricting his daytime hours to the Janus Order would be a must, perhaps followed with a deep cleaning of his office and the Order’s restrooms. He wouldn’t dare put the boy in the Training room, especially with what happened last time.

Atlas will undoubtedly be upset with the man’s decisions. It wouldn’t be the first time. The teen, despite his adult-like demeanor, was still a child and needed to learn that actions—especially irresponsible ones like not answering his bloody phone—had consequences.

His gaze flickered to the rising moon.

Still, Stricklander hoped, wherever the boy was tonight, that he was safe.
Chapter Summary

Wherein a drunk Blinky thinks up ways to convince Atlas over to their side and Barbara accidentally finds her missing son by hitting him with her car.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I'm back with another chapter! Sorry this too longer than I was expecting. Switching up the POVs for this chapter. I'm thinking of putting a Barbara POV subplot in this story, so that people can keep up with what Barbara is doing while the story continues, until her and Jim reunite again. Thank you for all the wonderful reviews. They always make my day. :) Please enjoy the new chapter.

As Heartstone Trollmarket began to mourn for their champion, Blinky downed another drink. It was too bitter and dry for the scholar’s tastes, but Kanjigar used to drink it to unwind and if there was one thing Blinky absolutely needed to do right now, it was that.

“Too much, Blinky.” AAARRRRGGHH!!! said, pushing the Trollish brew far away from where his four arms could reach. “Bad for health.”

“Nonsense,” Blinky gurgled, reaching for the drink. “I’ve not had near enough. Bartender! Another round for us!”

“Blinky,” he admonished, frowning down at him.

Sighing, the blue troll raised his hands in surrender.
“You're right, old friend,” he said wistfully. Blinky laid his elbows on the table, two hands coming to cover his lower eyes while the others grasped the book in front of him so tightly he was afraid he might leave indentions in the pages.

“To think Kanjigar was felled and a you-know-what has taken his place. And a child, at that. What was Merlin thinking? A human Trollhunter would be a novelty, not accepted but tolerated, sure, however—” he huddled closer to the larger male, whispering, “A Changeling Trollhunter? Trollmarket will be in an uproar! Not to mention, he works for you-know-who with the rest of his fellow you-know-whats. Great Gronka Morka. This is far above my expertise.”


“Yes, yes, but how?” He rubbed his chin, his other two hands massaging his temples. “Well, he is rather young. Impressionable, one might say. But to try and convince him to betray his own kind? I’m no miracle worker, old friend.”

“Share problem. Boy not like Bular either.”

Blinky narrowed all of his eyes. “Hmm. Yes. If we approached from that angle, he might be more amiable to joining us.” He sighed, “The problem, I fear, will be finding him. Master Atlas won’t fall for the same thing twice. We need something to get him to trust us more, an incentive so to speak, so I can talk to him about his newfound duties.”

“Food?”

“No. No. That won’t work. But maybe....” His eyes widened, a new idea forming. “Yes, of course! There was a stout little human with him today. His friend, I believe.”

“Blinky, no.”

“Blinky, yes!” He exclaimed, one pair of hands rubbing together while the others grabbed the book off the table, putting it underneath his arms. “We track down the boy and use him to lure Master Atlas out of hiding. If we can get him to Trollmarket, then perhaps we could convince him, turn him towards the side of good. Yes, yes. It’s all coming together, AAARRRGGHH!!!. Good job, old friend. I knew I could count on you.”
AAARRRGGHH!!! exhaled deeply, shaking his head as he rose from the table to follow the other back to their home.

Blinky hurried along ahead of his compatriot, not daring to look back in fear that the other would see the troubled look on his face.

AAARRRGGHH!!! was likely right. This wasn’t the best plan Blinky had come up with (arguably the worst, if his brother were still alive to comment upon it). In truth, it might even blow up in their faces, like a pile of Dwärkstones.

But Blinky had seen the boy, the uncertainty on his face painted as clear as Norwegian troll glass. There was a something to exploit there—be it his dislike of Bular, or his weakness for helping others, even to his own detriment. He didn’t kill the human boy in that locker-room like any other changeling would. Instead, the boy made a deal with the human. He worked with the human.

And then, for no apparent reason, he protected a smaller human from a larger one (not that Blinky was stalking the changeling. Sound from sewer lines underneath the schoolyard merely traveled well, he reasoned). Unlike the first, the second interaction gave him no exchange, no benefit from which he could derive. He merely did it on a whim.

A whim. Now, what sort of changeling does that?

Strange, this Atlas fellow. He acted unlike any other changeling Blinky had met (which, admittedly, were but a scant few).

And his appearance—

It troubled the scholar. Even changelings, as unnatural as they were, were still trolls underneath their human disguises. Not so for the boy. There were certain similarities of course, the horns, tusks, and ears for example; however the fact remained that the child was far too human-looking.

Which left only the impossible behind.

A changeling bred with a human.
He visibly gagged at the notion, hiding it with a sharp cough.

If changelings could breed with humans, then they were in even greater danger than he previously thought. How many hybrids existed? For all Blinky knew, the changelings might have found a way to expand their legions by tens if not hundreds of times over the centuries.

And if his intuition was correct, then they were probably living above Trollmarket right at this very second.

The others wouldn’t believe him. Too stuck to their ways with their heads in the dirt. *Trollmarket hadn’t been attacked in centuries,* they would say.

The only troll that might even remotely believe him was Vendel. Still, he would proof, and the boy—their new Trollhunter—was key. If he survived that long that is. The longer the young one was topside, the higher the possibility that Bular or one of the other changelings got to him first.

Blinky would need to approach much more cautiously this time. First, they would need to find the human Master Atlas was in contact with—Tub or Tim or something or other. At some point, the human would have to make contact with Atlas. Second, Blinky would need to explain himself better. He’d been too hasty to meet Master Atlas before and scared the poor child half to death.

His next meeting would go better.

It must.

Blinky looked back, observing the market with quiet solemnity.

Or else they were all doomed.
Barbara rubbed the sleep from her eyes. The clinic was swamped with the ill and injured and only two doctors were on duty that night. What was supposed to be her off night had changed when half of the medical personal called in sick with the flu. Typical.

God, what was she doing with her life? She was almost in her forties and here she was, living day in and day out with no motivation whatsoever.

The locket hanging from her mirror twirled like a dancer, the morning sun reflecting off its shiny surface.

Out of nowhere, her car hit a large pothole. The entire vehicle shock at the impact, the locket hitting the dashboard and breaking off its chain, falling below the front passenger seat. Barbara cursed.

Pulling over to the side of the road, the doctor parked the car and began to reach around. She huffed in frustration and unbuckled her seatbelt then bent down over the center console. Her fingers squeezed in between the seat and the door.

Finally, after several minutes of wiggling, she secured the jewelry between her index and thumb, a smile of triumph gracing her lips.

It disappeared when she noticed that the glass containing the photo had fractured.

“Dang it,” she muttered angrily under her breath. “Oh, this is just a perfect ending to my day, isn’t it?”

Barbara brushed her finger over the photo inside: one, a picture of her parents and the other, a picture of her son. It was right before his disappearance, she remembered in a moment of bittersweet nostalgia. He was sitting on his new bike, the one with those silly racing stripes and that he just absolutely had to have, as he liked to tell her. Of course, the photo was just before he hit a tree with that bike and knocked out his last two baby teeth. Barbara hummed softly. She couldn’t believe it had already been more than five years.

The doctor shook her head. God, look at her. Look at how pathetic she’d become. Younger Barbara would be appalled.

But younger Barbara never lost a son, either.
The doctor closed the locket and brought it to her forehead. Memories, it seemed, were all she had to live for these days. She should have left this stupid town a long time ago, but the desperate hope that her son would return kept her from leaving, keeping her trapped in the same damn home, watching as the same damn families around her enjoyed their lives while she was stuck with damn ghosts.

Damn, she really needed a vacation.

Perhaps somewhere far away, like Europe or South America. Anywhere, in truth, as long as she didn’t have to think too hard. A nice pristine beach with clear blue water, a tall, accented gentlemen at her side (she did have a thing for Brits after all), and a nice white wine to compliment it all.

Barbara yawned. First things first however; she needed sleep.

She threw the lever into reverse to return to the road. Checking her back mirrors as she switched into drive, she barely had time to react when someone came running out of the woods, smacking into her windshield.

Barbara jerked back, car shaking at the impact. Her face paled.

She killed someone. Oh dear god, she killed someone.

*No, he might still be alive,* her more rational side reasoned. *Damn it, woman, you’re a doctor. Do something!*

Barbara hurried to open the door, legs shaking as she pulled herself out of the vehicle. When she rounded the car to the front, Barbara openly gasped.

It was as if his armor made of light itself, magically glowing even in the early morning when the full light of dawn had yet to hit Arcadia.

That wasn’t what made her gasp however.
He was dark haired like his father, with pale skin and an oval face that she knew by heart. Older than what she remembered, but all the features were there. The teen groaned, squinting up at Barbara with blue eyes so similar to her own.

She choked, struggling to breath as tears began to spring forth. Her shoulders began to tremble.

Was this a dream? Had she fallen asleep at the wheel and died? Could this be heaven? She inched closer, her hands quivering.

Her luck couldn’t be this good. The boy blinked rapidly, dazed as she leaned closer. He used his elbows to push himself up into more of a sitting position.

Shaking fingers met warm skin, real skin, the contact sending an electrical shock through both of them. She didn’t let go however, merely caressing his cheek, relishing the feeling.

This was real. She wasn’t imagining things.

He leaned forward, causing her heart to sing with joy.

“Jim,” she whispered.

His eyes widened. There was recognition there.

It was her Jim. He was here. With her.

The feeling didn’t last long sadly. Mere moments later, Jim pulled away, picking himself up off the ground.

Her son turned to look down at the circular glowing disk near his heart, a dark expression befalling his features. “Crap, if Bular or the others see me like this out in the open—” his gaze flickered back to hers. “Forget I was here if you want to live.”

“No, please, wait!” She called out, scrabbling to her feet. “Don’t leave. Jim. Jim!”
Jim stopped at the edge of the forest. He looked back for a moment, confusion in his gaze. A second later, he turned away.

He disappeared as he came, running at a pace Barbara could not hope to match at her age.

She slumped down to the ground, her knees hitting the asphalt.

Her fist struck the pavement, frustration building up within her. He was gone again.

Had she been dreaming? Was she finally losing her mind?

Barbara went to check her glasses than stopped, scrutinizing her hand. A sticky red substance clung to her fingers. Not a lot, but definitely enough to be noticeable.

He was real.

All of this had been real.

She clenched the same hand into a tight fist.

Her son was alive. Dazed and injured (and a bit LARP-esque, she thought), but alive.

And he was running from something.

Barbara grabbed the bumper and pushed herself up off the road. No one would believe her, not the police, not her friends—hell, not even her own parents. Everyone else had written off her son as a lost-cause, either dead or missing, never to return.

There was only one person who would believe her, but she couldn’t burden the boy with this. Not yet.
She needed a plan.

But first, she would need to find him again.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I'm back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Ash, my beta reader, for going over this so fast for me. Midterms are coming up so I won't be able to post as often as I would like, but I will try to post once every week or two. Thank you for all the reviews! I read all of them and they are amazing. Nothing makes me happier than knowing people are enjoying my story. :) Please enjoy the new chapter. I'm happy to answer any questions in the comments if you have any.

It wasn’t long before he came to a stop, back near the entrance to the sewers where he left Toby.

He slept little that night, not used to the strange armor and even stranger body.

It was exhilarating. Everything felt new and amazing and terrifying. His new human skin was sensitive to even the softest of breezes and the feel of the cold water against its surface was unlike anything he had ever felt.

*But it comes at a price*, he thought, putting a hand to the small cut on his head, wincing in pain. He was weaker, his other senses duller than before. Was this what is was like to be human? This odd, blended sensation of vulnerability and invincibility?

*Or maybe*, his inner-Nomura taunted, *you’re just a dumb teenage boy.*

His mind traveled back to the night before. The tales about the Amulet of Daylight were true. Unimaginable power, right at his fingertips.

Atlas pulled out the sword. It fit flawlessly into his hand; its weight perfect. Nothing would feel as comfortable as the blade currently in his hand.
Not even his own sword felt as good, still sitting back at the Order, too conspicuous to be carried around during the day. It had been a gift, one of Stricklander’s personal favorites, a two-handed, great sword imported from Europe, doused in magic to cut even the hardest stone. Few existed, largely because the Troll who made them died in a drunken fist fight with a Gnome (*don’t ask*, his mentor said before Atlas could open his mouth), yet also because of its inefficiency in battle. The pummel was nearly as long as the blade itself and far heavier on one side than the other. Atlas had come to love the unique weapon, but *man* was it a pain to carry around.

Most Changelings weren’t frontline fighters either, preferring to use poisons, magicks, and trickery than physical weapons like swords and axes. Even Stricklander, well-versed in all sorts of weaponry, preferred to use knives and daggers, though he did try to teach the teen some battle form whenever he could take time away from his busy schedule.

Truth be told, most of his training came from Nomura, who, instead of instructing him how to fight, simply kept on attacking him until he learned to defend against her blows (“defend” being avoid as much as possible until she got bored and left).

*Stricklander,* Atlas suddenly realized. *Damn.* What the hell was he going to tell him?

“*Oh, hey, Stricklander,*” Atlas said aloud mockingly. “*Guess what? I’m the new Trollhunter. Oh, you want me to give you the Amulet to bring back Gunmar? Gee, I’m sure that will go well.*”

As much as he cared for the man (he called Atlas his *son.* The teen was still reeling from that in all honesty.), it amazed Atlas how devoted he was to a Troll who cared little for them outside of being tools for his return. They thought Bular was bad? Didn’t Gunmar once slaughter an entire group of “Impures” because they didn’t bring him enough humans to eat?

Atlas was terrified of Bular, but he feared Gunmar even more. Bular was terrible; Gunmar was the *literal* apocalypse.

Maybe he could convince Stricklander to give him some time to think about it. Did they even need Gunmar? Changelings were doing pretty well for themselves over these last few centuries.

*Oh, who was he kidding? The man was Gunmar’s Second-in-Command.* There was no way Atlas could convince him to abandon his master.

Suffice to say, Atlas was screwed.
The morning sun peaked above the slopping mountains of Arcadia, reflecting off his luminous armor like light atop water.

Atlas closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of heat against his face.

A moment later, the Amulet flashed, vanishing from its position on his chest and finding its place in his right hand.

Just as the armor disappeared so too did his human flesh, though not nearly as easily as it had come.

Pinpricks sensations dotted his skin, increasing in intensity with every second past. It was as if he were being stretched and pulled like a piece of gum, his muscles protesting at the sensation. Atlas grunted as his spine popped.

A pounding pain erupted as his horns sprouted forth, messing up the nice flat dark hair around them.

Nails darkened and lengthened until they returned to their claw-like form. His tusks followed, piercing out of his lower jaw and poking over his bottom lip. His canines elongated as well.

The most painful of all was his face. It was as if someone had put a hot iron to his skin, the bones and cartilage rearranging below the surface, the bridge of his nose curving and widening to fit his growing angular jawline.

By the end of it, he found himself panting, collapsed against a tree. His hair was drenched in perspiration.


It was as if he had just gone three rounds with Bular.

Everything felt sore. Even his eyelids felt tender, if that was even possible.
Atlas raised his arm, glaring down at the Amulet with hatred. “What the hell was that?”

Once again, it treated him with nothing.

“Oh, so now you’re giving me the silent treatment? Really? Oh, that is rich.” Atlas snarked. “I should throw you into a lake, you stupid waste of a pocket watch. Seriously, why did you do this? Is this just some sort of game to you? If I play being your little Trollhunter then I get to be a real Changeling, is that it? I don’t care how awesome your armor and sword are. You picked the wrong Changeling. I’m not—you made a mistake.”

He chucked the Amulet away, fingers curled tight around his horns. It returned to his side moments later.

Atlas knocked his head back against the bark.

“For as long as he could remember, he wanted to know his past. Whatever those humans did to him at the facility had wiped his entire mind clean, leaving him to pick up the pieces.

Atlas gave up finding out not long after joining the Janus Order. The Changelings had tried every sort of memory magic they could find but to no avail. This was a mental thing, they’d told him, not magical. He would need to figure it out himself.

A hand inched down from one of his horns to the spot where the woman touched him.

Such soft, warm fingers. The blood had dried, the cut already healing at a rapid pace.

The headache from his meeting with Toby had returned with a vengeance when he saw the woman,
twice as long and twice as painful.

He knew her. Or rather, *Jim* knew her. And she knew him. The moment they touched it was as if someone had grabbed onto the strings of his emotions and pulled at them like marionettist. A deep intense longing had flooded his being. It had taken his entire willpower to pull away (though not without recording every detail of her face to his mind). Whoever that lady was, she meant something to his past-self.

Atlas brought a hand to his mouth, biting down on his knuckle in contemplation. He needed help. Someone he knew. Someone who could tell him about Jim. Who could confirm his identity. Someone who had access to that kind of information.

Someone like Jim’s friend.

Atlas froze the instant he entered the office.

“Uh,” the Changeling (*Gladys*, his inner-Stricklander reminded him, *you should know this already*) at the receptionist desk sized him up, then returned to perusing her magazine. “You know what? Go on ahead. I’m not paid enough to deal with this.”

Atlas released a sharp exhale, relieved that the other did not recognize him. The mole costume was itchy and smelled like the inside of a shoe, but it did the trick.

He burst through the next pair of doors.

“Toby, I need to speak with you. This is urgent.”

“Seweusry? Wigh nah?” Toby asked. “Kan eh wagh?”
“Seriously? Right now? Can’t it wait?” A large human, the dentist, Atlas supposed, translated.

Atlas drew closer, hands moving as he tried to explain, “Okay, remember, the thing from the canals that starts with an A and likes to say James Lake a lot? Well, it works. And you’re not going to believe me, but I think—”

“Ugh, dahs grah an aw, dew, bah ah wanna git desh brashese augh bahfou am dirdee.”

The Dentist pulled out another dental tool, then said, “Ugh, that’s great and all, dude, but I wanna get these braces off before I’m thirty.”

“I waited until the morning, human. What more do you want? I thought you wanted to find this Jim?”

“Mah mawf esh lik dat Barshawona shearsh. Dis ish gonna tak ahwiwah.”

“My mouth is like that Barcelona church. This is gonna take a while.”

“How long?” Atlas ground out.

He shouldn’t have asked.

Eight.

Hours.

Night had already begun to descend upon Arcadia, the sun hitting the mountainside, casting long shadows along the street. Atlas groaned. Not only was he starving, but he’d been gone from home for more than a day. Stricklander was going to kill him.

Stricklander.
Oh, crap.

He forgot to return the phone to Stricklander’s office.

There was no human school today, if his inner calendar was correct. Maybe he could claim that?

He flicked on his phone. Messages stormed in by the hundreds. Mostly from his mentor from the day before, but a couple were from Nomura, who kept asking what sorts of things he wanted at his funeral.

Atlas cursed in Trollish.

Toby raised a questioning brow. “What’d you say, dude?”

The halfblood chose not to explain, instead responding, “I was in that place for eight freaking hours, Toby.”

“What, really? So was I.”

“I have never felt the need to kill something so badly.”

“You could have left, you know.”

“Yeah, but—” he paused, “It’s about your friend, Jim. And the Amulet. And maybe, me.”

Toby stopped rubbing his jaw, his eyes suddenly attentive. “You serious?”

“Absolutely. Is there someplace more secluded we could talk?”

“Oh yeah, no problem-o,” he said. “My house isn’t too far from here and Nana’s out playing Bingo with some of her friends. Man, who knew old folks could be so competitive. That stuff can go on
Atlas nodded, thumb stroking the Amulet’s side underneath the mascot uniform. “Yeah, that’s perfect.”

His mind traveled as they walked up the small hill. Atlas was scared, his heart beating so fast he thought it might jump out of his body. He was breaking every rule in the Janus Order by doing this. If Stricklander found out, there wouldn’t be just a slap on the wrist.

He swallowed the bitter taste of bile developing in his mouth.

Though he only knew the human for less than a day, he trusted the boy enough to be able to discern whether Atlas was truly this James Lake. And if Atlas really was this James Lake—

What was he going to do?

Was it possible to get rid of the Amulet? The downside was losing the ability to transform. Being a human had been an eye-opening experience, despite the pain it brought. The body, though smaller than his current one, was surprisingly comfortable, as if he had been residing in it his entire life.

Even now, part of him craved experiencing it again.

If he just got a handle on it, then he could finally be of some sort of use to his Order.

The problem was—

That form came with being the Trollhunter.

And Atlas highly doubted the Janus Order would accept him as such.

“Welcome to Chez Toby,” the boy said in a fake French accent, opening up the door to his home. “It’s not much, but its home.”
“It’s fine, Toby.” He said, giving the place a look-see.

Though not huge, the house was cozy and warm, with little knick-knacks and other human added touches that made Atlas smile. He chucked off the mascot head, Toby helping him with the zipper in the back.

“So, what’s this big thing you wanted to show me?” Toby said, leading them to his kitchen. He opened the fridge, pulling out a bag of frozen peas and placing them against his cheek. “Did you find Jim? Oh, is the Amulet some sort of locator device or something?”

“I think, maybe I should just show you.” Atlas said. “I-I’m honestly really confused about all this.”

“It’s cool, I got time.”

Atlas rubbed the back of his neck. “You’ve got to promise that the information I give you never leaves this room.” He crossed his arms, shoulders hitched in discomfort. “I lost my memory a while back.”

“Ah, man, that sucks dude.” The shorter boy cocked his head to the side. “What’s that got to do with Jim though?”

“I’m getting to that part,” Atlas said. “After I lost my memory, I was taken in by the Jan—” he closed his mouth abruptly, accidently biting his lip.

He’d nearly blurted out top secret information, and to a human no less.

Damn, he was terrible at this.

Toby gestured for him to continue, asking, “The Jan what?”

“The Order. The secret organization I told you about. Of people, like me,” he paused. “Well, not exactly like me. They can change forms.”
“Oh? Like superheroes or something?”

“Yeah, except we’re not exactly considered superheroes.” Atlas put a fist to his mouth. “Okay, what do you know about Trolls?”

“That they live under bridges or something? Wait, dude,” the boy threw him a wide-eyed stare. “No way, are you a Troll or something?”

“Well, half, yes, but—”

Toby jumped up off his chair, circling around the other in fascination. “That is so awesome sauce! So you’re, like, part of a secret society of Trolls? Do they all look like you? How come humans don’t know about you guys? Can I join? I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Toby,” he started, hands up. “That’s a lot of questions, all of which I can’t exactly reveal to just anybody. Honestly, I’m already going to be in pretty hot water by telling you all this right now. Strictly speaking, the fact that I’ve told you even this much may endanger your life.”

The human boy reached for a glass in one of the higher cabinets, filling it with water from the sink. “So, why are you here then?”

Atlas brushed his bangs back, both elbows against the table. “Because I need your help.”

“Okay,” he replied cheerfully, surprising the half-Changeling.

It never stopped amazing Atlas how willing Toby was to help him. Most of the Changelings in the Order distrusted him, so getting anyone outside of Nomura and Stricklander to help him with something was a null concept.

Perhaps he’d been wrong. Perhaps humans weren’t entirely bad.

He scooted out of the chair, standing in the middle of the kitchen area. “You knew this James Lake
really well, correct?"

“Yeah, we were best friends since kindergarten.”

“When did he disappear exactly?”

Toby closed his eyes, fingers wiggling as if counting. “Five years, four months, and two days.”

Atlas blinked. “That’s pretty accurate.”

“Well, he is my best friend.” He said. “I’m not gonna stop looking for him just because everyone else did.”

“Could you,” he licked his bottom lip. “Could you recognize him? Even after more than five years of not seeing each other?”

The human nodded fervently. “Absolutely. You may not know this, Atlas, but I’ve got quite the keen eye for people. Nothing gets past little ol’ me.”

“Good,” he said. “Because I need you to confirm something for me. And you can’t tell anyone, okay? This is just between you and I.”

Showtime. This was it, Atlas thought.

He pulled out the Amulet. He breathed in and out, trying to relax his body. Finally, he whispered, “For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to Command.”

Unlike the first transformation, this one was much faster, only taking a few seconds. The spheres of light shot out, lifting him off the floor and covering him in silvery armor. Though feeling a tad compressed, there was no pain. His body tingled from the aftereffects.

Glass shattered against the floor. Atlas’ head jerked back as a larger body crashed into him, hitting the wall. He coughed, staggered at the smaller teen’s strength.
Toby’s had the taller in a bear hug. His shoulders shook. Worried, Atlas tapped him on the top of his head.

“Are you alright, human?”

“It’s just…I can’t believe it.” The boy started, voice increasing in volume with every word. “It’s really you. I was right. I knew it. I knew something reminded me of Jimbo when I met you. Even if you are a thief.”

“Excuse me?”

Toby’s eyes began tearing up “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. It’s you! It’s really you! You even sound like you. This is amazing. Jim! Your mom’s gonna go nuts when she sees you.”

“Mm-my mom?”

“This is incredible! Come on, I’m sure she’ll be home soon. We can surprise her.”

“Uh, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

His heart rate rose. He had a parent. Part of him wanted to jump in the air in excitement, to rush off with Toby and meet her. He always knew his mother was a human. But to think that she was alive all this time and looking for him?

What did she look like? What was her name? Thousands of questions erupted like a volcano in his mind.

*Could it be the woman from before*, he wondered.

“Don’t tell me you don’t rem—” he stopped, realization dawning. “You don’t remember at all, do you? That’s why you didn’t recognize me before.”
“Toby, you can’t tell anyone about this, about us.” He looked down at the Amulet lodged in his chest.

Reality came crashing down on him. He couldn’t meet his mother, not now. She was looking for Jim, not Atlas. As much as it pained him, the teen would need to put her off until a later date, at least until he got this whole identity thing under control.

Atlas circled the sphere with a finger, its luminous glow pulsing with every heartbeat. “This thing, this Amulet, seems to keep me human, but the moment its off, I go back to normal.”

“Couldn’t you just wear it for the rest of your life then?” Toby begged. “Everyone misses you, dude. I miss you.”

“It’s not that easy. My Order want this thing too, and not for the best of reasons.”

“You work for the bad guys?”

“No, I mean,” he shook his head. “We’re not bad. They—we aren’t accepted by the rest of our kind. We’re considered impure.”

“Trolls are racist?” He furrowed his brows.

“Some (all, his mind interjected), yes. But if they get the Amulet, then they—we’re gonna try to resurrect an Evil Troll.” He scratched the side of his cheek. “He’s not exactly a big fan of humans either. Your species…might get eradicated?”

His eyebrows furrowed, a frown materializing on his lips. “That’s why you wanted the Amulet before? You were gonna take it right to them.”

“Yes, I mean, no. Well,” he pulled away from Toby, arms crossed in shame. “It’s complicated. Even I don’t know the whole story. I mean, supposedly, this could be really good for us. Perhaps Gun—the Evil Troll won’t dispose of us if I bring this to him. Maybe I can get clemency for us and you and my human mother.”
“But everyone else is gonna suffer if you do.”

“And that’s the problem,” he sighed. “If I can just convince my mentor that we don’t need this Evil Troll, that we can do just fine on our own, then maybe—”

“Dude, Jim—”

“Don’t call me that,” he scowled, hands in his hair. “I’m Atlas. Jim is—well, he’s not dead, but I’m not him anymore, okay? I’m Atlas now. Atlas.”

Toby nodded, bringing a hand to his shoulder. “Look, dude, Atlas, I get it. You’re with this group because they saved you and all and you feel that you owe them—”

“I do owe them.”

“But you’re scared because instead of the Amulet choosing some random guy, it chose you.”

“It wasn’t supposed to.” He mumbled.

“But it did.” He poked the Trollhunter’s Amulet. “You have a sacred responsibility now.”

Atlas laughed mirthlessly, “That’s what they said.”

“Who’s they?”

“You know how I said there were other Trolls?”

“Yeah?”

He rubbed his hands together sheepishly. “Well—”
“Master Atlas!” A voice boomed from the yard outside. “There you are! And you’re in human form? Wonderful!”

The two teens jumped at the sound. Toby screamed as a blue Troll looked through the screen door to his kitchen, turning the knob and stepping inside. Atlas startled, his body ready to run.

“I’m calling nine-one-one!” Toby said, scrambling for his cell. “No! Animal control! The F.B.I! X-Files!”

Atlas held his position, hand ready to pull the sword off his back. “You again!”

Blinky raised all four hands in defense, smiling amiably. “Ah ha, Master Atlas, how good it is to see you again. We mean you no harm. I knew it was a matter of time before the Amulet called to us.”

“Us?”

The larger Troll peaked through the doorway, too large to fit inside the already full kitchen. He waved, “Hi. Blinky need rope still?”

“No, no. Change of plans, my good fellow.” Blinky waved, laughing nervously.

“Called? You guys can feel it as well?” Atlas asked.

Blinky put two hands together into a steeple, head leaned to the side. “Well, no, not exactly.”

“Spy on you.” The larger—AAARRRGGH!!—Atlas remembered—supplied.

“Yes, what AAARRRGGH!! said.” Blinky remarked. “Though that sounds a tad perverse. Keeping a close eye I should say.”

Toby continued to freak out, dialing for Animal Control, only for them to hang up on him.
The blue Troll switched his attention to the stout human in the corner of the room. “Ah, hello there! You must be Master Tim.”


“Master Toby,” Blinky amended. “How strange, to think a human and a Changeling as friends.”

Atlas paused. Were he and Toby friends? They had only recently met. Well, for Atlas, at least.

Toby rubbed his eyes, as if not believing what was in front of him. “Holy crap, when you said Trolls I thought you meant Trolls like you, not like them!”

Atlas threw him a curious look. “Oh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

He gestured to both of the intruders. “They’re, like, nine feet tall.”

“No, seriously, what’s that mean?”

“I believe what Master Toby is saying is that you,” Blinky pointed at the Trollhunter. “Master Atlas, are not, and I do not mean this as an insult, as Troll-looking as AAARRRGGHH!!! and I. Not that there is any problem with that! There are a variety of Troll species. Why, Aaarrggghh!!! is a Kubera, one of—”

“So Atlas doesn’t look like other Trolls cause he’s only half then?” Toby asked.

“Toby,” Atlas scolded, elbowing the other. “What did I say?”

Blinky’s eyes widened, “I knew it!” Suddenly aware at his volume, he coughed, gathering himself. “Ah-hem, of course, I was fairly certain already when I first examined you—”
“Which was not appreciated by the way.”

He bowed lightly. “Many apologies once again, Master Atlas. I will refrain from touching you without your permission.”

Atlas paused, stunned at his words. People didn’t normally apologize to him. “I-fine.”

“Still, a half-Changeling, half-human hybrid. I’ve never heard of such a thing. How fascinating.” The Troll squinted two of his six eyes. “Are there more of you?”

He shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

“Dude,” Toby quipped, smacking Blinky in the eye with a ladle. “He’s got, like, eight hundred eyes. Atlas, what’s he want with you?”

“Would you mind, boy.” He swiped the metal cooking utensil away. Blinky cleared his throat, then explained, “Your friend, Master Atlas, is the newly chosen Trollhunter.”

Atlas scoffed, “Chosen. Ha! As If I had any choice involved.”

“And he has the sacred obligation to protect.” Blinky added.

“Oh? Like a “superhero”? Can I be his sidekick or something? You know, maybe get a cool costume of my own, with a cool superhero name like Deathblade or Snipersnake?”


“Us,” Aaarrrgghh!!! pointed to himself and Blinky, then to Toby. “Humans.”

Blinky agreed. “Yes, from bad Trolls.”
“Like Changelings.” Atlas said dryly.

“I didn’t say that.” Blinky said. “Bad Trolls can be anyone. You’ll also have to face Goblins, Gruesomes, and sometimes even the occasional rogue Gnome. Fiesty little creatures, those are.”

Toby then asked, “So, if Atlas works for the bad guys, does this make him an antihero?”

“They’re not bad guys, Toby.” Atlas said. “We’re just…a little misunderstood.”

“Wait, Master Atlas, you are in contact with other Changelings?”

“Changelings?” Toby asked.

“Trolls that can transform into humans.” Blinky provided.

“And the secret’s out.” Atlas put a hand over his face. “I work for them, Blinky.”

“I see. An secret society of Changelings. I-I think I need to sit down,” Blinky said shakily, grabbing hold of one of the chairs and sinking down into it. It creaked underneath his weight. “What, might I ask, is your role in this organization?”

Atlas puffed out his chest a tad. “I’m the head’s assistant.”

“Oh dear,” Blinky remarked, his eyes taking on a thousand-eye stare. “Changelings working together above Trollmarket. I had suspicions of course, but to think they were true! Vendel will need to know of this.”

“Not good,” Aaarrrgghh!!! said.

“No, not at all. The mantle of Trollhunter is a sacred responsibility, one which has never been passed to a Changeling before.” Blinky exhaled somberly. “This is a momentous occasion.”
Keys jingled. All four males froze.

“Oh, it’s my Nana!” Toby remarked shrilly, then pushed Atlas to the door. “Go to the backyard, quick! I’ll distract her!”

“I thought she wasn’t supposed to be home until midnight?” Atlas asked, sticking his head back through.

Toby put a finger to his mouth. “Shush! You guys just stay out here and be quiet. She’s pretty night-blind, so I doubt she’ll be able to see you.”

“Mmm.” Aaaarrrgghh!!! said, sniffing the human’s hair. “You smell tasty. Like cat.”

“We, uh, have a Siamese?” Toby said, blinking, then added, “please don’t eat her.”

The boy shut the door behind them.

Silence ensued.

Atlas looked to the two Trolls, then remarked in rough Trollish, “You should not come. If Order find out, it come after you.”

“You speak Trollish?” Blinky said, eyes lighting up in excitement.

He shrugged, waving his hand side-to-side. “Some. Like-Father taught me. Use Changeling more. Useful.”

If anything, the four-armed Troll looked positively ecstatic. “Your kind has crafted your own language? Oh, how fascinating. Aaaarrrgghh!!! Can you believe it? Think of what sort of syntax structure has developed over these thousands of years. The grammar! The idioms! I wonder how much human language has influenced it? Do they use Trollish grammar and human loan words?”
“Very cool.” Aaarrrgghh!!! said, looking at Atlas in open admiration.

He blushed, not used to being complimented. “Thank you.”

The screen door creaked open. Toby scuttled down the steps to the open grass. “What’d I miss?”

“Master Atlas is quite the linguist.” Blinky said. “He can speak Trollish and Changeling!”

“Wow, I have no idea what those languages are, but that is awesome sauce!” Toby said, patting him on the shoulder.

“We don’t call it Changel—Guys, please,” Atlas said, face burning. “Let’s get back to the Trollhunter stuff.”

Toby pulled closer to the other teen. “If Atlas is the first Changeling Trollhunter as you said, then who was the dude before him?”

Silence ensued. Atlas bit the inside of his cheek.

Blinky looked down at the grass mournfully. “The mantle of Trollhunter has been passed down from Troll to Troll for hundreds of years.”

“So what happened to the previous guy? Did he retire or something?”

Atlas shook his head. “No, Toby, remember those pile of rocks you saw yesterday?”

“Felled.” Aaarrrgghh!!! explained.

Toby cocked his head to the side, then asked, “Felled?”
“He was killed.” Atlas said.

Aaaaarrghhh!!! rubbed his arm. “Turned to stone and smashed. Not pretty.”

“Oh my gosh,” Toby gasped. “I stole the Amulet from his corpse! I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine Master Toby. You had no clue after all. His name was Kanjigar the Courageous,” Blinky said. “Brutally slain by the most vicious and ruthless of Trolls.”

“Bular.” Atlas said softly.

“Hey dude,” Toby patted Atlas on the back. “I’m sure this Bular guy just got lucky or something. It won’t happen to you, right Blinky?”

Atlas started giggling hysterically.

“Unfortunately, the, ah, evidence does not suggest that. Bular is a formidable opponent.”

“Then this Kanjigar dude was just having a bad day, right?”

Atlas crouched down in the grass, wishing that the ground would swallow him whole. The threat of Bular hung over his neck like a thick chain.

“Oh, I highly doubt that.” Blinky remarked. “Kanjigar was infamous. Well-known throughout Troll society. Strong, alert, definitely the most able of all Trollhunters.”

“But he can’t be, like, the best of the best, right?”

“Oh, no, he was the very best. There have been many a song and saga written about him, and quite a few stories from fans now that I think about it. Not that I have ever seen them with my eyes, ha, ha, ha . . .”
Toby bent down to Atlas’ side, rubbing circles into his back. “You okay?”

“I’m going to die.” He said in a monotone voice. “Bular is going to find out I’m the Trollhunter and smash me into a bloody pulp.”

“Oh, Master Atlas, don’t fret. “ Blinky came down on the ground with the two, hands hugging his knees. “We would never expect you engage him in battle quite so soon without the proper training, after all.”


Atlas shook his head, “Ask them how long it takes to train a Trollhunter.”

“Yo, how long does this Trollhunter training take?”

Blinky started to count off his hands, the fingers increasing with every second past. “Oh, it depends. I’m certain Master Atlas will be ready in a few decades.”

“Decades!” Toby exclaimed.

“Bular doesn’t know I’m the Trollhunter yet.” Atlas said. “So, how long do you think I have?”

Sighing, the blue Troll closed his eyes. “I’m going to be honest with you, Master Atlas. I’m not certain. A day or two, if you stay here. If we got you to Trollmarket though, I’m certain that we could prolong your life.”

“Trollmarket safe.” AAARRRGHGHH!!! added.

“So, are you ready, Master Atlas? We need to begin your training as soon as possible.”

“Uh . . .” Atlas threw up his hands. “Look. This seems like a really big responsibility.”
“Indeed it is.”

“So, this whole ‘dying at Bular’s hands thing,’” he pinched the arch of his nose. “That’s kind of a deal breaker for me here.”

“What sort of deal breaker are you talking about?”

“I’ll die! I hate Bular, but seriously? I’ve been pummeled enough by the asshole already. I’m not nearly ready to go up against him again. Not now. If I go against him, then the entire Order is going to come after me, my mentor included.” Atlas got up from the ground, shoulders bent forward. “I can’t do that to him. It would break his heart.”

“Again? You’ve faced him before?” Blinky rubbed his chin in interest, “And lived?”

Atlas nodded. “A few times, yeah. My first was for my so-called Initiation into the Janus Order. I still have the scars to prove it.”

Blinky smiled, all six eyes brightening in delight. “Janus Order? Is that what you call yourselves?”

Atlas groaned. “Agh. Just don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Well, Master Atlas, you’re already off to a far better start than other Trollhunters. You know what you’re facing.”

“Which is why,” Atlas said, finger clicking on the Amulet, “I think you should take this back. Find someone else to be Trollhunter. Once I figure out how to turn this thing off.”

“Oh, my,” Blinky shook his head. “Master Atlas. It chose you. And according to Trollhunter lore, you cannot refuse it or give it back. It is yours, until death.”

This must be some cosmic joke. As if Atlas didn’t already have enough to deal with. “There must be some sort of loophole to get out of this.”
“I’m afraid there is not. Master Atlas, you are now responsible for protecting humans and Trolls alike. If you do not, Trolls such as Bular will wreck destruction.”

“The Order has Bular under control.” He replied, eyes darting away from Blinky’s hardening gaze.

“Ah, but for how long?” Blinky asked. “As long as the Amulet is in your possession, Bular will seek you out, raining down havoc upon both worlds. At some point, you will have to face him.”

He was right, to Atlas’ displeasure.

Ugh.

Toby stood between the two. “I think,” he began, “that Atlas needs some time to process this. I mean, he’s only been Trollhunter for what? A day? Less? This is a lot of stuff to absorb.”

“Atlas okay?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked, his large hand paused right above the teen’s shoulder.

This time, Atlas didn’t flinch away. Instead, he patted one of the larger Troll’s fingers. “I need to think on this.”

Blinky nodded, lifting up and wiping off the grass from his legs. “Then we will reconvene tomorrow, Master Atlas. To begin your training as Trollhunter.”

Atlas crossed his arms, looking away.

“Might I approach closer, Master Atlas?” Blinky asked.

He threw a hand in the air. “Sure, whatever.”

The blue Troll guided him to a corner of the yard as the other two watched on. “Master Atlas, I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through right now.”
“Yeah?”

“But if I may say, Destiny is a gift,” he pointed to the sky, Atlas eyes following. Was it night already? Wow. Though not as beautiful as from the meadow, the stars twinkled brightly amidst the sea of black. “Some go their entire lives living existences of quiet desperation, never learning the truth that what feels as though a burden pushing down upon our shoulders is actually a sense of purpose that lifts us to greater heights.”

“I’m afraid,” Atlas whispered. “Afraid of how this will affect my mentor. He’s…he’s my dad. What if he doesn’t accept me?” Atlas closed his mouth for a moment, afraid to let out even more secrets. He just found out he had a mom today too. How was he going to protect her if Bular found out? “I don’t know what to do.”

“Never forget that fear, Master Atlas, is but the precursor to valor, that to strive and triumph in the face of fear is what it means to be a hero.”

“I can’t even think straight. How am I going to do this? How can I survive this?”

Blinky sighed, coming forward, one of his hands hesitantly hovering over the Amulet on his chest. “Don’t think, Master Atlas. Become.”

“But I—”

Blinky moved away, heading back to his friend. “At least consider it, Master Atlas. We will meet with you again tomorrow.”

“Where will I find you?”

“No worry. We find you.” AAARRRGGH!!! said. “Night, night.”

The two Trolls bid them adieu, disappearing over the hedge. Atlas and Toby watched them go.

The human boy broke the silence. “Well, that was weird.”
“Toby?” Atlas asked.

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if I stay at your home tonight?” He gestured down to himself. “I can’t exactly walk around like this and—”

“Dude, Atlas.” Toby wrapped an arm around his back, turning them back towards the door to the house. “It’s fine. Stay as long as you want. I get that this is a lot for you to process for you right now.”

“Yeah, that’s one way of saying it.”

“But, I want you to know, I’m here for you.” He said. “Even though you don’t remember, you’re my best friend and I want to help you in any way possible, okay? That’s what friends are for.”

“I’ve never had a best friend before.”

“Well, maybe I can jog your memory over dinner. How does tacos sound?” He paused, then smiled. “And call me Tobes.”
Becoming: Part 2 (III)

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Sorry for the late update. I'm studying for midterms so my time to write is limited. Big thanks to my beta readers Ash and Charlie for helping me with this. You can check out their tumblrs at https://ch4rl13sm1th.tumblr.com/ and https://ashtheunitato.tumblr.com/.

Also a big thanks for all the reviews, kudos, and bookmarks. I'm happy so many people are enjoying this story. Feedback is always appreciated and I love reading all of your comments! It makes me want to write more. Hope you enjoy the new chapter.

Toby circled around on his bike, making figure eights along the road. If Atlas were of clearer mind, he would be annoyed; as it was, the teen barely gotten a wink of sleep the night before, his mind preoccupied with worry.

Atlas adjusted the collar of the mascot uniform. Damn, it was itchy. “Would you stop that?”

Like clockwork, the moment the sun hit the house his armor vanished. He hid in Toby’s bathroom during the process, not wanting to freak out the boy as his body rearranged itself. Bones and muscles grinding against each other didn’t make very pleasant sounds. To his relief, the pain was not so bad this time. He was becoming used to the Amulet, or the Amulet was becoming used to him. It was hard to say.

Toby did as he asked. “You didn’t need to follow me to school, you know.”

“I’m not following you,” Atlas remarked. “I simply needed to return the mole costume. Besides, there’s something I need to do there.”

He gulped. Stricklander’s texts haunted him. How was he going to explain? Atlas was walking into the lion’s den. He only hoped he could leave in one piece.
“So,” Toby glided to his side. “What do you know about this Trollmarket place?”

“It’s the largest community of Trolls this side of the Atlantic. I’ve only heard stories however.”

“Oh, stories, huh? From who?”

“My mentor mostly. Changelings aren’t allowed though. We’ll be killed immediately.”

“Ouch, that sucks.” Toby winced.

“Which is why,” he began, “I’m a bit skeptical about what those Trollmarket Trolls from yesterday said. What if it’s a trap?”

“I don’t know, that Blinky-guy didn’t seem so bad. Aaarrrgghh!!! was nice too. I think they just want to help, you know?”

“Maybe you’re right, Tobes.” Atlas said, earning a smile from the other teen. “But in my line of work, you can never be too careful.”

The school approached in the distance. They’d arrived early, long before most students to avoid any suspicion. It was eerily silent; their footsteps loud against the paved path.

“Man, this place is creepy without any students around.” Toby mentioned.

“Be quiet,” Atlas said, scanning the area for any humans. “You can’t draw too much attention. Where’s the locker-room again?”

“There’s an emergency exit near the front. Probably locked right now though.”

Atlas sighed, “then we’ll have to get inside.”
“Oh! Coach Lawrence always leaves the windows slightly open in the gym cause the air conditioner is broken. The Gym’s near the locker-rooms too.”

After locking up Toby’s bicycle at the rack, the two teens traveled around the building to the gymnasium. Atlas pushed at the windows, but they wouldn’t open.

“Damn, maybe we should try another way.”

“Toby, I can’t see in this outfit. Tell me, is there anyone in there?”

The shorter boy plastered his face to the glass, nose smashed against it. Moments later, he pulled back, shaking his head. “Nope. Why do you ask?”

Atlas thrust his fist into the same window.

“I thought you said not to draw too much attention?” Toby exclaimed.

“You can’t; I never said anything about me.” He tip-toed over the broken glass.

“Oh, that is so unfair, dude.” Toby grumbled, following Atlas to the doors connecting the gym to the rest of the school.

Looking through the windows, Toby pushed the doors open with his back.

“What’s unfair about it?”

“Why me and not you?” Toby stopped walking down the hallway, stepping in front of Atlas. “Atlas…am I really your friend?”

“That’s an unusual question to ask.”
“It’s just…” Toby scratched his cheek. “You don’t even remember me. And you just come out of nowhere as this entirely cool and awesome warrior guy and suddenly all this crazy stuff is happening and I’m…I’m not sure what you even think of me, you know? I mean, I knew the old you since Kindergarten, but you’ve only known me for a day and I just…Sorry, I’ve been thinking a lot since yesterday.”

Atlas looked around, then took off the Mole head, breathing in and out. Wearing the mascot uniform was uncomfortable enough, but with his armor on? Freaking brutal.

“Human, you are strange and loud.”

“Gee, thanks,” he muttered.

“But you are also very kind and understanding. You dropped everything to help me. You treat me like an equal. You housed me and introduced me to tacos, free of charge.” Atlas said, the edges of his mouth turning up. “So yes, I suppose so. You’ll have to patient with me however. I know nothing about human friendships, or friendships in general, honestly.”

Toby began to smile, but suddenly frowned at his last words. “You don’t have any friends in your super-secret club?”

“It’s not a—” He shook his head. Presenting to two fingers, he said, “I’ve got two you could say, but both of them are significantly older than me and order me around all the time.”

Toby nudged him in the side affectionately. “Well, now you’ve got three, dude.”

With no further delay, they turned the corner to the boy’s locker-room. Inside, the faint odor of men’s socks and wet towels stank the area.

Atlas quickly zipped off the rest of the costume, sitting down on the bench immediately after. Thank the Lady he’d never have to wear that thing again.

“You sure you won’t get in trouble for stealing this?” Atlas asked.
Toby puffed out his chest, a smug smile on his lips. “Dude, I know this school like the back of my hand. No one will know it was even missing. And even if they did, they’ll never think it was me. I’ll be in and out like a ninja.” He smiled wider, “Besides, I’m doing this for my friend.”

It took the shorter boy a few moments to gather the mole costume from the floor. Once he did, he walked out of the room cheerily, a slight pip in his step.

A second after he’d left, Atlas’ face dropped, ears lowering as his fears caught up with him.

_This is insane_, he told himself, _I’m insane_. Atlas pulled his right knee up onto the chair, arms tight around it. His forehead rested against his kneecap.

He couldn’t believe he was even considering this whole Trollhunter business. A _Changeling_ Trollhunter? And a half-changeling at that. Merlin must have been off his rocker if he thought Atlas could beat Bular, much less Gunmar himself.

And what was he going to tell Stricklander? The Changeling had dedicated his life to his kind and the king of the Gumm-Gumms. Even if he considered Atlas as…his son, he would cut the boy down if Gunmar or the Lady commanded it.

The Janus Order was a cutthroat place. Disobedience was punished, severely.

A comforting hand brushed his back. “You gonna be okay, dude?”

“That was fast.”

“Forgot my backpack. Is everything alright? You look pale.”

“I’m fine,” he lied. “You go on to class. I’ll meet up with you here later.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”
*If I live through this,* he inwardly added.

Adjusting his cloak, he climbed up the pipes of the locker-room, hands searching for a loose tile. Finding it, he removed the piece and lifted himself into the interior, bringing the tile back in place as he did.

A network of wiring and metal greeted him. He crawled through the sub-space. Ugh. His heightened smell caught the scent of rat feces and mold. He covered his nose and journeyed on.

Thankfully, the lights in Stricklander’s office were off, casting the room in darkness.

A good sign.

Inch by inch, Atlas lowered himself down the ceiling, careful to not make a sound. If he was lucky, the man was at his human home or at the Order, perhaps finishing up his last cup of coffee before he made for the high school.

His feet barely touched the ground when he heard it.

Click.

“Young Atlas,” a figure in darkness stirred from behind, “what a pleasant surprise.”

Atlas turned around, palms sweating. His knees felt as weak as a newborn calf while his arms seemed to weigh down the rest of his body like boulders.

*Shoot,* he thought, as electricity ran down his spine, a sign of the Amulet’s stirrings. He hadn’t even said the words and the damn thing was starting to activate. *Control yourself!*

He pulled his phone out, avoiding the man’s glowing red gaze. “Wow, look what I found! Gee, I’m really happy I stole it back from that human named Jim. All’s well that ends well.”
Stricklander stood, the yellow sclera of his eyes all the more menacing. “Atlas.”

The teen backed away, bumping into one of his mentor’s bookcases. This was it. He’d probably figured out Atlas was the Trollhunter and was going to kill him. “I can explain. I—”

A hand flashed in his line of vision, grasping the back of his head. Immediately, the teen’s head snapped forward from the man’s strength. His face was mushed against his mentor’s collarbone. Another hand wrapped around his back, pulling him even closer.

Atlas looked up in surprise.

There was anger in the man’s eyes, but other emotions too, he noted, sadness, fear and…regret, maybe?

“Where on earth were you?” Stricklander growled, his true voice breaking free from the normal smooth tone he typically emitted. “What if you had been caught by the humans?”

“I got caught up with the amulet stuff.” He admitted. Hesitantly, Atlas touched the man’s shoulder. “It’s okay, dad.”

Immediately, Stricklander pulled away, his eyes scanning the area. “Atlas, I am your mentor, not—”

“I heard what you said, to Jim.” Atlas said, hands tucked underneath his armpits. “You called me your son. Is that how you see me?”

Stricklander searched his eyes. “You were there?”

“I was watching,” Atlas fibbed.

His heartbeat slowed. A feeling of relief and sadness filled him. His mentor didn’t know he was the Trollhunter. Yet.

Stricklander paused on the middle of the floor, arms behind his back. “Whether or not I think of you
as my son or not, you’re still in trouble, young one.”

“I know,” he said, hands fiddling with the hem of his cloak, avoiding the cold metal amulet in his pocket. “Allow me to report. Please.”

The Changeling returned to his desk, a cold calculating mask in place. He crossed his legs, pen bouncing against his foot as he waited.

Taking a deep breath, Atlas approached. Back straight and hands behind his back, he began, “I was caught up by the Trollhunter.”

Stricklander stopped bouncing his pen. “The Trollhunter? The amulet has already chosen? So soon?”

He bit the inside of his cheek, then nodded.

“What of the human who originally had it? What happened to him?”

“Lost it, from what I could tell.” He shrugged. “Probably thought it was a toy of some sort. I don’t think it really matters.”

“What does the new Trollhunter look like?”

“Hard to say,” he lied again, stomach twisting with every passing moment. “I didn’t get a good look at him. He noticed my presence immediately, so I had to leave.”

“Him? A male Troll then? Interesting.”

Shit, Atlas inwardly cursed. I should have been more vague.

“I don’t know what species or gender the Trollhunter was. It could be anyone,” the boy amended.
“Species?” Stricklander squinted. “You think the new Trollhunter isn’t a Troll?”

“I mean, it’s possible.” He began to backtrack. “But most likely, it’s a Troll, right? I mean, come on. Could you imagine a human Trollhunter? Ha. Ridiculous.”

“A human Trollhunter would be rather unusual.” His mentor said, scanning the boy. “Though not outside the realm of possibility.”

“Pft, ha, ha. As if.” Atlas laughed nervously.

The glow of his mentor’s eyes returned, the anger beneath his carefully crafted mask appearing once again. “This, you understand, does not get you out of your punishment.”

_Oh, come on_, Atlas thought, though he did not voice it. He liked his head on his shoulders thank you very much.

“It’s not like I had any choice in the matter. I lost my phone. What was I supposed to do? I would have revealed my position.” The teen tried to explain. “Is this because I couldn’t get the amulet?”

“The amulet?” The man shook his head, “No! Forget the _amulet_ for a second, child and listen to me. Your reckless behavior has put not only yourself in danger, but the rest of our Order as well. Staying out past your curfew, not once, but twice I might add, and refusing to obey my orders to return home, the list goes on,” Stricklander sighed. “Atlas, I’m disappointed in you.”

He stammered, “Sir, I’m sorry, I’ll do better, I—”

“Which is why I’m restricting your privileges, effective today.”

Atlas froze, slack-jawed. What was he, some sort of child?

“But sir—”

“No more daylight time. You’ll be regulated to Order controlled areas only. I also want you to
“update me on your coordinates daily.” He counted off on his fingers. “You’ll be taking on feeding the Goblins and cleaning after them, scrubbing down the restrooms at the main branch, and whatever else I decide to appoint you to do, understood?”

“But—”

“Understood?” The man repeated sternly.

_Completely unfair._ The boy grumbled meaningless words, shaking his head. “Understood, sir.”

“It’s for your own good and _ours_, young Atlas.” Stricklander said in a softer tone. “I have given you too much leeway. The others are already suspicious of our relationship. You must understand, as the leader of our kind, I cannot show weakness.”

“I know, sir.”

“After all, they already know you are my favorite.”

“I’m your favorite?” The boy perked up, eyes wider. “Really?”

“Atlas, I consider you like a son to me,” Stricklander said warmly. “Of all the Changelings in our organization, I trust you the most.”

Atlas smiled, switching his gaze to the window. “I—you trust me that much? Really?”

“Therefore, I would suggest you use this time as a learning opportunity and, perhaps, a time to sleep. You look absolutely knackered.”

He did understand, but that didn’t make it any better. The man was right about exhaustion though.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he yawned. “I’ve had a lot on my mind.”
“Then sleep here for today. I’ve a small cot in the other room.” He got up and walked to his secret passageway, Atlas following close behind.

Atlas rubbed his eyes. “I’m not tired.”

Once opened, his mentor guided him inside the room. Though Atlas was familiar with the place, it never stopped to catch his interest. Most times he entered the place there was something new and eye-catching, be it a glowing ominous crystal from the East or an ancient Troll battle-axe. Today, however, was not that day. Just boring old books it appeared.

“Can you take off your armor or would you like me to help?” His mentor offered.

“I’m not a little kid anymore, dad.” He retorted, emphasizing the last word sarcastically.

Unbuckling his armor bracers, Atlas let them slide to the floor, too exhausted to care. Soon, the rest of his armor littered the ground, picked up and set to the side by a soft chuckling Stricklander.

“Really now? Could have fooled me.” The man glanced at his watch and frowned. “Atlas, you’ve done enough for today. I’ll alert the Order of the current situation.”

He yawned again, “Can I still continue looking for the amulet?”

“You should take care of yourself, first and foremost, child. Worry about the amulet later.”

“You make it sound so easy.” Atlas said, hand slipping into his pocket. “Stricklander, sir, can I ask a question?”

Stricklander paused at the doorway, his human mask back on. “Just one, class starts soon.”

“What are you gonna do when you find the next Trollhunter?”

“Get rid of him and take the amulet of course.”
Atlas put on a thin smile, fingers biting into the freezing metal of the device. “Of course.”

“Inject the specimen with 200 ml of the solution. Alert me if there are any changes in its condition.”

“Dr. Mordred, is this procedure really necessary?”

“Are you questioning my methods, Dr. Ywain?”

“It’s just... Why all this when he hasn’t changed?”

“He will change. It is inevitable.”

“Still, we’re what? On the seventh test? Eighth? The rest of the creatures transformed by the fourth test at most. Are you certain we have the right person?”

“Dr. Ywain, you are letting your human empathy get to you. What you see before you is not a human child. Though its appearance and reactions seem human, they are merely imitations of the real thing. Besides, the younger ones are always the hardest to crack. You’ll see.”

“If you say so, sir.”

“Sir, its vitals are dropping.”

“It’s flatlining.”

“Someone get the defibrillator!”
“Clear!”

Atlas jolted awake.

Air. He needed air. The boy gasped, taking in as much oxygen as he could bear.

Cold sweat drenched his backside. Fingers twitched, his nails digging into the fabric of his cloak-turned-makeshift-blanket. His heart pounded into his ears. The taste of copper blossomed in his mouth; he’d bitten his tongue while sleeping.

He couldn’t stop gasping, the need for air turning into hyperventilation.

Damn it, he cursed inwardly. Quickly, Atlas brought his knees up to his face and began to rock, once, twice, thrice—until he lost count, trying to bring down himself back to reality.

A jolt of electricity ran through his arms. The amulet began to hum, reacting to his distress.

Not now, he pleaded. He hadn’t even said the incantation.

That had been the worst nightmare to date, he realized. Most of the time it was only flashes, soon to be forgotten once he arose to the waking world.

This one was different.

It was too vivid to simply be his imagination, Atlas reasoned, so it must be a memory. He would have to speak with Stricklander about this.

Yeah, the more sarcastic part of his mind added, just like you’ll tell him about your new gig as the Trollhunter.

Crap.
A loud bell resonated through the building, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Merlin’s artifact continued to tremble inside his pocket, shining so brightly one could see it through his clothes. His skin tingled; the amulet was right at the cusp of no return. He needed to relax.

Deep breathes, in and out, just as his mentor taught him. He counted to ten, feeling the stress in his body release. The amulet still glowed, though not as brightly as before.

His promise to meet with Toby was fast approaching. Atlas stretched his arms, his back protesting at the movement.

Right as he was about to leave through the secret room’s exit, he paused.

Why had he lied to Stricklander? The man was his mentor and—sort of dad, if he really wanted to go into it.

His fingers found themselves grasping the amulet possessively.

The device was proving to be more and more difficult to give up, that’s why. Not only had it given him a human form, but he’d gotten his identity back—he had a mom! He had a family that was looking for him!

If he gave up the amulet now, he might lose all that. Jim’s mom wouldn’t accept him like this.

Could he tell Nomura? Would she help him?

Maybe help me into an early grave, he joked morbidly.

No. This was too big of a secret to keep, he realized mournfully. Though absolutely terrified of the thought of telling Stricklander, he was the only one Atlas trusted. And Stricklander trusted him. If he could simply convince the man, then maybe there was a chance Atlas could keep both the amulet and his life.
Mind made up, Atlas walked out into the main office, going to his father’s desk.

Clicking one of the man’s ornate pen’s, he wrote a note, which read: ‘need to talk with you later. Something big happened. Be back soon. It’s about the amulet. – Atlas.’

The boy stood up straighter, placing the pen back in the cup holder. Atlas could practically feel the tension in his body lessening. It was as if his guilt was washing away. Stricklander was right, he needed to do what was best for himself. Atlas was certain Blinky and Aaarrggghh!!! would disapprove of his methods, but Atlas wasn’t a Troll.

He was a Changeling.

And Changelings had each other’s backs.

Well, sometimes.

Two knocks struck the door. The knob turned.

“Mr. Strickler, are you in there?”

Atlas’ heart leaped into his throat. The amulet began to burn against the inner folds of his clothes. Seriously?

He could feel it floating out from his pocket.

_Crap, crap, crap_, he chanted inside his head.

Immediately, he slammed the door close, remarking, “He’s not here.”

The door continued to jiggle. “Hey, look, I need to turn in one of my assignments. It will only take a moment.”
“Wait, just—” he couldn’t finish.

His skin sizzled with magic, Merlin’s power embracing his body. In a flash of light, he was the human Trollhunter.

Again.

Was this how it was always gonna be?

“Uh, is everything okay in there?”

Maybe this could work. Thinking on his feet, he opened the door a smidge, hand out. “I’ll put it on his desk for you then.”

He caught sight of the person beyond the door.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Well, at least for Atlas it did.

The brilliant streak of blue was what first caught his attention, striking against the dark neat lay of the human girl’s hair. Her lips were full and red. Was that her natural color or lipstick? Her purple and pink ensemble highlighted her petite frame. Chocolate eyes scrutinized him so deeply he thought she was staring directly into his soul.

“Gorgeous,” he said, then covered his mouth.

“Excuse me?” She asked with a cute, bewildered smile.

“Sorry, uh,” he stuck his head out the door, looking both ways before opening the door wider for the girl. “Gorgeous day we’re having, right? Man, it’s a shame it’s a human school day.”
She raised an eyebrow, brushing him aside as she entered. “Yeah, I guess it is. What are you doing in Mr. Strickler’s office?”

“Oh, um. It’s about…” He looked around, eyes landing on one of the books on the man’s desk. “History. History class.”

“Oh? Which class are you in? I’ve never seen you around before.” The girl said as she placed the paper on the teacher’s desk.


“Cool.” She smiled again, thrusting her hand out. “I’m Claire, by the way.”

Atlas stared at the hand, cocking his head to the side. “What are you doing?”

She threw him a perplexed look, hand falling. “It’s a handshake. You know, a greeting? You do know what a handshake is, right?”

“But handshakes are for negotiations and agreements,” Atlas said. “Are we exchanging something?”

“You’re…not from around here, are you?”

Shoot, how had she caught onto him? Atlas began to stutter. “W-well—”

“I’ve been looking all over for you, dude!” Toby yelled from across the hall. “I thought we were going to meet up in the locker-room? What are you doing in Mr. Strickler’s office?”

“Toby, you know this guy?”

Toby skidded to a halt, eyes wide. “Oh, yeah, that’s, ah, Jim. Jimbo!”

The girl drew closer, examining his face. “Like the kid who disappeared five years ago? That Jim?”

“Oh, ha, ha. No way,” Toby said, laughing nervously. “Complete coincidence, right Jim?”

“Right,” Atlas added.

“Jim’s my, ah,” Toby paused, then answered, “Penpal?”

“Penpal?” Atlas pursed his lips together, nose scrunched in confusion.

Toby stuck his finger up in the air as if he had just discovered something. “From Canada. French Canada!”

“Oh, oui.” Atlas caught on, then in a moment of pure genius (or stupidity, depending on who you asked), picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. “Comment allez-vous, mademoiselle?”

“You speak French?” Claire asked, intrigued.

Toby exclaimed excitedly, “Dude, how many languages do you know?”

Admittedly, his French was merde, but they didn’t need to know that. “Not a lot. My dad knows, like, a thousand. Literally.”

Claire’s expression brightened, her smile even more genuine. Atlas felt like he was melting.

“Cool. Not a whole lot of bilingual kids around here. And loving the armor by the way. So realistic. Oh, that reminds me! Do you like Shakespeare?”
“Ah, I guess? Why do you—”

Claire presented a poster to him. “You should try out today. We’re kind of having trouble getting boys to audition. It could be a really great way for you to meet other students!” Her phone buzzed. “Whoops! Looks like we’re about to set up the stage. We’re doing tryouts right now. You should come. Your armor would be a total hit with everyone!”

“Uh,” Atlas responded, words failing him.

“Oh, yeah, we’ll definitely think about it.” Toby grasped onto the taller boy’s arm, pulling him down the opposite end of the hall. “Just got some errands to run. Bye Claire!”

It didn’t take long for the two to reach their destination. Atlas practically crashed through the locker-room doors, slamming into one of the tall lockers.

“My heart is about to explode out of my chest.” Atlas wheezed, metal-clad fingers clawing at his breast. “What’s happening to me? Even thinking about her makes me feel all tongue-tied and weird.”

“Aw, man,” Toby tutted. “First crush, huh? We’ve all been there, dude.”

“Crush? I’m being crushed?” Atlas began to panic. “Is it serious? Can I die from this?”

“Nah. It just means you like-like her, dude. At worst, you’ll just experience crippling disappointment and self-esteem issues.”

“Mr. Domzalski,” Stricklander’s voice echoed through the vicinity, sending shivers of fear down Atlas’ spine. “Are you in here?”

His footsteps drew closer. No, no, no, Atlas thought. This cannot be happening. Not now!


Toby rounded the corner of wall of lockers, saying, “Ah, a little busy over here, Mr. Strickler. Could
you wait a sec—"

Too late.

The Changeling’s gaze bore into him directly. A moment of surprise flashed across the man’s features but it was quickly schooled back under his human mask. Stricklander looked at him like he looked at all the humans.

Because he didn’t recognize Atlas.

Well, of course not, why would he? In Stricklander’s world, Atlas could not transform. It was an impossible thing.

Just as a human Trollhunter was.

And as long as Atlas continued with that lie, he concluded, then so too would the man’s belief.

There was no going back after this.

He either told the man now or completely betrayed the Changeling’s trust forever.

Atlas shivered under his mentor’s cold calculating stare. So, this was what it felt like on the other side.

Stricklander—no, this was Mr. Strickler now, Atlas told himself—fished out his all too familiar pen, balancing it on top of his two index fingers. Though his demeanor appeared friendly, Atlas knew that the moment Toby left the room that the Troll would jump him.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, Mr.—”

Atlas began to open his mouth, but Toby answered before him.
“Jim, sir.” Toby added, “he’s new. Just got here yesterday. Transfer student.”

“Really? Welcome to Arcadia Oaks High.” Mr. Strickler gestured at his armor. “Now, Jim, I don’t mean to sound rude, but I don’t think this is appropriate school attire, do you?”

A pang of fear ran through his veins. What if he didn’t listen to Atlas and took away the Amulet anyway?

_No, this was dad_, he tried to reason with himself. _He’d listen to me. Right?_

“I, sir, I” he stammered, trying to force out the words. His throat closed.


“It’s for Romeo and Juliet! The tryouts are today.” Toby interjected. “Jim’s really good at acting.”

The shorter boy tapped his knuckles against the metal breast plate. “Real dedicated to authenticity and stuff. Made it himself.”

Stricklander bounced his pen atop his palm, his pleasant smile not reaching his eyes. “Oh, really? You better hurry, Jim. The auditions end in five minutes.”

And just like that, his chance was gone.

Crud.
Becoming: Part 2 (IV)

Chapter Summary

High School theater was never something Atlas aspired to do in life, but if Claire was involved, why not?

Also,

how the hell did Bular get around town without the humans noticing him?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Midterms are over! Big thanks to my beta readers Ash and Charlie for helping me with this chapter. You can check out their tumblrs at https://ch4r13sm1th.tumblr.com/ and https://ashtheunitato.tumblr.com/. If you want to see me fangirl about trollhunters you can find me at http://tunafishprincess.tumblr.com/.

And thank you for all the reviews and kudos! I really appreciate them. I love reading your reviews.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toby dragged the shell-shocked Atlas to the auditorium. It was a short distance, but considering what just happened, it felt like he had done a marathon.

Behind stage, the duo watched as Claire performed. She was perfect—everything about her was perfect—but it didn’t stop the aching hole developing in his stomach.

He lied to his dad. Right to the man’s face.

“I cannot believe that worked!” The shorter boy said happily. “Good thinking on my part, huh?”
Atlas continued to stare at his feet, dejected. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Man, I thought for sure Mr. Strickler was gonna bust us or something. Did you see the way he looked at you?”

“I should have told him before,” Atlas said mournfully. “Now he thinks I’m Jim. If I try to tell him now he’s never going to trust me again. He’ll hate me, I know it.”

Toby raised an eyebrow, clearly not understanding what Atlas was implying. “Whoa, dude, chill out. It’s cool. Consider Jim as your human alias or something, though technically you are Jim, even if you’re Atlas, so technically you’re sort of both Jim and Atlas, but separate too, and ah—” he stopped for a moment, brows crossed. “Okay, I’m confusing myself now. Back to Mr. S, seriously, it’s gonna be alright, identity-stuff aside. Mr. Strickler might be a stickler for the rules, but he’s not a bad guy. At worst, he’ll just give you a detention slip or something for the armor.”

Atlas let out a noise that sounded like a mixture between a whine and a giggle. “You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“I barely even know this play,” he admitted. “My mentor likes it, but I’ve never read the damn thing. What the heck am I going to say? I’ve never acted in my life.”

“Improvise, man,” Toby advised.

A round of applause interrupted their conversation. Claire bowed to the crowd, then, noticing the two boys behind the curtain, walked to greet them.

Claire waved then cocked her head to the side, smiling gently. “Hey! Jean, right?”

“At—Jim,” Atlas corrected, wincing. Somehow, it felt wrong. Like he was using the identity of a dead person, even though that person was himself.

“Man, this costume looks more and more awesome the more I see it,” She gushed, fingers tracing the
designs on the breastplate. Atlas blushed at the close contact. Up close, he could smell her shampoo, a soft strawberry scent floating through the air. “Did you make this yourself?”

“No, he stole a magical amulet from the boy’s locker-room and it made itself,” Toby provided.

Claire looked between the two as if she didn’t understand the joke, but laughed politely anyway. “Ha, ha. Nice. Very funny.”

“Yeah, very funny,” Atlas said dryly, smacking Toby upside the head when Claire walked off-stage. “You’re lucky I like you well enough not to cut you down where you stand, human.”

Toby rubbed his head, glaring back. “You have really got to work on your people skills, Atlas.”

“Just as soon as you learn to shut your mouth.”

“Next! Anyone next?” A shrill voice called.

Toby pushed him forward, perhaps a little too forcefully as payback for the head smack. “Good luck, Atlas! Oh, no wait! I mean, break a leg!”

Atlas threw the boy a terrified glance, leaving the curtains behind.

A light descended on the middle of the stage. A group of humans stared, waiting for him to start.

Atlas froze beneath their attention.

What he would give to be pummeled by Nomura back at the Order right about now.

“And you are?” A woman asked from the audience.

“Jim,” he replied.
“Jim what?”

“Ah, I mean, James Lake.” He added, “I just transferred here.”

She nodded, scribbling something on her page then gesturing for him to start.

“I…uh…” He paused. He didn’t know a lick of Shakespeare. What was he even doing here? This was ridiculous.

Claire waved at him, sending his heart aflutter. Oh yeah.

But what should he do? What could someone like Atlas say in this instance? He felt like his namesake, holding up the world as punishment for simply being on the wrong side.

Oh, Great, he thought dryly, my life is a Greek tragedy.

Wait.

Greek. He knew Greek things.

And for once in his life, Stricklander’s constant shoveling of all things Ancient Greek into Atlas life suddenly turned out to be useful.

“To move the world, we must first move ourselves,” he began. Socrates, Stricklander once said, was one of humanity’s greatest philosophers. Humans live such short lives, but every once in a while, one gains such immortality that far surpasses any other. A legacy.

Destiny is a gift, Blinky’s words echoed.

Atlas gripped the hilt at his back. His mind worked even faster, drawing from both old and new sources of inspiration. His father’s constant quoting echoed within, combining with Blinky’s earlier
speech, filling and connecting his ideas. “Destiny. Destiny is a gift. And…Character is destiny. Some
go their entire lives living an existence of quiet desperation, never learning the truth that what feels as
though a burden pushing down upon our shoulders…”

In one single fluid movement, he swung down the sword in an arch. The crowd gasped. “…Is
actually the sense of purpose that lifts us to greater heights. Fear is pain arising from anticipation of
evil and…never forget that fear is but the precursor to valor.”

Confidence grew in his chest. He thrust the sword in Claire’s direction, relishing the look of wonder
he received in turn. “A man cannot become a hero until he can see the foot of his own downfall.
That to strive and triumph in the face of fear is what it means to be a hero. Don’t think.”

The Trollhunter paused, looking up at the lights. He lifted the sword.

“Become.”

For a second, everything was still.

Then, slowly, a single clap, followed by another, and another, until it was outright applause. Atlas
stepped back in surprise, snapping back to reality.

Claire met him halfway down the stage stairs (how did he get here? His legs felt like wet noodles).
She tucked a hair behind her ear, eyes sparkling. Atlas stared, then noticing his actions, looked away.

“Jim, that was amazing!” She exclaimed, her hand coming to his chest.

“R-really?” He coughed, face burning. “I didn’t even think, it just sort of came out.”

She let out the cutest snort he’d ever heard. “That’s acting. You were amazing out there. Good job! I
hope you get the part.”

“I hope so too,” he admitted.
Maybe being the Trollhunter wasn’t so bad after all.

Even the trash on the streets appeared colorful and interesting. It was as if he was floating on a fluffy cloud. He felt light on his feet, his previous anxieties extinguished. Atlas couldn’t describe it in words; it was as if he could do anything, all because of her.

Claire said he was amazing.

Him.

“Earth to Atlas, can you hear me?” Toby joked, nudging him in the side with an elbow.

“Wha-huh?” The teen shook himself out of his daze. “Sorry, it’s just, wow. Are all human girls so beautiful?”

Toby shook his head, laughing, “Dude, you have got it bad.”

“Was, ah…Jim, was like this too?” Atlas asked, curious about his former self.

Toby paused, eyes widening, then grinned, “So you wanna know more about yourself now, huh?”

“Knowledge is power, as they say,” he said. “How was I, you know, before, with girls?”

“About the same way you are now.”

“Great.” He was doomed.
Humans passed him with nary a second-look. His fleshbag form was working it appeared. Strange, to finally be able to walk among them. He almost felt like an imposter. Though his human skin was rather comfortable, his mind struggled to accept that this was part of him. He wondered if Stricklander and the rest of the changelings felt the same.

By the time they made it into the city the people had thinned out. Atlas glanced at his phone. No new texts from Stricklander, which was good. Technically he wasn’t even supposed to be outside right now. Either he was busy with something or trusted Atlas enough to get back to the base on his own. Both worked to his favor.

Atlas scratched his ear, lips thinned in thought. He still wasn’t sure what to do with his mentor. The longer he put off telling him, the bigger and bigger the guilt festering in his stomach would grow.

Tonight. He would have to do it tonight.

Toby walked closer, the chains of his bike rattling against the uneven pavement. “You know, you and old Jim aren’t as different as you might think. I mean, you’re a thief and kind of a dick sometimes—”

“Hey!” He protested.

“But, you and him care about others more than yourselves.”

“How so?”

“You saved that kid Eli from Psycho Steve. You followed through on your promise to me,” He raised a third finger, “Plus, you seem to care a lot about this mentor-dude of yours, even if he is a bad guy.”

“He’s not a bad guy. It’s complicated. He took me in when the rest had already written me off,” Atlas tried to explain. “He taught me everything I know. I’d be dead if he hadn’t stepped in.”

“So, he’s like your dad then.”
“Yeah,” he sighed, hand stroking the amulet. “And now he’s seen me in this form and thinks that Jim is the Trollhunter. How am I going to tell him now? He’ll be devastated. He’ll never forgive me if I don’t relinquish the Amulet now.”

“That sucks, dude,” Toby said. “Wait, when did he see you in this form? You don’t mean—”

Swinging his head back, he groaned, fingers pulling at his hair. “Ugh. Everything’s so complicated now. What am I going to do?”

Toby raised his hands as if to placate him, switching the subject. “At least the armor is badass.”

He rolled his eyes. “And if I ever got the hang of it, it could even be useful. It keeps reacting to my emotions. I didn’t even have to speak the lines earlier. It just happened.”

“Maybe stress triggers it,” Toby said. “Didn’t Blinky said it was connected to you until death or something?”

“Well, it did react to my stress today, but it doesn’t make since. I wasn’t distressed the first or second time I transformed,” he remarked while turning the corner, then lurched to a stop on the crosswalk, hand immediately reaching to stop Toby. “But I am now. Yep. Definitely now.”

Blood drained from the Trollhunter’s face.

Two blazing red coals for eyes glaring menacingly at him. Even now, five years after joining the Janus Order, the half-blood froze up whenever he saw Bular. The troll bared his fangs at them.


Toby looked to Atlas. “Dude, is he seriously monologuing right now?”

“We need to go.” He pulled the boy back, his walk turning into a steady jog. “Now.”
The troll came forward to swipe at them, only to pull back in pain in the rays of light hitting his stone flesh.

Atlas glanced up, fear gripping his soul. The sun was setting hard and fast. They had mere minutes before their last line of defense was gone.

“Toby, as the faster of us two, I’m gonna need your bike,” he said, moving the boy aside and swinging one leg over the seat to put his feet on the pedals. “Can you direct me from the back?”

Toby looked at him like he was crazy, but hopped onto the rear pegs anyways, using the other’s shoulders to level himself. “Have you even ridden a bike before?”

Atlas fiddled with the gears on the handlebars. “I’m a fast learner.”

He took off down the street and not a moment too soon, Bular’s claw missing Toby’s head by an inch. Toby screamed in response, arms now wrapped around the other boy like an octopus.

“Give me the Amulet of Daylight and I promise to give you a quick death,” Bular assured.

Toby leaned forward to Atlas’ ear. “How do you even put up with this guy? He’s nucking futs!”

“You don’t,” he grumbled, taking too sharp of a left that nearly tumbled the two over; only Toby’s quick-thinking saved them from an even quicker death.

“Maybe you should let me drive,” Toby said nervously.

“And stop now?” Atlas yelled, avoiding another swipe of the monster’s claws. “He’s gaining on us.”

Toby spared a glance back at the carnage behind them before saying, “Why don’t you fight the guy? You’ve got the armor.”

“Have you seen him? Magical armor or not, he’s a monster.” Atlas shook his head. “The old Trollhunter Kanjigar was no match for him. What makes you think I’ll be any better?”
“Face me like your predecessor, Trollhunter!” Bular roared, barreling down the street towards them. “And perhaps I won’t eat your corpse and add your skull to my belt.”

Toby gasped, arms constricting around Atlas’ neck. “He eats people?”

“Toby,” he gasped, turning red from the lack of oxygen. “Can’t breathe.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He said, only to then yell, “Incoming! Left! Left! Left!”

Atlas swerved on Toby’s command, just in time, as dark shadow of an flying object passed over the two. The object—a large truck—smashed into the street, blocking access in that direction.

Like on autopilot, the Trollhunter followed Toby’s directions to the dot, veering and dodging every obstacle they encountered. They’d make a good team, if they weren’t riding for their lives.

Sometime after sunset they arrived near the outskirts of the city, sweat pouring down both their faces. His lungs were burning, which surprised him. It usually took a lot to wear out the teen. His human form must have lower stamina too. Crap. Another thing to worry about.

“Did we lose him?” Atlas panted.

“For now, at least,” Toby said, exhaustion and fear riding his tone.

In the forest alongside their path, two trolls appeared from practically thin air. Blinky practically bounced towards the two, AAARRRGHH!!! not far behind.

“Oh, that is just too damn convenient, isn’t it,” Atlas grumbled, pulling to a stop and getting off the bike.

“Master Atlas! Master Tobias! You’re alive.”

“Just barely. Bular was chasing us all over town,” Toby groaned, flopping to the ground, breathing
heavily. He stuck his finger up at the approaching six-eyed male. “You! Where the hell were you? And Tobias? Seriously? Only my teachers call me that.”

“Oh, I just knew you had potential, Master Atlas,” Blinky gushed, ignoring the human boy plastered to the ground.

Atlas sized the two trolls up, arms crossed. “Something tells me neither of you are here as reinforcements.”

“Alas, you are right, I’m afraid,” Blinky said, raising four hands in defense. “I could never hope to best Bular.”

Atlas jerked his head toward the larger troll. “What about you, big guy?”

AAARRRGGHH!! shook his head. “No fight. Hate fight. Pacifist.”

Toby got up from the ground, moving closer to the group. “Really? Dude, that is such a waste. You’re built. You’re like, the Hulk from the Avengers or something.”

“Thank…you?” AAARRRGGHH!! smiled questioningly.

The amulet began to power down, startling Atlas. “Oh no. Oh no, no, no.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to hold his Trollhunter form. If Bular found him back in his regular body, he’d immediately kill Atlas, either figuring out he was the Trollhunter or thinking he was in league with them.


A mixture of fresh lavender and burnt coffee.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he heard a woman laughing.
This. This was familiar.

The memory of warm blue eyes staring down lovingly at him entered his mind. He knew those eyes. She was looking at him as if *he* was the most important thing in the entire world. Who was she?

*Mom?*

Atlas’ brows furrowed in confusion. Where did that come from?

Thankfully, somewhere along the line the tingling had ceased. Did it work? Was he still in his Trollhunter form?

“Ah, Atlas, I think we have a problem.” Toby said.

“Oh, my. How curious.”

Atlas opened his eyes, afraid that Bular was in the area. Instead, another problem had sprung forth.

He was still human.

He just wasn’t the Trollhunter anymore.

Staring down in abject horror at his short pink cuticles, Atlas summarized the changes in one single word: “Crap.”

“I mean, it’s not so bad,” Toby said.

The unarmored teen reached for the fallen amulet and commenced smacking it against a nearby tree. “You! Stupid! Piece! Of! Crap! This is not what I meant!”
A roar erupted from down the lane, Bular’s figure easily visible.

“Come, children!” Blinky began to run up the hill. “To Heartstone Trollmarket. We’ll be safe there.”

*This is total bullshit*, Atlas grumbled inwardly, but nevertheless followed the blue troll.

Atlas tried to jog alongside Blinky, but kept stumbling every few meters in his loosened clothes. He’d left his regular armor and cloak back at Strickler’s office, leaving him defenseless.

His feet protested as fallen thorns, rocks, and other things embedded themselves into their soft undersides. Whereas before he could have easily outrun the group, he was now barely able to keep up with Blinky.

Stupid amulet.

Being a human sucked.

“You need to don your armor again, child,” Blinky yelled.

“I’m trying. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s not exactly under my control.” He began to read aloud the words over and over again to illustrate.

“You need to *focus* whilst reading the incantation.”

“I’m focusing the crap out of this, Blinky.” Atlas growled, throwing the device at the scholar’s head and smirking when it hit him square in the eyes (which was pretty impressive considering how many he had).

All six eyes glared at the boy. “If you weren’t the Trollhunter I would pull you over my leg and paddle your backside, little whelp.”

“I’d like to see you try,” he mocked.
“Not helping guys!” Toby said from AAARRRGGHH!!!’s back.

They reached a clearing, which to Atlas’ confusion was Arcadia’s canals. What were they doing here?

Before tumbling down the slope, Blinky gripped Atlas’ shoulder, the annoyance in his gaze now replaced with determination. “Focus. I know you can do it. Have faith in yourself.”

Atlas pulled out the returned Amulet from his pocket. “I’ll try. Go.”

This was crazy. Stupid crazy. Probably the craziest thing he’d ever done.

Atlas looked over his shoulder at the bottom of the canal, watching as the trio headed toward Arcadia Bridge. If Atlas failed, at least Toby would stay alive. His first human friend. His first friend in general, really. That was something to hope for, right?

Bular barreled through the forest, smacking down every tree in his way. Just like he’d do to Atlas once he reached him.

Time slowed. The air around him fell still. Tingling electricity shot up and down the arm holding the Amulet. Blinky was right. He needed to believe in himself. He wasn’t just Atlas now, the hybrid reject of the Janus Order. He was Jim, the human Trollhunter.

And they protected their friends.

His lips moved like water around the incantation. “For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is Mine to Command.”

Like his first transformation, the magic burst from the device, Bular’s incoming fist knocked away by the force of his power. Atlas fell in an arc to the bottom of the canals, the armor reforming around him as he descended.
His feet touched down gracefully, the magic pillowing his fall. He brought the sword up.

Could he really fight Bular like this? Would being the Trollhunter give him the edge he would need to defeat the troll?

Bular roared from the top of the canal.

“Nope, nope, nope.,“ He chanted, running down the path the others took, only for Bular to block his way. Damn. “Oh, come on.”

Bular pulled out his dual swords, scrapping them against each other. “Cowardly human. I’ll make a goblet out of your skull and toothpicks of your bones.”

“That is oddly descriptive,” Atlas said, mouth twisted in disgust, “and unsanitary.”

“Block with the sword!” Blinky advised.

“Turn him into rock sashimi, dude!”

A glow emitted from the bridge. A portal, Atlas realized, though he was too far away to reach it. He needed to get closer. But how?

Bular growled, shooting a glance to his friend. “Once I’m finished with you, I’ll have the fat one for dessert.”

Atlas’ face grew serious, his grip around the hilt strengthening, knuckles white. “You touch him and I’ll cut your head off and send it home to daddy dearest, Bular.”

If anything, that seemed to excite the monster more. He laughed dryly, “I’d like to see you try, little Trollhunter. I’ll tear off that armor and your skin along with it!”

“Bite me,” he screamed then, in a moment of pure stupidity, ran at Bular.
Bular brought his swords up to slash down. Immediately, the blades banged against the ground, having only met air.

The teen would have laughed if he wasn’t running for his life. Slipping through the troll’s legs, Atlas kept running, hand outstretched. Just a few more steps.

Bular roared, barreling down the canal. Atlas shot a nervous glance upwards; Bular had jumped in the air, swords at the ready.

Just as Bular fell onto the boy, the Trollhunter ducked and rolled, his hand hitting the now solid entrance with a bang. “Damn it!”

Bular chuckled, “Nowhere to run, Trollhunter.”

Atlas kept his back against the wall, sword at the ready.

So, this was it.

He was finally going to die.

“Eat my sh—” Atlas didn’t finish the sentence, his body jerked back so fast he fell backwards, the back of his head hitting AAARRRGGHH!!!’s body with a resounding thunk.

Oh thank the Pale Lady, or whatever his dad liked to say.

Alive. He was alive.

Atlas grasped AAARRRGGHH!!!’s mossy hair like a lifeline. He buried his head into it, breathing in and out, heart thundering against his rib cage so much he was worried he might explode. It smelled like wet grass and other earthy scents.
Toby rubbed his back up and down, then snapped at Blinky, “We were nearly killed! What the hell dude. Atlas almost died.”

“Almost, being the key word here, Tobias.”

“It’s okay, Tobes.” Atlas said shakily, pulling his head away from the larger troll’s fur. “I’ve faced Bular before.”

“You okay?” AAARRGGHH!!! asked, a finger brushing his bangs back.

“I’ll be al—ugh,” the amulet flashed, falling to the ground, causing a cascade of painful changes.

The shift from human to hybrid was unpleasant. This time it felt even worse than before and moved much slower. Bone cracked and stretched, as if his body was punishing him for the earlier forced transformation. The sounds he emitted were worse, judging by the horrified expressions of his compatriots.

By the end of it, only AAARRRGGHH!!!’s steady hold kept him from slipping to the floor.

His companions appeared to be in a state of shock.

Finally, Toby broke the silence.

“Holy crap,” he put a hand over his mouth, face green. “Is this why you looked so pale this morning? Is this what the amulet does? Is it supposed to do that?”

“Master Atlas, can you walk?” Blinky asked shakily, the troll’s hands fidgeting. “Would you like some assistance perhaps? AAARRRGGHH!!!?

AAARRRGGHH!!! switched his hand from Atlas’ shoulders to his waist, concern in his sober gaze. “Here for you.”

“Help would be nice, thanks,” He said, using the other as a crutch down the steps, which lit up the
further they descended.

“Is that amulet always going to do that? And why’d it suddenly shut off? What’s up with that?” Toby asked, staying close to Atlas’ side.

Blinky kept glancing back at Atlas, ears dropped low in what the teen guessed was concern. “Master Atlas is the first half-human, half-troll that we currently know of, Tobias. The amulet was originally crafted for Trolls. It’s not unexpected that there would be a few hiccups, though I never predicted this. I did not know ‘changing’ could hurt a changeling. Does this normally happen with you?”

“It doesn’t usually,” Atlas said. “But I was never able to transform like the others until I got the amulet.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Blinky said, worry in his brow. “I’m so sorry. If I had known, I —”

“Do you think there’s a way we could maybe lessen the painful parts?” Atlas asked, standing straighter as the aches left him, no longer relying on the gray troll for balancing purposes.

“If there is, I assure you that I will do all that is within my power to find it for you, Master Atlas.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Are you sure we’re gonna be safe down here from Bular, Blinky?” Toby questioned.

Blinky brightened up, “Oh, most certainty. The magic that protects Heartstone Trollmarket forbids entry to Gumm-Gumms like Bular.”

Toby gave Blinky a quizzical look. “And Gumm-Gumms are?”

“You don’t want to know,” Atlas remarked grimly.

Atlas agreed, “Basically, what he said.”

Though the changelings followed Gunmar, that did not mean that they were liked or even accepted by the troll’s army. It was one of the reasons Atlas disliked Bular, and by extension, Gunmar himself. What was the point of them serving assholes like that, when they had such a vast amount of tools and resources at their disposal?

“Dude, Atlas, look at that,” Toby said.

“What are you—oh.”

Even when they reached the bottom of the staircase, the two teens did not notice, too transfixed on the cityscape.

Giant selenite crystals jutted out from the ground, reflecting the mix-in-match landscape. It was a burst of color, full of vibrancy in both style and character, its people equally so. Little homes trading posts, and other small businesses crowded the cliffs and valleys of the underground metropolis. Tiny footpaths and bridges swam lazily through like the veins of a leaf, all leading to the main attraction: the Heartstone. Even from their viewpoint it seemed huge.

Atlas pulled away from AAARRRGGHH!!!, mouth open in pure childish awe.

Down below, smoked meats filtered through the air as a troll carrying a trolley of food parked himself at a trading center, arguing with a Stalkling (a rational business-savvy fellow, unlike his more animalistic brethren, Atlas realized) in Trollspeak about price rigging.

Further away, a large female troll squirted a concoction into another’s hair (one of Nomura’s race, he thought, with their long spindly bodies and hornless heads). The color immediately changed from black to a hideous mixture of blue and yellow—which apparently delighted the troll, going by the amount of coin she handled to the other.

Even his father’s race was represented; a tall green-blue troll who could have passed as the man’s uglier brother lamented his inability to woo a certain female to a stout troll with horns nearly as large as his body itself. It was incredible. Atlas had never seen so many species of trolls.
But none, Atlas noted with a hint of sadness, that looked like him.

“Welcome to Heartstone Trollmarket!” Blinky said, arms outstretched, grinning from ear to ear. “This is what you have been tasked to protect, Young Master Atlas.”

Atlas smiled, though his heart was no longer in it.

If only his dad were here to see it. He could imagine the man pointing out things, making dry quips or interesting observations about the scenery. Nomura would probably silently judge both of them, though not without taking Atlas on some long arduous search for pottery to add to her collection.

But changelings weren't allowed in Trollmarket, he thought with a frown.

Had Blinky even told anyone that their new Trollhunter was one? Going by male’s nervous body language, that would be probably a no.

Atlas drew closer to Toby, his claws flexing, instincts taking over. Toby was too awed at the view to notice, though Blinky and AAARRRGGH!!! certainty did, forming a tight circle around the two teens.

Atlas patted the shorter boy’s shoulder then pressed him forward, starting their walk down to the city.

Trollmarket was magnificent, far more than he could have ever dreamed.

But all that glitters is not gold.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the quotes I used for the speech part, if anyone was interested.
“To move the world, we must first move ourselves.” (Socrates)

"Character is destiny." (Heraclitus)

"Fear is pain arising from anticipation of evil." (Aristotle)

“A man cannot become a hero until he can see the foot of his own downfall." (Aristotle)
Wherefore Art Thou Trollhunter (I)

Chapter Summary

Barbara gets a man's number; Toby and Atlas' adventure to Trollmarket hits a bump.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters. Don't own the book Trollhunters by Daniel Kraus and Guillermo del Toro.

Hey! Finally got this chapter up! Next chapter might take a little longer because I'm on vacation and haven't had a lot of time to write. Big thanks to my beta readers Ash, Charlie, and my bae for helping me with this.

Reviews and Kudos are appreciated. I will be fixing grammar mistakes soon, but if you notice any please tell me! I'm trying to be better about it but I tend to make a lot of mistakes.

Translations:
Jamaica: hibiscus
Pinches ladrones: Damn thieves

Everyday life felt different after meeting her son again.

Barbara leaned against the grocery cart. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she scanned her checklist, her mind drifting elsewhere.

Sleep continued to evade her. She knew she was putting too much time into her search for Jim. The internet yielded little apart from something relating to Arthurian legends—but considering she googled “boy with glowing armor and sword”—that wasn’t much of a surprise. It felt as if she was back to square one again. She couldn’t talk with the police; they would think she was crazy (well, crazier than normal).

In the end, the only option left was to drive around town and hope she found him again.
And that—well—that brought her even more questions than answers.

It was a disaster. The night before, three gravely injured construction workers were brought into the emergency room, all clearly in the throes of delirium, screaming about a strange monster in the open sewer trench off Delancy Street.

A giant bear, one shuddered. No, another remarked, it looked like a bull, with large horns, but it *walked on two feet*. The fourth man in their group did not make it out. Last Barbara heard, authorities had yet to recover his body.

What was even more bizarre was what happened this morning; the three men were switched to a private hospital without notice, effective immediately. Barbara asked around her floor, but no one knew why or where the men had gone, only that their families requested it.

Curiouser and curiouser.

And then there was the destruction itself. Barbara only saw pictures on the news. The reporter called it an earthquake, but Barbara wasn’t so sure. How come no one else felt it? What about the aftershocks?

What really sealed the last nail into the coffin was on one of her rides searching for Jim, which was sometime after sundown.

Barbara found an entire clearing of trees destroyed. Bears weren’t that large, and earthquakes certainly couldn’t put giant claw marks into wood.

Something weird was happening in Arcadia, though she didn’t know what, and the fact that no one was doing anything about it troubled Barbara.

Her son and the strange happenings around town couldn’t merely be a coincidence. What sort of danger was her son involved in? Why was he back in Arcadia now of all times? These were the questions that preoccupied her waking moments.

She yawned into her hand, eyes half-lidded. Unconsciously, Barbara began to listen to the people
around her.

“Five dollars for how many avocados? *Apoco? Pinches ladrones!* I knew we should have gone to the store across town.”

“Papi.”

“And five dollars for *Jamaica* juice is plain *ridículo.*”

“Seriously, Papi, this kid’s armor was insane. I swear, it looked like it glowed in the dark. The amulet part especially. He even had this crazy cool sword. It was incredible!”

“Oh, that’s nice, Claire.”

Barbara froze in the middle of the aisle, nearly dropping her purse. Her heart caught in her throat. Carefully, she picked up jars of marinana sauce, pretending to compare them, all the while spying on the speakers on the other side.

“You’re not listening.” Claire sighed.

Barbara caught sight of the girl’s face. She recognized her—Councilwoman Nuñez’s daughter. She met the young teen at one of her mother’s events last year.

“No, no, I am. I am.” The father assured, adjusting the baby on his hip. “Sorry, mija. Things have been hectic lately, you know, with your mother’s bid for reelection and—”

“This is really important, Papi,” she stopped pushing the cart, arms folded. “I got the part of Juliet in the school play. Do you know how important that is to me? This will be my first big role.”

“You got the part, mija?” The father grinned, giving Claire a half-hug. “I’m so proud of you! I knew you could do it.”

“Well, it won’t be officially announced to the rest of the school until tomorrow, but yeah”, she said while blushing. “And Romeo is going to that new guy in the weird armor. I think he called himself Ji —”
A hand reached above her, surprising the doctor. Barbara jerked back on instinct, jar in hand. Her elbow smacked into the person’s chest, who emitted a sharp wheeze in response. To add to her embarrassment, the marinara sauce broke against the sharp angle of her cart, draining its contents all over the fallen man.

Barbara’s face burned with mortification. She rushed to assist the man she’d just knocked into.

“Oh my gosh, I am so so sorry.” Barbara said, picking pieces of glass out of his turtleneck.

“No, the fault is mine,” the man spoke British accent, crisp and clear. “I shouldn’t have reached over you. It’s quite alright.”

“I’m such a klutz,” she groaned, talking off her glasses to wipe away the excess splatter. “Listen, I live nearby. If you want, I can wash your shirt for you. I may not be a great cook, but I can run a mean washer and dryer. Heh, if I hadn’t gone into med-school, I would have opened a laundry and now I’m just rambling to a complete stranger and sound like an idiot. Oh god, kill me now.”

The man snorted, “You remind me of my son.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

He chuckled then righted himself, adjusting his jacket. “I’m Walt. Walter Strickler. I’d shake your hand, but its covered in—” he read the label of the jar, “‘Felipe’s Spicy Marinara sauce.’”

She nodded, tucking a stray lock behind her ear. “Barbara. Barbara Lake. I’d shake your hand as well, but I’m holding all the glass.”

They both snorted. Barbara’s eyes traveled on their own accord. He was older than her by ten years or so—not that it detracted from his attractiveness. His most handsome feature, his piercing green eyes, scanned her face, bemusement in his gaze.

“Well, I’m sorry we had to meet under these unfortunate circumstances. And you don’t have to wash my shirt, I’ve another in my car.”
“There must be some way I can help.” Barbara said, licking the bottom of her lip. No ring, she noticed. “Maybe Coffee? Dinner? An appendix removal?”

“Coffee would be a delight, Barbara.” He said, “and perhaps a rain check on that appendectomy.”

Holy crabapples.

In a hot minute she found herself holding the handsome man’s number, his retreating back disappearing down the aisle.

What had she done?

Barbara put the glass aside on the aisle shelf, her empty hands coming up to pinch her cheeks. This has got to be some bizarre dream. Handsome men like that don’t happen to women like Barbara. Furthermore, what was she even thinking? She didn’t have time to date, not with her son still out there.

“Oh, Mr. Strickler. How are you doing, today?”

Barbara’s snooping got the best of her.

“I’m fine, Ms. Nuñez. And yourself?” Walt asked warmly.

“Claire, who is this?”

“Oh, this is my History teacher, Papi. Papi, Mr. Strickler. Mr. Strickler, Papi.”

“I’d shake your hand, Mr. Nuñez, but I had a bit of an accident over in aisle ten. I was actually about to go alert the store manager.”

“Perhaps you can alert them of the outrageous prices they have too,” Mr. Nuñez said jokingly.
Barbara tuned out the rest, mind already formulating a plan. She clenched the number in her hand.

She wasn’t going to use him, Barbara reasoned. It might even be fun to date again. If it meant seeing the boy in the strange armor—her sweet baby again—well.

Nothing was going to stop her.

“Say cheese!” Toby snapped Atlas’ photo. “Come on dude, at least smile.”

Trolls gave the group a great amount of space as the traveled to the center, gossiping to each other in TrollSpeak. Atlas ignored them. AAARRRGGHH!!! kept to the back of their little entourage; Blinky walked front and center, leading them to Pale Lady knows where.

“Trollmarket is home and hearth and sanctuary for all good Trolls,” Blinky explained, arms outstretched. “This way, my friends. There is much to see.”

“I thought the only thing underneath our town was dirt and plumbing.” Said Toby.

Atlas whistled, “I never thought Trollmarket’s entrance would be through Arcadia Bridge.”

“But don’t Trolls live under bridges, Atlas?” Toby inquired.

The teen paused, eyebrows raised in realization. “Why didn’t I think of that? I’m suddenly questioning my entire life.”

Atlas looked around, suddenly noticing the insane amount of bridges within the market. “Blinky, is what Toby said true? What’s with all the bridges around here?”

“Ah, that, Master Atlas,” Blinky folded his fingers together, puffing out his chest. “Is because
bridges sacred symbols to our kind. They are considered a connection between two places, or planes, as it were, between trollkind and humankind. Even if humans were able to dig down this deep into the earth, they would find nothing but rocks and minerals, for Trollmarket occupies its own plane of existence. We both exist and do not exist in the same realm. The bridges are what allow us to walk between our world and yours. That is why, to get to Trollmarket, one must enter through a bridge, like your Arcadia Bridge for example.”

“Do all bridges work?” Toby asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Even footbridges?” Atlas asked, smirking at the twitch developing under one of Blinky’s eyes.

“Theoretically, yes, Master Atlas. Though not many a troll could fit through—”

Toby raised his hand, “Oh! Oh! What if someone laid a plank over a pothole? Would that work?”

Blinky covered his face with all four hands. “Would you stop interrupting me? Teenagers, AAARRRGGHH!!! I’m so glad we don’t have any of our own whelps.”

The two boys grinned cheekily.

“You’re awfully cheerful after nearly dying, Tobes,” Atlas said as they stopped to observe a troupe of dancing female trolls, Toby recording the session in pure delight.

The boy perked up at his nickname, “Gotta keep positive, A-slice.”

“A-slice?”


“Keep trying, Tobes.” Atlas said, lips upturned. His new human friend, though useless in battle, proved to be entertaining at least.
Suddenly, Toby pulled him off the main road over to a small footpath, “Oh, oh, oh! Look at that! Get out your phone too! We gotta do a dual selfie over near that cliff. It’s got a great view of the city.”

Toby was right; it was a good view. Atlas, bemused, did as he was told, crouching down so that both teens were in the photo. Technically, Stricklander gave Atlas the cellphone for communication only, but it couldn’t hurt to take a few pics, could it? It was his after all.

“Children, behave yourselves,” Blinky scolded half-heartedly. “This is no mere field trip.”

“Let explore,” AAARRRGHH!!! ruffled Toby’s hair, smiling fondly. “Young once.”

“Dude, let’s get some of that food over there!” Toby exclaimed. “I’m starving.”

“Let me,” AAARRRGHH!!! went to the stall, pulling out something from his hair and laying it atop the counter. The other troll, a large female with charcoal skin and antler-shaped horns, took the payment and gave him two of the smallest strips of dried meat there.

AAARRRGHH!!! carried the food over, smiling fondly at the two boys. “Taste good.”

“What do you want for it?” Atlas asked.

“Huh?”

“What do you want in exchange?”

“No change.” He tapped on Atlas’ hand and gestured for him to raise it. Taking the strip of meat, he placed it in the Atlas’ open palm. “Gift.”

“Seriously?” Atlas asked in a stunned manner.
Toby received the other strip, chomping down on it like a babe to a bottle. “This stuff is delicious. Blinky, I’m sorry. Big guy over here is my favorite troll now.”

“Oh, my, whatever shall I do.” The scholar remarked.

Atlas pocketed the meat, switching his attention to their surroundings. Trollmarket was gigantic. He leaned over the edge of the cliff, observing the people below. His ears twitched at the sound of a young troll’s mewling. His gaze served to locate the source of the noise, landing on an intersection of two busy footpaths. The child was curled up like an armadillo, its little horns and limbs sticking out. His foot moved forward out of instinct, but he pulled himself back. Rightly so, as another troll the size of a minivan rushed past the crowd, scooping up the younger one and cradling it. Whispering comforting words, the troll carried the little one through the streets, disappearing from Atlas’ view not long after.

The scene invoked a deep feeling of relief, though for the life of him he didn’t know why.

“Stay close,” Aaarrrgghh!!! reminded the two as they returned to the main road.

“A Human feet have never graced the ground of Trollmarket before.” Blinky said, then muttered softly, “Nor half-troll either for that matter.”

A large troll brushed into them, jerking back in horror at the two outsiders. “Human?”

AAARRRGGH!!! drew close to the two teens, growling, “Friends.”

*Friends for now,* Atlas thought grimly. He knew, the moment he revealed his role as the Trollhunter to Stricklander, that the two trolls would turn on him.

He snapped another photo of himself next to a sock-seller. His dad would get a kick out of it if he saw it. Atlas took another in front of a fountain, Toby waving in the background. Dang, this selfie thing was addictive.

“Whoa! A-bro, check these out.” He pointed at each rock, “Peridot, Cassiterite, and look, Kornerupine!”
The Kornerupine growled.

“Tobes!” Atlas stepped in front of the boy, snarling in Trollspeak at the larger creature what he hoped meant “back off”. That, or, “suck my gronk-nuks”, which, going by the anger displayed by the other troll, could very well be the case.

AAARRRGGHH!!! got in the Kornerupine’s face, who backed off immediately. Rolling his eyes at their ability to get into trouble, AAARRRGGHH!!! brought the two back into the group.

“Careful.” The gentle giant warned.

“Tobias! Thank Gronka Morka you’re okay,” Blinky grabbed hold of the boy’s shoulders, directing him down the street. “Your knowledge of minerals is almost troll-like.”

“Aw, thanks Blinky.”

Atlas kept close to them, now more alert. “There’s so many of you. How can you all live here?”

“Not everyone lives here in Trollmarket, Master Atlas. Many are travelers, come afar to our market to find comfort and remedies.” He explained. “You’ll find most anything you need, and sometimes, you’ll find what you never knew you needed.”

They strolled further into the market. The stairs to Arcadia disappeared from his line of sight. It would be problematic if he lost his way back, so Atlas began discreetly taking photos of street signs and landmarks during their descent down. He had no idea where they were going. Hopefully, it wasn’t to their deaths.

Out of nowhere, a small pointy hatted creature approached Atlas. It didn’t look like a troll, to his surprise. In fact, it was kind of adorable. What were they called again?

Atlas bent down, rubbing his thumb and index together while whistling for the little thing to come closer. “Hey, little guy. That’s a cute pointy hat you got there—”

It hissed, presenting him with a horrifying smile.

“And pointy teeth too! Oh, you’re so cute. Hey, I got a snack, you want it? Huh? Do you boy?”
Atlas pulled out some of the dried meat, tearing off a piece, then placing it on the ground.

The creature sniffed the offering, then snatched it off the floor and swallowed it whole. More began to approach Atlas.

These ones did not look as friendly.

And suddenly they weren’t so cute anymore. He felt like he was being watched by a pack of predators, waiting for the moment to catch him off guard.

“Master Atlas, look out!” Blinky stomped, sending the creatures scattering. “Get away! Get out of here, vile vermin! Be gone!”

“What were those things?” Atlas asked. It was on the tip of his tongue. He should have paid more attention in Stricklander’s lessons.

“Gnomes. Pickpockets, scum of the earth. They eat the parasite on the larger trolls.”

Atlas watched them scuttle about. He lost track of the one he fed sadly.

“Wow! Atlas, check this out. Maximum coolosity over there.”

Toby was right. Atlas hadn’t even noticed they’d been walking straight to the center of the city. The structure was enormous, casting an orange-yellow glow around the entire area. Trolls of all shapes and sizes approached the glowing stone. Some bowed in reverence, while others reached out to touch it. Trollspeak and English were the most common languages, but he heard some French and Spanish, and to his surprise, even Chinese. How far had these trolls traveled just to see this?

“It’s amazing,” Atlas admitted.

AAARRRGGHH!!! shuffled forward. “Heartstone.”
“The life force of Trollkind,” Blinky enlightened the two boys. “The means that keeps us from crumbling to stone and the source of our light and sustenance.”

“Wow,” Toby said, face cast in wonder. “Okay, that’s totally the bomb. This is the best day of my life.”

The murmur of the troll crowds grew louder and not for the right reasons. They’d sighted who was in their midst.

“What are humans doing here?”

A tall male remarked to another, “Is that one a human? It looks like a troll of some sort.”

“Never seen a troll like that.”

“Maybe it’s one of those things.” An older troll said.

A female troll gathered her young close to her. “Down here? In Trollmarket?”

Atlas clenched his teeth, fists kept to his side. “I think we’ve attracted some trouble.”

Blinky stepped forward to placate the developing mob. “Friends, there is no need to be afraid. He is the Trollhun—”

“What is this?” A large, teal-colored troll growled, breaking from the crowd of developing onlookers.

“I was just getting to that, Draal.”

“Human feet have never sullied the ground of Trollmarket before,” Draal glared at Toby, then tilted his head to the side when his gaze reached Atlas. “And what on earth are you?”

*Kick him in the gronk-nuts*, his inner-Nomura suggested.

“Believe it or not, he is, um How do I put this?” Blinky wiggled his fingers together nervously.
“Our new Trollhunter.”

Their audience gasped. Draal flinched, nostrils flared. “He can’t be the Trollhunter. He’s not a troll!”

“Ah, but you see,” Blinky came behind Atlas, arms extended in presentation. “He’s a half-troll, half-human!”

“A half-troll? What mockery is this?” Draal sized Atlas up, arms crossed. “A half-troll? Protecting us? Bushigal! I am Draal, son of Kanjigar and the amulet’s rightful heir!”

“Show him, Atlas.” Toby whispered.

Blinky disagreed. “Ah, perhaps now is not the time to transform, Master Atlas.”

Silently, Atlas looked at his group, to the crowds, then finally back at Draal. Blinky was correct. Turning into the Trollhunter right now was a supremely bad idea. Already the whisper of changeling was floating around on the lips of these underground denizens.

Which meant Atlas would need to distract them somehow. Do something they wouldn’t expect, to throw them off guard.

He withdrew the amulet from his clothes. Troll feet rustled in the background, clearly uneased. Atlas could feel the building power in his hand, the amulet beginning to whirl to life once more.

After careful deliberation, he chucked it straight at the blue bastard’s ugly mug. It flew, smacking Draal straight in the nose.

The resounding chink was music to Atlas' ears.

Dead silence. Draal picked up the amulet, too dumbfounded to react.

“You know what? You’re right. I’m not the Trollhunter. Blinky lied. Keep it.” He turned toward his human friend, saying, “Come on Tobes, let’s explore this place a bit more before we go topside.”

His group (and for that matter, everyone around them) looked at him like he was insane.
“You—you would give this up?” Draal asked hesitantly, cradling the amulet.

“I’ve no attachment to that moody waste of metal. Go nuts. Have fun being the next Trollhunter. Try not to get killed by Bular like your dad,” he raised a hand to his lips, “Oops. Sorry, I forgot. Too soon?”

Rage burst forth on the troll’s face. “How dare you.”

Atlas gestured to the amulet. “Or, Blinky could be right. Perhaps the amulet skipped over you and did chose me as the Trollhunter. Maybe I should just take that back.”

Draal pulled the amulet away from Atlas’ reach, a mixture of emotions on his features. “I will speak to Vendel about this, half-breed.”

He growled inches from Atlas’ face (dear Pale lady, did none of these people brush their teeth?) then stomped off in the opposite direction.

His shoulders relaxed, the tension in them disappearing. That was a close one.

Blinky smacked him upside the head.

“Hey!” Atlas exclaimed. “What was that for?”

“That was not appropriate at all! I’m ashamed of you, Master Atlas. Kanjigar was one of my dearest friends. At least pretend to have some respect.” He said angrily, then sighed as they watched Draal disappear into the market. “He just lost his father. Have a little heart.”

Atlas looked down at his feet. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me.”

It had been a little much, even for Atlas. At least it bought them some time however.

“We’ll have to work on your manners if you’re to be the next Trollhunter,” Blinky said, eyes narrowing. “You do know that the amulet will return to you soon, correct? It is yours until death.”
Atlas raised a finger to his lips. “Shush. He doesn’t know that yet.”

Toby shook his head. “That’s evil, but awesome sauce.”
“Now, this is more like it.” Atlas said, hands resting on his hips.

He whistled; a real training room. The one at the Order looked pathetic in comparison. His gaze traveled upwards to the columns that decorated the arena. This place was huge. Atlas walked ahead, Toby joining him.

*Where did the light come from*, Atlas wondered. *Was it magic, or something else? Perhaps related to the Heartstone? How did they power their lights?*

His dad would love to have seen this.

Toby’s phone camera flashed.

“Holy Trolls!” Toby added, mouth rounded in awe, “Is this a troll fortress or something? This place is sick!”

Blinky brushed past the boys, a prideful gleam in his eyes. “This, boys, is ‘The Hero’s Forge.’ Many a Trollhunter has been crafted inside its wall, strengthened and molded into our kind’s heroes.”

Toby leaned over the side of the bridge to take another photo. Atlas chuckled, pretending to push the
boy over, earning a shrill scream from his friend.

“Not cool dude.” Toby grumbled, punching him in the shoulder.

“Sorry, sorry. Now, come on.” Atlas said with humor, gesturing for them to keep up with their two troll companions.

As Toby moved on ahead, Atlas slowed down. Discreetly, he took out his own phone, snapping a photo of the arena. Nomura would be so jealous.

How many people used this place? Was it only for the Trollhunters or did they use it for other things as well? Atlas had so many questions.

He approached one of center structures (a door that looked like a mouth), his attention focusing on the intricate statues atop the forge. They almost looked—


“Old Trollhunters.” AAARRRGGHH!!! provided.

“Your predecessors, Master Atlas.” Blinky strolled around the floor, two arms gesturing widely while the rest stayed folded behind his back. “A line of heroism that reaches back to the age of Merlin. It all started in…”

Atlas tuned him out, his thoughts drifting elsewhere. Merlin. He nearly forgot. Atlas’ fingers reached for the amulet. That’s right. The Amulet of Daylight was connected to Merlin. He’d only heard a few stories about the old wizard from Stricklander but, like the Pale Lady herself, most of his history was shrouded in mystery.

Blinky pointed toward an empty stand above them. “This shall be the place of the final repose for Kanjigar ‘the Courageous.’ He put a hand to his chest. “May he rest in peace.”

“Oh my gosh, you mean,” Toby shivered. “These are all troll corpses?”
Atlas crinkled his nose. “Ew.”

“I know it sounds strange to you two, but this is considered a high honor amongst us Trolls,” Blinky explained. “One day, there will be a statue of you here too, Master Atlas.”

Atlas visibly gulped. Trolls in armor similar to his own glared down at him, each in different stages of fight. He felt naked, as if they were looking directly into his soul.

Blinky must have noticed, adding soon after, “Do not worry yourself, Atlas. I’m sure you have a long life ahead of yourself. Hopefully.”

Clammy palms burrowed themselves into his pockets, his posture hunched over at the revelation. Atlas stared back into the cold stone faces of his predecessors. That’s right. Even if he did survive Bular, this place would be his final resting place. Would he turn into stone like the rest of them? Or would he slowly decompose like humans do? Would they simply put his rotting corpse up for display?

If they found his body. He shuddered.

Toby must have noticed his quietness, hitting him softly on the arm to spring him back to reality.

Atlas lurched away as two fingers came rushing toward his face. He pulled his head back, blinking in surprise. Toby kicked out with his foot, waving his arms. “Trollhunter!” He said in a cryptic voice, “Prepare to meet you doom against Tobias Maximus.”

He gestured for Atlas to come forward with his index.

Atlas snorted, but complied, putting up two fists. “What in the world, Tobes. Are you challenging me to a fight?”

Toby crouched, legs spread out and hands making strange signs. “On your guard, for I am a master of Ninjustu and hold a black-belt in badass.”
“Oh, I see. Well, good to know,” Atlas said, the tension in his shoulders loosening. “I won’t go easy on you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, striking with three fingers near his face. “Hee-yah! Dragon Fang Fist!”

Atlas dodged playfully, skipping backward with each swipe of his new friend’s version of martial arts. The boy was a complete amateur, especially in comparison to Nomura and the other Changelings, but that didn’t make it any less fun. Toby stooped down, foot jutting out, nearly tripping Atlas mid-step. Atlas, feeling giddy, jumped in a dramatic fashion (Nomura would be proud) and tucked his head, dropping into a roll when he landed.

AAARRRGGHH!!! joined in to their astonishment, picking up Toby and Atlas and swinging them around. The two teens snuck out of his hold (or rather, AAARRRGGHH!!!! carefully laid them on the ground) and tag-teamed AAARRRGGHH!!!. Not seriously, of course. The large Troll carefully maneuvered around Atlas and Toby’s combined attacks, a dopy smile plastered on his face.

It was entertaining, to Atlas’ delightful revelation. It reminded him of his short childhood, before he was put into more serious training by Stricklander.

Their resident trainer was less than amused, head in hands, bemoaning the lack of adults in the room.

Minutes later, Toby collapsed on the floor, Atlas seated next to him. They would need to work on the shorter boy’s strength and endurance, Atlas thought, if Toby was to ever fight alongside him.

Gah, what was he even thinking? Helping train Toby? Atlas looked down at his hands, biting his bottom lip. This had to stop. Even if Toby was his friend and the two trolls were beginning to grow on him, they weren’t Changelings. No more lying. He needed to tell Stricklander as soon as he returned topside. He’d figure it out. He had to. His mentor—his father deserved to know the truth.

But didn’t Toby as well? Atlas clenched his claws into fists. His loyalties were becoming more and more difficult with every passing moment. He needed to make a choice.

He just hoped it would be the right one.

“So,” the shorter boy said between breaths. “there’s this one thing I’m not getting?”
Atlas snorted. “Just one?”

“You guys are trolls.”

Atlas coughed.

“And half-changeling.” Toby amended. “So, ‘Trollhunter’ sort of sounds like you hunt yourselves.”


“You guys keep saying that. What’s that mean exactly? Who are they?”

Atlas almost answered, but stopped himself. According to his mentor, Gumm-Gumms were the greatest fighting force on earth. No one could stop them, not even the Trollhunter. And if Gunmar ever returned, the changelings were expected to join them. He was expected to join them.

“In Trollspeak, ‘Gumm-Gumm’ means ‘bringer of horrible, slow, painful and thoroughly-calculated deaths. But I would not be too concerned, Tobias, Master Atlas. They were exiled to the Darklands centuries ago by Deya the Deliverer. Only one roams free now.” Blinky motioned one hand to the Trollhunter. “And wants to eat you.”

Atlas shook his head, sighing, “You make it sound so simple. Bular is unbeatable. I’ve yet to meet a troll who has bested him in battle.”

“Wait, so Bular is one of those super evil trolls?” Toby asked.

Blinky nodded. “His father and the rest of their number remain exiled to the Darklands, but they’ve been trying to escape for centuries.” His mouth thinned into a small frown. “However that has not stopped Bular from wreaking havoc on our kind, especially with our Trollhunters.”

“So, like, does that make Bular ‘Darth Maul’ and the Gumm-Gumms ‘Stormtroopers’ for trolls, then?” Toby rubbed his chin. “And I guess Gunmar is like Darth Sidious or something.”
All three gave Toby blank looks.


“Anytime I show interest in human things I get ridiculed for it by the others,” Atlas said. “So I stopped caring.”

He recalled the first time he showed an interest in human things years ago. He received “Gunrobot 3” from his mentor as a gift. It was the greatest movie he’d ever seen at that point, and spent weeks, if not months, bartering with other Changelings for the complete collection. Even better, he smuggled in a few old posters (humans throw away everything these days) and placed them above his bed. His favorite was the glow in the dark one. Sadly, one day, after coming back from cleaning duty, he found the entire video cassette collection destroyed, the tapes yanked out and torn to pieces. The posters were slashed and scribbled on with threats and jeers. At the time, he’d been infuriated and embarrassed. Still, he refused to tell Stricklander. The man had enough on his agenda as it was.

He did tell Nomura though, whose words in reply still echo in his mind today.

“*Caring is a weakness,*” she advised. “*And too much will only get you disappointed, or worse, killed.*”

She was right. Putting too much stock in things would make him vulnerable.

“Dude,” Toby army-crawled closer to him. “That sucks. Okay, movie night at my place this weekend. We’re gonna go through all the classics: *Star Wars*, the *Matrix*, Back to the Future, the Marvel series. Actually, one night is probably not gonna do it. We might need to make this weekly. There’s just so much I have to show you. Hey, maybe it will bring back some of your old memories too!”

“We have no time for games and fun, Tobias,” Blinky interrupted cryptically. “I sense ill times are upon us. Hence, the need for us to begin Master Atlas’ training now.”

“Saturday nights work for me,” Atlas whispered in the other boy’s ear. It sounded interesting. And as long as the changelings didn’t find out, he would be safe.
“Movie?” AAARRRGHH!!! perked up. “When?”

“Enough! This is serious!” Blinky said, walking up to one of the gigantic doors. “Step back, please, boys.”

“I don’t know, this floor is pretty comfortable.” Atlas laid back, arms behind his head.

“Very well.” Blinky said dryly, pushing a circular fixture.

Things immediately descended into chaos. An enormous scythe swung down. Atlas’ breath caught in his throat, but his body reacted subconsciously. Atlas jackknifed and rolled to the side. Toby yelped, jumping to his feet in alarm, barely missing the sharp edge by a mere inch.

Another blade shot out from the ground. Atlas back-flipped in response, landing on a low-hanging ledge. To his annoyance, a third blade oscillated towards his direction. He jumped again, this time, landing atop the door’s decorative mouth-carving above Blinky. He hissed at the blue troll. “Not funny, Blinky.”

“I must say, excellent reflexes, Master Atlas.” Blinky rubbed four hands together, eyes alight in excitement. “There’s hope for you yet.”

Toby dodged another swinging scythe. “Can’t we start off with something easy? This is a bit much.”

“Agreed,” Atlas said. “How are we supposed to learn if you don’t teach us the basics first?”

Blinky rubbed his chin. “I will take that into consideration in our next lesson. Now—"

“Blinkous Galadrigal,” a loud voice rang throughout the arena. “Blinkous Galadrigal!”

Atlas jumped down, landing next to the blue Troll, who quickly turned off the machine.

“Blinkous Galadrigal.” Atlas repeated, raising his brows, a small snort emitting from his nose. “That’s your name?”
“Ugh. Horrible, I know. My mother loved unique names.” Blinky rolled his eyes in shame, hands together like a child being scolded by a teacher. “Let me do the talking.”

A troll with long twisted horns and milky eyes walked across the bridge, his glare unmoving from Blinky. There was age in his face and body, far more than any other troll Atlas had met. Despite the male’s elderly appearance however, he was huge, dwarfing everyone save AAARRRGHH!!!.

“I wish to meet the hybrid supposedly chosen by the amulet.” He said, before scanning the group. He squinted at Toby first, then looked to Atlas. His eyes widened a tad, but the rest of his expression remained unchanged, which is to say, judgmental and grumpy.

Atlas squared his shoulders as the other approached, nervousness in his stance.

The troll stood over him. Atlas felt his neck crack as he tried to look up at him. Thankfully (or not, depending on how one looked at it), the larger male bent down until he was eye-level with Atlas.

Hands behind his back, the troll introduced himself, “I am Vendel, son of Rundle, son of Kilfred.”

“Uh,” he scratched the back of his head. “Atlas.”

*Son of Stricklander,* he supposed, but Atlas knew better than to reveal that sort of information.

“Produce the amulet, Trollhunter.”

Atlas shrugged, not meeting Vendel’s steady gaze. “Sorry, I gave it to Draal.”

“And Draal came to me after it disappeared from his person,” Vendel said, staring unblinkingly at the boy. “You cannot fool me, *whelp.*”

“Ugh, fine.” He sighed, reluctantly pulling out the device. Vendel plucked it from his claws, examining it.
“Amulet chose.” AAARRGGHH!!! said.

The amulet disappeared from Vendel’s grasp, once again returning to Atlas’ hands.

“Yes, that does appear to be the case. However, the amulet has been known to make ill-fated choices,” Vendel nodded his head towards Blinky, “as you know better than most.”

Blinky shuffled his feet, all arms folded, his expression guilt-ridden.

“What’s that mean?” Atlas asked.

“Blinky trained a Trollhunter before Kanjigar,” AAARRRGGHH!!! pointed to a statue, “Unkar ‘the Unfortunate.’”


“First night out, torn.” AAARRRGGHH!!! gestured with his hands, “limb from limb.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! pointed to one of the statues above directly above them. Atlas cringed. His was the worst out of the group, his body language terrified.

Toby shook his head, stepping away from that particular column. “Ouch.”

Unkar’s arm broke off, falling in the place Toby was standing moments before.

Both teens flinched in response. Blinky and Vendel began whispering in Trollspeak; it was so fast Atlas couldn’t keep up.

This was the life Atlas had ahead of him? Suddenly this hero of the people gig was sounding even worse than his Order one.
He put his hands up, waving between his predecessors and himself. “Hey, does Trollmarket really need a Trollhunter? I’m sure Draal and his buddies can protect this place. It’s the 21st century after all.”

All trolls in attendance ignored him.

He lowered his arms, sighing. “Never mind.”

Vendel finally spoke up in English, “If the amulet chose true, the Soothscryer will reveal it.”

Before Atlas could say anything, Blinky rushed forward, pleading, “Please! Master Atlas hasn’t had even an hour’s training. Let us work with him more. He needs more time!”

And to Atlas’ stunned observation, Vendel, in a moment of what he could only describe as toddler having a tantrum, stomped his foot and gestured down next to him, mumbling angrily, “Mm-mm.”

Oh dear Pale Lady, these were the trolls he would be assigned to protect?

The urge to tell his dad became all the more stronger.

Atlas walked forward, chuckling nervously, standing on the carved rock Vendel gestured to earlier. Immediately, the floor lit up, the lines aglow in a red light.

A large troll-shaped column rose from the floor. He stepped back in reaction. Its mouth opened, revealing several rows of teeth.

“Beyond, the Soothscryer!” Vendel exclaimed. “It will judge your true spirit. Insert your right hand, Trollhunter.”

“Uh,” Atlas swallowed, asking weakly, “I’m gonna get it back, right?”

“That is part of the test.” Vendel smirked.
Oh hell no.

“Noope, nope, nope, nope.” Atlas said, walking back to the group. “This has been a great experience and all, but I think you’ve got the wrong person. I’m just gonna—”

Vendel dragged him back by the collar of his shirt. “You will not leave here until you have finished the test, Trollhunter.”

Atlas muttered under his breath, “I’d like to see you stop me, you old goat.”

“What was that, boy?” Vendel asked, dropping him on the floor.

The teen glared, getting up then stomping over to the structure. Stepping back for a moment to judge the distance, he made a running leap, landing atop to the first ledge. He leaned forward into its mouth.

The teeth-like points inside began to whirl.

*I suppose this is how I’ll go out,* Atlas thought, *better than Bular’s stomach at least.*

Slowly, he reached in, careful not to touch anything.

Wrong move. Its mouth closed, trapping his entire right arm.

And, in what he would describe as a very un-Atlas move, he began to scream hysterically, yanking at his arm, trying desperately to get it back.

“Oh! It’s got my arm! It’s got my arm!”

Toby rushed over to help, arms around Atlas’ torso. “Don’t worry dude! I’ll save you!”
Then, just as suddenly as it started, the Soothscryer spit his arm back out. Atlas fell back against Toby, both slamming down onto the ground.

He breathed, in and out, trying to control his frantic heartbeat. The amulet glowed. He had to will it not to transform him.

“I’m alive. I’m in one piece. Thank you Pale…” he looked up at Vendel, now standing above him. “Pale troll, sir.”

“A-migo, can you get off? You’re kind of heavy.” Toby groaned. “Oh man, everything hurts.”


Vendel scratched his chin, “Hmm, It needs more time to render judgment.”

“A magic eight ball could have told us that.” Toby mumbled.

Vendel’s focus shifted back to Blinky, who stood up straighter under his gaze. “Now, I must speak to the Trollhunter and his trainer. Alone.”

“You going to be okay?” Toby asked as he got up, AAARRRGGHH!!! helping both boys to their feet.


He waved as Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! walked over the bridge, soon disappearing back into the tunnels.

Atlas shuffled closer to Blinky, brushing shoulders with the other.

Vendel leaned down, his claw coming towards the boy. Atlas had to physically force himself not to
baulk. Slowly, Vendel flicked his index and thumb at Atlas’ horns from the base to the top, humming in response at the sounds it made. Atlas tried to not struggle as Vendel put a finger under his chin, moving his head from side to side.

“What sort of creature are you?” Vendel asked in Trollspeak.

Atlas repeated sarcastically, “What sort of creature are you?”

Bad idea. Vendel smacked him upside the head, not roughly, but enough to annoy the teen. “Impudent brat. Blinky, what is this?”

Blinky rubbed his hands together, “Uh, perhaps we could talk about this in my study.”

Vendel peered closer at Atlas’ face. “No, I smell something off here. You’re not just a half-troll are you?”

Atlas sneered mockingly, switching from Trollspeak to his own people’s dialect. “If I tell you, what will you do for me, old goat?”

Ancient eyes enlarged in horror. Vendel reared on Blinky, index pointed accusingly at his face. “You brought a damn changeling into our mists? What on earth were you thinking?”

“Half-changeling”, Blinky amended, “and it is not I who chooses the Trollhunters. I merely followed the amulet. Merlin chose Master Atlas for a reason, Vendel. He hates Gunmar and Bular, just as much as we do.”

“What proof do you have?” Vendel said, eyes narrowed and frown evident.

Blinky balled his hands into fists. “Plenty! He had several chances to give Bular the amulet but chose not to. He even fought off Bular to allow us passage into Trollmarket, he—”

Atlas pulled up his shirt nonchalantly, one eyebrow raised. “Is this proof enough for you?”
Silence ensued. The two trolls stared. Vendel was difficult to read but Blinky clearly looked distressed. Atlas didn’t know why, it’s not like scars were unusual or anything. He’d seen plenty of trolls with them coming down from topside and he knew quite of few changelings with them as well (some of which were supplied by yours truly.)

“H-how old are you might I ask, Master Altas?” Blinky rubbed his temples, ears lowered.

He furrowed his brow, trying to remember what Stricklander told him. “Probably about fifteen or so. Why?”

“Fifteen?” Vendel asked in alarm, rising to his full height.

Atlas nodded. “Roughly, yeah.”

Vendel gestured to the worst of his scars alongside his abdomen, “This large one looks old.”

“That’s cause it is old. I got it when I was around ten? Eleven, I guess? Maybe nine, I don’t know my exact age, sorry. In short, what ended up happening was that in order to live I had to last five minutes with Bular.” He lowered his garment. “It’s better than it looks.”

Blinky grasped at his hair, blurtting out, “It looks like he cut you open! Great Gronka Morka. Are all these from Bular?”

“Nah, Changelings can be kind of vindictive.” He threw his hands up in a ‘what can you do’ sort of gesture. “It doesn’t help that I’m softer than most trolls. Human genes suck. Armor generally helps, but sometimes they pull out a secret dagger or something and you just can’t dodge it. Not all of them are bad. This one here is from when Nom—one changeling found out I sold one of her dusty old Chinese tea sets for new cooking knifes. She was furious! Used one of those knifes on me. Hilarious in retrospect really.”

Another awkward moment of silence. Atlas scratched the back of his neck, unsure of what else to say. Did he go into too much detail? What more was there to explain? Atlas told the truth.

Finally, Vendel shook his head, hand rising to meet his forehead. “Blinkous, he’s your problem now. We keep this information a secret. We’ll make something up if we have to in the meantime. He’s a half-troll. No more, no less. If anyone asks for details, you send them to me, understood?”
Vendel stomped off toward the bridge, though his gait was far less sprightly than before. He kept looking back at Atlas every couple seconds for some strange reason.

When he was out of sight, both Atlas and Blinky sighed in relief.

Blinky crossed his arms. “That went better than I expected.”

“Blinky…Thanks. You didn’t have to stand up for me.”

“You’re the Trollhunter, Master Atlas. And as your trainer, it is my job to bring out the best of you, half-changeling or not.”

“Still, you didn’t even tell him about the Janus Order.” Atlas said, disbelief dawning on his features. “Or that I work directly under the head.”

“I think he’s got enough to think about right now, don’t you?”

The Janus Order was quiet. Too quiet.

Atlas wasn’t even half-way through the hidden door before a large hand grabbed him, yanking him so fast his arm almost popped out of his socket.

“Nomura,” he gasped, “What a pleasant surprise.”

It amazed him how similar she appeared to the rest of her species, though her flesh was far more colorful. The same was true for Stricklander. Was it due to how changelings were made, or were their parent trolls equally so?
“Pleasant my ass.” She scowled, holding him inches above the ground. Her other pink claw dug into his collar. “You are in so much trouble, whelp.”

“C-can you put me down?” He asked, pointing to the floor.

She lowered him back to the ground but her hold remained. Before he could say another word she began fast-walking down the hall, Atlas struggling to keep pace. Changelings in the area stopped and stared. Heat blossomed upon Atlas’ cheeks; he desperately wished he didn’t leave his hooded cloak back at the school.

The door to Stricklander’s office was wide open; a bad sign, Atlas realized. Nomura closed it behind them.

His blood ran cold, his blush soon replaced with a pale pallor. Stricklander was in troll form, quietly arguing with Bular, who appeared even more pissed off than usual.

Bular caught sight of Atlas and sneered, red eyes flashing. The teen backed away, bumping into Nomura. “Scared, runt? Heh. You should be.”

“Atlas,” Stricklander turned to face the teen, arms crossed. With a tight-lipped smile, he asked, “What did I say earlier?”

“I can explain,” Atlas began, only for Stricklander to put a hand up.

“Please, do.” His mentor took out his pen, moving it between his fingers. “What did you want to tell me about the amulet?”

“Huh?”

“The note you left on my desk.” He provided, “You said something big happened.”

“Oh, that,” He looked down, sweat forming at his hairline.
This was it. Atlas’ big moment. He took a deep breath.

“I-I the Trollhunter,” Atlas began, “I know who he is. It’s—”

“James Lake, yes, we know. I met him.” Stricklander waved him off, boredom in his tone. “Is that all?”

No, Atlas thought, it’s me. I’m James Lake.


“I…” Atlas bit down on his bottom lip.

If he revealed himself now, there was a high chance Bular would kill him. This wasn’t just between him and his father now. As long as Bular was in the picture, Atlas would be in danger. His hands began to shake.

“Speak up, Impure.” Bular said. “This is ridiculous. Why did you even bring him here? He can’t even speak correctly.”

“I—” His eyes traveled down to his pocket. “I found—”

Memories of Bular’s cruelty flashed through his mind. The pain, the fear, the despair he felt during his initiation into the Janus Order.

Bular slammed his fist down. “Out with it boy!”

“I found out how to get closer to the Trollhunter!” Atlas exclaimed.

The two changelings in the room stiffened. Bular was the opposite, his shoulders and arms moving in tandem, restlessness in his stance.
“Liar,” Bular accused, eyes narrowing. He drew closer to the teen.

Stricklander put a hand up to stop Bular, then turned back to Atlas. “Explain.”

Hesitantly, Atlas pulled out his phone, clicking on the photo application. He presented an image of himself and Toby in Trollmarket. “I convinced the Trollhunter and his group I was their ally and got into Trollmarket.”

Bular snatched away the phone, holding it inches from his face, as if he could not believe what had transpired. After inspecting it for several moments, he tossed away, Stricklander catching it. “How did you get to Trollmarket?”

“I snuck in through the portal while you were fighting the Trollhunter,” Atlas said, adding, “who you failed to kill.”

Seconds passed before Bular reacted.

The taste of pennies rose in his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue. What happened? Why was he on the ground? It took Atlas a few moments to realize he’d pissed off Bular, and a few more to remember the troll grabbing him by the chest and slamming him into the wall. His head ached, horns digging into the smooth rock behind him. He tried to breathe, but found the action to be difficult. His ribs were on fire.

“Enough!” Stricklander roared, stepping between the two. “My office is not the training room, Bular.”

“You dare block me, Stricklander?” Bular growled, hands reaching for his swords. “Move away. This piece of filth needs to be punished for his insolence.”

“He didn’t mean it as an insult, merely an observation.” Stricklander reasoned. “Forgive him, lord Bular. He is an immature youngling.”

A pink hand rested against his shoulder; two Nomura entered his line of vision. “You okay, brat?”
“I didn’t know you had a twin,” he chuckled weakly.

“Great,” she sighed. “You better not lose your memory a second time.”

Atlas closed his eyes, trying to regain focus. The amulet buzzed in his clothing, but did nothing else, for which he was thankful. Now was not the time to transform.

“How dare that abomination speak to me like that,” Bular rounded back on Atlas, accusing, “And what of you? Why didn’t you kill the Trollhunter when you had the chance?”

Coughing, Atlas sat up, wincing at the pain it produced. He was going to be so sore tomorrow. “It’s because…” he looked to Stricklander. “Because…”

His mentor brought his hands together, pointing them at Bular. “Because, lord Bular, it would draw attention to us. Not only was your attempt to do so earlier unsuccessful, it risked exposing our agenda to both the humans and Trollmarket.”

“Not only risk,” Atlas said. “A human teen did see you. Thankfully, no one believed him, but still.”

Stricklander shook his head in disapproval. “You see? You are risking this entire operation. This requires finesse, patience.”

Bular spat on the ground, “Just what I expected. You’re all pathetic. Your little planning does nothing but prolong what could easily be solved with strength. Force is the only thing I respect, something none of you seem to possess.

“And I only respect your father,” Stricklander said dryly, “So, if you want any chance of ever seeing him again, adapt.”

“I could easily kill that human right now if I wished.” Bular flicked his tongue against his tusks. Though arrogance still clung to his features, there was hesitation there.
“The humans outnumber us, sir.” Nomura spoke up. “Their weapons are powerful.”

“Nomura speaks true. All of us here want to release your father as soon as possible, but this is our area of expertise. We know how to deal with humans. Let us handle it.” Stricklander pressed further. “Gunmar will severely displeased if he finds out you exposed us all.”

Bular snarled, “Do not bring keeping bringing my father into this, Impure.”

Atlas’ mentor brought up his hands in mock surrender. “Oh, I mean no disrespect, lord Bular. I merely wish to explain why Atlas’ plan will be more successful. If my subordinate gains their trust, then retrieving the amulet will be, as the humans say, a piece of cake.”

“Fine. Do what you want,” Bular said, flashing his fangs. “But the moment the Trollhunter crosses my path again, I will end him.” He snarled at Atlas. “Get in my way, runt, and I’ll end you along with him.”

After that, Bular stormed out, slamming the door so hard it almost fell off its hinges.

They all stayed frozen for several seconds, waiting for him to return. When he didn’t, the group relaxed. His dad was by his side in moments, checking his stomach and neck for injuries. “You, my young Atlas, are an idiot.”

“I know,” he said, then groaned as Stricklander pressed down on a bruised rib. “Ow, ow, ow.”

“You’re such a mother hen, Stricklander.” Nomura said, a toothy grin on her face.


Nomura rolled her eyes, getting back up to her feet. “Do I still get him for Goblin duty later?”

“Go, Nomura.”

“See ya later, brat. Be sure to bring a few buckets. You’re gonna need them.”
The moment the changeling left, Stricklander’s posture loosened, his expression full of concern. “Can you stand?”

Atlas nodded. Carefully, his father swung Atlas’ arm around his shoulders, then lifted him up. The teen’s fingers burrowed into the man’s cape, a soft cry leaking out. Once back on Atlas’ own two legs, Stricklander brought the teen’s head to his chest. In this form he was much taller, Atlas only just reaching the man’s collarbone if one counted his horns.

“We’ll need to bandage those. I think I have an emergency kit around here somewhere.”

He leaned against the wall as Stricklander went to his desk, moving around a few drawers before he found what he needed. He pulled out the material, wrapping the bandage around his hand several times then cutting off the rest with his tusks. His hand gestured for Atlas to sit in the chair. It took a bit of maneuvering (and a lot of pain) but the teen succeeded.

Atlas pulled off his shirt, his father helping. The damage was bad. Red and purple covered his torso. His father grabbed a vial from the kit, handing it to him.

“Ugh, do I have to? This stuff tastes disgusting.”

“Stop being a child and drink it.” Stricklander ordered. “It will help speed up the healing process.”

“Fine.” In a single motion, Atlas downed the concoction, lips curling. The taste was horrific, as if garbage and Gable’s cooking had a baby. He visibly gagged.

His chest hurt at the action. Damn his heritage. He was barely stronger than a fleshbag.

Stricklander began wrapping his torso carefully but swiftly. It was the same old song and dance; Atlas doing something stupid and his mentor fixing him up afterward. Finally taping the end of the bandage to the front, Stricklander stepped back to admire his work. “Not bad. I think I’ve outdone myself this time.”

Atlas gestured to the loose parts of the wrapping, raising an eyebrow. “Really?”
“Well, it’s not as bad as the first time I did it.”

He snorted, “True.”

Stricklander checked the door again, then smiled warmly at Atlas, which surprised the teen.

“I’m glad you’re safe.” A hand stroked the teen’s hair.

Atlas mumbled, “I thought you’d be angry at me.”

“Angry?” Stricklander tilted his chin up. “No, child. I’m proud of you.”

“What?”

“Though I’m rather worried as well,” he bent forward, a wrinkle in his brow. “Your namesake, too, carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I’m concerned that, like him, you’re overextending yourself by implanting yourself into the Trollhunter’s group. Why, just today you fell asleep in my office.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” he put a hand up. “Go back. You’re proud of me?”

Stricklander tossed his pen upwards, catching it in mid-air then pointing it at Atlas. “You’ve infiltrated the Trollhunter’s group. You’ve seen Trollmarket. No other Changeling can claim the same. Child, at this point in time, you are the most useful member of the Janus Order.”

“S-seriously?” He sat up straighter. “I am?”

“Our Lady will be pleased to know this.”

“Do you think she could restore my memories?” He asked.
Stricklander frowned. “She might, but I can’t say for absolute certain that she could. Still, our Lady is powerful. I’m sure she knows of something.”

“But there’s still hope, right?”

“Of course,” Stricklander moved away, shifting back to his human form as he picked up mess Bular left. “This doesn’t not, however, change the fact that you will still be punished, although perhaps I can lighten the load a bit.”

“But aren’t I the most useful member now?”

Stricklander wiped his hands as he deposited rumble into a nearby bin. His eyes flickered yellow for a moment. “And who is the head of the Janus Order, young Atlas?”

Atlas lowered his head. “You are, sir.”

“As I said earlier, actions have consequences.” He returned to Atlas’ side, leaning against the desk. “You are no longer restricted during daylight hours, but I expect you to report to me within twenty-four hours each day and alert me when you go to Trollmarket.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Your ultimate punishment lies with Nomura, as I promised her some help on a side project of hers, but it will only be for a small period of time.”

“You mean Goblin duty?” Atlas groaned. Only the worst of the worst changelings were assigned that. “Can’t I just do Bular’s laundry or something?”

“Heaven forbid, no. Even the worst changeling doesn’t deserve that sort of punishment.”

“So,” Atlas rubbed the back of his head. “You were never angry with me then?”
“Of course not, Atlas. Worried, definitely, annoyed, yes, but never angry. I’m sorry I gave you the impression as such.”

His dad held out his hand. Taking a deep breath, Atlas used the offered hand as leverage, pulling himself into standing position. The pain had lessened, but it still hurt to move certain muscles.

“Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Atlas said.

A pensive expression came over Stricklander’s face. His eyes glazed over, as if he were in another world. Atlas watched as man’s lips curled into a devious smirk. He was planning something, though what, Atlas couldn’t even begin to say.

“I get that I’m supposed to watch the Trollhunter and his friends,” Atlas said “But what is it you expect me to do, exactly?”

“Just keep an eye on the Trollhunter for now. Make friends as they say. We’re not Bular after all. I’ll need a few days to formulate a plan.”

Atlas scratched one of his ears, then asked, “Do we even need Bular and Gunmar? I mean, what if we just take the amulet for ourselves? Lead our own people.”

Stricklander paused, then squinting, said, “Do tell me you’re joking, Atlas.”

But what if he wasn’t? What if they built their own society? Why did they rely on Gunmar? Were they not strong enough to do things themselves?

He wanted to ask all of those things, but the only thing that left his mouth was, “Ah, yes, ha ha. Of course.”

“Good,” Stricklander sighed. “Because what you just said was practically treason and,” he laughed, “then I’d have to kill you.”
Atlas paled, mouth open in shock. His ears dropped.


The man headed for the door, pausing mid-step for Atlas to join him.

Atlas tried to put on a smile, joking, “You mean I make something to eat and you drink all the good wine.”

“You know me too well.” His father put an arm around his shoulder, bringing him close. “Don’t look so scared. It will be fine, child, you’ll see.”

Atlas stared down at the ground. “Sure, Dad. Sure.”
He exhaled, tightening his grip on the Sword of Daylight. Before this, he spent his evenings cooking dinner for Stricklander or patrolling Arcadia. Now, as newly designated Trollhunter, he had other duties. However, instead of getting to fight bad trolls like Blinky spoke of earlier, he was doing the one thing he hated most.

Training.

“Widen your stance.” Binky said.

AAARRRRGGHH!!! and Toby conversed excitedly as Blinky circled around Atlas. They appeared to be growing closer, Toby handing a bag of cat hair to the other as a gesture of good will. Good. His friend needed more friends. Toby was nice, too nice really, and he would need all the allies he could get if he was going to be among trolls.

Sooner or later, Atlas thought, we’ll need to figure out a training regime for him. Toby would be deadweight in a fight as of now. They needed to work on his dexterity and strength. Perhaps he could ask Blinky if they had any small weights for Toby to try after the lesson.

“Wider.”

The blue troll threw him a look.

He flicked the tip of his tongue against the back of his front two teeth. “Okay, fine. We’ll do it your way.”

Begrudgingly, Atlas followed Blinky’s instructions, moving his legs further apart. He knew how to fight, so why was he even doing this? It felt like his early days at the Order, except no one was trying to kill him. Yet.

“Good, good. Keep your frame,” Blinky gestured at his torso. “Much better.”

He replied, “You’re welcome.”

Blinky rolled three of his eyes then motioned upwards. “Raise your sword, Master Atlas.”

“Can’t I just do this in my other form?” Asked Atlas.

“No, you must learn how to fight in this form. It is your human half that is the Trollhunter after all.” He continued to make adjustments on Atlas’ form. “Head up, chin out, stomach in.”

The teen grumbled, “You don’t have to correct me. I know how to do this.”

“Apparently I do if you’re not doing it correctly. Whoever taught you to fight was either horribly inept or terribly negligent. Proper form is important.” The scholar frowned, eyes downcast. “Please do not take any offense, Master Atlas. I’m just trying to help. Whether you believe it or not, I want you to survive.”

“I-It’s…” Atlas bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Blinky.”

Atlas knew snapping at Blinky was wrong, but it was just so hard to accept the truth. For so long he’d considered himself a decent fighter, able to hold his own against Nomura and the other changelings to an extent. Now, he needed to be even better than that, and he wasn’t sure he had the
capacity to do it.

“Apology accepted.” Blinky put up three fingers. “Now then, the Trollhunter lives and dies by three rules.”

“Oh dear Pale Lady, I’m getting flashbacks.” Atlas muttered, thinking back to his first training session with Nomura.

The troll blinked, taken back. “You’re heard of these rules, Master Atlas?”

“No, no, go on. It just reminded me of something.” He said, waving his sword for Blinky to continue.

“Posture, Master Atlas.”

“Oh, right, sorry.” He straightened out his back, legs once again in line with his shoulders.

Blinky threw up a single digit. “Rule number one: always be afraid.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna be a problem.” Atlas said, eyes suddenly widening as a stone flew directly at his head. He ducked. “Whoa! What the hell, Blinky!”

Behind him, AAARRRGGGH!!! caught the stone, munching it down not a second later.

Blinky smiled wide, delight in his gaze. “See? Fear is good. Keeps us alert, on guard, makes us vigilant as they say. Your reflexes are quite good, Master Atlas, but you are still unused to your human body and its limitations.”

“Then how do I,” he began, hitting back another stone with the wide edge of his sword, “get used to it? It’s not like I have access to it outside the armor.”

“Did you not keep your human form in the woods? Surely you could do so again.”
He sighed. “That was a fluke. I’m not sure I can do that again, especially since, you know…the side effects.”

Blinky cringed, his blue face a shade lighter. “Ah, yes. That. Well, allow me to do some research. I’ve some shopping at Rot-Guts later this week. Perhaps they’ll have something there. Now then! Put up your guard, Master Atlas!”

He threw two more stones. Atlas reacted accordingly, the last nearly clipping him on the leg.

“A hero is not he who is fearless, but he who is not stopped by it.”

Atlas cocked his head to the side. “You know, with the amount of Trollhunters you trolls have gone through, perhaps it might be time to reword or completely change that first rule—Hey! Woah! Not the face!”

“Two: always finish the fight.” Blinky recited. “An opponent must be given no mercy.”

“That,” Atlas hit back one of the rocks, “is not an issue for me.”

Changelings were a vicious sort, something Atlas had learned since he first started at the Order. If you lost, they gloated about it, if you won, they would shut up, but if you made it a draw? Well, good luck walking down the hallways at night.

“Good answer. As the Trollhunter, every fight you are a part of may very well be your last. That is why you must always give it your all, no matter the cost.” Blinky instructed sternly, then grinned maniacally. He tossed the rest of his rocks at Atlas, laughing like some cartoonish villain.

Atlas blocked most of them, yelling, “Oh, come on!”

“No one will give you mercy, Trollhunter!” Blinky exclaimed. “Least of all, your trainer!”

“You just want to throw crap at me!”
“Widen your stance, Master Atlas!”

The teen finally smacked the last rock away with his blade, breathing heavily. “You mean I have to kill them.”

Of course. Just like changelings, trolls were an unforgiving bunch. Mercy was for the weak after all.

Atlas gazed down at his blade. Could he really do it? Could he really kill someone?

“Indeed. It is the job of the Trollhunter to vanquish his opponent through death.” Blinky remarked, turning to look at AAARRRGHH!!! and Toby for additional rapport.

“Sad but true.” AAARRRGHH!!! said.

Toby stood, scratching the back of his head, a look of unease on his face. “Dude, that sounds kinda harsh. You’re asking Atlas to kill people.”

“Ours is an unforgiving world, Tobias.” Blinky swerved back to Atlas, an unusual softness in his gaze. “Some of us understand that more than most.”

Atlas lifted the weapon above his head, staring at his reflection in its side. Blinky was right. His choice to lie to his dad could kill him if he wasn’t careful. His mouth twisted. He was walking on a double-edged sword. If he continues to play Trollhunter, then he would get his identity back (and presumably his mother as well), but if he gets found out by the changelings, they would feed him to Bular.

Oh goody. His future prospects were looking better and better, weren’t they?

Blinky put up a final finger. “Hence, the third rule: when in doubt, always kick them in the gronknukns.”

Atlas choked, trying not to laugh. “Seriously? What if it’s a girl-troll, Blinky?”
The troll paused. “You know, I’m not actually certain. Should surprise them at least.”

The idea of kicking Nomura between the legs, while humorous, would probably lead him to getting his head removed from his person.

He lowered the sword, arms burning with exhaustion. Damn, he only started an hour ago and he was already this tired? Sweat dripped down his temples. His energy levels were shit compared to his normal form. This was not going to be easy. “So, what’s next?”

He shouldn’t have asked.

“Oh! So, the Trollhunter’s training begins.” Draal said, or rather yelled, considering the volume of his voice.

Oh crap.

The troll’s face dropped at Atlas’ appearance. “Wait a moment. Who the hell are you? Where’s the half-breeder? I thought he was the Trollhunter.”

The group looked at each other. Blinky rubbed his chin, forehead creased in thought. Toby and AAARRRGHH!!! shrugged.

What should they say?

Atlas twirled the sword around—ignoring the fiery ache in his arms—as he tried to think on his feet. “Oh, he’s around. See, apparently…more than one person can be worthy of being the Trollhunter. He was…filling in for me yesterday. He’s my substitute.”

“What?” Draal’s face dropped, dismayed. “Two Trollhunters? And one’s a human Trollhunter? That’s impossible!”

“So is a half-troll Trollhunter.” Atlas said. “Don’t worry. I’m sure if we need a third sub, we’ll write...
you in at the top of the list of recommendations.”

Blinky reached out. “Wait, Master At—”

“Jim!” Toby covered Blinky’s mouth just in time. “Master Jim, right Blinky? Our resident human Trollhunter.”

The scholar frowned at Toby, removing the boy’s hand and hurrying over to Atlas’ side. “This is going to blow up in our faces if he finds out,” Blinky said in Atlas’ ear.

“He’s not going to find out unless you squeal.” Atlas whispered back.

“You’re expecting me to lie to my deceased friend’s son?”

Atlas nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, that would be great actually.”

Blinky smacked his face with three hands, two on each side and one to the top of his head. Finally, he turned back to Draal. “This is Jim. He is to be our new Trollhunter.”

“Well,” Draal began, recovering from his earlier shock. “I thought the new Trollhunter might accept my services as a sparring partner today. Part of your training regiment, isn’t it? Surely the amulet would choose a competent fighter.”

Blinky laughed nervously “In due time, perhaps. Another decade or two should do. At—Jim is still young, he is not even a fully grown human.”

“Why wait? I’m rather eager to see your new charge demonstrate his mettle.” Vendel said, his words creating a slight echo through the arena.

Atlas searched around, finally spotting the old troll in the upper seating area. He tapped on his amulet, smirking. “It would be a shame if Atlas showed up right about now, hmm. Might really change things up.”
Even from far away, Atlas could see Vendel narrowing his eyes. “Yes, it would. It would also be a shame if I forbade the Trollhunter’s human companion from entering Trollmarket, hmm.”

Damn. Atlas had to hand it to him; that was a good call on his bluff.

“Touché, old goat.” Atlas admitted.

“Call me that again and I’ll hang you up by your ears.”

Atlas gave him a toothy grin, pointing his sword at Vendel. “You’re beginning to grow on me, Vendel.”

“And you are beginning to try my patience.” Vendel signaled with his hand. “Why don’t you show us what you’re made of, Trollhunter? Let them spar.”

Atlas’ face went white. Oh crap, he shouldn’t have egged the old goat on.

“Blinky, I don’t think I can do this.” Atlas said, watching as Draal moved into position on the opposite end of the ring. “Actually, scratch that, I know I can’t do this. I’m not used to this body yet. He’s going to kill me.”

“Hit him as hard as you can.” Blinky supplied.

“I’m not sure you’ve noticed, but this body cannot hit very well. At all. I mean, have you seen my legs? Very skinny. My arms are practically noodles. I have no muscle definition in this form.”

“Surely it’s not that bad. You fought Bular, and, though it was brief, you did so quite gloriously. Your blade-work was especially impressive.”

“That was luck and adrenaline.”

Blinky encouraged him. “You can still do this.”
“He’s going to beat the stuffing out of me, and I don’t have a lot of stuffing to lose!” His shoulders tightened. “I’m not good enough, Blinky.”

“At—Jim. It’s okay. You are much stronger than you think. Trust yourself.”

“Easy for you to say,” Atlas muttered bitterly as Blinky wandered off towards where AAARRRGHH!!! and Toby were situated.

How could he trust himself when he didn’t even know his own human half?

It had only been two days since he got the amulet and he’d only spent a fraction of that time in his human form.

*Think,* Atlas told himself, *what can I use to take down Draal?*

“Begin!” Vendel yelled.

Draal cracked his neck, rolling his shoulders, a big smirk on his face, clearly not viewing Atlas as a threat.

Good. Atlas adjusted his grip, forefinger on the hilt. He breathed in and out, trying to calm his raging heart. Let Draal underestimate him. Maybe he could use that to his advantage.

Atlas rushed at Draal, catching the other off-guard. He dipped as Draal swiped sideways with his fist. Atlas weaved left then slashed downwards.

His blade scraped against the floor as Draal jumped to avoid his blow. Atlas arm shook at the vibrations that went up his arm from the impact. Stupid body.

The troll grinned, smashing his fist into his other open hand. “Is that all you got, Trollhunter?”
Breathing heavily, Atlas scanned the arena then ran towards one of the walls.

“Oh, are you running away now?” Draal began running on four legs, soon catching up with him.

He swung, but Atlas dodged, then, using the sword like a discus, threw it at the troll. Draal’s mouth dropped in surprise, but he blocked the attack with his arms, only slightly wincing. Atlas watched Draal’s face flash with a look of wonder as he picked up the sword, only for the weapon to vanish into smoke, right back in Atlas’ right hand. Draal frowned, then bared his fangs.

Draal ran toward him, quickly gaining momentum, then suddenly pulled into a roll that ricocheted up the wall and to the ceiling.

Oh dear Pale Lady.

Atlas’ throat tightened, his legs shaking. He couldn’t keep up in this body. He barely moved out of the way before Draal hit the ground, causing an eruption of sand to cloud the area.

Thinking fast, he used the cover of the dispersed sand to bend low to the ground, barely avoiding Draal’s fist, using the low visibility to snatch up some of the material in his free hand. It wasn’t a second too soon, as suddenly he was flung back by the troll’s powerful roar, straight into the wall. He groaned as his back hit the rock, the area Bular damaged earlier flaring up in pain.

Draal punched into the stone a mere inch away from his face. He drew in close, blocking any chance for escape. “I’ve waited my entire life to inherit the amulet.”

Atlas looked up, sneering, “Looks like you’ll have to wait awhile then.”

He threw the sand into Draal’s eyes, who reared back, scratching at his face. Atlas, remembering how the sword previously returned to his hand, threw it again in the other’s direction. Draal swung sideways to block it, knocking Atlas along with it, right near to the edge of the platform.

Ah oh.

Draal roared, glaring at Atlas. Before Atlas could get up, the troll rolled again, landing in front of
him. Atlas tried to crawl away but Draal grabbed him by the chest. He picked Atlas up and held him over the crevasse below.

“Do you think this is funny? The amulet isn’t some child’s toy to do with as one wishes.” Draal sneered.

Atlas struggled to breath. His vision flashed; suddenly, he was ten again and fighting Bular. The feel of Bular slowly crushing his skull made his lungs constrict. He was going to die. No, no, no. Not now. He blinked several times, pushing the memory back to the back of his mind. His left hand smashed down, over and over, against the troll’s flesh, his right focusing energy. Just a bit more.

“How could you be a Trollhunter? You’re just a,” he snarled the last word, “human.”

Atlas growled. “I didn’t plan on becoming the Trollhunter, Draal. The amulet chose, and clearly it decided you were the inferior candidate.”

He roared again, hand constricting further around his middle. Atlas coughed, then gathered as much spit as possible before hocking the biggest loogie into Draal’s open mouth.

Draal froze, so taken back that he stopped yelling. His pupils shrank, the corners of his mouth lowering. “You little…”

Draal brought him closer, only to be stopped the Sword of Daylight, now resting in Atlas’ hand. The teen held the blade an inch away from the troll’s elbow.

“If you cut my arm off, you’ll fall to your death.” Draal said. “This is my win.”

“Over my dead body,” Atlas growled, dragging the pointed end even closer to Draal’s arm. “Let’s see you be Trollhunter with one arm, asshole.”

“Time! Time, please!” Blinky called, hurrying over to the two.

Vendel nodded, quietly walking away.
“Excellent spar, Draal, but I think that’s enough for now, ha, ha.” Blinky said, hands moving around each other nervously.

Draal squeezed Atlas’ chest, so tight the teen almost blacked out from the pain. Then, he dropped the boy onto the floor, spitting on the ground next to him. “You’ve got guts. But cheap tricks don’t win battles. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay down and keep your mouth shut, worm. I suspect I won’t have to wait long for the mantel to pass on from you and Atlas.”

Shame flooded Atlas’ face.

He lost. This was supposed to be his defining moment, and he lost. Ignoring the needle-like stabs of pain in his side, he got up, using the sword like a walking stick.

“Master Jim, are you alright?” Blinky rushed over. “The sand trick was quite impressive. You’re very quick on your feet, but,” he frowned. “I would discourage you from trying to kill yourself to prove a point.”

“Don’t. Just…don’t, Blinky.” Atlas groaned, glaring at Draal’s receding back. “He beat me. How can I ever hope to defeat Bular if Draal is able to completely destroy me?”

“You surprised him many a time, Jim. I suspect, with time and more confidence, you will be able to defeat both of them.” Blinky said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Atlas shrugged him off, limping over to the rest of the group. “What if I’m not cut out for this, Blinky? Fighting isn’t a changeling’s specialty, you know.”

“You don’t know that until you try. You’re more than your parentage. Merlin chose you for a reason.” Blinky told him.

“Well,” he started, hand shifting to the amulet in his chest plate, “maybe Merlin chose wrong.”
He only just made it to practice, and even then, he struggled to keep up with everyone. By the end of it, all he wanted to do was soak his body in a tub of ice. He hadn’t been this sore since the Order’s last spring cleaning.

The gym’s makeshift stage lights bore down on his back, making him even more uncomfortable than he already was. Atlas rubbed his face. The shine of his armor hit his eye; he blinked rapidly in response, still unused to its supernatural glow.

Sitting cross-legged on the raised platform, he flipped through the script, head already dizzy by the amount of words before him. This acting thing was much harder than is appeared. Not only were there lines to memorize, but he had to know which stage to enter and leave from, where to stand, and a multitude of other little details that made his head spin.

Looking human was easy; it was the being part Atlas had yet to get a handle of yet. This past week was the most he’d ever interacted with the species. People would wave hello to him. Him. And all of them were so talkative, wanting to know about his life in Canada and did he really ride a moose to school?

A feminine cough broke his line of thought.

“Is everything okay? You didn’t seem very into the play today. You kept missing your cue.”

He looked up from the script, startled. His shoulders tightened, face burning. “H-hey, Claire.”

“You’re still in your costume?” She asked.

“I, ah, thought it would be better to wear it to get in the mood?”

“Oh, so you’re a method actor,” she smiled. “That’s so cool.”

“Ah,” he slowly bobbed his head, completely confused but wanting to impress her. “Yes, that’s exactly it. I’m a method actor. I’m a very method person. Totally method. You’re exactly right.”
Oh sweet Pale Lady. He was talking to Claire. Claire. Outside of the play. Here. Now. His pupils dilated. He brushed down his bangs. Did he look okay? Was his fleshbag appearance pleasing enough? Did his breath smell?

“I know we don’t know each other very well, but we’re going to spending a lot of time together,” she said, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “If you need some help memorizing your lines—”

“That would be amazing, actually.” Atlas said, brightening up. He scratched the back of his neck, hoping his face didn’t match the giddy glee erupting within him. “I’ve never been in a play before. There’s so many lines.”

“Well, I find writing mine down in numerical order helps. Sometimes I even make a mnemonic device to remember them.”

“Mnemonic?”

“It’s a memory game. You make a song, a rhyme, or even a small phrase to help you remember something.” Claire said.

“And this technique, can it help you recall everything?”

She shrugged, “Pretty much, yeah. I use it for my classes too.”

Atlas nodded, writing down her suggestion onto the top of the script. “Oh, ah, sorry for coming in late today. Things at home are hectic right now.”

She sat down next to him, crossing her legs. “Oh? The move?”

“Something like that.” He brought up his knee to his torso, resting his chin on it. “I haven’t told my dad…about the play yet. I lied that I was doing something else. He seemed really excited for me, but I’m afraid, if he finds out the truth, that—”
“That he’ll make you quit.” Claire finished, resting a hand on his shoulder. “That sucks.”

He sighed deeply, “Yeah.”

“What about your mom?”

“She’s…” He thought back to what Toby said. His mom was alive somewhere in Arcadia. The urge to see her was growing stronger by the day, but so too was the fear of exposing her to his world. What if she saw him in his regular form? Would she reject him? “…She’s not here. I don’t want to bother her with it.”

“Why not?”

“My family is…really complicated.”

She let out a deep sigh. “You and me both.”

Atlas struggled not to stare at her. She was gorgeous. Way too gorgeous. What made it worse was that she appeared rather caring too, which made everything all the more difficult.

The longer he carried on with this act, the larger his punishment would be if he was found out.

Atlas looked down at his hands, his small human hands. Was this attraction because he was in human form?

No, not if last night’s dream and embarrassing morning had anything to say about it.

Every time his mind drifted to her face, he felt weird, his mouth fuzzy and his stomach at the precipice of emptying itself all over the floor. It was as if he were walking on clouds whenever she came near. No changeling or human had ever made him feel this way before; it was driving him mad.

Where was Toby when Atlas needed him, damn it? How many times did that human need to get his
teeth fixed in one week?

She tapped his shoulder again, concern in her gaze.

Atlas straightened his back, eyes alert. Damn it, he’d been silent for too long! What was she going to think of him now?

“Is everything okay, Jim?”

He gulped, “Uh…”

“Jim, Jim!” Ms. Janeth waved at him. “I’m so glad I caught you before you left. Could you come over here for a moment?”

“Sure, Ms. Janeth.” Atlas spoke up, hoping he didn’t sound as anxious as he felt.

Saved, Atlas thought, as Claire got up, leaving his side. Or not. She had a contemplative look in her eyes, as if she were trying to get a read on him. Something told him this conversation wasn’t over by a long shot.

“Well, I’m going to go meet my friends. I guess I’ll see you in class next Monday?” Claire asked, arms tightening around her script.

“Ah, yeah. Hopefully.” Atlas said, suddenly remembering his words from the day before. He still had no idea how he was going to pull that one off. Could he keep the Trollhunter armor on long enough for that? It was possible; the amulet appeared to be becoming more and more attuned to him.

He watched as she left, her hips swinging back and forth in a memorizing way.

As Toby liked to say, he had it bad.

Ms. Janeth cleared her throat.
She pointed down at her clipboard, brows bent in confusion. “I noticed your name wasn’t on the school roster. Do you know why that is?”

“It isn’t? Oh, ah…” he tried to think quickly, “…maybe there’s a problem with the school computers? I don’t start until Monday. Apparently.”

She bobbed her head, “Hmm. I’ll talk with IT then. Make sure to go to the principal’s office if the problem persists. Usually transfer students don’t have this much trouble.”

“Great idea, Ms. Janeth,” he laughed nervously, “Oh! It’s my dad calling. Gotta go!”

Atlas practically ran out of the gym, shutting the door right behind him. Afternoon sunshine met his eyes, making him squint.

He yawned; this was normally when he slept. All this Trollhunter business was really screwing with his sleep schedule.

Moving from beam to beam, he checked left and right, looking down the long line of lockers for any human presence. When he found none, he pulled out his phone.

Atlas speed-dialed the only person he knew who could help him.

“Tobes, we have a problem.” Atlas’ voice cracked. His fingers bit into the plastic of his screen.

“What’s the four-one-one, dude?”

“I don’t have any school records.” He put his mouth closer to the cell, whispering, “I’ve never been to school. What are we going to do? They’re going to figure out I’m not a student and then they’ll find out I’m not fully human and then I’ll be back in some secret science lab...What if they try to dissect me? Oh dear Pale Lady, I can’t do this.”

Atlas could hear the dentist’s drill in the background. “Atlas, it’s okay. Take a deep breath.”
“I’m sorry,” he struggled to restrain the nervousness of his voice. “I know I’m acting weird, it’s just, I feel completely out of my element here. You’re the only one I know who I can talk to about this.”

“It’s cool, it’s cool. Everything is going to be okay.” Toby assured him. “I can fake some stuff on my computer. It’ll be easy.”

“You can?”

“You may not know this, but I’m pretty much photoshop master,” Toby bragged. “All we need to do is sneak into the school’s admin system and put some docs into the principal’s office to make it look believable.”

“It’s gotta be soon. The humans are already suspicious.”

“H-h-hey Jim! What are you still doing here?” A shrill voice asked nervously.

He jumped, ending the call. Ahead, a familiar short human came running toward him. Eli adjusted his glasses, his fingers trembling.

“Oh, hey. Eli, right?” Atlas looked around to see if anyone else was around. “Why were you running?”

Eli laughed nervously. “Oh, it’s Steve Palchuck. He’s been looking for you all afternoon and then he saw me and…well, good thing I’m a good runner!”

“Why?”

“Remember when you hit him and saved me from the locker?”

“That’s exaggerating it a lot, Eli.” Atlas answered. “And all I did was push him back a little.”
“Well,” Eli put his hands together, rubbing them. “He just found out you and Mole-man are the same person and he’s looking to kill you.”

“Who told him that?”

Eli pulled at his collar, swallowing. “It may have come out during lunch. I wasn’t trying to rat you out or anything! Honest! I was just telling someone how you helped me and—”

“Oh,” Atlas began, eyes widening as Steve stalked over to them. “Crap.”

In his human form Steve looked far bigger and menacing. If Atlas actually feared him, he would probably be quivering in his shoes. As it was, all he felt was a deep-seated annoyance.

“You! Mole-man! Where were you yesterday? I scheduled you in for a butt-whooping.”

“I’m sorry?” Atlas said, backing away, his back hitting the locker. Teens began entering the area, gathering near with interested looks on their faces. To his left, he watched Claire and her friend approach.

Steve motioned the clock hand again with his fingers. “You were supposed to meet me at the back of the school for the fight, like, yesterday, jerk face.”

“I don’t have any interest in fighting you.” He waved Steve away. “Now go. Shoo! Go away, fleshbag.”

“What did you call me?”

Eli tried to interrupt. “Steve, hey maybe you can just—”

“Let’s go, you and me. Right here.” Steve sneered at Atlas, “Unless you’re scared.”

“Ah, yes. Totally scared. Look! I’m running in the opposite direction away from you.” Atlas said in a monotone voice, walking towards the door to the school.
“You gonna run away, huh? Chicken!”

“Oh, are you running away now?”

Draal’s words echoed through his mind.

Damn it. He stopped walking.

Why was it, wherever he went, someone wanted to push him down for simply existing? First, it was Bular, then Draal, and now this human?

Atlas was getting pretty tired of being shit on lately.

“What did you say?” Atlas turned around, flexing his fingers. He cracked his neck from side to side.

Steve brought his arms together, imitating a bird. “You going back to mama bird, baby chick? Gonna go whine you couldn’t fight big bad Steve over here?”

Atlas looked the boy up and down. There was something in his eyes that didn’t settle well with Atlas, the kind of look a hurt animal had when put in a corner. “Listen, whatever shit you have going in your life, human, you shouldn’t take it out on me, or Eli, or anyone else. It’s pathetic. You’re pathetic. Go find a psychologist or something.”

Steve’s face turned red. “What’d you call me?” He stalked closer to Atlas.

“I called you pathetic.” Atlas said.

“And you’re dead meat!” Straightaway, Steve made a mad dash for him, fist at the ready. Atlas dodged, watching the other’s body language. Unlike Draal or Bular, Steve telegraphed his moves, making it easy for Atlas to keep up.
“Go Jim!” Eli cheered.

Steve growled. “You want a piece of me too, dweb?”

Using the distraction, Atlas used his left foot to trip the other. Steve fell to the ground with a hard thump, producing laughter within the developing crowd.

“What are you assholes laughing at?” Steve yelled. “Shut up! I said shut up!”

“Go home,” Atlas said. “You’re making an embarrassment of yourself.”

“I,” Steve picked himself up off the ground, features the personification of rage, “Am. Not. An. Embarrassment!” With that last word, he ran forward, arms swinging.

“Leave him alone, Steve!” Claire said, trying to stand between them. “What did Jim ever do to you, huh?”

“Stay out of this, Claire.” Steve pushed her away, eyes still on Atlas.

Atlas watched in slow-motion as she fell, caught in the arms of her friend. His stomach plummeted.

Steve cracked his knuckles. “Now, where was I?”

Ice bled through his veins. Claire was only trying to help. And now look at her. She held the arm Steve pushed, her pained expression bringing forth an anger Atlas had not experienced since Bular threatened to eat Toby.

Lightning fast, Atlas kicked the boy in the stomach. Steve hit the lockers. Before he could react, Atlas grabbed Steve’s arm, and, using his hips and shoulders, flipped Steve face first onto the cement walkway. He twisted the arm further, feeling bone crack from the force of it.

Steve spat out a tooth, groaning.
Atlas released the arm and squatted down, mouth inches from Steve’s left ear. “If you ever hurt Claire or any other person at this school again, I’m coming for you. You won’t know when, you won’t know how, but I will end your sorry existence at this school once and for all and feed you to my friends. Is that clear, meatbag?”

The injured boy looked up, blood draining from his face (or that could be from his broken tooth; it was hard to say).

“You…Y-y-your eyes,” Steve stuttered. “What the hell are you?”

Atlas grinned. “A monster.”
Chapter Summary

Nomura finds out more information, unbeknownst to the Trollhunter. Blinky deals with a drunk Atlas.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! New chapter here! I may or may not update next Friday. It depends on my study schedule. This chapter is from Nomura and Blinky's POVs. Thank you so much for all the kudos and reviews! They really make my day.

Normally, anyone could use the training room.

Today was not that day however. Stricklander had booked a private session for one reason: for Nomura to gather intel from Atlas. He suspected the whelp was keeping something from him.

She smacked the pommel of her sword into the boy’s chest. Atlas grunted, taking several steps back in surprise. Her lips pulled into a scowl.

She wasn’t sure if her boss’s intuition was correct, but the twerp was off today, more so than usual. His footwork was better, which surprised her, however there was a glazed over look in his eyes. It was as if he were in another world, barely blocking blows he could have done in his sleep on any other day.

It brought up memories of his more formative years, all limbs and no strategy. Back then, he at least had the excuse of being an untrained runt of a troll. She almost missed those days; his terrified little screams as she wiped the floor with him were music to her ears. Of course, she never tried to hurt him the way the rest of their brethren did, but she did try to toughen him up.
And what trainer wouldn’t? Stricklander gave her this role for a reason. Unlike the rest of them, he bruised and bled like a human, albeit less so considering his other heritage. Plus, she got paid to do it.

Atlas pressed forward, trying to corner her into the wall. She smirked. He might have succeeded if he wasn’t so sloppy, his movements all over the place.

Nomura squinted. Yep, something was definitely wrong. Looked like Stricklander was right.

Nomura resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She came to fight (and spy, to a certain extent), not be the brat’s therapist.

It didn’t help that the bags under his eyes appeared more bruised than usual.

Fan-fucking-tastic. And now she pitied the little brat. Stricklander better increase her pay next quarter with the amount of work she was putting in. Not only had she been slaving away on the Killahhead Bridge, but she had to play babysitter (though that had lessened considerably since he received his new assignment).

Her mouth drew into a thin line. She’d bet her entire collection of renaissance era pottery that this new change and Stricklander’s suspicions had something to do with Atlas’ assignment. She just needed to find a way to direct the conversation to there.

Atlas struck out with his weapon, breaking off her line of thought. In response, Nomura swerved underneath the blade then leaped into the air, both swords aiming for Atlas’ head. He blocked with the edge of his great sword, but that didn’t stop her. Using her right leg, she knee’d him in the stomach, sending him flying into the mats.

“Ow,” Atlas moaned, holding his side. “Oh man, I think I’m going to vomit.”

She used her foot to move him onto his side.

“Not helping.” He wheezed out.
“Aw, does the baby need a break?” She mocked.

“Yes,” he said, “Wait, what are you—Nomura! No! Stop it!”

She cackled, cradling him in her arms, her grip strong enough to keep him from breaking out. The melancholic look in his face faded, replaced with an embarrassed glower. Good. Sappy emotions were not her forte.

Atlas stopped struggling, crossing his arms instead. “I’m not an actual baby, Nomura.”

“You are to me, kid.”

Sometimes, too much of one. And whose fault was that? Everyone knew how protective Stricklander was of his young charge. And it didn’t help that Atlas followed their leader around like a puppy, eager to please his master.

“I’m not a kid either, Nomura.” He told her with more assertiveness, “I’m almost an adult.”

“Sure,” she said dryly.

His brows came together, jaw tightening. “You’re exactly like da—Stricklander. When are you guys going to start treating me like a full-fledged member?”

“Give it a hundred years or so. I’m sure Stricklander will let you out of Arcadia by then at least.”

It made her sick, how easily Stricklander had the boy wrapped around his little finger. Before it had been out of duty, but now, it had deepened into something resembling “family”. Of course, all changelings were “brothers” and “sisters” on account of their shared origins, but that didn’t make them family.

Family. Family meant home and Nomura knew there was no such place for her in this world. Not until Gunmar returned at least.
Did the boy have even the slightest inclination of how much Stricklander had manipulated and sculpted him into his most loyal servant? Instead of allowing Atlas to grow amongst them as an equal, Stricklander had placed the boy on a shiny pedestal for all the changelings to see. The teen worked around doing odd-jobs at the Order, but what else? He had never been commanded to kill someone or any other host of terrible things the rest of them were required to do.

Instead, he got a clean slate to work from; a *tabula rasa* as it were. Freedom from one’s past transgressions. How fortunate. It was no wonder so many of their kind grew green with envy (some quite literally).

Atlas *never* had to experience the loss of a familiar’s family and friends to age and disease, *never* had to learn how to scrap by with as little resources as possible, *never* had to pretend to be something you’re not.

He’d been lucky, to be able to live this long, innocent to the truly terrible things they did to one another.

When it came down to it, everyone betrayed you or you betrayed them. Stricklander had experience in that first-hand, but Atlas?

It was going to hurt like a bitch when it happened to him. She just hoped she wasn’t in the crossfire when it occurred.

“Do…” Atlas paused, a hand reaching up to scratch his cheek. “A hundred years is a lot of time. Do you think I’ll live that long? What if I have a short lifespan like the humans?”

“Of course you will. You’re one of us.”

“But what if I don’t?” Atlas asked.

“Magic has ways of extending one’s life,” Nomura pointed out. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it if you do.”

He laughed dryly. “If I even live long enough to see middle-age.”
“You’re worse than Stricklander,” she said. “Always talking about the end. How old are you? Fifteen? Stop thinking about it.”

Depositing him on bench, she sat down next to him, stretching her arms until her elbows popped.

“How can I not think about it? Especially with the whole Trollhunters stuff. I feel like the more I learn, the less certain I am about everything.”

Her lips stretched into a sly grin. She leaned closer. “Ah, are the big bad Trollhunter and his gang bullying you?”

“No, I mean, they’re not at least, but…Trollmarket. It was amazing and gorgeous when I first walked in, but now…I’m afraid. What will they do if my cover is blown? Will they really kill me if they find out I’m part-changeling?”

“Oh, most certainly.”

“But why?” His hands turned into fists. “Aren’t we all the same species deep down?”

“People hate what they don’t know, brat.” Nomura said.

Atlas lifted his head. “But that’s not always the case. Toby and AAARRRGGH!! get along fine, even though they’re two different species. What’s to say changeling-troll relations would be any different? Maybe I can change it. Show them that we’re not as bad as they think we are.”

She snorted, breaking out into a series of dry chuckles. “Oh, that is rich. You? Trolls won’t change for just anyone. Only when Gunmar comes back and takes charge again will they change their ways. That’s how our races will come back together.”

“But what if Gunmar doesn’t come back?” Atlas searched her eyes. “What then?”

She tapped a nail to one of her fangs, “Then guess who’s Bular’s next lunch?”
"You can’t be serious."

"This is your first big assignment, so allow me to let you in on a little secret: you fuck this up, then every single changeling will be gunning for your head. Stricklander could have chosen any other capable changeling to get the amulet. Instead, he chose you."

Atlas paled. "I never should have volunteered to get the amulet."

"Too late now."

Nomura remarked, patting the middle of his back.

He flinched back, releasing a painful hiss.

"Aw, did Bular give you a boo-boo?"

"No, I mean, yes, but I already healed from those injuries." Atlas’ ears lowered, his tusks even more prominent by the heavy pout he was sporting. "I got beat up by this big blue troll today."

She crossed her legs. "Oh? What did you do to piss him off?"

"Insulted his dead dad."

"You’re an idiot." She replied in a mocking tone.

A tiny miniscule part of Nomura blamed herself for encouraging his little shithead behavior. It helped toughen him up after all. But sometimes, she just wanted to smack him upside the head. He was too naïve for his own good and being on Bular’s shit-list was a recipe for disaster. It still amazed her he was alive right now, especially after the night before.

"I was just trying to do what you do." Atlas answered.

Nomura put up three fingers, pointing at them with her other hand. "What are the rules, runt?"
He sighed, throwing up a digit. “Rule Number One: avoid Bular at all costs, if possible.”

“Good. Now if only you could apply that to reality.” She motioned for him to raise another finger. “Next one.”

“Rule Number Two: Watch your fellow changelings backs and they might watch yours.” Atlas blew a raspberry. “Which is bullshit. Only you and Stricklander ever stick up for me on anything.”

“Give it time. Once you’re an adult, you’ll be able to spread your wings, travel to new lands, and make allies with changelings who haven’t learned to hate your guts.”

“You’re such an inspirational speaker, Nomura.” Atlas said, sarcasm dripping from his tongue. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She smacked one of his horns. “Remember Rule Number Three?”

He nodded. “Don’t fuck with Nomura.”

“Well, there’s a sub-rule under that.” She lifted his fourth finger with a single claw. “It’s called ‘don’t fuck with anyone that can beat the shit out of you.’”

“That would have been helpful to know beforehand,” he sighed, moving his hand away. “Why didn’t the amulet just choose Draal?”

“Wait, Draal?” She got up from the bench. “Draal the Deadly?”

“You know him?”

Know him? Oh, ho, ho. Memories of dry-humping the uptight bastard in the caverns of the Pitch Black Lagoon came back to her. Good thing she was already pink.

“It’s complicated.” She muttered. “I don’t want to go into it.”
“Ah, come on, Nomura, tell me.” Atlas persisted.

Nomura groaned, rubbing her temples. “Ugh, fine. I…dated him.” She admitted reluctantly.

Atlas scooted closer to her. “You and him? For real?”

“It was a long time ago.” She remarked wistfully.

Back when she’d been a young foolish changeling, still thinking she could defy the hatred between their races, that she could defy the path set forward before her.

Ridiculous.

“Doesn’t matter.” Atlas jumped up, clenching his fists. “How can I defeat him?”

“You? Defeat him?” She laughed, long and hard.

His shoulders dropped. “So it’s that impossible, huh?”

“You’re punching a little above your weight there, kid.”

“He called me a coward.” Atlas said. “He’s probably going around Trollmarket telling everyone what a useless cheater I am. I bet he’s laughing it up with his friends. Agh! He’s such an ass.”

“Oh is he now?” She picked up her swords, striking them together. “Alright. Break is over.”

“Already?”

“Yeah, especially if you want to fight Draal.” She swiped at his legs, but he dodged, back-flipping
twice before picking up his fallen sword.

“What should I do then?”

She smirked. “Let me show you.”

And then she hit the lights off.

“Oh come on!” Atlas yelled, ducking behind a pillar. His glowing blue eyes moved around, trying to catch sight of her own bright green ones. Though his night vision was on par with any other changelings’, he lacked the insight on how to truly utilize them yet.

She listened to his footsteps, lying in wait, like a lioness with her prey.

“One, Draal doesn’t fight like a changeling.” Nomura’s voice rang out, startling the boy. “He’s brute strength, pure and simple. His speed is top-notch too.”

Atlas swerved around, holding his great sword ahead of him. “Okay then, so how do I defeat him?”

“You won’t, not like that.” She made her move, hooking her sword around his neck. He gagged, releasing his weapon, his hands struggling to protect his exposed flesh. She put her mouth close to his ear. “Draal can only fight what’s in front of him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Atlas rasped, jabbing his elbow into her face.

She ducked, allowing Atlas enough time to get out of her hold and grab his blade.

“You’re still a youngling. Out of all of us here, you’ve had the least amount of training, the least amount of time to hone your skills to the nth degree.” She said, crawling up one of the pillars, her swords hidden.

“It’s not my fault you’re a sucky teacher.”
“Changelings learn from experience.” She said, ignoring his little comment. Sucky teacher? As if. He was lucky to have her helping him. “Are you a changeling, Atlas?”

He paused beneath her, lifting his head up. “…Yes. I am.”

Dropping from her position, she came upon him. He was better prepared this time however, running up to greet her with the tip of his blade, using the talons on his feet to hold onto the adjacent pillars. Their weapons clashed, sparks flying off to the ground below.

“Then act like one.” She said, trying to push him back.

To her surprise, he didn’t budge. Instead, he was pushing her back. “You keep making stupid vague comments. I’m tired of being talked down to, like I’m still a little kid. What are you trying to say, Nomura? Speak clearly.”

She tilted her head to the side, a mocking smile upon her lips. She leaned forward until their noses nearly touched, her arms straining to keep him from pushing her further against the wall. “You keep trying to fight against what nature has given you. Use it. Harness it. Then, when your opponent has their guard down…” she brought her head back and slammed it against his own.

He groaned, falling to the ground.

“Strike.” She said.

Nomura whistled, hitting the floor softly. She twirled blades around like batons as she strode away, only stopping to turn the lights back on.

“Seriously, what’s that mean?” Atlas said as he pushed himself up, holding his forehead.

She folded her blades and shifted skins, pink rock now incased in pale flesh. “Don’t you remember what I told you earlier? If you want to beat Draal, you can’t fight in front of him.”
Atlas hiked his sword up and over his shoulder, a look of realization dawning over him. “Oh. Oh! I get it!”

“Took you long enough.”

The kid grinned at her. “Thanks. You’re the best, Nomura.”

She flipped back her hair. “I know.”

Blinky cringed as Draal made another quip about their new Trollhunter. He was painting a far different picture than what actually happened.

Honestly, what a childish brute. Why, Blinky remembered when he was Atlas’ physical age; Draal couldn’t have swung a Peruvian Spikelball hammer over his head, much less the Sword of Daylight.

Despite the loss to Draal, his mentee was improving in leaps and bounds, far above Blinky’s expectations. Unfortunately, Trollmarket did not see it that way.

Blinky pressed his lips together, hiding his disapproval of Draal’s bragging behind another drink. Not as strong as last time, oh no, but strong enough to quiet his nerves, which were fluctuating quite a bit these past few days.

It had been a full day since the boy left topside. Blinky received no word since and it was beginning to put him on edge.

Had the boy been captured by Bular? Did he decide to defect back to the changelings? Oh, but things had been going so well! He’d hate to think his actions—or inactions as it were—lead to their new Trollhunter allying with the Gumm-Gumms once again.
No, Blinky shook his head. Atlas wouldn’t do that. The boy might be confused about his allegiance with the changelings (who Blinky was growing to dislike even more, especially after what the poor boy shared with him and Vendel), but his hatred of Bular—and by association Gunmar—would not take him down that path. At least that is what Blinky hoped. What he truly feared was the changelings interfering in some manner, twisting Atlas’ loyalties even further.

How disgusting. To do that to one of their own kind, a child at that! Troll society may be brutal, but they didn’t intentionally put their children in harm’s way or allow others to inflict violence on them! And putting a child up against Bular? His mouth almost acted before his head could stop him when he heard that piece of information.

Blinky was beginning to suspect this Janus Order was more and more like a cult, using whatever means necessary to keep their subordinates in check.

“Blinky okay?” AAARRRGGHHH!!! nudged him with his elbow. “Look angry.”

“I am angry!” Blinky grumbled, “Look at Draal, insulting Master At—Jim. Here’s an adult bragging about beating up a child.”


“No, not at all, my friend.”

Draal must have noticed them, his voice far louder than before.

“I was going to kill him, but I just couldn’t make up my mind as to how.” Draal grabbed another drink, chuckling. “At least the half-breed or whatever he was might have stood a better fight, but the human? Ha! Trollhunter? More like trollhunted.”

“Miss, old friend.” AAARRRGGHHH!!! took a sip through his bendy straw. “Miss new friends too.”

“As do I, but unfortunately, neither have contacted me today.” Blinky grumbled into his drink. “Do you think I should pay them a visit? What if they’re in trouble? Oh, but it’s still day, isn’t it? Dart. If only I could walk in the sun.”
“Tunnels?”

He rubbed his chin, squinting. “It would be doable I suppose. I fear there are no sewer lines big enough to take us to Toby’s abode however. There’s also the gamble of running into Bular or one of his minions.” Blinky sighed. “I’m worried. Now more than ever. And I fear…the longer we prevaricate about the Trollhunter’s identity, the greater of consequences we will be forced to deal with in the future.”

“What pre-ah-cay-te?”

“Prevaricate. It means to deviate from the truth.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! tested the word in his mouth a few times before commenting, “Ah. Understand now. Because Atlas and Jim are—”

Blinky put a two hands up against his friend’s mouth. “Yes. But I would warn you to keep your voice down, lest we attract unwanted attention.”

Draal snuck a glance over at Blinky’s table, smirking. Ugh! The gall of him! Blinky was glad the amulet did not choose such a prideful brat such as Draal. Why, it was only a few centuries ago Draal had barely come up to Blinky’s chest. Kanjigar must be rolling in his grave by the amount of disrespect Draal was showing.

Blinky took another sip of his drink, bitterness on his tongue. Oh, Kanjigar. The loss of their friend still felt fresh, even if they had not been as close as they once were. Trollhunting took up much of his old friend’s time and in an effort to protect others, Kanjigar separated himself from the rest, putting up an invisible barrier. He took his role as the Trollhunter very seriously (sometimes too seriously, in Blinky’s opinion).

“Over and over and over! He might have gotten a few cheap shots in, but what do you expect from a human?” Draal looked down into his drink. “What I would give to have another chance to wail on that fleshbag ag—”

Draal didn’t get to finish his sentence as long piece of cloth wrapped around his face and pulled him backwards. Blinky held his breath, the entire room falling into silence as Draal dropped out of his seat.
“Your wish is my command, asshole.” Atlas said.

Blinky’s grin stretched from ear to ear, eyes twinkling in delight. Yes!

Then, to blue troll’s horror, the boy downed all of Draal’s drink. Oh dear, he hoped that wasn’t what he thought it was.

Draal looked up, too stunned to be angry. Yet. “What the—you! The half-breed brat. How dare you! What are you doing here?”

Atlas wiped his mouth, licking one of his canines. “I’m declaring a rematch.”

“But…I never fought you,” Draal said slowly, as if Atlas were dense.

“No, you didn’t, but Jim’s a bit preoccupied at the moment,” Atlas began. “He’s—”

“Busy!” Toby interjected from behind the other boy, head held high and arms crossed defiantly. “With super important Trollhunter business.”

“Yeah, so I’m filling in for him today, before he kicks you sorry butt later.” Atlas gestured his thumb to the door, then switched to pointing his index finger at Draal. “You. Jim. Name the time. Name the place. And I’ll—”

Toby coughed. “he’ll be there.”

“We all will.” Atlas answered.

And—in quite the dramatic fashion— Atlas grabbed his cloak and yanked it off Draal’s head, draping it around his shoulders and walking out of the establishment with Toby in tow. Well, more like running. Even from far away Blinky could tell that Draal’s anger was beginning to catch up with him, especially as the rest of the bar began to snigger and jerk him over what just happened.
Pride burst forth from Blinky’s chest. He shot up from his seat, heading for the door, AAARRRGGHH!!! not far behind. It wasn’t a moment too soon, if the angry snarls and curse words were any indication.

_Draal would not forget this, Blinky thought, we’ll need to our increase training if Atlas is to live._

Blinky caught up to the two soon enough, grabbing them both and pulling them into a big hug. AAARRRGGGH!!! joined in, picking up all three of them.

“Oh, look at you! I knew you would be back!” Blinky gushed, then, noticing his behavior, coughed and loosened his hold. AAARRRGGHH!!! followed his lead.

“Good challenge.” AAARRRGGGH!!! said, rubbing the top of Toby’s hair. “Both good. Welcome back.”

“I’m quite pleased to see you again, Master Atlas, Tobias.”

“Who said I wasn’t coming back?” Atlas said, hiccupping at the end. His cheeks were pale, eyes dilated.

“Oh dear,” Blinky said, three eyes widening. “I don’t think troll alcohol agrees with you, Master Atlas.”

“Look green,” AAARRRGGGH!!! commented.

Toby grimaced. “Yeah, dude, you look like you’re about to throw up.”

“It’s okay, guys. I’m…” Atlas took a few steps, wobbling along the way, before he collapsed against a wall. “I don’t feel so good.”

“What did it taste like, if I might ask?” Blinky asked, though he was fairly certain of the cause.

Blinky put one hand on the Atlas’s back, his other two coming to hold each arm. “Ah. Dragon’s Blood. Just as I thought. It is a powerful brew amongst our kind. Few can withstand its quick and potent nature.”

Lifting Atlas off the wall, they began to walk (well, more like stumble about, but the addition of Toby to Atlas’ left side helped steer them all back to the main road).

“Dragon’s Blood?” Toby inquired. “Like, from a real dragon?”

“Of course not, Tobias. Real dragon blood would make you bleed from every orifice and cause your insides to explode. Quite literally, I should add.” Blinky laughed. “It’s a fermented drink made deep inside the earth, sealed within a dead dragon’s bladder for several decades until it’s safe enough to drink.”

Toby cried out, “Safe? How is that safe? I’m pretty sure that’s hazardous.”

“I think I’m dying.” Atlas said, wiping sweat off his brow, arm shaking. “Why is it so hot in here?”

“Uh oh.” AAARRRGHH!!! remarked.

Blinky tutted. “Let’s get you back to my place. I’ve got some old fashioned remedies that might help with the worst of it.”

Atlas rolled his head around, landing on Blinky’s shoulder. “Thanks Blanky.”

“Blinky,” he corrected.

“You’re not so bad for a troll.” Atlas said, leaning on him.

Blinky chuckled. “Well, you’re not so bad for a changeling, yourself.”
And to his surprise, Blinky meant it. Who would have thought a changeling, a human and two trolls could come together so peacefully? Yes, it had been a bit touch and go there at the beginning, but things were slowly coming into place. Why, had you asked him a week before if such an ensemble could co-exist, he would have scoffed at the mere notion. Perhaps change was on the horizon.

Still, Atlas was but one changeling, and only half at that. It did not mean he represented the species as a whole. And he knew—despite the boy slowly warming up to him and AAARRRGGHH!!!—that Atlas was reluctant to reveal himself any more than he had. Nevertheless, Blinky was patient. If the boy chose to reveal more, he would gladly welcome it with all the kindness and understanding Blinky could muster.

Halfway up the road his home, Atlas nudged him with the side of his horn.

“T’aint gonna…need help with Draal,” Atlas slurred. “Got any books?”

Blinky brightened up, mind already putting together a list. “Certainly, Master Atlas. I’ve quite the collection. We’ll start you on volume one of ‘A Brief Recapitulation of Troll Lore’ and go from there. Oh, ‘The Adventures of Gulgantus’ might be useful too. I might even have a copy of ‘The Anatomy of Stone’. There’s also a book about changelings would you might find inter—"

“S’good.” Atlas mumbled, eyes closing. “S’all good, Blinky. Tanks.”

“I’m so glad you want to educate yourself.” He smiled, looking out unto the road ahead, both literally and figuratively. “Do you know you’re the first Trollhunter who has asked me? Even Kanjigar, may he rest in peace, was more of a hit first, ask questions later kind of troll. You would think Trollhunters would want to know what they’re fighting against, but nooooo. Learning is a life-long process. Perhaps later on we can work on your Trollspeak—not that it’s bad, mind you, but if we can tweak it then perhaps the trolls in Trollmarket might be more amiable towards you. Just a thought of course. I know this is a lot to—"

“Ah, Blinky?” Toby asked.

He sighed, annoyed that he had been interrupted “Yes, Tobias?”

Toby gestured towards the Trollhunter. “Atlas passed out.”
“Oh,” Blinky remarked. “Oh dear.”
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! I actually got the chapter done! Thankfully I finished most of it last week, so I only had to do a few tweaks. Big thanks to Charlie who has been helping me with this fanfic. Another big thanks to moonlit_wings for helping me with the school naming part, lol.

And a huge hug to everyone who has been sending me kudos and reviews! I do a little dance whenever I read them. Thank you all for being so encouraging. I'm glad so many people appear to like my fanfic.

Atlas cracked his neck from side to side.

“This could be dangerous.” Atlas stated. “If we’re caught, it’s game over. For the both of us.”

“Bring it on,” Toby put both hands on his hips, legs apart.

“Ready?” He asked.

Toby pulled on his ski mask, throwing the other a thumbs up. “Born ready.”

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, Toby thought. He could barely contain his excitement. His fingers wiggled together in quiet glee, so much so that he had to hide them behind his back. But why wouldn’t he
be? It was their first mission together!

Man, does time fly by. Why, only last week he’d been sitting alone at home playing video games. Now, he and his best friend were involved in a secret world of magic and trolls. How awesome sauce was that?

Plus, they were now on a secret mission where Toby was needed. Him. Toby.

It felt like he had woken up after a long dream. Making friends after Jim disappeared had been difficult. Sure, he had lunch buddies, but none of them ever hung out with him after school or during the summer. Thus, he was pretty much friendless when he started Arcadia High.

That wouldn’t be for long however. Soon, his best friend was going to be with him in class and—oh my gosh! Toby hadn’t been this excited since he got that new Nintendo console from Nana last Christmas!


Sometimes, it felt like he was hanging out with the old Jim. There were lots of similarities; the way he talked, the little nonverbal ticks, even the way he looked at Toby (that slightly exasperated with his antics but amused smile, for example) were exactly like his best friend.

Other times though, it was obvious he wasn’t the same Jim. Atlas had warmed up to him fairly quickly, but there was so much he didn’t know about the guy. Sure, he worked for the Changelings, but where did he live? What was his childhood after his disappearance like? He so desperately wished his friend would reveal more to him. Toby would do anything to regain the old trust they shared.

It hurt to think about it, that his friend was both his old buddy and yet…not. Atlas was a lot more violent than Jim, who had never even thrown a punch (though hearing that Psycho Steve got the shit beat out of him did bring a big grin to his face, especially after the last swirly he got from the guy).

Nevertheless, despite the changes, the essence of Jim—the caring loyal guy who never left a friend behind—he was still there. It was difficult to call his best friend by a different name, because of all the memories attached to it, but he learned to adjust.
Atlas circled around him, inspecting his appearance. While no ninja, Toby thought he looked pretty darn awesome in his black jeans and dark hoodie. It made him feel mysterious, like a master assassin or a secret agent.

“What in the world are you wearing, Tobes?” Atlas chuckled, gesturing to his outfit.

Toby’s rested his hands on his hips, chest forward. “Look who’s talking. At least I blend in to the night, Mr. Cosplay.”

“Cosplay?”

“Okay, really?” Toby gave him an incredulous stare. “You…do know how to use the internet, right?”

“Of course.” Atlas said. “Who doesn’t?”

“Then google it.”

“I don’t see why I have to, because this isn’t cosplay. This is traditional changeling battle armor.” Atlas explained, motioning at the ensemble.

“You’re bringing battle armor to a spy mission?”

Atlas scratched the right side of his neck, shoulders raised. “It’s the only clothing I have,” he mumbled softly.


“I wash it every other day.” Atlas tried to justify.

“Not even pajamas?”
“I normally sleep in my under-armor shirt and pants.”

Toby raised both eyebrows. “Doesn’t your mentor buy you anything?”

Atlas tilted his neck to the side, fingers pulling at his earlobe. “He said it wasn’t necessary.”

“Of course it’s necessary! Why would it not be necessary?”

“For a while I kept growing out of all my clothes.” Atlas said. “Da—My mentor thought it was a waste of money. So he just sticks to the basics. Plus, changelings sort of wear the same thing underneath their human forms. Fashion isn’t that important to them.”

Toby felt a small prickling of jealousy creeping in at the edge of his mind but stuffed it down. So what if he hadn’t grown an inch in a year? His family were all late bloomers. After all, his dad started high-school at barely over five foot and graduated as a little over six. He’d get taller soon. Maybe not as tall as Atlas, but tall enough.

“Well, You can’t go wearing the Trollhunter armor around school all day. One, it’s not allowed. And two, at some point, you’re gonna need human clothes.” Toby pointed out.

“But that would require money”, Atlas explained, touching his fingers together to display a zero. “Which I don’t have.”

“Seriously? Not even a dollar?”

Atlas threw his hands up. “What would I do with it? It's not like I can walk into a store and go ‘hey, can I get this shirt, please?’”

Toby brought a hand up to his face, rubbing his chin as he contemplated alternatives. “Well, there is the San Diego Comic-Con we could go to, but that’s too far off right now.”

Atlas blinked. “Is that a store?”
“No, it’s…it’s hard to explain. I’ll tell you later.” Toby scratched his chin. “Listen, don’t worry about it right now. We’ll figure something out. First things first. The mission.”

Atlas nodded. “Right. Let’s get going.”

They tiptoed through the grass (well, Toby tiptoed, Atlas just strolled about like he normally did). Sneaking inside from the still broken window, they entered the school through the gym doors.

Dang. It was eerie how dark and quiet the area was. The lack of noise outside their footsteps made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He had to squint to see anything. His friend had no problem however, glowing blue eyes all the more apparent in the darkness. He wondered if Atlas knew how creepy his pupils looked in the absence of light.

Toby followed Atlas from behind, using him as a guide to their destination.

“So,” Toby started, voice barely above a whisper, “you keep talking about your mentor, but I hardly know anything about him. What’s he like?”

Atlas stopped for a moment, then continued. “He’s cool.”

“Come on, dude. A little more than that.”

“He’s,” Atlas ruminated over his words; while not the smartest guy in school, Toby easily discerned tenderness in his friend’s voice. “He’s like a father to me. If I ever needed something he was there for me. He’s the only one who stood up for me when I was taken in by the Order. They—We’re not the friendliest of trolls you could say. A lot of changelings don’t like me, or rather, the idea of me.”

“He sounds pretty cool then, even if he is kinda evil.”

“Yeah,” Atlas bobbed his head, closing his eyes for a moment. “But as head of the Order, my mentor’s not allowed to show weakness. Like, I can’t call him dad around the others. He told me it would send the wrong impression.”

“Atlas,” Toby said. “You’re not a weakness.”
“Changelings don’t see it that way. You got to understand, there’s a pecking order in our society. I might be the head’s assistant, but it’s a made up role.” He said, voice cracking with every word. “Because I’m half, I’m not considered a full-fledged changeling and because I’m younger than everyone, they treat me like I’m a little kid who doesn’t know anything.”

“Well, you are fifteen.”

Atlas pulled at his horns, lips dropping into a frustrated frown. “But everyone else started from the moment they were practically born! It’s not fair. There’s so much information that goes over my head, and I work for the head! It’s so annoying. He treats me like a little kid.”

“Is that why you’re defecting?” Toby ran ahead then turned around, walking backwards in an attempt to discern Atlas’s expression.

“I’m not defecting,” Atlas said softly, though he refused to look at Toby’s eyes. “I just can’t work for Gunmar and Bular.”

“Whom your changeling mentor-slash-dad works for.” Toby pointed out.

Atlas touched his index fingers together, head rolled to the side. “Well, right now.”

“Right now? What’s that supposed to mean?” Toby said.

“I’ve been thinking—”

Toby stopped stepping rearward, rejoining the other’s side. “Oh boy.”

“What if we stop working for Bular and Gunmar? What have they done for us anyway? While our numbers are small, we have troll magic and human technology. If we play our cards right, maybe we can build our own nation of people. And if the Pale Lady agrees—”

“Pale Lady?”
Atlas covered his mouth. “I should not have told you that.”

“Who is she?”

“No one of importance to you,” Atlas stated.

*Bull. Crap.* Every fiber of his being wanted to ask more, but Toby knew that pushing Atlas any further might cause a problem. He wanted his friend to trust him with information.

Instead, Toby remarked, “Leaving team bad guy, huh? That’s a pretty big dream to have.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, smacking his forehead. “I sound like an idiot, don’t I? How could I get an entire race to leave their so-called king?”

“Dude, if this is what you want to do, then I support you one hundred percent.” Toby smiled. “Consider me the first member to the CLF.”

“CLF?”


“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Tobes. I haven’t even figured out what I want to do yet and you’re already putting together movement names?” Atlas shook his head, laughing. “You’re something, you know that?”

“Something awesome.”

Atlas peeked around the corner, hand out to stop Toby from continuing. His ears twitched around like a cat’s. Toby had to restrain every instinct inside him that wanted to reach out and touch them.
Once the coast was clear, Toby brought up another question that had been plaguing his mind all night. “What are you going to do about Draal?”

“Draal?”

“You know, the fight?” Toby reminded him.

“Oh…” One of his fangs snagged on his bottom lip. “I’ve got a plan.”

Toby rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Sweet! Let’s hear it. Do we ambush him with ninja stars? Flood his home with jello? Poison his water supply?”

“What? No!” Atlas took a deep breath, then answered, “I’m going to fight him.”

“You were serious about that?”

“Of course! Challenges in troll and changeling cultures are treated very seriously.” He let out a nervous laugh. “I mean, I’m essentially forfeiting my life if I lose, but it’s all good. It’s kind of funny really.”

“But you’re the Trollhunter. Isn’t there some exception to that?”

“A challenge is a challenge. If I go back on my word I’ll be outcast by Trollmarket, if not hunted.” He shivered. “Draal would chase me unto the ends of the earth to get this hunk of metal.”

“Jesus, dude. What is wrong with them?” Toby asked.

“Tobes,” there was a change in Atlas’ tone. “I am one of them.”

Toby shrugged half-heartedly. “Yeah, but—”
Atlas drew close, leaning down, his face mere inches from Toby’s. His blue irises were luminous, their glow casting an eerie shadow over his face. Toby’s breath hitched in his throat. Before his very eyes, Atlas became still as a statue, unblinking and unreadable.

The hairs on his arms prickled, goosebumps rising. There was no rise in his friend’s chest, no slight movement. It was as if his friend had become like stone itself.

Toby resisted the urge to shiver. He’d forgotten how inhuman Atlas could be sometimes.

Finally, Atlas’ eyes fluttered, the unnerving stillness passing.

“Jim and I might be the same person, but we aren’t the same.” Atlas began. “I was raised in this culture. I am a changeling, human blood or not. I knew what I was getting into when I challenged Draal. I’ve put my life on the line more than once. Death is a constant threat for my kind. This is no different.”

“But do you believe it?” Toby challenged.

Atlas turned away, continuing his way down the hall. “It’s the way of my people.”

Fast-walking to keep up with the other’s increased pace, Toby said, “So if you win, you’re going to kill Draal.”

Atlas flinched, ducking his head. “I haven’t decided yet.”

His friend continued to walk faster. Toby had to break out into a small jog to stay at his side.

“What’s there to decide? I thought you were one of them.” Toby said.

“Well, maybe I don’t agree with some of their practices.”

“But I thought it was the ‘way of your people’.”
“A human like you could never understand the complexities of my world.”

Toby was about to respond when he lost his footing. He yelped, going headfirst into one of the lockers. Before his head hit metal, he felt two strong hands grab his arms, pulling him back up as if he weighed nothing. Atlas bent down, looking over Toby with a look of barely concealed concern.

“You okay?” Atlas asked softly.

“Fine, but…Atlas, dude.” Toby knocked the back of his hand against the other’s chest. “Maybe you don’t agree because you’re not just one of them. You’re one of us, too. You don’t have to be one side or the other.”

Atlas froze, eyes wide, and for a moment, almost vulnerable. It reminded him of Jim when he talked about his dad, that uncertainty about himself, like whether what happened was because of him. That he was the one that was wrong. Like all moments however, it ended not much later, replaced with a cold indifferent stare.

His friend’s eyes dilated then flew upwards. “We’re here.” Was all he answered with before he checked the doorknob.

“Locked.” Atlas began to twist the knob, “Just give me a second. I think I can break it.”

“Or, you could check the door frame and see if there’s an extra key.”

Atlas scoffed, but did as he suggested. “I don’t think—Oh.”

“Told you.” Toby’s lips turned up into a smug smirk.

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t. Nana does the same thing back home. That or she leaves it under one of the flower pots.
“Good idea, Tobes.”

His smirk grew, chest puffing out in response to the affirmative words. He missed this. No one made him feel good about himself like the way his best friend did.

Atlas unlocked the door, pushing it open. Inside, the office was spacious, almost as big as some of Toby’s classes. As to be expected of a principal’s office, Toby guessed. Behind the desk, certificates and degrees lined the walls. Toby immediately planted himself in the principal’s chair, swerving it back and forth, then around in a circle, feigning an evil laugh.

“Mua ha ha ha! I’m the principal now! You’re all expelled!”

Atlas used his foot to stop him, giving him an unimpressed look of disapproval. “Quit playing around. The longer we stay here the higher chance that we’ll get caught.”

Toby saluted his friend, earning a snort in return. Rubbing his hands together, he pressed the start button on the computer first and foremost. While it was loading, he pulled out a USB stick and some forged documents sealed in an envelope, the later of the two he placed in the principal’s office mailbox. Toby had no clue whether it would work or not (master hacker he was not) but it was better than nothing. As he typed, he noticed Atlas coming up behind him, watching silently.

“Do you think this will convince them?” Atlas asked.

“Hopefully. It’s not like they have any reason to doubt this.” Toby clicked open Documents file and snorted. “Oh. My. Gosh.”

“What?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” Toby said. “Wow, who knew the Principal kept his porn stash on his work computer? Awk-ward.”

Atlas leaned forward, eyes twinkling with interest. “No way.”

“Yes way, dude.”
“Who would do something like that?”

Toby grabbed Atlas’s shoulder, mouth drawn into a narrow line. “Atlas, if I die, whatever you do, I need you to delete my history and all the tabs on my computer.”

“Only if you do the same for me.”

“Bro, of course.” Toby put up a fist, which Atlas (now accustomed to the exchange) bumped with his own. “Wait, you own a computer?”

“My mentor lent me his old laptop last year. I may not be up-to-date on human cultural knowledge, but I know how to use technology, Toby.”

Toby clicked on another file, smiling victoriously when he found what he was looking for. As he began to input the information, he noticed Atlas rubbing his temples, brows pinched together in discomfort.

“You okay there, dude?” Toby asked.

Atlas leaned against the wall, continuing to massage the area. “Ugh, migraine. I’ve had it all day. Remind me never to drink Dragon’s Blood again.”

“That sucks,” Toby said as he typed in another line into the school’s database. Just because he could, he placed Atlas in the same classes as him. It made him excited, the idea of being in class with his best friend again more and more of a reality. “You were passed out when I left. Did your dad find out?”

“No, well, I don’t think he did.” Atlas responded, “Blinky let me sleep on his bed for the majority of the night.”

“Aw, that’s nice of him.”
“Yeah, so I didn’t really get back until early morning, and by then he was already heading to...his job.”

“I thought his job was being head of the changelings?”

“He’s got a human job too, you know, for appearances sake.” Atlas stretched his arms, back arching as he tried to get rid of all the aches in his muscles. “He was annoyed that I didn’t come home sooner though. I had to lie, again.”

“Oh? What did you tell him?”

“That I was helping the Trollhunter train.”

“But you’re the…” Toby’s eyes grew wide. “Oh. Oh yeah. He doesn’t know.”

Atlas pinched the top of his nose, frowning. “For now, at least. I’d like to tell him, but whenever I try to do it, someone else is always around. And...now, I’m sort of terrified about telling him. I don’t want him to hate me. He’ll feel so betrayed.”

“He’s gonna feel betrayed whether he finds out from you or someone else.”

“Which is why he’s not going to find out until this is all over. Once Gunmar and Bular are out of the picture, then I’ll tell him.”

“Well, Gunmar’s trapped in the Darklands, so as long as he’s kept there then he shouldn’t be a problem.” Toby remarked in what he hoped sounded encouraging. “So really, all you gotta worry about is Bular.”

Atlas grasped his horns and pulled his head back, head knocking against the wall. “Yeah. Great.”

Toby clicked save, hands smacking the desk in triumphant glee. “Ta-da! What do you think?”

Atlas moved closer, reading the text on the screen. He tapped a finger to the glass.
“James Howlett’s School of Academic Excellence?” Atlas inquired, “is that an actual school?”

“It is now.” He twirled around in the chair. “I even made a website and Wikipedia page for it.”

“Will it convince the adults?”

“You would be surprised how bad teachers are with computers. Guess what the code for breaking into this was?”

“What?”

“Password1.”

“Is that bad?”

Toby threw his friend a look of mock-horror. “Yes, that is very, very bad. Basically anyone can get into this thing.”

A door slammed. Atlas and Toby stiffened, looking towards the entrance. It wasn’t their own. The hallway lights turned on. Someone was in the building.

“Crapple Sauce,” Toby said. “Is it the police?”

“No,” Atlas said, sticking his face out the door. “Worse. It’s my dad.”

“Your mentor-dad? As in the head of your secret organization, mentor-dad?” Toby’s voice squeaked. “What the hell is he doing at Arcadia high?”

Atlas gulped. “You remember when I said he has a human job? Well,” Atlas rolled his shoulders sheepishly, hands rubbing together, “he kind of works here.”
“There’s a changeling in our school?” Toby said in a high voice, covering his mouth. “Oh my gosh, we’re so screwed if he finds us.”


“Come on, man.” Toby tried to pull at one of the windows, but it didn’t budge. “Damn. No escape. What are we going to do? He’s gonna find us!”

“I’ll distract him. Hide somewhere close to the door. When I give you the signal, you leave. I’ll meet up with you later.”

“What’s the signal?”

Atlas paused, thinking, then snapped his thumb against his forefinger. “How’s that?”

“Hmm, maybe something a little more obvious? Like a code word or something?”

Atlas’ ears shifted upwards like a cat’s. “No time. He’s almost here.”

It was an itch he just could not quite scratch, this James Lake.

A human Trollhunter. The mere thought was baffling enough, but to actually see it with his own eyes.

He almost burst into laughter at the sight of the boy. James Lake was little more than a snack for someone like Bular. Merlin must have blown a fuse to choose such a tiny little thing like him as the Trollhunter.
Nevertheless, Stricklander refused to believe that this was a coincidence. There were too many things that did not add up.

His internet search for the brat in Canada showed little. He’d even contacted some of his affiliates in the Canadian government, but nothing consequential turned up.

A transfer student from Canada his arse. Stricklander was no one’s fool, least of all some pathetic human boy’s.

His search in the U.S. did lead somewhere however. A missing person report had been issued for a boy with the same name more than five years ago. He’d tried to look further into it, but all articles related to the boy were deleted and any pictures related to him were either too blurry to make out or simply didn’t load.

Do you smell a fault? Stricklander asked himself, quoting from King Lear. Indeed I do, Gloucester.

Either someone was careless (doubtful), or (and much more likely) someone was trying to cover something up. He would get on his IT experts to investigate soon enough.

Still, he had time. He was patient. Hundreds of years of waiting had molded him into a creature of contingency plans. Whether or not he knew of Mr. Lake’s past mattered little in the grand scheme of things. How to defeat him and take the amulet were what were most important.

And Atlas would be the key to that.

Stricklander was so deep in thought he failed to notice a shadow approaching from behind.

Two arms circled his chest.

He startled, heart beating fast, almost falling over in shock. His first instinct was to fight off the person, but he resisted the urge. He looked behind him, recognizing the boy’s familiar horns and unruly hair. “Atlas? What on earth are you doing here?”
The boy’s ears lowered. “Sorry, is this a bad time or something?”

Yes, yes, it was, but Stricklander was not going to hurt the boy’s feelings. He had seemed a bit under the weather recently, and even now, he was paler than normal, the bags underneath his eyes darker than the previous week.

Stricklander ran his fingers through his hair, sighing in frustration, then smoothed down the boy’s hair with an open palm. “No, no. It’s fine. Shouldn’t you be with the Trollhunter or something? I thought you said you were going to Trollmarket tonight.”

Atlas tightened his arms around the man. “Change of plans.”

Stricklander pressed his lips together, not used to the abundance of affection Atlas was showing. Normally, the most fondness they showed each other was a quick hug. This was getting a little too close to how humans interacted with each other. He had to (carefully) pull the boy’s arms away from his person, displaying what he hoped looked like a fatherly demeanor. Atlas complied thankfully, and if he were hurt by Stricklander’s discomfort, he did not show it.

“You could have called.”

The boy snorted, then said, “And you would have told me to stay home and clean the Order’s toilets or something.”

“You know me far too well,” Stricklander admitted. “I’ve barely seen you all week. You’ve been busy with the Trollhunter and his group lately.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Atlas said, voice cracking at the end.

Strange, Stricklander thought, was the boy going through more puberty still? He scanned the boy, taking in his features. Though he had grown significantly over the past few years, there was still some baby fat to his cheeks and thinness in his body that had yet to fill out. He was fifteen (or so they guessed, they never did find out his real birth date), so another growth spurt or voice change would not completely out of the question.

Something in his tone spoke otherwise however. He could tell the boy was unsettled. Atlas, though skilled in many areas, was terrible at keeping secrets, especially from him.
“Is everything alright, young Atlas?” He cocked his head to the side. He loosened his shoulders, trying to appear as open as possible. It worked with his colleagues and students, so why not the boy?

“It’s…okay, I guess.” Atlas said, not looking him in the eyes.

So, not okay.

Stricklander bit the inside of his cheek, mind wandering back to Nomura’s recent report. What she wrote troubled him. The fact that Atlas was having second-thoughts about the assignment was concerning, but not unusual considering the gravity of the situation and his age—what was truly worrying was the boy’s newfound inclinations to reveal himself as a changeling, all of which was based on his interactions with the Trollhunter’s little rag-tag group of outcasts.

Despite all his warnings, despite all his teachings, the group was beginning to rub off on Atlas, and not in a good way.

He would soon need to rectify that, but now was not the time.

“What are you doing here?” Atlas asked shyly.

“Grading papers, but besides that,” Stricklander pulled out his pen, moving it from one finger to the next. “Something about the Trollhunter has been bothering me. I thought I’d do a little research.”

Atlas let out a quiet, “Oh.”

He reached for the knob. “I’ll be but a moment.”

“Wait!” Atlas exclaimed, “Maybe…maybe I can help?”

He patted the boy on the shoulder, trying to appear gracious. “That’s kind of you, Atlas, but I’ve a bit more experience in this kind of work.”
“Let me watch you then. I want to get better.” Atlas’ shoulders rose, his expression anxious. “How am I going to be a better changeling if I don’t learn by example?”

The boy was correct (though he chose the most importune time to be so). Stricklander had hoped to put Atlas in some sort of technology training due to his inability to shift skins yet—something along the lines of advanced hacking and sabotage—but the amount of changelings that knew of such methods were few and those willing to instruct him left to but one: himself. And between being Gunmar’s Second and his human cover, finding time to teach Atlas was difficult.

Stricklander pulled out a card to open the door, but to his surprise, it was already open.

He narrowed his eyes, irritation rising. Levit was such an imbecile. Who would leave their office unlocked, honestly?

Stricklander opened the door gently, motioning his other hand for the boy to follow. Atlas ears rose up, face alight with eagerness.

Pressing forward, Stricklander sat down in the principal’s chair, turning on the computer.

“So,” Atlas kicked his feet up atop the desk, settling in the chair opposite. “What do you think of the new Trollhunter?”

He tutted then pushed the boy’s feet off the desk. “He’s a child, with no coordination to save his life. I suspect it won’t be long before Gunmar is freed. He is a disaster in the making.”

“He’s not that bad,” Atlas said.

“Oh, you don’t have to pretend to be modest with me, Atlas. That boy is the worst Trollhunter the amulet has ever chosen. I would be amazed if he lasted the end of this week.”

Atlas frowned. “That’s a bit harsh.”

“Well, he’s not completely terrible. At least he’s got acting going for him. I watched his performance.”
“You did?” Atlas asked, then coughed. “I mean, of course you did. You know everything that happens at this school.”

“Yes, despite his obvious awkwardness, he became confident on stage. Even used some Greek philosophy. Now, I wonder where he got that…” Stricklander looked over to Atlas.

The boy chuckled nervously. “I may have helped him prepare a few lines…What? Don’t look at me like that. I was trying to gain his trust!”

“When was it you met him exactly?” He drummed his fingers against the desk, not looking away from the screen.

“I guess,” Atlas bit down on his bottom lip, one of his canines peeking out. “When I got my phone back. I introduced myself to Toby. The Trollhunter was there with him.”

He slowly turned to face the boy, expression cold. “So, you lied to me.”

Atlas slid back into his seat. “W-what?”

“When you came to me that morning. You said you stole your phone back. That was a lie.” His eyes glowed. “What else have you been lying about, Atlas?”

“It’s not a lie, I mean, it sort of was, but it all worked out in the end, didn’t it?” Atlas confessed, eyes pleading. “I didn’t want to upset you.”

“But you did and now, I’m unsure about what else you’ve been keeping from me.” Stricklander remarked frostily.

“I’m sorry,” Atlas pulled his legs closer, hands pulling at the frayed edges of his cloak.

“Tell me the truth. How did you meet the Trollhunter?”
“I…It was an accident. I met Toby in the locker-room and then there was a transformation and…Jim became the Trollhunter and I made up a lie. Then the Trollmarket trolls came in and I lied some more.” He glanced down at the floor, then said softly, “It’s my fault. It’s all my fault. There’s just so much going on, and it feels like I’m under the spotlight all the time now. I didn’t mean for it all to end up like this…I’m sorry. I’m really, really, sorry.”

“That does not excuse the fact that you mislead me.” Stricklander took a deep breath. “This cannot keep happening, Atlas. I have let you slip by with enough lies already. You are a member of the Janus Order and as such, are subject to its rules. Lying to Gunmar’s Second-in-Command is a grave offense, one with severe penalties.”

Atlas visibly swallowed, turning even paler. “I know, sir.”

“Head up, boy,” he commanded, then, in a stern tone, added, “I expect more reports from Trollmarket. I would also like you to look into this James Lake’s history. Ask him about his parents, his old school, his friends. There’s something there that doesn’t add up.”

“Understood.”

“I’m glad you do,” he said, tone becoming gentler. “Us changelings only have each other to rely on, young Atlas. Neither troll nor human will accept changelings. If the Trollhunter and his group find out who and what you are, I guarantee you will not live to tell the tale. Trollmarket kill changelings on sight. Only through Gunmar can we achieve some semblance of respect and acceptance in this world.”

“Yeah,” Atlas sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” he said. “How else do you think I’ve lived all these centuries?”

“So you’ve never revealed yourself to anyone? Not even your own family?”

Stricklander took a deep breath, closing his eyes. “No, never. And a changeling doesn’t have family, Atlas, you know that.”

Voice almost a whisper, Atlas said, “…I thought we were family.”
Oh. If he were centuries younger and not as worn by life’s harsh realities, he might of cried. But he was made of far sterner, colder stone than that. Family was such a foreign concept, and while he had certainly felt some fondness for his human family, the reality of their vast lifespan differences (and the added matter of their own son being stolen from them) kept him from ever connecting with them or anyone else, even his own brethren.

He smiled warmly, reaching over the desk to ruffle the boy’s hair. “I stand corrected.”

The boy’s sudden entrance into his life had…changed things. Why, just recently he had allowed the child to call him “dad”. It would be a lie to say he did not feel something whenever Atlas did as such.

Nevertheless, it was risky. Allowing his emotions to grow anymore would put both him and the boy in danger. Already the others believed he overly favored Atlas. If they found out—

No. They would not. Not as long as he was in control.

“Atlas,” he said. “You know you can come to me with anything, correct? I’m here for you, if you need me.”

“Of course, dad.” Atlas licked his lips then got up to open the door, before turning around, snapping his fingers as though a thought suddenly came to him. “Oh, I almost forgot to ask! What do you want for dinner tonight? I know I’ve been missing a lot of our meals together.”

Stricklander pulled out his pen, balancing it on his upper lip. “Hmm. What do you have in mind?”

“I’ve been wanting to try Mexican cuisine for a while now. Tacos?”

He grimaced, nose scrunching up in disgust. “Heavens no. Cumin tears up my insides. How about something less spicy and more savory? Your fried tilapia with tartar sauce last week was wonderful.”

Atlas drew away from the door, hopping over the desk to the right side of his chair. “Are you angling for some fish and chips again?”
He put a hand to his heart, a fake sorrowful look on his face. “You wound me. I would never.”

The teen took out his phone, typing up Stricklander’s suggestion. “Okay, fish and chips are down. What else?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Surprise me,” he tapped his pen against the computer, brows furrowing. “Why didn’t this show up in the system earlier?”

Atlas peered over. “What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Just a computer problem.”

“Well, you know how technology is. Not to mention the education budget is probably abysmal.”

“You’re right. Honestly, the coffee they serve in the teacher’s lounge is nothing compared to yours.”

“You can’t outdo perfection, dad.”

“Though your tea could use a little work.”

“Gee, thanks.” Atlas remarked dryly.

Stricklander pushed himself back and stood up, wincing as his spine popped. Age, it appeared, was finally catching up with him. He brought a hand to Atlas’ back, guiding them out of the office. Gently, he closed the door behind them.

“How is your relationship with the humans going?” Stricklander tried to ask casually.

Atlas paused, fingers pulling at the frayed parts of his cloak.

“It’s difficult. Toby and I get along fine, but Jim and I…” He brought his thumb up, biting down on
a sharp black nail. “It’s like we’re two completely different people.”

“Work on it. You know, though you may not think it, you too are a lot alike.”

Atlas froze, then said, “Ha, ha. Very funny.”

“I’m serious. Find something both of you can relate to.” He recommended.

Atlas bobbed his head. “Alright, I’ll try it.”

“But, just remember,” Stricklander lightly rapped his pen against the boy’s right horn. “Don’t allow yourself to get too entangled with the Trollhunter and his friends. You may act like their friend, but do not allow yourself to be one. Emotions will cloud your judgment.”

He watched the boy’s face, analyzing the teen’s tight shoulders and hesitance to speak.


This, Stricklander thought, is going to be a problem.
He was dying.

A fiery heat raged against the ice in his veins.

Getting sick sucked.

Even under two blankets and a duvet he was shivering, all the while sweating out of every pore. The covers felt suffocating, sure, but the alternative was far worse.

His body was sluggish, as though he were encased in mud. His joints ached too.

Of all the times to get the flu, it had to be during spring break.

The air smelled stale, or perhaps it was simply him. He rubbed his runny nose. His mouth tasted of cough medicine, and not the good grape-flavored kind, but the cherry one he hated with every fiber of his being. Mom forgot to buy some during their last trip to the pharmacy. Again.
He was a big boy though. He could tolerate it.

Cool fingers stroked his cheek. Like a plant to sunlight, he leaned into it, relishing how nice it felt against his hot skin.

“How do you feel?” The owner of the hand asked.

“Head hurts,” He mumbled, snuggling deeper into the bed. “This stinks.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” She said.

“I wanna go out and play with Toby, mommy.”

The woman—his mother—smiled softly, brushing his bangs back. “I know, honey. We can’t let Toby get sick too, though.”

“Wanna feel better.” He said.

“You will, soon, but only if you get some sleep.” She turned her face away, as if readying to leave.

His sweaty fingers tunneled out from under the covers, tugging on the side of her shirt. “Don’t wanna be left ‘lone. Stay with me.”

The bed dipped. In the corner of his eye he saw her. Blocky glasses obscured part of her face, but it didn’t detract from her beauty. Out of all the school’s moms, she was the prettiest in his eyes. Her auburn hair was more tussled than usual, due to working more shifts at the clinic to support them. It was only him and his mother now after all.

He frowned, anger flowing through him like a river for his no good father. It was his fault his mom wasn’t able to pick him up from school anymore. It was his fault that mom was overworked and too tired to play with him. It was his fault mom and him were struggling.
But they would be just fine without him. They didn’t need him anymore.

“I really wish I could, but—” Her lower lip wobbled, eyes glassy.

Though he didn’t like it, he understood how hard his mom worked to keep the house and bring food home every week. It made him feel remorseful to even ask such a question.

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine. Is Ms. Domzalski coming over soon with soup?”

“Yes, and she’ll come check up on you ever hour while I’m gone, alright? And if you need anything at all—”

“ ‘my number is on the table.’” He recited by heart, accidentally triggering another round of coughs.

She brushed back his bangs, kissing his forehead. “Before I go, how about I sing you a lullaby?”

He huffed. “But lullabies are for babies.”

“Not this one. This one is made especially for big boys.”

“Well, I guess I could listen a little.” He said.

Her fingers weaved through his hair. He shifted closer to her, eyes half-lidded. Even though his body ached, he wanted to stay awake with her for as long as possible. He rarely got alone time with her as it was.

“Mommy?” He gestured for her to come closer.

She complied, her face inches from his own. “Yes, Jim?”

“Love you lots.” He whispered into her ear.
“Love you more.” She said.

He reached up to capture her fingers, giving them a quick squeeze. “Love you most.”

Slowly, she began to hum. At one point it might have been a real song, but now it was merely a memory, passed on from generation to generation.

His vision began to blur.

The last thing he saw was her blue eyes looking down at him.

Atlas lurched forward, suddenly awake.

His eyes were wet; his throat raw. Blinking, he looked around, slowly realizing he was not in his bed back at the Order.

Trollmarket. He was in Trollmarket for training. Oh crap. He fell asleep during Blinky’s troll history lesson.

Well, it wasn’t as if Atlas didn’t know their history already. Stricklander had been quite thorough in his teachings in that area. Still, he knew how rude it must have looked.

The group stared at Atlas, unnerving him. Toby appeared paler than normal for some strange reason, and both AAARRRGGHH!!! and Blinky were frozen in place, eyes blown as wide as they could go.

“Is, ah, everything okay?” Atlas said with a hint of cautious trepidation.
Blinky shuffled around before setting down the book he’d been clinging to moments earlier. He approached Atlas as if he were a wild animal, all hands facing frontwards as if trying to show he wasn’t dangerous.

“I think the real question is, are you okay, Master Atlas?” Blinky said.

“How, why do you…” His cheeks burned, his mind finally connecting the dots. “I was screaming again, wasn’t I?”

“Again?” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, scooting closer to him.

Atlas brought his legs up. “It’s…not uncommon for me to get bad dreams.”

“Dude, you were sound asleep for a moment and then the next you were thrashing and screaming.” Toby said. “Are you sure you don’t have PTSD or something?”

Atlas narrowed his eyes. “PTSD? I don’t…What is—”

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” Blinky supplied. “When someone experiences an event that they have difficulty recovering from. Even trolls are subject to it. AAARRRGGHH!!! too, ah…experiences it from time to time. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m fine,” Atlas said curtly. “Nothing is wrong with me. I’m not sick. They’re just dreams. Can we just drop it for now?”

Toby tried to engage him. “But Atlas—”

“No.” he said.

His friend crawled closer. “Dude, we only want to help. I know you don’t like talking about your past, but maybe if you did you would feel better.”
“Toby, can you please shut the hell up? Did I ask you for advice?” Atlas strained, not looking the boy in the eyes. “Lay off, alright? I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I just thought—”

“I don’t need your thoughts, okay? This is my problem. Not yours.” He added icily, “Drop it, human.”

Like the autumn leaves of a tree, Toby’s face fell. Abruptly, he stood up, stomping away from the group.

Great. A ball of guilt hung low in his stomach. On instinct, he brought his knees up, resting his forehead against them.

Ugh! Why was he like this? No, he had a right to privacy, didn’t he? So why couldn’t Toby understand? He didn’t mean to hurt his friend’s feelings. He knew the boy was only trying to help. But there were some things Atlas wasn’t ready to share with them (or anyone really).

“Can you go to him and make sure he’s okay?” Atlas asked AAARRRGGHH!!!, whose eyes kept flickering between him and the direction Toby went. Even though his friend had gone past the main bridge to enter the forge, he could hear Toby’s quiet sniffling.

“No need help?”

“I’ve dealt with this for my entire life.” Atlas said. “So no, I don’t need your help.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! released a soft affirmative noise, gently getting up and walking out of the training hall to meet with the other boy. From the sound of it, both left the area not long after.

Atlas’s shoulder’s loosened up, though his heart did not. Subconsciously, the claws of his feet tapped against the floor, anxiety pulling at the frayed corners of his mind.

Blinky sat down next to him, placing the book in Atlas’s lap.
“Troll history training might seem like a minor duty, Master Atlas, but I truly believe you would benefit from it. I know not where troll and changeling history diverges, however I suspect you have only seen one side of the story. So far, you have an idea of why the people of the Janus Order fight, but, lest we forget, a changeling is a troll as well, just as you are. We are your people too.” Blinky cleared his throat, then continued, “One must understand why one fights, for these early steps will decide whether a young Trollhunter will become a Daya “the Deliverer” or Unkar “the Unfortunate.”

Atlas didn’t respond.

Blinky readjusted the bags on his belt, brow heavy. He reached out to touch Atlas’s shoulder. “Master Atlas, I—”

Atlas jerked away, growling, “If this is about the PTSD thing again, then I’m leaving. I came to learn how to fight Draal next week. My main concern right now is for my immediate future, not my past.”

“No, no. None of that.” Blinky coughed, retracting his hand. “I respect your personal space. I will not ask what these nightmares of yours entail, unless you choose to do so that is, but… I would ask that you not lash out at us. We only want to assist.”

Atlas exhaled deeply. His knees dropped to the sides. He cradled his face in his hands.

It hadn’t even been a week since he became the Trollhunter and already he was falling apart. How long could he keep this up? Stricklander’s assistant by day and Trollhunter by night left little time for rest. And as his first day of school loomed, so too did Atlas’s impending nervous breakdown. How long could he pull this off?

That didn’t excuse the fact that he’d been an ass to Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! though. Whenever they returned he would need to apologize.

“I know, Blinky.” Atlas said softly. “I’m…sorry, if that means anything. I know what I said was cruel. But you more than anyone else here knows why. My nightmares are mine alone. It wasn’t even a nightmare, not really.”

“Oh, a prophetic dream, perhaps?” Blinky tapped his chin, a thoughtful expression coming over his features. “What sort? I’ve some background in dream theory. Human sleep psychology has always
fascinated me. Perhaps I could assist you in deciphering it…That is, should you decide to share.”

“It’s…” He paused, sparing a glance in the direction Toby and AAARRRGHH!! went. “You won’t tell the others, right?”

“Not without your permission.” Blinky promised.

“There was a woman, the very same woman I saw a few days ago, right around the time I found the amulet actually. In the dream, I was sick and she was taking care of me.” Atlas rubbed the spot where she kissed him, the sensation still fresh on his mind. “I… I called her mom. I didn’t want her to go. What does it mean? Did I just make it up?”

“Are you certain it was a dream then, and not a memory?”

His heart fluttered. A mom. His mom. Could it be true? The woman that had always lived on the edges of his mind now had a face and voice. All the Trollhunters business had distracted him from seeking her out again.

What if by meeting her I accidently place her in danger? His mind played out a thousand scenarios. It was his greatest fear: losing someone he cared about. Before, he only had to worry about Stricklander and, to a certain extent, Nomura. Now, Toby, AAARRRGHH!! and Blinky had joined the ranks. Now, the people he cared about were on opposite sides, and Atlas wasn’t sure whose side he would pick if forced to make a choice.

And then there was the problem of his appearance. Would she accept him if she saw him in this form? Possibly yes, possibly no. If she was anything like that dream he had however, he believed she would.

His hands trembled. Even the notion of reuniting with her thrilled him beyond belief.

Noticing his behavior, he corrected himself, hiding his arms beneath his cloak and wrapping it around him.

He swallowed. “Do you really think so? Could she really be my mom?”
“I…Master Atlas, I cannot begin to imagine what sorts of dreams you have and whether or not it is one of your lost memories. I, along with most trolls, rarely sleep and even rarer dream. But it is certainly possible.”

“Yeah, the changelings don’t sleep much either.” Atlas looked down at his body, chuckling humorlessly. “Why am I always the odd man out?”

Blinky put each pair of hands together into two steeples. “I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

Atlas gestured widely to himself, from his horns to his talon feet. “This. Me. Why am I so weird? Why was I even born, Blinky? I’m a freaking joke, some changeling’s slip up. I shouldn’t even exist. You would think genetics might throw me a bone, but nooo. I need to sleep, eat, and drink regularly like a human. I’m barely stronger than one either. My body isn’t even made of stone like a trolls. I can’t change, not naturally, like a changeling. Not yet at least. So where the hell do I fit in this world? I’m too troll to fit in with humanity and too human to fit in with the changelings, and the rest of trollkind for that matter.”

His fist smashed into the stone floor below him.

“What if I can’t do this?” He said. *What if the rest of Trollmarket finds out my secret and decides to kill me? What if dad was right?*

“Master Atlas,” Blinky began, “When I first met you, I was a skeptic. Merlin choosing a changeling, and a half-human one at that! It was unheard of. I was afraid you would turn on us, at first, that is. But you fended off Bular during our escape and lived. You fought Draal, and though you lost, you challenged him in one of the bravest ways I’ve seen thus far. I know you’re unaccustomed to praise, but please believe me when I say that I believe you possess the makings of a *great* Trollhunter. So you sleep more than the average troll? So what? That doesn’t make you odd. Your body was made for you. If you need sleep, then there’s a reason for it.”

Atlas raised his head, regarding Blinky with visible curiosity. “You think I’ll make a great Trollhunter?”

“Yes, and with a great deal of training from me, I believe you could become the best this world has ever seen.”

“Pft,” Atlas snorted. “I knew there was a catch.”
Just as Blinky was about to respond, a newcomer ran into the forge.

Atlas and Blinky immediately shot up to their feet.

The female troll’s appearance was a bit jarring for someone like Atlas. Most of the changeling females in the Order were thin and spindly, as if they were starved at a young age (or perhaps it was simply the ones in the Arcadia branch, since Gabe’s cooking was so terrible). On the opposite end, troll females (outside of Nomura’s original tribe) were large and curvaceous, this one was particularly so.

It made Atlas wonder: did the process of making a changeling do something to them at a genetic level too? Would his mentor be shorter and thinner in comparison to those of his race?

Would Atlas be shorter and thinner in comparison to his birth father’s people?

Her shoulders were tightened, her expression full of urgency and fear.

Atlas instantly became on edge. Something was wrong.

She went towards Blinky, who comforted her, remarking in a gentle tone, “Oh no…Is it the Heartstone, Bagdwella? Has something happened to it?”

“No, no!” She said in a shrill voice, gasping for air as though she’d run a marathon.

“Stalkling?” Atlas said. Bular had gotten into contact with them recently. Could one of them have gotten into the underground?

She shook her head.

Atlas persisted with another question, dreading the response if it were true. “Is Bular in Trollmarket?”
His stomach churned at the thought. If Bular had figured out a way into Trollmarket, then everything he’d done thus far will have been for not.

After catching her breath, she answered.

“No, it’s a gnome!” She explained, elongating the last word with a trill of her tongue, so much so that it echoed throughout the room. “A rogue gnome!”

His shoulders slumped.

What.

They met up with Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! outside the Hero’s forge. Atlas apologized to both of them along the way to the main market road and, at least outwardly, they both appeared to accept it. To his surprise, Toby apologized to him as well.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you, dude.” Toby said. “That was totally uncool and I’m sorry.”

“I…It’s okay. What’s done is done.” Atlas said, patting the other boy on the shoulder. “As mentor likes to say, it’s all water under the bridge.”

Toby scratched his nose. “Ah, yeah…Speaking of mentors, dude, I can’t believe Mr. Strickler’s a change—"

Atlas covered Toby’s mouth, looking around the market. “Not so loud.”

He lowered his voice, “Your dad is my history teacher. What if he finds out I’m helping the Trollhunter?”
“Oh, well,” Atlas bit down on his lower lip, eyes cast upward to the tunnel’s ceiling. “He…already kind of knows about that.”

“How much is kind of?”

Atlas twiddled his thumbs together. “Ah, you see, I might have let it slip out that you and Jim are best friends and that you know about trolls now.”

Toby gushed, “Oh my gosh, I’m your best friend? That’s so awesome sau—Wait, so if he knows that I know about it but not that I know about him knowing, then how do I know he won’t come after me for knowing what I know?”

Atlas slowed down, trying to wrap his head around what just exited his friend’s mouth. “I…that… What are you trying to say, Toby?”

“Is he going to come after me?” Toby said, a hint of nervousness in his manner of speech.

Noticing that they were losing sight of the rest of the group, Atlas picked up the pace, Toby not far behind.

“I don’t know.” Atlas admitted. “But just to be sure, don’t be in any rooms alone with him.”

“Gee, thanks for the great advice.” Toby said.

Atlas smiled, messing with the other’s hair before picking up speed to join Blinky’s side. “No problem.”

It was a quarter past midnight when they arrived at her store.

Socks upon socks of all shapes, colors, and sizes hung from the ceiling. The scent of damp clothes clung to the air. Atlas watched as AAARRRGGH!!! licked his lips, regarding a periwinkle pair of socks longingly.
“At first, I couldn’t find my monocle, then my collection of bed coils.” Bagdwella threw her hands up in irritation. “Now, something disappears every minute! It’s horrendous. How am I going to compete with Tilda’s Treasures, or Rock-mart?”

In the corner of Atlas’s eye, a fast blur scampered out from one of the holes in the wall, scurrying out onto the floor and tripping the female troll. She yelled in alarm, falling on her side. Atlas heard a faint whisper of high-pitched giggles.

“Ah, yes. Gnome.” Blinky held out a hand to the lady. “Quite a nuisance, those little vagrants.”

Bagdwella huffed, knocking away his offered hand. “Oh, dirty little pests. Up to last week, the glue traps were working fine.”

Sinking her hand down a large pot, she pulled out one of the contraptions. Atlas blanched. The dead body was still attached to the trap.

The same gnome knocked it out of her hands, zipping upwards onto the sock line.

She put her hands together, eyes pleading. “Fix it, Trollhunter.”

Atlas looked to his left, then his right, before finally pointing at himself, one eyebrow perched upwards in open alarm. “Seriously? Uh, yeah, super sorry about that, but it looks like you need a gnome-catcher. Unfortunately, that is not in my job description. Best of luck to you.”

He turned away, heading from whence he came. Bagdwella cut him off, blocking his exit.

“But you’re the Trollhunter!” She insisted. “You’re supposed to help me.”

“Excuse me? Listen,” he slowly started to explain, because obviously she didn’t hear him. “Jim is the Trollhunter, not me. Go ask him.”

“That’s not what I heard.” She said, squinting down at him. “I heard there were two Trollhunters now.”
“Ah, ha, Master Atlas, a Trollhunter cannot refuse the call.” Blinky elbowed him sharply in the stomach. Atlas responded in kind. “And since you and Master Jim are co-Trollhunters, one of your tasks is to help a troll in need. And what better a task for you to train with than a pint-sized quarry?”

“And what the hell do I get out of this?” Atlas whispered in Blinky’s ear.

“Why, another supporter of course.” He lowered his voice to match Atlas’s. “Trust me, we need allies, Master Atlas.”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

They both startled at the scuttling of quick footwork behind them. Soft guitar-like music played.

Atlas turned back towards her, arms crossed. “What will you give me if I do it?”

Her eyes bulged “What?”

Blinky smacked one of his horns, glaring. “Master Atlas, no.”

“Master Atlas, yes.” He answered, flicking his tongue against his left tusk, the universal troll signal for ‘back off’. “I’m not doing this for free.”

“But…but you’re the Trollhunter.” She tried to reason. “Kanjigar would never—”

“Kanjigar’s a piece of modern art right now.” He countered. “And me, I’m not exactly the most charitable man around. Half-trolls need to eat too.”

Toby was right; Atlas didn’t have much to call his own. Most of the things in his room were either bartered from another changeling or ‘borrowed’. If Atlas learned anything from his brethren, it was that there was always room for deals, no matter the situation.
She narrowed her eyes. “What do you want?”

He smirked. Pressing his hands together, he scanned the store, looking at all the merchandise (junk) she had.

Atlas stroked his chin. “What is it that you primarily sell in this store?”

She shrugged. “Socks are a big commodity down here, but anything and everything. What’s it to you?”

“Most of these things look human-made.” He cocked his head to the side. “Are they stolen?”

That got a reaction out of her. Her nostrils flared. She moved her hands to her waist, lips receding to display her sharp pearly fangs.

“Lat fyst-il myrksa, half-breed. How dare you. I am no thief.”

“Lat fys fynka, trow” he cursed back. “I only asked you a question. There’s no need to get offended. Are. They. Stolen?”

From across the room, the gnome stepped out from the curtains, taunting them with gestures that bordered on obscene. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it disappeared, only its high-pitched voice reminding them of its presence.

Bagdwella seemed to deflate, desperation clinging to her demeanor.

She sighed gruffly, “No, not that I know of.”

“Where do you get them?”

“I receive them from a supplier nearby. One of garbage runners. Whatever the humans throw away, we repurpose. Most of it is useless, but every once and awhile there are some good finds. Why, last month, I received a most scrumptious supply of premium grade VHS tapes.”
AAARRRGGHH!!! licked his lips. “Hmm. Remember. Yummy.”

Atlas’s smirk elongated. “I see. How about a deal then? I’ll get rid of your gnome problem, on one condition.”

“What’s that?” She asked, body still standoffish.

“I become one of your new suppliers.”

“Of all the…” she stopped for a moment, as if the gears in her head were slowly turning on. He could see the merchant part of her calculating the advantages. Good. “I’ve enough suppliers. What makes you so special?”

“Because I don’t have to dig through human trash to find things. I can get you exactly what you want and more. But only if you pay me.”

“You can find VHS tapes? Bed-coils?” She flipped back the long bang covering her eye, considering him with a scrutinizing look. “Anything I want?”

“Do I look like a liar, Bagdwella?” Atlas said.

Blinky interrupted. “Master Atlas, this is hardly—”

A cascade of pots fell from one of the shelves. The gnome tittered in delight.

“How much?” She said, pushing Blinky out of the way.

“Fifty-fifty on all the goods I bring you.”

“Bushigal. Do you take me for a Quagawump? No, ten.”
“Thirty.”

“Fifteen.”

“Twenty-five.” He said, “and that’s my final offer.”

She sniffed, eyes gauging him. “You’re not just a half-troll, are you? You’re one of them.”

Ah oh. He controlled his expression, not wanting her to see his surprise. “That’s a rather wild accusation to make.”

“Do not take me for a fool. The others may not be so observant, but I am. You and the human Trollhunter are never in the same place at the same time. Now, I wonder why that is?”

“Merely a coincidence,” He said. “And business is business, is it not?”

“Clean this place of gnomes.” She said. “If you don’t, the deals off, and I reveal your little secret to everyone.”

“Agreed.” He said.

“Atlas, this is a bad idea.” Toby said.

“I agree with Tobias,” Blinky said, before quietly adding, “you’ve put yourself at risk of exposure. Trollmarket might not be ready for a half-changeling Trollhunter.”

Atlas retorted dryly. “Will it ever be?”

The group all jumped as the off-key Spanish guitar music stopped, the creepy giggle alerting them of the gnome’s nearby presence.
Blinky cautiously approached the creature. “He’s trying to distract us. Hold tight to your valuables.”

“Why?” Toby asked, chuckling. “He can’t be that bad. He plays the guitar.”

Toby lost his belt moments later.

“Oh come on! Well, at least he didn’t take my Nougat Num—”

The candy vanished from his hands.

Atlas raised both eyebrows. “You were saying?”

Toby’s face grew dark. “Son of a b—”

The gnome giggled evilly. After that, it was chaos. They chased the creature around the store. More than a few toes were stepped on, his included. The gnome was surprisingly quick-footed for such a small creature.

Still, no matter how hard they tried, it alluded them. AAARRRGGHH!!! tried to be helpful, but his pacifist position left him unable to truly stop the menace.

It wasn’t until the gnome tripped Atlas that he noticed something missing from his person.

He released a string of changeling curse words, (some of which must be close enough to Trollspeak, going by Blinky horrified face).

“Master Atlas, language!” Blinky admonished.

Atlas got up on one knee, scowling. “He’s got the amulet.”
All of Blinky’s eyes widened. “Oh dear.”

Laughing, it zipped behind a cabinet. Toby tried to push it away with his back, with little success. AAARRRGGHH!!! stepped in, effortlessly moving it aside with a mere nudge.

Once the cabinet was completely removed, Atlas’s eyes zoomed in towards a small tunnel near the bottom of the floor.

“Hole.” AAARRRGGHH!!! stated.

“Wow, I never would have guessed.” Atlas said.

Blinky nodded. “Yes, it appears the plot, quite literally, deepens.”

Atlas put his hand down the hole, trying to call back the amulet. “Ah, shouldn’t the amulet be coming back to me right about now?”

Blinky’s eyes became downcast. “Dolefully, that rule only applies if you’ve rejected it. When thieved, it’s another story. If you had read *A Brief Recapitulation*, you would have known that.”

“Motherf—”

The female troll behind them scoffed. “Some Trollhunter you are. Atlas the light-fingered. Perhaps we should have gotten the *human* Trollhunter to do it instead.”

Atlas growled. “Give me a day. That little asshole won’t escape my grasp again.”

“Dude, what are you going to do about rehearsal tomorrow?” Toby reminded him. “You can’t transform without the amulet.”

Atlas’s ears lowered, his face becoming ashen. “Shit, you’re right.”
“Master Atlas, Tobias, do not fret.” Blinky said, “We shall press forward. All hope is not lost.”

“But what can we do?” Toby asked.

Atlas added. “Yeah, it’s not like any of us can fit in that hole.”

Blinky got a look on his face that greatly disturbed Atlas. It was thoughtful. “Hmm, currently.”

“Bad idea.” AAARRRGHHH!!! immediately cautioned.

“Well, no Trollhunter has ever lost his amulet.” Blinky argued, shaking his hands angrily. “We’ll need time to procure the Furgolator.”

“What’s a Furgolator?” Toby asked. “Atlas?”

“Don’t look at me. I’m just as clueless as you are.” Atlas said.

Blinky smiled, arms held out wide. “Ah ha…Don’t you worry about anything, Master Atlas. Go back home and sleep. We’ll watch over the hole. Tomorrow you’ll return refreshed to deal with this, uh…,” he chuckled nervously, a pair of hands grasped together as he regarded Atlas. “Little problem.”

Atlas gulped. Somehow, ‘little’ was not how he would describe it.

Bagdwella walked away from the group, though not before bumping into Atlas deliberately. “One day, boy. That’s it.”

Atlas glowered. Barely even a week and already he was signing his life away.

All over a stupid gnome.
Wonderful.
Gnome your Enemy (III)

Chapter Summary

Stricklander has a big problem with being discreet. Atlas has a small issue with his duties as Trollhunter.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Finally back with a new chapter! Sorry it took me so long! But finals are over and I get to write as much as I want. Big thanks to Charlie for helping me with this chapter. Hopefully I'll update with a new chapter again on Friday and get back into the rhythm of things. So two chapters this week! Thank you for all the reviews and stuff! I really appreciate them. They make my day. :)

“Is something wrong, Walter?”

Stricklander nearly tipped his drink over in alarm. Only quick thinking and dexterous fingers saved the Earl Grey from an untimely demise (that being scalding hot water on his new pants). His forehead puckered.

He cleared his throat before enquiring in a stunned manner, “Pardon?”

The woman in front of him turned her neck to the side, tucking a stray lock back behind her ears. Her gaze trailed up until it reached his own, her pupils slightly enlarged. Stricklander sat up straighter. For a human, Barbara was…quite pleasing to the eyes. She was lithe and tall, with a long elegant neck and a charming face to match. It still amazed him that she was not already taken.

Additionally, Barbara was a decent conversationalist for a human. It was always nice to find a beauty with such an intellect. Of course, he knew relations with the fleshbags was forbidden, but this was
merely a meeting of two intellectuals over drinks at a local cafe, nothing more

“Sorry, I don’t mean anything bad by it, it’s just...” She folded her hands in front of her, then said, “You seem rather distracted.”

“You have caught me, Barbara dear,” he said, pretending to chuckle. “How could you tell?"

She gestured to his tea. “Well, I’m no Sherlock, but you’ve been twirling your spoon in that cup for a few minutes now, and you haven’t said a word.”

Outwardly, he smiled bashfully, but inwardly, Stricklander berated himself.

How foolish. What an imbecile he was! He’d slipped up, and in front of a human no less. How could this happen? Was he losing his edge?

No, it must be stress. It came naturally to one in his position, and normally he had no trouble managing it. Lately however, things had taken a sharp turn into unknown territory. They were so close to their goal and yet even the smallest of mistakes could change everything. It was a struggle, trying to balance all of his facades in preparation for his lord’s return.

And now, with the near completion of the Killahead Bridge, his plans had to be fast-tracked.

He became increasingly anxious about the entire affair. Too many variables lay in the balance, too many interwoven threads that could snap at the lightest of touches. It was his own personal house of cards. His subordinates grew rowdy with each passing day. Stricklander couldn’t blame them; they could very nearly taste the lips of sweet lady victory herself as the dawn of a new age loomed, a day where his people would no longer have to hide within the shadows.

But it made everything all the harder. Even Nomura, who was normally tolerable as company, had become a thorn in his side, trying to overstep her position, intent on working her way into his own. Just yesterday she had gone over his head to Bular about the bridge’s final pieces. Not a surprise really, she was always hungry for more power, more freedom—they all were. However, now of all times—and with Atlas in the thick of it—he had begun to experience the one thing he feared most.

A loss of control.
He resisted the urge to shudder.

Before his son’s entrance into his life, he controlled every miniscule detail, having worked his way up the Order on account of his extensive knowledge of planning and perfect execution. His opponents would have called that arrogance, and perhaps it was, but he was not the one six feet under, now was he?

Stricklander took a sip of his carefully brewed tea. Not as good as Atlas’s, but tolerable. It had been strange not having the boy around as often, his dalliances with the Trollhunter and his group gradually taking up the majority of his time. For some bizarre reason, a small tender ache arose in his chest, the desire for their past routine growing with each passing day. Did…did he miss Atlas’s company?

Oh dear. His brethren would eat him alive if they knew.

He could not be distracted by his emotions, not as the head. Keeping secrets was a heavy burden, and as the highest ranked member of the Order, Stricklander was charged with the most demanding duty to maintain and grow his lady’s operations. It was his purpose in life after all.

But, truth be told, it would mean a great deal if he had someone to share them with, someone who could listen to his problems, someone who could understand him.

*There was always therapy,* his mind supplied. He immediately stifled the notion. He would have to kill them afterwards and with a small town such as Arcadia, people would talk. No, that was not a viable option.

His son would have been an option, if he were not one of the problems Stricklander was struggling with.

“You’re doing it again.” Barbara said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Oh heavens. I cannot believe I’m that obvious.” Stricklander covered his eyes with one hand, leaning forward against the table. “I’m so incredibly sorry, Barbara. This was not how I imagined our first meeting going.”
“Don’t be. I invited you, remember?” She drew closer, eyes full of concern. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He was on the cusp of saying no when the idea struck him.

Barbara.

Yes.

*Of course.*

Barbara was an outsider with no connection to the Janus Order. While he would never admit the truth to her, that did not mean he couldn’t vent out some of his frustrations. Perhaps it would be cathartic.

And if he did leak something out and she discovered his true self, well, he could always kill her.

Stricklander sighed into his tea, deliberately putting on a solemn frown. “Are you sure, Barbara? I would not want to be a bother.”

“It’s fine. What are friends for?”

Ah. *Friends.* They barely knew each other outside of texting for the past few days, but Americans were well-known for their overtly friendly nature. It made manipulating them all the easier.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “It’s always nice to have friends.”

His fingers inched toward hers. He lay his hand palm side up in a casual manner, but watched raptly for her response. Like a dream, Barbara reacted perfectly, putting her hand into his own. His eyes widened; her skin was soft and warm.

“What’s been bothering you, if you don’t mind me asking?” Barbara said.
“Work,” he stated, taking a deep breath. “Work has been a complete and utter nightmare.”

“How so?”

“It feels like everything and everyone is out to get me. My colleagues are breathing down my neck, I’ve a huge deadline approaching, the vice-principal keeps trying to mess with my project, as if the buffoon knows anything about structure and finesse, and…” Stricklander paused. “It’s my son. I… I’m worried about him. He’s been hanging out with a new group lately. He barely even knows them but suddenly he’s spending almost all his waking hours with them.”

Barbara hummed softly, a melancholic look in her eyes. “I can sympathize. My son…eludes me.”

“You have a son?” Stricklander asked. His face went blank. He had not anticipated that. She looked far too young to have any whelps of her own, or perhaps that was merely his perception of her. Human ages were quite difficult to determine sometimes.

He squinted, analyzing her. Was it possible her and the Trollhunter were connected? Now that he thought about it, Barbara and the Lake-brat did share similar blue eyes. And there was that missing person case (which his IT staff had yet to get on, the lazy buffoons).

Could it be?

Barbara smiled, though it did not appear to reach her eyes. “Yes, but he’s living somewhere far away from me now. I hope to see him again soon though…But enough about boring ol’ me. Tell me more about this son of yours. Does he go to Arcadia High with you?”

He relaxed a bit. It gave him a bit of peace of mind, that the Trollhunter and his new friend were not related. It made the inevitable killing of the human less troublesome for Stricklander.

“Goodness gracious no. He’s homeschooled.” Stricklander remarked, still thinking about her words.

Dear Pale Lady. Even the notion of Atlas going around a human high school and picking up all the human slang was nightmare-inducing. The boy was bad enough with the Trollhunter’s group influencing him.
“So does his mother teach him, or…?”

His fingers enclosed around hers. “No Mrs. Strickler, I’m afraid. She’s out of the picture.” He said. “No, he has…severe allergies. I’m afraid of exposing him.”

Barbara nodded, then said, “And you’re afraid this new crowd will put him in that position?”

“He’s a rather impressionable boy. It’s my fault, really. I protected him from so much as he was growing up. I didn’t…I didn’t want him to end up like me.”

“Oh Walter, you’re not…” Barbara began, but he put up his hand to stop her.

“I’ve done many things in my life that I’ve regretted. I don’t want him ending up like me, making the wrong choices in life. But…he’s changing so fast now. He has this entire life I don’t know about. It used to be only us. It’s so aggravating. I thought I knew everything about him, but now he’s listening to all this strange music and texting on his phone all the time, posting ‘memes’.”

Oh do not get him started on those ‘memes’. Nearly half of his messages with Atlas were now filled with pictures of cats and some cartoonish green ogre saying ridiculous messages. He almost regretted giving that boy a cell phone.

“He’s growing up, becoming an adult.” Barbara said.

Stricklander snorted, waving her off. “Oh no, he’s too young for that. He’s only fifteen. No, I just give him far more freedom than I should.”

Freedom that needed to be put in check soon enough. Atlas was too reckless, too trusting. While it might be acceptable for trolls or even some humans, changelings were not meant to be as such. But how to get through to the boy? It appeared with every passing day that Atlas was becoming increasingly entrenched with the group and further and further away from where Stricklander could keep an eye on him. It made him uneased.

“Maybe it would be good to find something to do together with him.”
And oh, if he could he would have kissed Barbara then and there (not that he would ever willingly kiss a human).

The Killahead Bridge would soon be completed. He was planning on announcing it the entire Order during the upcoming annual council meeting, but with how fast things were proceeding, he might not get that chance. All the superior officers in the main branch knew, but he had yet to speak of it to Atlas. It was a top secret project after all, and as much as he trusted Atlas, the boy was terrible at keeping most secrets. Soon though. He needed to tell him. Perhaps he would even give Atlas the honor of putting in the last piece.

“There’s an idea. I’ve been meaning to include him in something at work.” Stricklander remarked lightly.

“The play you mean?”

Stricklander cocked his head to the side, completely at a loss. “I’m sorry?”

“The theater production of Romeo and Juliet.” She coughed into her napkin. “I heard some of your high school students talking about it. Seemed interesting.”

“Ah, yes.” Stricklander remarked. “Well, the problem is, one of the people from his little group is involved in the play.”

“I see…” Barbara reached down for her bag, her face obscured.

“Yes. A new student. Jim something rather.” He looked up at her, checking to see her reaction. “In fact, I think he shares your last name.”

She continued rummaging through her bag. “Probably a coincidence. Lake is a very common name.”

“True,” he checked the clock on his phone. “It looks like my break is over. I’ve got to head back to the school.”
“Same, I mean, not to the school, but the clinic,” Barbara returned to her former position in the chair, back straight as a rail, her hands coming to her face as she shook her head in visible embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I’m so terrible with words.”

Her adorable little gestures warmed his heart.

“Not at all. You’ve given me a lot to think about. I appreciate it. And thank you Barbara, you’ve been extraordinarily lovely.” He stood, then, without thinking, picked up her hand and kissed the topside. “Do you like French food?”

“I…yes.” Barbara’s checks were as rosy as her lips.

“Then how about dinner with me this weekend? I know a lovely little French bistro across town.”

She smiled, a genuine pleasurable look that sent tingles down his spine. “That would be wonderful, Walter.”

“Please, call me Walt, Barbara.” He said.

It pleased him how red her face became, stroking his ego.

Nevertheless, this was merely a friendship. He could not risk it becoming anything more. Barbara was simply an ear to which he could vent his frustrations.

He would not allow it to be anything else.

Blinky rubbed his hands together gleefully, like a mad scientist who had just discovered his latest experiment.
This, Atlas thought, is not going to go well for me.

No, remember the deal, he told himself. He lifted his chin, Bagdwella in the corner of his vision. From behind her shop keep desk she watched the group with an anxious look on her face, hands held tightly together. Atlas couldn’t blame her. Catching the gnome was of utmost importance. If he failed, well, any chance of showing his face again in Trollmarket without being killed was slim to none.

“Remember when I told you all Trollhunters must start small?” Blinky said as he removed a sheet of cloth, revealing a golden tome-like structure.

So this was the Furgolator. Atlas drew closer, uncertainty in his stance.

“No, I don’t,” Atlas sighed. “I can’t believe I agreed to this.”

“Oh my gosh, so cool.” Toby gushed excitedly, snapping a picture of what Atlas could only describe as a gaudy-looking torture device.

Atlas tightened his grip on the pummel of his sword. It had been a hassle sneaking it out of the Order, but Blinky said he would need it to fight the gnome.

It was odd; even though it had been less than a week since he took up the mantle, his old weapon felt unbalanced and unwieldy in his grasp. He would need to practice with it more. As much as he enjoyed the perfection of the Sword of Daylight, his old blade still held an important place in his heart. It was a gift from his father and one of his most important treasures.

His eyes switched over to the machine as it began to whirl to life. Like a train, a high pitched noise erupted from the structure as steam rose from one of the strange cylindrical tubes attached to its top. Two doors swung open, revealing a surprisingly empty interior. Atlas peered inside.

“Still bad idea,” AAARRRGGGHH!!! commented from behind them.

“I agree with AAARRRGGGHH!!!,” Atlas remarked, scratching his left horn as he stepped inside the contraption. “So, how the hell is this thing going to help me get a gnome out of a hole?”
Atlas startled as the gates commenced to shut close around him. Just as they were nearly sealed, he heard Blinky say, “If the gnome won’t come out, the Trollhunter must go in.”

“Wait…what?” Atlas said, looking through the window.

Blinky chuckled, “Don’t worry. We often use the Furgolator to compress minerals.” He clipped together a pair of tongs. “And now for the anthracite.”

“Hey!” Toby remarked as the stone was taken off his hands. “Ah man, I wanted to put it in.”

“This is a very dangerous procedure, Tobias. One wrong move in putting this into the machine and poof! Half of Trollmarket would be blown to smithereens.”

“Compress minerals? Blown to smithereens?” Atlas nearly shrieked. “Please tell me you’ve done this on actual people before.”

It was a long pause before Blinky answered, “Not exactly. But I’m not concerned.”

“You’re not the one trapped inside it!” Atlas said in a higher octave than his normal voice. “Oh sweet merciful Pale Lady. This is how it ends for me. Squished to death.”

“Nothing to worry about, Master Atlas. We work best under pressure.”

“Easy for you to say!” Atlas screamed back, coughing all the while. “And what’s with all the smoke in here? Are you trying to suffocate me?”

And just to add salt to the wound that was his upcoming death, the machine began to shake, the sound it made so loud his ears nearly bled. The steam clouded his vision. Atlas beat at the wall with his fist.

Why did he agree to this? He never should have trusted Blinky. The troll was a step from insane anyway. He closed his eyelids, jaw clenched as images flashed subconsciously flew through his
head. He tried to push them away, but they continued to come at him, progressively clearer with each passing second.

_Darkness. Breathing rough. No escape. Only two voices from behind the barrier reminded him that he was still alive._

“How long has Specimen J been in the tank?”

“Forty-eight hours and seventeen minutes.”

“Any change in status?”

“Not currently, Dr. Mordred.”

“Hmm. What a pity. And here I thought we would finally make a breakthrough.”

“Would you like to continue?”

“No, no. Let’s not waste any more time than we already have. I suppose we’ll have to try something else. Get him out of there and put him back in his room.”

“Affirmative.”

Atlas banged his head against the wall, tearing his sword off his back and throwing it against the floor. Sweat poured down his face. His heartbeat skyrocketed, which only made breathing difficult and excruciating. His lungs were barely keeping pace.

No, no, no. Not now. He couldn’t start remembering that time now. He was not going to have a panic attack in the middle of this stupid contraption. He started counting, willing away the beginnings of another episode.

“Come on, you gotta get him out of there! What if he dies?” Someone (Toby, Atlas believed) yelled.
“Don’t just stand there, AAARRRGHHH!!” Atlas heard Blinky concur.

The doors shot open. He breathed, in and out, trying to calm himself. It’s okay. He was alive. The machine didn’t kill him. Atlas, legs shaky and stomach unsettled, looked around himself, then up. And up.

Oh, great. Everyone was gigantic now. Or rather, he was the size of a freaking doll.

Shakily, he walked out, shoulders tight and mouth drawn into a frown.

Atlas glared up at them with the most spite he could muster. “I hate you all.”

Toby let out a girlish squeal. “He’s like a little action figure. Oh my gosh, he’s a pocket Atlas.”

“Oh, that is,” Blinky coughed, trying badly to hide his laughter, “a rather good play on words, Tobias. Yes, I suppose he would be a…pocket Atlas.”

“I really really hate all of you right now.”

“Oh my, someone’s cranky.” Blinky picked him up from the floor, cradling him in his hands, all eyes alight in wonder. “It appears that the Furgolator functioned perfectly! Look at you. All compressed and proportional.”

Atlas crossed his arms. “You sneak. You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Sorry,” AAARRRGGHHH!!! said. “Not supposed to tell.”

“It’s not so bad,” Toby said. “You’re kind of adorable like this.”

Atlas hissed, “I can still smother you in your sleep, Tobes.”
“Ouch, dude. Come on, don’t sweat the small stuff.” Toby snorted out, outwardly gleeful at using the words.

“Small stuff? Oh ho, I get it now. ‘Start small’, ‘little problem’. Cute, Blinky. Real damn cute.” Atlas grabbed two fistfuls of his hair, groaning. “This is terrible! I can’t be shrunk. I have reports to make! I have to make dinner for my mentor. I have the school play! I can’t miss any more rehearsals!”

“You have a gnome to catch.” Blinky added, setting him down at the entrance to the hole. “Now, onward, Master Atlas, and fetch your destiny!”

“Wait, wait!” Toby giggled like a schoolgirl, picking up Atlas’s fallen sword, which was now effectively the size of a pencil. He presented the weapon with a mock bow. “Your royal sword, my king.”

Atlas yanked the weapon from his friend’s fingers, then jabbed it into the other’s fleshy hand. “Shut up.”

“Ow!” Toby exclaimed, cradling his hand, then after not finding any blood, crossed his arms. “Geez, dude, it was just a joke. Have a little restraint, yeah?”

He deliberately chose to ignore his friend’s last words, descending into the hole. Using his left foot, he kicked up a cap with a peace symbol on it, catching it in mid-air and fixing it to his arm.

“Oh, one last thing to know when dealing with a gnome, Master Atlas,” Blinky called out from behind him, “and this is of dire importance: Do not touch its hat.”


“You’ve read it?” Blinky said excitedly.

“No, of course not! I’ve barely even had time to sleep! What makes you think I’ve had a moment to read the damn thing?” Atlas responded, voice echoing off the walls.
The hole was surprisingly deep and well-maintained. He bypassed a creepy doll head hanging from the ceiling, keeping his makeshift shield close to his body.

Once he was finally outside of his friends’ attention, his shoulders relaxed. He nearly had a panic attack in front of them. Would they think less of him if he did? That he was weak?

And now he was shrunken down to the size of a toy. This was not how he imagined his Thursday night going.

As he traveled down the tunnel he made note of the mysterious emerald and violet stones illuminating the area. Did the gnome bring them in? No, that was doubtful, especially with how embedded into the bedrock they appeared.

It wasn’t the first time Atlas had seen such stones, though they were far larger, the biggest being the Heartstone. Were they all miniature Heartstones, or were they powered by the main one? How did stone magic work anyway?

Maybe he should get started on that book Blinky gave him.

The gnome’s laughter grew louder. Atlas slowly crept forward, weapon at the ready. He willed his heart to calm down, even though his body was a hair-trigger away from fighting. His nemesis soon came into view. The creature was tittering on beside a gnome corpse, likely the one it had stolen from Bagdwella’s hands the day before.

And it appeared to be using his amulet as a table. Great.

“Aren’t you a big fellow now?” Atlas whispered, adjusting his thumb upward, closer to the top of the handle. It didn’t matter what size he was; Atlas had faced bigger foes before. In fact, most, if not all of the people he’d fought were taller than him.

He watched on as the gnome offered a Nugat Nummie to its fallen comrade, who—to no surprise but the gnome’s—did not appear very hungry. The gnome chattered angrily when its friend did not take its offering, decided instead on eating the candy itself.

Atlas bent down to the ground, eyes focused on the amulet in front of him. He needed to get it back, but how?
The head of the dead gnome broke off, rolling down until it neared Atlas. The teen stepped silently backward, into the darkness of the corner. He lowered his sword, brandishing his shield in front of him instead. *Wait for it,* he thought.

From the light of the stones, he could see the shadow of the gnome move closer. It chattered along, unaware of his presence; Atlas smirked. Slowly, it bent over to pick up the fallen skull.

Like lightening, his shield came down hard against the back of the gnome’s head. Shocked, the gnome fell backward. Atlas used the butt of his sword and smashed it directly between the eyes.

This only served to anger the little gremlin, recovering quickly to lunge directly for his throat. Atlas growled, displaying his tusks, and ran forward, knocking the gnome on its back. Though the gnome might be physically stronger at this size, Atlas has the advantage of training.

“Give me back my amulet and I won’t take your life, gnome.” Atlas commanded, driving the sword closer to its neck.

It babbled like a banshee, using its feet to kick him off.

Thinking fast, Atlas tried to grab onto its clothes for leverage, only to pull off something else.

“Oh crap,” Atlas said, eyes widening as he looked at the red cloth clenched within his claws. “I touched his hat. I touched the hat. Shit, shit, shit.”

Beneath the hat, a tall sharp cone of hair sat. The creature paused, looking between Atlas and his hand. A second later, the tattering grew louder, its dismay written all of its reddening face. Head positioned forward, it tried to skewer him, but Atlas backpedaled, evading every jab.

Behind him, the light of the amulet glowed. Atlas clenched his teeth. If only he could get back over there. The gnome came at him again. Instinctively, Atlas ducked then used his feet to springboard the feisty little asshole into the air.

This was his chance! He threw his sword at it. The gnome dodged by a mere inch, but ended up falling into a small open hole, its cone head squeezed inside. Inwardly thanking lady luck, Atlas
rushed towards the amulet.

His foot hit metal.

“For the Glory of Merlin,” Atlas began, relishing the look of panic on the gnome’s face. “Daylight is mine to command!”

The amulet shrank immediately, fitting to his person. In the aftermath of his transformation, the magical force of the armor forced the creature out of the hole and against the wall. As the magic settled, Atlas summoned the Sword of Daylight.

It cowered. Atlas sighed. As annoying as the critter was, the look of fear in its eyes struck Atlas hard. Earlier, he’d seen the little critters traveling in groups, but this one was alone. Well, currently alone, especially after what happened to his friend.

Atlas surveyed the small room. He’d been expecting far more gnomes than this. Had it really only been this little guy that caused a fuss?

Its eyes bulged, saliva dripping from his pointy fangs. Ah man, Atlas thought. How could he kill something so adorable?

Picking up his old sword from the ground, he tried to adjust it to his back. The amulet must have picked up on his intentions, as he heard a small click at the center of his shoulder blades.

The gnome backed away when he came over. Silently, he put the red hat on the creature’s head. The gnome looked back at him in curiosity.

“What? Hats don’t look good on me.” Atlas said.

It cocked its head to the side.

Atlas walked around the gnome, poking his Daylight into its back. “Now, onward. You’ve been a real pain in the ass. It’s time you faced justice.”
Outside the hole, his friends waited eagerly, brightening up as he walked into view out of the hole.

Blinky clapped his hands together. “You summoned the armor and caught the gnome! Well played, Master Atlas.”

He blushed. It felt good, being praised like that. And he’d actually completed his first mission!

The teen bowed. “Thank you, thank you. All good things come in small packages.”

“Expedient and good-humored.” Blinky remarked.

“For now,” Atlas said. “And between you and me, next time? A warning would be really appreciated.”

“Noted, Master Atlas.”

“Did you just crack a joke?” Toby said. “So I guess you’re not so grumpy being shrunken anymore? Does that mean I can make more short jokes?”

“Don’t push it.” He responded.

Atlas pushed the gnome forward, who sighed morosely. It jumped to the floor, quickly snatched up by Toby into a small sack.

“Oh, my hero!” Bagdwella said dramatically, hands clasped together.

Atlas raised an eyebrow. Yeah, he didn’t think for a minute that she was actually impressed. More satisfied with not having to pay for pest control most likely. Atlas would have made a biting remark, but exhaustion was soon catching up with him.

“A deal’s a deal.” Atlas said to her.
She eyed him warily, but nodded. “Yes. I won’t go spreading your secret, little Trollhunter.”

“And the business contract?”

She laughed behind her hand, eyes calculating. “We’ll discuss it at a later date.”

Satisfied, he switched over to his trainer.

“So, when does this shrinking stuff wear off?” Atlas asked Blinky. “Please tell me it wears off.”

“Ah, not to worry. All you need to do is sleep it off.” Blinky said. “By morning, you should be as good as new.”

“Should?”

“Ah ha, will. Will be good as new.” Blinky corrected. “Oh, and congrats on completing your first mission! Atlas "the Gnome Slayer"! Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? Now all that is left is for you to take care of it.”

He vanished Daylight, arms crossed as he peered down at Toby’s bag. “Kill it, you mean.”

“Wait, seriously?” Toby interjected in an alarmed tone.

“Rule number two.” Blinky pointed out.

“Always finish the fight.” Atlas quoted.

Blinky wiggled his fingers together. “Ah ha! Yes. You remember. And by "finish", I mean deaden. Terminate. A finishing blow, or as the French say, le coup de grâce.”
AAARRRGHH!!! illustrated by making the universal gesture of cutting off one’s neck.

Atlas nodded, balancing his non-magic sword against his shoulder. “I’ll take it topside and get rid of it then.”

The trolls appeared satisfied with his answer.

Atlas glanced over at the sack near Toby’s bed. Every few seconds it moved, clearly unsatisfied with its current accommodations. He didn’t blame the creature. Being trapped was not a pleasant experience.

Subconsciously, his claws palmed the amulet in his pocket, making sure it was still there. Losing it to the gnome had been a close call. He’d nearly blown his cover.

And now he would have to get rid of the gnome.

“What are you going to do?” Toby asked.

“Didn’t you hear me back there? I promised to get rid of it.” Atlas said.

Toby lay his head in between his hands. “But he’s so cute. Sure, he’s a little asshole, but he can play guitar and sing! Maybe we could make him into a youtube star. He’d be a hit on Tumblr and Reddit.”

“So it’s a ‘he’ now?”

“He looks like a ‘he’ doesn’t he?” He said.
Toby poked the bag; the creature hissed.

“I guess.” Atlas said quietly, looking away. “Tobes…I don’t think I can do it.”

“Well, I guess you could refer to it as a ‘she’, but—”

“Not that! The killing. I…I don’t think I can kill him. It’s in his nature to be a scavenger. Who am I to judge? I’m not a killer. I mean, I will if I have to, I suppose. But not like this. It feels wrong.”

“I’m a killer.” Toby remarked.

Atlas perked up, intrigued. The human had killed someone? Was it an enemy, or perhaps a rival? “Who did you kill?”

“Detective Snuggles.”

An investigator? Not exactly what Atlas was expecting. Maybe he misjudged Toby’s battle prowess after all. “What did you do?”

“Well, it was just past Easter, and I had pulled in a big haul.”

“A big haul of what? Dead bodies?”

Toby’s mouth dropped. “What? No! Chocolate, dude.”

“What does Chocolate have to do with a Christian holiday? Does your deity give you this chocolate or is it an offering?”

“No, no. Okay, so there’s an Easter Bunny and he lays eggs around the yard and afterward, you’re supposed to go pick them up.”
“There’s a bunny that lays eggs?” Atlas squinted, mouth pulled into a thin line. “Is it somewhere in Arcadia? How many of these ‘Easter Bunnies’ exist? Can we catch one?”

“Okay, this conversation is going completely off the rails.” Toby smacked his forehead. “No, no, none, and no. They’re not real. It’s something for kids. Like the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus. They’re not real, but people tell little kids to keep the mystery alive.”

“Ah, I see,” Atlas remarked, rubbing his chin. “Like the Jötnar King then.”

“Jötnar King?” Toby asked, lifting his chin.

“The biggest of trolls. Even mountain trolls cannot compare to his vast size. As white as winter and just as cold. His horns are long and curved over his head like a ram’s. They say his fangs are the color of blood, because of how much like likes meat. He comes down from the mountains to hang and eviscerate the human children.” Atlas conveyed his words with vivid gestures, even mimicking the gutting. “We hang nooses from our doors to ward him off, should he mistake one of us changelings for humans. We drink hot cow’s blood to throw off our scents.”

Toby bent forward, face pale. “Wow? Really?”

Atlas broke out into laughter. “No, of course not. Oh dear Pale Lady, I can’t believe you fell for it. As if I don’t know what Easter is. Pft.”

“Not cool, dude.”

Atlas laughed. “Sorry, sorry. My apologies. That was mean.”

“And you got me sidetracked. Now, where was I?” Toby said. “Oh yeah, so, Nana warned me not to leave my haul lying around, but I never thought that cat would find my stash.”

“Detective Snuggles is a cat? Oh, this is rich.” Atlas continued to laugh, holding his stomach.

“I was traumatized! By the time I found him, it was too late.”
The shrunken teen calmed down, regarding his friend with tired eyes.

“There are worse ways to go.” Atlas said softly, mind drifting elsewhere. “Death by chocolate would be a luxury for me.”

Toby drummed his fingers against his crisscrossed legs. “So…Have you ever killed anyone, Atlas?”

Silently, he brought the sword’s pummel to his chin. Atlas had been waiting for this kind of question to come up, but not this soon. “No…but I’ve seen others do it. As the head’s assistant, I’m called into a lot of meetings. Most are administrative-related, but sometimes, there’s…executions. Traitors to the cause. I saw a changeling get its head chopped off by Bular once. It wasn’t pretty.”

Toby gulped. “Your Order doesn’t sound like a very nice place to live.”

“No, but it’s home.”

“What about your other home?” Toby said. “I’m sure your mom would love to see you again.”

“I think,” Atlas mulled over his words, then said, “I think I would love to see her again too. What… What happened to her when Jim disappeared?”

“She was really distraught, dude. Like, I didn’t see her leave the house for months except to go looking for you. Nana and her talked a lot. They still talk now. I think they’re friends or something. She cried a lot too. It was really hard to watch.”

“How is she now?”

“Better, I guess. I don’t really talk with her that much. But I think she really really wants you home. You’re her son. She loves you. She’d be over the moon if you came home.”

Atlas gestured towards his less than human features. “Have you seen me? She’ll scream bloody murder if I met her like this. She loves Jim, not…me.”
“What if you explained it to her?”

“Explain it? Toby, do you know how insane that sounds? Where would I even start?”

“Maybe from the beginning?” Toby said, scratching his nose. “How much do you remember from before? Perhaps you could start there.”


“But?”

“I’ve been getting flashes of things. Ever since…ever since I picked up the amulet, I’ve been dreaming more than ever. And they’re not dream-dreams. I think I’m remembering things.”

Toby jumped off the bed. It felt like an earthquake to Atlas. “That’s great!”

“Yeah, it would be,” Atlas began, “if I wasn’t reliving some of the worst parts of my life.”

“You mean life in the Janus Order?”

“No, not that, I,” Atlas lay his sword against his lap, claws running up and down its blade. “I don’t think I want to talk about it.”

“Aw, why not? I’m a good listener. I promise I won’t say anything.”

“It’s not that. There’s just some things in my life I’m not comfortable sharing. It’s not you, Tobes.” Atlas bit down on his lower lip. “If anything, it’s me.”

Atlas got up off the bed, jumping off to the ground with ease, despite his size. One of the perks of being half-troll, he supposed.
Toby crouched down, smiling in a comforting way. “Well, I’m always here if you need me, dude.”

“Thanks.” Atlas turned on his phone, flicking through the messages with his thumb. “I think I’m gonna go to bed soon. I’ll talk with you in the morning.”

“You’re welcome to use my bed.” Toby said. “Or even the doll house. It’s got all its furniture and everything!”

“I think I’ll just sleep over in the corner.”

“Not the most comfiest of places.” He said.

Atlas sat down, laying his sword to the side of him. “No, but it is the most secure against attackers.”

“We have a cat. I’d hate it if she did anything to you while you were asleep.”

“I’m a light sleeper.” Atlas remarked. “No cat will get its claws into me.”

Toby shook his head. “You’re weird, you know that?”

“Well, you’re not exactly normal, Tobes.” Atlas replied. “How many humans are friends with trolls?”

“Hey, you never know. Us humans are pretty friendly folk.”

Atlas leaned back against the wall, shutting his eyes. “Some yes, but I’ve had my fair share of the not so friendly, too.”

His shoulders relaxed, body conforming to the cool back surface. As Toby said, it wasn’t the most comfortable, but it would make do. He slept better when he was battle ready anyway.
“Atlas?”

He sighed, opening one eye. “Yes, Tobes?”

“You know I’ve got your back, right?” Toby said. “Through thick and thin. I’ll be there for you, even if you push me away. I’ve got your back. Just…don’t disappear on me again, okay? Promise?”

“Tobes…” Atlas groaned, wanting to go to sleep.

“Please, dude. I don’t think I could handle losing you a second time. I mean, I know you and Jim are different, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’ll always be my best friend. It was really hard the first time, and—”


“Yeah…Night, dude.”
On any normal Friday, Atlas slept in until noon. Alas, today was not one of those days.

Atlas covered his nose; the smell of dirty gym socks and Nuggat Nummies were not a pleasant combination, and the cramped dimensions of Toby’s bag made it even more pungent.

He snuck a peek outside of the bag. Human teenagers ambled around aimlessly. Probably trying to waste as much time outside of class as they could before the bell rang. He couldn’t blame them. Atlas cringed as his right horn knocked against the metal zipper pull.

Toby carried the backpack in front of him like a baby, all the while peering down at Atlas with a dopey satisfied grin.

“This was not what I meant when I said I needed a ride to school, Tobes,” Atlas said.

After the initial panic of walking up miniature still, Atlas found dozens of messages from his dad.
Stricklander had asked (ordered) him to arrive at the school during the morning to receive his newest instructions. Why he couldn’t do it over the phone, Atlas had no idea. It took all of Atlas’s willpower not to pull out his hair.

“Aw, come on. It’s not so bad,” Toby said.

“Not so bad? You’re not the one who’s seven inches tall!” His mouth drew into a fine line. “Blinky said this would wear off by morning.”

“Maybe it’s taking longer because you’re a half-troll or something,” Toby suggested.

“Or, and much likelier, Blinky didn’t know what was going to happen and I have to deal with the consequences.” Atlas groaned, “What if I’m stuck like this forever? How am I going to fight Bular? Stab him in the eyes?”

“That might work,” Toby whispered, looking up once to give the stink eye to a fellow student who was watching him. “What? Can’t a guess have a proper conversation with his backpack? Shew! Shew!”

Once they were several meters away, Atlas remarked, “Smooth.”

“It’s a gift.”

“The fact of the matter is, I can’t live like this,” Atlas said.

Toby’s eyes brightened, waving his head back and forth like the tail of an excited puppy. “Oh, oh! Speaking of living, I got rid of the gnome for you last night.”


“Well, I know you’re kind of against killing,” He said. “Soooo, I did it for you.”

“Toby,” Atlas started, sticking his head outside the bag, his face the perfect picture of alarmed.
“What did you do exactly?”

“Well,” Toby started, only to be interrupted by man from behind. Atlas dropped down back into the backpack, hiding between Toby’s books. He tilted his ear close to the opening. The man’s accent was foreign. German? Austrian?

“Señor Domzalski,” A man said as he approached. His footsteps were as loud and commanding as his voice. Curiosity getting the better of him, he peered out to see who it was. If Atlas had to describe him, he would say the man had the body of a bodybuilder and fashion sense of a door to door salesman. “Are you ready for your oral exam today?”

Toby’s shoulders seized up, his hold on the straps of his backpack loosening. “Ah, Señor Uhl! Hi, I mean, hola. Oh wow, the exam. I completely…T-Totally ready. Uh…”

Without warning, Toby dropped one of the straps; the bag immediately tipped forwards. The change in position threw Atlas halfway out, his torso dangling. What amounted to a four story drop eyed him from below. He sucked in his breath, the claws of his feet clenched tight to the inner walls of the backpack. A cold sweat began to break out all over his body. He could feel his grip on the fabric loosening.

Two large fingers encased Atlas torso. He froze. It was humiliating enough to be picked up by Toby and Blinky. An unknown human made him feel even more exposed. Though still as a statue he struggled to keep a straight face as the human turned him over, inspecting him like an object.

“You need to be more careful with your…dolls. This one was halfway out of your backpack.” Señor Uhl brought Atlas to his face, his index finger stroking Atlas’s hair. “Hmm. Very lifelike. Is it supposed to be a demon? A devil? Something from one of your American cartoons?”

“Ah, yes?” Toby squeaked, voice high pitched. “He’s, I mean it’s…part of my presentation?”

Señor Uhl nodded, handing Atlas to Toby’s eager hands. “Excellent. Come, let us walk to class, Señor Domzalski.”

“Sure, I mean, sí, Señor Uhl,” Toby said.

“How are your other classes? I hope you have gotten over your fear of speaking. I would hate to
have a repeat of last time.”

“Oh, yeah…totally. Been practicing in the mirror and everything.” Toby responded.

His friend’s fingers squeezed around Atlas’s body, constricting his entire upper body. Atlas couldn’t breathe. When the teacher wasn’t looking, Atlas sank his fangs into his friend’s thumb.

“Oh! Damn it. That hurt, Atlas.” Toby said, relinquishing his vice-like grip.

Señor Uhl leaned over. “Pardon?”

“Oh, my action figure. His, I mean its name is Atlas.” Toby explained. “He’s got a lot of annoying pointy parts and one of them snagged my finger. It’s not like I’m talking to him personally or anything. I’m not crazy, ha, ha, ha…”

“I see,” the teacher said, opening the classroom door.

Inside was only marginally better than the hallway. Marginally.

“Señor Palchuk! Put your phone away. Class is starting.” Señor Uhl pointed to another student. “And you, Señorita Wang! What did I tell you about chewing gum in my class? Detention!”

For some reason Toby had yet to move away from his position at the door. Atlas glanced up; Toby was sweating up a storm, his front teeth biting down hard on his bottom lip.

“I-I can’t do this,” Toby whispered, bringing Atlas closer to his face, his back facing the class. “I don’t have anything prepared. With all the Trollhunters stuff I completely forgot to study for it. Dude, I’m going to bomb this exam!”

“You can do this,” Atlas encouraged.

“What do I say?”
“Say whatever comes to you.” Atlas patted his friend’s forefinger. “I believe in you.”

“L-O-L, is that a doll?” Steve sneered, “Aren’t you a little old for toys, buttmunch?”

“He’s not a doll,” Toby said defensively. “He’s…a super awesome action figure.”

Señor Uhl tapped a pencil to his board, then pointed it at Toby. “En Español, Señor Domzalski.”

Toby’s eyes bulged. “We’re beginning? Now?”

“Sí.”

“Okay, sure. Right.” He took a deep breath, glancing down at Atlas for a second, then lifting his chin. “Este es...mi figurito de acción favorito. Él…es muy coolio. Él can lucha muy bien. Él can, I mean, puede ser antipatico sometimes, pero es porque…yo pienso que él tengo mucho miedo. Él no tiene muchos amigos. Él tiene muchos responsibilidades too. Pero él es muy strong, muy muy. Y—”

Someone screeched, “Rat! It’s a rat!”

“It’s over here!” Another yelled.

A girl jumped up onto her table, finger pointed towards the left corner of the room. “No! It’s there! Right there!”

A familiar tittering met Atlas’s ears.

The entire class descended into chaos. Students climbed atop the chairs and desks, pushing one another to get as far away from the ground as possible. Claire appeared to be the least affected, still at her desk as the anarchy ensued. She threw the group a look of disbelief, before shaking her head and nestling down into a book.
“Everyone calm down!” Señor Uhl yelled. He grabbed a broom and wielded it like a sword. “Now, where is it?”

Toby turned towards the chalkboard, hiding Atlas from view. “How did the gnome get all the way here?”

“What did you do?” Atlas said, though he already suspected the answer.

“I kinda sorta…flushed him down the toilet,” Toby answered. “What? Don’t look at me like that. It was humane.”

“He must have followed us somehow. He looks pretty angry. I wonder—” Atlas raised an eyebrow at Toby. “He’s also missing his hat. Any idea where it might be?”

His friend scratched his cheek sheepishly. “I might have taken it off of him as a souvenir?”

“Seriously?” Atlas groaned. “Okay, hand me the hat. I’ll lure him out of the class.”

Toby pulled the red cloth out of his pocket. “Atlas, I’m really sorry, I—”

“Toby,” Atlas said. “It’s okay. I—we’ll figure something out. Cover for me. Make up a distraction.”

Toby nodded, relinquishing his hold on Atlas. “Got it. Try not to get squashed.”

Atlas climbed down from his Toby’s hand, hitting the floor with the balls of his feet.

“There’s another one over there!” Toby shouted, motioning at the back of the class.

*Good thinking, Tobes,* Atlas thought. It deterred attention from where the gnome truly was: underneath Claire’s desk.
He smacked his forehead. Damnit.

Atlas broke out into a sprint, waving the fabric like a bullfighter. “Hey! Looking for this?”

The gnome went crazy, immediately zeroing in on his location. Atlas dashed left, narrowly dodging its claws and cone shaped head. When the creature tried to side-swipe his face, he cartwheeled then finished with a somersault.

Atlas narrowly missed Claire’s shoes, back-flipping to avoid them. She crossed her legs. He quickly averted his gaze.

This wasn’t going to work. He needed a different strategy. Atlas put his hands up in front of him. The gnome stilled, uncertain. Its nose wrinkled, lower lip quivering.

While Atlas wasn’t a master of reading people like his mentor, he knew body language.

It was scared, Atlas realized. And why wouldn’t it be? Taken from his home, his only possession stolen from him—it didn’t take a genius to figure out that the little gnome was absolutely terrified with the world around him. And, like any animal, it lashed out.

Carefully, he walked over, hands out in what he hoped was a peaceful gesture. Just a little more and —

Wait, was his right hand always bigger than his left?

“Crap! Shit, shit, shit!” Atlas chanted furiously. He was growing bigger by the second. He waved the hat, grabbing the gnome’s attention once again, and ran towards the exit. Thank the Pale Lady, Toby left the door open.

Toby noticed his exit, eyes widening, before he quickly shut the door behind him.

Atlas slid like he was heading for home base, hitting one of the lockers. Unlike the shrinking, growing came in short rapid spurts; first an arm, then a leg,—the entire process more than uncomfortable. Not as bad as his first transformation with the amulet, but pretty darn close.
Speaking of amulets. His claws dug inside his pocket, pulling out the device. He chanted the incantation as his body finished expanding. The armor encased his body, his troll features disappearing.

His heart thundered in his chest. Atlas frantically scanned the area. When he found no on-lookers, he let out a sigh of relief. He was back to his normal size and no one saw him. He snatched up the gnome with one hand, then, carefully, placed the hat back on his head.

“Sorry about all this,” Atlas apologized.

The gnome made a frustrated noise, bearing his fangs. Atlas struggled not to smile at the creature’s pure adorableness.

“And I’m sorry Toby flushed you down his toilet. How about a truce?”

The gnome huffed, but was too exhausted to do anything else. His little beady eyes began to close. He was nodding off.

Before he received an answer the door cracked open, nearly falling off its hinges. Atlas immediately hid the gnome behind his back.

Broom in hand, Señor Uhl looked about ready to skewered him with the makeshift weapon, but paused mid-strike.

Señor Uhl looked from left to right, breathing heavily. “Student, did you see a rat just now?”


Señor Uhl looked him over “Are you wearing armor?”

“It’s for the play.” Atlas added, “Romeo and Juliet.”
“Costumes aren’t a part of the school dress code,” The teacher said. “What are you doing out here? First period started ten minutes ago.”

“Oh, I’m, ah…”

Toby snuck past Señor Uhl and dragged Atlas inside by the arm.


Atlas motioned his thumb towards Toby. “What he said.”

There was a softening in the Spanish teacher’s gaze. He opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it.

Finally, he said, “Not bad, Señor Domzaski. A rather unorthodox presentation, but your Spanish has improved. And you didn’t freeze up this time. C-plus.” Señor Uhl’s gaze landed on Atlas. “As for you, Señor…?”


Recognition showed up in his eyes. “Ah, yes, the new student. We don’t normally get transfers this far into the semester.”

“Ah, yeah. Crazy, huh? I start Monday.”

The teacher frowned, brows knitted together. “What are you doing here so early then?”

“I…wanted to see how classes were?” Atlas said, hoping he didn’t sound as nervous as he felt. “You know, really get a feel of American high schools. I’m all about the, um…school experience?”

“Excellent. It is always nice to see a student with a passion for learning.” Señor Uhl patted him on
the back. “Come, come inside. We have a few more students doing their own presentations. You can spend the weekend preparing for your own oral examination.”

Atlas took a step back. “But, sir, I just got here. You can’t expect me to—”

“I’m sure Señor Domzalski would be happy to assist.”

“Oh, you bet,” Toby said, coming around Atlas’s side with his backpack. “Don’t worry, Jimbo. I’ll help get you up to speed in no time! Here, let me get you some paper and a pencil for class. You can reach inside my backpack to pull them out.”

His friend wiggled his eyebrows, eyes gesturing toward his bag. Atlas nodded, subtly depositing the gnome inside the backpack and pulling out the suggested materials. In a flash, Toby zipped up the bag.

“Thanks,” Atlas whispered. Toby threw him a thumbs up.

“There’s an open seat near Señor Palchuk.” Señor Uhl gestured to an empty desk.

Steve stood up, presenting the chair with a dark smirk on his mug. “Yeah, come have a seat, Lake.”

Atlas put a hand on the chair, but Steve wouldn’t let go. Atlas jerked his hand back, but Steve resisted. “Thank you for the chair, hum—Stan.”

“Steve,” the boy said, lisping the word.

“Ah yeah, Psycho Steve, wasn’t it.” Atlas said, intentionally lisping the name. “You look different today. Did you do something with your hair?”

“You broke my front tooth, freak. And sprained my arm. I can’t do practice for a whole week because of you.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m onto you.”

Atlas finally got the chair away, setting it down. “Careful, Palchuk. Wouldn’t want to lose the other
one too.”

“What’d you—”

Señor Palchuk. Señor Lake.” The teacher came between them, tapping his pencil against his hand. “Please, take your seat.”

The rest of the class period was spent in quiet torture, Steve doing everything in his power to annoy the other. Spitballs, paper planes, erasers—whatever Steve had at his disposal, he used. At the ringing of the bell, the students began packing up. Steve approached his desk, blocking him from leaving.

“I’m not through with you, Lake. You picked the wrong guy to mess with.”

Atlas popped his knuckles, one after another. “This is cute and all, but you need to lay off, Psycho Steve.”

“Or what?” Steve said in a mocking tone. “You gonna call your mommy and daddy?”

Atlas cracked his neck sharply. “Alright, you want another go at me? Fine. Midnight, this Saturday. Soccer field.”

“You better not chicken out, again.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Steve growled, then pushed him away with his shoulder, stomping towards the door.

Once the class was empty, Toby crossed the room over to his side, a spring in his step. As they walked through the hallway, Toby put out a fist. Now accustomed to the gesture, Atlas bumped it with his own.

Toby pumped his fist into the air. “Woohoo! Crisis averted! Who knew gnomes could be so
“Well, I don’t know much about gnomes, but that little guy definitely is,” Atlas said.

“And, Dude, did you just challenge Psycho Steve to a fight?” Toby asked. “I mean, that’s awesome sauce and all, because actually getting to see him get his ass handed to him would be amazeballs, but what if you get caught?”

“Oh, I’m not going. Midnights on Saturdays are when the school runs their sprinkler systems.” Atlas grinned. “But Steve doesn’t know that.”

“That’s…actually pretty tame, coming from you.”

He rolled his shoulders. “Steve’s a human. It’s not like he can really do anything to hurt me.”

Claire passed him on the left, stopping to open her locker. His stomach began to do flip-flops. Leaving Toby's side, he approached her hesitantly.

“Claire, ah, it’s nice to see you.” Atlas said, ears burning. “So, apparently I have an exam this Monday and—”

“Where were you, Jim?” She said, not meeting his gaze. “You missed last night’s rehearsal. This is the second time this week.”

“The play, wow. I’m so sorry. Things have been hectic lately,” Atlas said.

“Look, I don’t know what you’ve got going on, but this play is pretty important to me. My family’s coming, and if you make me look like an idiot up there—”


She shook her head, lips drawn together in a thin line. “Just be there tonight, okay? Also, I know Steve is a jerk, but there are better ways to finish a fight than punching someone in the face.”
“Ah, excuse me?” Atlas said. “Steve started the fight, not me. Plus, he pushed you down. What was I supposed to do?”

Claire held her books tighter to her chest. “The point is, you had options.”

“Like what?” Atlas said, annoyance rising. “Letting Steve hit me?”

“You could have gotten a teacher,” She suggested.

“Where was I going to find a teacher with him coming at me?”

“You could have walked away,” Claire said. “You broke his front tooth!”

“So?”

She shook her head, no longer looking at him. “Ugh, you’re impossible.”

“And you’re being a naïve child!” He responded.

Her cheeks turned rosy. Brows furrowed, she spun around and walked away. Shit. Atlas’s shoulders slumped. The third time he’s spoken with her and he’s already screwing everything up. Atlas followed then tapped her on the shoulder.

“Wait, please!” Atlas begged. “Claire!”

“What?” She said coolly.

“I…I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit Steve.” He screwed his eyes shut. “I got scared and reacted. It’s just…this entire place is completely different to what I’m used to. There’s so many different rules and expectations. It feels like I’m in a different universe.”
“Well,” she snorted, eyes softening, “that’s high school for you.”

“And I shouldn’t have snapped at you. That was rude of me. Things at home have been really ah—complicated and I let my anger get the best of me.”

She sighed, scratching the side of her nose. “Yeah, well, I didn’t really think about it from your point of view either. Listen, I gotta go to my next period, but here,” She tore a piece of notebook paper out of her journal and scribbled down a series of numbers. “My cell. If you have any questions about American stuff or want to practice lines from the play, I’m happy to help.”


She closed her locker, tucking a stray hair behind her ear before waving goodbye. He watched her stride, the sway of her hips mesmerizing. Toby punched him in the arm.

“Ow! What was that for?” Atlas rubbed the bruised area.

“A little payback. I’ve got two little holes in my thumb, curtesy of your fangs. Also, you and Claire are so disgustingly adorable.”

“Did…did you listen to our entire conversation?”

“Dude, I was only a few feet away. What else was I supposed to do? Twiddle my thumbs?” Toby peered over, a knowing smile emerging on his face. “What did she give you? Oh nice! You got her digits? Good job.”

“She’s so…” He struggled to find the words. “She’s all the best words put together, Tobes. Is she like that with everyone?”

“Nah, I think she’s just being sweet on you specifically.”

“Really?” He said, a big smile stretching across his face.
“Aw,” Toby gushed. “You are so into her.”

“Do you know if she’s, ah, taken?”

Toby rubbed his chin, looking up at the ceiling in thought. “Hmm…Not that I know of. Why? Wanna become her boyfriend?”

He blushed, mouth slightly ajar before closing it with a sharp click. “Wha? I’m not—No. That’s impossible.”

His gaze went back towards her retreating figure. It could never be. Stricklander would never allow such a relationship. But, a small voice inside him whispered, dad doesn’t have to know, does he?

“So, changing the subject. Did you actually mean that stuff about Steve and apologizing?” Toby asked as they walked down the hall.

“Not. A. Word.”

“Damn, dude. That’s cold.”

“When you’re raised by a race of blood-thirsty shape-changing trolls, punching people is a way of life,” Atlas said. “I shouldn’t have snapped at Claire though. But that’s the only thing I’m sorry for.”

“I guess I can see where you’re coming from,” Toby said.

"How's the little guy doing?"

Toby unzipped the bag. Inside, their little gnome friend was sleeping on Toby's sandwich, a half-chewed pencil in his mouth.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Toby looked down, guilt in his features. “I’m sorry I tried to kill the gnome without telling you. And for flushing him down the toilet. And for taking his—”

“It’s fine, Tobes. He’s rather cute when he’s all tuckered out. Perhaps all he needs is a nice home.” Atlas said, looking fixedly at his friend, a hopeful gleam in his eye.

“I hope you’re not implying what I think you’re implying.” Toby frowned. “Have you seen my house? What if Nana finds out?”

“Just keep him in the dollhouse. Besides, how cool would it be to have a magical creature as a pet? Blinky said to ‘take care of him’ but what if we literally take care of him? I know it’s not exactly Trollhunting tradition, but a half-changeling Trollhunter and his human sidekick aren’t exactly traditional themselves. We can do it our own way, without the murdering.”

Atlas tilted his head to the side, bottom lip trembling. He interlocked his fingers as though in prayer.

“Come on, dude. Not the puppy dog look. I never should have told you about that.”

“It’ll only be for a while. At least until we find a proper home for him.”

Toby groaned.

“Fine, but only if I get to pick the name.” Toby said, peering into his bag at the creature. “Hmm. Okay, I got one.”

“That fast?” Atlas said. “Okay then, let’s hear it.”

“Gnome Chompsky.”

Atlas snorted. “Gnome Chompsky?”
“Too on the nose?”


Though Trollmarket was always lively, there was a certain lull in activity during the midnight hour. Ages ago, before Vendel’s time even, witching hour was dangerous. It was when the magic that kept trolls hidden was at its weakest. But Vendel no longer believed in such wives tales. Superstitious trolls would wait out the time in their homes, hording up on protection crystals and praying to the ancestors in the Void for protection. Those kinds of trollfolk were far and between these days. Most elected to use the hour as a momentary leisure from the hustle and bustle of city life. For many a traveler, Trollmarket could be overwhelming in its enormity in comparison to their own little villages scattered throughout the world.

It was his favorite part of the day. A time for reading and reflection.

But not today.

Vendel did not normally travel this far down into Trollmarket, but according to his informant, this was where the youngling was located.

Now, Vendel would not consider himself a spymaster. Of course, a thousand years of life had given him enough opportunity to create one, should he have chosen. But he was not some sort of changeling. He merely relied on information from certain residents of Trollmarket—shopkeepers, bartenders, rockmovers, whelpraisers—salt of the earth kinds of trolls. None of them were spies, goodness no, merely worried townsfolk who wanted to do right by their city.

The intel proved correct. Most bars were filled to the brim with gulg and rowdy young upstarts eager to butt horns. This one was quite the opposite. Only a few patrons sat amidst the long wooden tables and tall chairs. The barmaid, a withered troll with grey skin, bowed legs and curved horns, noted his presence immediately, stepping behind the bar to go into the back. Other trolls too saw his entrance, but they stayed seated.

Though his sight was not nearly as good as it once was, the hybrid was easy to spot, sitting quietly in
the corner with a large book. Like any youngling, his body language betrayed his emotions, ears shifting up and down in clear irritation.

Tapping his staff against the floor to alert the boy of his presence, Vendel shuffled closer.

“Hybrid,” Vendel said. “I’ve been meaning to speak to you.”

“Go away,” Atlas mumbled in Trollspeak.

“It is ‘go away’ not ‘go away’,” Vendel said, pulling up a chair and crouching down carefully. He stifled a groan as his limbs creaked. “And your accent is even more horrendous than before. You need more practice.”

“Thank you for your wonderful words of encouragement,” He said dryly, not bothering to even look at him. “I’m busy. Go away.”

Of all the—No, Vendel thought, he would not allow the whelp to get under his skin. Still, such impudence. This is why Vendel never had any children.

“I merely wish to talk.”

Atlas flipped a page. “You’re just trying to get information out of me. It won’t work.”

“What makes you think I’m here for that?”

“Then what are you here for?”

Exactly what the boy said, but it appeared he would need to take a different approach.

“As the leader of Trollmarket, it is my job to protect our people at all costs,” Vendel reasoned.
“Ours? Have I finally been accepted into your little club now?” Atlas said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Do I get a t-shirt?”

Vendel sighed. “Why must you make everything so difficult?”

Why indeed. Of all the whelps he’d come across, only one proved to be as difficult as the one before him.

“Difficult?” Atlas raised his head, glaring. “You were the one who decided to egg on Draal to fight me.”

Ah, so that was the reason for his standoffish nature today. Vendel perched his claws together, elbows resting on the tabletop. He peered over the boy, not enough to appear menacing, but enough to get a view of what the boy was reading.

His mouth curved upwards. Ah, *A Brief Recapitulation*. It would do the brat some good to learn about their history and culture. A changeling upbringing was not the sort he wished on any child.

“I only wanted to test your mettle against a tougher opponent,” Vendel insisted.

“Did you now?” Atlas said, arms covering the page he was reading.

“Is that so hard to believe?”

Atlas raised an eyebrow. “Are you seriously asking that?”

“Fine then,” he sighed. “What is it you think my intentions are?”

Atlas frowned, eyes turning into slits. “It’s pretty obvious you want me gone. You’re planning on me dying against Draal and him becoming the new Trollhunter.”

“A brash rationalization. I was not the one who decided to challenge Draal after losing a warmup match. This upcoming battle was *your* own doing, not mine.”
“But that’s what you want, isn’t it?” Atlas said.

There was a shift in the boy’s voice, almost imperceptible, but Vendel was not most trolls. Vendel examined Atlas's face. Atlas's subtle wide-eyed glance toward the door, his slightly knitted eyebrows; Vendel had seen the look a thousand times. The child was scared.

He sighed. Vendel felt even more ancient than he already was.

“There are many things I want, whelp. But, above all, I want a safe Trollmarket and a trustworthy Trollhunter.” Vendel paused, then remarked, “I heard you completed your first mission yesterday.”

“Yeah, gnome infestation.” Atlas said, rolling his head to the side. “Big whoop. I bet Kanjigar never had to do stuff like that.”

“You would be surprised. Your predecessor completed many a mission, both big and small. He was well-loved by our people.”

Atlas was quiet for a moment, staring at his book. There was a tightness in the boy’s eyes, his hands clasped together. “I…Look, I’m not good with this sort of thing, but let me just say…I’m sorry for your loss. He fought valiantly. Bular wouldn’t have won if they were on even ground. I was rooting for Kanjigar to win.”

Vendel leaned in closer. “You were there?”

“I was watching from the trees.” Atlas explained.

“I see…You are immune to sunlight like the rest of your kind I take it?” Vendel asked.

“Yeah.”

“And you can also change forms?”
“Only with the amulet,” Atlas said. “Before the amulet, I was never able to shift. I mean, it’s possible now I guess, but…”

“They don’t know you’re the Trollhunter.”

Atlas closed his eyes. “No. They don’t.”

Vendel rubbed his chin. The wheels of his mind began to move. While it was not what he hoped for, it could still be useful. “Perhaps there is a reason the amulet chose you, youngling.”

“Wha—” Atlas’s eyes snapped open. “ Seriously? That’s…actually nice of you to say, Vendel.”

Vendel crouched over to the side, he pulled out an item from his satchel. “Here. I thought this might be of use to you. I know Blinky has given you quite a number of books—

“No argument there,” Atlas joked.

He dusted off the cover, handing it to Atlas. “I received this a long time ago from a bookdealer, though I no longer have any use for it. He said it was a very popular language dictionary for guests from lands afar.”

“‘Troll to English’, huh? Never seen something like this before back at the Order.” Atlas flipped the book back and forth, then looked through the pages.

“Put it to good use. If you’re to be the next Trollhunter, you will need to vastly improve your vocabulary.”

And for the first time, Vendel saw Atlas smile genuinely. “Thank you, Vendel. I appreciate this.”

“You are welcome, boy.” Vendel rose from the chair, leaning against his staff. “I shall see you next week.”

“What for?”
“The fight, of course,” Vendel said. “I shall be the referee, as the humans like to say.”

Atlas dropped the dictionary onto the table. “Crap, that’s next week isn’t it?”

Vendel put a few coins down on the table before leaving. At the doorframe, he looked back at Atlas, who was now effectively banging his head with the dictionary.

He rolled his eyes. By Deya’s Grace, that whelp was something else.
The room buzzed with anticipation. Atlas could feel it in his bones. A sharp metallic bang resounded. The machines whirled to life, kicking off another dash for survival.

Atlas back hand-sprigged away from a row of spears, the last one missing him by a hair. Sweat clung to his bangs. Landing on his feet, he summoned Daylight as another dozen came flying toward him.

“Always be afraid,” Blinky advised.
“Rule Number One, right?” He said.

In one fluid motion, he sliced through three projectiles, Blinky’s teachings subconsciously guiding him. Though he stumbled once or twice, his movements were smoother than ever before. He couldn’t believe it; he was doing it. All these arduous training sessions were finally paying off.

“Spot-on!” Blinky cheered. “Fear is one of the greatest emotions we experience. It heightens your senses and keeps you alive.”

Atlas twirled his sword, breathing heavily, a huge smile plastered on his face. “Holy crap! Did you see that? How awesome was I, Tobes?”

Spoke too soon. A stone smacked him in the backside, sending him face first into the ground. Atlas groaned.

“And it is arrogance like that, Master Atlas, which will get you killed.” Blinky remarked in a tired tone.

Atlas rolled over on his back. He rubbed his injured nose. Not broken, thankfully. Dodging fast-moving scythes, hidden floor traps, and flying rocks was exhausting enough, but throw in only being allowed to use his Trollhunter form? Well, that made everything ten times worse. His stamina was barely on par with the average human male. At least he finally learned how to flip in this flesh—albeit badly, if his scraped chin was any indication.

“Ugh, okay. Give! I give! Break, please. My bruises have bruises.” Atlas said, lifting his arm to cover his eyes. “Blinky, are you sure you aren’t a demon in disguise?”

Blinky ignored his comment, folding his hands behind his back and shaking his head like a disappointed grade school teacher. “You must be ready for you match with Draal, Master Atlas. Draal is a fierce opponent. He does not fear you, which shall be his weakness. But not you. You must be both mentally and physically terrified when facing him in battle.”

“How is that going to be remotely helpful?”

“Fear good.” AAARRRGGHH!!! held out his hands, mimicking a weighing scale. “Not too much. That bad. But not too little. Find balance.”
“Well, I’m pretty sure I have plenty of Rule Number One,” Atlas said.

Blinky rubbed the arch of his nose with two fingers, then stated, “Fear is good, but you must have plenty of all three. If Trolls are ever going to embrace you as Trollhunter, you must ignore your instincts as both a changeling and a human.”

“If they ever accept me,” Atlas said. “I don’t think Trollmarket will ever be ready for a human Trollhunter, let alone a changeling half-breed one.”

Blinky brought his two clenched fists up, a fiery look of determination in his gaze. “Defeat Draal, and I have no doubt they will.”

That would certainly be something, Atlas thought. It would be great not having to hide behind the flimsy two Trollhunters lie they had set up.

“Ah, I get that Atlas needs to prepare for the fight, but why am I being included?” Toby interrupted, landing into a pile on the ground next to Atlas. Atlas covered his nose. His friend smelled heavily of gym socks and sweat. Even his human senses could pick up that much.

“If you are to be at the side of the Trollhunter, you must be able to protect yourself, Tobias. It was at Master Atlas’s request that we include you in his training.”

Toby turned to Atlas. “I’m not sure whether to hug you, or choke you.”

“That would require you to be able to catch me.” Atlas pointed out.

“True,” Toby laughed, then tapped the device on his wrist. “Hey! My Chubby Tracker says I burned a hundred calories! Not too shabby.”

“Good job.” AAARRRGHHH!!! said, patting Toby’s head affectionately.

Blinky crouched down, throwing out an open hand. Atlas took it, groaning as he got back up onto his aching feet.


“Bad. Really bad. I’ve missed some rehearsals, so Steve Palchuck is now my understudy,” Atlas said. “He’s such a pest.”

“And this Steve is…?”

“Our high school bully. He likes to pick on others.” Toby smirked, “Atlas punched his lights out last week. From what I heard, it was a pretty epic fight. No one squealed to the teachers though, otherwise he would have gotten in a lot of trouble.”

“Steve’s too stubborn to say anything. But now he has it out for me.” Atlas provided.

“Oh dear, that doesn’t sound good.” Blinky said.

“Toby says it’s all a part of the human high school experience.” Atlas made air quotes around the last word.

“Oh! That reminds me. I almost forgot to ask.” Toby asked in a song-song voice, “How’s Claire?”

“Who that?” AAARRRGHH!!! said.

Atlas blushed. “She’s just a human girl from school. She gave me her number, to text her if I have any questions.”

“Oh? What kind of questions?” Toby waggled his eyebrows.
“Nothing special. I mean, earlier today I asked her what sort of music American teenagers liked. She sent me multiple links to a woman and her group screaming and playing loud instruments.” Atlas frowned. “I keep trying to listen, but I don’t understand its appeal. Is it a joke or…”

“Oh, that’s probably Papa Skull.” Toby piped in.

“And this Papa is considered music to you humans?” Blinky asked.

“Of course!” Toby exclaimed, then turned his attention towards Atlas. “What sort of music do changelings listen to?”

“Mostly classical,” Atlas replied. “Dad’s a big fan of the violin, so he plays that in his office a lot.”

“And what about you? What do you like?”

Atlas was about to answer when the doors to the Forge opened. Draal and a buddy of his stomped in as if they owed the place. They were chuckling, glancing over at the group then at each other. Atlas scowled. He hated being the butt of other’s jokes.

“I’ll tell you later,” Atlas said. “Seems we have an audience.”

“Aw, is the little human training?” Draal mocked as he crossed the group’s path. “How cute.”

Blinky shook his head. “Ignore his words. Let your fear keep you alive. Let his arrogance lead him astray.”

Behind Atlas’s back, he heard Draal say something in Troll speak to his friend. Atlas’s face flushed. The insult didn’t have a direct translation into English, but its best equivalent in the Changeling tongue would be something along the lines of “A changeling so ugly the Pale Lady gave him back to his family.” Draal’s insult was more vicious though, on account that it included a dig at his mother.

Atlas may not be fluent in the tongue, but he sure as hell knew all of its insults and curse words.
In response, Atlas spat out the most heinous retort he could muster—which going by Draal’s surprised face—appeared to work.

“What did you say, human?” Draal growled.

“Ah ha ha, look at the time! We really must get going.” Blinky swung one arm around Atlas’s shoulder and another on his back, guiding him out of the arena at a fast pace. “Come Master At—I mean Jim. Let us head over to my library. I have something to show you. Salutations, Draal!”

Picking up on Blinky’s shift in tone, AAARRGGHH!!! picked Toby up and hurried alongside.

Once outside the Hero’s Forge, Blinky smacked Atlas upside the head.

“Ow!” Atlas said, cradling the injured area. “What was that for?”

“Did you not understand anything I just said? Arrogance will get you killed.”

“Didn’t you hear what he said though? He called me a—”

“You don’t have to repeat it. In fact, I’d rather you not at all. One must choose their battles.” He leaned in, whispering, “Think. Do you think Jim would know TrollSpeak? There is already one troll who has figured it out. Draal and the rest will soon too if you keep this up.”

“But—”

Blinky rested two hands on Atlas’s shoulders with a third on his arm. “As the Trollhunter, you must be aware of all your actions, both big and small. I understand your upbringing was very different from both humans and trolls. Nevertheless, you must rise above petty insults. You will face Draal soon enough. Ignore his bait. Focus on what’s in front of you.”

Atlas grumbled for a moment, but relented. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Mind you, Master Jim, these are merely suggestions. I am only your trainer. I am glad you are
taking them seriously however. Draal, I fear, would make a very poor Trollhunter on that end.”

“What did you say to him?” Toby said.

“Nothing of importance, Tobias.” Blinky coughed. “Merely meaningless bravado. Now, let us make haste. We have much to do and so little time.”

The walk to Blinky’s winded through several flights of stairs and roads. The last time Atlas had been there was not under the best of circumstances. Unlike then, Atlas tried to take notice of his surroundings. Whereas the area around the Forge was bright and touristy, the further they went out the more ancient it felt. Atlas wondered if that was how Trollmarket was built, going from the outside then down, layer after layer to fill Trollmarket’s growing population.

Blinky heralded the group with a spring in his step, a secretive smile on his blue mug. Atlas and Toby were only steps behind, with AAARRRGHH!!! meandering in the back. The formation was obvious in nature, but Toby either didn’t know or trusted the others to protect them. Atlas believed it was the former though.

Atlas scratched at his cheek, wincing when he accidently touched the scrape. He needed to be more careful, both mentally and physically. Blinky was right; he was slipping. It only took one accidental change for his secret to be exposed.

But…what if Trollmarket did find out? Bagdwella, Blinky, AAARRRGHH!!! (and to a certain extent Vendel) were evidence that Trolls could tolerate his kind. How would Trollmarket really react to finding out their Trollhunter was part-changeling?

He wanted to be hopeful, but the answer must likely would be: not well. At all.

It was okay though. He could do this. Living three different lives couldn’t be so hard, right?

“Oh, sorry, Tobes.” Damn, was he really that distracted that he couldn’t pay attention to his surroundings? He rubbed the fatigue out of his eyes, ignoring the strain in his muscles as they continued to climb.
“So,” Toby started.

Atlas cocked his head to the side. “So what?”

“First day of school tomorrow. Sophomore year. Lucky you. Got to miss the whole awkward Freshman period.”

“Ugh. Yeah, almost forgot about that.” No. No he hadn’t in the slightest. He spent most of the morning panicking about it actually. He didn’t want to burden Toby with such fears however.

“Got your presentation for Spanish done?”

“Most of it. Thanks for the help.”

“No prob! Besides, we got to hang out and watch movies afterward. I haven’t done that since I was a little kid!”

“You never had any other friends over?”

“No,” Toby said, avoiding his gaze. “Anyone I invited over would say no or bail. I mean, I’m over it now. It doesn’t matter anymore, since now my best friend and I get to hang out every day.”

“Anything I should be prepared for tomorrow?”

“Hmm,” Toby rubbed his chin. “Oh yeah. Almost forgot. Remember to bring a packed lunch. We’re going on a fieldtrip to the local museum.”


“Mr. S’s class, though I guess he should really be called Mr. C now—”
Atlas put two fingers to Toby’s lips. “Shush. Not here.”

Toby moved the hand, whispering into Atlas’s ear. “Shouldn’t we tell the others? They deserve to know.”

“We will soon, okay? Just keep it quiet for now. I don’t,” Atlas lowered his voice even further, “I don’t want Blinky and AAARRGGHH!!! investigating him. Blinky is curious enough as it is. But don’t worry. I’ll tell them after the fight with Draal…if I live through it that is.”

“What about Mr. S? He knows Jim is the Trollhunter, right? What if he tries something tomorrow?”

“He wouldn’t. Not with that many people around. It would be too risky.”

“Is everything alright, boys?” Blinky said, leaning backwards with two hands on his hips, the other two pointing to the right. “Just a few more steps. It’s at the corner up ahead.”

“Ha, ha, everything’s fine, Blinky.” Atlas jabbed an elbow into Toby’s stomach. “Right, Tobes?”

“Yeah,” Toby wheezed. “Just…peachy.”

The second Blinky turned around, Toby was at his ear once again.

“Okay, but can the amulet last that long?” Toby asked. “What happens if it goes off in class? Can you even wear the armor all day?”

“Well, what other choice do I have?” Atlas said as they approached the entrance.

“Welcome to my abode, though you’ve been here before, Master Atlas, albeit inebriated,” Blinky lifted up an index finger on all four of his hands, a great big smile on his face. “And the answer to that particular question, dear children, is where I might be of service.”

Blinky quickly ushered them in, the excitement in his step all the more pronounced now that they were inside.
Though his memory was fuzzy, he recalled the humble home’s exterior quite well. Unlike others, Blinky’s house had a distinctly ancient feel, not subject to what Atlas would consider an overabundance of fluorescent lights and trash ornaments. The inside was dark, lit up by glowing rocks that acted as lamps. Atlas picked up a fallen book and placed it on one of the tables.

Incense filtered through the familiar smell of old books and manuscripts coated the air. It reminded him of his father’s study, though this one was messier and had clearly seen better days.

Blinky disappeared behind a curtain. The sound of falling books and soft Trollish curse words met Atlas’s ears. Atlas tried to peer through the opening.

Sticking his head out of the curtain, Blinky grinned, all teeth on display.

“It took me a few days, and lots of brokering,” Blinky said, “but I was finally able to procure this!”

He presented the item to the two boys with a proud gleam in all six eyes.

Toby’s brows drew together, lips pulled apart in blatant confusion. “A horseshoe?”

“It’s not just any horseshoe,” Atlas said, eyes widening.

“Indeed. This is a gaggle-tack. A mystical totem of unknown origins,” Blinky said. “With but the slightest of touches, it reveals the true nature of a changeling. Master Atlas, I know shifting is very difficult for you to do by yourself. So I thought, why not see if perhaps the gaggle-tack might circumvent the pain of transformation? Only if you approve however.”

Atlas shook his head fervently. “No, no, I completely approve. Let’s try it.”

His nostrils flared, ears rising. He reached out, then hesitated. He had heard of gaggle-tacks before, even read about them, but he had no idea how they would work on a half-breed like him.

He licked his bottom lip. But what if it did? Atlas wouldn’t have to fear about transforming during
He could change anytime he wanted. Just like his dad and the rest of his people. He could be complete.

Or he could blow up. Magic never was very simple.

His fingers grasped onto the device. He closed his eyes in anticipation. Several moments passed. To his disappointment, nothing happened. Atlas released the breath he’d been holding in.

“Ah man,” Toby said. “Guess it’s back to the drawing board again.”

“Thanks, Blinky. It was a good idea, even if it didn’t work.” Atlas said, patting the troll on the shoulder.

“Hmm,” Blinky’s tongue poked out, lower two eyes squinting. “Perhaps if you de-activate the amulet.”

Atlas shrugged then did as instructed. For a moment, the amulet flashed a bright ominous blue. After that, the light within flickered, the longer arm of the device ticking backwards. It didn’t last too long however, his Trollhunter attire vanishing seconds after, the energy returning to the device.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” Toby jumped up and down. “It worked! It worked!”

_Holy shit._ Atlas examined his body. The weight of his old armor felt burdensome and large around his thin frame now. In fact—Atlas barely pushed his armguards for them to fall off, hitting the floor with a sharp metallic click. He wiggled out of the rest of his armor, now much easier to get out of due to his decreased size and lack of horns.

A soft snort blew out his nose at the view of his feet. His normal human feet. Though not as dexterous as his prior body’s, they still had a similar range in motion at least.

He felt vulnerable, but in a good way, if that made any sense. Like coming out of a hot shower.
“Blinky, you’re a genius. This is amazing. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You can go to school tomorrow!” Toby exclaimed excitedly. “Oh, but you’re gonna need some clothes. I don’t think those fit you very well.”

“Ah ha, that, children, I have planned ahead for as well,” Blinky said. “AAARRRGGHH!!!, if you would.”

Atlas had nearly forgotten the large troll’s presence. AAARRRGGHH!!! didn’t seem to mind, using Blinky’s distraction to drag in their next surprise. Releasing the tie, he dumped the contents onto the floor in front of the group. Both teens’ mouths dropped.

An assortment of fabrics fell out. Shirts, pants, shoes, hoodies—everything and anything honestly. Atlas and Toby grinned at each other, digging into the clothes with interest.

“Tis a gift from Bagdwella, as thanks. She also told me to tell you that she wants a shipment of VHRs by the end of the week.” Blinky explained.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Atlas said. Nothing a little bargaining with some changelings wouldn’t get him.

Toby brought up one of the garments, sniffing it. “These smell weird. Kinda musty.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! picked out a small pink bow and put it in Toby’s hair. Toby laughed, rummaged through the fabrics and picked out a sparkly barrette. He clipped it to AAARRRGGHH!!!’s fur. The troll posed, fluffing his fur.

“Pretty?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked.

Toby gave him two thumbs up. “Awesome, wingman.”

“Wingman?”
“You know, a buddy? Friend?”

AAARRRGGHH!!!’s eyes brightened. “Friend. Yes, I like it. Me wingman now, Blinky.”

“I have no earthly idea what that means but good on you, dear friend.”

Atlas pulled out a red garment. There was a small triangular yellow insignia on the left breast. “What about this shirt?”

“Dude, that is killer. Oh ho ho!” Toby picked up a blue jacket. “Try this one too! You can use it to hide the gaggle-tack.”

“Good thinking,” Atlas said, taking the offered clothing.

“Pants.” AAARRRGGHH!!! passed over Toby’s head to Atlas, who nodded in response.

“You’re gonna need some sneakers too.” Toby added to the pile in the other’s arms.

“Blinky, is there any place I could ah…” Atlas rolled his shoulders, lifting his eyebrows. “Change?”

“Oh, certainly, Master Atlas. Right this way.” Blinky said, motioning to the same curtain from earlier.

Atlas sighed, stepping inside. Dropping the clothes down the ground, he pulled off his pants, followed by his shirt.

His breath hitched.

Blinky must have noticed, calling out, “Is everything alright in there?”
“Dude, no. Let the guy have some privacy.” Toby said.

He gazed into the dozens of tubes and unnamed potions on the shelves next to him, taking in his appearance. A human boy stared back at him. With human skin and a human mouth. With human ears and human hair. No one would suspect James Lake Junior to be some half-breed monstrosity. Not unless they looked.

Atlas traced the litany of scars on his torso. No matter how human he looked, the scars of his past would always be there. Pale human skin couldn’t replace the years he spent as Bular and the other changelings’ punching bag.

He finished changing, hanging the gaggletack onto the collar of his shirt (he made a mental note to get some twine for tomorrow) then pulling up the zipper of the jacket to cover it. He smoothed down the material. Not completely hidden, but one wouldn’t know if they didn’t know to look for it.

Flipping the curtain open, he put his hands out. “Ta-da.” He said dryly. “How do I look?”

Toby grinned, shaking his head enthusiastically. “Awesome sauce, dude! Totally badass.”


“Yes, you are the picture perfect image of a healthy human teenager,” Blinky said. “Why, if human appearances held any meaning to me, I would say you look quite dashing!”

Atlas’s cheeks burned. This was new. It wasn’t like he didn’t receive compliments, but so many at one time? It was nice. He liked it.

Toby rolled over a long silver mirror. Though old, Atlas saw himself, clear as day. “Here, check it out. Mighty fine, huh?”

Atlas touched the reflective surface. Wow, he really did look like a regular teen. “Do you think Claire will like it?”

“Are clothes a way for humans to attract mates?” Blinky said.
“Well, no…” Toby paused, lips pursing. “Actually, you might be onto something there.”

Blinky threw up a fist. “Then we must procure as many attractive garments for Master Atlas to win over his lady love.”

“Guys,” Atlas started, tempted to make a sarcastic quip, but decided against it. “I…I just don’t have the words.”

He turned away from the group, hoping to hide his expression. Was this how it was like for everyone with friends? This collective feeling of happiness? It was…fun. More fun than he’d had for a long time, not since he was a little kid. How could he have lived without this? The best way he could describe it would be like a breath of fresh air or seeing a new color for the first time. Meeting the ragtag group of troll and human was an eye-opening experience, and the more he hung out with them, the more he learned about himself in a way.

Was this what it was like to be human?

A phone began singing In the Hall of the Mountain King.

Damn.

“Uh oh,” Atlas sighed, returning to the curtain. He pulled the phone out from his pocket, eyes scanning over the screen. “I’m gonna have to cut this trip short, you guys. I’ve gotta go.”

“Huh? Seriously? Right now?” Toby asked. “But we still haven’t gotten all your clothes together! Tomorrow’s your first big day.”

“Yes, AAARRRGGHH!!! and I were putting together a most handsome outfit.” Blinky said, gesturing to a pair of clothes in his hands. “See? These polka dots are quite alluring, especially paired up with these dashing striped pants. This Clara will most assuredly swoon at such a sight.”

Atlas covered his mouth to hide a snort. “Tobes, remember when I told you that my actions had consequences?”
“What kind of consequences we talking about?”


Nomura marched in front of him, a playful smirk emerging on her smug mug.

“Your task is a great one. No other person can do this. You will either succeed or die, for you are about to embark upon the greatest crusade this world has ever seen,” she said in a dramatic tone. “The hopes and prayers of changelings everywhere march with you. Our hearts and souls are one with you. Only you can finish the fight. This will be the toughest battle you will ever face in your puny insignificant half-breed existence. Are you ready?”

Atlas pulled at the loose parts of his jumpsuit, a hideous rubbery outfit made for only one job. “Do we seriously have to do this?”

“Not we, runt,” Nomura said as she opened what Atlas would later amount the gates of hell. “You.”

Cautiously, he stepped through the door, only to immediately back out.

“Holy—Gunmar’s gronk-nuts, what is that stuff? It’s everywhere! Ugh, and the smell. How did it get on the walls? It’s never been this bad.” He covered his mouth to hide a gasp. “Oh sweet Pale Lady it’s on the ceiling too.”

“Aw, is the baby changeling scared?” Nomura mocked.

Atlas threw his hands up, shaking his head as he retreated. “No way. Nope, nope, nope. I’m out. Find yourself another changeling, Nomura, because this—this is plain disgusting.”
In a flash, she grabbed him by the horn and tossed him inside. Atlas fell on his back, stunned, before scrambling to get back on his feet. Too late, if the tall-tale click of the door’s lock was any indication. Atlas banged his fist against the door.

“Let me out!” He begged, “Please. Anything but this!”

“Not a spot left, whelp, or you’re gonna do this again and again until you learn your lesson.”

Atlas tried to turn the knob, but the second his hand touched the metal it burned him. Damned, he thought, magic.

“This isn’t fair, Nomura. How can I get all this done this close to morning?”

“Life’s not fair, kid. Now get on it. You don’t have much time. Daylight’s in four hours,” she said. “Make them count.”

Kicking the air, he groaned, checking the area around him. Nomura at least left him cleaning supplies. Better to put his anger towards cleaning than some priceless artifact. Rolling up his sleeves, he pulled out a mop, dunked it into the nearest bucket, then wiped up the strange green gloppy goo on the floor.

His ears twitched higher as the pitter-patter of dozens of tiny feet approached. It reminded him of rain, though the smell certainly different. Atlas didn’t even need to look up to guess who had finally decided to join the party.

“Waka Chaka Cha,” one said, jumping on Atlas’s head and playing with his hair.

Atlas smacked the creature away. “Yeah, yeah, waka screw you too.”

It chortled. The rest joined suite.

Goblins weren’t the brightest creatures, but they were damn persistent. Atlas wasn’t sure what their origins were exactly—something about originally being from the Darklands—but they’d been around for nearly forever, or so Stricklander told him.
This wasn’t his first incursion with the goblins. Atlas glowered at the floor, brushing the green goop as fast as he could. His gaze never faltered from the goblins for too long however. He recalled the fateful day, only six months into working at the Janus Order. Bright eyed and eager to help, his ten-year-old self threw out a hand, introducing himself to the creatures.

Big mistake.

Stricklander and Nomura never let him live it down. He still had tiny bite marks on his hands from their curious teeth.

His eyes came upon the only one he actually recognized—Frogger. He wasn’t sure where the name came from, maybe because his hop was more frog-like than the others? The Fragwa almost acted as a pseudo-boss for the creepers, commanding their attention and directing their forces to a certain extent. Wait. He squinted. Was that Frogger or had a new goblin taken his place? Hard to tell, since they all looked so alike.

Frogger leered, rocking his head back and forth, a vicious smile upon his face.

Atlas bent down a few feet away from the goblin, pointing to the destruction.

“Who made this mess?” He asked.

The goblin pointed to his friend.

Atlas flicked his tongue against one of his tusks. “Bullshit.”

Frogger chuckled, letting out a long string of gurgles and goblin words. The group whispered among themselves. Probably trying to come up with an excuse, Atlas thought. He caught the words “fragwa” “revenge” and “box” amongst the strange collection of goblin-speak.

Now, Atlas might not be Blinky, but there were enough clues here to tell something was up. He tucked a finger underneath another goblin’s head, tilting it up. This one had part of his ear chewed off. Gee, what a surprise—cannibalism. Their hunger was worse than Bular’s.
“Hey, you. Where’s the old boss?”

Atlas began to scratch beneath the goblin’s chin. Like a cat, it purred, leaning into the motion. The other goblins continued on with the chatter, though every once and awhile they looked over at them, interest piqued.

“‘Well?’ Atlas insisted.

The half-chewed off ear goblin grumbled, motioning a finger across its neck.

“‘Ouch. How’d he go out?’

He smacked his two little green hands together, shaking his head mournfully.

“‘Yuck,’” Atlas said. “‘So what are you guys going to do then?’

Smacking his lips, the goblin opened and closed his right hand, gesturing toward his mouth.

“‘Oh, ho, ho. Bribery, huh?’ Atlas reached inside his pocket, pulling out his greatest of weapons: Nuggat Nummies.

The goblin tried to make a grab for it, but he was faster. Holding it up high above his head, Atlas gestured for the creature to continue.

“‘What are you going to do?’

“‘Waka chaka cha,’” the goblin giggled deviously. He snapped his teeth together, grinding them.

“‘So you’re going to kill them, huh? Does Stricklander know what you’re going to do?’”
Grumbling, the goblin refused to meet Atlas’s steady gaze.

“Yeah, I thought not. Look, just don’t do anything stupid, okay? No killing humans. We can’t alert them of our presence.”

All heads swerved towards him as Atlas broke open the packaging, plopping the piece into the eager goblin’s mouth.

“Waka waka chaka,” the goblin moaned, savoring the chocolatey goodness. The others joined in, hands outstretched, hungry eyes pleading.

Atlas presented each piece of candy like a king anointing his knights, the look of awe sending a wave of giggles through him. It was stupid—how pleased such a small act of kindness made him.

Changelings would consider such an action a weakness.

His hand hesitated as he passed out the last candy.

But, he thought, I’m not like most changelings, am I?

Dropping the last chocolate into their awaiting hands, he got up, stretching his back. All in a good day’s work, he inwardly told himself.

And then they ran amuck.

Insanity wouldn’t cover the amount of crazy in this room right now. Frogger lead the pack, rubbing his chocolatey hands over the walls and floors. Mouth open in horror, Atlas watched as they left through one of the open high windows, a chocolate path of destruction.

Atlas grabbed his horns and growled.

Last time he ever did anything for those ungrateful little monsters.
Claire thinks something is up with her new co-star. Later, Atlas and crew take on the goblins. It does not go well. At all.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of it's characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter! I'm going to Mexico for a week, so I may not be able to update next Friday. I've also made a new story called, "Summer Happy Fun Time" which is a post-season 3 inspired crack story where everyone lives, no one dies, and instead of Trollhunter, Jim is a Life Guard. I'll be posting that along with this today.

Big thanks to Charlie again for helping me out with my fanfic. You are awesome. Check out their fanfic "Labyrinth". It's seriously cool.

Also, thank you Vanveee for the gorgeous fanart! OMG! I did a little happy dance when I received it. Here's a link: http://vanveee.tumblr.com/post/174580742989/atlas-from-tunafishprincessss-au-i-happened

I've linked all the fanarts to my profile page if anyone is interested. Check out those awesome artists if you can.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter.

“I know contemporary media might lead you to believe European history is full of swords, sorcery, and scandal,” the museum lady began. “I assure you, the truth is far more interesting, and there’s no better place to start than Renaissance Era pottery. It all began…”

Claire raised an eyebrow. As much as she liked history, she doubted pottery was as engaging as the woman made it out to be. The class appeared to agree with her, if their drooping eyes and bored expressions were anything to go by. Only Eli appeared to be interested.
Mr. Strickler swooped in to save them, interrupting, “Ah, since we have limited time, Ms. Nomura, perhaps it’s best if they explore the museum on their own.”

Ms. Nomura threw their teacher a cold glare. “Well, I—”

“Wonderful,” he said, waving at the class dismissively. “Off you go children.”

Claire followed the rest of the classmates through entrance, her eyes immediately focusing on the embroidered costumes on the second floor. On the way up the stairs, she noticed her co-star leaning against the top of the banister.

She squinted. There was something about James Lake Junior she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Normally, Claire thought she could read people pretty well, but not so with Jim. His personality was all over the place and his demeanor equally so. At rehearsal he was the most kind and courteous guy she’d ever met, if a little absentminded, as though his head were somewhere else half the time. Maybe it was. She barely knew the guy after all.

And then there were those other times, like when Steve tried to start a fight. She had never seen a person move so fast. His eyes had practically glowed with a cold rage. That kind of anger wasn’t normal, especially for a teenage boy.

It made her wonder: which Jim was the real one?

Speaking of—his eyes perked up at her approach. It was probably his most striking feature. They were a unique blue, with multiple shades that glittered under the light.

But first things first.

“Jim, hey,” Claire started.


“And you okay?” She gestured to his jaw. “What happened to your face?”
He immediately put a hand to the cut. “Oh, ha ha. This? It’s nothing. I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Why do you ask?”

Annoyance filtered through. Did he get into a fight with Steve again? Her eyes flickered over to the blond teen. No injuries, so most likely not.

“Jim, it’s not fine. You missed the early morning rehearsal,” she pointed out.

“There was an early morning rehearsal?” He said in surprise.

She put a hand on her hip. “We discussed it last week, remember?”

Jim dragged a hand down his face. “Ugh. No, not really. Things at home haven’t been, ah, easy, I guess.”

Claire frowned. This wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned his home life. Was his dad really as hard on him as he made it sound? A darker thought emerged: was it his dad that gave him that cut?

Covering his mouth, Jim tried to disguise a yawn.

“You look terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean, you don’t look like you’ve had much sleep. What did you do last night?”

He shrugged. “Not much. At the beginning I hung out with Toby and…some other guys. It was fun.” He crossed his arms. “Ugh, I did have to spend most of the night cleaning and babysitting some kids for my dad. Nom—my aunt didn’t want to do it, so she foisted it off on me. Who knew kids could be so difficult?”
Claire nodded. She almost scolded him until he reached the part about the kids. That, she could understand. This was a subject she was well-versed in over these past few months. “I know what it’s like. My parents always put me on babysitting duty for my baby brother all the time. Now I never have any down time. It’s like I’m—”

“Going crazy?” Jim finished.

They laughed. Her cheeks felt warm. Despite Jim’s strangeness, he was fun to talk with in comparison to the other guys in class.

“Never thought you had experience in babysitting,” Claire said.

“Oh?”

“Gah, sorry. That was presuming of me, wasn’t it?” She curled a finger around a loose lock of hair. “Change of subject: what do you think of Arcadia?”

“It’s…pleasant,” he said.

“But?”

“I’ve never interacted with so many people before. Before it was just my dad and his colleagues.”

“But didn’t you go to school up in Canada?”

“Oh, yeah, I mean. It’s just,” He bit down on the side of his lip. “School life wasn’t like it is here. I didn’t have anyone I could really call a friend there.”

Claire watched his gaze turn towards his friend Toby Domzalski. Her heart fluttered at the sight of his softening smile. It was sweet, how close they were. She couldn’t imagine not having Darci and Mary around all the time.

His knuckles rapped against the glass of the case. “These, they’re, ah…Pretty costumes.”
“Yeah,” she sighed. “With our school budget, I’ll probably end up doing the balcony scene in my bathrobe.”

He grinned, nudging her with his shoulder. “Hey, if anyone could pull it off, it’d be you. Besides, you’re the only one on stage who looks like they know what they’re doing out there.”

“Ha! Tell that to my parents.” She imitated her father’s voice, “Mija, how could you get a B in Spanish? Dios mio, maybe you should drop that silly play of yours.” Then she twitched to her mother’s, “You need to get into a good college. Start focusing on the future for once, Claire.”

“Your parents seriously said that?”

She leaned against the railing, lips pulled into a melancholic smile. “It’s okay. The way my grades are I could easily get into college by the end of this semester…but my parents want the best for me, so they put a lot of focus on grades over extracurricular.”

“They’re crazy, Claire. You were born for this.” Jim said, and damn if Claire’s heart didn’t skip at the earnestness of his voice.

Claire moved closer. “And what about you, Jim Lake Junior?”

“Me?”

“You’re not half-bad on stage yourself. You seem to have a pretty good handle on this whole acting part too.”

He scratched the back of his neck, chuckling nervously. “Let’s just say, I get a lot of practice at home.”

She paused, eyes narrowing. And there it was again.

Something about his words were off, though she couldn’t say what.
Claire leaned in, concern in her brow. “Hey, is everything really alright? I know we don’t know each other very well, but we’re theater partners. I promise I won’t tell anyone, honest.”

Jim’s eyes widened. It wasn’t the sweet charming Jim or the icy rage Jim this time, but someone else behind that mask. He licked his bottom lip, then opened his mouth.

“I—”

“Jim, Jim, Jim!” Toby chanted.

Jim turned away, looking at his friend. “This better be good, Tobes.”

“It’s actually kinda sorta bad,” Toby said, eyes shifting left to right. “Hey, Claire, can I borrow, Jimbo? We got a problem we need to sort out.”

“What kind of problem?” Jim asked. Toby whispered into his ear. The redness in his cheeks faded.

Toby pulled out his phone to show something to Jim. Claire tried to look over his shoulder, but all she caught was a green blur.

“Is everything okay? Anything I can do to help?” Claire said.

“No, no, it’s all cool,” Toby said, dragging Jim by his jacket down the hall. “Say goodbye, Romeo.”

Jim waved, glancing over his shoulder at her before disappearing around the corner.

So, she was right. Something was definitely wrong with him. The question was what. Her lips pursed, eyebrows drawn together.

Was there anything she could do to help?
Probably not, she thought somberly. She could ask her parents, but they wouldn’t give a flip. All they cared about was the elections and precious Enrique.

She shook her head. No, no, no. Enrique was precious, but—

No. Think happy thoughts, Claire, she told herself. You’re better than this.

Oh, who was she kidding?

It wasn’t as if she didn’t love her brother. No, she loved him to pieces. It was just…hard, being the only child for so long only to have that taken away so suddenly. They never asked her about her feelings on it, never asked her whether or not she wanted to babysit all throughout her entire high school career. What about her life? Wasn’t she a kid too?

She immediately pushed away the dark feelings. Everything was fine. As long as she got good grades she could do her play and everything would be fine, right?

Ugh. She shook her head, pulling out her phone to text Darci. She was getting frustrated for no reason. Probably because her co-star kept missing the rehearsals.

If Jim had a big problem, then he had her phone number. No use thinking about things that she barely knew about.

Still, she couldn’t help but give another glance back to where they had gone.

Something was definitely off about that boy.

The moon loomed above the wooded path. Atlas breathed in the fresh air, taking in the sweet
fragrance of spring. While California didn’t get as cold as other places, it still had some resemblance of seasons.

“Do you think Trollmarket has any cool weapons for someone my size? I mean, you got the sword. Maybe I should go with something else, like a sickle or a hammer,” Toby said.

Atlas shrugged. “We can check another time if you’d like. But I think we should work on your physical strength before we get into weaponry.”

Altas knew that particular lesson from experience. Bular’s demented face passed through his thoughts, but he pushed it aside. He would not allow that monster to ruin his good mood.

“Yeah, I guess…On the bright side, I lost one pound! Can you believe it?” Toby flexed his arms. “I knew getting the Chubby Tracker was a good idea. Free stuff and I get to lose weight. What could be better than that?”

“I’m happy for you, Tobes.” Atlas said.

And to his surprise, he actually meant those words. The better Toby got physically, the easier it would be for him to protect himself. Fleshbags were notoriously fragile; even a punch from a scholarly troll like Blinky would cause serious damage.

Toby nudged him in the arm. “What’s next on our agenda?”

“Probably go home and sleep.” Atlas said, letting out a long yawn. His eye bags now had bags under them.

His friend’s shoulders slumped. “Aw, you don’t want to hang out?”

“I’ve gone almost two days without sleep. If I’m going to be functional tomorrow, I need to get some rest.”

“Are we still going to Trollmarket again?” Toby asked in a hopeful tone.
“What other choice do we have? My match with Draal is only days away. If I’m ever going to survive, then I’ve got to train as much as possible, whenever I can.”

Toby pulled out the horseshoe, tossing it up in the air then catching it with the same hand. “Speaking of Draal, now that we’ve got a solution to your transformation stuff, keeping your two lives separate should be a breeze back in Trollmarket. Draal and the others won’t suspect a thing!”

“Trolls have seen me in this form though. It would rise suspicion if I suddenly disappeared but Jim stayed,” Atlas pointed out.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Toby rubbed his chin with the gaggle-tack. “Hmm. Well, at least the school problem is solved.”

“Maybe,” Atlas sighed. “I still don’t know how I’m going to be able to pull off being in the Janus Order, the Trollhunter, and a human high schooler. I barely get enough sleep as it is.”

“Ah, it’s okay, dude. I know the perfect siesta spots around school. There’s a lot of classes you can get away with snoozing in. But heads up: do not nap in Señor Uhl’s.”

“That’s not the point. Tobes, what if…what if I can’t keep this up? Being the head’s assistant is hard enough with Bular and the other changelings breathing down my neck, but add in Trollhunting and high school and things are ten times worse! I’ve never lied to my dad for this long before. What if I fail? What if he finds out?”

“Isn’t he going to find out eventually anyways?”

“But that’s after I defeat Bular. If we want the changelings to become independent, we have to get rid of Bular.”

“Will defeating Bular make the changelings, well, actually change?” Toby asked. “Don’t you still have Gunmar to worry about?”

Atlas pulled his cloak further over his head. His gaze went skyward. “Who knows. I mean, it’s insane to even think about it, let alone talk. But we have to try, right? I don’t want my people
suffering under Gunmar and Bular anymore. I don’t want my dad getting hurt.”

Even if, technically, Atlas was hurting his father in the meantime.

“Hey dude, count me in. Whatever I can do to help, I’m there for you.”

“Thanks Tobes, but,” Atlas crossed his arms. “What are we doing here? Seriously. How the hell am I going to defeat Bular when I can’t even kill a stupid gnome?”

“Hey, relax. You stress yourself out too much. Hey, that’s another thing you and Jim have in common!”

“Thinking about our impeding demise if we fail?”

“No, not that. Overthinking the small stuff. You’re doing fine. Think about the positive stuff in your life, like how you and Claire got closer today.” Toby waggled his eyebrows. “I saw the way she was looking at you.”

“She was looking at me?” He coughed, trying to hide the high pitch of his excitement. “I mean, well, duh. We were talking. Why wouldn’t she be looking at me when we’re talking?”

“Not that way. She was giving you the eyes,” Toby said, blinking owlishly.

“The eyes?”

“Don’t tell me…” Toby paused. “Actually, Nevermind. You really do have no experience with the finer sex. Well, no worries. I’ve got a bit of Casanova in me. I’ll whip you into shape for her.”

Atlas snorted. “You whip me into shape? Can you even lift your arms right now?”

“Of course I—” Toby groaned at the action. “Nope. Too soon. Ow, ow, ow.”
“You should put some ice on your shoulders when you get home. Maybe take a bath in Epsom salts too. Drinking lots of water should help as well,” suggested Atlas.

“You really like to mother people, don’t you?”

Atlas rolled his eyes, a soft smile emerging.

Toby motioned the gaggle-tack at Atlas. “You sure you don’t want to take this with you?”

“No, it would cause too much suspicion. The amulet is small enough, but a horseshoe would be pushing it. Better to leave it with someone I trust. We can meet up mornings at the shortcut to school near the bridge.”

Toby gasped dramatically. “You trust me that much?”

“More than most.”

“This is big. This is so big, dude.” He touched Atlas’s shoulder. “We’ve gained a friendship level.”

“Friendships have levels now?” Atlas asked.

“Wha—no, I mean…maybe?” Toby scratched his head. “What I’m saying is our friendship is getting better. At least, I think it is. Do you feel any way different about me since we met?”

Hmm. Atlas stopped walking. He turned his attention to Toby, crouching down to the shorter boy’s level. With a finger, he turned the other’s head from left to right and back again.

“Atlas,” Toby said. “You’re freaking me out, dude.”

“You’re…more tolerable?” Atlas finally said.
The other’s shoulders slumped. “Oh gee, thanks.”

“In a good way. I like hanging out with you,” Atlas remarked. “I told you I was terrible at the whole friendship thing.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He checked his phone. “Damn. It’s almost nine. Didn’t we get to Trollmarket at four? Feels like we were only there for an hour.”

“Time flies when you’re fighting for your life.”

“Blinky is a slave-driver.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“How does he expect us to do training and school?”

Atlas nodded, rubbing his eyes to keep awake. Damn, he was ready to drop. He could practically hear his bed calling out to him.

“Oh, speaking of school, the field trip to the museum. You never told me exactly what it was that you saw in Eli’s photo. You just changed the subject.” Toby clicked his phone on, showing the photo to him again. “When I first saw it I thought it was a troll or something.”

Atlas shook his head. “No, it’s a bit blurry, but it’s probably a dead goblin.”

“A goblin? Those exist?” Toby asked excitedly, “Is there Goblin King too?”

“Yes to the first question, no to the second. Sucks for Eli though.”

“Why’s that?”
“He’s,” Atlas put his hands together into a steeple close to his mouth, trying to think of how best to put it to his friend. “probably going to die.”

“What!”

“Hey, I could be wrong. Goblins don’t normally attack humans, not unless the human did something.”

“Eli’s our classmate. We gotta save him!”

“Look, it’s probably just a coincidence that Eli found that dead body near his home. The Order will handle it. Let’s just—get down!”

He grabbed the boy’s backpack, pulling him down behind the bushes. Before Toby could protest, Atlas covered the other’s mouth with one hand while his other hand placed an index finger to his lips.

Ahead, where the forest path converged with the road, the streetlamps flickered. One by one, they turned off. At the edges of the darkness of night, they crawled closer. Tens, if not hundreds of goblins scampered across the empty road.

Atlas pressed down on Toby’s head. Between the hedges, he watched the creatures continue westward, completely oblivious to their proximity. For now.

He held his breath. A few goblins looked up from the group, sniffing around, before returning to the task at hand. Minutes later, they were gone.

“You were saying?” Toby whispered.

Atlas got up. He offered a hand to Toby. “Go get Bilinky and AAARRRGGGHH!!!. I’ll text you the address.”

Toby accepted the gesture, groaning as he returned to his feet. “Do you even know where he lives?”
“I don’t have to,” Atlas said, tapping his nose. “The nose knows.”

Breaking out into a run, he jumped high, landing on a roof. A few tiles broke off, but otherwise, he was good.

“Did you just make a joke?” Toby yelled at Atlas’s retreating figure, “I knew I was rubbing off on you!”

Atlas saluted his friend before continuing onward. One goblin might be difficult to find, but a whole horde of the tiny assholes was like an emergency siren to any troll, or in this case, half-troll.

Keeping a significant amount of distance, Atlas moved perpendicularly to the creatures. As long as he got there first, then things would be alright.

He hoped.

It was hard to determine which house was which (suburban development at its finest). Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

“Eli Pepperjack, what did I tell you? Finish your homework.” A woman yelled three houses left from Atlas’s position. He recognized the figure in the first floor window.

“Mom,” a shrill familiar voice moaned. “In a minute. I’m doing something important.”

“Homework,” she commanded. “Now, or so help me, I will ground you for the entire weekend.”

“Fine,” Eli grumbled.

Bingo. He dropped a pin on his location and sent it to Toby. He hoped Toby got to Blinky and AAARRRGHH in time.
His heart raced within his chest. One goblin was fine, but an entire horde was suicide, Trollhunter or not. Atlas approached cautiously, sliding down to the lower edge of the roof he was standing on. Bending his legs, he took a running leap for the largest tree in the yard adjacent to Eli’s home.

He shook the tree with his landing. The branches creaked from underneath him. Atlas held steady to the trunk. After a few seconds, the cracking noise subsided.

Slowly, he minced across the biggest branch as though he were on a tightrope. He stopped every time the tree crackled, until he grasped a higher branch.

Pulling himself up, he crouched over, watching in anticipation. At first, there was nothing, only the sound of crickets. Then, several houses down, he heard the wheels of a car approaching.

A delivery truck rolled down the road. His ears twitched, nostrils flaring at the growing scent of goblins. They were close. In the distance, more lights began to flicker out. Atlas sucked in a short breath.

The deliveryman walked out, taking a package from the back and heading up towards Eli’s house.

After ringing the doorbell, the box slipped from the man’s hands, hitting the ground. Atlas winced at sound of something breaking. He hoped the human didn’t have anything expensive in there.

“Oops,” the human said, picking the package up.

The door opened a moment later. Eli jumped in excitement. Atlas smiled. Even though the boy was technically his age, the way the other acted was almost youthful. It reminded him of Toby.

“Yes! Finally! Mom, my spy gear arrived!”

“That’s nice sweetheart,” a bored voice called out from beyond the door.

Eli shook the box. “And it’s unassembled too!”
The delivery man passed Eli, saying, “Hey, can I use your bathroom? Great. Gracias, little dude.”

The door closed shut.

More lights were shut off. Atlas held in his breath as the goblins began appearing out of the mist. Below him, he saw a sea of goblins inching ever closer. Then, suddenly, hundreds of the green bastards swarmed the car.

His phone rang.

Atlas scrambled to pick it up, whispering into the cell, “What the hell, Tobes?”

“War Hammer to Trollhunter, how goes the mission?”

“War Hammer?”

“It’s my new code name, okay?”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “Goblins in sight at Eli’s house. Looks like they weren’t after Eli at all, but the car that killed one of them. Go figure.”

“Seriously? Oh man, well we’re almost there. Hang in there. Make sure they don’t go after anyone.”

“Will do,” Atlas said, ending the call with a sharp click.

Atlas gulped. Damn, it had only been a few seconds but they had destroyed the entire car. Not a piece was left. Sweet Pale Lady, what if they spotted Eli and came after him? What if they spotted Atlas?

His mind began to whirl, round and round, as his heart pounded faster. He needed to calm down. Goblins could smell fear.
Think about something else, he told himself. What about the play? The play…Crap! There was a rehearsal tonight and he completely forgot about it! Claire probably hates him right now.

Claire. There was so much he wanted to tell her. But she was human and he…less so. What if she discovered his secret? Would she run away in fright? It wouldn’t surprise him; he was technically a monster.

Damn it, why did his life have to be so complicated? Why couldn’t he be attracted to changeling girls? Not that any changeling girls would give him the time of day. There was always that little extra-added fact that all of them were centuries older. Ew.

Was it his genetics? Was he predisposed to preferring human women?

Wait, what was that smell?

Crap.

A few goblin heads turned towards his direction. Atlas covered his mouth. He had allowed his thoughts to grow out of control.

Calm down, Atlas chanted inwardly. He started to count back from ten. He would have succeeded, if a bright light didn’t distract him.

“Monster!” A shrill voice screamed. “Mom, there’s a monster in that tree over there! Come quick!”

Atlas cursed. It was Eli. Shit, the human had spotted him!

A camera flashed, blinding him. He threw up his hands to shield himself. He moved left. Unfortunately, there was nothing in the that direction but air. Even though he tried to regain his balance, Atlas lost his footing.

He tumbled down, hitting what felt like every single branches on the way to the ground. “Oh fuuu —”
The amulet activated, covering him in armor. His landing was less than spectacular, his back and head smacking into something wet and crunchy. He could feel the material seeping into his hair. Sitting up, he put a hand to the back of his head. Was he bleeding? His head did hurt some. Had he cracked his head open?

Oh no. It was far worse.

Green muck dripped from his fingers.


One of the goblins swerved around, locking eyes with the teen.

“Waka Chaka,” it growled, followed by another, and then another, until the entire group was in a frenzied state.


A bold goblin launched itself at his throat. Atlas sidestepped the creature and took off. Behind him, a chorus of grunts and “waka chakas” erupted, followed by hundreds of feet smacking against the concrete. Atlas didn’t dare look back. Death was nipping at his heels.

Out from beneath the trees, he spotted a familiar face.

“Where are you—Great Gronka Morka, you've lead them to us!” Blinky yelled, joining the Trollhunter in the race for their lives. “What did you do?”

“It was an accident!”

“What did you do?” He repeated. “And what on earth is that on your back—Kanjigar’s ghost! You killed a goblin?”
“It was an accident!”

“They don’t seem to care. Run faster!”

“I can’t!” Atlas wheezed, the earlier adrenaline boost no longer there. “The armor is too heavy.”

“Your armor is responding to your emotional state!” Blinky urged, “Control your fear or you’ll soon be dead!”

The sounds of the goblins drew closer. He could feel their hot stinky breath at his back. Atlas prayed to every deity he could think of: God, Vishnu, Buddha, Santa, Morgana, whatever troll deities there were (he knew he should have paid more attention during Stricklander’s lessons)—the list went on.

Too late. A goblin jumped on his arm. He tripped, losing his footing. Two more goblins latched onto his legs. He fell, his body then slowly dragged backward. Ways away, the rest of the goblins approached at breakneck speed.

Oh, sweet Pale Lady. This was it. He was going to die by goblin. Atlas squeezed his eyes shut.

“Master Atlas!” Blinky called out.

The ground shook underneath him. Like a ragdoll, he was thrown into the air by a large hand, landing on a soft mossy and familiar back. His fingers dug into the hair; his shoulders relaxed. He opened his eyes again.

Toby sat aside him on AAARRRGGHH!!!’s back. The other teen patted his back.

“You okay there, dude?”

Atlas nodded. “I am now.”
Ahead, Blinky took a sharp right, motioning AAARRRGGHH!!! to do the same. Despite their speed, a few goblins still persisted.

Toby’s watch beeped. “Oh sweet! Guess who got a free t-shirt? This is so much car--wah!”

Toby was pulled off of AAARRRGGHH!!!’s back. Atlas barely made it in time to grab the other boy’s foot. His arms ached. He was going to be so sore tomorrow.

“Ah! It’s got me! It’s got me!” Toby wiggled around, nearly kicking Atlas in the face.

Though he couldn’t see what exactly happened, the goblin somehow slipped off Toby’s arm, along with the chubby tracker.

“No! I need that! He has my points!” Toby moaned.

“Fuck your points!” Atlas resisted the urge to smack his friend. “Our lives are in danger!”

“Master Atlas is correct. We must find a refuge somewhere. Trollmarket’s too far from here.”

“Where go?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked.

Toby pointed left. “I got an idea. Let’s cut through the bushes. It’s a shortcut to my house. Now come on!”

“You heard the man,” Atlas said.

Blinky heralded the group, soon enveloped by the dark hedges. AAARRRGGHH!!! had to bend down even more. Leaves brushed against Atlas’s back. From behind, the goblins drew closer, their cries louder and louder with each passing second.

Once they approached Toby’s fence, AAARRRGGHH!!! lifted both teens over, then himself. Toby rushed to the backdoor. Atlas drew out Daylight, guarding the other boy’s back. The door rattled.
“Hurry, Toby,” Atlas said as a goblin head popped up over the fence. It leered at him. Atlas shuddered.

Keys jingled. “Don’t rush me!”

Six goblins leaped over the wall. Atlas backed into Toby.

“Watch it, dude!”

Atlas brought his sword up. “They’re here.”

“Hurry, Tobias!” Blinky said.

The lock clicked. “Yes! I did it! Go me!”

The group hustled inside. Well, most of the group. AAARRRGGHH!!! was halfway in, the rest of his body unable to fit. A look of fear passed over the troll’s face. Toby was the first to act. He flipped a switch, showering the backyard in light.

The goblins hissed. One by one, they fell back.

Atlas collapsed to the ground, the armor vanishing. Though the pain of transformation was gone, his teammates still cringed as his body popped and creaked back to his normal size.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that,” Toby said.

Atlas cracked his neck to the side. He moved his jaw around as his teeth changed. “You and me both.”

Toby looked over AAARRRGGHH!!!’s shoulder. “All clear. Thank god Nana is paranoid about burglars.”
“Toby-pie, is that you?” An elderly woman yelled from another room.

The group froze. All eyes focused on the human of the bunch.

“Ha, ha, don’t mind me, Nana. Going up to my room to, ah, study,” Toby said, grabbing a bowl of food from the fridge. “Oh yeah, I think Aerial America is playing right now. Why don’t you binge. Also, maybe keep the cats inside? Lots of stray dogs out tonight. Wanna be safe, ya know?”

Tip-toeing through the kitchen, they carefully climbed the stairway. The moment they entered Toby’s room, they relaxed.

Toby sat on his bed, cradling the bowl as he snacked. “Anyone else want some? No? Okay. Don’t mind me then. Stress eating calms me down.”

Atlas drew his cloak tighter around his body. The amulet buzzed in his pocket. “That was close. Way too close.”

“I’m sorry to say this, Tobias, but it appears that your town is infested with goblins.” Blinky looked to Atlas. “Though you probably already know this.”

Atlas rolled his shoulders. “Guilty.”

“Okay, first things first, how are we going to get my chubby tracker back?”

“The chubby tracker should be the least of your worries, Tobes.” Atlas explained, “They know where you live.”

“Master Atlas is correct. We must eradicate them at once before they seek their revenge.” Blinky said.

Toby took a bit of an apple and swallowed. “But how?”
“Must find den.” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, taking Toby’s bowl and eating it and the apples contained whole.

The group turned their attention towards Atlas.


“You know where they are hiding,” It was a statement more than a question. Blinky put two hands on his hips and waited for Atlas's answer.

Atlas scratched his cheek, looking out the window. “I…might.”

“Must destroy. Will hunt you and friend.” AAARRRGGHH!!! put two fists together, twisted, then motioned the two hands to his mouth, pretending to chew on them. “Kill and eat both.”

“I’m not ready to be goblin chow, dude,” Toby said.

“And I’m not ready to be Bular’s dessert,” Atlas responded.

Blinky put his hands together and brought them underneath his chin. “They will come back with reinforcements. Light might deter them now, but they saw the Trollhunter kill one of their brethren.”

“Shit, what if they recognize me?” He hadn’t thought about that.


“Still, as long as you continue to carry the stench of goblin on your body, it would be best you not return to the Order this night,” Blinky suggested.

Atlas nodded. The Trollhunters fell into silence.
High-pitched giggling broke them out of their thoughts.

Before Atlas could explain, Blinky leaned down, peering into the toy home. “Great Gronka Morka! What is the gnome doing here? Why is it living in a dollhouse? What is the meaning of this, boys?”

Atlas and Toby laughed sheepishly.

“By Deya’s Grace, it’s fornicating with a doll!”

Toby raised a finger. “Funny story. See—”

“Toby-pie? Is everything alright up there?” Nana called from beyond the door. “I don’t recognize that voice. Who is that?”

“It’s a friend, Nana.”

“A friend? Really?” She gushed. “Oh, that’s wonderful. I’m so happy you’re finally making friends again. Do they want anything to eat?”

“No, Nana. We’re fine.” Toby insisted.

“Master Atlas, Tobias,” Blinky pointed at the two of them then jerked his index toward the house. “Could you perhaps explain.”

“You told me to take care of the gnome,” Atlas gestured toward the dollhouse. “so we’re taking care of it.”

Blinky threw his hands up in the air, then stuck his finger in Atlas’s face. “No, no, no! This is in direct violation of Rule Number Two! Finish the fight. This is not finishing the fight. A gnome is not a pet.”

Atlas slapped the hand away. “Your rules suck Gronk nuts, Blinky. Seriously, Rule Number One is always be afraid, except if you’re around goblins cause they smell fear.”
“Yeah, that does seem kinda lame.” Toby added. “It makes less sense than algebra.”

“Algebra?” Atlas asked. That sounded familiar, though he didn’t know why.


“There is a gnome in the dollhouse.” Blinky reiterated.

Atlas brushed back his bangs. “Look, I’m sorry. Really, but between trolls, humans, and changelings, it’s kinda hard to follow all these different rules you’ve got set up. I’m not…I’m not a troll…Not fully. And I’m not sure I’m ever going to be ready to fight Draal, much less Bular. This isn’t easy for me. If I give you the location of the goblins, I’m putting myself in danger with the Order. They’ll know I told you guys.”

Blinky took a deep breath, the anger in his face soon replaced with tired acceptance. He rested a hand on Atlas’s shoulder.

“As your trainer, I can only advise, not make your decisions,” Blinky said. “You’re caught between three worlds and as a teenager that must be quite stressful.”

“I’m really sorry about the gnome, I—”

“But,” He interjected, “it’s alright. You’re learning the rules in your own way. I never expected you to be like Kanjigar or like Deya. You are you and there is nothing wrong with that.”

Atlas looked up, blinking in surprise. Those…that was not what he was expecting. No one had ever told him that. Hesitantly, Atlas raised his hand and patted Blinky’s hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks, Blinky.” Atlas said.

Blinky smiled.
“The gnome can stay. Right now, we have bigger things to worry about. These goblins must be stopped. AAARRRGGHH!!! and I will seek out their den and lure them out. Then we can get rid of them, once and for all, together.” Blinky explained, “That way, the Order won’t suspect a thing.”

“That’s…not a bad idea,” Atlas said. It wouldn’t lead directly back to him. At least, he hoped it wouldn’t.

“Rest. Eat. Be good,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said.

“Yes, focus on getting some sleep. Enjoy being a human teenager. Television has told me the experience is quite a ride,” Blinky advised.

“Yeah, it’s definitely like nothing I’ve ever done before,” Atlas said.

“It seems life has thrown enough at you for one day.” Blinky said. “We’ll reconvene at sunset.”

Atlas nodded. “Sounds good.”

“But a gnome in a dollhouse?” Blinky added under his breath. “Absolutely absurd.”
Waka Chaka (III)

Chapter Summary

Barbara lies to Walt and Atlas lies to Claire. Like mother, like son.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters

Hey! Got some time to write while in Mexico and finally finished this chapter. Thank you for all the lovely reviews and kudos! They always make me smile. Big thanks to qruis and Charlie for helping me with this chapter. Hopefully I will be able to post Summer Happy Fun Time's next chapter sometime this weekend if all goes well.

I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Barbara snorted, trying not to spit out her water. *Eyes on the road,* Barbara thought.

She recollected herself then said, “Okay, okay. What happened next?”

“The flour coated the entire kitchen. Not an inch was spared. It was a spectacle. Atlas’s eyes made it even more comical. He looked about ready to faint from fear. You should have been there, Barbara. My boss’s son was so furious. He was covered head to toe in the substance. Honestly, it took every iota of control I had left not to burst out into laughter. One of my colleagues was not so well behaved. He…was let go soon afterward,” explained Walt.

“How did the Principal react?”

Walt frowned, brows furrowed. “The Principal?”
“Isn’t he your boss?”

“Oh yes…” Walt coughed. “Well, he was too preoccupied with work at the time to care. It was AP testing season you see.”

“Understandable,” Barbara said. “And Atlas? How was he afterwards?”

“You would be surprised how much pizza could lift that boy’s spirits. One minute he was hiding under the table and the next he’d gone through half of the pepperoni and started complaining about the meat being too overcooked. Honestly, that boy.”

“Your son sounds absolutely adorable.”

“Oh, he is,” he sighed. His gaze turned wistful. “I just wish he would be more open with me.”

“I can sympathize.” Barbara asked, “Is he still hanging out with that group?”

“Yes, unfortunately. He’s even helping one of them to memorize their lines for the play at the school. I found a journal—”

“Found?” She said, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He placed his hands on the passenger’s dashboard. “Alright. Perhaps there had been a little sleuthing involved.”

“You stole his journal.” She chuckled, “You dog, you.”

“I did not steal it, I merely borrowed it for a few minutes then put it back.”

“Oh, is that it? Borrowing, huh?” She shook her head.
“You know, Barbara,” Walt drummed his fingers along the dash. “You’ve not spoken a word about your own son. Is everything alright?”

She adjusted her glasses, giving Walt what she hoped was a sincere smile. “It’s…complicated. I love him to pieces. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him. I wish I could spend more time with him where he currently is, but—”

“Work gets in the way?” Walt provided.

*More like I barely even know where to start,* she thought. But she wouldn’t burden Walt with her predicament. The man was stressed enough with his job and his son’s ongoing rebellious phase. Barbara couldn’t—no, wouldn’t—drag the poor man into her search.

Besides, it was nice to not have someone look at her with pity.

Walt was fun and engaging and…she didn’t want to ruin that. Every time someone found out about Jim’s disappearance, there was a change in their demeanor towards her. It was as if they put up invisible walls. They treated her as if she were made of glass. If there was one thing she hated more than pity, it was fake sincerity. She’d had enough of that at work and around town.

That was why, the moment he found out about the real her it would be over. Barbara didn’t want that to happen. Not yet, at least.

And besides. She wasn’t lying per say, merely keeping her answers open-ended.

In the end, it was better to give vague responses then the harsh reality of truth. Sometimes, she almost even believed what she was telling him. Almost.

“How is it you know exactly what words are going to come out of my mouth.” Barbara finally said.

He shrugged, eyes half-lidded. “Intuition.”

She threw a raspberry at him. God, how long had it been since she’d done that? She hadn’t flirted this hard since she and her husband were college students.
James. Wow. She hadn’t thought about him once all night.

It felt nice, being appreciated. She wasn’t the bitter divorced wife with a missing child. She was just Barbara again.

Alas, as fun as their night was, it had to come to an end sometime.

They rolled up to a row of apartments. New development, she observed, with high walls and blacked out windows. Very modern. Almost cubic in shape. Not her cup of tea, but it wasn’t her home after all.

“This is my stop,” Walt said, his voice now more subdued. “I’d invite you in for some wine, but I have to be at the school early tomorrow. I need to grade the students’ quizzes and give them back before first period.”

“A raincheck then?”

He smiled. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

Walt leaned closer. Barbara sucked in her breath.

His lips caressed her cheek. Did he—had he? Immediately, she touched the spot where he kissed her. It was soft kiss, but damn if it didn’t make her blood run hot. Her cheeks warmed. Heat pooled in her abdomen.

“Goodnight, Barbara,” he whispered before drawing away completely.

Barbara shivered. No man should sound so good. She coughed into her hand, brushing back her hair before replying, “Goodnight, Walt.”

Did she sound as sultry as she hoped? Probably not, but his cheeks were red too, right? Or was it just the lights in the car? Still, that kiss had to mean something. Her heart raced. She watched as he
practically sauntered up the steps to his apartment. When he was finally out of sight, she let out a deep sigh.

Barbara laid her head against the steering wheel.

How in the hell did someone like her score someone like him? Tall, broad shouldered, but a nice tempered waist and long legs—and that was only the tip of the iceberg. His personality was like something out of her old romance novels. Intelligent, courteous, well-humored—a tad old-fashioned, but he was around ten or so years older than her—in short, he was everything a girl could want and more.

She checked the rearview mirror. Her mascara and lipstick had been applied multiple times before she found the right look. Would a man like Walt find her attractive in a dating way? The only guys that had hit on her since her husband left had been drunkards at the hospital. Occasionally a young resident or two had shown interest, but Barbara never dated men younger than herself. Maturity went a long way in a relationship.

Not that they had a relationship. They were friends. Just friends. Right?

Or maybe something more, her mind supplied.

Barbara groaned, massaging her temples as she tried to get rid of all these new thoughts. Keep your eyes on the prize, Barbara reminded herself. Her son was out there and she needed Walt to get to him.

Still, this wasn’t what she had planned. At first, she’d thought it would be an effective way to get close to her missing son, but now, now there were these…feelings involved.

Checking both side mirrors for any incoming cars, Barbara turned on the ignition again, rolling back onto the street from which she came.

She tightened her hold on the steering wheel. She need to regain focus on her primary objective: her son. How had Jim even gotten into Arcadia High without her knowledge? Did they even search to see if he was before accepting him? Probably not. Like most things in this town, news that was no longer relevant was swept under the rug.
What a joke. She should just march right into that school, get Jim by the ear and ask him where the hell he had been over the last five years.

Her mind drifted back to their last meeting. The armor, the mysterious earthquake, the disappearances going on around town—they were all tied together somehow. She bet her bottom-dollar that Jim was involved in something, though what that something was had yet to be revealed.

Could he be involved in a gang? A child-trafficking ring? A secret organization? There were so many possibilities.

No, as much as she wanted to, storming into the school would probably get her arrested instead of leading her towards her son. She needed to take a different approach.

Perhaps she could spy from her car afterschool? She thought about it for a full second then discarded the idea. No, that would probably get her in trouble with the parents. Not to mention that was during the time when she worked.

She slowed down as she approached a stoplight. Her phone buzzed. She checked the message and smiled. It was a text from Walt.

“Dinner soon?” She read off the text and giggled.

Feeling a bit flirtatious, she texted back, “How about my place?”

Confidence roared within her, spurning her to do something more. She added a winking smiley face to complete the sentence.

Perfect. She hit the send button and waited for a reply.

“It was an accident!” A familiar voice yelled.

Barbara jerked her head around, looking at the street behind her.
No. It couldn’t be.

Could it?

A boy in glowing armor ran down 12th Avenue.

Barbara rubbed her eyes.

Was she dreaming? She pinched her arm.

No, it was real, she realized, her heart soaring.

Jim.

Beside him, there was a—what on earth was that thing? Four arms pumped back and forth, carried by rather disproportionate legs. It was almost comical if the creature wasn’t so horrifying. Those teeth, those eyes, those horns—Barbara nearly screamed. Oh dear god, was that monster chasing her son?

“What did you do?” The monster said. “And what on earth is that on your back—Kanjigar’s ghost! You killed a goblin?”

“It was an accident!”

“They don’t seem to care. Run faster!”

They soon disappeared past her line of vision. Not far behind them, strange green creatures followed. She covered her mouth, hands beginning to shake.

Her baby was being chased by monsters.
Motherly instincts took over. She threw her car into reverse, doing a one-eighty across the small two-lane strip. Her tires screeched in protest. Once in the other lane, Barbara shifted her car into full gear, turning the corner as fast as her vehicle would allow. She spotted her son and the blue monster taking another street. Just as she was about to roll down after them, a gray-green blur jumped out of the trees.

Her heart nearly stopped. She stopped the car, slack-jawed at the creature’s size. And she thought the blue one was huge. This one was on an entirely different level. Neither it nor its rider appeared to have noticed her thankfully, continuing down the street after her son.

The blue monster called out something in alarm but was too far away for Barbara to make out the words. She didn’t need to understand however. The urgency in his (or her? She couldn’t tell it’s gender) voice was more than enough to clue her in. The green gremlin look-alikes were gaining on Jim.

Barbara nearly jumped out of her car when the green creatures grabbed ahold of her son. Thankfully, she didn’t have to do so. Seconds later, the grey one smacked the little creepers off her son, tossing him onto its mossy hair. The other rider, a large human boy, patted her son’s back, keeping him steady.

Relief filled her. Her son was alive.

What a second. She squinted. No…it couldn’t be.

Her eyes widened.

But it was.

Toby Domzalski.

She banged her fist against the wheel. Her car horn squeaked. That little—Toby knew her son was alive! And he didn’t tell her.

Part of her was angry as all hell. A fire erupted within her. How long had this been going on? How long had Toby known her son was alive? Did Nana know too? What were they doing with those monsters and why were they all running away from the smaller ones?
Her mind was bursting with ideas, each one more outlandish than the last. Only one thing was for certain however: Toby knew where her son was.

Still, most of her was relieved. This made things much easier. She wouldn’t have to use Walt. She could go directly to the source. It made some sense why Jim would contact Toby first, though it didn’t hurt any less that he chose Toby over her.

But first things first. Barbara picked up her phone and dialed a number she knew by heart. It rang twice before someone answered.

“Hello, Mrs. Domzalski?” Barbara began.

“Barbara, dear, is that you?” Mrs. Domzalski asked, her voice emitting concern.

“Yes. How are you doing?” She added, “We haven’t spoken a couple weeks. I wanted to check in and see how things were.”

“Oh, just dandy.” She said. “I won another round of Blackjack with the girls down at the senior center. Practically knocked ol’ Doris’s wig off!”

“That’s great,” she said. “And how’s Toby doing?”

“Wonderful! He’s a sophomore at Arcadia High now. He’s even got some new friends. It’s so nice to see he’s hanging out with others again. He was so miserable during his first year of high school.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Barbara said softly.

After a short pause, Mrs. Domzalski asked, “Is there any reason you’re calling so late?”

She froze. Shoot. What should she say? What reason could she give for why was she calling? “Mrs. Domzalski—”
“Oh, call me Nana. I hate it when you get all formal and use that name. I get it enough around town as it is.”

“Do you remember, after Jim…disappeared, you said you would be there for me to talk, anytime I wanted?”

“Of course, dearie.” Nana said in a soft caring tone. “Anytime. You know that.”

“How about tomorrow night? Maybe around eight or so?”

“Splendid! Oh, it’s been so long since we last chatted. I do hope you’re doing well.”

“I’m…alright.” She added, “I’m even dating someone.”

Dang it. Barbara put a hand to her face. Why did she say that?

“That’s wonderful! It’s about time you got a man in your life. You must tell me all the juicy details,” Nana said. “And you know you’re always welcome at our house.”

“Thank you, Mrs.—I mean Nana.”

“Anytime, dearie. See you tomorrow! Remember to brush your teeth!”

Barbara pulled the phone away from her ear. Nana was a lifesaver. Truly. If it wasn’t for her support after Jim’s disappearance she would have—

No. She wasn’t going to go sink back into that place again. Barbara had come too far to have to repeat that.

Barbara wasn’t that lost mother looking for her baby anymore. She was a woman with resolve and no one, not even her son’s best friend, was going to stop her from reuniting with her son.
She smirked.

“Gotcha,” she whispered.

Atlas adjusted the collar of his gym shirt. It felt like sandpaper against his skin. At least he wasn’t alone in his misery; dozens of teenagers shuffled about in the uncomfortable ensemble.

Gym class was officially his least favorite human subject.

He shouldn’t be here. He should be cleaning his mentor’s weaponry or filing away the new collection of books that arrived from Bulgaria yesterday. Already he was behind schedule for his normal everyday tasks at the Order.

And what was with humans and moving from class to class? Why couldn’t the teachers move instead? How inefficient.

The classes themselves were even worse. Thankfully, he and Toby shared classes, otherwise he would have gone insane with the amount of information being thrown at him. Who the hell needed to know how to dissect a frog in real life? What purpose did desecrating an amphibian’s corpse have when the books easily showed how everything worked?

And don’t even get him started on his Spanish class. After his horrid presentation in Spanish, Senor Uhl had loaded him with an entire library of books to help him catch up with the rest of the class. The old backpack he borrowed from Toby was now filled to the brim with what amounted to thirty pounds of books and homework.

How the hell was he supposed to play high school student with his other two lives?

“Mole-man!”
Great. Atlas yawned, examining his cuticles. He didn’t need to look to know who that stupid moniker came from.

“Thought you could skip out on a fight and leave me hanging?” Steve yelled, “Dodge this, Lake!”

A large red ball flew, heading straight for him. Atlas easily avoided the object. On the other side, Steve growled. Atlas ignored him. He had bigger things to worry about.

In the corner of his eye, he spied Eli. The boy appeared almost giddy, switching his phone on every few seconds before hiding it back underneath his shirt.

Not good. Atlas frowned. He would need to get a hold of that phone sooner or later, preferably the former. Even the blurriest of photos was still proof. And if that proof got back to his mentor—well, suffice to say, he might be assigned to something even worse than goblin duty.

But that could wait. It appeared the sulking teen beside him needed attention of some sort.

“Is everything okay, Tobes?” Atlas nudged him. “You don’t seem very interested in this game.”

Toby let out a long sigh. “Why bother taking another step? My Chubby Tracker’s gone. I got it from saving up all allowance for, like, a month! Life’s so empty when you’re not racking up points.”

“There are goblins out to kill us and you’re worried about your toy?” Atlas said incredulously.

“It’s not a toy,” he grumbled. “It's a highly advanced calorie recording machine.”

Coach Laurence began yelling. He blew his whistle at every student who got hit and sent them to the bench. Soon, only three people were left on each side.

Two dodgeballs locked onto Atlas. He cartwheeled around the first then backflipped over the second. They hit the wall, bouncing off into the corners of the gym.
Toby snapped out of his wallowing. Even Eli had looked up from his phone.

“Dude, you are killing it today.” Toby said.

“Great job, Jim!” Eli encouraged.

“Come on, you guys are exaggerating.” Atlas said, hiding the developing smile on his face.

Eli drew closer, nodding enthusiastically. “No way, that was really cool. Can you teach me how to do that?”

“Eli’s right,” Toby said. “That was pretty amaze-balls.”

“Yeah, I guess. Looks like training is paying—” Atlas pulled Toby and Eli out of the way of three incoming balls. “Off.”

Steve stalked around, his goons following behind. His eyes were locked on Atlas. Wonderful. Ignoring Steve had only made him angrier.

“Whew, thanks, dude.” Toby threw out a fist.

Though he kept his eyes trained on Steve, he still knocked the fist with his own. “No problem.”

As long as Toby was there, he could at least keep his mind off the annoying blond in front of him.

“Watch out!” Toby moved in front of Atlas, taking a hit in his lower abdomen. He crouched over, holding his privates.

Damn. He’d jinxed himself.

“Man down,” Toby groaned. “My Gronk-nuts.”
“Toby! Are you alright?” Eli asked.

Atlas got down on his knees, concern in his gaze. “Everything okay, Tobes?”

“Do I look okay to you?” Toby retorted in a high pitched voice.

The Coach blew his whistle. “You’re out, Domzalski!”

Atlas offered the boy a hand up. Before Toby could even grab it however, a dodgeball lodged itself into the shorter boy’s face. Toby groaned in pain. It was Atlas’s turn to growl. Another ball came, but this time Atlas caught it with one hand.

“He was already down, Palchuk,” Atlas said.

“That’s so gonna bruise tomorrow,” Toby said as he sat up.

“Need a hand?”

Toby side-eyed Steve, then shook his head. “Go on without me. Avenge me, At—Jim.”

“I’ll do my best,” Atlas replied.

“Leave Jim and Toby alone!” Eli shouted.

Steve glared at Eli, who immediately backed up behind Atlas. In the corner of Atlas's eye, Toby slinked off to the bleachers. Better there than out on the court right now, Atlas reasoned.

Scooping up a ball in each hand, Atlas let loose, hitting both of Steve’s ‘friends’. In response, Steve knocked Eli out. Eli sent a worried glance to Atlas before leaving the court. Perhaps he thought Atlas wouldn’t be able to handle Steve. His human body was pretty noodly. But like all things, looks could be deceiving.
Atlas wiped the sweat developing on his brow; now, it was just them.

Steve chuckled, juggling one of the balls. “Nice throw, Mole-man. But you better watch out, cause you’re about to kiss your Juliet goodbye.”

Atlas’s mouth twisted in disgust as Steve pretended to make out with the ball. Seriously, what the fuck was wrong with this guy?

Steve tossed another at Atlas, who caught it. Like a discus thrower, Atlas whirled around and lugged it at the blond boy’s face. It missed the other by a hair.

Steve scowled.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Atlas said. “Also, leave Claire out of this. You got a problem with me? Fine, but don’t take it out on everyone else.”

“Aw, did I upset you?” He mocked.

Ugh! How could such an insignificant fleshbag get under his skin like this? He needed to try a different approach. He needed to catch Steve off-guard.

*Never let your enemy see what you are thinking,* his inner-Strickler advised, *control yourself.*

That…could work. Better than nothing at least. Atlas took a deep breath, relaxing his face to a more neutral state. *Don’t let the human get to you,* he told himself.

Picking up one of the balls, Atlas began walking forward.

Perhaps it was his gait or maybe even his demeanor, but Steve’s face changed from a mocking sneer to worried frown. Good. Fear was something Atlas knew quite well.
Twisting his torso, he slammed a ball towards Steve, who had to duck and cover. The ball smacked against the wall so loudly that the entire gym fell silent. Even the Coach had stopped talking.

He summersaulted over to two more balls. He threw the first at Steve’s face. Steve barely swerved in time. When he tried to lurch for his own ball, Atlas knocked it out of the way with his second, sending both careening off into the sidelines.

Only one ball left. Steve made a mad dash for it. Atlas merely waited.

“Ha! Last one, Lake.” Steve said, eyes darting around like a cornered animal. “Whatcha gonna do?”

Atlas kept silent. He continued to look at the boy with a blank stare.

This only seemed to infuriate the teen more.

Steve bounced the ball against the ground. “What’s wrong with me? How about what’s wrong with you?”

Atlas cracked each individual knuckle. Each crack made Steve flinch.

“You’re…You’re a freak, you know that? No one likes you. You creep everyone out,” Steve pratted on. “Go back to Canada, loser.”

“Projecting a bit much, are we?”

“What did you say?”

“Do you even have any friends, Palchuk?”

Steve’s face froze up.
Atlas continued his march towards Steve, who drew back. There was an uneasiness in his walk now.

“I’ve got lots of friends. Who do you have? Domzalski? Who would want a fatass loser like him for a friend?”

*Get under your opponent’s skin,* his inner-Strickler reminded him.

“You know what I think? I think you don’t have any real friends,” Atlas said. “I think you’re just taking out all your anger on people like me because you’re an asshole. Because you’re jealous.”

“Palchuk! Lake! Get your heads in the game. This ain’t no time for chit-chat!” Coach Laurence yelled from across the gym.

“Me? Jealous of you? As if.” Steve switched the ball to his right hand. “Pucker up, loverboy.”

If Atlas had been a normal teenage boy, Steve might have won.

But Atlas had never been a normal-anything.

The ball smashed into Atlas’s open palm. He held it for a moment, then locked eyes with Steve. Atlas’s lips curled up into a knowing smile. Sweat slid down Steve’s face. Others in this school might put up with the other boy’s bullshit, but not him.

Atlas ran toward the halfway line. Steve got up to run, his back towards Atlas. Just what he wanted. Throwing the ball into the air, Atlas slammed his fist into it like a volleyball player.


Coach Laurence blew his whistle. “You’re out, Palchuk. Lake wins!”

Atlas approached Steve, crouching down. “Next time I won’t be so nice.”
Steve groaned. “You’re so dead, Lake.”

Atlas picked up the ball and threw it over his shoulder in a lackadaisical manner. “Better luck next time, human.”

_Not a bad way to end last period_, Atlas thought.

Oh, if only his luck were that good.

“Watch out, Claire!” Someone shrieked.

Atlas turned around, eyes wide. As if in slow motion, the ball flew toward Claire. She barely had time to react before the object kissed her right in the mouth. She dropped like an anchor, hitting the ground with a sharp thud.

Oh no. Oh no no no. Atlas sprinted over to her side. Her eyes were tearing up. Guilt rankled him. This was his fault. He had been careless and arrogant and now Claire was hurt because of him.

“Oh snap,” Toby said as he jogged up behind him. “She gonna be okay?”

“Okay, everyone back off.” Coach Laurence leaned over. “How many fingers I got up, Nuñez?”

She groaned, putting up two fingers.

“Good enough.”

“Claire, I’m so sorry,” Atlas said.

This was the worst. How could he have let this happen?

“You just can’t avoid hurting anyone, can you?” Steve bit out.
Atlas growled. The gaggle-tack on his neck began to grow warm.

“Steve, bench. Now.” Coach Laurence blew his whistle. “You and I need to talk.”

Steve threw the man a confused look. “But Coach—”

“On the double,” he ordered.

Steve gave Atlas one last glare before heading over to the bleachers. It was a good thing too. Atlas was itching to take off the gaggle-tack and show Steve what a real freak was, what a monster with a grudge could make out of a fleshbag like him. No, that wasn’t right. Steve wasn’t the one who hurt Claire, not this time. His shoulders slumped. He let his anger get the best of him. Claire was hurt because of his actions.

Claire hissed slightly as she removed the hand holding her mouth. Atlas cringed. Her lips were swollen to twice their normal size.

“Uh, can someone help me up?” She asked.

Immediately, Atlas scooped her up, one arm behind her head and the other behind her knees. His human arms burned with the extra added weight, but Atlas paid them no mind. He kicked open the gym doors.

The Coach sent him a bewildered look. “Lake! Where the hell are you going? Class isn’t finished yet!”

“Nurse’s Office!” He yelled back, not giving the man another glance as he began walking down the hall.

Claire frowned, her eyebrows pulled together in annoyance.

“I can walk,” she insisted. “You don’t have to carry me.”
“You’ve got a head injury. I know what those are like,” Atlas said.

Besides, it was the least he could do for injuring her face.

She cocked her head to the side.

“You do?”

“Yeah, my dad and aunt have smacked me around a bunch of times,” Atlas said. “You get used to it.”

Her eyes widened. The anger in her brow disappeared, replaced with...something Atlas couldn’t decipher. One of her hands reached out to touch his chest. The hairs on his arms stood up.

Claire was touching him. He struggled to control his face. It was as if his stomach was full of butterflies.

“Why haven’t you ever told the authorities?” She asked.

The authorities? What could cops do against centuries old trolls? Atlas almost scoffed but hid it under a cough.

“What’s there to tell? It’s just training.”

“Training?” Claire said.

“My dad and aunt train me.” Atlas added, “They want me...to join the military. When I’m older.”

Gunmar’s army was technically a kind of military, right?
“But is that something you want to do?”

“…No, I don’t know what I want right now. Not really.” He gestured his head to the left. “Looks like we’re here.”

“Can you put me down now?”

“Oh, sorry,” Atlas said. Gently, he lowered her to her feet. It made his back ache something fierce, but that was nothing in comparison to the pain she was experiencing.

He opened the door for her.

“Such chivalry,” she joked.

“Claire,” Atlas began, biting his lower lip. “I’m really really sorry. I wasn’t looking where I threw the ball and you got hurt and—”

She put two fingers to his lips.

“It’s okay. It was an accident,” she said. “Right?”

Atlas’s eyes widened as far as they could go. His jaw slackened.

“Right,” he replied.

She looked around the room. “Seems like the nurse isn’t here.”

Atlas pulled up a chair for her. “Sit down, I’ll find something for your lip.”

She seated herself in the offered chair, a hand moving up to cover her lip. Even though she was smiling, he could tell she was in pain from the glassy look in her eyes.
Quickly, he went to one of the cupboards, pulling out an instant cold pack. He crumpled and squeezed it until it became cold. Once satisfactory, he bent down and handed it to her.

“You sure seem to know your way around this place.” Claire remarked with a raised eyebrow.

Atlas coughed. “I might have come in here once before.”

Multiple times actually. While Stricklander was usually his go-to for the more serious injuries, things like sprains and cuts were normally treated with whatever things he could find. The school was one of the few safe areas he could relax. It was Stricklander’s territory to a certain extent.

“Why are you wearing a horseshoe around your neck?”

Crap. Atlas looked down. Bending down, the makeshift necklace was easily visible from underneath his gym shirt. He stood up, brushing the fabric down so it looked less out of place.

“Oh this? Ha, ha,” he chuckled nervously. “It’s my good luck charm I guess. You know, keeps the bad parts of me from coming out.”

“Jim,” Claire said softly. “You’re not bad.”

“Oh Claire, you have no idea.” Atlas got up, avoiding her gaze. “I probably need to get back to class. If you need anything, just text me. I’m sure the nurse will be here soon though.”

She pulled the icepack away from her face for a moment. “Wait, are you going to be at rehearsal later?”

Atlas stopped. He still needed to figure out a way to stop the goblins from killing him and Toby. Not to mention figuring out how to get Eli’s phone to delete his picture.

But when else would he get time to hang out with Claire?
“If my job doesn’t get in the way, sure.” Atlas answered.

Even if he couldn’t tell her the whole truth, he could at least tell her that.
"War Hammer to Trollhunter. The coast is clear. Ready to proceed?"

Atlas poked his head out of the shower stall. "What on earth, Tobes. You’re still going on with that?"

"We need to use the code names, dude, especially at school. Gotta be careful, ya know?” Toby said, “Especially around you-know-who.”

“That’s...true, I guess,” Atlas admitted. It only took one name slip-up and his dad would easily be able to deduce he and the Trollhunter were the same person. He shuddered. Hopefully that never
came to pass, at least, not without Atlas telling the man himself.

“I vote we call him Stickdude.”

Atlas coughed to cover his laughter. “You know, maybe we should be focusing on more important things, like my fight with Draal. All this goblin stuff has been really distracting.”

“Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that. Any plans?”

“Well, I’ve got the start of one,” Atlas said.

“Oh? How much of a start?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “Like, ten percent of one?”

“That’s…” Toby chuckled nervously. “Well, gotta keep positive right? Maybe Draal will choke on his gulg and die. You done in there yet?”

“Yeah, one sec,” Atlas said, stripping out of the last of his human clothes. He stuffed them inside his backpack before he stuck a hand out past the shower curtains. “Ready.”

Toby handed over the dark clothing to Atlas like they were some sort of ceremonial offering. “Your garments, my liege.”

“Ha, ha. Very funny,” Atlas said.

While the human clothes were decent, nothing beat the comfort of his old gear. He unfolded his cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders and adjusting the small hook. Once he got it just right, he opened the curtains.

“Ta-da,” Atlas said, spinning his cloak around with a dramatic flourish.
“You look like you’re about to go LARPing,” Toby remarked.

Atlas crossed his arms, eyes half-lidded. “Gee, thanks.”

“It’s weird seeing you without your armor.”

“I left it back at the Order. It would have been a hassle to lug around, especially with this body.”

“Makes sense,” Toby said. “Plus you took forever changing this morning. What’s the deal with that?”

“Yeah, I noticed that too.,” Atlas replied. He adjusted his sleeves, pulling them up to his elbows. “Maybe it’s because we didn’t use the amulet first?”

“Hmm, yeah, I can see that.” Toby said, nodding his head. “The amulet makes it pretty instantaneous right? Kinda like a cheat code.”

“That doesn’t explain the other weird thing though.”

“What weird thing?”

“Look,” Atlas pulled the gaggle-tack necklace off his neck and placed it on the ground. A second or two passed before he picked it back up. “See?”

“What am I seeing?” Toby inquired with a quizzical expression.

“Ugh,” Atlas said as he brushed back his bangs. “I’m not transforming! Okay, so a gaggle-tack works both ways for changelings, but when I’m in human form, it doesn’t work at all. It makes me go from troll to human but not vice versa. Why do you think that is?”
“Maybe because you’re a half-changeling it only works half-way? Dude, I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“It’s slower too,” Atlas noted. “When I use the amulet along with it there’s no change because I’m already in human form, but when I only use the gaggle-tack it takes a couple minutes. When I’m not touching the gaggle-tack for a few minutes I transform back.”

“Did you ever touch a gaggle-tack as a kid?”

“They tested one on me when I first came in, but only a quick touch. Maybe that’s why I didn’t transform before. Maybe I didn’t have long enough exposure,” Atlas scratched his head. “Honestly, I don’t know. We should probably tell Blinky. Maybe he knows something.”

“Guess Blinky's solution wasn't the cure-all we were hoping for.”

"It's okay. As long as I've got the amulet and the gaggle-tack, everything should be okay,” Atlas said, picking up the horseshoe again. "Catch.”

Toby ducked. The gaggle-tack clattered against the shower tiles near his friend. "Watch where you're throwing that! I almost got gaggle-tacked!”

"Gaggle-tacked? Is that even a word?”

"It is now. I've christened and trademarked it. Now, if you use it you have to pay me a dollar."

"How about a Nougat Nummie instead?"

"Hm," Toby crossed his arms, bringing a finger up to tap at his chin. "Acceptable."

Atlas almost smiled but instead bit down on his bottom lip as the onset of transformation set in.

It sucked that it only took a minute or two away from the gaggle-tack for him to return to his old form. He tried to focus on retaining his human shape, but for some reason his body refused to
cooperate. What did he do that one time again? Atlas struggled to remember. He gave up halfway. What was the point?

Once finished, Atlas stretched, reaching down to touch his toes then twisting from side to side to get all the kinks out.

“How long was that?” Atlas said.

Toby checked his phone. “Five minutes exactly.”

“Damn,” He said. Atlas had hoped the second time he would have sped up a little at least. “This morning’s was about that time too. I was hoping we could shorten the time.”

“We’ll work at it. Gotta keep practicing, right?” Toby said as he walked out of the showers, Atlas following from behind. "Still, this sucks. I wonder why it doesn't react to your regular form?"

Atlas sighed, "I wish I knew, Tobes. I really do."

Toby pushed open the exit doors before looking both ways, ushering Atlas to follow with his right hand. Flipping his hood up, he hid in the nearby bushes as Toby unlocked his bike. Once Toby got out onto the road, Atlas trailed from behind, jumping from tree to tree. They were supposed to meet Blinky and AAARRRGGHHH soon enough.

Checking the time on his phone, Atlas nearly cursed; half-past seven. It felt longer. Rehearsal was a nightmare. He nearly fell asleep during one of his lines and almost knocked Ms. Janeth off stage. At least he didn't have to continue looking down at his script during every line. That was an improvement, right?

It didn't help that Claire kept giving him strange looks. Her lip had appeared better at least. Unfortunately, Steve kept being a pest, coughing whenever Atlas said his lines or tripping him when teacher wasn't looking.

Asshole.
What was worse was that Atlas let him. He couldn't do anything so long as Claire was present. It meant he had to play nice with Steve. Nice and Atlas did not go well together.

At least it was over. For now.

His cell buzzed. He put it up to his ear.

“Earth to Trollhunter, do you read me?”

Atlas jumped down from the tree, landing a few meters away from his friend.

“You know you don’t have to do that. You could have just called out.”

“You seemed distracted,” Toby leaned his bike to the side, a knowing grin emerging on his face. “Thinking about Claire?”

"Yes. She keeps invading my mind and I don’t know how to stop it! Girls are way too complicated," he admitted to Toby.

Toby smoothed down his sweater vest with his knuckles. "Maybe for you. I've got it all figured out."

Atlas sent the boy an incredulous look. "Have you even dated a girl?"

"Have you?" Toby retorted.

"Touché."

Dating, hanging out with friends, school—Atlas never thought he could have such things. Not that he had asked Claire out on a date or anything. But now, there were these…possibilities that had never existed before. His life had been sworn to the Order the moment he survived his initiation, his existence centered on trying to please his mentor, the father-figure who saved him from death. How could he ever repay a man for that?
Barely two weeks had gone by and everything had changed. The knot of guilt had continued to grow. Even now, he sensed it. It festered like a bad wound.

Toby’s phone beeped. He looked at it and grinned. "Sweet Cheeseits! I got a windbreaker!"

He showed Atlas the screen. Ah oh. Atlas cleared his throat, not looking Toby in the eyes.

"That's great."

"I know, right? If it's not too warm and not too cold, I'll have the perfect cover-up!" Toby said, “Chicks dig windbreakers too, right?"

"Yeah…sure." Atlas said, trying not to think of the implications.

"Hey, look it's moving…” Toby's brows came together before rising above his hairline. He gasped, "Oh my gosh, it's the goblin! That asshole must still have my Chubby Tracker on him! And look, it's heading down Main Street!"

"Wow, look at the time,” Atlas whistled. “We should go to Trollmarket and meet up with Blinky and AAARRRGHH!!!."

"Dude, what if the Chubby Tracker battery is dead by then?" Toby folded his arms, eyes narrowing. "Whoa, hold the phone. I get it now. You know where it's going, don't you?"

Atlas twiddled his thumbs. "I can neither confirm nor deny that allegation."

"That's why you don't want to go. You're afraid."


"Then let's go," Toby said, kicking the footstool off his bike.
"Wait," Atlas said. "Toby, this is a bad idea. If someone from the Order sees me, I could get seriously reprimanded."

"Dude, as long as you're in human form everything should go fine, right?"

Damn. Toby got him there. Atlas sighed, pulling out the amulet.

“We’re only going in there to scout, alright? Then we go straight back to Trollmarket to tell Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!!”

“Got it,” Toby said.

“For the Glory of Merlin...Daylight is Mine to Command,” Atlas said in a monotone voice, hoping the stupid metal wouldn’t work for once.

It did.

Toby grinned cheekily, patting the back of his bike. Atlas got up onto the spokes.

As Toby rode on towards the goblin’s location (and their possible doom), Atlas sank deep into thought. He wished he could say he was thinking up plans to evade the possible meeting of the two sides (as inevitable as it would soon be), or that he was contemplating a reasonable way to take out the goblins without the other party knowing.

Unfortunately, all Atlas was really doing was panicking. And cursing.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The goblin was going leading them to an early death. Think, Atlas inwardly told himself, what would
Well, for one, Stricklander wouldn’t put himself in a situation like this in the first place. And two, the fact that he was bringing Toby along, a friendly but extremely volatile variable, would no doubt prove to be disastrous for both parties.

“We should be letting Blinky and AAARRRGHH!! handle this,” Atlas grumbled.

“And what if someone dies in the meantime? We need to get rid of them.” Toby said as they rounded a corner, only a block or two away from the museum. “How many people have they killed?”

Atlas leaned down closer to Toby’s head so the other boy could hear him. "They're not that bad. They're just misunderstood."

"Dude, I get that you're on team changeling and things are different for you, but these creatures ate a delivery truck and nearly killed someone: you. What if that had been me or your mom? It's your job as the Trollhunter to protect humans and trolls, right? Sometimes, you gotta do some crap stuff."

Atlas closed his eyes, giving a quick squeeze to Toby’s shoulders. "You're right."

“Look! My phone says it stopped at the museum. I wonder why they’re hiding there.”

Atlas sucked in his lips before answering, “It’s where the Order keeps them during the daytime.”

“Why not at the base itself?”

“Because goblins are disgusting. It’s a hassle to even keep them in one place. They love to explore and eat and piss all over the place. They don’t listen very well either. It’s a crapshoot on whether they’ll take your orders or not.”

“So they’re like Nana’s cats then.”

Atlas opened his eyes, giving the back of Toby’s head a hard look. Finally, he waved his hand.
“Well...Sure, yeah, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

As much as the changelings liked to say they were in control of the goblins, Atlas was beginning to see that they really...weren’t. A lot of his previous beliefs about his people were being disproved and Atlas wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Even the troll history book Blinky gave him had pointed out some inconsistencies in his own knowledge. How many changelings fully grasped the full truth? How much was shielded from them?

Perhaps once Gunmar and Bular were out of the way trolls and changelings could come to some sort of truce. A peace between the two races. Maybe that was why Atlas was chosen to be the Trollhunter.

If trolls could ever trust changelings enough to do so.

Atlas shook his head. He was getting sidetracked from his objective. They needed to lure the goblins away without alerting Nomura.

Who was conveniently walking right up the steps to the museum. Crud.

Quickly, Atlas jerked his body right, driving both of them straight into the bushes.

“What the hell, dude.” Toby said, pulling the twigs out of his hair. He spat out a few leaves.

“We’ve got company,” Atlas whispered. "Crap, it's Nomura."

Just as he finished speaking, a few goblins jumped from one of the rooftops onto the museum building, shambling into the open spire like a group of drunk football fans. Toby grabbed his arm.

"You mean museum lady from the field trip? Oh my gosh, she doesn't know the place is infested! How many do you think are in there? They could strike at any time. Or worse, lay eggs in her ears or her stomach then pop out her chest or something," Toby rambled.

Atlas side-eyed his friend. "Uh...Goblins don't do that, Tobes."
"They don't?" Toby rose out of the bushes, setting his bike against a tree carefully before jumping straight out onto the sidewalk. "Well, it doesn't matter. We have to save her."

Toby made it to the entrance first, Atlas slinking behind. His stomach churned with unease.

What was Nomura doing there so late at night? She normally avoided handling the goblins around this time, leaving it to some low level changeling.

Something was off about this situation.

Toby pulled at the handles for a few moments before giving up. "Damn, it's closed. How are we going to get in?"

The shorter raised both his eyebrows, giving Atlas a knowing look.

"What?"

"You gotta know another way inside, right?"

"I…might," Atlas admitted, gesturing with his hand towards the side of the museum.

Toby patted him on the back. “Lead the way, Trollhunter.”

Atlas sighed, sinking low to the ground. Thankfully, it was nighttime, so his armor wasn’t as glaringly out of place as it would be otherwise. He tapped his index against a few of the windows until he found the open one he normally used. Within seconds (well, minutes, since Toby got stuck halfway through), Toby and Atlas were inside the museum.

“What is it with you and windows? Were you a cat burglar in your past life or something?” Toby said.
“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to do some breaking and entering, not me.”

“I prefer the term breaking and rescuing,” Toby replied. “And besides, it’s for a good cause.”

Atlas pushed him forward. “Just don’t break anything. As soon as we see the goblins, we gotta go.”

“But what about the museum lady?”

“She’s a secondary priority. If it’s possible, we’ll warn her.”

"Dude, we can’t just warn her. We gotta get her outta here," Toby urged. "Then we can go back to Trollmarket and let Blinky and AAARRRRGGHH!!! lure them out.”

"I don't think the Goblins are going to attack her," Atlas mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Atlas said. He looked up, eyes widening.

Suddenly, their chances of success—which were already very low—dropped rapidly.

The goblins’ numbers had doubled in merely a night. They’d already replenished their forces and then some.

Atlas swallowed the bile building in the back of his throat. Focus on the objective, Atlas told himself. He couldn’t allow his fear to gain a single ounce of control.

"Whatever you do,” Atlas whispered, “don’t look up.”

"What are you…Oh holy—" Atlas put a hand around Toby's mouth.
"Don't. Say. Anything." He added, "If you make too much noise, they will wake up. If you become scared, they will smell you and they will wake up."

Toby slapped his hand away, saying in a low voice, “You’re not leaving me a whole lot of options.”

“We found the goblins. Our job is over. We need to leave. Now.”

“But what about the museum lady? She’s still—”

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. A light turned on. Toby snuck away from Atlas’s side, hiding behind one of the columns. Ahead, the wooden doors were swung open.

Carefully, Atlas crept closer to his friend, all the while keeping as close to the walls as possible. When he finally reached the boy, Toby was already peering around the corner.

Peep Gynt played softly in the background.

"Doesn't she ever listen to anything else?” Atlas muttered under his breath.

"Did you say something, Atlas?” Toby whispered, eyes still glued on Nomura. "What do we say? If we scare her, the goblins will come after all of us. Oh, maybe we could say we're art lovers and just couldn't wait to see that new exhibit or, oh, oh, what if we say we're from the gas company and that the door was open and we smelled a leak? No, that won't...what is she doing with that thing...and why...sheeeeeohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh."}

Toby whimpered. His face appeared much paler than before. Once he gathered himself, he glared at Atlas, sticking his forefinger an inch away from the other’s line of vision.

Atlas pretended to examine his nails through his gauntlet.

“You,” Toby accused. "You totally knew, didn't you?”
“We really need to get out of here.”

“She’s a changeling.” Toby pulled at his hair. “Wait a sec. You said her name earlier, Nomari or something. You know her.”

"Why do you think I didn't want us going to the museum?"

"You could have told me a changeling was guarding it!"

"Shush! You're going to wake the goblins."

Toby jammed his finger into Atlas’s chest plate. “Don’t shush me. This is not cool, bro. Not cool at all.”

Atlas froze. The music from before was suddenly louder. Further away, his ears caught the sound of quick-footed hooves. The hair on his neck stood up. Immediately, Atlas deactivated the amulet.

“What are you doing?” Toby said in a hushed tone. “I thought you said—”

“Providing a distraction. This mission is a failure. You need to get out of here: now.”

He stepped over Toby’s body, motioning for him to turn back. Toby nodded, crawling behind one of the marble columns.

Steadying himself, Atlas stepped into the light.

Nomura tensed up. She whipped around, her fangs pulled into a comically evil smile. When all she saw was Atlas, she frowned in disappointment, shoulders sagging.

“Great. It’s you.”
"Hey, Nomura," Atlas said, rubbing his hands together. "Fancy seeing you here."

She drew close, peering over his shoulder. "I heard someone whispering."

“Probably one of the goblins sleep-talking,” Atlas said.

"What are you doing here Atlas?" She said, pressing him against the wall with a single hand.

Atlas tried to smile. "Goblin Duty?"

She threw him a bored look. "Bullshit."

Atlas resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. Toby would be fine. As long as he got passed the goblins, everything would be okay.

She lowered her nose to his hair, sniffing. Her lips curled in disgust. “I smell the stink of teenage flesh."

"Well, I did spend some time with the Trollhunter and his human friend today."

“Waka chaka cha!” A goblin yelled.

A high pitched scream tore through the air.

Atlas tensed up. His heart began hammering against his ribcage. Every part of him wanted to jump into action to save his friend, but the changeling in him held him back. One false move could ruin everything he’d worked for.

"Wait, Nomura. It's the Trollhunters friend. He…followed me here."

"So? We're going to kill the Trollhunter soon enough,” she remarked, licking her lips. “Might as well start with his chubby friend."

"But Toby... Toby's just a human. He's got nothing to do with this,” he tried to reason.

She scoffed, "Oh, don’t tell me your care about the little fatso now?"

Atlas stayed silent for a moment before stating, "If you go after Toby, I'm going to tell Stricklander. You're about to blow my cover."

Nomura grabbed his collar. "Is that a threat, whelp?"

“Not a threat, Nomura,” Atlas said, his mouth drawn into a thin line. “A warning.”

She narrowed her eyes, pushing him away. Atlas’s back smacked against the wall. “Sit back and let the adults handle it, whelp. It's obvious you're too chicken shit to do it yourself."

“Nomura, wait—” Before he could finish, she was out the door.

Damn.

Atlas clenched his hands into fists. Why didn’t she just listen? Why did nothing he say matter to his brethren?

Did his words really matter so little to them?

No. He could get through to her. Maybe not as Atlas, however.
He reached inside his pocket. The amulet glowed, beckoning him.

"For the Glory of Merlin," Atlas chanted, eyes trained at the door. "Daylight is Mine to Command."

Once transformed, he frantically round the corner. Across the hall, he watched Toby get chased into the closed off exhibit area by a trio of goblins. Not good. Atlas followed after them, brushing past the thick curtains.

“Get them off! Get them off!” Toby yelled, struggling as one went for his neck. In a split second, Atlas punted the goblin. It flew halfway down the room before landing in a Grecian pot.

The other two goblins growled.

“I knew I smelled the stink of teenage flesh,” Nomura said, brushing back the curtains as she entered.

“Do we really stink that badly?” Toby asked, smelling his armpit before putting up two fists as the goblins crawled nearer. “Looks like we got some company.”

Atlas kept his eyes on Nomura. “Tobes, get out of here.”

“No way, man. I’m not leaving you behind.”


“Sorry, but this human,” Atlas began, summoning the sword in his right hand. “Is not on the menu!”

“Nice one, dude!”

Her smile dropped, eyes widening at how close his weapon was to her neck. She dropped down and rolled backwards.
Atlas swung Daylight downwards. It glistened in the dim light. Nomura caught the blade with both hands on each side.

While it was good she didn’t recognize him, it pained Atlas that she was trying to kill him.

She twisted away, kicking him backwards.

Atlas tucked his body into a somersault, grabbing the sword and swiping sideways when she tried to cut him down with her claws.

"Stop it, Ms. Nomura. I don't want to fight you." Atlas added, “I know about what you are. You’re a changeling.”

"So he told you,” she sneered. “Pathetic.”

"He didn't have to. I figured it out myself," Atlas said. "Atlas...he cares about you, you know. He doesn't want you to get hurt."

"Oh, it won't be me who's going to get hurt, human," she cackled.

She side-kicked him in the left side, sending him flying into a box of wooden crates. They broke underneath his weight. Atlas groaned, only to yelp as she dove down, her nails aimed at his face. He broke away, barely avoiding a scrap from her claws.

Panic set in. He continued to swing at her, his heart rate nearly on par with his haphazard sword strikes. Nomura could tell, her eyes glowing with satisfaction.

He was doing this all wrong. Atlas stopped, fixing both hands on the pummel. He widened his legs and straightened his back, just as Blinky advised during training. Nomura tried to come forward, reaching out to scratch his eyes out, but Atlas blocked her with his blade.

She hissed, bringing a finger up. Light red blood dripped down her index. “You’ll pay for that, Trollhunter.”
She unhooked the khopeshes on her back. The blades unfolded and grew in length, glowing so brightly they illuminated her entire body.

Her attacks went from playfully dangerous to deathly painful. She threw him into one of the displays. His head banged against an old Viking shield. Atlas groaned, trying to regain his bearings before she assaulted him again. He knew Nomura wasn’t playing around anymore. His teeth rattled as she set upon him with a barrage of hits.

“Maybe we can come to some sort of arrangement?” Atlas said as she tried to stab him.

“An arrangement?” She leered. “How cute, you think you’re in the position of negotiation, little Trollhunter?”

Atlas kicked her in the face, rolling to get back on his feet then immediately veering right to block her two blades with his own. She ground down on him. Their swords sparked against each other.

“Listen, I may not know everything about your situation, but do you really think Gunmar and Bular are going to be good for the changelings?” Atlas said.

“Better than anything you can offer us, brat.” She swung at his head. He ducked. “What can a human brat like you offer me?”

“I don’t know, a hope for your kind?”

“Hope?” She laughed darkly, her eyes crueler than he’d ever seen them. “Do you think you can convince a race of half-breeds with hope? How cute. I can see why Atlas likes you so much. All idealism and no substance.”

“That’s not true,” Atlas argued. “It isn’t like that at all!”

He sunk to the floor, causing her to tumble forward. She tried to round on him again, but he kept his distance, sword at the ready. In the side of his eye, he noticed Toby fighting one of the goblins with a Viking helmet.
They really needed to get that poor boy a weapon.

Nomura stalked forward like a lion. “Oh? Then what big plan do you have to save the poor little changelings from the big bad Gumm-Gumms? Don’t you get it, brat? We chose this.”

Atlas’s eyes widened. “You chose? But—”

“The only side worth siding with is the one who's going to win. You’re not the first Trollhunter to offer changelings your so-called ‘peace’ and ‘friendship’.” She spat out the last two words with such derision that he nearly flinched. “Time and time again you’ve slaughtered us and time and time again we’ve fought back. There is no more time for words, boy, only action.”

She smacked him into one of the tapestries. He fell to the floor. The material holding up the old fabric broke, covering his body. Frantically, he tried to escape. He heard Nomura chuckling, only feet away. Her sword dragged the fabric off of him.

“This was fun,” she said, leaning down. “Now, you’re history!”

Atlas blocked her first strike, but lost his sword when she kicked it out of his hands. It flew off, meters away.

He looked up. Nomura sauntered forward, swinging her swords above her head as she went in for the kill.

"All that fancy armor and you're just a scared little boy,” she mocked.

Was he? No. He hadn’t been a little boy for a long while. Not since Bular nearly killed him. His childhood ended a long time ago.

But scared? Yes. Undoubtedly. How could one not be scared when death was always around the corner, waiting for Atlas to screw up.
Fear heightens your senses, his inner-Blinky reminded him.

Fear was something Atlas was well-versed in. Nomura? Not so much.

His eyes flickered over to the goblin standing on the tapestry behind Nomura, holding up a black marker like a trophy.

One chance, Atlas thought, I have one chance.

"Fear keeps you alive." Atlas quoted as he bent down, fingers digging into the fabric. He quickly pulled the tapestry out from under her. "Arrogance gets you killed!"

It was almost as if time had slowed down. Atlas watched in horror as she twisted in the air, unable to stop her trajectory. The goblin splattered against the entirety of her back and arms.

She got up, dazed, before looking at the group of incoming goblins. One picked up the black marker, uncapped it, then drew the all too familiar moustache.

It belted out, “Waka Chaka!”

The others joined.

"No, no, wait, it wasn't me!" She scrambled to her feet, trying to distance herself from them. "No! No!"

One of the goblins tried to jump her but Atlas kicked him back.

“Go!” Atlas said, stepping in front of her. “I’ll distract them.”

He didn’t need to tell her twice. She jumped, crossing the room in two great leaps as she headed for the door. The head goblin snarled at him, but took off toward Nomura, more goblins joining it.
Suddenly, the room was still. The music had ended. The only sounds that were left were Atlas and Toby’s rough breathing.

Once Atlas caught his breath, he said, "We need to get out of here."

"One sec, I wanna take a pic of the bridge-thingy." Toby said, taking a quick snapshot with his phone.

"What bridge?" Atlas looked to where Toby was pointing.

Atlas stiffened.

“Ugh, that big one over there,” Toby said. “I can’t believe you didn’t notice it.”

Goosebumps skirted up his arms and legs. His entire body felt chilled, as if he just walked into a snowstorm. He wanted to move, but found his body immobile. Still, all these things were perfectly natural reactions to something of this magnitude.

Killahead. The stories were true.

Was this the project his mentor had been working on for so long? How many changelings knew about this?

Of course. The mysterious boxes delivered late at night to the Order, the way Stricklander kicked him out of the room when they arrived at his desk, Nomura’s increasingly long hours at the museum—it all made sense now.

His lips pulled into a snarl.

"That asshole," Atlas growled. "He knew this entire time and he didn't tell me?"

"What are you talking about, dude?"
Atlas sunk his sword into the ground. The amulet flashed, his armor fading. "That's not just any bridge, Toby. It's the Killahhead Bridge."

"The Killahhead Bridge?"

He almost explained before his ears twitched. Police sirens were drawing closer. Nomura must have called the police.

That clever bitch.

"I'll tell you later. We need to go," Atlas bent down, gesturing for the boy to come closer. "Get on my back. I'll get us out of here."

Toby looked him up and down. "Seriously? No offense, but can you even carry me?"

"Your weight is fine. I'm probably heavier than you anyway."

"Oh yeah, how much you weigh?"

Atlas sighed, but answered, "Two hundred and fifty pounds more or less."

Toby's eyes bulged. He patted Atlas's stomach. "How? How is that even possible? Where do you hide all that weight? Is it changeling magic?"

"My muscles are denser than a human being's."

"No fair man." Toby shook his head. "That's so not fair."

"Come on," Atlas urged. "The police are almost here. Unless you want to give tell them what happened."
Toby climbed on, arms hooking around his shoulders. "You better not drop me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Atlas said.

Before he took off, he glanced back to the ancient structure. He couldn’t help it. What changeling would? It was the Killahead Bridge for Pale Lady’s sake. How long had his father (and the rest of the changelings for that matter) been working on something like this?

And how long had Atlas been kept from it?

One thing was for sure, this wasn’t over.

Not by a long shot.

Atlas slammed the door open, not even bothering to knock. He was too angry to give a shit about the repercussions.

He had asked Toby to deliver the news to Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!!!. Atlas…wasn’t really ready for that particular discussion with his trainer. And considering Toby’s messages after the fact, he wasn’t sure he wanted to either.

The Killahead Bridge’s existence (and near if not entire completion) wasn’t just a minor hurdle, it was an entire game-changer. No wonder Bular and the rest of the changelings had been so anxious lately. If Atlas wasn’t careful, the Eternal Night might actually happen.

And Atlas…Atlas didn’t want it to. As much as he cared for his father and Nomura, he also cared for Toby, Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!!!. Plus, he had family to care for now. He’d be damned if he was ever going to allow a Gumm-Gumm lay one hand on her.

Which was why, when he stomped into Stricklander’s office, he made sure to hide a few knives in
cloak. One could never be too careful around changelings.

Even through the dim light Atlas could see them. Stricklander sat in his regular chair, leaning over a sketch of something Atlas was too far away to see. Immediately, Stricklander rolled the paper up, setting it aside. Atlas narrowed his eyes. Whatever it was, it must have been important.

“Bular will not like this,” a Germanic voice said.

“The operation will continue until I so see fit to cancel it,” his mentor said to Otto, still not acknowledging Atlas’s presence. “Is that clear? This conversation is over.”

Otto’s ugly mug laid plastered over the communications screen, blinking out every second or two. He was in an office of some sort, the window behind him showcasing what appeared to be Berlin or some other large German city. He too appeared unperturbed by Atlas’s entrance. In fact, his all-knowing smile appeared to grow.

“It looks like you have a visitor, mein Freund,” Otto drawled. "Oh, my how time flies, junger Atlas, you're looking even more human by the day."

"Oh my, Otto, you're looking even more and more like a Berliner every time I see you,” Atlas retorted.

Otto's left eye twitched.

In the corner of Atlas’s vision, he saw Nomura glowering in the corner. She peeled off the wall as Atlas walked to the center of the room. She was the only changeling wearing her true form. Her mouth was pulled into an angry scowl. Atlas couldn’t blame her. She still had goblin goo in her mane. “You,” she accused. "Where were you when I was fighting the Trollhunter whelp?"

"You said to let the grown-ups handle it,” Atlas said. “I was laying low, unlike you. You started a fight in the museum! Are you nuts?"

She raised her hands, eyes glowing. “The opportunity presented itself. What was I supposed to do?”
“You tried to kill Toby!”

"Whose side are you on?"

“Enough!” Stricklander said. His eyes flashed gold before returning to normal green hue. His fingers skittered across his desk before they reached his favorite pen. Once in hand, he pointed the tip at Atlas. “I’ve already heard Nomura’s side of the argument. Now, let’s hear yours.”

Atlas clenched his hands so tightly his nails cut into his skin. Still, he did as the man asked.

“The Trollhunter and his friend were looking for the goblins. They tracked them with Toby’s Chubby Tracker watch. It had gotten around one of the goblin’s necks. They traced it to the museum...I warned Toby not to go inside, but he was adamant. He and the Trollhunter saw Nomura change. I tried to intervene, but Nomura went after Toby. From what I heard, the Trollhunter defeated Nomura. I escaped with the Trollhunter and Toby before the police could arrive.

“The Trollhunter brat knows about changelings,” Nomura said. “You told him about us, about me.”

“Everyone and their gnome knows about changelings in Trollmarket, Nomura,” Atlas countered. “And I never told them your names. In order to fit in, I would…relate stories to them. About the people I live with.”

“Alas, he is right, Nomura,” Otto spoke up. “Your argument is, how do I say this, not holding much water, yes?”

“Go back for a moment.” Stricklander tapped his pen to his lip. “Do the Trollhunter and his friend know you are part-changeling now?”

Atlas nodded. “I...Yeah, they figured it out. Maybe—”

“Do the trolls know?”

“I...No, I don’t think so, but—”
“Then there’s still time. Make sure the Trollhunter and his little friend do not reveal your little secret. We cannot have them spoiling any more of our work. Keep them busy until the time is right.”

You mean the time when Killahead Bridge completed, Atlas wanted to say. As much as he was seething inside by that revelation, he kept that comment to himself.

“And the fight with the Trollhunter?” Nomura said, her voice higher. “Where were you?”

“Watching,” he said, then added, “analyzing the enemy’s moves.”

“Good,” Stricklander said. “Your caution is commendable.”

“Commendable? Don’t make me laugh. He let the Trollhunter and his friend get in the way. I nearly had the Trollhunter’s neck in my grasp.”

"Excuse me? Stricklander didn't give me orders to hurt the Trollhunter, so why did you?"

Stricklander swerved around in his chair, eyes landing on the woman. "Yes, Nomura, that was rather impudent of you."

Nomura glared at Stricklander. It felt like the temperature in the room had dropped ten degrees.

"The Trollhunter was barely a worthy opponent, much less a challenge. The only reason I could not kill him was due to those worthless goblins you so like to employ.”

Stricklander put his hands together in a steeple under his mouth. “Are you blaming me for your incompetence, Nomura?”

“Maybe if you starting acting more instead of waiting for the Trollhunter to fall into one of your overly complicated traps this situation could have gone our way. The Trollhunter is nothing more than a human boy, who, if I remember, is one of your students.”
“Oh my, Stricklander, you didn’t share that little bit of information with me,” Otto piped in.

“It makes no difference whether the Trollhunter is one of my students or not. The school is too well-guarded to make any sort of attempt on his life there.”

“The Trollhunter would have been dead from day one if you took more incentive instead of playing your little dominance games with Bular.”

“Careful, Nomura,” Stricklander said. “You’re treading into dangerous water. It is not I who will have to explain why she failed to kill the Trollhunter to Bular after all.”

Nomura’s eyes widened. “Me? If you weren’t so cautious, I could have killed the Trollhunter and have thrown his body into the canals before the night was up.”

"But you didn't, and now he knows about the Killahhead Bridge,” Atlas interrupted, no longer wanting to be kept out of the loop. "And now I know about Killahhead Bridge."

Stricklander folded his hands over his pen. "Young Atlas—"

“No,” he interrupted. Through clenched teeth, he asked, "Was I ever going to find out about that little secret?"

Stricklander’s shoulders tightened, the calm collected demeanor he portrayed earlier taking on an authoritative strain. He brought the pen up to his face, clicking it shut.

"You would have been briefed about the Bridge’s completion at tomorrow’s quarterly meeting, like the rest of the changelings in the Order,” his father said in a cold tone.

“Briefed?” Atlas came forward, slamming his hands down on the desk. It gave out a satisfying crunch. “I’m your assistant! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Stricklander did not move from the chair, though his body language clearly indicated the desire otherwise. “Do not question my decisions.”
"But da—"

The older male’s eyes flashed.

"Go back to your room and await my instructions,” Stricklander ordered.

"But…” Atlas whispered, "I thought I was your most useful member."

A hand grabbed him by makeshift collar of his cloak. Atlas couldn’t move away as his mentor pulled him down. At first, he tried to break away, but the man’s grip was as solid as stone and just as immobile. Atlas could feel Stricklander’s eyes trying to catch his own. When they did, Atlas found himself unable to look away.

Unlike the normal green, his sclera were completely golden, the pupils slit like a snake’s. The air around them cackled. Stricklander was on the brink of transforming. Finally, Atlas looked down, his ears flattening.

"I am the most useful member, you insolent child,” Stricklander hissed out. “and you would do well to remember that."

He pushed Atlas back, releasing him simultaneously. Atlas stumbled a few steps, face heating up. Lack of sleep and the day’s activities began to catch up with him, building like a tidal wave. He felt his eyes burn with irritation.

"Aw, Stricklander, look, you’ve made the little one upset. Does he need to be put down for a nap?"

"Shut up, Otto,” Atlas said, resisting the urge to wipe his face. He would not cry. Not now. Not in front of them.

Otto side-eyed Stricklander. "Are you going to let the boy speak to me like that?"

"Leave,” his mentor said.
Atlas’s shoulders slumped. He walked away like an injured animal, still looking at Stricklander for guidance.

"Wait, Atlas…” There was a soft tone in the man’s voice.

Atlas’s face opened up. Would they be able to talk later? Was that why he was acting this way?

"Stop acting like a child,” Stricklander scolded. “And correct your behavior. You are a changeling. Act like it. You're growing too attached to the Trollhunter and his group. Remember: once they know who you really are, who you really work for, they will betray you."

Atlas said nothing, only silently nodding before he closed the door behind him.

How ridiculous. Look at him. He was pathetic. If the Trollhunter couldn’t convince one changeling to switch sides, then how in the hell was Atlas going to be able to do it?

Atlas finally wiped his eyes with his cloak. Stricklander was right. He wasn’t a child anymore. His outburst had likely lost him a great deal of respect (if there was any to begin with) from the older changelings. Atlas had no doubt the rest of the Order would know by morning.

His body felt unwieldly and numb, the physical and emotional excursion he experienced that day finally hitting him. Somehow he made it to his room, flopping down on the old mattress face first. Everything was spiraling out of his control. He almost got Toby killed by not telling him about Nomura. Hell, he almost got killed by Nomura herself! And now he made a fool of himself in front of his mentor and the others. While the goblins were scattered for now, they would no doubt return soon enough, which meant their entire mission was a failure.

And then there was the added fact that he was going to fight Draal tomorrow.

He lifted his head as the reality of tomorrow began to dawn on him. The fight with Draal was less than twenty-four hours away.

Atlas picked up a pillow and screamed into it.
The air in Blinky’s study was unpleasantly warm. Perhaps it was the amount of candles Blinky had lighted, or the amount of bodies currently stuffed within an already crowded space. Either way, it felt extremely uncomfortable.

But, then again, nothing about this situation was going to be comfortable, was it?

Toby bumped into Atlas’s shoulder. The shorter teen lifted his head for a moment before nodding off again, resting heavily onto Atlas’s side. He let him. His friend was paler than normal, his sweater vest on inside out. Atlas couldn’t begrudge the boy of wanting a few extra winks. This early morning meeting had been made posthaste. Atlas was already awake when he received the sleepy text from Toby, who had been none too thrilled to find AAARRRGHH!!! standing over his bed at zero dark thirty.

Nevertheless, they all came.

Blinky said something in Trollspeak, but Atlas barely caught any of it other than a few spare words. His mind was elsewhere, still stuck in the hazy in-between of sleep and awake. Atlas wondered if he
looked as bad as Toby. It wouldn’t surprise him. His mind felt burnt out. Though he only got a few hours of sleep, his dreams were quite long and vivid, all centered around Killahed.

He saw flashes of battle, troll against troll, with a dark ominous bridge standing tall amidst the death and destruction below. He wondered if it were merely his imagination, or something more. Did it have something to do with being the Trollhunter? He wished he could talk with the previous guy.

Atlas bit down on the inside of his cheek. All this business about the bridge left a bad taste in his mouth.

And now he’d walked straight back into it.

The talk was one he desperately wished he could have avoided, but considering current events, Atlas knew it was better start now than wait until later, especially as the fight with Draal drew nearer. It sat like a pendulum above his head. Every second passed meant another second closer and closer to his possible death.

Though, Atlas noted inside his head, this isn’t the first time someone’s wanted to kill me.

And now it felt like it hounded him at every corner. He brushed paths with it yesterday, close enough to make him twitch every time a door creaked open. Nomura would no doubt want to regain her honor. The question was not a matter of if, but when.


Atlas jerked his head up, blinking in surprise. The force of movement nearly caused Toby to topple over. Both teens stood ramrod straight, now wide awake.

“Sorry,” Atlas said. “I got distracted. What were you saying?”

Vendel banged his staff against the ground, placing a hand over his eyes in what Atlas expected was exasperation. “The bridge, child. Are you certain it was the Killahed Bridge?”

“No, it was the Golden Gate Bridge,” Atlas snarked. “Of course it was the Killahed. I know what I
saw. Why would I lie?"

“We got evidence too!” Toby added, waving his phone around. “I mean, it’s a little hard to see, but that’s totally a bridge.”

Vendel peered into the phone’s screen, the glare of the picture reflected in his milky eyes. He turned his head from side to side.

“That could be anything,” Vendel grumbled.

“While Tobias’ photographic skills are less than exemplary,” Blinky remarked. “I trust Master Atlas’s word on this.”

Atlas waited for AAARRRGGHH!!! to back Blinky up, but heard nothing. Strange. Instead, AAARRRGGHH!!! sat in the corner of Blinky’s study, surprisingly quiet. His legs and arms were tucked close to his body, as though he were trying to make himself as small as possible. He smiled when Atlas glanced over, but it did not reach his eyes.

Vendel shook his head, turning his body away from the group. “What you are suggesting, Blinkous, is quite an egregious accusation.”

“What else could it be?” Blinky asked. “Tobias, is there anything else of note you saw there?”

“Well, there was this changeling—”

Atlas interrupted, “She was a low-level minion, nothing more.”

Both Blinky and Vendel regarded him with knowing looks. Atlas didn’t budge, arms tightly wound behind his back. He had failed to protect one of his own kind. The least he could do was protect her here.

Even if she might hate his guts right now.
Thankfully, Toby tried to change the conversation to something else. “So, what are changelings exactly? I mean, I know Atlas is part one, but where do they come from? And why do trolls and changelings not get along?”

“Changelings,” Blinky started, his tone grave. “Are quite the unusual sort. In the Old World, Gumm-Gumms stole our young and did something unnatural to change them. Their sole purpose was to spy on the world above. Trolls do not take kindly to spies.”

“Is that true, Atlas?”

Atlas crossed his arms, eyes focused on the floor. “We’re not unnatural. My mentor calls it the Pale One’s Gift. Most of us only have two forms, while others, polymorphs, are able to take on anyone’s appearance, human or troll. And we don’t all spy. That’s a common misconception.”

“And these changelings, they are the ones who put together the Killahead Bridge?” Vendel said.

Atlas nodded.

Vendel began to pace, his staff hitting the ground in a steady rhythm. “I do not question you saw a bridge, but Killahead? It would take years to collect all of the stones. Decades, even. You would need an army—”

“We,” Atlas sighed, knowing what would come next. “we do have an army.”

“They call themselves the Janus Order,” Blinky provided. “Atlas is currently the head’s assistant.”

“Oh…Oh dear.” Vendel said, his mouth slackening as his eyes grew large. “I think I need to sit down for a moment.”

Blinky brought up a small stool. Vendel looked at it with annoyance, using his staff to push it away. “I can stand just fine, Blinkous.”

Atlas raised an eyebrow. “But you just said—”
“It was a turn of phrase,” Vendel snapped.

“Hey, quick question,” Toby began. “What exactly does the Killahead Bridge thingy do?”

“Where you not listening to what we just said, human?” Vendel said, now choosing to lean against one of the bookcases to Blinky’s chagrin.

Toby yawned. “Sorry, it’s like five A.M right now. My mind hasn’t woken up yet.”

“The Killahead Bridge is a portal to the Darklands,” Blinky explained. “It is where Gunmar and the rest of the Gumm-Gumms were sent by the Trollhunter Deya. If Bular and the Order have the Bridge, it will only be a matter of time before they figure out how to open the portal.”

“Dude, what are we going to do?” Toby turned to Atlas.

Blinky stepped in between the two boys, one hand on each of their shoulders. “Right now? Neither of you will do anything until I see the structure myself.”

“You can’t,” Atlas said.

Blinky frowned. “And whyever not?”

“Because it’s been moved.”

“By who?”

Atlas stared down at his feet. “Well, technically, me.”

Blinky was quiet for a moment. In the edge of his vision, Atlas saw Blinky’s fingers tense.
“Pardon?” He finally said, his voice cracking.

“We moved it to another location,” Atlas stated. “My mentor made sure of it.”

The blue troll placed two hands together in front of his mouth, all six eyes hyper focused on Atlas. The teen resisted the urge to squirm.

“Where is it now?” Blinky asked in a soft voice.

“I can’t tell you. If I tell you then my mentor will know I told you. He already knows Jim and Toby know,” Atlas stressed, pulling away from the other troll’s grasp.

To the teen’s disbelief, Vendel actually agreed. “Hmm…Yes, as strange as it may seem, I believe Atlas is right on this particular matter. He would compromise his position if he told us. As the leader of Trollmarket, I would not let such an opportunity to destroy it pass me by if I knew of its location. Even you, Blinkous, I doubt would sit by and do nothing.”

“I’m already on thin ice with the head of the Order,” Atlas admitted. “Yesterday I…kind of blew up on my mentor. I didn’t know about the Killahead Bridge, honest. So when I found out…I let my feelings get the better of me. It was stupid, I know.”

Respect was a commodity within changeling society and Atlas had just bankrupted himself. He allowed his emotions to get ahold of him and—arrogantly—tried to challenge Stricklander’s authority. Atlas acted recklessly and paid the price. Embarrassment couldn’t even begin to describe the emotions he was feeling. He’d humiliated himself in front of his dad and his subordinates, possibly compromising the head’s authority. He was lucky Stricklander even tasked him with hiding the bridge away in the early hours before dawn.

Nevertheless, Atlas knew that such a task wasn’t without a hidden agenda. He’d been around his mentor enough to spot that at least. If the Trollhunters group got to the bridge Atlas would immediately be blamed for treason. It was a proverbial knife-to-throat tactic so to speak. He couldn’t blame the man. Atlas would have done the same in Stricklander’s position.

Didn’t mean the sting hurt any less though. He would need to work hard to regain his dad’s trust.

Blinky edged closer, leaning forward with a comforting expression on his face. “You are balancing
three lives, Master Atlas. I do not think anyone here can fault you for such an action, especially considering the circumstances in which you are living.”

The edges of Atlas’s lips rose up, not enough to be a smile, but very nearly close to one. It never ceased to amaze Atlas how much trust Blinky put into him.

“Thank you, Blinky,” he said. He looked up at the group. “And even if I did tell you, Nomura is protecting its location night now. She would immediately alert Bular and the rest of the Order.”

“Nomura?” Blinky asked.

Crap. He did it again. “She’s the changeling who was guarding it last night. She’s not important. What we need to do is tell Trollmarket. Maybe they can help somehow. We’re stronger together, right?”

Vendel massaged his left temple. There was skepticism in his features, but also fear. His gaze traveled to Atlas, clearly calculating the variables that now existed. Finally, he spoke. “You keep mentioning this mentor of yours. What is he to you?”

Atlas shuffled his feet, shoulders bent forward. “He’s…he’s my dad.”

The old troll tried to school his features, but Atlas could read the shock in the way he held his staff, stiff and trembling. “Your sire is the head of the Janus Order?”

“Oh no,” Atlas said, hands up in what he hoped was a placating gesture. “He’s not…He kind of adopted me. According to Tobes, my birth father skipped town when I was a kid.”

“And your birth father, I presume, was the changeling?”

“I mean…I guess? What else could he be?” Atlas said.

Vendel stroked his beard. “So this other changeling adopted you.”
“In a way. It’s not official or anything. Like, I can’t call him dad around any of the others.”

“Seriously?” Toby said. “Dude, that’s cold.”

“He has an image to uphold,” Atlas explained. “If he showed any more favoritism to me than he already does, then it could put us both in danger.”

“And what is this mysterious father’s name?” Vendel asked.

Atlas took a deep breath, sucking in his lower lip with his teeth. “I can’t tell you that either.”

“So far,” Vendel said in a tired tone. “It does not appear like you can tell us much of anything. Your accusations are rather serious, but without further proof, we are at a stalemate of sorts. If this got out to Trollmarket—”

Toby raised his hand as if in class, eyes widening. “Whoa, whoa, wait a second! You aren’t going to warn the other trolls?”

“It would be rather ill-advised to tell an entire society that their way of life is being threatened with but a scant amount of information,” Vendel stated.

Blinky stomped his foot, hands outstretched, moving with his rising voice. “A scant amount? Is that what you’re calling what could amount to being the most vile plot of this century? A scant amount of information? No, this is no mere conspiracy. I have uncovered many a plot, and while some may have led to dead ends, this, good sir, is not one of them. You are acting as if this information is not as dire as it truly is.”

“I’m risking my life telling you this,” Atlas said. “And now you want to do nothing?”

“Dude, what about Arcadia?” Toby added, “Our families could be in danger!”

“I know,” Vendel said in a strained voice.
Blinky’s hands shook. “Then why—”

“Because I do not want to cause a panic!” Vendel yelled, silencing the group.

“And being blissfully unaware of what’s happening topside seems fine to you?” Atlas asked dryly.

“No, it is not fine, but as the leader of Trollmarket I must keep order. Unless you are willing to part with the information of the bridge’s location, I see no reason to start up a panic that could shake the very foundations of our society.” Vendel said, appearing to deflate with each word. “I do not ask for you to understand my reasoning, only to respect it.”

“How long must we wait? This is of the utmost urgency!” Blinky argued.

“We will resume within a week’s time. It will take time to gather the elders of Trollmarket and convincing them of the issue even more so. Caution must be taken to ensure a productive result.”

“But Atlas’s fight with Draal is tonight. What if Atlas is injured, or worse?” Toby said.

“If I could postpone the battle, I would do it, but that is not my decision to make,” Vendel said. “You may try to convince his opponent, but I highly doubt Draal the Deadly will budge, Killahead Bridge or not.”

“So we just wait on this?” Atlas said. “Wait until it’s too late to act?”

“I do not see you providing any solutions, boy.” Vendel said.

Atlas could feel the amulet whirl to life. Vendel glared down at him. Atlas arched his back, refusing to break eye contact.

It was Blinky who broke the two up, pulling Atlas away. “I think we should make a decision soon, but it is obvious emotions are high for all of us right now.”

“Agree with Blinky,” AAARRRGGH!! said, no longer residing in the corner. “Plan later. Now,
everyone scared.”

“All this must remain a secret,” Vendel ordered. “Until such time we reconvene.”

Toby was about to speak up, but Atlas placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. Atlas… wasn’t sure what he wanted to do about the bridge yet. While he disagreed with the trolls on not telling the populace, everyone in the room was growing increasingly upset. From AAARRRGGHH!!!’s unsteady gaze to Vendel’s tired face, no one looked ready to face the reality that was now in front of them. Gunmar had left a scar on these people, just as his son had left on Atlas.

Still, this entire conversation left him feeling fatigued. It was another lie to Atlas’s growing list. All these secrets, all these lives—at some point soon, he knew he might break under the weight of them. How could he juggle being Jim, Atlas, and the Trollhunter, all within the same day?

Perhaps this was why he was a failure of a changeling.

Vendel left without saying goodbye, his gait more alike to a male his age (older than dirt, Atlas thought) than ever before. AAARRRGGHH!!! approached the two boys, a soft comforting smile on his lips.

“Look sad.” The large troll said.

“It’s okay, wingman,” Toby comforted, patting the troll’s hand. “We’ll be okay. Ready to go to school, Atlas? It’s a bit early though. Maybe we should go get breakfast first. Oh! The local diner has the most amazing blueberry pancakes!”

Atlas turned his head to the side, eyes focused on the door. “Not today. There’s some things I need to do. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Aw. I’d play hookie too, but the school’s got Nana on speed dial,” Toby admitted. He reached out to pat Atlas’s shoulder. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah,” Atlas lied. “Yeah, I think I will be.”
The bar was surprisingly busy for what was supposed to be in the early morning. However, given that trolls kept to different schedules in comparison to humans, perhaps a morning for a troll was like happy hour for humans.

Atlas watched the bar-goers silently. Every once and awhile, a troll would throw an uneasy glance over at their table, specifically towards himself.

While he wasn’t bothered by his hybrid status, it was clear that Trollmarket had yet to accept that fact. Three times someone tried to grab one of his horns in a nondescript way and three times Atlas caught the offensive hand in his claws, squeezing tightly to assure them that yes, he was real and yes, his bite could take a finger clean off a troll’s hand if the situation called for it.

Atlas took a slow sip of his water. Unlike topside, the liquid had an almost sweet clean aftertaste to it. He had yet to ask Blinky the reason, but he suspected the Heartstone had something to do with it.

Speaking of Blinky—Atlas fixed his attention to the troll across from him. Blinky tried to appear nonchalant about it all, but the way his fingers strummed atop the table made more for the beginning of a drumline and less like the composed troll he liked to portray.

Blinky licked the gulg off of his upper lip before starting. “I know that you do not trust me very much—”


As much as he was able to, at least. While he liked Toby’s company more, Blinky was a far better listener and confidant. He respected Atlas’s secrets and his advice was normally worthwhile.

“Truly?”

“You remind me of my mentor,” Atlas supplied.
It was unfortunate Blinky chose that moment of time to take another sip of his drink, for he spent the next few seconds choking on it. Coughing into the back of his hand, he raised all six eyes to Atlas’s two. “The leader of the you-know-who? I should say, I would be offended had I not known the amount of respect you hold for the man. In truth, I’m almost flattered. Tell me, what similarities do you glean from us?”

Atlas twirled the water in his cup. “You both like to lecture me.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve received lectures from others.”

“It’s not the same though. Your lectures…both of you try to guide me, I guess is what I’m trying to say. You care about me and my future. You care about what happens to me.”

“Atlas,” Blinky drew closer. “Do you think you are not worth caring for?”

A curious question, one Atlas couldn’t say he knew the answer. He had gone from the Janus Order’s weakest link to some strange chosen figure destined to fight the very people who gave him a home at a moment’s notice.

“I think…I think I’m tired of this game,” Atlas said, switching the subject. “I keep adding different identities and now I’m not sure which one I am.”

“Which one do you want to be?”

“I…I don’t know. Not anymore.” Atlas said.

“Might I ask you a more serious question, Master Atlas?”

He wrapped his fingers around the cup, holding steady. “Sure. Ask away.”

“Why will you not reveal your father’s identity?” Blinky asked. “It would help—"
“He’s my dad,” Atlas interjected, slamming his drink down. “I don’t want him to get hurt. He saved me. I owe him my entire life, so he’s…he’s off limits, okay?”

Even if they were technically on the outs at the moment.

“And the rest of the changelings? Toby told me that the museum curator is this so-called Nomura. What will you do if she decides to come after Toby?”

“No, no, she wouldn’t. She’s only after the Trollhunter, not Toby. He’s just a human. Nomura, she’s not that desperate.” Atlas paused. “She can’t be that desperate, can she?”

Blinky looked down at his gulg, his mouth pulling down into a sharp frown. “Dark times are upon us, I fear. If the Killahed Bridge is almost or already completed, I’ve no doubt the changelings are growing restless to free their Master.”

“He’s not my master and he never will be.” Atlas urged.

Blinky’s eyes rose back up to meet his, capturing Atlas within his steady gaze. “For you, yes, but what of the rest of your brethren?”

Damn. Damn him and damn the changelings.

Damn it all.

Atlas dropped his head. “I just want my people to be saved. Why is everything so hard? Why can’t they understand I’m trying to help them?” He lifted his eyes, looking at Blinky. “We’re not all bad, right?”

Blinky reached out, smoothing out Atlas’s fallen bangs. It was almost comforting. “Of course not, but, Master Atlas, you are quite different. The others here may not believe the words of one to account for the rest, especially in regards to the abuses between our two kinds.”

“What if I’m not the only one? What if, I can find another changeling? Someone who agrees with me?” Atlas said, lifting his head higher.
“While I’m not certain it would convince the other trolls, it may help convince Vendel to a certain degree.”

A spark of hope lit up within him. There had to be some changelings that disagreed with living under Gunmar’s rule, right?

The question was, how would he be able to find them?

His cell hummed within the inner folds of his cloak. He clicked it on. It was nearly dawn. He would need to make Stricklander’s breakfast and then…what? What was he going to do with the rest of his day if he wasn’t going to school?

Crap, what was he going to do about rehearsal?

“Well, if it isn’t the Trollhunter’s little friend,” A familiar voice rumbled, a large hand draping across Atlas’s shoulder and upper arm. “Or is that Co-Trollhunter? Funny, I never see you in the armor.”

Atlas shucked off the hand, getting to his feet. Draal cocked his head to the side, assessing him. Atlas knew his plan wasn’t the best. While manipulating Blinky into taking him to Draal’s favorite bar had been easy, the second part now seemed far more daunting than he predicted.

Still. He had to try.

“I’ve already got armor,” Atlas said, hitting his breastplate with the back of his hand. “Listen, Draal —”

The troll punched his open palm, his entire body language reading as aggressive. “I look forward to your friend’s pain and I’ll drink to his death.”

Atlas closed his eyes, putting his hands on his hips. This was probably going to go very badly for him, but damn the consequences. If Draal had any speck of honor, he would listen.
He hoped.

“We—You need to postpone the fight,” Atlas said.

“Oh? Is the half-breed afraid his little human friend is going to lose?”

“No, he’s not, I mean, I’m not. Just…put down your troll bravado bullshit and listen. This is serious.”

Blinky put a hand on his shoulder. “Master Atlas—”

“I saw the Killahead Bridge,” he said. “It’s almost completed.”

The conversations around them grew muted. More than one troll dropped their mugs. Atlas didn’t look at them however. He stared at Draal, eyes not leaving the troll’s face for even a moment.

Someone had to listen. Someone needed to know.

Blinky laughed nervously, hands furiously working to do damage control. “He’s kidding! He means the Kaibab Bridge! You know, that small one where all those pixies reside! Excellent tourist spot, I should add.”

Draal flared his nostrils. “You’re bluffing.”

“Ask you ex.”

“Which one?”

“The angry pink one,” he replied.

Atlas didn’t hear the rest, too busy being dragged outside of the establishment. Once they were
around the corner, he twisted out of the Draal’s hold with a well-placed kick to the male’s face. It hurt his foot, but damn was it satisfying to actual get a hit on the troll.

“That almost hurt,” Draal said, rubbing his jaw.

He crossed his arms. “Good.”

Draal paced around in a circle before coming close his face. “How do you know about that? I’ve never told anyone. Who are you?”

“Who I am is not important right now. She helped build the bridge.” He added, “Also, she tried to kill me last night.”

Draal paused. “Yeah, she’s like that.”

“Look, I’m not good at asking for help but…Draal, you can have your chance at Jim later. Right now, the fate of both trolls and humanity is in jeopardy. I don’t,” Atlas said before visibly swallowing. “I don’t want to see the people I care about get hurt…I don’t want to lose my dad.”

Despite the status of their relationship, Atlas…still loved his dad. If he just had enough time to convince the man, then maybe—

Draal looked away for a moment. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry. Troll challenges cannot be postponed or reversed. Even if I agreed, Trollmarket would not accept it and your friend and I would both be banished. This is just how things work down here.”

Atlas nodded, no longer regarding the troll. “Then I guess…Jim will see you on the battlefield.”

Before leaving, Draal gave the teen one last parting line. “If I win and become Trollhunter…I promise I will look into this Killahead business, if it’s really true.”

Atlas stayed silent. There was nothing could be said in response. If Draal did become Trollhunter and stop Bular, his dad and Nomura would be killed, as would the rest of the changelings.
It was up to him to stop it. If only he could figure out how.

A second or two ticked by before Blinky found him. Carefully, the troll raised his hands in a placating gesture, two of them coming to rest on Atlas’s shoulders.

“How long have you been listening?” Atlas asked.

“Oh, not so long.” Blinky admitted, “Just most of it.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“You didn’t. I knew what you were trying to do the moment you suggested this very bar.”

“I never should have challenged Draal to a rematch,” Atlas said, his voice rising. “Everything is all… Damn it! What’s the point in being the Trollhunter if no one ever listens to me?”

“I’m sorry it turned out this way. I wish my society were not so rigid in its customs and social mores. It’s part of the reason I admire humanity so much. Their capacity to change and grow is rather fascinating. Us trolls are not so flexible in that regard. We are like stone, unmoving.”

Atlas’s head shot up, his eyes fierce and determined. “Then I’ll make them move for me.”
Win, Lose, or Draal (II)

Chapter Summary

Stricklander plans and Nomura schemes.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Big thanks to Charlie for helping me with this chapter. The next Summer Happy Fun Time chapter is almost done. Sorry! Also, if anyone is interested, I'm opening art commissions soon. It's on my tumblr tunafishprincess. I'll be putting up the prices soon enough.

Hope you enjoy the chapter! There's some big changes coming up soon.

Tonight must be perfect.

There could be no room for error. Heads would roll if he saw even one changeling out of line.

The lives of his brethren were counting on him to usher in a new era. An era where changelings would no longer be shoved aside. An era where changelings would be thought of as equals, elevated to the status for which they were born to be, instead of the one trolls so cruelly imposed upon them.

It would be an impeccable night. But only if everything went smoothly—and lately—Stricklander’s life was anything but smooth. It was one of the reasons he called in sick that morning. The school would no doubt bring in Coach Laurence to sub (a horrendous idea to be sure, but that was the American education system for you). The green room had been cleaned and fitted with the best electronics money could buy. In less than ten hours, his face would be broadcast to the entire Janus Order. Every changeling would see the grandiose bridge chroma keyed behind him (the real bridge kept in an undisclosed area for obvious reasons), brought back into being by decades of Stricklander’s hard work and dedication to the cause. The LED lights framing the structure did not hurt either.
It filled him with a great sense of satisfaction. To know that all the effort he had put into this plan was finally coming into fruition. But like all great plans, there was always an unknown variable.

Stricklander found that variable in the kitchen. A curious sight, since Atlas had not cooked him breakfast in several days. His work with the Trollhunters’ group claimed a majority of his time nowadays. But not for long. If all went well, then the amulet would soon be within his grasp and Gunmar would be free once again.

They would all be free.

Atlas lifted his head at his presence, acknowledging his existence, before returning to his work.

Stricklander squinted. He knew that look.

Children, honestly. He worked with them for decades and neither time nor place changed their natural disposition. Really, if he scolded them even once they would walk around like kicked puppies until someone (him, usually) threw them a bone. But students were easy to manage. Sons, on the other hand, were quite another subject entirely.

“How may I help you, sir?” Atlas said in a monotonous manner.

Stricklander placed a hand on Atlas’s shoulder, trying to comfort the boy. “It’s alright, it’s only you and I tonight.”

It should have worked. Atlas could not be that angry with him, right?

Apparently not. Atlas shrugged the hand off, his lips pulling into a biting scowl.

A small knot began to develop inside Stricklander’s stomach. If he were a kind man, he would have regretted hurting Atlas’s feelings last night.

But Stricklander had never been a kind man. Kindness was only an opening for others to exploit. A
weakness any changeling would love to get their hands on. As much as he cared for his people, he would throw them under the bus if they ever tried to ruin his plans. Atlas was no exception. The boy needed to understand that the mission was above all else. His mission especially.

Still, he probably could have worded his comments a tad differently last night.

“What brings you to the kitchens this time of day, sir?” Atlas continued, “Would you like me to cook you something?”


The teen picked up an apple, cutting it into six slices at record speed. “Do the Order’s bathrooms need cleaning again? Do you need me to polish one of your swords? Do you need someone to—”

“Please,” Stricklander stressed. It was hard enough having to deal with his subordinates. Having a moody son on his hands during one of the most important days of his life would be…difficult to bear. “Please, don’t push me away. Atlas. I apologize if I hurt your feelings yesterday. I did not mean to offend you, but the others were watching. You know how important my position is. You nearly compromised both of us. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Atlas sank the knife into the cutting board. “Offend? You humiliated me in front of Nomura and Otto! Now, every time I pass Nomura in the hallway she keeps asking if I need a nap. It’s already spread to the rest of the changelings too. Someone left fucking diapers next to the door of my room this morning. Diapers!”

“You must ignore them, Atlas. They are merely being spiteful,” Stricklander advised.

Atlas crossed his arms. His blue eyes glared accusingly into Stricklander’s own green.

“How can I? It feels like I don’t understand anything around here anymore. Every time I think I’m in the loop, I find out something new. You keep pulling me in then pushing me away. It’s like…it’s just…it’s so hard sometimes. I never understand how you think. You took me in and I’m grateful for that, really, but…I just wish we could be father and son, for real.”

“But we—”
“We’re not,” Atlas said, and damn if it did not puncture Stricklander’s carefully crafted façade. “Not really. I’m not allowed to call you dad outside of our private conversations. At first, I was okay with it, but now, I’m not so sure. Who am I to you? What do I mean to you?”

Stricklander looked down at the boy. What did Atlas mean to him? A curious question. At first, he helped the boy out on a whim, as a favor to his younger self who never had a mentor. Now, the boy had entrenched himself into Stricklander’s life so seamlessly that he had almost forgotten what it was like before. Almost.

The closer they got to their goal, the more distance appeared to grow between them. And Stricklander…did not like that. At all. The Trollhunters were growing too close to Atlas, supplanting years of hard work he had put into his most faithful protégé.

Atlas stirred uneasily, shuffling from foot to foot as he awaited Stricklander’s answer. The older changeling clicked the pen in his pocket. Atlas, despite appearances, was a child. Children needed reassurance. Therefore, Stricklander needed to give something back, something to bring Atlas to his side once again, like the old days.

“When Gunmar returns,” Stricklander began, the wheels in his mind turning. “I will acknowledge you as my son. Officially. In front of the entire Order.”

Atlas turned his head to the side, mouth ajar for a moment before he closed it with a sharp click. “You’re joking.”

“I would not joke about something like this.”

“You’ll really make me your son,” Atlas said.

“Of course,” Stricklander said, bringing the boy in for a side hug.

It was the truth. Once Gunmar was freed, placing Atlas as his heir would allow Stricklander many of the societal advantages trolls had over changelings, who were by and large sterile. He would have a second pair of eyes and hands, someone who could execute his plans accordingly, instead of half-arsing them like Nomura or one of the other lesser changelings. And, though he would never outright admit to it, having family to share things with would be a pleasant change from the life he grew up in.
Atlas leaned into the familial gesture. His face softened. The teen’s shoulders lost their defensive nature, sinking back to their normal level. Good. Stricklander did not want another incident like last night. Best to placate and deescalate the situation before their big night.

“You could have visited after,” Atlas mumbled.

“After what?”

Atlas uncrossed his arms, eyes flickering up to his own before returning to the floor. “Last night.”

Stricklander glided away from the teen, his fingers dancing across the tabletop. “Unfortunately, I had several meetings with the minor branches I had to attend. Tonight is the night we reveal our plan to the rest of the changelings. We are going to unveil the Bridge live.”

Instead of the excitement he’d been hoping for, Stricklander received but a slight smile from the boy. Atlas picked up another apple, rubbing it against his shirt before biting into it.

“Sounds fun,” Atlas said between bites.

“I was hoping.” Stricklander coughed into his hand. “I was hoping you would be at my side.”

Atlas’s downcast eyes provided him with all he needed to know on that front.

“Sir…Dad,” Atlas started, “I wish I could, I really do, but I can’t. The Trollhunter is fighting Draal in some big life or death challenge. I promised I would be there.”

“Surely you can change your plans?”

This was his night. Revealing the Killalaead to the rest of their kindred would elevate his status tenfold. Everyone would be there.
Well, not exactly everyone, anymore.

Atlas looked down at his half-eaten apple before throwing it into the trash. “I’m sorry. If things go south during the fight, which is a big possibility, the amulet could choose Draal as its next Trollhunter and...I can’t let that happen.”

Stricklander sucked in his lower lip. It made sense. Despite his desire to have his assistant at his side, the Trollhunter (and by extension the amulet) were a far greater matter of importance.

“That serious is it?” Stricklander asked. “Well, I cannot fault you for thinking in such a manner. In fact, I am rather impressed. You have changed quite a lot these past few weeks.”

“I have?” Atlas asked, his voice cracking.

“Yes, of course,” Stricklander remarked in a warm tone. “You have matured. Years of teaching and you are finally putting my lessons to work.”

Truly. Now, if only the teen could stop with the ridiculous emotional roller-coastering. Though, Stricklander supposed, changing his mind, that was a part of growing up, was not it?


“Well, last night’s little display may not have been your finest moment,” Stricklander pointed out. Atlas cringed, his ears dropping. “But the dedication you put to your task is noteworthy.”

“Yeah, ‘dedication’,;” he put air quotes around the word. “Nomura probably hates me right now.”

“Nomura blew her cover by her own misdeeds. Do not allow yourself to feel pity for the blatant disregard to my protocol.”

Atlas frowned. “I should never have gone to the museum.”

“No, but you did anyway and were able to salvage the situation. You cannot change the past, young
Atlas, only the future.” He put his hands together as if in prayer. “Now, what will you do if this Draal fellow wins?”

Atlas took a deep breath, his hands tightening around the fruit. “Whatever I have to. He cannot get the amulet. The fate of our kind depends on it.”

Stricklander raised an eyebrow. He had never seen the boy so passionate about their people. It made his heart burst with pride, washing away the doubt he held earlier. As young and confused as Atlas could be, his heart would always belong to his people. It was something he instilled into the boy at a young age. He was glad to see the efforts of his labor were coming into fruition, in spite of the road bumps they were currently experiencing. “Indeed. Your actions here will be told throughout the ages, young Atlas. I am glad to see you have your heart in the right place, but…”

“But what?”

Despite the boy’s intentions, Atlas had never killed someone. He had the ability of course—trained in the art of battle under Stricklander’s careful watch—but the emotional upheaval of one’s first kill was never easy. Stricklander did not want to put the boy through such an experience until he had reached adulthood.

Nevertheless, Stricklander knew it was foolish to try and prevent the inevitable. Atlas would have to kill someone sooner or later, be it Draal or the Trollhunter.

Therefore, it would be up to him to lead the boy down the right path.

“Your mind is all over the place these days,” Stricklander said, picking up the knife stuck inside the cutting board. He drew closer to Atlas, who gave him an uncertain glance. Like a trapeze artist on a rope, he balanced back and forth on his index. It was of good quality. Not something he would use in battle, but it appeared to be sturdy and sharp. Suddenly, he tossed the blade into the air, catching it halfway down. Atlas startled; Stricklander grinned. “What do you say we spar for a bit? Like old times.”

Atlas rubbed his arm. “I don’t know—”

He patted Atlas’s head in what he hoped looked like affection. “Humor this old man. I hear from Nomura you have improved this quarter.”
Atlas cocked his head to the side, a small smirk forming. “Are you sure? I’ve gotten pretty good with a sword.”

“Oh, no swords in this battle.” Stricklander pointed the blade at Atlas. “We’re working with knives.”

The teen’s body language changed, more confident and playful. This was the Atlas he knew best. He moved behind Stricklander, subtly taking out three knifes from one of the racks. Well, not that subtly since Stricklander noticed. He kept an eye on the boy, who walked steadily around the table to keep his distance.

“You think that’s a disadvantage?” Atlas said, his eyes alight, as if filled with blue fire. “Have you seen what I do in the kitchen?”

“Such arrogance,” Stricklander mocked. His eyes flashed gold. “Let’s see if you can handle this.”

The knife soared forward, striking against the kitchen cabinets. Atlas somersaulted underneath, his head popping out of the opposite end of the rectangular tabletop. “Seriously? Here? Now?”

“You must be prepared, young Atlas.” Stricklander snatched another blade lying about. “A fight does not always happen in the fields of battle or in a training hall. Even your own kitchen can spell your doom!”

Atlas barely dodged the incoming projectile. It clattered against the floor, landing but two inches from him. Stricklander chuckled at the boy’s dismayed expression.

“No!” Atlas moaned, picking up the object. “That’s one of my Shun knives! Do you know how hard I bargained for these? Six weeks of cleaning Nomura’s room. Six weeks.”

“You say that as if it was a struggle,” Stricklander said. “When I was your age, I had to scavenge the bodies of dead trolls in order to receive a single meal.”

“Yeah, yeah, I bet you had to walk fifteen miles to school in the snow, too,” Atlas said, rolling his eyes.
“Life is full of hardships, young Atlas,” Stricklander advised. “Your blood will follow you wherever you go. Tell me, what is the code of our brethren?”

“Ah ha!” Atlas smiled. “I know this.”

“Good, good,” Stricklander said, throwing two knifes at the boy. “Rule Number One!”

The boy sank to the ground, striking back with a flurry of butter knives. “Avoid Bular at all costs!”

Stricklander nearly tripped over a fallen pot. He gave the boy a bewildered look. “Wha—No! Where in Pale Lady’s name did you come up with that one?”

Atlas scratched the back of his head, eyes cast to the door. “Nomura,” he admitted.

“That blasted,” Stricklander cursed underneath his breath. “Fine. It is alright. I suppose I will have to teach them to you myself. Listen and listen well, for I will not repeat these. Rule Number One: There is honor among assassins.”

Like a gymnast, Atlas flipped over Stricklander’s next volley. Excellent. The boy was getting better. His movements were fluid, able to keep up with the older troll’s pace.

“We’re assassins now?” Atlas said, blocking a battery of flying blades with a long carving knife. “Huh, I think Toby has a game called—Ah! Not the face!”

Stricklander openly laughed. Atlas jumped over the table, tackling him to the ground. His body sensing danger, Stricklander transformed. He grabbed at the boy’s shirt, pulling him close. Atlas struggled to get out of his hold.

“Rule Number Two,” Stricklander whispered into the boy’s ear. “One is a lie. There is no such thing as honor.”

Using his legs, he kicked the boy off. Atlas moved with the momentum, landing on his feet several feet away before scurrying behind the kitchen island table.
“Okay, these are already some of the worst rules I’ve ever heard. First Nomura, then Blinky, and now you? Is there any place I can find a book with all this stuff inside it?” Atlas yelled out.

Stricklander stalked closer, pulling out several blades from his cloak. The boy had improved tremendously, but he was no master. He came upon the boy from behind, only to be blocked by two carving knives.

Stricklander kicked open one of the cabinets as a distraction, hooking his toe around one of the pots’ handles and slamming it near the teen’s head. Atlas reacted instinctively, flinching away, only to end up with Stricklander’s blade beneath his chin.

“Rule Number Three: Everyone and everything is a tool to get what you want,” Stricklander said, pressing his weight (and thereby the knife) onto Atlas.

“Okay, okay!” Atlas coughed. “Give! Give!”

A flash of light and Stricklander was back in his old form, grasping Atlas’s forearm and pulling him up. The teen rubbed his neck. A few scrapes and cuts were nothing compared to an actual fight.

After brushing back the loose strands of his hair, Stricklander lifted Atlas’s face with his index.
“Atlas, do you know what it is I want?”

Atlas’s mouth drew itself into a thin line. His eyes grew serious. “The amulet, sir?”

“Precisely. I trust you, young Atlas. Only through you can we finally succeed in returning Gunmar from the Darklands.” He lifted his other hand, tightening it into a firm fist. “You are the sword with which we can strike into the Trollhunter, once and for all.”

Atlas looked away. “I didn’t know you trusted me so much.”

He did not, but the boy had no need of such knowledge. Atlas, as loyal and caring as he was, reacted unpredictably in the grand scheme of things. He could count on Nomura, Bular, and the rest of the changelings to do their part, but Atlas?
While disappointing not to have the boy at his side tonight, part of him felt relieved. There would be no interruptions, no improper etiquette, no backtalk. It would only be Stricklander and the stage, announcing their progress and, hopefully, the future that is to come.

He should feel relieved. Happy, even.

But, instead, it was as if someone had took some of the air out of his sails. Well, no matter. The important thing was that Atlas would be spying on the Trollhunter tonight, gathering more intel for their people.

He hoped.

Nomura crossed her arms, legs kicked up on the desk. Stricklander’s nose scrunched up in disgust. She wasn’t going to let him do the usual routine he liked to do.

For fucks sake, she would rather be cleaning up Bular’s last breakfast then wait and be scolded by this old tool. Though their ages were not too far a part, Stricklander lorded it over her, and since no one else at the main branch was older than the asshole (save perhaps Bular), he used it frequently as a measure of power. Ha! As if age has anything to do with power. Trolls became weaker with age, just as humans did.

Of course, there were always exceptions. Gunmar was supposedly thousands of years old and still as healthy and hale as the height of his power. He was born of a Heartstone however, so perhaps that was why he didn’t fall under the weight of time as others did.

“This is not a common layaway for you to put your feet up on my furniture, Nomura.” Stricklander scolded. “Behave yourself. Some common curtesy, if you please.”

Oh hell no. Nomura struggled to maintain her human form. She could feel her skin crackle with magic.
“Behave myself? Common courtesy? Oh, look who’s talking. You were ready to hang me out to dry back there,” Nomura said, rising from her seat.

“You’re an imbecilic fool,” Her boss said. “You jeopardized everyone’s security, and in front of the Trollhunter no less. You are lucky Bular was stupid enough to fall for you little trick. As if we need more changelings.”

“Thank you for your support out there,” she sneered. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. Such a gentlemen.”

Stricklander threw her a nasty glare. Getting up from his seat, he asked, “What was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, stick up for the person who’s been slaving under you for the past six decades and is taking care of your precious son?” She spat out.

The air became saturated with tension. Stricklander and Nomura were not friends and never would be. Their personalities clashed too much. Nevertheless, they both kept away from each other’s sore spots, at least they did until now.

Stricklander stalked towards her, eyes glowing. He stuck his pen in her face accusingly. “That is a blatant accusation, Nomura. I should have your mouth sewed shut for such insolence.”

She smacked the pen to the side. “Like you did with your son last night? Oh wait, you didn’t, you just sent him to his room.” Nomura said.

Even Otto had been put off by Stricklander’s actions, choosing to end their call not long after the boy left. Stricklander should have punished Atlas. The boy was his subordinate. Any other changeling would have whipped his ass for challenging their authority. Six years ago, Stricklander would have done the same. Now? The man practically shouted to the world that Atlas was more than a mere apprentice.

How sickening.
“What I do with Atlas has nothing to do with you,” he remarked in a cold tone. “He has been properly punished. We are here to speak about your transgressions. Do not try and switch this on me.”

Ha! Nomura was the best damn agent this side of the world. Did he really think he could pull the wool over her eyes like he did the rest? Pathetic.

“You think you’re so subtle?” She mocked, “You may have some of them fooled into thinking Atlas is your little pet, but not me. I know you.”

“You know nothing,” He hissed.

Oh, she’d hit a nerve. Excellent.

“How long are you going to allow this little charade to continue, oh benevolent leader? How long before Bular finds out and decides to dispose of him?”

“There is no charade. Your accusations are baseless and tasteless,” he said. “Bular may have been manipulated this time, but he will not be so trusting of your opinion the next. He is too obsessed with retrieving Gunmar to pay attention to our affairs.”

“You know, as smart as you like to think you are, you always underestimate others.”

She really should just kill him. He had been a pain in her ass since day one. She had put blood, sweat, and tears into this damn project and received nothing in return. Not a pay increase, not a congratulations, not even a pat on the back (not that she would ever allow him to do such a gesture). It would be a service to all of changeling kind to get rid of the fool.

“I could have you hanged before noon, you know,” he remarked.

“But you won’t,” Nomura said, gaining confidence. “You need me. I’m the only one besides you that won’t off the brat in his sleep.”

As much as she would like to kill Stricklander, she wouldn’t. She had a far greater grudge against
someone else that she needed to settle.

“And here I thought you were ready to kill the boy.”

“I might not like the kid, but my quarrel isn’t with Atlas,” she said. “The Trollhunter will pay. I had him right where I wanted him. You should have let me go and kill him. There’s still time.”

Even though the battle was heavily in her favor, she had lost to the Trollhunter on a mere technically. A trick. Even now, she still smelled faintly of goblin. He wouldn’t get one over her again. She would be the one to strike first. And she already knew where to start.

Nomura smirked. The Trollhunter won’t even know what hit him until it was too late.

Stricklander waved her off. “Enough of this. What happens with the Trollhunter is of no concern of yours now. You are to guard the bridge. Nothing more,” he ordered. He tapped his pen against his palm. “Who is coming from the Darklands?”

She threw the other a searching look. “Why do you care?”

“Someone needs to keep Atlas in check. You are obviously not doing enough.”

She scoffed. “Not my fault you raised such a tender-hearted brat.”


She shrugged. “Newbie. No name yet.”

There was a thoughtful look in the male’s eye. He began to pace, tapping the pen against his hand in a steady rhythm.

“Truly now? Hmm. Yes…This could be good. A clean slate. Someone new. How is his personality?”
Her mind traveled back to the short talk she had with the changeling. He liked to joke around, his words crass and vulgar. It was almost disturbing, especially since he looked like a baby troll. That was the problem with becoming a changeling. Until you’ve received your human form, you were stuck in the body you were found. She had been lucky, only waiting a few decades before she was placed. This one, she suspected, had likely spent the majority of his life trapped in such a body. It didn’t seem to bother him though.

“Different,” she finally responded.

Stricklander turned his head toward her. His eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

“Let’s just say he’s not the most orthodox of changelings,” Nomura said.

Shit, what would they do if she picked the wrong person for the job? She might face an even worse death than being Bular’s next meal.

No. This had to work. Her entire future relied on it. If need be she would just kill off the newbie and make it seem like the Trollhunter did it.

“An unorthodox changeling…That…that actually might work,” Stricklander said, nodding to himself. “How much does he know?”

“Only what I’ve filled him in on.”

Which wasn’t much, considering the current situation.

“Good, good. We don’t want the other changelings corrupting his opinions.”

Corrupting his opinions? Nomura raised an eyebrow, her mouth opening slightly. Stricklander had a pleased look on his face, as if someone had just dropped a canary straight into a cat’s dish.

“What are you planning?” She said cautiously.
“Neither of us can watch Atlas all the time. We need someone on the inside, someone who can influence him to make the right choice,” Stricklander explained.

“So, what?” She placed a hand on her hip. “Another babysitter then?”

“No, no. No more of that. He needs someone closer. Someone on the same level as he is. Someone who he can confide in.” Stricklander clicked the top of his pen. “He needs a friend.”
Win, Lose, or Draal (III)

Chapter Summary

Atlas and AAARRRGGHH!!! have a moment. Atlas fights Draal.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, I'm back with a new chapter and OMG! More fanart! Djkdhfksjlka. Alright, so one of them was a commission, but they read my fanfic and are super awesome. I've posted the links to my profile as I always do for fanart for my stuff, but check out these wonderful artists! Their art is super cool and they are really friendly and fantastic folks. Please support them.

http://vvvici.tumblr.com/post/175799751743/piece-done-for-tunafishprincess-for-the-fantastic

https://brothebro.tumblr.com/post/175785283255/tunafishprincess-a-little-fanart-3-hope-ya-like

I hope you enjoy this new chapter.

There's a reference to the Avengers in the fic. Just saying. Finally, big thanks to Charlie for helping me with this chapter. You are an awesome friend. Go check out their new fanfic. It's called "A Bright and her Shadow".

Two hours left until showtime.

Dusk passed over the town of Arcadia. The clear California blue sky gave way to a swirl of shifting shades, much like the heavy strokes of a painting. Atlas wondered how it looked outside of Arcadia. How did a sunset appear from the opposite end of the world? Every night the scene was different. The colors never stayed the same. Atlas pulled out his cell, taking a shot of the scene. He added it to his collection.
This might be his last view. Better to take it in and enjoy it.

The leaves rustled as a warm wind traveled through the trees. It carried a sharp fragrance of the native primrose. Atlas smiled fondly. Those were his dad’s favorites.

Atlas tapped a claw to his phone screen, sending one last text message to the man. It wasn’t anything special. ‘Good luck’ wasn’t his best work, but it got the full idea across. Even if Atlas couldn’t be there to support the man, he still hoped Stricklander got the recognition for his work.

Atlas’s ears perked up as the sound of screeching tires drew closer.

He watched eagerly as she pull up into the driveway. Even from far away he could see the details of her face, delicate and beautiful. He tried to discern what features they might share, but all he ended up with was their eyes and (perhaps, he still wasn’t finished growing yet) their thin lanky frames. And maybe the way their hairs parted? Atlas wasn’t sure if that was a genetic trait or not.

As she got out of the car, her phone screen lit up. She glanced down. A big goofy grin emerged as her eyes flickered back and forth, reading whatever was sent. Atlas beamed, his heart filled to the brim with warmth.

**Wow, Atlas inwardly noted, even our expressions are similar.**

At least when he was in human form. She slipped the cell into the pocket of her white coat. For a doctor she appeared surprisingly friendly. Of course, Atlas’s experience with doctors was not a particularly good example of the entire profession now that he thought about it.

Atlas rested his head between two hands. What was she thinking right now? What did she do during the day? Toby was right. He really should have come sooner.

As if she heard his thoughts, the woman paused halfway up the steps to her house, glancing back.

Atlas nearly forgot to breath. Had she spotted him? He’d chosen this high of spot for a reason. It’s heavy foliage cast deep shadows, enough to hide even the largest of trolls. Or so he believed.
She turned away a second later. Atlas observed her enter the house, his heartbeat echoing in his head. Once she was finally inside, his shoulders loosened. That had been close.

Atlas ran his fingers through his bangs, his other hand reaching for the sheets of paper and pen he brought from the Order. It wasn’t anything special, but it was his, and that was enough.

So.

That was his mom.

He clicked the pen, twirling it between his fingers like Stricklander did.

_Huh._

“Bar-bah-ra,” he sounded out, tasting the syllables. It was a good name. A nice ring to it one might say. Very human. Very normal. In a hushed tone, he whispered, “mom.”

“BAH-BUH-RAH,” a deep voice rumbled from below.

Atlas nearly toppled out of the tree. He peered over the side, baring his fangs on instinct, only to roll his eyes in the next instant at what he discovered.

“Seriously, AAARRRGHH!!!? You nearly gave me a heart attack,” Atlas groaned, his back hitting trunk with a soft thump. His horns rustled the leaves above his head, a few of them falling into his hair. “What are you doing here?”

“Almost night,” the troll said. “Bored.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s safe to go out for you yet. And where’s Blinky? Don’t tell me you came all the way from Trollmarket without him?”

AAARRRGGHH!!! grinned sheepishly.
Atlas smacked his forehead. “Unbelievable. Wait, how did you find me?”

“Good nose,” he said, gesturing to his snout. “Track.”

“Oh, I…wait. Were you following me?” Atlas asked.

“Maybe.”

“You’re supposed to be watching Toby’s house right now,” Atlas remarked. The goblins were still about Arcadia. Who knows when they would seek their revenge.

“Not home yet.” He said, “Bin-go?”

Atlas chuckled, the word conjuring a humorous image within his mind. “Poor Tobes.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! tried to look at the papers in Atlas’s lap. “What do?”

“I’m writing a few letters to some people,” Atlas explained, his right hand tapping the pen against his leg. “I’m trying to think of what to write someone I barely remember. What do I say?”

“Heart knows best,” he suggested.

“You’re right. I should probably keep it short and simple. Tell her how I feel. Tell her that I know who she is and that as much as I want to meet her, it’s too dangerous right now for her to be involved. Yeah, that sounds good,” Atlas said to himself, nodding as he jotted down the words. “Alright, next letter. Okay, so this one’s to a girl.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! raised his stony brows, his expression playful. “Claire?”

Atlas laughed. “You’re smarter than people give you credit, AAARRRGGHH!!!”
“No, not smart,” AAARRRGHH!!! said, wiggling his ears. “Just listen.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I was looking for a good listener.”

Atlas moved the pen back and forth between his fingers. While Barbara had been easy, Claire was a lot more complicated. He had never felt this way about someone before, this strange uneasy emotion between excited and terrified. It was like he drank one too many of those fizzy drinks Toby had in his fridge.

“I’m scared,” Atlas admitted. “Is it strange that I want to tell Claire everything? But I’m afraid… getting her involved might get her killed. It would be better for everyone if we never spoke to each other again, for her safety…yet…I don’t want to? Is that selfish of me? I’m not sure what I feel for her in all honestly. This ‘crush’ literally feels like its ‘crushing’ me. I always feel like I’m a complete idiot around her. She makes me want to vomit, but in a good way, you know?”

AAARRRGGH!!! nodded, giving Atlas a knowing smile. “Yes.”

“I mean, what in the world am I thinking? Where do I start? ‘Dear Claire, you’re receiving this letter because I’ve most likely been slaughtered by a troll. Good luck with the play.’ Yeah. A-plus effort there, Atlas.” He sighed. “I think I’ll tell her as much as I can. If I die, someone other than Toby should know, and I want that to be her. Say I’m dealing with monstrous issues in my life. Get it? Monstrous? I mean, that’s true right? I just don’t want her to get too involved. It’s too risky. But I also don’t want to leave her hanging if something happens to me. Okay. What about this? Claire, I don’t know how to tell you this, but let me try…”

He tried to make it look as clean as possible, but damn did his cursive suck Gronk-nuks. Still, it was personable, right? That had to mean something. He laid everything out to her.

Besides, if he did win, he could just get it back before she got to it, right?

“Okay,” Atlas said, initialing his human name underneath the last paragraph. “Done. Next up: Toby. What should I say?”

“Best friend?” AAARRRGGH!!! suggested.
Can’t argue with that. “That’s a good start.”

Toby’s was much shorter than the rest (no pun intended). Mostly because he would be seeing the boy later. If anything, this was his will to the teen. Still, he tried to put as much emotion and thought into it as he could muster. Should Atlas die, Toby would (hopefully) receive his great sword, his favorite dagger, and the wicked human skull he found in the sewers last week. Those were good gifts, right?

Well, he thought they were good gifts.

Once completed, he folded each letter vertically and placed them atop his bag. Three down. He planned on leaving his mother’s on her doorstep before he left for Trollmarket. Claire’s letter would be a bit trickier. Thankfully he knew where her locker was. She would likely receive it in the morning. At least, he hoped. Toby’s would go to him before the fight. All that was left was—

His hand froze an inch above the sheet, writing utensil perched between two fingers. Atlas licked his bottom lip. This would be the hardest.

“Last one. It’s hard, keeping a secret from my dad this long. He doesn’t deserve this. Sweet Pale Lady, I’m the world’s worst son. It’s like I’m throwing away everything he’s taught me. I mean, I want to tell him, but I know he would never accept it, at least not right now. If I had more time, maybe I could convince him.”

Atlas pulled out the amulet. If only he could convince his kind. Even just one changeling would do. If he lived through the battle, perhaps he could finally put his plan into action. Nevertheless, he had a steep hill in front of him. But nothing ever comes easily to a changeling, now does it?

“I think…I think I need a bit more time with this one,” Atlas said softly.

But time wasn’t something he had, was it?

AAARRRGGHH!!! tilted his head upwards. “Atlas okay?”

He snorted. Okay? What did that really mean? Was he okay with fighting Draal to the death? Was he okay with betraying his brethren for a race of people who might kill him if they found out what he truly was? Was he okay with being three people at once?
“No, not really,” Atlas admitted. He stuffed his things back inside the bag. Once everything was accounted for, he leaped off the branch, landing a few feet away from the large troll. “I think I’m about to do something either really great or really stupid.”

“Need hug?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked, arms outstretched.

Atlas nodded, returning the gesture. His face brushed against AAARRRGGHH!!!’s mossy mane. The troll smelled of earth and laundry fresh out of the dryer. It was almost soothing. “Yeah. For once, I think I do.”

This was it.

“Gathered trollkind!” Vendel’s booming voice echoed through the arena. “The Trollhunter has laid a challenge before the son of his predecessor, and you shall bear witness to the ensuing battle, which will be one for the ages…”

Atlas peered out of the entryway. He ducked back in a moment later, his heart frantically thundering against his ribcage.

Polite cheering and claps made rounds through the stands. There was a thick but quiet anticipation hanging over the grounds. The seats were packed with trolls, all squished in together like sardines. Nearly every kind of troll was accounted for, minus the extraordinarily rare ones. He had never seen so many of their kind in one place. While challenges were not unheard of, a Trollhunter and an ex-Trollhunter’s son beating the snot out of each other was probably Trollmarket’s most eventful night in several years, if not decades.

Damn, these guys really needed some better hobbies.
Atlas’s hand traveled to the amulet attached to his chest. The power of the amulet was a great thing, but could prove disastrous in the wrong hands. Draal would kill Nomura and Stricklander, if he wasn’t first killed by Bular. Atlas was the only one who could prevent that. Besides, Merlin chose him for a reason, right?

“Whoa, that’s a lot of trolls,” Toby remarked as he stuck his head out for a second before turning to face Atlas.

“No shit,” Atlas said. “And I thought your human school was intimidating. This is on a completely different level.”

“Speaking of, it was weird not having you in class, today,” Toby mentioned. “You missed the history quiz.”

Atlas chuckled dryly. “I’ve only been at Arcadia High for a couple days, Tobes. What was so weird about it?”

Toby punched him in the arm. “Shut up. I missed you, okay? It was cool, having my buddy around school.”

Atlas rubbed the appendage. “Me too. Outside of Steve and the classes, it was fun.”

“Was? Oh no. You and me, we’re gonna take the school by storm, dude. Just you wait. Prom King Toby and Prom Knight Atlas: the world will never be the same.”

“Is that so?” Atlas said.

“Yep.” Toby added, “And don’t worry about what to say tomorrow, I told the teachers and Claire you had food poisoning.”

“Great.” Atlas covered his face with one hand. Another lie to add to the rest.

“Well, that’s what best friends are for, right?”
Atlas swallowed the lump in his throat. He reached inside his bag, pulling out the card. Everyone else’s had been delivered.

“Hey, I want you to have this.” Atlas handed over the letter.

Toby glanced down at it. “What’s this?”

“It says everything I want to say,” Atlas said. “You’ve been a good friend to me, Tobes.”

Toby frowned, folding his arms. “Nah ah. No way. You promised to make me tacos.”

“Now is not the time for dinner, Tobes.”

“Last weekend, we ate popcorn and watched half the Marvel movie series. I said ‘I wanted tacos’. You said, ‘next time I’ll make some.’ You’re going to get this letter back unopened after the fight, and when you get back we’re gonna celebrate with tacos and movies.”

Atlas was about to respond, but Vendel’s announcement interrupted their conversation. “Draal, son of Kanjigar, son of Tarigar, ‘Draal the Destroyer,’ come forth.”

Atlas nearly whistled. He had to give it to the troll. Draal made a damn good entrance. The male in question rolled out of the tunnel in a flash, spinning into the air before descending hard onto the ground, landing on both feet. The bastard even had balls to model for the crowd a bit, roaring and waving his fists around like he’d already won.

“Tobes…” Atlas turned his attention back to his friend, squeezing his shoulder. Toby shook his head.

“Don’t. I’m not going to lose my friend tonight, okay? You’re gonna go out there and beat the snot out of Draal then afterward we’re gonna get some Swarma. And tacos. Swarma tacos. You know how to make those, right?”
Toby put out a fist. Atlas knocked it gently against it. “Avengers, right? I understood that reference.”

The other boy’s eyes shined. Toby’s lower lip trembled. “Kick his Sonic-looking ass, dude.”

Atlas nodded. He turned away from the teen for a moment, his brows drawn together in confusedly. Unlike the first, he did not get this reference. Who the hell was Sonic? He would have to ask Toby after the battle.

That was, if he lived through this.

AAARRRGGHH!!! patted him on the back assuredly. In the meantime, Blinky edged closer, worry etched into his stony brows. There was a slight fidgeting of his hands, as if they were unsure of what action to take. The dark shadows cast by the Forge emphasized the troubled expression on Blinky’s face.

“Goodness gracious, I can’t believe we’re here. And you, here fighting Draal to the death…Right, it’s time to put everything I’ve ever said to you to practice,” Blinky pumped his fists. “With a little luck, he’ll trip and fall. Then you can use your ‘changeling tactics’ on him.”

Atlas turned his head to the side, eyes wide. “Changeling…tactics?”

“You…you do have something of that, don’t you?” Blinky sucked on his bottom lip. “Damn, there goes that theory. Ah well. Now, tell me: rule one.”

“Always be afraid,” he recounted. His mind drifted as he spoke. Nomura and Stricklander’s voices echoed inside his head.

Avoid Bular at all costs.

There is honor among assassins.

“Good, good. Rule two.”
“Always finish a fight.”

*Don’t fuck with Nomura.*

*There is no such thing as honor.*

“Rule three?”

That was the real question, wasn’t it?

“About that, Blinky,” Atlas began. “I gathered some intel from Draal’s old girlfriend. I also noticed while reading that when the Venerable Bedehilde fought the Hydrabeast, it didn’t have gronk-nuks, but it did have a weakness under its scales.”

“You read the book?” Blinky remarked, eyes taking on a gleeful sparkle.

“I think I might know Draal’s weakness, but if you could give me some information on his troll species or—”

Blinky hugged Atlas, lifting him up. He turned to AAARRRGGHH!!! with an excited demeanor. “He read the book! Did you hear that AAARRRGGHH!!!? Our boy read the book! There’s hope for him yet!”

AAARRRGGHH!!! smiled. “Good Atlas.”

The teen’s cheeks flushed.

Alas, Atlas never did get an answer. The spotlight fell upon him.

“And now, Draal’s combatant, At—James Lake Jr. Son of, ah,” Vendel paused as a troll leaned over to whisper into his ear. “Son of Ba-bu-rah.”
Atlas took a deep breath.


The bars separating them from the arena rose, not unlike curtains in a play. Two troll guards turned towards the group, settling on either side of Atlas. The audience booed. No surprise there. He was not the favored winner after all. He had no doubt more than one troll placed a bet on him losing.

“Fight from your heart, Master Jim,” Blinky called out. “It’s strong, stronger than any rock.”

The troll’s words did little to comfort Atlas, but nevertheless he appreciated the gesture.

“Prepare for battle.” Vendel called out.

Draal roared. He pounded his fists into the ground.

Atlas summoned Daylight into his palm. He could do this. “Let’s tango, asshole.”

“Begin!” Vendel spread his arms out wide, his words resonating throughout the room.

Just as the cheering from the stands began to rise, so too did ground beneath Atlas’s feet. He tried to keep his eyes on Draal, but it was hard considering everything that was going on below him. The floor separated like pieces of a puzzle, forming a multi-level platform. Suddenly, Atlas wasn’t so sure he could do this (if he ever was to begin with).

Draal squatted down, growling menacingly, before he leapt and attacked without warning. Atlas had to pirouette away, jumping down to one of the lower levels to gain distance between them. Draal reached out against, but this time Atlas was prepared. He lifted his sword high to defend himself. Draal pounded on the blade, then tried to swipe at him from the side.

Atlas dodged swiftly, and, using the balls of his feet to gain momentum, tried to roundhouse kick the troll. Draal caught the foot. Atlas’s eyes widened. The troll swung him around, launching the Trollhunter into the air. For a moment, Atlas sailed over the crowd, but only for that brief period of time. The next he was falling, and quite rapidly so. Thinking quickly, Atlas shifted his body feet first.
He bounced off the arena wall before hitting the ground. He stumbled a bit on the landing, but nothing was broken. Yet. His legs ached from the exertion. Moves he used against Nomura weren’t working here.

Damn it, he was falling back into his old instincts. Changeling attacks wouldn’t work on someone like Draal. He needed…he needed…

He needed to fight like a human.

Atlas looked up. As expected, Draal was showing off for the crowd. He scowled. Draal, noticing his opponents position, rolled off the platform, trying to run Atlas over. The teen made a swift half-turn on the first round, the troll passing by him with only a few inches of distance. On the second, Atlas was more prepared. Lifting the sword like a javelin, he started to run. Once he got close enough, he threw it in front of Draal. The Sword of Daylight sunk into the ground.

Draal hit the weapon square on, stopping dead in its tracks. He held his head, eyes slightly dazed. Atlas used that brief moment to strike at Draal’s Gronk-nuks. A high-pitched groan left Draal’s lips. Atlas hit him in the same spot again.

“That was for almost killing me during practice,” Atlas said.

A hand grabbed his ankle. Ah oh. Without warning, Atlas was soaring back into the air. Fuck, he got too close again. The hand didn’t let go of his leg. Instead, Draal slammed him against the floor so hard the ground beneath cracked and buckled, spreading dust everywhere. The teen coughed. Atlas winced as the taste of copper blossomed inside his mouth. He bit his tongue.


Atlas rematerialized the sword, slicing at Draal’s side. The troll hissed, falling back. Atlas used the weapon to leverage himself back up, spitting out the excess blood. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, stuck out his middle finger on his other hand to motion Draal forward. Suffice to say, Draal was not pleased.

Perhaps he shouldn’t have flipped Draal the bird, especially when the male swung his fist into Atlas’s chest. Magic cackled around them. Both were pushed back by the energy. The force knocked the air out of Atlas’s lungs, sending him careening off to the side. Half his body hung over the ledge. Hot fumes blew up at his face, the scent of overdone hard-boiled eggs overwhelming his nose. The
lava below bubbled and flowed like a hot river. An inch more over and he would be toast. Literally.

Before he could move, Draal grabbed onto his arm and threw him like a ragdoll to the top platform. This time, his landing far less graceful. His face scrapped against the rough surface of the ground. Atlas’s eyes teared up from the pain. His breathing became choppy and rough.

Shit, this was bad. Not only was Draal winning, but Atlas was beginning to run on empty. His human energy reserves were nearly exhausted. He had only minutes before he would lose any edge he had on Draal in the dexterity department.

He needed a distraction.

Draal began jumping up from the lower level, showing off to the crowd by doing flips and twists. The spotlight followed him, the light illuminating his form.

Wait a moment.

The light! That’s it!

Atlas positioned the broad side of his sword in front of him and directed one of the lights into Draal’s eyes. The troll covered his face, landing on one knee on the top platform. He tried to hit Atlas with the back of his hand, but Atlas swerved out of the way, making a full-turn behind Draal. Below them, one of the ginormous scythes swung back and forth, like the metronome in his mentor’s office. Atlas sucked in his bottom lip. If he couldn’t damage the troll, then perhaps something as large as that could do Draal some damage. He just needed to get Draal to jump into its path. But how?

Once recovered from the temporary blindness, Draal began to look around for Atlas. The teen copied the troll’s footsteps, keeping as far from his line of vision as possible.

He counted the movement of the scythe. Ten seconds in, ten seconds out. That’s how long he had. Five of those seconds would be taken up by Draal falling, which meant he needed to be precise. One false move could ruin his last chance. It was risky and completely unchangeling-like.

Thank the Pale Lady Atlas was a terrible changeling.
“Neither you nor Atlas can be the Trollhunter. You’re children!” Draal yelled, “I am son of Kanjigar!”

Once the scythe was in and Draal was positioned with his front facing the outer edge, Atlas jammed the pummel into the troll’s back knee. Draal stumbled a tad, but it was Atlas kicking him with both feet that really did the trick.

Draal fell like a stone, glaring back at Atlas in shock.

“And I am Jim, son of Barbara.” Atlas added, “The amulet chose me for a reason. By the way, have a nice trip.”

The scythe swung before Draal could answer. Draal was tossed about, over the edge of the lowest platform.

The crowd gasped.

The ground shook underneath Atlas. The platform was returning to its normal form. Thank the Pale Lady. When the floors returned to their proper place, Atlas limped over to the side. To his surprise, Draal still hung on by one arm. Below, lava simmered like a pot of overcooked sauce.

The audience roared, banging their feet against the stone so hard Atlas literally felt the arena shake. Atlas could sense hundreds of eyes locking on him. If he wasn’t nervous before he definitely was now.

“Finish the fight! Finish the fight!” They shouted.

He could do it. This was his chance. No more Draal breathing down his neck.

“Finish it.” Draal locked eyes with him. A defeated look came over the troll’s face. He had accepted his death.

Draal was an asshole. He reminded him of the changelings who jeered at him in the Order. He reminded him of Psycho Steve. For all intents and purposes, Atlas should have every right to kill
Draal. It would elevate his status with Trollmarket. He would be feared. People wouldn’t question his identity anymore (at least not in public). It would be the changeling thing to do. He had told Toby it was the way of his people after all.

But he couldn’t.

Because Draal…didn’t deserve to die. Draal was an arrogant ass, but killing him would solve nothing. It was pointless. It was unnecessary. He wasn’t Bular. He wasn’t Gunmar. Hell, if Kanjigar had killed Stricklander, Atlas would have hunted the Trollhunter down to the ends of the earth. Death was final. There was no coming back from it. When it came down to it, Atlas really didn’t want to be Draal’s ending.

Atlas reached out, pulling at Draal’s arm. The armor flashed blue for a moment, giving him the extra strength he needed to tug the large troll back onto the ground. Atlas shot an annoyed glance at the amulet. Why didn’t it give him that strength before?

“The fight is to the death,” Draal said.

Atlas shrugged his shoulders, wincing at the pain it produced. “House rules, not mine,” he stated. “Don’t make this weird, okay? I’m only doing this for you once.”

“You should have killed me, human.”


The boos continued, pieces of food and drink thrown in their direction.

Atlas scowled. His anger rose like a tidal wave, washing over his feelings of fear and worry. He was exhausted on so many levels. So what if he didn’t kill Draal? It was his choice.

Yes, Atlas realized, it is my choice, isn’t it? He chose to hide his identity. He chose to keep all these secrets. It hit him like a bag of bricks. Didn’t Blinky once say he was supposed to protect trolls and humans from the Gumm-Gumms? All he was really doing was protecting them from the truth.
He could be the perfect little Trollhunter and even then, they would hate him. Hated him for his strangeness, his foreign nature, his so-called humanity. They were stuck in their old ways, just as Blinky said. Too long had they left their heads in the sand.

Atlas clenched his teeth. None of this would have happened if the trolls had kept tabs on the Killalahead pieces locations, or hell, gotten a group of warriors together to take down Bular. They were so focused on the world below that they completely missed the changes in the world above.

*You know what*, Atlas thought, *I was just going to warn them, but fuck it.* They needed the right kick in the rear. Something that would finally get Trollmarket into gear.

“Hey assholes!” Atlas called out to the rowdy trolls in the stands. “Yeah, I may not have followed your stupid rules, but neither did this crappy amulet when it chose me!”

The crowd continued to jeer.

Frustration flowed through him. He clawed at the amulet in his chest. “Screw this. I’m tired of these stupid lies. It’s time everyone knew the truth. If I have to live with this information, then so do you.” Atlas pointed upwards. “Right now, above our heads, changelings are in Arcadia. Guess what? They have the Killalahead Bridge. While all of you were drinking gulg and pissing around, they were collecting pieces of the Bridge. They want to use it to bring back Gunmar. Now, you might be asking yourselves, how do I know this?”

It was as if someone had muted the entire room. He saw Vendel in the stands, the horrid realization of what Atlas was about to do dawning on the old man. He would be too late to stop it however. He heard Blinky yelling in the distance.

Atlas took a deep breath, deactivating the amulet. It transferred over to his hand. He looked up at Trollmarket, letting them see the full transformation. He wasn’t ashamed.

So what if he was changeling?

“Because I’m one of them,” Atlas said. “You’ll need a Trollhunter who doesn’t have to live in the shadows. I’m your only shot. Take it or leave it.”

A pin could have dropped and the sound would have echoed through the arena. It was deathly still.
Every single troll in Atlas’s view froze up, so frozen in place they could have passed for statues.

Even Draal had stopped moving, eyes so wide Atlas was afraid they might fall out.

This…was not the reaction he was expecting. Actually, Atlas was surprised no one was yelling or screaming yet. Maybe he could work with this? Perhaps Trollmarket didn’t hate changelings as much as Blinky said they did. Maybe they could be reasoned with.

The air shifted. Whoops, it looked like they would rather leave it. Atlas barely dodged a flying battle-axe aimed at his head. It clattered to the floor behind him. A second later, Atlas had to block a javelin with his dagger.

Alright. Okay then.

Maybe he shouldn’t have revealed he was a changeling.

A large gray hand shielded his face from a well-aimed hammer. AAARRRGGHH!!! stepped in front of him protectively, Toby clinging to his fur.

Blinky snatched Atlas up by the hood of his cloak.

“You. Are. An. Imbecile!” Blinky ground out, throwing the teen over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Say no more! We must leave this instant!”

“They have a right to know,” Atlas yelled over Blinky’s shoulder. “And put me down!”

AAARRRGGHH!!! knocked one of the troll guards away with a swing of his fist. Once they reached the entrance from which they arrived, Blinky dropped Atlas to the ground. The troll’s mouth was twisted into a disgruntled frown, his hands moving erratically.

“And you have a right to listen. Ours is an ancient race. It will take time to win hearts and minds, and you just threw an entire supply of dwörkstones into that!” Blinky mimicked what Atlas thought was a bomb going off with his hands. That, or jazz hands.
“I know,” Atlas said, looking away.

Blinky massaged the bridge of his nose. “Then why on earth did you do it?”

“I’m tired, Blinky,” Atlas said, grabbing his head. “I’m so sick of pretending to be all these different people at once. I knew Trollmarket would be shocked just…not to this extent.”

“And now you’ve marked yourself for death,” Blinky said.

“Seriously? Trollmarket hates changelings that much?”

One of the more aggressive fans jumped out of the stands, landing mere feet away from the scholar. “Die, impure!”

“Blinky, watch out!” Atlas pushed the male behind him, blocking the attack with his arm guard. He hooked a foot around the attacker’s leg, causing him to trip. “You need to get Toby out of here. I’ll try and meet you guys topside.”

Blinky shook his head. “Not without you, Master Atlas.”

“Yeah, he’s right,” Toby said. “We’re not leaving you!”

Atlas gave the group a hard look. “Then I’ll be leaving you instead.”

Before the others could protest more, Atlas made a half-pirouette around AAARRRGGHH!!! then launched himself into the arena once more. Most of the trolls were still in the stands, panicking and stomping about in a mad frenzy. It was really only the guards and a handful of the more daring trolls that tried to stop him. Draal, to his surprise, was nowhere to be seen. Well, at least Atlas had that going for him.

He swerved around each strike and plow. Though his side burned with all the action, he continued forwards to the opposite side of the Forge, to the entryway Draal arrived from earlier.
Before going into the tunnel, he looked back. Thankfully, his friends were gone, hopefully halfway to the surface if they took the right path. It brought him relief. Toby would be safe with AAARRRGHH!!! and Blinky. Atlas would attract trouble in his current state.

As he ran through the dark passage, he heard Vendel’s booming voice, trying to calm down the masses. Most of the words were lost to him, but the noise from the crowds had lessened and no one followed, so that was good, right?

Once he got a good enough distance away, Atlas smacked his face with an open palm. “Ugh! Stupid, stupid, stupid. What in the world were you thinking, Atlas?”

He really screwed up big time. Blinky and Vendel warned him, but did he listen? No, he just painted an even bigger bullseye on his back. A human Trollhunter was strange, but a half-changeling? Yeah, no surprise Trollmarket went ballistic.

Stricklander was right, to Atlas’s dismay. They really were ready to kill him.

Atlas kicked a stray rock. The further he distanced himself from the arena, the more tumultuous his emotions became. Why protect a people who detested him for his race?

And why did Merlin, some supposedly all-powerful wizard, choose someone like him to protect everyone?

The tunnel continued upward, though Atlas had no idea where he was going. He had never gone through this route before. Great. He was probably lost then. It was mostly dark, the glow of the amulet and the green and purple crystals lining the ceiling his only sources of light. It would have been almost pretty if his mind wasn’t all over the place.

Why did he do that? He knew the reason, but still.

Despite the guilt he felt from revealing his true self, there was an even greater sensation of relief. Getting it out in the open felt amazing. How could someone feel both horrible and fantastic at the same time?
A cold hand snaked around his throat.

Atlas couldn’t react in time before his body was lifted and struck against the tunnel wall. His vision danced. He didn’t have to see to tell whose hand was tightening around his windpipe. The voice itself was recognizable in itself.

“Impure,” Draal spat out, anger coating his voice. “I should kill you.”

Atlas clawed at the hand, but the troll's grip was as hard as steel. “If you kill me, then any hope of defeating Bular and destroying the bridge dies with me.”

Draal studied him. After a long hard look, he said, “Talk.”

“It’s kind of a long story—”

Draal growled.

Atlas stopped struggling. He put both hands up in a gesture of good-will. “Okay, let's go with the short version then.”
Win, Lose, or Draal (IV)

Chapter Summary

Atlas and Draal travel together without killing one another. Atlas later stumbles upon a tea party. It goes as well as one might expect when Nomura is involved.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Back with a new chapter! Finally done with this best. More than 10,000 words! Holy cheese! Thank you for all the wonderful favorites, kudos, reviews and fanart! Oh my gosh! I love fanart! If you can, check these artists out! Guardian-of-da-gay did a wonderful cover for my fanfic.net account and vvvici did another beautiful comic of a scene from the previous chapter. I've provided their links below.

http://vvvici.tumblr.com/post/176038600698/another-piece-for-the-wonderful-tunafishprincess

http://guardian-of-da-gay.tumblr.com/post/176033887104/a-commission-for-tunafishprincess-for-their

Big thanks to Charlie for betaing this for me and providing suggestions on characterization and the like. I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Of all the places he'd expected to be right now-rotting in Trollmarket's dungeon, hung from his toes in the Forge, drawn and quartered in the market center-a dark tunnel with his possible murderer was not one of them.

Atlas resisted the urge to flee. It was a strong primordial force; one he knew quite well. This was not the place to run however. Here, unlike the arena, Draal had a much greater advantage. And he knew it too.

Draal scratched his head. Atlas tried not to flinch. There was a slight furrow in the troll's wide brow. He examined Atlas, as if trying to make sense of him. Good luck with that. Atlas wasn't sure if Draal
was angry, confused, or a mixture of the two. Likely the later, Atlas noted.

On a positive note, Draal wasn't strangling him anymore, so that was a plus.

"I don't understand," Draal remarked, his voice echoing off the cavern walls. "You said you're a half-changeling, but how does that even work?"

The troll flicked his forefinger and thumb at Atlas's horn. Atlas turned his head away, glaring back in annoyance.

Seriously? That was what Draal was struggling with? Not the rest of his story? How he had been taken by humans and experimented on? How he fought off Bular in the canals? Albeit, it had been a short explanation, but come on!

Suffice to say, Atlas was a tad miffed.

In response, Atlas put two fingers up, slowly bringing them together. "Well, when a daddy changeling and a mommy human love each other-"

Draal scowled, clearly not impressed with Atlas's explanation. Don't antagonize the giant troll who can tear you to pieces, dumbass, his inner-Nomura lectured, remember rule number three.

Right. Except Atlas sucked gronk-nuks at following rules, if the earlier fight was any indication.

"I've no need of your jokes," Draal said. "It just doesn't make sense. Impures aren't even humans. They're impure. Your kind are sterile. Therefore, you cannot bear whelps. It's impossible."

"So is a human Trollhunter," Atlas pointed out, stroking his chin. "Well, I guess half-human Trollhunter in this case."

Draal walked around him in a circle, scrutinizing Atlas from the tips of his ears to the guards on his shins. Atlas's whole body tensed up in reaction. It vaguely reminded him of his first inspection in the Janus Order, or even earlier, when the human scientists had a hold of him. It left him feeling bare and vulnerable.
The glow of the crystals above reflected off Draal's spiky backside. It would have almost been pretty if Atlas wasn't still fearing for his life. Finally, Draal came to a stop in front of him.


"Your guess is as good as mine," Atlas said, pulling out the amulet as he spoke. "I've been asking myself that ever since I picked up the damn thing."

Whatever gamble Merlin took on making Atlas the Trollhunter seemed to be a lost cause now.

Though the sounds of the crowds had lessened, it did nothing to stop the quiet pressure building up within Atlas. His body was taut, ready to spring at even the slightest of movements. Being next to the person who tried to kill him in battle did not help matters.

A glint of something Atlas couldn't discern shined in Draal's eyes. He drew closer. Atlas backed away cautiously.

"Are you…afraid of me, Impure?"

Atlas growled. "Whatever you're trying to do, stop it."

"You are," Draal concluded, a smug smile forming. Atlas met the troll's eyes with a frosty glance.

"What are you going to do now?" Draal asked.

"Now? Why the hell do you care?" Atlas said. "I'm surprised you didn't kill me on the spot."

"I would have," Draal admitted. "Any other time, I would have snapped your neck and been done with it. Your kind bring trouble wherever you go."

Draal crossed his arms. "It is the truth."


Even though his words were steady, Atlas's heartbeat thumped so loudly he could hear it in his head. Draal could easily have killed him with a flick of his wrist. Honestly, it was jarring even speaking with him here and now. What's to say he wouldn't try to come after Atlas again? Others had in the past after all.

Atlas silently motioned his thumb over the small compartment in his armguard. If Draal tried to make a move against him, Atlas would immediately strike back.

There was a small hesitation in Draal's movements, his hands awkwardly trying to arrange themselves but failing all the while. In the end, he tucked them underneath his armpits.

"Answer me, Impure…Why did you spare me?" Draal asked out of the blue.

An excellent question. The more Atlas thought about it, the more he regretted his choice. A dead Draal would have been a better in the long run. A living Draal meant Atlas now had a very volatile troll on his hands. One that-like the rest of Trollmarket-hated changelings. Atlas could handle escaping the other trolls, but Draal? The troll moved faster than anyone, even Nomura, whose species were known for their agility. His title "Draal the Deadly" was no silly nickname. One wrong move could end his life.

Atlas took a deep breath. He looked away. "It was nothing but a fluke. Just a snap decision in a heated moment."

"A fluke, was it?" Draal's eyes narrowed, his lips forming a disgruntled frown. "Well, I guess it was a fluke for me too."

Bullshit, Atlas thought. Nevertheless, Atlas wasn't going to fight him on that premise. He had fought enough today. All Atlas wanted to do right now was get home and sleep. His arms and legs felt more and more like lead with each passing second. Additionally, his left side ached every time he breathed. Everything was bruised. Great. He would probably need some hours, if not a day or two, to recover from the fight.
"All this time," Draal muttered under his breath. "All this time, you and the fleshbag were the same person."

"It didn't start out that way." Atlas sighed, "Honestly, it was a mistake on my part."

"I still cannot believe it. You lied," Draal growled, his teeth grinding together in a menacing manner. There was a tightness in Draal's shoulders, carrying over to the rest of his body. Draal clenched his fists. "Lied to everyone."

Atlas stared down the narrow hall. His ears shifted back and forth. They were alone. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or bad thing at this point.

"Not anymore. Looks like the secrets out," Atlas replied in a soft manner.

"How?" The shadows in Draal's face took on a sharp edge. "Blinky knew, didn't he?"

"AAARRRGGHH!!! as well." Atlas counted the others off with his fingers. "Vendel and Bagdwella too."

Without warning, Draal smashed his fist into the wall. The ground shook from the attack.

Almost immediately Atlas jumped back, the dagger from his armguard out and ready to strike. His index finger snaked around the top of the handle while his thumb inched up the past the crossguard. Atlas bent his knees, the claws on his feet curling. His other hand palmed for the knife near his thigh.

Atlas tried to steady himself, but his arms shook like a weeping willow in a thunderstorm. Only a few short minutes had passed since his near-death experience, and he wasn't ready to experience another one today. His eyes darted left and right. Escape might be his only option here.

"Ugh!" Draal groaned, ignoring Atlas's defensive stance. He pounded the wall's surface again, this time with his head. Rocks broke off and tumbled to the floor. "Bushigal! That's how you knew about Nomura. I never told anyone about her. Not even…" Draal paused. "Not even my own father. By the Void, why didn't I see it before? Everything! It was so damn obvious. Two Trollhunters. Bah! I can't believe I fell for it. I'm a fool. My father…I failed to live up to his legacy once again it seems."
Even though Atlas feared Draal, he did feel a pinch of relief that the anger at him was now being redirected to Draal himself. As Stricklander once told him, 'sometimes, the toughest opponent one must face is yourself.'

"Yeah, I imagine you're not the only one feeling that way right now," Atlas said. His claws racked through his bangs, pulling at the hairs. "Fuck, I'm so stupid. I should have just kept my damn mouth shut."

"You should have," Draal stated.

Atlas shot a nasty glare at the troll before returning to his frustrated rambling. "I don't need your commentary, Draal. I know what I did. I know I screwed up. Blinky's gonna kill me, if Vendel doesn't do it first. And Toby! Oh man, I hope he's okay. I mean, AAARRRGGHH!!! is there to protect him, but what if the trolls go after them too?"

"No troll in Trollmarket, outside of myself, would be able to take down AAARRRGGGH!! He is a formidable opponent." Draal said.

Atlas crouched to the floor, his back hitting the wall. He returned the dagger back to its compartment. Draal moved away from the wall, looking down him with a peculiar expression.

"What are you doing?"

"Having a fucking tea party. What does it look like?" Atlas retorted. Racking his claws through his hap-hazard excuse for bangs, Atlas grabbed his horns. The back of his head hit the rocky surface with a soft thud. "I can't believe it. I put them in danger! Crap, I didn't think about that. I didn't really think about anything really. I just…"

"You just what, changeling?"

He glanced up at Draal, his lips pulled back in an annoyed snarl. "Why do you care?"

"I don't care," Draal responded. "You are the one who continues to blather on about your failures."
Atlas's mouth pursed, his eyes locking with Draal's.

Draal glared back.

The stare-off lasted forever (two whole minutes, Atlas counted). Finally, Draal broke the silence.

"So?" Draal said.

"So what?"

Draal folded his arms, his head turned to the side. "Aren't you going to continue?"

"You're being awfully talkative right now. Did you think I didn't notice you're trying to prime me for information?"

The troll's eyes widened before settling back to their normal state. "I am doing no such thing."

"Sure you aren't." Atlas got back up, brushing the dust off his pants. "There's not much else I can say. Killajead was too big to keep secret, and I already have enough of them. I thought...I thought Trollmarket needed to know. All of you here live such comfortable lives, away from what's happening topside and because I'm the Trollhunter, I'm supposed to let you continue like everything is all happy and nice? All the while Bular gets closer and closer to returning Gunmar from the Darklands? Fuck no! Keeping everyone in the dark is-no, was-ridiculous!"

"And now Trollmarket is in an uproar. I haven't seen it like this since the Third Gnome Wars," Draal said. "Not only did you not kill me, you revealed yourself as an Impure. For someone who is supposed to be a changeling, that's..."


Draal nodded. "Yes."
"I hate to say this," Atlas said, his face scrunching up, "but I think Vendel was right, at least in some ways. Shit. None of this would have happened if I just kept quiet."

Impulsive. Sweet Pale Lady he was the worst. Even Gable, the main branch's head cook-whose use of grease on food was both unsanitary and ruined the flavor of everything he touched-could have done a better job than him. Not only was he a failure of a changeling, but he quite possibly destroyed any good will he had accumulated in Trollmarket. Blinky was right. He was an imbecile.

A living imbecile that is. Atlas knew he wasn't out of danger yet.

"I don't know about you, but I'm not gonna stick around here any longer than I have to," Atlas said, walking away from Draal. Out of all the stupid decisions he'd made today, staying in one place for too long would not be one of them.

Up ahead, the path split into two tunnels. Both were equally illuminated by unusual stalagmites, a smattering of glowing mushrooms growing below the in-between that separated them.

Atlas's eyes flickered up and down the tight corridor. Though he lacked the superior senses of a full-blooded troll, he could detect a small movement of air flow from the left one. It was a hunch, but that was all he really had at the moment, now wasn't it?

To his annoyance, Draal followed, matching Atlas's pace. "Where will you go?"

"Right now?" Atlas tapped his lips with a single claw before explaining, "None of your fucking business."

Draal growled. Atlas's thumb twitched. Still, the teen kept a calm face, even if inwardly he would rather scream.

Atlas briefly glanced in Draal's direction. "Why do you care? You were about to kill me a few minutes ago."

"I don't care," Draal responded.
Atlas moved a few paces away. "Then stop following me."

"I can't do that either," Draal grumbled, his eyes narrowing. "I don't trust you."

"The feeling is mutual."

Draal wasn't like the Blinky and the rest when they discovered the truth. Sure, they all had their bias, but they didn't hold it against him the way Draal and the other trolls of Trollmarket did. Perhaps it had to do with their close proximity to him, being able to distinguish him as an individual instead of simply another nondescript changeling.

And that was the core of the issue between their races, now wasn't it? Blindly judging him on account of his cursed blood instead of the person that blood runs through.

Said blood was chilling with every step he took. Draal's presence dwarfed Atlas's own, carrying a tumultuous storm of emotions that were almost suffocating. In a way, he reminded Atlas of Bular, being able to command an entire room with but a single gesture.

Atlas's fingers fiddled with the frayed ends of his cloak. It was a nervous habit, one he had not yet learned to break, but even that did not soothe him.

The longer he walked with Draal, the more uncomfortable Atlas felt. Finally, he came to a standstill.

Draal strode a few paces ahead before coming to a halt. He eyed Atlas suspicious. Great. Just what he needed right now. Atlas counted off his breathing, trying to stem the adrenaline rushing through his veins. Was he having a panic attack? Or was it something worse?

The changeling in him wanted to fight, to claw Draal's eyes out and any other troll that got in his way; the human in him wanted to run, to claw his way back to the surface by any means possible. This dichotomy-An "SAT" word Toby taught him-made him more out of sorts than his normal self. There was no way his so-called changeling tactics were going to work on Draal in such close quarters, especially if Draal decided to attack first. He needed an exit, one preferably as far away from the big troll as possible.

"Listen, I need to get back to the surface. No offense, but bringing you with me would make it near impossible," Atlas curved around Draal, heading further down the tunnel. "I think this is where we
should part ways."

Nevertheless, in spite of his words (or rather, to spite Atlas), Draal followed. The troll brushed shoulders with Atlas, giving him a half-lidded look.

"Did you not hear what I just said?" Atlas said.

"I did," Draal answered. "I've elected to ignore it."

"So you're going to stalk me around? The battle's over. If you're not going to kill me, then go."

"You could still be planning something," Draal argued. "I'll accompany you on your way to the surface."

"What, you know how to get to the surface from here?"

"More or less," Draal said as he squinted. He pointed to a channel that jutted off to the far left side. "This route. I think."

"You think?"

"I know every tunnel and crevice that leads to Trollmarket," Draal stated.

"How many are there?"

"Did you think you could fool me?" Draal said, raising an eyebrow. "As if I would tell you that, Impure."

Atlas rubbed the bridge of his nose. A full day's training with Nomura would be heaven compared to this.
"Have you ever been down this tunnel before though?" Atlas gestured to the place Draal pointed towards, both eyebrows raised.

Draal cocked his head to the side as he gazed down the crevice-like passage. "Not…recently."

"Maybe we should take another tunnel then. If you aren't so sure."

"No, it is too late to turn back now," Draal said. "We must go forward. It's this one. I'm sure of it."

Both males froze as the sound of faint footsteps approached from a larger tunnel.

Atlas looked to Draal. "I'm not going anywhere with you without a guarantee you won't kill me tonight."

Draal growled. "I make no deals with changelings. I already told you I won't kill you now."

"And I'm not going in that tunnel without a guarantee my head's gonna stay on my body when we reach the surface."

Draal gnashed his teeth together. Finally, he said, "I promise on my honor, as long as you do no harm to Trollmarket or any of its trolls, that I will not kill you."

"And if one of those trolls decides to harm me?"

Draal straightened his back, showing off his full height. "They will have to get past me first."

Atlas rolled his eyes, but stuck out his hand. Draal stared at it blankly.

"It's a handshake. Humans use it as more of a greeting, but us changelings more or less use it for deals and negotiations. If you want to come with me, you have to shake on it."
"I make no deals with changelings."

"How about a temporary truce then?" Atlas amended.

Draal clinched his hands, his expression guarded. Finally, he took Atlas's hand, giving it a hard shake that nearly threw the teen off balance.

"If you try to trick me, I will knock your head off," Draal warned.

"Such encouraging words," Atlas said, placing a hand to his heart. "You really know how to win over people."

The footsteps drew closer. Once the deal was struck Atlas hustled down the small route, his head and back kept down to avoid any cobwebs or dust. Draal was not so lucky. Atlas smirked when the troll banged his horns against the small twisting ceiling.

Once they were far enough away, Atlas looked back. Even though his vision was weaker than the other's he still saw Draal's full form, clear as day. He looked like the stereotypical troll-large, sharp, and deadly. He wondered what a changeling from Draal's race would look like. Probably a lot shorter and thinner. He almost grinned as the image of a skinny Draal with the same horns came to mind.

"How much farther does this route go?" Atlas asked as the minutes past. He checked the watch on his phone. Only forty or so minutes passed since the end of the fight, but Atlas felt like it had been an eternity.

"I can't say," Draal said.

"Great," Atlas groaned. His eyes traveled to the ceiling. The glowing crystals became more sparser as they navigated the small tunnel. "You know, all this really makes me question the whole hatred between our kinds. What started it? Who started it? I mean, technically, we're the same deep down, right?"

Draal threw him an incredulous stare, his nostrils flared. "We are nothing like you, impure."
Okay, that little nickname (along some other unsavory words) was beginning to grow old fast. He got it enough from Bular as it was. Unlike Bular however, Draal did not have the immunity to say whatever he damn well pleased due to his status. Atlas turned around.

"Stop it with the 'Impure' and 'half-breed' bullshit," Atlas shot back, flashing his fangs. "It's either changeling or hybrid. I get it from Bular enough as it is."

A dark shadow overtook Draal's face. His pupils dilated. "You know my father's murderer?"

The memory of his old beat downs flooded Atlas's mind. Winning against Draal had been a combination of a lot of luck and quick thinking. Bular would not make the same mistakes that Draal had. Unlike Draal, Bular was desperate to get his father back by any means necessary.

"He broke one of my ribs last week," Atlas said. "So yes, we are quite familiar with each other."

For a second, Draal appeared surprised. It disappeared just as quickly as it came however. "You hate him."

"Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner." Atlas said, running his hand alongside the wall as he traversed through the increasingly small passage. Atlas hoped it didn't have a dead-end.

Draal clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Atlas's eyes flickered back for a moment before returning foreword. Atlas was no expert on troll gestures. Changeling ones were more aligned with human gestures for the most part. But Atlas did know this one at least, or so he thought. It was a pensive expression. Not quite good or bad. Merely observant.

Draal asked, "Everything you said back there, about the changelings and the bridge, those were true?"

"Why would I lie?"

Without missing a beat, Draal answered, "Your kind are not known for their truthfulness."

"And your kind are not known for their intelligence," Atlas countered.
Draal jerked forward, inches from Atlas's face. The teen jerked back in surprise. Draal smirked.

Atlas continued forward, though not without checking behind him every few steps. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Draal said.

Atlas was getting pretty damn fed up with this. First Draal hated him and now he wanted to play chicken? It made Atlas consider reevaluating Draal's mental age. While no teenager, he was certainly fairly young as far as trolls go, especially in comparison to the trolls and changelings he kept in his company.

Draal's shoulders loosened, though his eyes were still zeroed in on Atlas, as if waiting for the teen to make the wrong move. "Is all this the reason you have allied yourself with Trollmarket?" Draal asked.

"I'm not Trollmarket's ally," Atlas said. Especially not now.

"Then you are allied with Gunmar?"

Atlas shook his head. "No. I'm not his ally either."

Draal's nose scrunched together, his brows drawn into a perplexing stare. "Then whose ally are you?"

Atlas walked ahead, jumping from rock to rock like a cat. "My friends. My family. I told you yesterday. That's why I wanted to postpone the fight."

"Then you don't want the bridge to be reopened," Draal said, following Atlas's from close behind.

"Bular is a nightmare. Having to deal with his father would be insane."
"Agreed. I have never fought him, but I have heard the stories." Draal shuddered. "The battle of Killahead was one of the worst fights I had ever been in."

"You were at Killahead?" Atlas said, mouth dropping. He immediately closed it with a soft click.

"Yes. I was rather young. Only a few centuries. I'd been mostly grown then. I spent my childhood fighting alongside my father. The battles building up to it were intense, but not nearly as intense as the last one. Killahead was horrible. It took days for me to get rid of the stench of the dead."

"I hope it never comes to that," Atlas admitted.

Draal's eyes softened. "As do I."

"Trollmarket might hate me now, but my friends don't, and honestly, that's all that really matters to me. Sure, it sucks your people want to kill me, but that's not something I'm unused to."

"Unused to?"

"Changeling aren't all that welcoming to outsiders," Atlas admitted softly. "I'm the first hybrid. Well, known one. A lot of them didn't take too well to that information."

"And yet you still defend them. These people who condemn you."

"They are my people. They took me in when no one else would. I...I would be dead if it wasn't for my mentor," Atlas said. His fingers burrowed into his pocket, sliding over the cold metal of the amulet. "But they're brainwashed! They all think returning Gunmar will somehow save us. But...I think they're wrong. I mean, I grew up thinking Gunmar returning would be alright in theory, but in practice? It's insane. Bular is terrible. I'd hate to think of how is father is. I mean, what has Gunmar really done for us? From the stories I've been told, he doesn't seem all that interested in our kind, outside of doing things for him. I'm pretty sure if we were in one of Toby's movies we would be designated lackeys of the bad guy. It's not right. That's why I need to destroy the Bridge and defeat Bular. That way, Gunmar will never escape. I just...I've got to keep everyone safe, even if some of them don't want to be saved."

"That is rather admirable of you, changeling." He sniffed. "But you are not nearly ready to fight Bular, much less defeat him."
"I know," Atlas said, his lips parting as a new pair of feet hit the ground. The footsteps were heavy. Atlas tried to pinpoint its location, but the smaller tunnel and Draal's breathing kept distracting him. "Looks like we have company. How fast can you run?"

"You're not going to fight them?" Draal asked.

"I just fought you earlier." Atlas gestured to his side, wincing when he accidently touched a sore spot. "I'm in no position to fight right, but by all means, you go for it. I always wanted a proper meat shield."

"Let me take the lead then."

Atlas motioned his hand out in front of himself, body half-turned. "Lead on, oh master navigator."

Atlas broke into a small run. More like a jog really. Draal, even in cramped quarters, easily outran Atlas. It was a struggle to keep pace with the troll, but he did it, even if it was to his own detriment.

By the time they made it out the other end, Atlas was exhausted. His legs wobbled a bit, but at least he still had the strength to move. He leaned against the exit door.

"By the Void you sound like her," Draal said, dusting off his horns and shoulders.

Atlas turned his head towards the troll. "Who?"

"Nomura. Your mannerisms are very similar."

"Nomura? No way." Atlas huffed, wiping the sweat off his brow. "I think we lost them," he said between gasps.

"Lost who?" A shrill voice alerted him from behind.
Atlas stumbled away from the wall, sliding out both daggers from their sheaths. Though his eyesight wasn't nearly as good as the other's, he recognized the newcomer. While he didn't exactly relax in the person's presence, he did feel a bit more relieved, if cautious.

"What in Deya's name are you two doing here?" Bagdwella hissed. Her hands settled on each side of her waist, giving the two a no nonsense look. "You should not be here."

"Ah," Atlas started, his tone wary. He motioned his thumb at the tunnel they just exited. "Did you see the fight in the arena?"

"Of course I did, whelp." She eyed Draal. "And you. Dare I even ask why the two of you are together?"

"Well, you see-"

Draal interrupted, "We are only going to the same place. No more, no less."

Atlas rolled his eyes at the upstaging, but didn't comment on it. "So, are you going to try and kill me too, Bagdwella?"

"What? No!" Bagdwella said, tapping her chin. "Though you would fetch for quite the price."

"You'll lose your newest supplier if you do," Atlas pointed out.

"I can always find more." She said, though her heart was not in it. She didn't sound mad, merely tired. "You delivered the VHS supply earlier than I asked. That's a rather unsound business tactic, especially for a changeling. I haven't even paid you yet."

Atlas pulled the hood of his cloak over his head. "It was merely a gesture of good will between merchants, Bagdwella. Nothing more."

Bagdwella looked down the hole they came from, squinting all the while. Finally, she drew back, motioning with her arm to follow. "Come. We don't have much time before other trolls come through this area."
"Where are you taking us?" Draal asked.

"There's a small passage back to the surface, but it was closed to us a long time ago." Bagdwella said.

Atlas couldn't help but smirk. Draal didn't seem to understand the implication however.

"Closed? No passage has ever been closed before. If it was, I would know," Draal argued.

"No, you wouldn't. Not even the Trollhunter knew about it. This area is off-limits for a reason. The power that hides Trollmarket away from human eyes makes the rocks here strange. Tunnels shift and move all the time. One could get lost for hours, if not days, if you don't know the way," Bagdwella explained. "You boys are lucky you even got here."

"There was no luck involved," Draal said, gesturing to his head. "I am an expert navigator."

Atlas and Bagdwella shared a look.

"This tunnel," Atlas started, rapping his knuckles against the wall's surface. "You use it for smuggling, don't you?"

She put a finger against her lips, flipping her hair back. "Do you want to leave here alive or not?"

"Alive would be preferable," Atlas said.

She lead them for several minutes, right up until they reached a small cavern. The walls were lined with crystals, particularly in the upper right corner. Though no other troll was in the vicinity, Atlas spied their presence, if the barrels of socks and other knickknacks was any indication.

Bagdwella withdrew her horngazel, drawing it up against the barest surface. The lines weren't as precise as Blinky's, but it still did the trick. The lines for the makeshift door glowed. It warped and shifted until they could see the dark night sky.
"Well, if I don't see you, good luck, young Trollhunter," Bagdwella said, stepping back.

"Thank you, Bagdwella," Atlas said, nodding to her as he exited.

Bagwella blinked in surprise, only to roll them in the next moment. "Consider this payment for the VHRs, half...changeling. Nothing more-"

"Nothing less," Atlas finished.

The second his feet hit the warm ground he sighed. He had never been so pleased to see the night sky.

And then the scent of garbage invaded his nose. He looked around and groaned. Of course the door would lead to the dump. Thankfully, it wasn't too far from Toby's home. He sidestepped over a fallen bag, nearly jumping when a rat crawled out of it. He shivered. The urge to clean grew, but he stifled it. Not his dump, not his problem.

Draal stomped around, circling the grounds. Atlas regarded him with a careful eye. Draal almost appeared unsure of himself. It was a strange sight to behold, especially with all the confidence he'd shown earlier in the fight. Draal rubbed the side of his arm, his gait slow and cautious.

"Draal, look, I've got a couple calls to make," Atlas said as he checked his phone. Damn, thirty missed calls from Toby.

He nodded, though there was a hesitation in his following answer. "I will take my leave then."

There was almost a dejected tone in the way he spoke. All the hot air he'd been so proud to strut about earlier had deflated the moment his feet hit the gravel. Atlas watched on as the troll ambled away, unsure of what direction to take.

"Hey, Draal," Atlas called out.
"Thanks for your help," Atlas said.

Draal shrugged. "It was nothing, truly. I barely did anything."

"Well, you didn't kill me, so that was nice." Atlas looked up at the night sky. "What are you going to do now?"

"I will go where the wind carries me I suppose," Draal said, his own eyes focused on the moon.

Atlas nodded, a small smile emerging. "Stay safe, Draal. I mean it."

The troll blinked, mouth opening before he shut it with a sharp click. "Thank you…Trollhunter."

Atlas watched the troll leave. Silently a part of him was sad to see the troll go. They had been through an ordeal after all. He knew it would be a long road ahead for Draal.

Once the troll had disappeared from hearing distance, Atlas stepped forward. He listened to the leaves rustle in the distance, the smell of gasoline and compost hitting his nostrils.

He placed both his hands out in front of him, clenched as tight as he could without breaking the skin. Two fingers unfurled from the closed hands, not unlike a bud opening into a rose.

It was a silent double-bird salute to the troll.

Softly, Atlas whispered, "Fuck you, Draal."
Toby was a bundle of emotions when Atlas arrived. Not unexpected, since he did sort of ditch his friends in the Forge, even if it was for a good reason. Atlas did his best to explain what happened with Draal. When he got to the part about Draal leaving, Toby moved closer, trapping Atlas with his arms. The teen's shoulders hunched up in alarm, but settled once he figured out what the other boy was doing.

Toby hugged his torso like a lifeline, his head barely reaching the lower part of Atlas's chest. It was times like this Atlas remembered how small and fragile the boy could be. Despite his bravado, his humor, his positivity-Toby was just as afraid as Atlas was, if not moreso.

After a few quiet moments, the shorter boy pulled away, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"You're an asshole," Toby said.

"I know," Atlas said. "I'm sorry, Tobes."

"I'm angry but I'm also happy you're alive," Toby admitted. "Dude, that was stupid. Seriously, why did you do that?"

"I thought Trollmarket needed to have a kick in the ass," Atlas said. "I was just so tired of trying to keep up with so many different secrets and identities. I see now I made a terrible mistake. Vendel and Blinky were right. I never should have revealed myself. Too late now though. I'll miss Trollmarket. It was fun exploring all the different places with you guys."

"Uh," Toby twiddled his thumbs together, a high pitch giggle exiting his mouth. "Funny story about that? I can't believe you missed it.

"Missed what?"

"You're not going to believe what happened."

"I don't even know what it is," Atlas said, his brows moving together. "Did Trollmarket go even more insane or something?"
"I mean, yeah, at first. You sure you want me to tell you everything? This might take a while."

"Go for it."

Toby took a deep breath, rubbing his hands together. "Okay, so I was eating my burrito in Blinky's place with AAARRRGHH!!!, cause of all the chaos going about. I brought it with me cause I didn't get to eat much of a dinner and I thought, why not go to Taco Bell's before the fight started? It was mainly lettuce, and you know I don't like too much lettuce on my burritos, dude, much less my Burrito Supreme. You know, but there was a nice jalapeno hot sauce that saved the day. It was awesome sauce, seriously, though it is probably going to tear up my insides tonight."

Atlas watched as the teen's hands moved on their own. It was adorably human of Toby. Not that he would ever tell the boy such.

"We were just chillin until we could head up back here, but then Blinky comes in and is all like, 'dudes, Vendel is making a speech, we gotta go see this.'"

Toby splayed his hands out In front of his face to represent Blinky, like that monster from the creepy Spanish film Toby sent him. Atlas snorted.

"And AAARRRGHH!!! was all like, 'dude, what about Toby? What if it's not safe for him?' and I was all like, 'it's all cool dudes, I'll just keep hidden under AAARRRGHH!!!. And Blinky was all, 'that's totally not going to hide you, dude', and I was all, 'got any better plans, dude, and-""

"Can we skip to the main part?" Atlas asked. As humorous as all this was, the longer they stayed out in the street, the closer Atlas would be discovered by someone. "What happened?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, so when we got to the Forge there were all these guard guys, you know, like the ones who tried to kill you earlier? Well, those guys weren't there, but there were other guys dressed like them. And all of them had gaggle-tacks! They touched everyone, even me. Anyways, they led us and man, that place was packed! There were trolls in the stands and on the ground. It reminded me of when I was a little kid and had to go to a music festival with Nana. See, Nana knew this guy who-"

"Tobes, focus."
"Oh, sorry. Went off on a tangent there. Okay, so once everyone was settled, Vendel made this big speech and man, was it good. Like, Darth Vadar I am your father, huge. He was all like, yo, dudes, I've got a story so shut up and listen."

"Vendel said that?"

"Well no, not exactly, but it was similar. Okay, so then Vendel went through this entire story of losing his wife and unborn child during Killahead. Apparently, his son survived, but was taken by Gunmar to be made into a changeling. Yada, yada, yada, this was all translated by Blinky, since Vendel was speaking in Trollspeak the entire time."

Atlas nodded, struggling to keep up. "Okay, what happened next?"

"Well, Vendel finally gets to the part where he says his changeling son contacted him several years later ago, and was all like, 'yo, I'm dying of Creeper stuff, can you look after my kid, I don't want the others to find him and stuff', and Vendel was all like, 'nah, dude, I don't trust you, impure, go ask the other changelings, bro' and he thought that was that. But then, you were chosen by the amulet, so Vendel was all like, 'wow, man, it must be fate. Guess I gotta take care of the little dude.' Dude, it was crazy. Vendel went full monologue, with tears and everything. He kept messing up his words too, but with the crying and stuff, everyone thought it was real. Hell, I almost bought it. I mean, I know he said it to save them from outright killing you, but still. Great performance. He deserves an Oscar."

Atlas blinked, once, twice, before he opened his mouth to say, "What."

"Oh, Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! were there to confirm the story. So congratulations! You're now Atlas, grandson of Vendel."

"And where are they exactly? None of them followed you, right?" Atlas said shakily, looking around behind Toby.

"Doing damage control with Vendel. Trollmarket was about ready to chop off your head, you know."

"Yeah, I didn't think they would be so," Atlas shuddered, "vicious."
"Well, Blinky did say trolls didn't like changelings. Guess they really really don't like them. But hey, all's well that ends well," Toby said, patting Atlas on the back.

Atlas squinted. While Toby might think it was a gesture of good will on Vendel's part, Atlas knew the old goat wouldn't put himself out there without something to gain. Though Atlas knew little of Trollmarket's laws, he could easily smell a political maneuver in the works. Atlas had to give it to the old troll; he knew how to play his cards right. Whilst Atlas may have caused instability within Trollmarket, Vendel had cashed in on the chaos and twisted it into his favor.

What that favor was however, Atlas couldn't say.

_Out of the frying pan and into the fire_, he thought. Changeling politics were crazy enough as it was. Atlas shuddered at the prospect of navigating through troll politics as well.

This day just got better and better, didn't it?

"Seriously, that's it?" Atlas asked.

"Ah, um, not exactly," Toby said, scratching the back of his head. "You're supposed to meet Vendel tomorrow night at the entrance to Trollmarket. There's some big secret council thing you've got to attend. Also, Blinky is setting up a really grueling training regime for you."

Damn. He was supposed to have theater practice then. Oh well, it wasn't like he didn't miss the others. One more couldn't hurt. "Well, that's better than being killed, I guess."

Toby grinned, walking ahead of Atlas with a pep in his step. "Now we can just be normal average teenagers for the rest of the night. Also, congrats on winning against Draal! Dude, those moves were killer. You've gotta teach me some of that. First things first though. I'm starving. Oh man, I've got all the ingredients at home for tacos too. Swarma Tacos might be a bit difficult, but we can always improvise."

Atlas motioned to himself. "I think we need to take care of one problem first. Do you have-"

Toby pulled the gaggle-tack from out of his pocket. "Got you covered, bro."
Atlas smiled, taking it into his hand. "You're the best, Tobes."

The teen brushed his right knuckles against his sweater vest, the other hand stroking his chin. "Yes, yes, I know."

Once transformed and clothed in more appropriate human wear, the two headed down the avenue to Toby's home. Atlas snuck a glance at his mom's home, but sadly he saw no sign of her. He checked the time on his phone. It wasn't even ten yet. Maybe she went out somewhere?

Toby skipped up the steps to his front door, Atlas not far behind him.

Opening the door, Toby called out, "Hey Nana, I'm home. I'm gonna head upstairs to do some homework. I might come down later to make tacos though. You want any?"

Atlas placed his bag at the bottom of the stairs. Toby's old backpack was rather sturdy, if a little small. Still, the amulet was safely tucked in one of the front pouches making it easily to retrieve but hidden from prying eyes.

The sound of laughter met Atlas's ears. He paused half-step up the stairs. One of those voices was familiar, but he couldn't quite place from where. Furthermore, why did Toby's grandma have someone over on a weekday? Shouldn't she be at Bingo night?

Toby appeared to be in a similar state of thought. The teens shared a look of confusion. Atlas climbed down, turning his head towards the kitchen. Toby began to edge closer to the noise.

"Toby-poo," An elderly woman called from the kitchen. "You're just in time. Come, come have some tea with us. Your Art Teacher brought some tea."

"My Art Teacher?" Toby inquired.

A chill ran down Atlas's spine. Toby grabbed onto his arm, his fingers digging into Atlas's sleeve. Both teens shuffled closer to the kitchen until they were in full view of the occupants. The sight that met them was one they would never forget.
A tea party. They were having a tea party.

"Hello, boys," Nomura chirped in a too-sweet tone. Her pinky finger extended out elegantly from the tea cup she held. She placed the saucer and cup onto the island behind her.

Atlas's mouth dropped, his face taking on an ashen color. Toby was in a similar state. It wasn't simply because of Nomura however.

His gaze bypassed the changeling, locking directly with the one woman he so desperately wanted to meet.

All too familiar blue eyes stared back at him. Her hair fell in loose waves, rich in shades of auburn. It reminded him of his dream, back when he was still Jim. Unlike her normal garb, she was dressed in a beige blouse with a long dark skirt. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Atlas tried to say something, but he found himself in a similar disposition. Neither could speak. What could he say?

Mom.

Mom was here. Warmth filled his chest. He hadn't seen her this up close since he became the Trollhunter. It felt like eons ago, even thought it had only been little over a week or so. His stomach flip-flopped like crazy, his face flushing up a storm. Shit, this wasn't how he wanted her to see him. His hair was greasy and matted down from the earlier fight's exertion. Not to mention his face. Even without looking he knew he had more than one bruise it. He should have showered. He probably smelled like sweat and trash right now. Sweet Pale Lady, he wasn't ready for this. Not now.

"You didn't tell me you were taking art this semester," Nana cooed to Toby. "Oh, is this your new friend? Sorry, I left my glasses on the nightstand. Please, come closer and let me take a look at you."

The older woman took a sip of her drink. Atlas's eyes zeroed in on Nomura's face. There was a dark satisfied smirk pulling at the edges of her mask.

He never should have violated her third rule.

"Nana, stop!" Toby said, reaching out for his grandmother.
Atlas agreed, "Tobes is right. Mrs. Domzalski put down that tea!"

"Toby-poo what's..." His Nana never finished her sentence, her head and chest slumping onto the table. Her hand knocked the cup off of the table. It shattered on impact.

His mom dropped her own cup, the liquid spreading across the table and dripping off the sides. Atlas could see the drugs move through her system like wildfire. Nevertheless, she still tried to reach out for him. It tugged at his heartstrings. Her eyes were desperate, her arms stretched out as far as it could go. He wanted to catch her. To tell her everything was okay, that he wanted to-

But Nomura had balanced her poison well. Barbara fell out of the chair, her body halfway sprawled onto the vinyl tile while her legs were entangled with the seat. Her head dropped to the side. Atlas lurched forward to reach her, but Nomura blocked his path.


"We don't have to do this, Nomura," Atlas said, backing away. "Stand down."

Nomura cackled. It was a shrill and inhuman. Atlas wasn't used to seeing her this deadly. "Oh, fleshbag, I want to."

Atlas didn't have time to run, Nomura grabbing the fabric of his jacket and tossing him back into the kitchen. His body slammed against the backyard door. The pain was immense. His earlier injury screamed in pain, its dull ache erupting into stabbing agony. He barely had time to duck before Nomura struck out at him.

Her human disguise morphed, revealing the true troll beneath. Atlas scrambled around her, looking for anything to use against her. He pulled open the drawer where Toby normally kept his knives, but it was empty.

Atlas gulped.
"Look out!" Toby yelled.

"Looking for these?" Nomura mocked, the blades nestled between fingers.

The first knife nicked his left ear. Thinking fast, Atlas summersaulted over to the refrigerator. He pulled the door open, using it as a makeshift shield. While one hand held the door open, his other frantically searched for something more mobile to protect himself.

Shit. He left his amulet in his backpack. He needed to get out of here, he needed to-

His hands grasped onto a large rectangular cupcake pan. Atlas took a deep breath. This will have to do I guess, Atlas thought.

Atlas shut the door, holding the cookie pan out in front of him in protection. Once Nomura ran out of knives Atlas tossed the metal piece at her like a disk. She jerked away in surprise, narrowly avoiding the projectile.

Using the distraction for all its worth, Atlas grabbed a small bag from the cabinet. He used his fingers to cut a small hole, then, like an American baseball pitcher, swung the flour straight at Nomura. It hit her perfectly, covering her head to hoof in the white substance.

She screeched, clawing at her eyes. Atlas barely avoided the quick side-swipe as he made his way over to Toby and the fallen women.

"Nana! Nana, get up!" Toby yelled, his voice cracking. He checked over his shoulder at Atlas, eyes starting to glisten. "They're not getting up. Oh god, are they dead? Please don't tell me they're dead. I can't lose, Nana. She's all the family I've got left. Please, oh god. We need to call the hospital!"

"No," Atlas feels the pulse on his mother's neck. It was slow but still steady. "They're only sleeping. Tobes, I need you to get out of here."

Atlas pulled Toby out of the kitchen. All the while, his friend kicked and struggled. Atlas kicked open the front door.
"No, I can't leave Nana alone! What if Nomura kills her?" He gestured to Nomura, who was still reeling from the flour in her eyes.

"I'll kill you brats!" She yelled, knocking a plate rack onto the floor.

"If she wanted to kill them they would already be dead," Atlas said in a low tone. "Go find help."

After all, it was far easier to cover up two deaths than four. Still, what Nomura was doing was extraordinarily reckless. He wouldn't put it past her to kill the two women at this point. As long as he focused Nomura's attention on him, they might stay alive. It was their best shot at this point.

"But Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! are too far away," Toby said, still keeping his focus on Nomura in his kitchen. She had knocked into the open refrigerator, causing a cascade of food to drop on top of her. "I can't leave you, dude."

Atlas sighed. It was a gamble, but what other choice did he have? "There…should be one troll still around."

"Who? No, wait." Toby's eyes widened. "You mean him? Seriously? You want me to find the guy that nearly killed you?"

Atlas pushed his friend out the door, pointing west. "Better than nothing, right? He shouldn't be too far yet. Now go!"

Toby said. "I'm not leaving you! Friends stick together."

"Tobes, please," Atlas stressed. "I…We can't fight her together on this. I know I don't normally say this, but we need help. Now, please, go."

"You little bastard!" Nomura yelled. She glared, her normally green eyes tinged with an angry red.

Toby hesitated but nodded, squeezing his arm at the wrist. "Promise me you'll stay safe."
"I'll do my best. And same to you," Atlas said, shutting the door.

Nomura leapt across the hall, landing in the spot Atlas had just been. He swung himself over the handrail. He grasped the amulet in his backpack. The cold metal buzzed against his fingertips. Nomura tried to scratch at his eyes but Atlas was quicker, presenting the amulet to meet the offending claws. The force of magic slammed her backwards. Unfortunately, the amulet had gone with her, settling meters away from her crumpled body.

Atlas couldn't wait for it to return however, not with Nomura beginning to recover from the blast. He rushed up the steps. He closed every door he came across until he arrived at the small bathroom at the far end of the room.

He snuck inside, moving all the way to the window. He squeezed himself in-between a small, empty rectangular space where the heater was located. His legs bumped against the old, iron radiator. In his normal form, he probably wouldn't have been able to fit inside such a tiny area. It looked like his small, noodley form came in handy after all.

Just in time too. A soft eerie whistle drifted through the area. It was familiar, a tune Atlas had heard more than once. Now, in this rendition of the piece, did Atlas start to wonder that maybe Nomura wouldn't be so easily convinced to reject Bular and by extension Gunmar after all.

"Where are you, little Trollhunter?" Nomura said, her voice dripping with malice. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. You can't hide forever. Trust me. I would know."

Atlas struggled to keep his breathing under control. A soft light flashed next to him, nestled amongst an open box of potpourri. Never had he felt more relieved to see that shitty piece of metal. He whispered the incantation, hoping she wouldn't notice. The armor enveloped him, though not without casting a bright flash of light throughout the room.

Crap. Her footsteps ceased. Atlas stopped breathing. Through the bottom part of the door he saw her shadow.

Her fingers spread out underneath the door, mere inches from Atlas's foot. She racked her claws into the bathroom tile, the sound scratchy and high-pitched.

"I'm going to enjoy killing you," she said. Atlas shivered. This was not the Nomura he knew.
No, as much as he wished it were not so, this was the real Nomura. The truth sunk into the pit of his stomach like a heavy ball of lead. He needed a plan.

The doorknob rattled. Atlas summoned Daylight, holding it up to defend.

Suddenly, a loud bang shook the home. Atlas flinched. A cacophony of growls and broken glass resounded beyond the door.

Slowly, Atlas creaked the door open. It looked as if a bomb had gone off in the hall. Though the area was clear, Atlas could still hear Nomura's voice. His attention switched over to the broken window. Something (or someone) had completely destroyed it. At least the frame was still intact. Atlas felt a moment of remorse for trashing Toby's home, but property damage versus physical damage was preferable.

More loud bangs occurred, this time, from the roof.

For a second, Atlas stuck his head out the window, in an attempt to find out where all the commotion was coming from. Bad move. A second later, a Khopesh nearly cut his head off, missing his skin by a hair. A large body smacked directly into Nomura, sending her tumbling to the grass below.

Atlas scrambled down the stairs, nearly tripping over on the last step. At the screen door to the backyard, he watched as Nomura was thrown against one of the trees, the force of it enough to shake the trees.

For once in his life, Atlas was happy to see Draal.

Nomura screamed, trying to make a pass at him. Thankfully, Draal blocked the attack with his arm. She back flipped, landing on the grass like a gymnast-well, a gymnast with hooves.

"What are you doing here?" Nomura accused.

"Delivering you pain again, Nomura," Draal growled, spitting her name out like a curse. "Do not touch the Trollhunter."
Atlas sent a bewildered look at Draal. Wasn't this the asshole that had tried to kill him today? Did he seriously believe he could get into Atlas's good graces if he protected him from Nomura?

Because if he was, it was sure as hell working.

"Suddenly you're honorable?" She mocked, her eyes blazing with what Atlas could only describe as pure loathing. She brought the blade to her mouth. "Sorry to hear about daddy. Bular always liked the way he screamed."

Atlas couldn't help but cringe. Oh sweet pale lady, he really did take after her in some ways, didn't he?

To no one's surprise, Draal roared, charging at the changeling. Nomura held her own for a bit, even slicing Draal's arm, but Nomura failed to take into account Draal's stance. The next time she swung down with her weapons he grabbed them, one in each hand.

Atlas stared on in astonishment as he swung her around like a cartoon character. It was over before it even started. Atlas had never seen Nomura get her ass handed to her so fast. Finally, Draal twisted around, using the momentum to throw her into the sky.

Atlas felt a small pang of remorse, but Nomura had gone through worst fights. Still, he did worry she would land alright.

"Impure," Draal spat, interrupting Atlas's chain of thought.

Atlas tightened his grip on Daylight, though he didn't lift it in defense (at least, not yet). Draal swerved around, staring down at him with a guarded expression.

"I take it you're not here to kill me?" Atlas asked.

"Not kill," Draal said. "Protect."

"Seriously? You? Protect me? Our truce is over." Atlas raised an eyebrow. "Do you honestly think, with all the shit that's happened, that I would let you do that?"
"I'm not protecting you," Draal answered. "I'm protecting Trollmarket. Bular and the others will use any leverage they can against you. Your friends and family will be the first place they try to hurt you."

"I," Atlas swallowed the biting remark he so desperately wanted to make. His side hurt. He was tired. All in all, there had been way too much things that had happened tonight that he would need a few hours, if not days, to process everything. "I think I understand. Alright then, now where's Toby?"

Draal's nose scrunched up. "Who?"

Atlas frowned. "The human whose with me all the time. So...he wasn't the one who found you?"

"Found me? No. I merely smelled Nomura's scent and followed it to this house."

"You were stalking me, weren't you?"

Draal didn't reply.

As if summoned by his name, Toby stuck his head over the fence. "Hey! I got back as soon as I could I couldn't find Draal but-Oh, hey Draal." He waved.

As Toby struggled to get a leg over the wall, Draal drew closer to Atlas. Atlas resisted the instinct to flinch. Draal bent down, his mouth near Atlas's ear.

"She doesn't know, does she?" Draal said. "Nomura."

Atlas looked away. The amulet deactivated silently, returning him to human form. The gaggle-tack hung heavily from his neck, much like the weight of his guilt. "No, none of them know."

"You are walking a fine line, Trollhunter," Draal said. "Sooner or later, they will find out. I pray by then you will be ready."
"Ready to what? Kill them?" Atlas shook his head. "No, it won't come to that. I won't let that happen."

"So Naïve," Draal said, shaking his head. "Why? Why protect those who would so gladly see you killed?"

"Didn't you hear what I said in the caverns? I don't want my dad and the others suffering under Bular and Gunmar anymore."

Draal looked at him, really looked at him. There was something in his eyes that Atlas couldn't decipher.

"You're not the average changeling, are you?" Draal finally spoke.

Atlas responded, "And you're not the average troll either."

Toby booked it over to them, grabbing Atlas's arm for balance as he wheezed. "Is…Is my Nana… okay?"

Atlas's eyes widened. "Oh shit, I almost forgot."

Kicking the door open, they returned to the scene of the crime. As Toby helped prop his grandmother up, Atlas sunk down to the floor next to his mother. In the corner of his eye, he watched Draal awkwardly stand at the backdoor entrance to the house.

He bit down on his lower lip. Hesitantly, he reached out, brushing back a loose lock of hair. Her eyes fluttered, but never opened. She must be dreaming, Atlas thought.

Slowly, he took off her crooked glasses, setting them up on the table. Her hair was much redder up close, like fresh roses. Making sure Toby wasn't looking in his direction, Atlas brought his nose to her hair. He smiled. She smelled like a mixture of cinnamon and vanilla. His shoulders relaxed.
"Uh," Toby started, staring at Atlas like he grew another head. "Are you smelling your mom?"

Atlas jerked his head away. "No."

Draal snorted, a bemused expression passing over his face. Atlas covered his face with a hand, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Draal approached Atlas on his right side. "Even though you are a whelp, you are the Trollhunter. Your battles won't always be waged in arenas. You won't have time to prepare, to study your opponent for weaknesses as you did with me. It is time to start being afraid." Draal glanced at the woman on the floor. "That is your fleshbag mother I take it?"

Atlas nodded.

Draal leaned down, picking up his mother. Before Atlas could protest, Draal placed her on one of the living room couches. He looked over his shoulder at Atlas.

"Nomura won't stop trying to attack you and your friend's loved ones. Since I cannot go back to Trollmarket, I will protect them in your place. Though, I will need a place to stay."

Atlas walked over to his mother's limp form. He leaned down, brushing her bangs back into their original position. Once satisfied, Atlas turned over to the large troll. "Listen, Draal, that's nice of you, but-"

"Hey, doesn't your house have a basement or something?" Toby piped in. "Maybe he could stay there?"

Atlas's brows came together, his mouth pulling down in an unpleasant scowl. Over my dead body, he thought. No way was Draal going to live in his mom's home.

"Tobes, wait a second, don't-"

Draal nodded, dropping his fist down into an open palm as though it were his own idea. "Yes. A basement will suit my needs perfectly."
"Wait a second, that is my home. You can't just-

Draal knocked over a lamp, not even bothering to pick it back up. "I will make my way there now. I doubt Nomura or the other changelings will make a reappearance anytime soon."

"Ah, could you maybe get that lamp?"

"I protect," Draal said. "I do not clean."

Atlas clenched his teeth. How had he gone from having a dangerous rival to a lazy freeloader in a few hours' time?

Back in the kitchen, Atlas heard Toby groan, the sound growing louder as he took in all the damage. "Holy crap, what did you do to my house?"

"It's okay, Tobes," Atlas assured the boy. "Unlike some people, I'll help you clean."

Draal scoffed, picking up a wooden spoon then immediately scarfing it down.

Toby eyed his Nana in the kitchen before glancing at Atlas's mother on the couch. Finally, he said, "What are we going to do with them though?"

Atlas scratched his chin. "I think…I think I have an idea."
To Catch a Changeling (I)

Chapter Summary

Barbara grows suspicious. Draal drops in on Toby and Atlas blowing shit up.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! New chapter! Big thanks to Charle for betaing again. You're awesome. Also, shoutout to Techgrl1 for doing a lovely series of sketches of Atlas found here: https://techgrl1.tumblr.com/post/176459134778/some-little-trollhunter-sketches-of-jim-from. I've also linked theirs and others to my profile if you want to check them out. I love fanart. You guys are so awesome. It makes my heart sing.

Thank you all for the reviews. Ya'll are my favorite fanbase. I hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Barbara was many things.

The top of her class, the student council’s treasurer, president of the pre-med society—she had worked hard to get to where she was.

But this, this was something else.

“Push, Mrs. Lake,” the Nurse ordered. Her voice could only be described as somewhere between nails to a chalkboard and a foghorn. “You must push harder.”
“I’m doing the best I can,” Barbara shot back, slamming her head against the hospital bed.

Barbara was about ready to push the woman down a flight of stairs if she said ‘push’ one more time. As if she wasn’t trying her damn hardest already.

What she wouldn’t give to have her parents here. If only her dad hadn’t broken his leg trying to fix the gutters. Served him right for not getting someone who wasn’t nearing his twilight years. At least they were there in spirit, if the overabundance of teddy bears and flowers on the nearby couch was any indication. But being there in spirit was not the same as in person, and right now, Barbara would give anything to have someone other than Ms. Enthusiasm holding her hand like a dead fish. If only James were there. Traffic in Los Angeles was a nightmare, especially during rush hour. Barbara had been lucky since their home was so close to the hospital, but her husband still had ways to go until he reached her.

So, here she was, on her own. Suffice to say, it was pretty damn terrifying. She would give anything to have someone she knew holding her hand right now.

Sadly, anyone from James’s family was out of the question. From what she gathered, it was a sore subject for him. It irked her. How could someone reject someone as loving as James? Sure, he could be cold and standoffish at times, but that was only because of his intellectual nature. It was part of why she became attracted to him. He was an old soul, a wary Evergreen in a forest of maples. Why on earth he choose someone like her she couldn’t begin to fathom.

Another round of stabbing pain hit. Barbara vomited at the strength of it, even though she had nothing left in her stomach at the time. She struggled not to brake the Nurse’s hand, her grip so tight her knuckles turned pure white. Her back ached from the position. She wanted to walk around again, to ease the agony building up in her lower body, but she was already too close now to stop.

God, what she would do for some vodka and gin right now. She had only just finished college a month ago and had to defer medical school for another year because of this. Still, while it wasn’t what she pictured for herself growing up, Barbara was still going to be the best damn mom she could be.

“Another push, Mrs. Lake. You’re almost there.” The Doctor said in a soft tone. Where in the seven hells was he earlier?

Barbara moaned. Words could not describe what she was feeling. God, why had she let James touch her that warm summer night of Junior year?
After an eternity of cramping and labor, her effort was awarded. The softest of mewls could be heard from the doctor’s hands. Her heart nearly sang aloud, catching in her throat as the Nurse brought the babe to her breast.

“It’s a boy,” the Nurse said.

No shit, Barbara thought, but kept those words to herself. Even though this was her first time she amassed every book and medical journal she could find about her pregnancy. Though some things had been a little old (especially that one month when socks smelled appealing), the pregnancy went smoothly.

And now, in her arms, her own flesh and blood stared up at her. While most mothers might gush about their newborns, Barbara struggled not to snigger. He looked like an angry middle-aged man, complete with a red face and a disgruntled expression, not unlike her father’s when he read the Sunday morning newspaper.

“Hi there,” she cooed.

The baby’s unfocused eyes centered on hers. Barbara nearly forgot to breath.

A multitude of emotions came over her. Tears gathered in her eyes. She had made this. This was her flesh and blood, crafted from generations of humans and likely generations after. She couldn’t wait for James to meet him.

He was perfect.

He was hers.

Her little Jim.

Barbara gasped. Her eyes shot open. The ceiling fan circled around lazily above her. Her mind was blank, slowly turning back on.
The first thing she noticed was the pina colada song blaring full blast from somewhere nearby.

The second was the painfully awkward angle her neck was in. This was not her bed.

She groaned. What was she doing on the couch? Barbara tried to look around, but the light of dawn pierced her line of vision.

Wonderful. What happened last night? Barbara used her elbows to push up off the furniture. The faint smell of coffee sang to her from across the room. It didn’t disguise the scent of tequila on her shirt however. When did she have tequila? Barbara rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to starve off the beginnings of a headache. The glare of the morning sun made it even worse.

Her gaze traveled from her hands to the rest of the room. Barbara’s eyes narrowed. She adjusted her glasses, pushing them back to the top of her nose. This wasn’t her home. Her fingers dug into a nearby throw pillow. She examined the all too familiar paisley pillows beneath her.

She knew this place. Hell, she was quite familiar with the couch, having spent more than once crying on top of it. Nevertheless, why was she in Mrs. Domzalski’s home? When had she gotten here?

Like a newborn deer, Barbara rose to her feet, her legs numb and tingly. The small headache had ballooned to a full-on migraine. Oh, this was just peachy. She checked the time, silently cursing at what she found. Her next rotation was in an hour and she hadn’t even showered. God, what would the staff at the clinic think if she came in like this? Probably the same pity they graced her with normally, and perhaps a write-up for coming in disheveled.

Maybe she should just call in sick.

First things first however— she needed caffeine.

Like a zombie in a Tarantino movie, Barbara dragged herself towards the smell from the kitchen.

An oh-so familiar face popped out from the kitchen. It nearly gave Barbara a heart attack.

“Oh, is that you, dear? Finally awake I see. Wonderful!” Nana remarked, meeting the woman at the
threshold to the kitchen. “Come in, come in!”

Barbara tried to gather her thoughts. “Mrs. Domzalski—”

“Please, just Nana,” The woman said, pulling a coffee mug out from one of the cabinets.

“Nana,” Barbara amended. “What am I—”

“One second, dearie. The pot should be just about done,” Nana said. She was surprisingly spry for someone nearing eighty years, pouring the coffee into the cup like a skilled master.

Barbara felt slightly jealous. Cooking and cleaning were not Barbara’s gifts. In fact, the majority of the time her coffee came from the Clinic’s own pot or whatever she bought on her ride to work.

Nana presented the mug into Barbara’s awaiting hands.

“Thank you,” Barbara replied, taking a long sip of the rich black brew. The bitterness washed away the bad taste in her mouth, its heat awaking her mind to her surroundings.

Nana poured the rest of the coffee into her own mug, eyes still trained on Barbara in an attentive manner. “What is it you were saying earlier, dear?”

“Oh, ah,” Barbara scrambled to pick up where she left off. Setting her drink to the side, she leaned closer to the woman. “I was going to ask what I was doing here.” Her temple ached the second she asked. Barbara winced, rubbing her forehead. “And why does my head feel like it’s about to explode?”

Nana patted Barbara’s shoulder. “It seems like you and I had a little too much to drink last night. Poor Toby-pie found us, bless him, and put you and I on the couch. Such a lovely boy.”

“He did?” Barbara paused, trying to remember such an event, but nothing came to mind. “That’s strange. I normally don’t forget things like that.”
Barbara had enough experience with drowning her sorrows to know her limit. But, apparently, that might need to be corrected. She sighed. God, getting old sucked.

“My memory is all foggy. What was I even doing here?” Barbara asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Must have been some party though. The upstairs are still quite messy. Toby cleaned it up as much as he could though. I’ll need to call in someone to do the broken window however.”

“Broken window?” Barbara said, bringing the drink away from her mouth.

“Yes. Reminds me of my college days. Still, how embarrassing. I normally don’t drink. Not since…” Nana smiled softly, stirring her own mug with a small spoon. “Not since Toby’s parents passed.”

Barbara’s shoulders tightened. She looked away, unsure of what to say. She’d nearly forgotten that Nana too had lost her own child. Barbara had never met Toby’s parents, but from how Nana spoke of them, she knew them to be incredibly kind and much like Toby himself.

Speaking of the boy, Barbara almost didn’t catch him in the corner of her eye. She cleared her throat, calling out the his name. He froze, looking up in alarm before his eyes settled on her.

“H-hey Dr. Lake,” Toby started, his eyes darting back and forth. “What’s hanging? You feeling okay? Some party, right?”

Barbara set down the mug. “I’m alright, though I do have a bit of a headache. What exactly happened last night? When did we start drinking?”

“Oh, you know, crazy party. Lots of old people music and alcohol. I don’t remember when you starting drinking, um, maybe in the afternoon? No, night. It was probably night…I think? Sorry, I wasn’t here when you guys started.”

Barbara got out of the chair, drawing closer to the boy. Something was off, but she couldn’t pinpoint as to why. He’d never been this nervous around her before. Barbara clicked her teeth together.
She must have come here for something. The lack of a proper answer rankled her.

What was the reason? Barbara pushed her bangs back. Her memories of the last few days were almost as fuzzy as last night. Had she really had so many shots of tequila to inspire memory loss?

“Toby, how much did we drink?” Barbara asked.

Toby let out a high-pitched chuckle. “Oh, I don’t know, a couple bottles maybe?”

“A couple bottles of tequila?” Barbara exclaimed, her mind running through the numbers. “And you didn’t call the hospital?”

“Ah, well, you guys didn’t drink all the bottles, I mean, you were pretty out of it and…” Toby checked his bare wrist, tapping his pointer figure against. “Oh no, look at the time! It’s the time for the hour of school, which is where I should be. Like, right now.”

Barbara glanced at the clock in the living room. “It’s six-thirty in the morning.”

“Oh, um, I want to get there early,” Toby explained, inching further and further away. “Gotta get a jump-start on that homework, ya know?”

Yes, something was definitely off. Barbara edged toward the boy.

“Do you want me to drive you?” Barbara offered. She picked up her purse from the hanger by the stairs.

Toby continued to walk backwards to the front door, one hand behind while the other was waving nervously in front. “Nah, it’s cool. I’m meeting up with a friend.”

“Maybe I can drive you to meet him.” Barbara said.

Toby smacked his back against the wall near the entrance, startling at the sensation. He laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his head.
“Oh, ah, he’s shy around strangers. But thanks for the offer. Seriously, Dr. L.” Toby scrambled for the doorknob next to him. Right before he left (ran, Barbara, he ran) Toby added, “Greattaseeya! Haveanicedaygoodbye.”

In a flash, he slammed the door shut, the light above the entryway shaking from the force of it.

“He seems rather chipper today,” Barbara remarked dryly as she moved away from the door. Nana shuffled in from the kitchen to meet her, handing back her coffee.

“Must be those new friends of his,” Nana explained. “Toby-pie goes to study with them every night it seems. Part of me worries, especially when he doesn’t come home until midnight.”

Barbara’s brows came together, a small frown upon her lips. “Why don’t you ground him then?”

Nana settled down on the couch, picking up one of the fallen pillows and fluffing it until it returned to its normal shape. Once finished, she crossed her legs, gripping both hands together. “He’s been so happy recently. Toby always struggled to make friends. He used to be such a happy boy, and after… After the incident, he became so withdrawn. I was worried, especially when he entered into high school. Freshman year was difficult. He almost missed too much school. I had to speak with the guidance counselor, and the principal, and his teachers and—”

Barbara laid a hand on Nana’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I wish I had known. I know I wasn’t all there when Jim disappeared. I was so focused on my own pain that I forgot about the people around me.”

Nana smiled softly, nodding her head. “We’ve all lost someone, Barbara-dear. I’m just glad Toby-pie has someone new he can trust. I feared he would never make another friend.”

“Time heals,” Barbara said.

“No,” Nana sighed, “it merely gets easier to cope I think.”

“True,” Barbara amended, tucking a stray lock behind her ear. “Thank you for the coffee, Nana.”
Nana squeezed Barbara’s hand. “Not a problem, dearie. I want you to know: you’re always welcome in our home. Though I do hope we don’t throw a wild party again. I’m not sure I can handle the repair costs next time.”

Barbara put her hand over Nana’s own. “Let me handle the costs, Nana.”

Nana waved her hand dismissively. “Oh no, you really don’t have to, Barbara-dear.”

“No, but I want to,” Barbara insisted. She clicked on her phone, reading the messages she missed. “Call me when you’ve got the repairman over. I’ll cover the payment and everything.”

Nana’s lower lip trembled, but she didn’t break into tears. Instead, she drew Barbara into a tight embrace. She smelled of coffee and sweet perfume. It reminded Barbara of her own mother.

It wasn’t long before Barbara had to leave however. She traded goodbyes with her friend, walking across the lawn to her home across the street.

Barbara sighed as she came across another trash bin pushed over. Both hands came to rest on her hips, her head shaking in annoyance. Raccoons again? She hoped they didn’t have another infestation building up.

She gathered the contents back into the bin, only stopping when her hand brushed across a folded piece of paper. It was the inscription that truly caught her attention however. It looked like someone had tried to get rid of the evidence, even crumpling it into a small wad, but Barbara was not so easily fooled. This wasn’t part of her trash.

Curiosity gripped her. She unfolded the piece of paper.

The effect was immediate. It was as if someone had punched her in the gut.

Her shaking fingers traced the lines of her name. Barbara bit down on her bottom lip. She forced herself to breath.

Barbara tried to read the rest, but the words danced and blurred underneath her watering eyes. She
recognized his loopy cursive anywhere. How could she not? It was so much like her own after all.

She placed the letter to her breast, cradling it like a newborn.

Memories from the previous nights rose, a tidal wave of emotions enveloping her. She remembered—her missing child, the monsters chasing after him, and her son’s best friend smack dabbed in the middle of it all. She had gone over to Toby’s home to confront him when—

Barbara massaged her head. There had been someone who arrived at the house. A woman. There had been a woman and they were having tea then—

Her eyes widened.

“Jim,” she whispered.

Draal liked to consider himself a pragmatic troll.

When life gave him hardship, he punched through it, sometimes quite literally. But being shamed out of Trollmarket had been a humbling ordeal, one only topped by the fact that the one responsible for it was a bloody changeling.

An impure had defeated him. Him. Even now, a day later, he could not fathom how foolish he had been. All the clues were there, but like most of Trollmarket, he had dismissed the idea of them. The safety of the underground had deluded them into a false feeling of security. It would have been their downfall too. Changelings above Arcadia, and in such a large number, meant nothing but dark times ahead.

And now one of them was messing around with the Sword of Daylight in the fat one’s backyard, as if it were a toy.
Draal ran a hand down his face, flicking a tongue against his right tusk. This is ridiculous. His father and the rest of the Trollhunters would be aghast at such a display.

Of course, they likely would not have approved of Draal’s eavesdropping either.

“So, what did Claire say about the letter?” The stout one (Taby? No, Toby, Draal corrected himself.) asked the other.

“Nothing. We didn’t have any classes together today. I did text her I wouldn’t be at rehearsal, but she hasn’t replied back yet.”

“Ouch.”

“You think she’s mad at me?” Atlas said, his voice raising an octave.

“You have missed a lot of rehearsals.”

“True,” Atlas said softly, running a hand through his hair. “Fuck, I never should have tried out, but Claire asked and I didn’t want to refuse. Sweet Pale Lady, she’s—”

“Perfect? Stunning? Amazing?” Toby provided, lifting a new finger for each new word. “What other adjective are you going to use to describe our school’s Juliet?”

“Have I really been that terrible?”

“Dude, I get that you like her, but don’t put her on some pedestal. You’ll only set yourself up for disappoint.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Middle school was…difficult.” Toby explained in a soft tone, before puffing out his chest. “But
that’s fine. I’ve learned from my mistakes. Soon, girls will come flocking to la casa de Tobes. Watch and learn from the master, A-slice.”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “For the last time, A-slice is not happening, now or ever.”

“But you gotta have a nickname. You call me Tobes.”

“You call me Jimbo at school,” Atlas countered.

Toby crossed his arms. “But that’s different.”

Atlas began warming up, stretching his legs and arms. “Well, give it time. Maybe you’ll think of one over the weekend. Swarma tacos and movies again?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that. Your mom’s supposed to come over on Saturday to my house.”

“Oh,” Atlas said softly, ceasing his movements. “Is she…is she okay?”

It took Draal a second to remember which fleshbag the Trollhunter was referring to. His eyes traveled back to the home he’d just come from. The Trollhunter’s mother had not yet arrived home and likely wouldn’t for several hours more. While he had settled into the basement fairly easily, it was a struggle to find comfort in the unfamiliar surroundings. It was one of the reasons he had gone looking for the Trollhunter, though he would never admit to such a fact.

Toby shrugged his shoulders. “As far as I know. She didn’t seem to remember anything this morning.”

“That’s good. As long as she’s safe, then everything’s good.” Atlas remarked, his head nodding as he spoke.

“Did you give her that letter?”

Atlas scratched the back of his neck. “I was going to but…After what happened last night, I thought it’d be better to leave her out of it. If Nomura or any of the other changelings found out that she was
my mom I…she can’t know. I disposed of her letter. Hers and my mentor’s.”

“That’s harsh, dude,” Toby stated.

“Maybe. Or maybe not. It’s over and done with though, so come on. I thought you said you wanted to train.” Atlas said, fluffing his friend’s hair. Toby smacked his hand away playfully.

“You sure you’re ready for the War Hammer special?” Toby asked.

Atlas rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck from side to side. “Let’s go. Do your worst, human.”

Toby cleared his throat before hurling the watermelon towards his friend.

Atlas swiped sideways, the fruit taking on an unnatural blue glow as it split into two from the force of the blade. It floated in the air for a moment before imploding, spraying the two boys with its innards.

They laughed like children. No, Draal thought somberly, not like—they were children.

Toby yelled out, “It slices—"

“It dices!” Atlas finished. “Oh my gosh, did you see that?”

Toby threw his arms into the air. “That was amaze-balls! Let’s do it again!”

Atlas used the sword to slide a bag over to himself, rustling his fingers inside until he pulled out what the humans called a “Tah-coh.” Both boys munched happily, seemingly unaware of Draal’s presence.

“Alright, what more do you have that you want me to explode?” Atlas asked.
Toby rubbed his chin, reaching around in the grass for a pile of old human magazines. “Mm. You know, we probably should recycle these.”

Atlas came behind the boy, looking over his shoulder. “Actually, could I have that last one?”

“Motorheads Monthly?”

The Trollhunter looked away from his friend, arms folded against his chest. “I mean, it’s not like it’s that important or anything. I just, you know, want to check it out. To learn more about human culture.”

“You could just say you like mopeds, dude,” Toby said, handing the magazine over.

Atlas’s eyes brightened. He held the piece as if it were made of ancient troll glass. Draal sniffed in disapproval. What a strange whelp. Atlas placed the favored item near his bag by the tree before twirling his weapon around like a baton.

“You sure you want to recycle the rest of them?” Atlas waved his sword invitingly.

Toby grabbed onto the magazine stack, swinging himself around. “Hell no! Let’s shred these suckers! Ready?”

“Pull!” Atlas exclaimed.

Like the watermelon, the moment the paper hit the blade it exploded into a thousand pieces.

“This is way too much fun!” Atlas chuckled.

Toby waved his hands in the air, gushing, “It’s like a ticker tape parade of awesome!”

This had gone on longer than Draal had intended. Seizing the moment, Draal decided to make his entrance into the fat one’s backyard.
Draal hopped over the fence gracefully, striding forward with a nasty glare. “What is this mockery?”

Atlas immediately went on defensive, stepping in front of Toby. “We’re just having fun while training. Lay off. Besides, aren’t you supposed to be freelloading next door?”

“I am protecting your fleshbag mother and that one’s grandmother. Not this ‘freeloading’ you so like to claim.” Draal explained, “The Sword of Daylight is not a toy to be played with. It’s a hallowed obligation I have spent my entire life training to be worthy of.”

“Seriously?” Atlas looked down at the sword, holding it out. “You never had any other ambitions in life?”

“It was my father’s calling. I had hoped…I had hoped it would have been mine as well,” Draal said.

The fat one elbowed Atlas, gesturing towards Draal and the sword. A silent conversation appeared to play out between the two, finally accumulating with Atlas holding out Daylight to Draal.

“Yo,” Atlas said, motioning to the blade. “you want to take it for a spin?”

The fleshbag’s friend held two thumbs up at his friend. That wasn’t what got Draal’s attention however. Hesitantly, Draal picked up the sword, holding it above his head. Such a strange sensation, to hold his father’s legacy in one hand while the true wielder stood mere feet away. For a moment, his father’s face flashed across the gleaming metal, but disappeared just as suddenly, along with the blade itself.

The weapon reappeared in the hybrid’s hand, startling both boys. Atlas scratched the back of his head. “Oh, ah, Sorry, I forgot.”

Draal sighed. It wasn’t as if he didn’t expect it to happen, but that didn’t mean the burn of shame didn’t hurt any less. “If my destiny is to not hold the sword, perhaps it is to teach you how to properly wield it.”

“I’ve already got Blinky to teach me,” Atlas said, squaring Draal up. “What makes you think I need another trainer?”
Draal looked around, spotting a flimsy lamp nearby. He tossed the lampshade, then, in one fluid movement, slashed at Atlas.

“What the hell?” Atlas yelled, bringing the sword up in defense. Draal passed him by, continuing to strike at nothing. Finally, he swung around, his sword hand striking downwards at Atlas. The boy flinched, covering his face, only to realize moments later that he had not in fact been bludgeoned to death with his best friend’s furniture.

This was their new Trollhunter. Draal was starting to wonder if Merlin truly was as great as they said.

Still, he would make do with the hybrid in front of him. He had made a promise after all.

“You blade is but an extension of your body,” Draal explained, lifting the makeshift weapon away from the boy’s face. “and your body, an extension of your eyes.”

Atlas furrowed his brow, nodding slightly. “You didn’t have to scare the shit out of me though.”

“Something tells me you learn by reaction,” Draal said.

“He’s got you there,” Toby added.

Atlas shot a glare at Toby. “Not helping.”

“Mimic my movements, Trollhunter,” Draal commanded.

Atlas moved into position. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. Draal sighed, using the lamp to push the boy’s shoulders down. “Blinky may have taught you the basics of swordsmanship, but that will not work against Bular.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Atlas griped, swinging at Draal. The troll sidestepped the boy.
“A troll may fight using his strength. That, Trollhunter, is something you will never possess, be you fleshbag or im—changeling.”

Atlas swerved around, grinding his teeth as he launched a fury of attacks at Draal. “I know that too. I’ve trained with Nomura enough to figure that out.”

“Nomura is a terrible teacher, that much is obvious,” Draal said.

Atlas fended off a blow from the lampshade, falling back several feet. “Don’t say that about her. She’s the only one whose ever taken the time to train me.”

“Train you or pummel you into the ground?”

Atlas growled. Draal smirked. He had hit a sore spot.

“You fight defensively. It has been molded into you. Any expert swordsman can see that. But defensive is not the same as offensive. You must do more than defend yourself. You must take risks, push forward, and use your advantage as much as possible. You may never be as strong as I or as fast as Nomura, but you have flexibility and dexterity on your side. Use them. That might be what saves you in the end.”

Draal practiced another series of movements, slow enough for the whelp to copy this time. While sloppy and uncertain, the boy followed his instruction.

In truth, despite his misgivings about the changeling, Draal respected Atlas’s resolve. He was brash and sarcastic, much like he and Nomura had been in their youth. But unlike Nomura, Draal had grown up. Atlas too, would need to learn that while he might want to protect his people, they might not want to do the same.

Maybe that was why he protected the boy’s close ones. He would need them in the coming days and weeks, especially once the rest of the impures discovered his betrayal. Atlas was naïve to believe he could keep this up for long. Sooner or later, his secret identity would be unveiled.

Part of Draal, the nastier, mourning portion of himself, felt an almost smug satisfaction at the thought. Unlike Draal, Atlas had not lost his father or his mother. He had not lost his childhood to war like Draal did so long ago.
Immediately, Draal banished such thinking aside. *Father would be ashamed at such jealousy*, Draal thought. Here he was, a famed warrior, known throughout Trollkind, feeling jealous over a child, one who didn’t even choose to be Trollhunter in the first place. Perhaps this was one of the long list of reasons Merlin did not choose Draal for the honored position.

Well, worthy or not, Draal would make sure that his father’s legacy did not die with him. Fate had things in store for Draal still, and though he may not know his destiny anymore, he at least trusted that it would give him the chance to redeem himself in his father’s eyes.

Draal blinked, snapping out of his thoughts, taking in the sky. How much time had passed? More than an hour at least. The light of day had completely faded from the valley, the night black with stars and human pollution. Though Draal had not yet broken a sweat, it was clear Atlas was reaching his limit.

Nonetheless, Draal had to hand it to the brat. Even when he was red-faced and shaking, Atlas got back up, over and over, no matter how many times Draal knocked him flat on his ass. Still, Draal needed to wrap this up before the humans noticed their presence.

In two wide steps, Draal caught the boy’s sword hand, pinning him against the house with the lamp. Atlas struggled to wiggle out, but Draal’s grip was strong.

“That kinda hurts,” Atlas grunted. He tried to make a few kicks for Draal’s groin. Draal knew better by now however, easily avoiding the teen’s legs.

“A real fight is never predictable, Trollhunter. You have to expect the unexpected and learn to embody the armor, force it to do what you want.”

The boy stopped squirming. Instead, he closed his eyes, his breathing taking on a steady rhythm. For a moment the suit glowed, until suddenly Draal found the sword no longer in the teen’s dominant hand but instead poking into the troll’s large chest.

Draal chuckled at the lopsided smirk on the boy’s face. While not a victory, it was an improvement. Even though it was but only one of the amulet’s many talents, it was one more the Trollhunter now had in his pocket, and one Draal had taught him at that.

“Dude, that was awesome!” Toby gushed from the sidelines.

Atlas licked his lower lip. Finally, he said, “Thanks, Draal.”

“The amulet has many uses. You would do well to take this lesson to heart, whelp.”

A strange chirping noise emitted from the Trollhunter’s backpack. Atlas groaned. Toby tutted, picking up his bike from the grass and heading towards the street.

Atlas took out his phone, shaking his head all the while. “I can’t believe it’s already eight. Crap, I’ve got to head back to Trollmarket.”

“What for?” Draal asked. “Last time I checked they were ready to kill you.”

“Why do you care?”

“Atlas is Vendel’s grandson now,” Toby enlightened him.


Toby rolled his eyes. “What? If Draal’s gonna be part of team Trollhunters, he needs to be in the know too.”

Atlas pointed aggressively at Draal. “Seriously? And who decided he was gonna be a part of it? Because I sure as hell didn’t vote on it.”

“Dude, why are you getting all angry for? The guys watching over our families.”

“He tried to kill me yesterday!” Atlas said, before turning back to Draal. “No offense.”
Eh, it was technically the truth. Draal shrugged.

“But didn’t he save you too? That’s got to cancel some stuff, right?” Toby said.

Atlas muttered something in Trollspeak. Draal tried to hide his snort with a short cough. Though the information was new to the troll, it did not surprise him that Vendel had something like that up his sleeves. There was a reason Trollmarket chose Vendel as its leader.

“Fine,” Atlas grumbled, covering his face with one hand. “Okay, so Vendel made up some bullshit about me being his grandson and now I have to go introduce myself to the council and a whole load of other crap I really really don’t want to do. Ta-da! Now, let’s go, Tobes.”

“Have a good trip, honored grandson,” Draal joked.

Atlas shot him a frosty look. “Don’t start.”

Before they left on their bikes, Draal called out to them. “Hey!”


Draal mulled over his words before saying, “Tomorrow night, whelp. Same time. Same place. I won’t wait up for you if you get here late.”

Atlas pulled his head back, as if stunned, before settling into a small smile.

“Only if you teach me the roly-poly thing you do all the time.” Atlas yelled back, disappearing behind the gate soon after.

It took Draal almost a minute to digest what the boy said.

It took almost an hour for him to stop laughing.
To Catch a Changeling (II)

Chapter Summary

Vendel takes Atlas to meet the council. Claire breaks the news about the play to Jim.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter. Big thanks to Charlotte for betareading this for me. Also, big thanks to Shakjt! They did fanart for the fanfic and it is sooo awesome. Check out their art. It's super cool. https://shackjt.tumblr.com/post/176681909573/some-things-from-tunafishprincess-s-love-in

I hope you enjoy the new chapter.

Vendel was a patient troll.

He had seen many things in his very long existence. Why, he not only weathered Killahead but all three Gnome Wars, and several other countless, nameless battles in their kind’s long history of warfare. Up until this point in history, Trollmarket had experienced its longest peaceful period in centuries. The discovery of the Heartstone beneath what the humans called Arcadia gave trolls from all lands and races a place to call home. Sure, there were a few gnome infestations and one or two changelings who had gotten in (and were swiftly disposed of) but by and large, their city was one of the safest amongst their people.

And then Atlas came.

At first, Vendel had tolerated the half-changeling’s presence. Merlin’s methods were not easily discernable at times—Unkar for example— but there must have been a reason for the mysterious wizard’s choice. Sure, more than one troll had been perturbed and suspicious of the whelp’s origins, but a little gulg and a belly full of Siamese kept most curious onlookers at bay.
And then Atlas revealed the Killahead bridge was being rebuilt.

Vendel knew that secret would find its way out of the whelp’s mouth sooner or later. After their meeting at the morning of Atlas’s match with Draal, Vendel had kept an eye out for the boy. To no surprise, he went to the bar Draal frequented. It took a little more coin and one or two of his secret barrels of Phoenix Fire, but that, too, had been hushed.

And then Atlas revealed he was a changeling to the entirety of Trollmarket.

Vendel was starting to suspect Atlas was Merlin’s way of fucking with them.

The call for the elders of their community to reconvene had been made posthaste before anyone else tried to instigate it. Too many variables sat in the balance. Vendel needed to control the narrative and as long as they continued forward with his story, everything should go smoothly.

Or as smoothly as one could with the reconstruction of Killahead and changelings and Bular living above them.

The representatives began to shuffle inside. Though not a formal call for assembly, Vendel suspected nearly every troll elder would be present at the meeting. Even Blinky, who normally avoided such meetings as pretentious and pandering, sat aside their resident Trollhunter, two arms around the boy’s shoulders. Though he was the only one of his race in Trollmarket (and therefore it’s representative), the Conundrum could hold his own in a combat of intellect with any troll here (besides Vendel himself). Blinky’s young charge was another matter however.

Vendel approached the two cautiously. Even then, he noticed the boy’s back tensing up. Ah, yes, young Atlas. He almost rolled his eyes at Blinky’s fretting over Atlas like a Stalkling mother over its young.

Deya’s Grace, he needed a drink. Vendel released a soft sigh. The boy was clearly stressed, if his twitching ears and darting eyes were any indication. He had pulled his cloak around him, glaring from beneath the hood like a weary animal. In a flash, Vendel reached out and pulled the cloth away. Atlas startled.

“What the hell, Vendel?” Atlas said in a low voice.
“Show your face. It will garner more sympathy if they see you as a child instead of a changeling.”

Atlas looked about ready to bite his head off, but Blinky tapped the boy’s right shoulder. “Vendel is right, Master Atlas. Right now, you need to be seen. It will make trolls more comfortable with your presence here.”

The whelp’s shoulders slumped, his eyes downcast.

Atlas crossed his arms, cocking his head to the side. “So, who are the council?”

“You’re asking this now?” Vendel said.

“You didn’t really give me much time to ask questions before you dragged me here from the bridge,” Atlas replied.

Blinky drew closer, his voice low. “They are the different elders of our community, elected by their tribes.”

“How many tribes are there?”

“Currently?” Blinky brought out all four hands, silently counting. Finally, he answered, “Over one hundred I suppose.”

“A hundred old guys doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Larger tribes can choose more than one elder. At present, there are more than six hundred representatives.”

Atlas’s eyes grew large, his line of sight taking in the growing number of people entering the hall. Vendel had no doubt it would be filled to capacity and then some soon enough. “That’s, uh, a lot of trolls.”

“Keep your head up and your mouth closed,” Vendel cautioned. “If you speak one word out of turn,
I will forbid your little human friend from ever returning to Trollmarket.”

Subdued, Atlas nodded, his head subconsciously leaning closer towards Blinky.

Good. Better the boy mulled over that instead of running his mouth off like last time.

Ugh, teenagers.

Vendel returned to the center, both hands grasping his staff. He hit it against the ground several times before the voices turned to whispers.

“Greeting to the council,” Vendel announced in Trollspeak, his voice carrying through the large cavern. “I know many of you are concerned about the new turn of events. I am here to allay any fears or worries you, in your vast intelligence, may feel important to discuss.”

Immediately, Vendel was blasted by a resounding number of voices, most of which, to his annoyance, regarded the questioning of Atlas’s lineage. Did they truly not understand the gravity of the situation? Wasn’t Killahead more important than some hybrid’s lineage?

“Surely you do not think we would believe this mockery of our laws,” said Wabgowl, the leader of the most troublesome race in Trollmarket.

Vendel resisted the urge to smack the troll upside the head. He dreaded holding council when Wagbowl and his band of zealot showed up, which was practically all of them. Though particularly rotoid and unpleasant, the troll had quite a large group of rebellious trolls at his disposal, but what do you expect from a Redcap?

Nitwits, the whole lot of them. Sometimes, he wished he had pushed the crazy troll into the sea when he had the chance. Webgowl and the rest of the Redcaps claimed to be a pacifist group of trolls who considered gnomes the sacred messengers of their god. In Vendel’s honest opinion, they were more alike to a cult, all united in the same bloody hats as the creatures they worshipped. It appeared particularly ridiculous on Webgowl’s head, barely hiding the bald spot he had been trying to hide for centuries.

“I do not ask that you believe, merely that you accept. I have laid my claim over the whelp,” Vendel spoke, shushing the rest of the group. “Blinky, would you bring me the Book of Records, Volume
Twenty-three.”

“Of course, Master Vendel,” Blinky said, pulling the aged book from the table beside them, just as planned.

Blinky walked to the center of the stage, opening up to the bookmarked page. He coughed, then said, “On the third day of Umbrashack, Vendel, son of Rundle, son of Kilfred, bonded to Yundella, daughter of Melindela, daughter of Orina.”

“My bonding ceremony was not a lie, and neither was the child we begat,” Vendel announced for the crowd. His back ached as he arched higher. He tightened his grip on the staff.

Webgowl growled, his tusks even more prominent than before. “A bonding ceremony means nothing without proof of lineage. All you’ve shown us is but a factual statement to uphold this grandiose story?”

“Are you accusing me, Trollhunter’s leader, of lying?” Vendel said in a frosty tone.

Webgowl seemed to deflate, not ready to be called out so blatantly. The trolls around him began to look uneasy, scooting away until a large gap existed on each side of Webgowl.

“No,” Webgowl said in a timid manner. “I merely find it suspicious that—”

“It may not mean much,” Blinky interjected. “Pardon my interruption, but Yundella was of blue eyes, not unlike our young Trollhunter. Her horns were also similarly shaped.”

Whispers of agreement broke out. Though few remembered the gentle troll, those that did recalled her as having such features. Soon enough, trolls began recalling how similar Atlas was to her, both in personality and looks.

Vendel turned his attention towards Blinky. He nodded slightly, relief filling him.

It was amazing what tweaking history did to the mind. All he had to do was plant the seeds and suddenly everyone and their gnome could remember her. Thank the void none of her family yet lived
to contradict his little story. Yundella had been of green eyes and, though there was a similarity in horn shape, their color and make were vastly different. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was the belief. As long as Trollmarket had reason to believe Atlas was his grandson, then they could move forward with putting their focus on retrieving and dismantling the Killalahead Bridge.

“What Blinky says is true. Many trolls here are quite familiar with matrilineal lineages. It is not uncommon for trolls to take more after their mother’s side then their fathers, as you well know.”

Webgowl narrowed his eyes. Considering his own mother had been ugly enough to make some trolls go blind, the comment was as barbed as he intended it to be. “I suppose, that is plausible, but—”

“Then it is settled,” Vendel said.

“This isn’t over,” Webgowl stuttered. “What proof do you have that he won’t betray us to the rest of the Impures?”

“If Atlas choses to do so, then it will be my responsibility to terminate him. Any further questioning should be submitted in writing. We will reconvene to go over more pressing matters, such as the Killalahead and our city’s future in a fortnight. It is time we return the Trollhunter to his training. This meeting is adjourned.”

While they did not per say run out of the room, they did make a brisk exit. Guards surrounded them as they left the area, providing a thick wall of bodies between them and the representatives. Just as well. The longer he stayed, the more scrutiny he would be under.

The crowds began to lessen as they climbed the stairs, curious citizens returning to their normal lives. Good. A few tried to follow, but the guards were able to turn them around. Vendel lifted his gaze upwards. Vendel’s library (home, though he rarely stayed long) was not far from the meeting hall, settled atop the valley of Trollmarket through a winding staircase of crystals and petrified wood. Though small for someone of his status, Vendel found the view to be far more satisfying over any spacious home the lower districts might have to offer.

Once the guards were released from their duty, he closed the door, his eyes traveling over to his so-called grandson.

Great Gronka Morka. His grandson. Vendel shook his head. The hybrid was lucky Trollmarket laws were such as they were. Any older and Atlas would have been slaughtered. It was the only time his
youth was a positive aspect. In any case, there was no going back.

“So,” Atlas began, scratching his cheek with one claw. “I guess this means everything’s good?”

“I fear things are far worse than they may seem, Master Atlas,” Blinky admitted.

“Yeah,” Atlas sighed. “It always is, isn’t it?”

“Of all the idiotic things you’ve done thus far, what happened last night by far the worst,” Vendel scolded, pushing to fingers as closely together as possible to illustrate his frustration. “You are this close to being kicked out of Trollmarket. The only reason you’re still in one piece is because of me.”

“I know,” Atlas said, his hands folded over each other. “What’s going to happen now?”

“You saw the council. What do you think?”

“They looked like they were about ready to kill me,” Atlas acknowledged, not meeting his eyes.

Vendel removed the books off his chair, setting them down before resting back into the old furniture. He leaned forward, gesturing his staff at the door. “I take it you’ve noticed the armed guards around Trollmarket.”

“It wasn’t exactly subtle.” Atlas said.

“Normally, a Trollhunter has a Troll Guard,” Blinky explained.

“Troll guard?”

“Trollhunters were not always solitary figures. Why, many had armies of troll guards to fight for them. Old Families who for centuries had pledged their loyalty and servitude to the Trollhunter and his kin. Kanjigar was the first Trollhunter to refuse a guard.” Blinky softly added, “You are the first we have had to reinstate for necessary purposes.”
Atlas’s nose scrunched up. “For necessary purposes?”

Vendel motioned the boy to come forward. While cautious, Atlas came a few steps away, leaning against Vendel’s desk, his fingers grasping at the edges. “Trollmarket is in upheaval.” Vendel took a small pause, watching the boy’s face. Atlas’s ears dropped low, his lower lip caught under one fang. Good. At least the boy felt accountable for his actions. “My claim on you only goes so far. Most of our society will not touch you, but the more extreme will no doubt take their frustrations out on you.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong,” Atlas stressed.

Blinky laid a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. Vendel scoffed. The conundrum was too soft on the boy. “You didn’t,” Blinky said. “but your kind have certainly left their mark on many a troll.”

“Pot calling the kettle black,” Atlas muttered.

“Excuse me? What does sentient pottery have anything to do with this conversation?” Vendel inquired.

“I believe it is a human saying,” Blinky supplied.

Atlas’s toes curled, his body taunt and defensive. “The feeling on our side is the same. Trolls have been mistreating us since the Pale—since we were chosen.”

Vendel nearly fell out of his chair. “Chosen? Is that what you tell yourselves or is it what they tell you?”

Atlas glared.

“No, please, tell me. Who was it that spun such a tale? Was it your mentor?”

“If you’re going to make fun of me, I’ll leave,” Atlas stated, the blue of his eyes casting a luminous glow.
“No, let’s not come to that,” Vendel relented. “Moving along, you will need to protect yourself better. Trollmarket does not take kindly to spies. You may be safe for now, but sooner or later what happened tonight will reach your superiors. It was quite possible one of your mentor’s henchmen were in the crowds last night.”

It was as if someone had blown out a candle; Atlas’s facade broke, the cautious changeling switching to a more self-conscious teenager. “I hadn’t thought about it like that. Gunmar’s grunk-nuks, what if they already know? What if Bular tries to kill me in my sleep? What if he tries to ambush me on the way back? Oh fu—”

“It is rather unlikely, Master Atlas,” Blinky said in a placating tone. “Why, the last time we saw a changeling in Trollmarket was over a century ago.”

“What happened to them?” Atlas asked.

“They were found and killed on sight,” Vendel enlightened, his tone dry. “It is why we instituted the GSA.”

Atlas flinched, but continued, asking, “Okay, what is the GSA?”

“It is short for the Gyre Security Administration,” Blinky said.

Atlas cocked his head to the side, looking between the two trolls. “Are they any good?”

Vendel and Blinky looked to each other, waiting for the other to speak. A few seconds of silence passed before Vendel picked the conversation back up.

“They are a very thorough group of trolls,” Vendel said, inwardly cringing at his words. The last time they had caused a great upheaval over claiming one of the local children was a changeling. He could still remember the fury the association of parents inflicted upon the council. His ears began ringing at even the thought.

“That covers that end, I guess,” Atlas said.
“For now,” Vendel warned. “As leader of Trollmarket, my powers of protection are limited. The council will expect you to present yourself more often. You will need to prepare yourself.”

“What? You were serious about all those books on the way to the council?” Atlas rubbed a hand down his face. “I thought it was punishment for revealing myself to Trollmarket.”

“What you did was without a doubt the most foolish thing I have ever witnessed, and I am over a thousand years old.”

“Thanks,” Atlas said.

“But we cannot change the past. The damage has been done. Now, all we can do is repair what is there and hope it is enough.”

Atlas stood erect, moving away from the table. He positioned himself at front of the open window, watching the city below. “And what if it isn’t?”

Vendel pulled himself up with the help of his staff, bringing himself to the boy’s side.

Atlas stared down at the market, not lifting his gaze. The soft glow of the Heartstone contrasted the sharp shadows in Atlas’s face. Though Vendel could not see nearly as well as he did in his youth, he could easily discern the dark circles beneath the teen’s eyes.

His greatest regret at Killahead was allowing the younger trolls to participate. Desperation had clouded his judgment at the time and birthed an entire generation of trolls scarred by the experience. Though no troll spoke of it outside private conversations, more than one youngling had chosen the sun over continuing to live, disappearing one day only to be found the next in a pile of rubble.

It was something he would regret unto his dying days.

Perhaps that was why he had covered for the young Trollhunter. Atlas was in a precarious state, balanced across a two-sided blade. It was up to Vendel to control that sword’s edge and whether Atlas fell upon it.
“I think you know the answer to that, young Trollhunter,” Vendel spoke after he mulled over his next words. “The people need to see us working together. It is imperative we demonstrate a united front. As my grandson, you will be called to do more than simply your Trollhunter duties. You must go above and beyond to gain their acceptance, or else both of us will be killed.”

“I’m with you there,” Atlas said. “I know I can’t mess this up.”

Vendel turned his body to the teen, motioning for the teen’s attention. “This will not be easy. They will ask about the bridge at the next council.”

Atlas’s eyes turned cold. He drew his hood over his face, masking his features. “Ask all they want, I’m not telling them where it is.”

“You are a strange one, Trollhunter. Why protect such a people?” He asked. “You know they will do everything in their power to release Gunmar and the rest of the Gumm-Gumms.”

“Maybe, or maybe not,” Atlas said. A small breeze circled through the room, I’ve got a plan. I’m going to free them from Gunmar.”

And oh, did Vendel feel all his years at once. Youth was a fantastical sickness, full of idealism and hope. Thank Deya it was not contagious. “Oh child, that is an impossible dream. Surely you do not expect to turn all Gunmar’s most loyal subjects against him.”

Blinky piped in, “I would have thought so too, but look at how much Master Atlas has grown. If anyone can change them, it’s him.”

“It might not be everyone,” Atlas admitted. “But there’s got to be more than me who don’t agree with the status quo, right?”

Vendel glanced over at one of the shelves. Reaching out, he pulled out one of the volumes. It was old, but it would have to do the trick.

“You are particularly optimistic about this, Trollhunter,” He said as he handed Atlas the old book. “While I doubt such an endeavor will work, I think it is time you learn the true history of your
Atlas’s mouth dropped, though he still took hold of the book. “How am I going to find the time between this and the rest of my duties?”

Vendel smirked. “That, young Trollhunter, is your problem, not mine.”

First bell blared, knocking Claire out of her musings.

Her eyes scanned the area, widening when she caught Jim walking along the street to school. It was obvious to her, though maybe not for everyone else. Though the teen was relatively normal in appearance, something about him caught her curiosity. She leaned forward, her head sticking out from the backseat between her mom and dad.

“Let’s stop here,” Claire said.

“You sure you don’t want us taking you a little closer, mija?” Her dad asked.

She shook her head, eyes still focused on Jim. “No, this is fine.”

He turned closer to her. “But—”

“Let her do what she wants, Javier,” Her mom spoke up before returning to her call. “I know you can’t babysit that day, but who else am I going to get at such short notice?”

Claire interjected, “You know, maybe you should have had a backup plan for something like this.”

“Can’t you find anyone? I thought you were a reputable childcare institution. Mark my words, I will
be speaking to your boss. This is ridiculous,” Claire’s mom said, before switching her attention to her daughter. “It looks like you will have to babysit Enrique again, Claire.”

“But mom, that’s when the concert is,” Claire stressed. “I saved up all last summer to get a ticket. You can’t just tell me to drop my plans like that.”

“And this event could make or break my career,” her mom argued back. She massaged her temples. “Listen, I’ll pay you back for the concert tickets. You can go another time.”

Claire glared, but said nothing. This was ridiculous. How could her mom drop this on her so close to the concert date? She clenched her teeth. Enrique, Enrique, Enrique. Ever since he was born, all her mom worried about was the baby and her job. Claire had become an afterthought. It stung, but she was used to it.

She needed to stay positive. Maybe she could get Darci or Mary to fill in for her. There had to be someone she knew who was free that night.

Her gaze flickered back over to Jim. She needed to hurry. He was already halfway up to the school. Claire’s fingers itched for the letter in her backpack. When her dad finally pulled to a stop, she jumped out. Jogging over, she couldn’t help but notice Jim’s slower gait. Was he waiting up for her? Butterflies danced in her stomach. She called out, “There you are!”

Jim finally looked over his shoulder. Claire’s eyes widened. There was a new bruise on the teen’s face, right below his right eye. The fluttering in her stomach grounded to a halt. Jim’s eyes widened at her approach.

Had it been from one of the monsters he’d talked about in his letter? Or was it a metaphor for something else. She hoped it was the former. The little girl who loved to play Harry Potter and dreamed of distant magical lands and creatures so desperately wanted them to be real. And yet, what if he only meant it symbolically? What kind of person was James Lake Junior truly?

She opened her mouth, but found she couldn’t ask the question. What if he denied ever writing the letter? What if it was a prank?

No, not yet. As much as she wanted to ask, she knew she needed to tell Jim about the play first.
Jim’s friend was the first to notice her, presenting two finger guns. Claire tried not to cringe. “What’s up, Nuñez?”

“Hey, Colby,” Claire said.

“It’s Toby. Not that it matters,” Toby said, leaning against his bike. “You can call me whatever you want—ah!”

She glanced back at the fallen boy, but he waved sheepishly for her to go ahead. Claire approached the steps. She watched as Jim’s hands tightened around the shoulder straps of his backpack.

“You’ve been looking for me?” Jim said, his soft blue eyes scanning her. Though Jim wasn’t conventionally attractive, his eyes were a different story. She couldn’t describe the shade, but if she had to make a choice, it would be the robin eggs in the nest outside her window.

“You didn’t run into Ms. Janeth yet, did you?” Claire asked.

“What? Is she mad I couldn’t make rehearsal? Something came up,” Jim explained, ending with a soft nervous chuckle. “Steve filled in. That’s what understudies are for, right?”

Ah oh. Claire ducked her head slightly. How should she put it? Claire glanced down at the ground before lifting her eyes to the boy. “Uh, you haven’t heard? Steve isn’t the understudy anymore. You are.” Claire walked up the steps, standing eye-level with the boy. “She’s tired of you never showing up, so she made Steve Romeo.”

Jim appeared shocked for a moment, before a cool mask descended over his features. Claire’s heart lurched. It was like he was putting a wall up between them. She wanted to reach out and ask him about the monsters, if his life truly was filled with the creatures she read religiously about in her free time, but now wasn’t the time.

“That’s probably better in the long run,” Jim said dryly. “I’ve never been much of an actor. Besides, my workload at home has gotten a lot bigger. My…grandpa gave me a new job.”

“You’re not a bad actor, Jim. You play Romeo well,” Claire said. “Maybe your grandpa can give you a few nights of reprieve to make the play.”
If he’s willing. He’s kinda angry at me right now,” Jim said, before adding in a longing tone, “Still, I memorized my lines. I don’t think Steve even remembers his first line.”

Claire giggled before clearing her throat to answer, “Doesn’t matter. Ms. Janeth is on a warpath for you. I’d watch out.”

“Hey, don’t you have algebra with her?” Toby asked.

“Fuck me, it’s going to be awkward isn’t it?” Jim muttered. “You think she’s going to assign even more homework? I can barely understand it as it is.”

Claire perked up. The gears in her mind began to turn.

“You know, I did honors algebra last year and was pretty okay at it,” Claire lied. Okay? She had the highest grade in that class. She even got an award for it at the annual Academic Achievement Ceremony. But Jim didn’t need to know that. “What if you came by my place for a study sesh?”

“Wow, really?” Jim said, scratching the back of his head. “Why would you do something like that? I sort of screwed up your play.”

“Promoting Steve to Romeo wasn’t your idea.” Claire said. “And honestly, I’d rather be on stage with you, even if you are a total flake.”

“It’s not like I try to be;” Jim remarked.

Claire brushed a stray strand behind her ear. “See you tomorrow at six?”

Jim’s lips tugged upwards, presenting her a gentle smile. Claire nearly melted. Coupled with his stunning blue eyes and mysterious aura, she was surprised he didn’t have a girlfriend yet.

Wait, whoa, whoa, whoa. Claire’s cheeks burned. Was she seriously considering this guy for a date? The guy who kept missing rehearsals?
He was probably fighting those monsters, Claire reasoned inwardly. And besides, she could finally ask what he really meant in that letter.

“Yeah, see you at six,” Jim said. He brushed past her, Toby joining him.

Claire watched him disappear into the building. Jim was a contradiction. Just when she thought she had him figured out, a new part of his personality emerged. He never talked about his family and the only friend he had was that boy Toby. Not that him and her had ever really talked much outside of the play and a few texts here and there.

But that would change. The study sesh meant she should dive deeper into the mysterious boy’s head. What was Jim hiding?

Well, Claire thought, tonight I’ve going to find out the truth. No more lying. This time, Claire was going to uncover what he really meant in that letter. If the world truly was as magical as he made it sound, Claire wanted in.
To Catch a Changeling (III)

Chapter Summary

Atlas learns his actions in the human world have consequences, especially when they involved Ms. Janeth's play. Later, Blinky takes on wifi and bargaining.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Oh my gosh, I got two fanarts of Atlas this week and I am dying. Ya'll are amazing. Check these two artists out if you haven't. They're really talented and need more followers.


Thank you for all the lovely reviews, kudos, and favorites. I'm happy so many people like this fic. Big thanks to Charlie for betaing my fic again. If you ever want to fantalk, I'm on tumblr as tunafishprincess.

I hope you enjoy the new chapter.

Mornings were the worst.

How did humans do it? Sleep was likely a big component, Atlas reasoned, something he had lacked as of late.

Atlas stifled a yawn as he neared the classroom. Ever since he took on the roles of Trollhunter and Jim Lake he had been busy, busy, busy. At least now he could somewhat be himself in Trollmarket, though he didn’t dare fall asleep there anymore. Troll bodyguards or not, letting his defenses down could mean waking up in the void or wherever changelings ended up after death. Back in the
Darklands? Somewhere in the Pale Lady’s realm?

Or did they merely fade into nothingness?

Atlas brushed back his bangs. Thinking about his very possible impending death was not good for his health. He imagined Blinky chastising him for not taking better care of himself. Stricklander would be more focused on completing the task at hand before taking a rest. And Nomura…

Damn. He did it again. Focus on the matter at hand, Atlas inwardly told himself. He really needed to stop zoning out. His fingers caught the door handle, pulling it open as quietly as he could.

Just in time too, he thought. The entire classroom turned their attention toward him. There was a heavy sense of anticipation clinging to the air.

Ms. Janeth stiffed at his presence. Atlas froze mid-step. Thankfully, she continued to write across the board, seemingly ignoring his entrance.

Maybe she wasn’t as mad as Claire made her out to be? He hoped. Atlas shuffled to the back of the class, trying to make as little noise as possible. He really wished he could disappear right about now.

“As it is true for any such equation. For instance, let’s take 3x,” Ms. Janeth said, stopping for a moment to zero in on Atlas. “So, you won’t come to rehearsal, Mr. Lake, but you will arrive to class.”

Atlas blinked rapidly.

She swerved back to the board.

“Excuse me?” Atlas said.

Her gaze returned, this time alight with more than just annoyance.

“Don’t sit there, Mr. Lake.” She gestured to one of the chairs nearby. “I saved you the best seat, front
Oh, it was going to one of those days, wasn’t it? Looked like Claire was right. Atlas bit down on his bottom lip to keep from saying something he’d regret.

He was Jim now, not Atlas. Drawing any further attention to himself would draw even more scrutiny. He chanted the name over and over again in his head. *Jim Lake, Jim Lake, Jim Lake. Just Jim Lake.*

“Loser,” Steve jeered as he walked over.

Eli in the neighboring seat gave him a pitying glance.

“Joy,” Atlas said, then silently cursed. He needed to reign in the sarcasm and use the techniques Blinky taught him last night. He slumped into the new chair, slipping off

Rummaging through his backpack, he pulled out the notebook and pen he borrowed from Toby. Tobes, Atlas thought with a heavy sigh. The other boy had to make up a test today and could not share in this torture. It was such a foreign feeling. Without Toby at his side to correct his less than human behavior he had to rely on what he knew.

It didn’t help that the classroom appeared to be shrinking the longer he sat in the chair.

“Pst, Jim,” Eli whispered. “Are you okay?”

Atlas ignored the human.

“As I was saying, every algebraic equation requires balance,” Ms. Janeth remarked before flashing another angry look in his direction. “For instance, every piece of this equation plays an important role.”

*Be the nobody you were born to be,* Atlas thought. *You are air. Nothing affects you. You’re just an average human teenager with an angry teacher. Keep your head down low. Jim is the quiet transfer student. He’s polite. His best friend is Toby. He’s—*
“That is, unless variable $X$ is a zero,” Ms. Janeth said in a frosty tone.

“Jim, did you hear me?” Eli asked.

Ms. Janeth walked over to the other boy’s desk. “Is there something you would like to share with the rest of the class, Eli?”

Eli’s face whitened. He ducked his head. “No, ma’am.”

“Then let us return to the matter of $X$.”

Atlas cringed. He needed to take it. As much as he wanted to shove it back at her, he had to practice his self-restraint.

Still, his inner-Nomura beckoned, ‘throw that stupid marker back at her.’

Ms. Janeth’s voice began to rise with each word. “$X$ has no role. $X$ doesn’t show up. $X$ lets the equation down. Then, the entire play—I mean, equation—falls apart! It becomes impossible!”

He just had to make it to the end of class. Ms. Janeth wouldn’t stay mad at him forever. Humans were naturally forgetful creatures. Sooner or later everything would blow over. It had too, right? The gaggle-tack underneath his shirt began to warm against his skin.

“Mr. Lake,” Ms. Janeth spat out like a curse. “How would you solve this mathematical problem?”

“Maybe you should ask someone else,” Atlas suggested.

“Are you backing out again, Mr. Lake? Do you flake out on everything you’re asked to do?”

“I just don’t think I’m the right—”
Ms. Janeth crossed her arms, remarking, “No, you aren’t right, are you?”

“Dumbass,” he heard Steve snigger.

Atlas looked at the board. It was a series of numbers and signs Atlas couldn’t even begin to understand. His education at the Order focused on the practical side of things and all these letters representing numbers was making his head spin. Stricklander made sure his education was proper for a changeling, but that didn’t mean jack shit for a human in high school.

He clenched his hands into fists. This wasn’t fair. If he were in the company of a changeling or troll he could fight back in some manner, but the humans’ social structure was far more limited. He knew his position with the former, while the latter was something he largely relied on Toby to explain.

And he didn’t have Toby right now.

“Mr. Lake, are you listening?” Ms. Janeth slammed her hands on Atlas’s desk, causing him to flinch back, placing his arms above his head in self-defense. She paused, before resuming to put himself directly in his personal space.

“Mr. Lake.”

“Can I borrow your marker?” Atlas asked.

She looked about ready to throttle him with the object but she relented, placing it into his awaiting hand. “Certainly, Mr. Lake.”

Atlas examined the marker for a moment. It wasn’t anything special.

As if in a trance, Atlas stood up from his chair, making his way toward the window. Before Ms. Janeth could stop him he opened the window. He soaked in the morning sun and smell of freshly cut grass.
It was right then and there that Atlas chucked the marker. Satisfying couldn’t even begin to describe
the feeling he received as it bounced against a nearby tree then vanished into the bushes.

Blinky and Stricklander would never have approved of such a tactic.

Meanwhile, his inner-Nomura chuckled deviously.

It took Ms. Janeth a moment to recollect herself before she yelled, “Mr. Lake!”

Shit. Already he was starting to regret his actions. Atlas could feel his throat closing up. His eyes
locked onto the door. The gaggle-tack around his neck began to burn.

Atlas recollected himself before responding, “I’m sorry, Ms. Janeth.” Atlas picked up his backpack
as quickly he headed for the door. “I’m going to the nurse. I feel sick.”

“Stop right there, Mr. Lake,” she exclaimed. “Jim! Jim, stop right there!”

“My name isn’t—” He caught himself. “Don’t call me that.”

Ms. Janeth gestured angrily at his face with her pointer finger. Though she tried to appear
threatening, her shrill voice and demeanor betrayed a more frazzled reaction.

“If you leave this classroom I will be forced to give you a detention,” she warned.

Atlas looked between the teacher and his shocked classmates. He shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

She tried to approach him, but Atlas fell back, evading her reach. “This isn’t over young man.”

Yes, yes it was, but Atlas wasn’t going to voice that out. Instead, he left with a different farewell.

Pushing his back against the door, he then bowed at the waist, one hand behind his back while the
other sat against his breast. “Good night, good night!” He quoted after a dramatic pause. “Parting is such sweet sorrow. That I shall say good night till it be morrow.”

Unlike Palchuk, he remembered his damn lines.

The door shut silently behind him, Ms. Janeth’s stunned expression the last thing he saw.

It was almost euphoric, until reality once again caught up with him.

“Fuck. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why on earth did you do that, idiot?” He berated himself.

The anger dissipated, leaving him feeling even more drained than before. Atlas swiftly turned away from the class, hurrying down the narrow hallway. His shoes squeaked loudly against the floor, reflecting the simmering frustration within him. Better to put distance between himself and the humans. Why was he so emotional all of a sudden? Why couldn’t he control himself?

It didn’t help that his dreams were becoming more vivid with each passing night. He hadn’t told Toby or Blinky, but coupled with his reveal in Trollmarket and all these new duties he had undertaken, Atlas felt like he was slipping away.

Not to mention seeing his human mother again.

Oh sweet Pale Lady, his mom. Was she doing okay? He checked on her home this morning, but she had already gone to work. Good thing too. He had grown more daring, knocking on her back door in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. Instead, all he got was Draal’s bewildered mug mid-snack through her silverware drawer.

Well, she wouldn’t have noticed him anyway. She had her eyes set on Jim, not the strange creature who spied on her from the trees. Atlas…she didn’t know Atlas, did she? She only knew Jim. How was he ever going to explain it to her? Should he even try?

Though he would never admit it openly, Atlas was terrified. Jim was taking over his life. He was spending more and more time in his fleshbag form and less and less in his changeling one. It was as if Jim was slowly eating Atlas away. How long before Atlas was nothing more than a mere memory?
No, Atlas inwardly rejected the notion. He had the Janus Order. He had his dad and Nomura. No matter how human Jim might appear, his blood was *changeling*, mixed or not. He was one of them.

Right?

The school bell chimed, announcing the end of first period. Atlas backed into a small area of isolated empty lockers. The humans practically burst out of their classrooms, showering the hallway with chaos and the occasional paper airplane.

Which made it a surprise when a hand reached out to grab his arm. Atlas, still fueled on the earlier adrenaline rush, grabbed the assailant by the limb. He pushed them both against the lockers, forcing their arm above their head as Atlas’s other arm pushed against the person’s windpipe.

“C-Could you let me go?” Eli coughed.

Shame and embarrassment danced across his features. His eyes widened in recognition. A few students paused but most ignored their interaction. Neither Claire nor Toby appeared to be nearby to see, so that was a relief.

“Shit, Eli, I’m so sorry,” Atlas apologized, dropping his arms. “I didn’t mean… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay,” Eli said, though he did take a few steps away from the boy. “Are you okay though?”

“Huh?”

Eli looked down at his shoes, not meeting Atlas’s eyes. “Back in class. You looked really scared.”

“It’s been a rough couple of weeks,” Atlas admitted.

“Yeah, I get it. Moving’s rough, huh?”

Atlas’s brows came together in confusion before he remembered Jim’s fake backstory. Right,
Canada. “Uh, yeah. Speaking from experience?”

Eli nodded. “Not a whole lot. I mean, I’ve spent most of my life here, but when we moved from one part of Arcadia to the other, I had to change school districts. I didn’t know anyone there and I was too shy to contact my old friends. It was really hard. Starting all over is really difficult sometimes.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Do you want to maybe, ah, I don’t know, come over and hang out sometime?” Eli asked. “I’ve got some super cool footage of this creature from last week. I mean, we could watch a few movies too, and wow, I’m rambling again. Ha, ha, ha…”

Atlas’s jaw dropped.

He nearly forgot about that after everything that had happened. Eli still had that photo of him. Crap, crap, crap. What if Stricklander found out?

What if he already knew?

“A creature?” Atlas said, hoping his voice was steady enough.

“Sorry, I mean, if you’re not interested—”

Hell yes he was interested. Destroying that photo had suddenly jumped up Atlas’s priority list. “No, that actually sounds fun. Sure. Let’s do it.”

“Really?” Eli’s eyes grew to the size of saucers.

“Well, I’ve got to talk with my dad, but it should be okay.”

Eli pumped his fist, smiling brightly. He adjusted his glasses. “Great. Um, uh, I got to get to class, but let’s talk later about the date and stuff. I mean, not a date date, but like the day and ah…”
Atlas patted the boy on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Eli. We can talk later.”

“Right, right,” Eli said, about to turn the corner. He stopped for a moment, looking back at him. “Oh, I almost forgot. Please don’t be too mad at Ms. Janeth. She’s just really passionate about the play and when you left the class she looked really guilty and she sent someone to find you but—”

“It’s fine,” Atlas replied. “Go.”

“Okay. Be safe, Jim.” Eli hurried off, disappearing back into the throes of teenagers.

That didn’t go so bad. At least that problem would be solved soon enough. His shoulders relaxed.

Atlas barely had time to breathe before another person came up to him. Unfortunately, this one was not so friendly.

Steve banged the locker above his head, looking down at him with an angry glare. “Dude, what the fuck was that?”

Atlas moved out of the other teen’s space. “Leave me alone, Palchuk.”

“No way, freak,” Steve growled. His gaze flickered over to Atlas’s face. “What happened to your face? You look like you went through a meat grinder. Piss off someone else, Lake?”

“It’s none of your business,” Atlas said.

“Did your dad do that to you?”


He tried to leave, but Steve blocked his exit. Steve’s angry expression was still there, but something else had appeared too.
Oh sweet Pale Lady.

Was Steve pitying him?

“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to tell Ms. Janeth.”

“Just let it go, Palchuk.” Atlas sighed. “Please, I don’t want this leaking out to the rest of the school.”

“What’s the matter, buttmunch, scared?” Steve’s eyes flickered over to one of the posters in the hallway before returning to Atlas. “If you give up the play, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Why do you care about being Romeo so much?” Atlas asked.

Steve chuckled, puffing out his chest. “Who wouldn’t want to kiss the most popular girl in school?”

“Is that all the play is to you? Just kissing?” Atlas said skeptically.

“Scared I’m going to take away Claire?”

Atlas tightened his grip on the strips of his backpack. For once in his life he felt…old. Steve, Eli, Ms. Janeth, Claire—none of them understood the gravity of the situation around them. Kissing was a human thing. It wasn’t a gesture trolls or changelings engaged in, if it all. Not that the notion of such intimacy with Claire didn’t cross his mind. But that wasn’t what disturbed Atlas. It was the words Steve used.

“Claire doesn’t belong to me or you or anyone else. She’s her own person. Don’t degrade her into an object to be won.”

“You’re just jealous I have a better chance with her than you do,” Steve mocked.
Atlas laughed mirthlessly. “Me? I have no chance with her. My dad would kill me if he found out I was dating one of her kind.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “So…your dad’s a racist?”

“I guess?” Atlas finally broke away. “Listen, Palchuk, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but good luck with the play. You’re gonna need it if you’re ever going to remember your lines.”

“It’s gonna be the best play this school has ever seen,” Steve growled, but made no move toward him. “I still don’t like you, freak.”

“Same to you, Steve,” Atlas said as he walked off. “Same to you.”

Heartstone Trollmarket was a flurry of activity. Of course, it was no surprise, especially given what had recently occurred. But no matter. Blinky was simply relieved the new Trollhunter was still amongst the living.

Trolls gave their group a wide berth. He caught sight of one or two guards as they strolled down the winding path to the deepest part of the commercial sector, but most were hidden within the group, only popping up whenever someone got too close to their small entourage.


Atlas continued to stay silent, his eyes glazed over.

AAARRRGGHH!!! yelled into the boy’s ear, “Master Atlas!”

The teen startled, nearly bumping into a nearby food stand. “Yes, sorry. Paying Attention now.”
A shot of concern floated through Blinky’s mind, only to be subdued by his more logical side. It would not do if their Trollhunter was distracted.

“As I was saying, assuming that Killahed Bridge is still in Arcadia—” He sent a pointed look at Atlas.

“It is,” Atlas confirmed.

Blinky folded his fingers together. “And we know that it has been moved to a location Atlas is not allowed to disclose on penalty of death.”

Atlas nodded. “Yep.”

“Which means,” Blinky pursed his lips, bringing his hands under his nose in a thoughtful gesture. “Arcadia has several changelings who helped scavenge, assemble and disassemble it.”

“Also true.”

Blinky’s eyes narrowed. “Currently, you and Tobias are the most vulnerable to a surprise attack, as you no doubt already know from experience.”

“Yeah, it was pretty traumatizing,” Tobias said.

Atlas shrugged nonchalantly. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“She destroyed my nana’s window and almost killed us and our loved ones,” Tobias argued, giving Atlas an incredulous look. “Dude, I’m sorry, but your friend is kind of an asshole.”

“I, uh.” Atlas sighed. “Yeah, I can’t really argue with that.”

“We need to prepare. Our first order of business should be you and Tobias’s protection.” Blinky
scratched his chin. “If only we had some sort of communication device for which to contact each other.”

Tobias furrowed his brow, pulling out the fanciful handheld device he liked to carry around. “You mean like our cell phones?”

“Does Trollmarket even have electricity?” Atlas remarked.

“Officially yes, unofficially no. We have it here and there from the batteries and car chargers we collect, but nothing as grandiose as what you humans have created.” Blinky’s shoulders dropped. “It does seem to be a rather far-fetched idea now, doesn’t it? Still, we will need to set up a watch for you two. I will take dawn while AAARRRGGGHH!!! will take dusk.”

“Nah, dude, it’s cool. We got it covered.” Tobias said.

“Pardon?” Blinky said with a puzzled glance at the two boys.

“It’s Draal.” Atlas turned his head away, touching his indexes together. “He kinda sorta made a home in my basement. He’s looking out for my mom and Toby’s family.”

Blinky grabbed onto AAARRRGGGHH!!!’s fur to keep upright. A flash of fear enveloped him. Draal being in close proximity to Atlas made Blinky…nervous. And rightly so. Draal had nearly killed his young charge.

“Of course,” Blinky said in a high pitch voice, his head grown dizzy with the irrationality of it all. “When a troll is defeated in combat, it’s completely natural for them to take refuge in the victim’s domicile.”

“Oh good, so you understand,” Tobias said before whispering to Atlas, “Is that sort of thing normal in Troll culture?

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Atlas answered back.

Blinky’s hands shot up into the air. “I understand such an arrangement could only end in disaster.
“Utter disaster! Are you mad?”

AAARRRGGHH!!! rubbed Blinky’s back. “Calm, Blinky.”

“There’s your answer, Tobes,” Atlas remarked.

“Yeah, but it’s better than nothing, right?” Tobias said. “You and AAARRRGGHH!!! can’t always be topside.”

“Toby’s right,” Atlas added, “And Draal’s been helping me train too. He’s made an oath to protect them. I don’t think he’s the kind of troll who would go back on his word.”

A small flash of jealousy arose within Blinky, but he immediately stifled it. Draal was a better fighter than Blinky. It would make sense he could teach things to Atlas that Blinky could not.

It was not an arrangement he approved of, but with their scarce resources, it would have to do.

After a moment to recollect himself, Blinky admitted, “Master Atlas, while I trust your judgment I do not agree with these methods at all.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” Atlas said coolly. “I merely ask that you respect them.”

He shut his mouth with a soft click. Though Blinky tried to appear accepting, inwardly he fought against the urge to knock the whelp upside the head. But he could not. He had voiced his concerns to the Trollhunter. If he pushed anymore then Atlas would close himself off again. Now was not the time for them to be at each other’s throats.

“Indeed,” Blinky said, deciding to switch to another subject. “Which leads us to our next problem: detection. “We must find another changeling. The council will want proof than merely the Trollhunter’s word alone.”

The cavern grew darker as they descended further into Trollmarket’s depths. The population of trolls dwindled with every step. Soon enough, only they and the no longer disguised guards remained. Thankfully, their security force kept their distance, making small talk with the locals.
“Maybe we could find a changeling like Atlas,” Tobias suggested. “You know, someone who doesn’t want to free Gunmar.”

“I’m afraid we will be limited in our search,” Blinky remarked.

Atlas, while a changeling, was a rare sort, with a fair better moral compass than his compatriots. Blinky suspected it had something to do with the boy’s humanity.

Atlas sighed, both hands behind his head as he walked between Blinky and Tobias. “If we had more time maybe, but everyone at the Arcadia branch is really obsessed with the whole ‘bring Gunmar back from the Darklands and start the Eternal Night thing’. Hell, I sort of bought it too for a while.”

“What made you change your mind?” Blinky inquired.

“I hate Bular’s guts and I doubt Gunmar is any better.”

“Valid,” Tobias said.

Blinky rubbed his hands together as they approached their destination. “Officially, changelings have not been heard or seen in Trollmarket for centuries. As you no doubt remember, the mere word caused hysteria.” He motioned two hands in a presenting manner towards the infamous shop. “Which is why we have come here.”

“Rotguts,” AAARRRGGH!!! provided.

He chuckled as Tobias and Atlas gawked. Like two whelps in a sock store, Blinky thought fondly. It struck him that they hadn’t truly brought the boys around this way. Bagdwell’a’s and the rest of the upper storefronts paled in comparison to RotGuts.

Tobias whistled. “Nice.”

“This place looks insane,” Atlas said.
“Purveyor of fine charms, totems, and spells,” Blinky explained before whispering to Atlas. “Now, follow my lead.”

He knocked twice. A few seconds later, one of the holes opened, a large troll eye surveying them. It widened when it noticed Atlas, who drew his cloak closer in response.

“Aliment or curse?” The troll dulled out.

Another latch opened. Another troll chided, “Oi, numbskull, don’t you know who that is?”

“Huh?” The other said.

“Let me answer it.”

“But I already did answer it.”

The second troll closed his latch, softly arguing with the other. “You complete buffoon. Rot, that’s our leader’s grandson out there. You can’t greet him like that. What was not clear about the ‘I deal with the customers, you handle the wizardry’ we talked about earlier?”

“Fine,” Rot sighed.

The other cleared his throat, “Welcome to our humble shop, honored grandson of Vendel. How may we service you?”

Blinky frowned. Did they just bypass him for the Trollhunter?

“Oh my gosh, Atlas, you’re famous now.” Tobias said excitedly, “Hey, do you think we could get a discount? Atlas, use your changeling bargaining powers.”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “They’re not—"
“Boys,” Blinky chided. “Totem, my good troll. We seek aid in our quest for the bridge.”

“I see,” Totem remarked, as if deep in thought.

Rot returned to the door, looking over at Totem. “You do?”

“It’s a figure of speech you twat,” Totem said.

“We suspect one of these fleshbags may be a changeling,” Blinky remarked in a hushed voice.

Totem looked from Atlas to Blinky. “Suspect? Are you blind?”

“We have medicine for that,” Rot added.

“Other fleshbags,” AAARRRGGGHH!!! corrected, stepping up between the two boys. He gave the owners a glare.

Rot hummed softly. “You’re gonna need another gaggetack then.”

“Unfortunately,” Totem hastily added, “you see, we’re running a bit short on those. Very hard to get.”

Rot’s eye narrowed. “But I’ve got a bag of them right here.”

“You nitwit,” Totem scolded. “If you’ll excuse us for one moment.”

The group looked around in different directions, trying to appear like they weren’t eavesdropping on the shopkeepers.
“What in Ymer’s testicles are you doing? I’m trying to drive up the price over here.” Totem argued.

“I thought we were trying to help Vendel’s grandson.”

“Help? What about us? We can’t just give it to them. We gotta sell it up. Make it seem fancy and all that.”

“Blinky, let me handle this,” Atlas said.

Blinky frowned. “I’m not so sure—”

Atlas cleared his throat, knocking on the door. The latches opened, both trolls starring down at the boy. “Pardon me, but I couldn’t help but noticed the enormity of your shop. How long have you two been in business?”

“A couple of centuries,” Totem sniffed. “What’s it to you?”

“It’s amazing how many magical artifacts you have, though,” Atlas tapped his chin. “I don’t see any human-made ones around here though. Surely you, in your vast collection, have some twenty-first century items in your stock?”

“Humans don’t have magic,” Totem scoffed. “Been lost to them for centuries.”

“Oh, I’m not talking about that kind of magic. I’m talking about their alternative. Human technology is vast, but very hard to obtain, even for such a famous shop as the world renowned Rotguts.”

“We’re renown?” Rot asked.

Totem glared at the other. “Don’t listen to him, Rot. He’s just trying to get a better deal from us.”

“Deal? No, a business opportunity.” Atlas took out his phone, turning it on for the two. “This is a cell phone.”
“We know what it is,” Totem said in a haughty manner. “We have hundreds of them.”

Rot perked up. “We do? Where?”

One could almost feel the scorching heat from the glare Totem sent his business partner.

“Not easy to get around Trollmarket, but all the changelings and humans have them. I can play thousands of songs, contact people all over the world, and buy whatever I want, just from this small device.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about those on the telly!” Rot said excitedly. “It can really do all that?”

“And more, though, it won’t work without electricity. You’ll also need wi-fi.”

“Well, don’t have any of that lying around.” Totem mumbled.

“Yes, but you do have the means to do so.”

“Keep talking,” Totem said.

Atlas looked to Blinky. There was a growing uncertainty, reflected in his twitching ears and the way he clenched his jaw. Blinky placed a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. The twitching stopped. Atlas nodded then turned his attention back to Totem and Rot.

“Trollmarket is woefully unprepared for changelings. They have both magic and human technology.” Atlas said. “But what if Trollmarket did have access to those kinds of things? Imagine how much money someone could make, marketing these as ways to get the upper hand against a changeling. The changelings won’t know what to do. Imagine how grateful all the trolls in Trollmarket will be to RotGuts.”

“Master Atlas is correct. You would have, as the humans say, a leg up in the competition,” Blinky remarked.
“He’s trying to butter us up,” Totem grumbled, though there was a hungry look in his eye.

“Of course, I can always take my business to another store.” Atlas turned his body as though he were about to leave. “Bagdwella has been thinking about opening up a new store will with all the money she racked in from the VHS tapes I delivered to her.”

“Yes, I believe Bagdwella even got a shipment of gagglebacks this morning. Perhaps we could get a better price there.” Blinky said, copying the boy’s movement.

“W-wait! Stop! We…we will consider the agreement,” Totem amended. “Just give us a few days to draft up a contract.”

“A few days?” Blinky said, shaking his head. “Master Atlas, it does not seem these two are all that interested in doing business with you.”

“You’re right.” Atlas sighed dramatically. “If only there were something to sweeten the deal.”

“What about a gaggleack?” Rot suggested.

Blinky scratched his chin. “A gaggleack? Hmm, now there’s a good incentive.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Atlas said.

Totem’s eye widened, likely at the little act they had fallen so easily into. Still, it appeared his lust for more business far outweighed a single horseshoe. “Fine then. As consideration, here, one gaggleack.”

“Just one?” Blinky said.

“Don’t push your luck,” Totem growled before shutting the door. Rot gave a quick goodbye and followed soon after.
Tobias was the first to move, hugging Atlas around the middle. “Oh my gosh, Atlas. That was awesome sauce.”

“Indeed,” Blinky said. “I am most impressed.”

Now, if only they could harness that into something more refined.

Atlas’s ears folded downward, his cheeks darkening. “It was just business. Geez, you guys are embarrassing. And you weren’t too bad yourself, Blinky.”

“Blinky is good actor,” AAARRRGGHH!!! remarked.

Blinky pulled at his suspenders, his chest puffed up in pride. Yes, he was a good actor, wasn’t he?

Tobias received the item from Atlas, holding it up triumphantly. “I’m gonna use this baby on everyone in school.”

“Careful with that Tobes,” Atlas said. “I wouldn’t use it except as a last resort.”

“Yes, Master Atlas is right. They could be anyone,” Blinky explained, waving his hands in the air. “They’ve dwelt among you for decades. I’ve no doubt they’ve burrowed themselves deep into human society.”

“Yeah? Like who?”

“Used car salesmen, tax collectors, television executives,” Blinky listed off.

Tobias pointed his index finger into the air. “And Dentists.”

“Yes, especially dentists.” Blinky shuddered. The mere mention sent shivers down his spine.
“Maybe even teachers too,” Tobias muttered under his breath.

There was a small shift in body language between Tobias and Atlas. Blinky squinted. He would bet an entire box of Gorgos’s kitty-cakes it had something to do with Atlas’s father and mentor. He had theorized the Janus Order’s head interacted with the boys on a common basis. It would make sense if he were a teacher or principal at their high school.

Something for future reference at the very least.

Atlas lightly elbowed the boy. “No.”

“Oh come on,” Tobias moaned.

Well, no use dwelling on it now, Blinky thought. They had more important things to do. He clapped his hands together. “Now that that’s out of the way, I believe it is time for another lesson in Trollsp...”

“Uh, I’m kinda busy tomorrow,” Atlas said, his eyes casted downwards. “Claire invited me over to her place to study.”

“Master Atlas, your dalliances with the fairer sex are far outweighed by your newfound responsibilities. You are Vendel’s honored grandson. You must learn the customs and ceremonies you will take part in. The leader of Trollmarket has many roles. As a family member, you will be expected to be there in observance. Your Trollsp...”

“My manners are fine.”

Tobias snorted, singing out, “Claire and Atlas, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s—”

Atlas immediately launched himself at the boy, trying to cover the boy’s mouth with his hand. Tobias continued on, laughing at Atlas’s flushed face.
“Oh my gosh, you should see yourself,” Tobias said between breathes.

“Case in point,” Blinky said. “You lack finesse.”

“It’s not that bad,” Atlas defended.

“What may have worked with merchants like Rotguts or Bagdwella will not work with visiting dignitaries and foreign rulers.”

“Alright, so what do I need to correct then?”

Blinky approached the boy, hands out. “With your permission, may I correct you?”

Atlas paused, his eyes narrowing into slits. Finally, he shrugged. “Yeah, sure.”

Blinky started on the teen’s back, straightening it out. “Your biggest problem is your posture. You crouch over, as if you’re trying to make yourself as small as possible. While humans might view it as being uncomfortable, our kind see it as threatening. You look as if you’re ready to spring on them at any moment. It doesn’t help you have a rather expressive features either.”

“Okay, what’s wrong with my face?”

“Well, it’s not your face exactly.” Blinky motioned to his own. “Rather, your ears. They convey your every emotion, like right now, they’re saying you’re tense and annoyed. Earlier, during your discussion with Rotgut’s, you became tentative for a time. Before that—”

Atlas covered his ears. “Seriously? Crap, has it really been that obvious?”

“It is not uncommon for young trolls to emote their thoughts to others by accident,” Blinky explained.

“Normal,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said gently. “Young.”
“That’s how my mentor knows what I’m feeling before I even say anything,” Atlas groaned.

He placed a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Not to worry, Master Atlas. Vendel and I will make sure that by the time you meet with the council again, you will be calm and composed.”

“Do you really believe that or are you just telling me so that I don’t freak out,” Atlas said morosely.

Blinky took in the boy’s large eyes and dismayed expression. He patted the Atlas’s back reassuringly. “You have improved tremendously thus far as the Trollhunter. I understand you are scared about the new role you have taken on, but—Tobias, be careful with that gaggle-tack! It is a priceless artifact.”

Tobias bent down, seemingly to put away the object, only to pull out another gaggle-tack from his backpack. Blinky recognized it as Atlas’s original one. Oh dear.

“Atlas, come here.” Tobias waved both around, approaching Atlas. “I wanna see what happens if you’re touched with two gaggle-tacks.”

“Oh no,” Atlas responded, moving back a few steps. “No, no, no, I gave that to you for safekeeping. You’re not touching me with both.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

Tobias held both in the air, approaching Atlas menacingly. “You dare defy Horseshoe God Toby? Surrender or be gaggle-tackled, changeling.”

“Oh no, I’m so scared.” Atlas dodged the other boy’s reaching arm.

“Dude, come on.” Tobias tried to catch him in a corner, but the other boy evaded him.
“No way man. You’re not touching me with that,” Atlas said amidst laughter.

“This is exactly what I was saying, boys.” Blinky shook his head. He turned to AAARRRGHHH!!. “Honestly, old friend. What are we going to do with them?”

AAARRRGHHH!!! gestured behind the two boys. “Look.”

“I don’t….oh.”

The streets had become busier, trolls no longer hiding in their homes from Atlas’s appearance. In fact, some appeared to be curious. It struck Blinky that Atlas and Tobias’s childish antics might be helping the Trollhunter’s reputation. Roughhousing was common amongst both species, and to see the Trollhunter act his age might aid in providing sympathy for the boy. Better to be viewed as a child then a changeling, Blinky concluded.

He smiled warmly as Atlas caught Tobias underneath his arms, swinging him around as the two cackled.

Perhaps there was hope for their species yet.
To Catch a Changeling (IV)

Chapter Summary

Atlas and Claire go over math and guacamole. Toby fucks up and hurts his friendship with Atlas. Stricklander is there to pick up the pieces though.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter. Big thanks to Charlie for beta reading and giving me some advice with Claire. Also a big thank you to Inco, who is a Toby expert, for giving me some tips on writing Toby's POV. I'm starting school soon so I may not be able to get out a chapter every week. I'll try to update when I can though. Thank you for all the kudos, favorites, and reviews. I truly appreciate them.

Chase did a sketch of Toby and Atlas riding a Stalking and it is the awesomest thing ever. Go check out their artwork. They're a very talented artist.


I hope you enjoy the new chapter! There are three POVs in this one: Atlas, Toby, and Strickler.

He was at Claire’s place.

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

Atlas hiked up his sleeves. He could do this. He had faced down Bular and lived. He won against both Nomura and Draal in battle. Atlas had this.
“Hey, Jim. Glad you could come.” Claire said as she opened the door. “Come in, come in!”

Atlas stepped carefully into the home as if he were traversing a bomb site. He was in Claire’s home now. Dangerous foreign territory. Gunmar’s gronknuts, his heart felt like it was about to explode out of his chest. “Nice, um, casa.”

Inwardly, Atlas berated himself. Casa? Seriously?

“Thanks,” she chuckled. “Make yourself at home. I’m just making a little snack.”

He watched her back as she left for the kitchen. Atlas cautiously examined the home. He spotted the living room to the right, a small comfortable area with a large orange couch and other tasteful furniture. A small table at the entrance had a few burning Religious candles along with faded pictures of people Atlas suspected were long gone. The faint scent of cinnamon invaded his nose. *Incense*, Atlas determined. A small basket of shoes sat opposite of the table. Not wanting to be rude, he deposited his sneakers into it.

Overall, her home was just as cozy as Toby’s. Sure, they were different, but the personal touches the humans made to them calmed his frantic heart. His eyes traveled over to the photos on the wall, painting a picture of Claire’s childhood and family. They all looked so happy.

Atlas swallowed. A tinge of jealousy filtered through his mind. Claire and Toby had freedoms he could only dream about. He only had his weapons and the clothes on his back to call his own. Back at the Order, the room given to him by Stricklander was barren of any personal possessions. Everything was exactly the same as when he first moved in so many years ago. It felt lifeless. Of course, he could have personalized it (and had done so in the past), but considering his previous failed attempts, he avoided doing so. Anything he liked would be exposed and stomped on, curtesy of the lower ranking changelings.

A tiny human’s gurgling’s interrupted his train of thought. His eyes widened at the creature, sitting nearby in its bouncing chair. Atlas came closer, awe in his expression. He had never seen a human baby this close up before.

It was…

So ugly.
Did he look like this as a child? Sweet Pale Lady, he hoped not. The baby was round and fleshy, with big eyes and a nose too tiny for its head. Sort of like one of those aliens on that one show Toby liked to watch. Well, perhaps it would get cuter as it aged. It was related to Claire after all. He angled his head from side to side, observing the child. The baby copied, even matching his expression.

“Hey there, little human,” Atlas said as he crouched down. “You must be Enrique.”

Claire had mentioned him a few times. Unlike Claire, Enrique was fair. The only characteristic they seemed to share was their eye color.

The baby giggled. Atlas smiled. Okay, so perhaps not so ugly.

“Hey, Enrique,” he said, his hand reaching into his pocket. It couldn’t hurt to show the babe, right? Atlas brought out the amulet.

Enrique’s eyes grew large. His mouth dropped in amazement. He reached out, babbling in excitement. Atlas snorted. That was almost cute.

“For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to make babies ogle,” Atlas cooed.

Claire appeared in the corner of his eye. He immediately stuffed the amulet back into his pocket, hoping she didn’t notice.

“I hope you like guacamole. I put a little milk in it. Secret family recipe.” Claire leaned over him. “Wow, he really likes you.”

“Really?” He coughed. “I mean, of course. Kids love me.”

“That’s right, I forgot. You babysat your cousins, right?” She balanced the bowl of guacamole on her hip, her other hand scratching her chin. “Huh. How old are your cousins by the way?”

“Oh, pretty young. But I’m good with them,” Atlas chuckled nervously. As good as one could be
with goblins, Atlas thought.

“Well, I didn’t invite you here just to play with my baby brother. Come into the living room with me. We can work on your Algebra there.”

Atlas followed, his stomach beginning to flutter. Claire made him feel nervous and giddy at the same time. Even breathing was hard around her. It was as if she sucked out all of his confidence, leaving him an awkward mess.

No, he could do this. Atlas sucked in his bottom lip, biting down to regain control. He would not allow this ‘crush’ to gain anymore foothold within his psyche. He was Atlas, assistant to the head of the Janus Order and Trollmarket’s newest Trollhunter. A simple study lesson was nothing in the grand scheme of—

Her hand accidentally brushed against his knee. She picked up a chip, dunking it into the sauce, then devouring it with a satisfied smile.

“T-This is a lot of guacamole,” he said, stumbling over his words. “Ha, ha. You could probably swim in it.”

“Oh my gosh, I wish.” Claire gushed, taking another chip and repeating the process. “I would totally take a bath in guac.”

“I think I’d prefer a bath in Bouillabaisse,” Atlas remarked.

Claire raised an eyebrow. “You cook?”

“Ah, yeah.” Atlas said, trying to find something to do with his hands. He settled on placing them on his thighs. “I cook for my dad mostly. But I’ve been cooking with Toby too. We made some Swarma tacos that weren’t too bad. I’ll need to adjust some of the ingredients though. The meat was a little too dry for my tastes.”

“Wow, Chef Jim. You must share your secrets with me sometime.” She crossed her left leg over her right, hands folded together on top of her lap. “Maybe we could cook together.”
“Seriously? You would want to do it?” Atlas gestured to himself. “With me?”

“Yeah, is something wrong with that?” Claire asked.

“No, it’s just…” Atlas scrambled for a chip, dipping it into the guacamole. He snarfed it down in one gulp. His eyes widened. “Oh wow, this is the best thing I’ve ever had.”

She perked up. “You’re not just saying that?”

“You know what? I hang up my chef’s hat. You are the avocado master,” he joked.

“Am I now?” She asked, shifting forward. He could feel her breath on his face.

Atlas could hear the pounding of his heart inside his head. He leaned closer, mere inches away. Up close, he spotted the faint dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. “You are.”

Her cheeks pinked. She pulled away, turning her head to the side. He scouted a little further down the couch. She tucked back a nonexistent strand of hair (nervous habit? Oh sweet Pale Lady, was he making her uncomfortable?) before taking out a piece of paper and pencil. “Alrighty. Now that we’ve got food let’s start on the equation.”

Atlas tried to pay attention, but the amount of numbers and letters going about made his brain hurt. The laptop was useful in finding some explanations for the problems, something he would take note of for future class assignments. The first equations were easy to understand, but the further and further they went into the book the more and more uncertain Atlas became.

“See, the equation only contains powers of X that are non-negative integers. Does that make sense?”

“Okay,” Atlas pressed his hands together in a steeple then pointed it at Claire. “What the hell is a negative number? And for that matter, what is an integer?”

“Didn’t they teach you this in Canada?” Claire asked.
“Eh, yeah, I probably just forgot, ha ha, ha,” Atlas said. His eyes trekked upwards to her lips. Did she wear lipstick or were they naturally that color? “Hey, thanks again for this.”

Claire turned her head to the side. “What?”

“I… I feel really bad about what’s happening with the play. I know it means a lot to you,” Atlas admitted.

“You know, I was super mad at you, but then, I realized you’ve got a lot more going on than people think.”

Atlas paused before remarking, “That’s… actually pretty accurate. How could you tell?”

“Come on, Jim.” She laughed, setting down the teaching material. “You didn’t think I invited you here just for algebra, did you?” She pulled out a piece of folded paper. A very familiar piece of paper. “You can’t just write a letter like this and not expect a conversation.”

Oh.

Oh, oh, oh.

Oh crap.

She read the letter. Atlas struggled to keep a straight face. His mind was running a mile a minute, frantically trying to figure out the right words. How was he going to explain this? Shit, he barely survived against Draal. There was also the fact that Nomura had very nearly killed him and Toby in the other boy’s home.

What if he did tell her? A part of him secretly liked the idea. Having Claire at his side didn’t sound so bad.

But he would also be putting her in danger. Claire was only a child. Atlas wasn’t sure bringing another human into the mix was such a good idea. While Toby had lived this long, it was largely due to circumstantial luck. The longer Toby continued to live in the world of trolls, the easier it would be
for trolls (especially changelings) to target him.

Not to mention, what would she do when she saw his other form? Toby had been shocked by his appearance. He had no doubt Claire would too. What if she rejected him? Atlas sucked on his inner cheek.

What if she didn’t though? What if she liked his other form? His cheeks warmed. That…that wouldn’t be so bad, right?

“This…I don’t know how to describe it. You have to battle monsters? You’re caught between two different people who hate each other? That sounds like a really difficult situation to be in. And you’re afraid of abandoning one for the other? Saving the world in which we know? What kinds of monsters are you battling?” Claire brushed back her bangs, her eyes searching his own. “I mean, we all have stuff we go through in life, but are you in some kind of trouble?”

Atlas turned his gaze to his hands. They were human now, but what if—No. “It’s hard to explain.”

“You called yourself a monster.” Claire paused, then continued, “Jim, do you mean that literally or metaphorically?”

He pulled on the collar of his jacket. Even though the house was cool he felt as if he were burning up. “Oh, yes, Metaphoric. Completely. Exactly the word I was going to say.”

“You’re not a monster,” she affirmed. “I mean, no one’s perfect, we all have our flaws, but you’re not a monster and whoever has made you think that is wrong.”

It was Atlas’s turn to pause. He licked his lips before answering softly, “That’s nice of you to say.”

“It’s the truth. Your words are beautiful, Jim.” She said in a gentle tone, “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“It’s Atlas,” he muttered.

“Huh?”
“Shit, ah,” Atlas covered his eyes with both hands. *Think, think, think,* he silently chanted. “Um, so, Jim is my name, but Atlas is my nickname. Back home people used to call me Atlas. It started as a joke my Dad made and then it caught on and…I don’t use it at school because people would get confused, but around friends and things is okay I think.”

“Atlas,” she said, as if tasting the name. It sounded wonderful from her lips. “It’s very poetic. I like it.


“It’s from Greek mythology, right? The tragic titan Atlas, forsaken by his brethren, he was forced to hold up the sky.”

“Dad is a bit of a myth-lover,” Atlas explained. “He owns a lot of books, but Ancient Greece is his favorite I think.”

Claire gestured her finger to the lower end of the letter. “There’s some sentimental stuff at the end which I thought was kinda sweet too.”

“Really?” Atlas scratched his neck, his other hand rubbing his leg. “I mean, of course. I wrote it that way.”

Claire’s eyelashes fluttered, her gaze lifting to his face. There was a warmth there, like a hearth on a cold winter’s day. It made him want to know more about Claire. What were her dreams? What did she want to do in life?

Did she see him as more than a classmate?

“If you ever need someone to talk to about ‘the monsters’, you can talk to me,” she said.

Atlas searched her eyes, trying to find a speck of falsehood. “You won’t tell anyone else?”

“It can be our secret,” she promised.
Atlas locked his pinky with hers. Claire blinked, one eyebrow perched higher than the other. Heart in his throat, he turned his head away, hoping she didn’t see his mortified expression. “Tobes said pinky promises were the most sacred of oaths amongst humankind.”

“I think Toby was exaggerating.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to realized that,” Atlas chuckled nervously. “Wow, I probably look stupid then.”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “I pinky promise not to tell anyone if you pinky promise to be honest with me.”

He released his hold on her pinky. “All I can promise is that I’ll try my best. But somethings I just can’t share, Claire. It’s not you, in fact, I wish I could share it with you, but I can’t.”

“Alright, I understand,” Claire said, her eyes returning back to the book. “So, on to problem forty-two?”

“That’s it?”

Claire shrugged. “Well, I did promise you I would help you with Algebra.”

“I’m gonna need a lot. I barely even understand problem one, let alone forty-two,” Atlas confessed. He took up a pencil, twirling it from finger to finger. The pencil very nearly tumbled to the ground one the last finger, but he caught it in mid-drop.

“Has school always been this difficult for you?” Claire said.

“No, but things at home have been kind of hard, so—”

“Have you thought about telling Ms. Janeth about whatever you’re going through? Maybe she’d reinstate you as Romeo if she knew about it.”
Atlas paused his pencil an inch away from the notebook paper. The corners of his mouth tugged down. “I’m not so sure—”

A soft beeping noise resounded from Claire’s bag. She pulled it out and placed it to her ear. Her brows came together, nose scrunched up in confusion. Finally, she handed him the cell.

“It’s for you. Someone named Woby?”

“Woby?” Atlas repeated in a confused tone. He listened to the frantic caller. Though he could barely pick out the words, he knew enough to know what was happening. Shit, he’d forgotten Toby had another braces appointment today. How many times did he have to go to that doctor for his braces anyway? He groaned.

“Shit, I have to go.” Atlas grumbled. “Damn it, Tobes.”

“Is everything okay?” Claire asked.

“It will be.” Atlas added, “Hopefully.”

Atlas gathered his things and left for the door. He slipped on his sneakers, too busy to tie the laces. He could be out of them soon enough. Before he even turned the knob he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait, before you go, you’ve got some guac on your face,” Claire pointed out.

Atlas tried to rub it off with the back of his hand. “Oh, where?”

She handed him a napkin. He cleaned his face, all the while staring at Claire, who did the same.

A moment of silence passed between the two. Finally, she turned her head towards the door, breaking eye contact.
The amulet began to buzz in his pocket. His blood rushed to his head, his face burning like a bad sunburn. “Thanks, Claire,” he said in a breathless tone.

Claire smiled. “No problem, Atlas.”

He mirrored her expression. He rolled the paper napkin into a ball, depositing it into the small nearby trashcan as he walked to the door.

“Thanks for the guac,” he said as he was about to leave. A second later, Atlas paused, sticking his head back through the door. “Be careful out there.”

“You too,” She giggled.

He so badly wanted to stay. The one on one time with Claire was addictive. Despite all the nerves and awkwardness, Claire made him feel…normal, if that made any sense. She actually liked him for him. While Toby had become his best friend, Atlas reasoned that it was at least partially due to his past as Jim and not who he was today. Claire never knew Jim. She just saw him. Atlas.

It took every iota of willpower to leave.

But he did it.

Unfortunately.

Toby hated dentist appointments.

For one, they were excruciatingly long. Not awesome sauce. He didn’t even get a sucker out of it like he did with his normal doctor. The other reason was the Doctor’s disregard for his pain threshold. Not that he couldn’t handle it or anything. Nana always said Domzalski men were strong.
Therefore, in spite of the pain, he persevered through Dr. Muelas’s the prodding and poking of his most sacred of orifices.

And there was that one time when Dr. Muelas had to extract his baby tooth that wouldn’t fall out on its own. Super painful. Ugh, he couldn’t eat nuggat nummies for a week since it was one of back teeth.

Getting his braces put in was also pretty terrible.

Fuck, and there was that one time that—

Wait, he was getting off track. Shit.

Well, this was different.

Atlas was right. Holy shit, shit, shit. He shouldn’t have been playing around with the gaggetack like he did. Not that it wasn’t fun—hitting Palchuk in the face had been extremely satisfying—No, wait, focus.

 Damn it.

He couldn’t let his mind wander, especially right now.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. But hey, on the bright side, he found a changeling. That was pretty Coolio. On the not so bright side, she was trying to murder him and his friends. Toby didn’t take too kindly to that.

He eyed the dentist tools Gladys pulled out. If he weren’t laughing his ass off from the happy gas, he would likely be running for his life.

This was bad.

This was very very bad.
Toby barely dodged another swipe at his person, swinging the chair around just in time. Her shrill laughter would no doubt haunt him for nights to come.

Seeing her transform by touching the gaggetack drove in how different Atlas and the rest of the changelings were. The dentist assistant’s was more like, crackly electricity then poof! Atlas’s was more of a crunchy body-horror transformation-thingy—kinda reminded him special effects in horror movies—that was all and all kinda uncomfortable to watch. Using the amulet made it more glowy though.

“Sit still so I can kill you,” Gladys said, giggling all the while.

Holy cheese her laughter was terrifying.

“Nah whah,” he responded.

His prayers were answered not a moment too soon.

Atlas kicked open the door, changeling armor and daggers at the ready.

Okay, so Toby had to give it to Atlas. His best friend had some pretty awesome sauce entrances. All they needed was some flashy lights and a few explosions and Atlas could star in one of those Michael Bay films.

Huh. Would that make Toby his agent then?

Wait, hold that thought.

The hybrid paused, his nose wrinkled up as he took in the scene. Toby could only imagine the confusion the other was experiencing. Blinky was gasping for air on the floor while AAARRRGGHH!!! hung halfway out from the ceiling window, both trolls desperately trying to withhold their laughter.
Oh man, this was not good.

“What in the world are you guys doing?” Atlas tensed up at the sight of the changeling. “Gladysgroes, you need to leave. Now.”

“Atlas! Come and help me with these fools,” she said between breathes. “We can use them to lure the Trollhunter here.”

Toby tried to reach for his friend, but the numbness in his arms had yet to wear off. Instead, he watched helplessly as Atlas backed away.

Just a little more. Toby tried to move his hands, but all he could achieve was a slight twitch in his thumbs. Stupid numbing agent. Super not cool.

“Stand down, Gladys. Let’s talk about this,” Atlas said.

The changeling continued to gain ground, driving Atlas into a corner of the room. “Talk? Now you’re sounding like one of them.”

“No, I’m not,” he refuted.

She drew closer, her laugh slowly dissipating. “Then help me.”

Atlas shook his head. “I can’t.”

Screw you, lady! Toby wanted to yell the phrase, but all he could do was scream garbled noises as the changeling.

“I knew you were too human to be one of us. Always so sentimental,” she snarled. She was laughing less, the gas slowly dispersing from the room.

“That’s not true.”
“They hate us and you’re helping them? What hogwash. And where’s the Trollhunter? The fat one called for him earlier, surely—”

“Gladysgroe. You need to leave.” Atlas insisted, “Please.”

“Leave? Or what? You’ll go crying to Stricklander?” She spat on the ground. “No, I’ve worked too far for this. I spent years slaving in this stupid office with that imbecile. The bridge will be opened. It has to. Gunmar will bring us into a golden age. Then we’ll finally be free.”

Atlas’s features became clouded, the glow of his eyes almost haunting. Toby wouldn’t say he was spooked by his friend’s expression, but he was damn near so.

It was times like these Toby remembered—Atlas wasn’t human. He observed the teen’s hunched back and curled toes. Toby had enough experience with cats to know his friend was reaching his breaking point. Crap.

“How can you believe such bullshit?” Atlas growled, his voice rough. “What has Gunmar or Bular ever done for us?”

“You could never understand, half-breed,” she taunted.

Atlas moved into a defensive stance, his eyes not once leaving the changeling. “No, I do understand, and that’s the problem. You’re better than this. We’re all better than this. We don’t need Gunmar. We can rule ourselves.”

“Only a child could believe such drivel,” she mocked, “They’ve corrupted you.”

“No, they opened my eyes to the truth. We can be better than what they think we are. This war, it’s meaningless. The trolls aren’t our enemies. Peace isn’t impossible,” Atlas stressed. Even though his body language appeared standoffish, his eyes were pleading, almost begging her to step down.

“Please. Just listen. You don’t have to agree, but if we can come to a compromise between our races then—"

“Peace is Gunmar,” she said, her voice firm and unyielding. “And my peace will be slitting your
friend’s throat.”

As if in slow-motion, he watched the changeling turn towards him.

Toby balked. Her glowing red eyes were much more terrifying now that they were locked onto him. Shit—where was a knife or something? Damn it, did Gladys take all the pointy stuff away?

Atlas jumped the changeling immediately. They rolled around on the floor, hissing and growling beneath Toby’s seat. Blinky tried to intervene but was quickly swept back to the wall.

Gladys knocked Atlas against the moving table, several dentist tools falling to the floor. She dragged herself over to Toby’s position, her mouth wide and fanged.

Toby forgot to breathe.

As the numbness in his limbs faded, a feverish chill ran down his back. He could feel her hot breath on his skin, the odor nearly as hideous as she was.

He was going to die.

Not good, not good, not good!

“Don’t you touch him!” Atlas roared.

A flash of light blinded him from the rest of the scene. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust. He lifted his numb arm, rubbing his eyes against it. As his eyes cleared, he spotted Atlas. Or rather, Jim. Even through the blurry aftereffects he could see the ‘Trollhunter’s armor, amulet blazing brightly against his chest. Both boys looked at each other, shocked by the sudden transformation. It was like the locker-room accident all over again.

Gladysgroe stared, her eyes so large Toby thought they would fall out. “You.” Toby could hear the disbelief in her tone. Her right hand inched toward one of the sharper tools.
“Jimbo!” Toby cried out. “Look out!”

No—Atlas, not Jimbo. Crap, he was on a roll today. He wanted to bang his head against something, but all he could do was wiggle.

Gladysgrove swerved the chair around, hitting Blinky (who tried and failed to capture the changeling) right in the forehead. It was only AAARRRGGHH!!!’s meaty paw that saved the other troll from slamming backwards against the floor.

Atlas brought Daylight up in defense, driving the changeling into a corner.

She made a dash for the exit, but Atlas reached it first. It took Toby a second too late to realize her plan. She tripped Atlas, using her weight to grapple him onto the floor. She grabbed tight to his sword hand. Toby, no longer so numb, frantically searched for something to distract her.

“What is this? No, it all makes sense now.” Her breathing was choppy, but it didn’t detract from the rage in it. “How the Trollhunter found the bridge. You’ve been fooling us all this time.”

“Not on purpose,” Atlas admitted. “I was just trying to—”

She scowled. “Traitor. Wait until Stricklander hears about this.”

Atlas locked eyes with Toby. Anger, shock, fear—Toby couldn’t say what exactly Atlas was thinking, but he could guess. This wasn’t like the fight with Draal or even Nomura. This was the real deal.

Toby continued his search. He rummaged through the items near him.

“He won’t,” Atlas said, his gaze flickering back to the changeling’s. The amulet glowed, reflecting the stormy look on his friend’s face. “because you’re not going to be able to tell him.”

“Accept your death, Trollhunter. I promise I’ll make it quick.”
“I should say the same, Gladys.”

“Over my dead body, whelp.”

Toby yelled, “Eat paste, bitch!”

The toothpaste hit her eyes. Yes! Score one for the Tobes! She roared, rubbing at her irritated eyes.

The sword disappeared from Atlas’s dominant hand. He tilted his head up, enough for Toby to capture the boy’s gutted stare. “Then so be it.”

A glow overtook the other hand, transforming into a sword. Gladys was too slow to escape. Daylight sank into her flesh like a sheath, as morbid as that sounded. Outside the goblins, Toby had never seen someone die before. It felt wrong, like catching someone naked in the bathroom.

“I’m sorry. I really am,” Atlas whispered. The sword vanished, but the wound was still there. Toby could see the cracks along her skin from the injury, glowing much like the amulet itself.

“Stricklander will kill you when he finds out,” she said.

Atlas visibly swallowed. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I?” She coughed, her voice raspy and failing. Soon, she was all aglow. It was a terrifying sight, especially since Toby knew what was about to happen. “The Bridge will be opened. Hail Gunmar and the Eternal Night! Death to the traitor!”

Toby flinched as her body exploded. A moment later, the room and its remaining occupants were covered in her dusty remains.

Suffice to say, neither Atlas nor Toby took it all that well.

Toby blinked, trying to process what just happened.
“Oh my god, she’s in my mouth,” Toby finally said, trying to find a place to clean his tongue. He entered up running his mouth through the tiny sink the dentist used to clean his tools.

It tasted exactly as it looked. It reminded him of elementary school, when someone dared him to eat dirt. Bleh.

Atlas powered down, amulet in hand. His chest began to increasingly rise and fall with each breath. Without warning, he lobbed the device at the wall, creating a small dent. It dropped to the floor for a moment, only to return to the boy’s hand, no worse for the wear.

Toby felt his stomach drop. He’d fucked up. Badly.

“What were you thinking, Tobes?” Atlas finally snapped. He turned to the other two. “And why the hell are you two here?”

Tears threatened to escape his eyes. His hands slightly shook. He had messed up big time.

“We, well,” Blinky cleared his throat. “I thought it was possible that danger may come to either of you should you cross paths with the wrong changeling, so we followed Tobias as a precaution. We were also curious—”

“I don’t care. Look at this!” He motioned to the room. “How can two trolls not take down a single changeling?”

Atlas’s shoulders slumped forward. He leaned against the wall. “I killed someone. Oh sweet Pale Lady, I murdered one of my people.”

A soft whine escaped his friend’s mouth. Toby’s heart shook at the sound. Atlas had killed someone for him. He had made his friend kill someone.

Damn it. All he wanted was to be useful and now look at him.
Blinky came closer, his head bowed while all four hands locked together behind his back. “Master Atlas, I’m so sorry. It was my mistake. I never should have given Tobias the gaggetack.”


“No, they’re covering for me,” Toby said. “It was mine.”

Atlas turned to him. He stalked over to the teen, lording his height over the other boy. Atlas slammed his fist down next to Toby. A week ago, he would have flinched. But not now. Well, no, that was a lie. But only a little.

“I told you. I told you and you still did it,” Atlas stressed, his voice straining. “She would’ve killed you.”

Toby looked up. He put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. His face burned with shame. He fumbled over his next words. “I just… I was… I was just trying to help.”

Atlas moved the hand off. Toby cast his gaze downwards, afraid to meet his friend’s eyes.

“But you didn’t and now I’ve had to kill someone.” Atlas said, his volume rising. “Tobes, seriously, what the fuck were you thinking? Did you even think about your safety? You’re not like Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!!. You’re breakable.”

“I… I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” Toby apologized dolefully.

“You keep acting like this is all a game. It’s not. I’m…” Atlas paused. “This isn’t one of those superhero movies you like. We are fighting in a war. Do you understand what that means?”

“I do. I’ll be better. I promise,” Toby said.

Oh god, had he broken their friendship? No, no, no—he barely even had his best friend back and he’d already fucked everything up.
“Just like you promised to be careful with the gaggletack?” Atlas let out a deep sigh. “How can I trust you?”

“It was a mistake. Please,” Toby pleaded, the water in his eyes beginning to overflow. “I’ll take this more seriously. I won’t seek out changelings anymore.”

“You say that, but how can I believe you now?” Atlas said.

“Because I’m your best friend.”

Atlas squinted, his shoulders raised. There was a tightness in his brow. “Are you?”

A sudden wave of nausea rolled through him. His hands became clammy and cold, all the while his face was on fire.

He had broken their trust.

He—he just wanted to be useful. Atlas was the Trollhunter and this super important guy now and Toby…wasn’t. Hell, half the time it appeared he was the cause of their issues.

And now he’d ruined their friendship forever.

Toby clenched his hands against his sweater as tightly as he could. Anything to distract himself from the wave of guilt and fear invading his mind.

This was all his fault. His fault, his fault, his fault.

Atlas had been hanging out with Claire and had to come save Toby’s pathetic self. Because Toby was weak and stupid. He had forced his best friend to kill someone.

He was the worst.
“We should reconvene at Trollmarket,” Blinky interrupted. “Perhaps Vendel may be of some help.”

“No, not today. I need,” Atlas brushed his bangs back, eyes closed. “I need some time alone.”

Toby looked up through the tears, struggling to form words. “Atlas, I’m sorry. Really.”

“I know but sorry doesn’t always cut it, Tobes.” Atlas placed a hand over his eyes. “I can’t…I can’t do this right now.”

Atlas pulled up the hood of his cloak, leaving before Toby could say anything else. An uncomfortable silence settled between those who remained.

Toby’s stomach twisted into knots. He had failed to do the one thing he promised not to do and now Atlas hated him.

He likely caused the end of the friendship too.

Toby hid his face between two hands. Even though he had the two trolls nearby, he felt more lonely than any other time in his life.

Stricklander prided himself in his steadfast calm demeanor. Whereas other changelings might panic in the face of death, Stricklander always kept an ace up his sleeve, using whatever means necessary to achieve victory, or at the very least his survival.

Atlas chundering inside his private toilet was not one of those things.

After a moment of hesitation, he entered the room. Normally, he would have scolded the boy. This was his private loo. It had taken a lot of clout (and a good deal of favors) to get his own private toilet
and shower away from the rest of the changelings. It was by no means lavish, but it had all the necessities one might come to use whilst living amongst humans.

As he watched Atlas hurl his out heart into the porcelain bowl, his mind raced through different scenarios.

Was the boy sick? Stricklander tried to think of anytime Atlas had been under the weather, but found none. Morose, perhaps, but what teenager wasn’t? Nevertheless, should Atlas have caught something from the fleshbags he associated with it would be quite troublesome. Cross-species contamination could prove deadly. Trolls and changelings had hearty bodies. Even if the boy were sick, it would not have advanced to this degree, right?

Perhaps he was pissed. Now there, that was something he could chide the boy for. Stricklander suspected one of those Trollmarket trolls had given the boy alcohol a week prior, if the glassy eyes and smell after his early morning return wasn’t evidence enough. Atlas tried to hide it of course, but Stricklander knew enough about hangovers to see the signs.

Atlas must have noticed his presence, his head slowly rising. Wiping the leftover saliva and vomit off his face with the back of his hand, he shifted around until he caught sight of Strickler.

“Hey,” Atlas croaked.

Stricklander sniffed the area. Whilst the boy’s eyes were red and puffy, he smelled no sign of alcohol. Crouching down to the boy’s level, he brushed the teen’s bangs back. Atlas leaned into the touch. Hmm. No fever either.

“Is everything alright, Atlas?” He finally asked.

“No,” Atlas muttered under his breath.

Stricklander lowered his hand to the boy’s chin, raising his head up with an index finger. “Would you like to talk about it?”

It was as if the boy were made of paper; Atlas crumpled, his eyes starting to glisten.
“I fucked up,” Atlas stated. “I’m a murderer.”

“A murderer?”

Stricklander stroked his jaw. Atlas continued to look to him for guidance. Surprisingly, he actually felt a tad relieved. This was his area of expertise. It was something he had long prepared for.

“Tell me,” Stricklander said.

“I told Toby not to do it. That bringing the gaggletrack around in the open could get him killed. Then one of the others found out he had one and targeted him. She came at me and,” Atlas stopped. He took a deep breath, shuddering all the while. “I killed her.”


Atlas shifted his head closer to Strickler, his forehead coming into contact with the changeling’s chest.


“No, you didn’t.”

It was Atlas’s turn to be surprised. He snapped his head up, nearly nicking Stricklander with his horn. “What?”

“You didn’t kill Gladysgroe.” Stricklander pulled out his phone, writing up a small message he would send out to the rest of the Order. No one would suspect a thing. “The Trollhunter did. At least, that will be the official story.”

Atlas’s shoulders tensed, his ears shifting backwards. Stricklander sighed. So emotional. Still, he tried to appear at least empathetic to the boy’s feelings. It was his first kill after all.

“You’re covering for me?” He said, his eyes searching for an answer in his own.
Stricklander clicked the phone off, dispensing it back into his pocket. “Gladysgroe was only supposed to spy on the boy. The moment she decided to act she officially disobeyed my direct orders. You were within your rights as a changeling to dispose of her.’

“But she didn’t deserve to die,” Atlas reasoned.

Stricklander pressed forward. “Did she attack you?”

The boy’s mouth thinned. He answered in a subdued tone, “Yes.”

Stricklander tucked a wild hair back behind Atlas’s ear. It was getting a tad longer than Stricklander liked. They would need to cut it soon. “Did you defend yourself?”

“Yes, but still I—”

“Then there is nothing to worry about.” Stricklander remarked in a friendly tone, patting down the boy’s unruly hair. “She strayed outside of the parameters of her mission while you stayed in yours.”

Alas, his words only seemed to make the boy feel even worse. He tried to hide his eyes, but Stricklander could see a few tears trying to escape.

Oh dear.

Stricklander closed his eyes, breathing through his nose. The first death was always the hardest. It was something one never forgets, troll or not.

“It hurts, dad. Is this how it always is?” Atlas said in a hushed voice.

Stricklander began rubbing circles into his charge’s back. His turtleneck was beginning to get wet, but he had a spare in the office. “No, but our race does not have it easy, Atlas. You know this. Death is a constant reality we must face.”
“I’m afraid. I’m so afraid that whatever I do will hurt even more people,” he admitted.

“That, young Atlas, is something we must all face in our lives. As a famous philosopher once said ‘Fear? What has a man to do with fear? Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown. Best live as we may, from day to day’,” Stricklander said. “You will have to battle your fears. All changelings must. But once Gunmar is freed and our Lady returns we will finally be safe. No more hiding. It was through our fears that we found our greatest of strengths after all. The Trolls of Trollmarket and the rest of the world will rue the day they spurned us.”

Atlas pulled his head away, giving him a long stare. His eyes were beginning to drop, his breathing much calmer now. Had the boy been getting any sleep lately? Well, he was juggling a lot these days.

“You sound so certain,” Atlas said. “What proof do you have that they’ll really help us?”

“Belief,” Stricklander admitted.

“Belief?”

“Sometimes, even in the most desperate of times, I have held onto the belief for a better tomorrow for our kind. It may not be tomorrow or the day after that, but we are edging ever closer to our destiny,” Stricklander said, his excitement overflowing.

Every day he drew closer to the completion. Soon, Gunmar would return and Stricklander would be free to do what he pleased, instead of what he had to do.

Atlas nodded, though he didn’t appear to be listening as actively anymore. “That’s…rather optimistic of you.”

Stricklander brought the boy’s head back to his chest, the rest of his body falling to the side. Atlas slumped into his lap, not unlike his first few months in the Order. He smiled. Despite the teen’s large size, he was still young to their ways, as evidenced by his actions.

Yes, everything would go just as planned. A new changeling to the Order was just what they needed. Atlas would finally have a friend (outside of the Trollhunter and his group) and Stricklander would finally regain control.
It was unfortunate Gladysgroe perished, but that was the risk in these sorts of situations. He would report it to Bular later, though he suspected the brute would care less.

“There is much you do not know about me, Atlas.” Stricklander said. “I have been around for centuries. In the blink of an eye I have seen kingdoms flourish and perish. Some of them I even had a hand in. And throughout all my years, I have found belief to be the strongest motivator. I believe in a better tomorrow for us. What do you believe in, Atlas?”

Atlas startled. He looked up, eyes half-lidded. “Huh? Oh, sorry, I—”

“I believe you are in need of sleep,” Stricklander joked. “Come. I will walk you back to your room.”

Atlas’s claws tightened their hold on his jacket.

“Can…can we just sit here for a bit, dad?”

It was rare to see Atlas so vulnerable. Normally, he would have brush off such affection, especially since the teen had taken to overstepping his bounds as of late.

Atlas dozed off before he could give an answer. Of course. Cheeky brat. His breathing slowed down into a rhythmic pattern.

“Alright,” Stricklander sighed. “But only for a little while.”

That little while ended up being quite a few hours. But just as well. Atlas needed the sleep, especially for the road ahead. Gladysgroe’s death, while disappointing, would be a stepping stone to obtaining the Amulet. His young charge had confirmed his loyalty and likely won over the Trollhunter and his friend.

Excellent.

Now to his next plan of action.
Adventures in Trollsitting (I)

Chapter Summary

Atlas visits Vendel; Toby gets a second chance. The boys are back together, but a new problem arises.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter! Thank you for all the wonderful reviews, kudos, and favorites! Big thanks to my bae quis for helping me with this chapter, as well as Charlie, who has been super awesome throughout this all. I'm almost done with Fallen Too Far and will be publishing a new chapter today and sometime over the weekend. Stay tuned!

Check out my tumblr tunafishprincess. I post all my art and people's fanart. If you ever want to drop a line and say hello, I'm always happy to reply! :) I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Atlas peered inside.

The hot throw of freshly lit candles and musty books accosted his nostrils. He scratched his nose in irritation. Vendel’s library was cleaner than his first visit, though that was largely due to Atlas’s last assignment. How cleaning the old goat’s room correlated with his new duties Atlas would never understand. Honestly, what did dusting the shelves and washing the floors have to do with diplomacy?

Atlas was starting to think “honored grandson” also meant “personal servant.”

His claws dug into his skin. Vendel must have noticed his presence, if the slight twitch of his ears
was anything to go by.

After much deliberation, he stepped past the threshold.

“Ah, so the prodigal son finally arrives,” Vendel remarked dryly, his nose buried into an ancient scroll. “You’re late.”

Atlas flipped off his hood, brushing the more wild strands of his hair behind left ear. “I’ve been busy.”

“As have I, but I still make sure to arrive on time,” Vendel lectured.

“I’ll do better next time.”

“See that you do,” he advised.

Atlas rolled his eyes. “When do we start?”

Vendel glanced up. His mouth was twisted into a tight scowl, as if he had eaten something sour. “When I am finished.”

“But you just said—”

“You made me wait. Now, it is your turn.”

Atlas crossed his arms. Vendel continued to inspect his work, the faint signs of a smug smile developing on his face. Of course. After several minutes of silence, Atlas began perusing the bookshelves. To his surprise, he could actually read some of the titles. Figures. Blinky had been pretty hard-ass on him to improve his TrollSpeak. The written language wasn’t too different from English. In fact, many of the titles were directly translated from the language. His eyes brightened at the sight of an entire collection of Shakespearean plays.

For a moment, he imagined Claire’s expression at discovering such a find—her eyebrows raised high
on her forehead while her two front teeth sneaked out past her front lip in that quirky smile of hers.

But Claire was human. Even if she knew his name, she knew nothing about who he truly was.

Atlas immediately tucked the thought into the furthest regions of his mind. He had more important things to think about. For one, he needed to figure out how to set up electricity and wi-fi in Trollmarket. Rotgut had yet to finish the contract and every day that passed made Atlas more and more anxious.

At least Bagdwella appeared to be doing well for herself. The latest supply of VHs tapes increased her profits two-fold. In turn, Bagdwella became more confident in his skills. She asked that his next shipment include a new commodity: DVDs.

It was to Atlas’s good fortune that the Janus Order never threw away their things, providing Atlas a literal dragon’s horde of old hardware. *One changeling’s trash is another troll’s treasure*, he joked Blinky earlier. The troll merely rolled his eyes.

Atlas’s shoulders slumped. Well, Toby would have found it funny.

Tobes.

Damn it.

He swallowed down the emotions that came with the boy’s name. Atlas needed to be alert. His brethren would become suspicious if a large chunk of their junk disappeared overnight, which meant Atlas had to get creative.

But none of that mattered right now.

“Are you done yet?” Atlas groaned. It had been half an hour and he was already dying of boredom. He spun a nearby globe, watching the sphere twirl round and round until it lost momentum. There were only so many books he could pretend to like.

Vendel flipped his scroll over. “Patience is a virtue.”
“And time is gold,” he countered. “You wanted me here, so I’m here.”

Without missing a beat Vendel picked up a looking glass, completely ignoring Atlas’s comeback.

Atlas huffed. He slumped against the bookcase, producing a small cloud of dust. Even after he brushed it off the smell clung to his clothes. Ugh. Atlas let out an audible sigh. He would rather be anywhere than here. His fingers tugged against the fringes of his cloak. The rounded walls and ceiling made him uncomfortable, as if they were slowly closing in. He knew he was safe here, but his heart refused to listen.

Still, he said nothing. There wasn’t any reason to. He understood the thin ice on which he walked. Any further and it would crack, swallowing him whole.

Atlas.

Changeling.

Son of Stricklander.

Trollhunter.

Honored Grandson of Vendel.

James Lake Junior.

So many names to keep up with. It was beginning to make his head spin. At least Trollmarket now knew who he was, more or less.

His eyes fell upon a small leather-bound book. It wasn’t anything special, not like the other grandiose neighboring scrolls and novels in the shelf. Perhaps that was why it intrigued him in the first place: a mundane piece within a litany of more valuable works. The cover was faded and aged, its contents held together by a twine. He pulled it out, carefully opening it to the first page.
To his delight, the words were crisp and clean, the black ink remarkably vibrant for its apparent age. He read the first few lines. While he couldn’t understand everything, from what he could grasp it appeared to be interesting. Oh ho ho! The writer even cussed in the first paragraph. Nice. He began to lift the next page.

“Put it back,” Vendel warned.

Atlas let out a cheeky snort. “I thought you wanted me to learn.”

“Learn, yes,” he said. In one fell swoop Vendel flicked a forefinger and thumb against Atlas’s horn whilst snatching the novel from his grasp. “going through my personal possessions without my permission is an entirely different matter.”

Atlas rubbed the base of his horn. While the action didn’t hurt, the feeling was certainly unnerving. Still, he pressed on. “Did you write this?”

Vendel inspected the book, skimming through the first few pages. He shook his head. “No.”

“Then who’s the writer?”

“It has neither a title nor the writer’s name. At horn-value, I can only guess that its originator is likely long deceased.”

“Have you ever read it?”

“Does it look like I have time to read every single parchment that comes through my doors?” Vendel answered. “Perhaps one day when I have leisure, though I fear I will have less and less of that as time goes on.”

Atlas nodded, his mind traveling back to that day in the museum. “The Killahead Bridge.”

“No,” Vendel replied, sending him an exasperated glance. “You, you daft whelp. Barely a week and
you’re already evading my guards.”

Oh.

That.

Atlas rolled his shoulders back, a playful smirk gracing his face. “I can’t help that they suck at their job.”

“You’re putting yourself at risk again. You are not invisible, Atlas.”

“I know,” Atlas said, brows wrinkling as Gladysgroe’s death flashed through his mind. “What’s the agenda for today?”

“Review. Your next meeting with the council is steadily approaching. You cannot mess up. This will be your first address to all of Trollmarket, outside the little disaster you created in the Forge of course,” Vendel drew back towards his desk, though his eyes did not leave Atlas. “How many tribes does the Trollmarket Council contain?

He stood up straighter. “One hundred and twelve.”

Blinky had gone over Trollmarket’s government structure quite extensively. Though it bared a few similarities to democracy, much of it was based on troll tribal laws and peace treaties. As troll societies went however it was special, not only because of its lack of a royal bloodline but that no single species ruled over the others. Everyone was equal in Trollmarket. Except gnomes. And changelings for that matter.

“And how many of them have more than one representative?”


“Not bad.” Vendel stroked his beard. “A delegation from the Oni clan greets you. How do you respond?”
This was a little harder. Thankfully, Blinky had covered this part with him the day before. Atlas bowed at the waist, his right fist grasped by his left in front of him. “Welcome to Trollmarket, honored guests.”

Vendel tutted. “Bow lower or else you may not have your head attached when you get up. They are a notoriously difficult bunch. Next scenario: A funeral for a fallen warrior is taking place. How do you respond to the grieving tribe?”

Unfamiliar territory. Sweet Pale Lady, he knew he shouldn’t have spent last night catching up on his Spanish paper.

“Um…ah…Oh!” He switched stances, his left hand grasping his right elbow. He raised two fingers, placing them against his left breast. “Our condolences. May the Void carry them to their ancestors.”

“You’ll also need to bring a sacrificial offering. Normally, trolls simply put food, but occasionally we have the more traditional sort,” Vendel commented.

“Traditional?”

“Live sacrifices. Cats mostly, but dogs, cows, horses have been used in the past as well. We once had someone bring in a shark. By Deya’s Grace, I still have no idea how they managed that one.”

Atlas cringed.

Vendel walked around the table, tapping his staff against the floor. “A group of Red Caps want to throw a festival. How do you respond?”

He chewed on his lower lip. Red Caps, Red Caps…Those were the weirdos who worshipped gnomes, right? Shoot. He must have skimmed that part of the reading.

After much deliberation, he answered, “Please submit your request at the next council meeting?”
“Wrong. You never allow the Red Caps to host a festival. Parties, yes, but the last time they hosted a festival it nearly lead to the fourth Gnome War.”

“Yikes.”

“A new whelp is born to a pair of Gargulas. We are asked to attend the naming ceremony. What do you say to the parents?”

He scratched his head. “Crap, ah, congratulations?”

Vendel groaned, shaking his head. “Are you even reading the material I’ve given you?”

“You gave me a crapload of books. What made you think I could read all of it in such a short period of time? Besides, I’ve got homework,” Atlas confessed.

Vendel’s nose crinkled, his milky eyes narrowed. “Home…work?”

“Human school assignments,” he explained. “The teachers give us afterschool work.”

“You will need to drop it then.”

“The homework?” Atlas frowned. He rubbed his chin. “I don’t think the teachers will be too happy about that.”

“No, boy. School. It is obvious your activities in the human world are taking up too much of your time.”

A wave of fear brushed over him. No, no, no—Arcadia High was the only place he could interact with Claire. Atlas wasn’t ready to give that up. Not yet.

“I can’t. If I disappeared, the humans would get suspicious,” he argued. “Not a good idea.”
“Your role as the Trollhunter is far more important.”

“It’s not about importance,” Atlas said. “It’s about me. You need someone topside to keep an eye on the changelings.”

Vendel tapped a finger to his chin. “We could always get your little friend to do it.”

Atlas bit his lower lip. Toby’s tearful face flashed through his mind. He checked his phone. No new messages. He had tried to write one this morning but every time he typed a message out he deleted it. What was he supposed to say?

“No, he can’t.” Atlas said. “Not anymore.”

Vendel leaned closer. “And why on earth is that?”

Atlas switched his attention to the open window. He side-stepped around Vendel, staring down into the valley below. It was the only thing he liked about Vendel’s small abode. Trollmarket buzzed with activity, much like the town of Arcadia. His mind drifted back to his first visit. He never would have gone if it hadn’t been for Toby.

“I said some things that I can’t take back,” he finally replied.

“Ah, so that is the reason you have been moping around and neglecting your studies.”

Atlas swiftly turned, gesturing his pointer finger at Vendel. “I wasn’t moping and I already told you. I had homework.”

Vendel pushed the finger aside. “When was the last time you spoke with him?”

“Why do you care?”

“Humor me.”

“Yes, Blinky told me as much,” Vendel said.

He folded his arms. “What should I do? Toby violated my trust. I told him not to play around with that stupid gaggetack. I killed someone to protect him.”

“You are the Trollhunter. Killing is inevitable. It is in your job description.”

“It’s just,” Atlas paused, the emotions he’d tried to stifle returning once again. “I’m angry and sad and I didn’t even like Gladysgroe! She was terrible. She stabbed me once for calling her out for being lazy. Plus, she tried to hurt Toby, Blinky, and AAARRRGH!!! too. I would kill her again if I had to. I would pick Toby over her any day of the week.”

Vendel placed a hand on his shoulder. “Then forgive the boy.”

“It’s not that simple,” Atlas said, moving away.

“Isn’t it? I’ve seen how important the fleshbag is to you.”

“He probably hates me now.”

Vendel raised both eyebrows. He let out of long sigh. “I highly doubt that.”

“What should I do?”

“You’re asking me?” The troll snorted. “You never should have brought the fleshbag here in the first place.”

“Then I shouldn’t speak to him again?”
Vendel smacked his hand against his face. He returned to his desk, resting his staff against the shelves behind him. “Are you that daft, boy? Talk. Tell him. Resolve this childish conflict you have between yourselves.”

“It’s not childish,” Atlas argued.

“It is to me,” he contended. “See what the fleshbag thinks. You need all the allies you can get, both here and in the human world.”

“I said some pretty mean things.” Atlas scratched his cheek. “Things I can’t take back. What if he doesn’t want to be my friend anymore?”

“By Deya’s Grace,” Vendel groaned. “Go. Whether you fix your relationship with the boy or not has nothing to do with me. Either do or don’t. Now get out of here before I bludgeon you with my reading material.”

“But what about the lesson?”

“What about your human school?” Vendel countered.

“Touché.”

Vendel exhaled, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Trollhunter, let me bequeath a few words of wisdom: friendship is like a pebble from a riverbed. Some are useless and dull, but everyone once in a while, you find a piece of gold.”

“So what you’re saying is Toby is that piece of gold?” Atlas said.

“I’ll leave the interpretation of that unto you.”

“Thanks Vendel,” he said. For some reason, their talk made him feel more centered. Vendel was right; Toby was his friend. How Gladysgrove was handled had been a mistake, but it shouldn’t be
what destroyed their relationship. He checked the watch on his phone. If he hurried, he could catch the boy on his way to school.

Before leaving, Atlas turned back. He placed his fist against his chest, bowing dramatically. “Goodbye, honorable grandfather.”

Vendel threw a book at his head in response.

Toby trudged along. His feet dragged against the sidewalk, as if he were walking through mud.

Today was not awesome sauce. Nor was the day before that or the day before that. The bright sunny morning did nothing to relieve his mood either. Nothing would.

He had stayed in bed all of yesterday, too ashamed to go to school and face his friend. Well, ex-friend. Nana bought his excuse of food poisoning, but he knew he couldn’t keep it up for long. He had already missed enough class as it was.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Toby rubbed his eyes, trying to get rid of any residual tears. His stomach growled. He hadn’t eaten in over twenty-four hours, too nauseous to find the will. Sleep had been fitful as well.

But that was nothing compared to what his friend had gone through. What was Atlas doing now? Had Toby accidentally caused him to change sides? What if he was the reason Trollmarket and humanity were destroyed? Nuggat Nummies would probably go out of business. What if a troll decided to eat him? Crap, he really should have done more cardio. One would think running away from shapeshifters and goblins would be enough of a workout. Considering how much good food Atlas had been stuffing him with lately, any exercise was likely offset by that.

God, what he would do for another of Atlas’s homemade enchiladas.
Crapple Sauce. The thought of his best friend brought back the guilt again.

What was he going to do? Was it even possible to rebuild their friendship now? Toby was terrified and upset and all the worst sorts of feelings all rolled into one bad sushi roll of fried nerves and negativity. Great, and now he was thinking about food and shame.

“Check that baby out. Vespa 300 GTS Super,” a voice from behind said.

Toby froze, knuckles tightly clenched to the straps of his backpack. A small sliver of hope edged through the dregs of his self-loathing.

This was his only chance. He couldn’t screw this up.

“I…didn’t know you liked Vespas so much,” Toby said, trying to keep his wavering voice as steady as possible.

Bull. Of course he knew how much Atlas liked them. The guy had it as lock-screen screensaver for gosh sakes. It was another thing he and Jim shared. Not that he would ever tell him—Atlas was already sore over the similarities between him and his previous life. Plus, Toby liked having his body in one piece, thank you very much.

“Why do you think I kept the magazine you gave me?” Atlas asked.

He kept it? He kept it! Good, good, good, good, good, he inwardly chanted.

“So,” Toby started, turning around.

Atlas crossed his arms, cocking his head to the side.

Was he judging him? Did he think Toby was pathetic? He was feeling pretty pathetic. Oh god, this must be what it felt like to be in a play. He could almost feel the glaring spotlight landing on him.

Focus, he told himself. Too bad his mind didn’t care, going over a hundred different scenarios.
Toby kicked the air. Licking his dry lips, he blurted out, “Atlas, oh my gosh! What happened was so not awesome sauce and it was all my fault. I’m really sorry that—”

“It’s fine. I mean, no, it’s not fine but,” Atlas sighed, rubbing his neck. “We need to talk. Really talk.”

Toby continued to spill out words. “I was wrong. How I acted was stupid and childish and put us both in danger. I promise I won’t screw up like that ever again. It was so stupid. I feel terrible. I can’t believe you’re even talking to me. I thought you hated me and—”

Atlas put finger to Toby’s mouth, giving the boy his familiar lopsided smile. “Calm down, dude. It’s okay or at least it will be. I should probably apologize too. Things got heated and I said some things I regret.”

Toby threw his hands into the air. “No, no, no! I’m the one who is supposed to apologize, not you.”

“Not everything is one person’s fault.” The small smile on his lips vanished. “Toby, you need to be more careful. I want to trust you again.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to regain your trust, dude. Honest. I swear on my life.”

Atlas shook his head. “Don’t swear on your life, Tobes. Just promise you’ll do better. That’s all I want.”

Toby shook his head eagerly. “I will. Cross my heart and swear to die, stick a needle in my eye, dude. Tell me what I can do.”

Atlas looked perturbed at the promise (shoot, trolls didn’t have that kind of thing, did they?), but appeared to take them in stride. “You’re absolutely certain? This world isn’t like the human world.”

“I know.”
“Death is a very real possibility. The next Changeling you meet won’t hesitate to kill you now. You know too much.” Atlas leaned closer, the shadows of his face ever starker. “I’m giving you an out, here and now. We can just be friends at school. You won’t miss sleep or video games anymore. You can be a normal kid.”

If he had asked him after Nomura’s ambush, Toby knew he might have taken the words more seriously. Now, days without his best friend, he knew he couldn’t abandon the other boy, or rather, he didn’t want to be abandoned himself.

He had forgotten the feeling of loneliness. He didn’t want to ever go back to that nor have Atlas experience it either. Toby needed Atlas. He was his best friend.

A small part of him hoped the other boy felt the same way.

“We’re in this together. The amulet was what literally brought us back together. I won’t abandon you. I can’t.” Toby squeezed his hands into the fabric of his sweater. “I’ll be careful. I won’t do what happened before anymore. I promise.”

“There will be rules,” Atlas said.

“I’ll do anything, dude.” Toby begged, “Tell me.”

Atlas lifted his index finger. “I’ve talked with AAARRRGHH!!. He’s going to be guarding your home full time now.”

“Okay. That’s cool. Wingman can crash with me upstairs. My room’s big enough.”

“No more trips at night without me or the others,” Atlas said, raising a second finger.

Toby nodded. “Not a problem. I follow you around mostly anyway.”

“The gaggletack is a last resort.” Atlas presented a third finger. He motioned his other hand at the gaggletack beneath his shirt. “You can carry one around, but don’t use it openly. If you’ve got both of them, make sure they’re put some place someone won’t confiscate them.”
“Got it. I’ve got a hidden pocket in my backpack. I won’t tell a soul.”

“You’ll also need to take training more seriously, not just jogging back and forth in the Forge. With the ways things are, you might end up against someone from the Janus Order at some point, or worse, Bular. You need to be prepared.” Atlas said, his thumb raised to complete the rules list.

Yes! Yes! Yes! Finally! Toby jumped up and down in excitement. It took everything in his power not to squeal like a kid in Disneyland. Already he could imagine himself in badass armor, holding a super cool and equally badass weapon. Toby coughed to hid his high-pitched excitement from leaking out, replying, “I’m totally up to learning how to fight.”


“I can totally do that too. I’ll be the best dodger you’ve ever seen. I’ll even wear a Dodgers shirt if I have to. Please don’t make me wear one though, Nana and I are Giants fans,” Toby said.

His friend stared. “I…What?”

“Oh yeah. Sorry, baseball joke, not that I was joking about the dodging of course. Just trying to lighten up the mood and it did not work going by the look on your face and now I just feel super embarrassed. Forget I said anything. I’ll dodge. I’ll run. I’ll scream if I have to. Nana says I’m a good yeller,” he explained. Damn it, shut up, shut up, he thought. Of all the times to word-vomit, he had to do it when he was apologizing to him. Slow down, he advised himself. After a few moments of breathing, he restarted, saying, “I’m really sorry, Atlas. I’m sorry I’m such a loser. You’re my only friend and I nearly blew it and there are no words that could express how much I screwed up and how badly I feel. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. Tobes, I never would have figured out my past if it wasn’t for you. We just… We gotta be better.

“I totally agree.”

“I want to trust you again, I really do.”
“I’ll do my best to earn that back. I promise. I won’t go looking for danger anymore,” he scratched his neck. “But say, ah, if danger finds me, what should I do?”

“Avoid it as much as possible.”

Toby touched his index fingers together. He stepped back and forth anxiously. “And if it isn’t possible?”

“Well, that’s what tonight’s training is all about.”

Toby perked up. Training was tonight? Oh my gosh, oh my gosh—this was awesome sauce! He hadn’t expected they would be fighting so soon. He tried to rein in his enthusiasm, but the bemused smile at Atlas’s lips told him he wasn’t doing a very good job. He brushed the back of his hand against his sweater, striking a cool pose he saw some movie star do once. “Oh? What am I going to do?”

Atlas walked around Toby in a circle, his smile stretching even wider. “You’re going to go into the arena.”

“Coolio! Am I going to fight someone? Is it Blinky? He’s a big guy, but I think I can take him down if I hit him in the eyes. Oh man, I’ve never used a sling shot before. Unless you give me an axe, or a hammer. Or is it AAARRRGGHH!!!!? I’m not sure I could face the green guy without some cat hair.”


“Oh,” Toby’s eyes widened. “Oh fudge. Go easy on me?”

“Changelings don’t go easy on their opponents,” Atlas sand melodiously.

Toby visibly winced. “I can already feel the bruises.”

“That’s more like it,” Atlas paused mid-step. Toby tensed. It wasn’t as if the boy transformed, but his demeanor had shifted, more like the changeling he was and less like the human façade Toby had
grown accustomed. Atlas’s fingers curled, as if he still had his claws instead of pink tooth-bitten fingernails. If Toby squinted, he swore Atlas’s pupils had silted slightly, like one of Nana’s cats.

Atlas swerved his head around. “Did you see that?”

Toby’s brows furrowed. “Huh?”

“There was a goblin.” Atlas paced backwards, his eyes scanning the area. “It was holding something. I think it was a baby.”

“What would a goblin want with a baby?”

Atlas stopped walking. Toby could see Atlas’s skin turn a shade lighter. Atlas brushed his bangs back, shaking his head. “Maybe…no. It’s not possible. They wouldn’t, would they?”

Toby drew closer. “What?”

Atlas began to pace back and forth. “But how? I thought all of them were destroyed? But what other reason could there be?”

“Dude, tell me,” Toby groaned. He couldn’t stand not knowing.

“You can’t tell anyone. Not Blinky, not AAARRRGGH!!!, not even Vendel.” Atlas took in a deep breath. “This is just a hunch, but I think Arcadia’s going to have a new changeling soon.”

“What!” Toby exclaimed.

“Shush!” Atlas said, dragging Toby down into one of the alleys. “Do you want everyone to hear you?”

“How? I thought Goblins just guarded the bridge.” Toby glanced upwards. Damn, he wished he could have seen it. How could Goblins carry a baby with such tiny arms? Weight-wise it didn’t seem all that possible.
“That’s not their original purpose.” Atlas explained, “They take human babies then replace them with changelings. In order for a changeling to maintain its human appearance in this world, they place the baby in another world.”

“Another world?”

“The Darklands,” Atlas provided.

“That’s where Gunmar is trying to escape from! Oh my gosh, what if he gets out?”

“He won’t. Cracks form over time between our dimensions, but they only allow small things to pass.”

“Like babies and stuff?”

“Sadly, yes,” Atlas answered.

Toby scratched his head. “What’s gonna happen to it?”

Atlas adjusted his collar, not looking Toby in the eyes. “The baby will be cared for there. All familiars are. He or she will want for nothing.”

Toby raised an eyebrow. Something about that reply felt fake, like the repeated words of someone else. He wondered if Stricklander told him that himself or that was what Atlas actually believed.

“They won’t hurt them?” Toby asked.

Atlas began walking out of the alleyway. Toby followed right behind. “Not as long as the changelings are useful to Gunmar.”

“Whose baby was it?”
“I don’t know,” Atlas admitted. He cracked his neck from side to side. “But I’m definitely going to go find out.”
Chapter Summary

Atlas learns about his new coworker from Stricklander; later, he discusses what he's learned with Toby.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Charlie and meanqueensupreme (my bff irl) for helping me with this chapter. Also, shoutout to Vvvici and Trolololololz for their awesome art. I commissioned some comic pages from Vvvici. They're amazing at art and if you can I would totally recommend commissioning them.

http://tunafishprincess.tumblr.com/post/177842436871/vvvici-if-you-havent-read-tunafishprincess


Sorry I couldn't get this done sooner. Thank you for all the lovely reviews. I cherish each and every one of them. I hope you enjoy this new chapter!

“Good morning, young Atlas.”

Atlas stilled.

His pupils dilated. At his temple, sweat began to gather. The pipe creaked underneath his weight.

Stricklander clicked his pen, features obscured by a small mountain of papers. “What have I told you about walking in the daytime?”
Atlas dropped out of the ceiling. He hit the landing alright, though he did rock a little on his heels. A Professional gymnast, he was not.

The morning bell softly rang from outside the door. Soon, the hallways would be overflowing with anxious students and teachers.

He could have waited, he supposed, but that would have given Stricklander time to dodge his questions. Stricklander was a planner. Catching him off guard was the best course of action right now. If he wanted to know—really know—he needed to do this now, whilst the switch was still fresh.

He minced his way up to him, ears flicking back against his head. His attention centered on the windows. Atlas’s breath caught in his throat. The blinds were closed. He bit down a curse. It could only mean one thing.

Stricklander had been expecting him.

Not good.

“Technically, I’m inside,” Atlas pointed out, settling into one of the chairs.

Atlas deliberately sat up straight, even if all his body wanted to do was crawl into a hole and die. His father rose from behind the desk. Unlike Atlas, Stricklander was methodical to the nth degree. He ambled around the desk, both hands in his pockets.

What did he know? Was Atlas in trouble for something else?

Had he found out his secret?

The muffled sound of shuffling feet and laughter echoed in the background of the room. Atlas struggled to keep a straight face. Showing fear was the worst possible thing a changeling could do.
Stricklander pressed into his shoulder. Atlas tensed. The changeling leaned over into Atlas’s line of vision. “My point still stands.”

Atlas tilted his head upwards. Stricklander’s eyes crinkled, lips upturned into what Atlas could only describe as exasperated fondness. Tension fled his body. Thank the Pale Lady. Stricklander didn’t appear to be angry, though looks could be deceiving.

“I just wanted to talk with you,” Atlas confessed.

It wasn’t a lie. Atlas was generally curious, if not a touch nervous. A new changeling in the Order meant change. The last time the Order got a new member was when he joined.

A lot of changelings didn’t take very well to that change.

Stricklander released a soft snort, returning to his seat. He sat back, one leg crossed over the other while his arms locked together. Finally, he inquired, “You couldn’t have called me over the phone?”

“It’s important,” Atlas started. He paused before adding, “And I didn’t want anyone listening in.”

“A logical response. Well, what would you like to talk about?”

Atlas leaned into to the desk, placing his elbows on top of it. “You’re awfully cheerful. Care to share?”

Stricklander balanced the pen between his hands, tipping it from side to side like a see-saw. “Guess,” he teased, his accent more pronounced.

A playful mood then? He could work with this.

Atlas folded his hands together, placing them over his mouth. He glanced about the office. Nothing appeared out of order. He eyed Stricklander’s bag.Whilst nowhere near the level of a troll or a changeling, he smelled baby oil and dry milk in the air. He returned Stricklander’s gaze. “Something’s different. There’s been a change.”
“Any idiot can pick that up,” Stricklander chuckled. He waved his hand. “Go on.”

“It has something to do with the mission?” Atlas ventured.

“You’re getting warmer,” Stricklander commented. Positioning his chin beneath a perched hand, Stricklander’s eyes narrowed. His smile straightened into a thin line. The teen resisted the urge to squirm. “Did you think you can fool me, young Atlas? I know you know something. Speak.”

“The Trollhunter and his friend saw a goblin carrying a baby,” he confessed.

Stricklander growled, his eyes taking on a golden glow. Atlas hunched his shoulders. The changeling, having noticed his behavior, coughed into an closed fist.

“Those idiots. I told them to do it before dawn. Impudent fools. I knew we never should have entrusted the role to the goblins,” he bemoaned. He let out an exaggerated sigh before continuing, “Did anyone else see?”

“No, not that I’m aware.”

“Good, we cannot under any circumstances let this get out,” Stricklander pushed himself out of his chair, walking towards one of the shelves. He uncapped his pen to unlock the hidden door. It opened with a flourish, Stricklander stepping inside.

Atlas followed after him. He cocked his head to the right. “So, why was a goblin carrying a baby?”

“I think you know the answer to that particular question,” Stricklander remarked.

“There’s a new changeling in Arcadia,” Atlas stated.

Stricklander looked back out the secret passage before closing it. He recapped the pen before gesturing it at Atlas. “A simple deduction. What else?”
Atlas’s hands fiddled with the edges of his cloak. This wasn’t just a game, Stricklander was testing him. He had no clue for what purpose however.

“They’re from the Darklands,” he said, his eyes widening. “You brought in a rookie.”

“What brought you toward that particular assumption?” Stricklander pressed his pen into Atlas’s collarbone. “For all you know, it could be any one of us. It could be that fool Otto, or one of his fellow polymorphs like Eloise Stemhower. Why, it could even be King Arthur or Lancelot for all you know.”

“Those last two aren’t real. Besides, you would have said their name already if they were already here. This one doesn’t have a name yet, at least not one they’re comfortable sharing in the human world,” he said.

Changelings didn’t make up their names. They received them from their human counterparts. Atlas was the rare exception.

Stricklander brought the pen in-between Atlas’s eyes, holding it steadily between his thumb and forefinger. “Better, but you’re only skirting around the issue. What else have you theorized.”

“It has something to do with the Trollhunter.” Atlas made a grab for the pen, his father pulling away a split second faster than he. “You’re going to use the changeling against the Trollhunter in some way.”


Atlas started to walk around the room, deep in thought. It was a struggle to contain how much he knew versus what Stricklander himself did. He bit down on his bottom lip.

“Because you wouldn’t call in another changeling without a pretty good reason.” Atlas turned around. “You’re planning something.”

Stricklander reached out, stroking back a wayward bang.
“You’re getting so big. I remember when you were a tiny little wisp of a changeling,” Stricklander sighed, motioning his hand to his waist. “Soon I fear you’ll be taller than me.”

“And you’re switching the conversation.” Atlas pointed out, one eyebrow raised. “Nice try though.”

He patted Atlas’s shoulder. “Alas, you’re growing ever more observant. Good. It means I’ve trained you well. It’s about time you start putting what I’ve taught you into practice.”

“Not a lot of places to practice when all you do is clean and cook,” Atlas replied.

Warmth built within his stomach. He scratched the back of his neck. Atlas couldn’t stop the smile from emerging on his face. It was nice to catch his dad in such a good mood.

Making a sharp heel-turn around Atlas, Stricklander headed over to a long desk. He ran his fingers down the side of it, then frowned at the amount of dust it produced.

“You are young,” Stricklander said. “Putting you out into the field would have been suicide. While the retrieval of the amulet has been…difficult, I’m certain our newcomer’s presence will quicken the expediency of our mission. You and him shall work side-by-side to retrieve the amulet.”

Atlas’s brow furrowed. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, I thought this was a solo mission. My mission.”

“Bular wants fast results and you’re not producing them,” Stricklander remarked in a tired tone.

Panic gripped his heart. No, no, no. This was way too soon. He had barely even gotten a handle on not accidently transforming. Having a changeling breathing down his neck would make keeping his secret all the harder.

But Stricklander was right; he wasn’t producing anything of value.

“I’m sorry. I’ll do better,” Atlas replied.

“I’ve no doubt you will.” His eyes softened. “Bular lacks the understanding of finesse and precision
we changelings do. But I digress. If he sees you two working together, he will be more… manageable when we reach our goal.”

He swallowed, his throat dry. In a soft voice, Atlas answered, “To open the Killahed Bridge.”

“Precisely.”

“Whose baby did you take?” He asked.

“No one of importance.” Stricklander said, returning to the center of the room. “But they will be close enough to the Trollhunter without arising any suspicion. I doubt the boy will even notice.”

“You underestimate the Trollhunter. He is smarter than you think.”

Stricklander scoffed, “He is an idiot. A reckless child, full of openings. Nomura lost due to her arrogance. We will not make that mistake again. It’s time we returned to our roots, gathering intel through indirect means is the most important thing we can do.”

While his father’s worlds stung, he knew well enough to not show it on his face. Stricklander was suspicious enough of Jim’s mysterious origins. Atlas needed to be more careful.

Atlas pressed on with his questioning. “Indirect means? So it’s someone the Trollhunter knows.”

“Oh yes,” he chuckled. “Quite well.”

Atlas searched Stricklander’s self-assured gaze.

No.

It couldn’t be.
“Could it?"

“Claire.” Atlas added, “The Trollhunter met her baby brother a few days ago. That’s who you took?!”

Stricklander tapped his pen against Atlas’s breastplate. “Oh, don’t look at me like that.”

He turned his head, hiding his anger. A new changeling meant someone lost their real child. Guilt ate at him. He knew the process, a necessary evil for their kind, but he had not anticipated it affecting him personally.

His actions had caused this. Atlas clenched his teeth. Claire lost her baby brother because he kept the stupid Amulet. Logically, he probably did the right thing (one human baby for all the lives of Arcadia) but it didn’t make him feel any better.

Claire’s brother was lost. No one had ever taken a human baby out of the Darklands. It was impossible.

Another burden he would have to carry.

“This is a terrible idea. You’re putting both the girl and the changeling at risk,” Atlas argued. “What happens if Claire sees him shift?”

“Doubtful. Humans rarely find out. Claire is no different.”

“You’re taking a huge gamble.”

Stricklander’s eyes glowed once again. “Are you lecturing me, young Atlas?”

The room dropped several degrees. Atlas bowed his head.

“No sir,” he replied.
“Good,” Stricklander said, patting Atlas’s shoulder. “I’ll schedule a meeting between you two in a few days. I’ve given him your phone number.”

“Does he know about me?” Atlas asked.

Stricklander motioned his hand from side to side. “Vaguely.”

Atlas nodded, trying to absorb all the new information. This changed things. Time was no longer on his side, he needed to act.

But how?

“Any other reason for your surprise visit?”

“No, sir.”

Stricklander brushed back Atlas’s bangs then sighed. “You need a haircut soon. Your bangs are getting in your face again.”

Atlas rolled his eyes, pushing the man’s hand aside. “Dad.”

Stricklander shifted Atlas’s head from side to side. “You seem to be better today. Did something happen?”

So much. He couldn’t even begin to explain. Between the Janus Order, Trollmarket, and Arcadia High School, he barely had time to really think about things.

His mind flashed back to the last meeting with his mom.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately,” Atlas confessed.
“Care to share?”

He smiled wistfully. “Maybe another time.”

“Atlas, I know you’re still rocked by what happened, but I want you to know, our time is coming.” Stricklander gripped both his shoulders, excitement radiating in his voice. “We’re so close to our goal.”

“Understood, sir,” Atlas replied. “I should get going. You have class soon.”

Before he was able to leave, Stricklander cleared his throat.


He turned his head. “Yes?”

Stricklander placed his fingers together underneath his nose, his gaze calculating. After a few moments of silence, he said, “I want you to get a few pictures of the amulet for me.”

“Why?”

“Research purposes,” Stricklander remarked casually, placing his pen back into the pocket of his coat.

Atlas nodded then quipped, “Try not to get into any trouble.”

“I should say the same,” Stricklander retorted.
“For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is Mine to Command,” Atlas chanted.

Almost immediately the amulet’s magic engulfed him in blue light. Shower curtains whipped about from the force of power that emanated from it. His body turned warm and tingly, the transformation taking hold. Metal plates clicked together, just as his feet hit the ground with a sharp bang.

Atlas tucked his bang behind his rounded ear where it actually stayed for once. One of the few perks of humanity: tame hair. Not that his other form had bad hair, but running any kind of human comb through it had earned him more than one broken hairbrush.

Slinging the makeshift gaggle-tack necklace across his collarbone, he focused on deactivating the amulet. Blinky was right about the relaxation part. He breathed in and out, counting down like Stricklander taught him. Soon enough, he was back in the body of James Lake Junior. He peeled off his normal attire, tripping over his pants in the process. He banged his elbow into the tiled wall, hissing as a sharp pain ran through his arm.

He shucked off cloak before working on the bracers and chest plate. That was the problem with his transformations. It was an inconvenience. Even worse, it wasted time. By the time he redressed, the second period bell rang. By some miracle he made it into the class, only to be stopped at the door by a familiar face.

Stricklander.

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

He had his class today, didn’t he?

“Mr. Lake, late again I see,” Stricklander said in a cool tone. He opened the door, waving the teen inside.

“Sorry, something came up,” Atlas replied before laughing nervously.
He circled around Atlas like a hawk before noticing his behavior and backing off. “See to it that you are not late for another of my lessons, Mr. Lake. I would hate to give you detention so soon into your career at Arcadia.”

“Understood,” he responded in a quiet voice.

His friend waved cheerfully from the back of the class. Atlas’s shoulders relaxed. He passed Claire’s desk, sending a soft smile her way. She returned the grin with equal sincerity, sending his heart aflutter.

He slid into the seat next to Toby, his head low. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out his school-owned computer, along with some paper and pens. The other boy tapped his foot anxiously against the desk leg, producing a metallic clinking noise. Stricklander turned off the lights, starting up the projector to display a map of the Roman Empire on the classroom’s front board.

Minutes into the class, Atlas began to drift, his mind floating elsewhere. He picked up his pen, clicking it open and closed in tempo to the ticking of the clock behind him.

Toby edged his desk closer, hand covering his mouth. “So?”

Atlas blinked, dropping the pen. “Huh?”

“What did he say?” He asked.

Atlas’s gaze flickered to Stricklander—No, Mr. Strickler. Thinking about him otherwise could expose him by accident. Though the man was absorbed in his lecture, he still sent one or two looks towards him as he recounted tales of Roman emperors and philosophers in precise detail. It made Atlas wonder how old his father truly was, and if the tales he recounted in class were from his own personal experiences.

A student raised their hand. Mr. Strickler’s gaze fell onto them, allowing Atlas to scoot closer to Toby.

“It’s Claire’s brother,” Atlas whispered.
Toby’s mouth fell open. “No way, seriously?”

“Keep your voice down,” Atlas warned. “Do you want him to hear us?”

“What’s the plan then?” Toby said.

Atlas placed his head between two hands. “I don’t know.”

“Well, what would you like to do then?” Toby asked, his fingers dancing across the keyboard in front of him. “Do we good cop, bad cop the changeling dude? Oh, can I be the bad cop? I’ve always wanted to be the bad cop. Or anything really. Cause I’m behind you one ciento por ciento, dude.”


“Would Mr. Lake and Mr. Domzalski like to share something with the rest of class?” Mr. Strickler called out.

He ducked his head. “No sir.”

Mr. Strickler’s brows came together for a moment before smoothing out. He returned his spot at the front of the room, his attention back to the screen, pointing his pen at the shaded borders of the empire. “Now, as I was saying. The fall of Rome didn’t happen in one night. Several factors contributed to…”

Toby silently scooted closer, using his laptop to hide their interaction.

Atlas whispered into the other’s ear, “I don’t want what happened with Gladysgrove to happen again. We need another ally on the inside. Someone who can help me convince the rest. Just me isn’t enough, but if we had another. I think… No, I know we could convince Strickler and maybe Nomura. But we need something to bargain. Changelings aren’t like trolls and humans. You have to sweeten the deal. Make it something worth their while.”
“Like what?”

Atlas picked up his pen, doodling onto a scrap of paper. He started out with geometric shapes, slowly moving toward more defined forms. While no artist, he made sure to make them as clear as possible. He drew a young girl to represent the human, making sure to get her hair and outfit perfect before moving onto the other two.

“Come on dude, lay it on me,” Toby said, leaning over Atlas’s shoulder to see.

“Even though we’re technically the same species, trolls and changelings have very different ways of handling things. You remember what happened with Bagdwella and Rotguts?”

Toby nodded. “Yeah?”

“Well, outside of merchants, that’s not normal behavior. Trolls are more straightforward.” He added back spikes and large horns to the troll’s body. Then, in a moment of pure spite, drew a fluffy tutu around its waist. “They will tell you they don’t like you. Battle prowess is more important to them in comparison to changelings and humans. Trolls like Blinky are considered oddities.”

“Nomura seemed pretty into battle though.”

“Most Changelings aren’t like that.” He sketched out long hair on the changeling, giving it a wicked smile and large almond eyes. “For us, knowledge is power. We aren’t as physically strong as trolls, so we have to rely on other means. Bargaining and deals are commonplace, as is backstabbing when you get down to it. Every changeling is different. Some want old socks while others want Renaissance era pottery. It changes from changeling to changeling. The problem here is, we know nothing about this new guy.”

“Holy cheese, are those supposed to be Draal and Nomura? L-O-L. Nice.” Toby gushed, “Aw, you even drew Claire too.”

“Tobes, focus.”

“Okay, okay, got it.” Toby grinned, waggling his eyebrows. “Well, I know one thing.”
Toby leaned back in his chair, one hand reaching below. “While you were talking to you-know-who, I was scouting out the area. Using my old detective skills, ya know? I mean, the goblin couldn’t have gone too far right? Anyways, I searched one of the alleyways and you’ll never guess what I’ve found.” He lifted the top of his backpack. “Ta-da.”

A lopsided rabbit greeted him, it’s beady eyes staring directly into his soul, as if judging him.

Atlas scratched his head. “A plushie?”

“Well, it was sitting on the ground near a high wall, almost like if a certain monster stealing baby dropped it.”

“It could be anyone’s,” Atlas said.

“There wasn’t a whole lot of people in the area,” Toby explained, closing the flap. “It would be super suspicious if a baby’s favorite toy suddenly disappeared.”

“We have no clue if that’s Enrique’s or not,” Atlas argued.

Toby rolled his shoulders. “It’s the best lead we got right now.”

“Valid, but barely,” Atlas admitted.

“What should we do next then?”

“We can’t approach them now. Let’s go down to Trollmarket today and see what Blinky and the others say.”

Toby’s eyes widened, his lips turning upward. “Wow.”
“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just.” Toby shrugged. “I think you’ve changed a bit, that’s all.”

“Changed?”

Toby pressed his fingers together. “Well, normally before you were all ‘I’ll do it myself, no troll can tell me what to do, screw you Vendel’ whereas now you’re all like ‘we can’t do it alone, we should discuss this as a group’ sort of thing.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“You threw the amulet at Draal’s face.”

“One time,” he insisted with a shaking forefinger.

“And Blinky’s.”


His fingers tightened around the pen.

He glanced at the window. A human boy stared back at him. He peered down at his soft pale hands and pink cuticles. Goose-bumps prickled up his forearms.

A small voice in the back of his head asked, Are you?

Toby waved his hands. “Hey, it’s not that it’s bad or anything. It’s good! I’m glad you trust me and the other guys.”
He leaned forward, laying his head against his crossed arms on the desk. “I guess...having you guys around has been slightly useful.”

“Only slightly? I’m hurt,” Toby said.

“Maybe a bit more than slightly.”

A hand grasped both boys’ shoulders. Atlas immediately covered up the drawing with his forearm. They didn’t need to look up to know who it was.

“Boys,” Mr. Strickler said. He bent down to their level, annoyance in his voice. “Am I going to have to pull out a detention slip?”

Toby and Atlas glanced at each other before grinning sheepishly.
“Are you NUTS?” Toby shrieked.

When Atlas said training, he thought it would be more along the lines of a spar, or at the very least a game of tag. Well, maybe not tag. Did changelings even play tag? What about trolls? Did any of them even have sports? Wait, was there, like, an actual sports teams? That would be kinda cool. How many sports did they have? Were there, like, any professional ones and if so, could he get a jersey in his size? He would totally kill for some troll sports merchandise.
Speaking of kill.

Toby eyed the dagger mere inches from his face. His fingernails bit into his hands. Now was not the time to be distracted.

But seriously, what the hell? When his friend said he wasn’t going to go easy on him, Toby took it in stride. Atlas wouldn’t actually try to kill him, right?

Hot breath tickled his right ear. Toby very nearly wet his pants. He scrambled away from the wall, only to lose his footing and fall back, his rear smacking loudly against the stone floor. He groaned. That was going to leave a bruise for sure.

Atlas laughed deviously. He tried to send a menacing glare to his friend, but failed to do so when he got the full view of him.

The best metaphor Toby could use to ascribe to what he was seeing was a vulture awaiting its next meal. Seriously. Atlas stared down. No, not ‘stared down’, that didn’t capture the heightened sense of fear and rush of adrenaline Toby was currently experiencing. No siree. ‘Bore into’, that was it! He bored into Toby’s gaze so intensely Toby thought he would vomit spontaneously. It was that strong.

He knew it wasn’t on purpose. No. Wait. It was totally on purpose, but maybe not done to completely freak him out? It did anyway though.

And how could it not? Atlas’s lips were pulled back into a demonic grin, upper and lower canines prominent and sharp. The glow of his eyes did not help matters either.

It was times like these Toby was reminded of how different his old friend Jim and his new friend Atlas were.

Merlin’s pants. Toby had no chance.

_Huh, that actually kind of rhymed_, Toby thought. Guess he was a poet who didn’t know i—
A second dagger sunk into the space above his head. Had he been sporting an apple, it would have been cut into halves.

Toby almost fainted. Almost.

“I told you I wouldn’t go easy on you,” Atlas said (too cheerfully, in Toby’s honest opinion).

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you would do that!” Toby said, rolling away from Atlas’s next strike.

He got to his feet as soon as he could, jogging away from his friend. He zigzagged down the maze Blinky had set up.

Well, maze was a bit much. More like a funhouse of training material and human junk. Whereas half the area was stone columns and troll training tech, the other was a mix in match of broken mirrors, old furniture (was that Nana’s old couch?) and a host of other odd things, all compiled together in a blend of absurdity no one except Blinky could imagine.

His mind wandered aimlessly while his feet moved to the beat of his heart. Eh, perhaps not that fast, but fast enough. Where was he even going? What direction was he taking? Holy moly, this was crazy. He was crazy. Less than a month ago he was spending his nights playing video games. Now, he was the star of Toby Torture Time, brought to you by Blinky Productions.

His stomach growled and clenched with nausea. How could he be hungry and sick at the same time?

Ugh. This sucked. Sucked, sucked, sucked.

Toby was totally out of his element. He couldn’t see over the wall and he wasn’t strong enough to climb or break them down either.

Shit. Okay, he needed to stop going around like a chicken with its head cut off and plan. If he was moving erratically, Atlas would have more trouble hitting him. The problem was, running was not Toby’s forte. Like, at all.

Sure, he could make a mad sprint to the bathroom after Gym class, but running long distances? Next
to impossible for him. Domzalskis were not long distance runners. They were sturdy folk, descended from Polish warriors who defended the homeland against the Mongol hordes. At least, that’s how his Nana liked to tell it. He liked that version in comparison to the one where his great grandpa stole a horse and fled to America to avoid the authorities. First story sounded way better. Sturdy soldiers. Good for defense, terrible at fast fighting. Yeah. That fit.

Another blade zoomed past.

Toby may or may not have let out a small squeak. A manly one though. He ducked between a tall column and broken piano, peering out of a pair of broken keys to locate his pursuer. It didn’t take him much time. He spotted Atlas’s head above a pile of old desks.

It was fascinating to see how differently his friend moved. Jim, or rather, Atlas playing Jim, trapezed around like a foreigner in a strange land, not unlike a lot of his classmates in all honesty. His Trollhunter armor gave him more confidence, but it didn’t take away from that uncertainty in his posture. Even when he was in changeling form he didn’t deviate too much from the second.

But this was different. This wasn’t regular Atlas hanging about and laughing at his jokes. This was his friend in his inherent element. This was the changeling side, the part Toby was only just getting to know. Atlas’s gait was fluid and crouched, eerily similar to the pink changeling that tried to kill him. It wasn’t as smooth as Nomura’s of course—he had feet instead of hooves and kept moving his cape around to get weapons—but there was a likeness there. Definitely.

He wondered if Mr. Strickler was like that too. Was it a changeling thing or an upbringing thing?

“Rule One: Always be on your guard,” Atlas dictated, juggling five, no, six blades like it was nothing. “Changelings are masters of surprise.”

Toby shrunk away. He hid further underneath the piano, hoping his friend wouldn’t notice. “Dude, I do not need your version of the Trollhunters rules right now.”

Atlas threw another blade in response. It hit one of the keys above his head.

Toby flinched back, his backpack thumping against a pile of books. They toppled over, exposing his cover. Crap. He tried to find another hiding spot, but was too late.
Atlas zeroed in on him.

Another blade scraped his cheek. Toby yelped. He held the stinging wound, glaring up at his friend.

“Stop trying to kill me!” Toby exclaimed with shaking hands.

Atlas took three more from his cloak (where the hell did he hide that many weapons?) before shooting them off, one by one, in Toby’s direction. “Then stop standing still.”

Toby sidestepped the attack, summersaulting behind one of the training dummies. Oh god, he thought, this is it. Why did he ever agree to this? He screwed his eyes shut, waiting for the end.

Except, it didn’t.

He heard Atlas walking away, his footsteps echoing throughout the forge.

Sweat beaded at his forehead. His armpits were wet and sticky too. He sniffed himself and retched. Deodorant! So that was what he had forgotten this morning. No wonder Atlas found him so easily.

He waited a moment.

And then another.

But nothing. A wave of disappointment hit Toby. He looked past the training dummy. The maze wall was too high for him to climb, but he could see two figures at the opposite side, joined by Atlas.

His hands grew clammy. What were they doing?

Toby’s shoulders lowered. Was it over? Oh please, let this be over.

A French horn began playing, steadily growing louder. More instruments joined into the fray. It was
the sort of music that made someone uneasy, like déjà vu but in symphony form.

Suddenly, the notes took on a booming edge. Toby’s heart hammered against his rib cage.

Of all that is holy and nuggety, why must he endure this hell?

“Are you serious?” Toby said, hysteria riding his words. His hands were vibrating, or perhaps he was too exhausted to see straight. “Are you seriously playing classical music right now?”

“I wanted to get in the mood,” Atlas yelled back, his voice echoing through the forge.

“Chasing me around wasn’t enough?”

“Tobias, Master Atlas merely wants you to be better prepared for any future scenarios,” Blinky spoke up.

“Payback,” AAARRRGGGHH!!! stated.

“Thank you, AAARRRGGGHH!!!,” Toby said (well, screamed, but same difference at this point). “At least someone is being truthful.”

The music began to climb. It was a full on orchestra, Toby realized, and a popular one to boot. He recognized it as one of Atlas’s ringtones.

“I promised I wouldn’t maim you,” Atlas said, his voice louder as he returned to finish Toby off.

“Oh, but everything else is fair game?” Toby snarked.

A dark shadow appeared above his head. He whimpered, knowing exactly who it was.

“Dodge!” Atlas yelled.
Toby barely escaped, three blades now occupying his previous position. His heart leapt to his throat.

Atlas danced across the maze walls, swinging his weapons around like they were toys.

“Nothing can be worse than this,” Toby lamented between breathes. He darted from wall to wall, making sure not to be in Atlas’s line of sight.

“Are you so sure about that?” Atlas asked.

Horror began to dawn on Toby’s face. “Whatever you’re thinking about doing, stop. Please.”

It turned out, Atlas was quite good at doing worse.

In what could honestly be the worst English accent imaginable, Atlas proclaimed, “I am burdened with glorious purpose.”

“Oh no!” Toby said, almost stopping. “Oh, no, no, no! You are not using supervillain lines against me. Marvel is sacred. Sacred!”

Atlas leaped from junk pile to junk pile, searching for Toby. In a deep voice he said, “Really? Well, Tobes, I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

“Not Star Wars, too!” Toby groaned. He never should have done Saturday movie marathons with him. This was the deepest of betrayals. He was about to turn a corner when he jerked back behind an old lazyboy.

Atlas was ten feet away. Toby tried to hold his breath, but he still made enough of a sound to catch the other’s interest.

“Dread it…run from it…” Atlas whispered, popping over the headrest. “Destiny still arri—fuck! Ow! What the fuck, dude?”
“That’s what you get for ruining my childhood,” Toby shot back, waving his fist.

“You punched me in the nose!”

Atlas’s eyes narrowed, he flicked something with his right hand, so fast Toby barely saw what it was.

A soft whoosh flew by his shoulder. Toby moved away in response.

“You underestimate the power of the dark side,” Atlas said.

Toby tried to sock his friend in the nose again, but the other was gone, jumping to the top of the makeshift wall. “I hate you so much right now.”

“Dodge!” Atlas yelled again. This time, he used smaller weapons. Toby had to stop, drop, and roll to save his ass. He sent a silent thankful to Coach Lawrence and his fire safety lessons. Brutal, but efficient.

Toby looked behind at his previous position, noting the tiny metallic weapons on the floor. Wait, were those—

“Oh my gosh, are those ninja stars?” Toby cooed.

*Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,* Toby inwardly chanted. Real life ninja-stars! He picked one up, his inner-anime nerd freaking out.

“Yes,” Atlas said, lazily ringing one around his finger.

“Can I have one? Where do you get these? Holy moly, these are so cool. How many of these do you have? How many can you fit into that cloak?”

Atlas shook his head. “Rule Number Two: don’t ask questions when you’re running for your life.”
A shuriken embedded itself into his backpack. Toby was equally horrified and amazed. He pulled it off, chucking it in Atlas’s direction.

Atlas side-stepped the projectile.

“Oh come on!” He groaned, turning to flee.

A dark shadow enveloped him. He tried to move, but barely a second went by before Atlas slammed into him. Toby struggled, but Atlas’s weight held him down. It was frustrating; he could breathe but anything else was next to impossible.

“Rule Number Three: When in doubt, spit at them,” Atlas said.

Toby covered his face. “Please don’t. I surrender. Uncle! Uncle!”

“This has been fun,” Atlas said, his breathing heavier than before. There was a childish gleam in his eyes now. “I don’t think I’ve had this much fun in a while.”

Toby shimmered out from underneath the other boy until he could move his arms. “Yeah, yeah. You win. Congrats. But seriously, why not just kick them in the gronk-nuts?”

“Not all trolls are males,” Atlas explained. “Are you ready?”

Atlas leaned closer.

“No!” Toby moaned. “I give! I call upon the best friend code! Bros don’t loogy bros!”

Atlas laughed, ruffling his hair. “Kidding. I’m kidding. Come on, I think we’ve done enough for today.”

Even though his friend let off, Toby found himself unable to move anymore. His legs would no
longer cooperate. He turned his head to the side, sighing dramatically, “Save yourself. I’m just gonna die here for a bit and, wait, no, what are you doing? Stop!”

Atlas picked him up by the armpits, carrying him down the maze. Blinky met them at the entrance, an excited gleam in his eyes.

“Time! Excellent work boys. Why, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you run so fast, Tobias. You evaded our Trollhunter for thirty minutes. That is quite a feat.”

“Thirty? I thought it was an hour,” Toby moaned dramatically. Atlas released him to his feet. Toby collapsed to the floor, relishing the cold stone against his overheated body. “I’m dying.”

“You’ll live.”

Toby shifted his head to the side to get a view of Atlas. “Are we even now?”

“If you’re going to survive you need to learn how to run away,” Atlas said, bending down to his level. “Use your surroundings.”

“I thought I was going to learn some basic running techniques or something,” Toby responded after several gasps for air. “You didn’t even give me a shield! How can I run away when I’m being attacked with a thousand knives?”

“You need to get better with your endurance. Defending means nothing if you can’t last long enough.”

“In time you will, Tobias.” Blinky added, two hands held together in front of him while the others were holding a book. “But Master Atlas is right. Your wellbeing is important to us.”

“How bad was I?” Toby inquired.

“You…well…” Blinky coughed. “I think it best we work on your focus. You lack concentration for the task at hand. Mayhap it would do you well to start training your mind. I have a number of materials you could partake in to improve your focus issues. Games, for example, might be one—”
“I’ve got some videogames at home. I’m sure one of them could help,” Toby said. “Could…could that help?”

Blinky scratched his chin. He didn’t appear to like the idea, but he wasn’t disapproving either. A good sign. “You will need a supervisor, someone who can monitor your progress.”

“Wingman and I are rooming anyway,” Toby said, signaling his thumb to the large green troll in the room. “Why not him?”

Blinky turned to Atlas, who shrugged.

“I don’t want to see what happened with Nomura happen again,” Atlas responded, folding his arms. He rose back to his full height. “If you think videogames will help you focus, then I’m all for it. You just have to know how to get away without getting distracted.”

“Wingman,” AAARRRGGHH!!! added with a big smile.

Atlas nodded. “Changelings won’t give you mercy. You have to be focused.”

Toby wiped the sweat from his eyes. Yeah, they were right. He was the weakest link, but that didn’t mean he had to stay that way. He pulled himself up, dusting off his pants. Even though his muscles were on fire, he resolved to push past the pain.

“Aw, you guys are awesome sauce,” he said, then switched his attention to Atlas. “So, on the subject of changelings, what are you going to do about the new one?”

Atlas frowned, his hand reaching for his pocket. “I’ve got a few ideas in mind.”

“How many of them do you think will work?”

“If we’re lucky?” Atlas pulled out the amulet, the device slowly whirling to life. “One.”
Claire giggled.

Jim, despite his initial awkwardness, was surprisingly enjoyable to talk to, if his texts had anything to say about it.

Sure, he could be cheesy (the juan jokes were the worst), but all and all, he seemed like an interesting guy.

Weird, definitely, yet it was almost endearing. He stood out, even when he wasn’t trying to do so. Claire attributed it to his foreignness.

Sometimes he said things that didn’t make sense (what on earth did Bushigal mean? Was it Canadian slang for something?) while other times he could make her break into laughter (and get in trouble too, especially after spraying water at Steve during rehearsal).

Their discussions were never just one subject either. They covered everything. Music, theater, history, memes—every day was different.

Different. That was the best definition for him. Jim wasn’t like the other guys in school. No, really. He didn’t poke fun of her dreams of acting or get bored when she babbled on about her favorite playwrighters.

He listened. She liked that.

While she had been annoyed at his constant missing of rehearsal, she could sympathize with his situation.

Plus, she thought guiltily, I did sort of push him into it in the first place. Being the new kid, he was
probably eager to make new friends. Claire took advantage of that, all because they didn’t have enough boys in the play. She never considered what home life was like for him either.

Maybe one day he would open up to her. For now, however, she would enjoy the silly memes and videos he texted over.

She flipped through her collection of short gifs, choosing her favorite, then pressed send. Darci peered over her shoulder.

“Aw,” Darci giggled. “You got a crush.”

“Oh, shut up,” Claire mumbled. She playfully punched her friend in the arm.

“You got it bad,” Darci pointed out.

Claire tucked a loose hair behind her ear, clicking off her cell. “I do not.”

“You spent part of yesterday doodling his face in your notes,” Darci said.

“So? I draw you and Mary all the time.”

Darci rolled her eyes. “Bull, girl. Have you seen your math journal lately?”

Damn. She got her there.

“Okay, so I’m a little interested in him,” she relented. “But he just seems so lonely, you know? He’s got this aura of mysteriousness. I only want to help. Other than Toby he doesn’t seem to have any other friends either. And when was the last time Arcadia high had a transfer student? He’s probably going through a lot. I can’t imagine moving away from all I’ve ever known.” She added in a soft mumble she hoped Darci wouldn’t hear, “He’s kinda cute too.”

Darci’s brows crossed together. She gave Claire an incredulous look. “Him? For real?”
“What? He’s not so bad.”

Darci did not look convinced. She countered, “He’s a beanpole,”

“Oh, he is not,” Claire laughed, bumping her friend with her shoulder playfully. “He’s got a runner’s build. There are tons of guys like that at school.”

“Still super skinny. He needs more meat on his bones, like his friend.” Darci squinted, as if trying to remember the boy’s face. “His face is pretty average, I mean, in comparison to most of the guys you’ve dated. Kinda long for his body type. His smile is weird too.”

“You’re nitpicking. Have you seen his eyes?” She asked, motioning to her own to demonstrate. “They’re so blue. Not regular blue, but electric, you know? Not just one color either. They change in the light too. I swear, sometimes they look like the glow or something. They’re so pretty.”

Darby nudged her in the side. “What a coincidence. That’s your favorite color.”

“Shut up. You suck,” she groaned. “I am not awake enough to deal with this. I spent half of last night studying.”

Darci laughed. She leaned closer, a secretive smile on full display. “Are you going to ask him out?”

Of course that would be what Darci would ask. Geez Louise, it wasn’t even first period yet. What was supposed to be a nice walk to school ended up switching to the subject of boys. Why was everything about dating anyway? Couldn’t a guy and girl just be friends?

Still, it wasn’t as if she didn’t think about it.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “With school, the play, and everything going on at home, I’m not sure I really have time to date someone.”

Darci pulled away, letting out a dramatic sigh. She stretched her arms above her head. “Girl, you
“That’s why I’m going to the concert tonight,” Claire replied, perking up. She couldn’t hide the excitement in her voice. “Less than twenty-four hours until I’m only a few feet away from Papa Skull! Oh my gosh! I haven’t been this excited since, like, forever!”

“Your parents,” she said, emphasizing the words with two air quotes. “The same parents who freaked out when you failed a history exam parents? Your parents are actually letting you go?”

“Well, not exactly. I told them I was, but I got Mary to babysit tonight,” Claire explained. “I’ll be home way before they notice a thing.”

“Wait, doesn’t she have that thing?” Darci said.

Claire was about to ask what thing before her attention zooming in on the scene in front of her.

Toby and Jim were standing by the bike rack. But that wasn’t what caught her eye. It was what was in Jim’s hands, or rather, who.

“Oh my gosh! You have Suzy Snooze?” She called out, leaving Darci’s side. “My—I mean, my brother’s bunny! I’ve been looking all over for it.”

Jim stood up, passing her the beloved toy. She cradled it like a baby. Nostalgia rose in her chest.

“You’ve been looking for this?” Jim said.

“Yeah,” she confirmed, stroking it’s fur. Even after sixteen years it was still as soft as ever. A few patches were not so hairy as before, but that was fine. “He’s been acting so weird without it.” She looked up. “Where did you find this?”

“School,” Jim said at the same time Toby said, “Downtown.”

The two boys looked at each other. There was a battle of expressions before Toby explained, “What
my friend Jim means to say is we found it crossing through downtown on our way to school.”

“So,” Jim asked, hands moving to the rhythm of his words. “How, exactly, has your brother been acting? Any suspicious behavior? Has he eaten any socks, per chance?”

She raised a brow.

“Easy Jim!” Toby pulled his friend aside. “Ha, ha, he’s always concerned about the kids. You know, comes from a big family and all.” He drew closer to her, looking up with a sheepish smile. “You’re, like, totally absolutely positively certain this is his, right?”

Claire nodded, sparing a fond glance at her old childhood friend. “I think I’d know the stuffed bunny I grew up with.”

Toby nudged Jim. “Hey, didn’t you have something like that growing up, Jim? I remember you used to bring a stuffed blue bear to my place, rem—oh.”

“No, Toby,” Jim said in a monotone voice. “I don’t. Drop it.”

There it was again. There was a vulnerability in his gaze, one that called out to her. She wanted to tell him it was okay. She wanted to know all the things he bottled up.

But the words stayed locked behind her lips.

“Jim,” Claire started, only to be distracted by the arrival of a newcomer.

Mary almost knocked into her headfirst. Claire had to pull away from the boys, standing a few steps back. After catching her breath, Mary jerked her head up, pupils blown out and guilt-ridden. Noticing her appearance, she brushed herself off, putting on a more refined girl persona. “Claire, oh my gosh, I love you but I’m so sorry. I just can’t babysit tonight.”

Claire stared. This couldn’t be happening. She must be having a nightmare.
“I can’t.” Mary stressed, “I *really* can’t.”

It took her a moment to find her words. Once she did, she responded angrily, “What the heck? You promised! My parents have a work thing and Papa Skull’s concert is tonight. Tonight. Not tomorrow, not this weekend, tonight.” She gestured at her shirt. “Papa Skull, who in case you haven’t noticed, I, like, have been living in their shirt since forever! I thought we had a deal?”

“Sorry,” Mary apologized (though honestly she sounded the least bit so). “But Dean finally asked me to a movie, you know, the one about the two star-crossed lovers, and then Hank invited me to ice cream. Ice. Cream. When is this girl ever going to get another chance like that? Hank! Tight jeans Hank! Did I mention he has tight jeans? I’m sorry, but love can’t choose, Claire. I’ve been waiting months for him to ask me out. Months.”

“I’m five seconds away from strangling you,” Claire groaned. “Do you know how much I saved for those tickets?”

Well, not the tickets she was *currently* sporting. Steve’s offer to be driver and the two front row tickets were way better than the nose-bleed one she got online.

Besides, what fan would turn down a chance like that?

Not Claire, that’s for sure.

But if Mary and Darci couldn’t do it, who would?

Panic set in. She needed to go to this concert. She had been dreaming about it for months. She babysat for Enrique all the time. Why couldn’t she be a teenager for once?

Jim coughed, drawing closer. He raised a hand. “Claire, I can babysit.”

She turned to her savior. “No way. Tonight? Really? You would?”

“See? Problem solved,” Mary said, already turning to leave. “You guys don’t need me to help, right? Great! Bye Claire!”
Claire rolled her eyes as her friend left for her locker. Last time she ever asked Mary for anything important.

Jim gave Claire a cute lopsided smile. Her heart became aflutter with relief.

“Uh, yeah,” he affirmed. “I babysit for my cousins all the time.”

“What about your folks?” Claire asked.

Jim shrugged. He looked away. “My dad is busy, so I’m pretty free for the night.”

Toby chuckled nervously before grabbing Jim’s shoulder. “Uh, what about training and the plan from last night?”

“We can train later,” Jim said, brushing the other boy’s arm off.

Toby grabbed his arm, pulling him to his level. “Don’t you have lessons with Vendel?”

Claire interrupted, “Who’s Vendel?”

Jim scratched his head. “My…uh…”

“Jim’s Grandpa,” Toby supplied. “He supervises us. Wants Jimbo over here to take over the family business.”

Claire cocked her head to the side. A family business? But wasn’t he from Canada? Maybe it was a multinational one. “Oh, what kind of family business?”

Was it a popular dojo or sports facility? It would explain why Jim seemed to have a different bruise every week. It would also explain why he took Steve down so quickly.
“It’s hard to explain,” Jim said, brushing a hand up and down his arm. “But it doesn’t matter. If you’re in a bind, I’d be happy to help.”

“Oh, my gosh! You are a life-saver!” Claire exclaimed. “I could kiss you! Just come by my house at seven, no sooner, okay?”

“Works for me.”

Feeling giddy, she drew close, planting a small peck on his cheek. His cheeks grew adorably red, making his eyes all the more brighter. She laughed.

“Thank you, Atlas,” she whispered before pulling back.

Toby gawked, too shocked to say anything.

What? Did the kiss really stun them that much?

Claire shook her head, rejoining Darci at the entrance door.

Boys.
Adventures in Trollsitting (IV)

Chapter Summary

Atlas screws up his meeting with the changeling. Toby screws up playing video games with AAARRRGGHH!!!. And in the end the Trollhunters agree to a fragile bargain with what could easily pass as kermit's mutated brother.

One thing is for sure.

Atlas is never babysitting for Claire again.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Finally finished this big chapter. More than 8 thousands words! Dang! I hope ya'll enjoy it. Thank you for all the lovely reviews, favorites, and kudos. Seriously. Stuff like that keeps me going sometimes. Big thanks to Charlie and Dankqueensupreme for helping me with this chapter. Ya'll are awesome. Also, callout to spacerocknroll for doing this super cool cover for the fanfic, which I'm gonna add to the wattpad version of this story.

http://spacerocknroll.tumblr.com/post/178299709336/tunafishprincess-bone-app%C3%A9tit

Check out their art! It's super good!

I keep all the fanart for the fic on my tumblr tunafishprincess. I'm also now on amino, so if you want to drop a line and say hello, I'm always happy to chat. :D

Hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Atlas adjusted his collar.
Claire’s front door was only a few feet away. *Deep breathes,* he reminded himself.

He could do this.

Blinky would be here within an hour. Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! were on standby if anything bad happened to him beforehand. He just needed to make it through the next sixty minutes.

He checked his phone. Fifty-nine minutes left.

*It’s go time.*

After a moment of hesitation he knocked, letting out a nervous, “Hey, Claire.”

“Jim! Come on in,” she called back, waving at him through the door’s semi-clouded glass.

Atlas carefully opened the door, quickly scanning the premises. The area looked exactly how it did during their last study session. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Yet.

“I put his routine up on the fridge,” Claire mentioned as she pressed a spoon to the baby’s lips. Letting out a childish gurgle, the child (*changeling, Atlas corrected, he’s probably centuries older than you anyway*) ate up the mashed meal with gusto. “After playtime, you just have to put him down. He’s a good sleeper.”


She rolled her eyes, but that didn’t stop her from throwing him a genuine smile. Wow, were her lips always that red or did she change lipsticks?

“All the phone numbers are here for emergencies. My number, Darci and Mary’s numbers, the ER, his pedestrian,” she listed off before motioning the piece of paper at him. “But whatever you do, do *not* call my parents first.”
The sudden realization made his eye widened. In response, Atlas smirked, crossing his arms. “Oh, you’re good. They don't know you're going to the concert, do they?”

“You're not the only one hiding a secret,” she shot back playfully, handing him the note. “So, if your secret is eating babies, now is the time to tell me.”

“Alas, you’ve caught me,” Atlas jested, placing a hand to his heart. “They call me Jim the baby muncher back home.”

She punched him in the shoulder. “Cute.”

“Wait, Claire,” he said, stopping her at the door.

“Yeah?”

“About your brother. I’m not so sure—” He paused. Claire was just a human girl. A human girl whose brother was replaced with a changeling, his inner voice reminded. What was he going to say? Oh hey, your brother is gone because of my piss-poor decisions and now I’m gonna try and negotiate what could be the beginning of my end or the start of a changeling revolution.

That’ll go over real well.

But was the situation really all that bad? Enrique was safe in the Darklands. He would want for nothing. He would sleep, eat, and play with goblins forever, never knowing hunger, thirst, pain, or any of the problems the human world held.

Yeah, his conscience provided, but he would never grow up either. Because of you, Bular brought in another changeling. Because you kept the amulet, Claire’s family lost their child.

“Nevermind. Forget it.” He let out a small snort, waving his hand dismissively. “You’d never believe me anyway.”
She leaned forward, concern in her gaze. “You sure? Is everything going to be okay?”

“Yeah. And out of the kindness of my heart, I promise not to eat your brother.”

“Hmm,” she said as she rolled her shoulders. “Well, alright. That’s good enough for me. You’ve got my number.”

“Already saved in my phone,” he said. “Wait, that sounded creepy. I mean, you gave me your number on my first day here and I added it. I didn’t just add it the second you gave me this number or anything.”

She laughed. “Dude, it’s cool. I’ve got yours saved too.”

She did? Atlas’s cheeks burned. She saved his phone number. What did that mean? He would need to consult Toby about it.

At the front of the house someone honked. Claire glanced at the window.

“Oh, there's my ride,” she said, passing over the bowl of baby gruel. “Bye, bye, hermanito. Big sis will be back soon.”

Atlas glimpsed down below. The baby bounced along happily, playing the part of the infant to the utmost degree. If he wasn’t Claire’s fake brother, he would be impressed.

Wait. A roll of nausea settled into the pit of his stomach.

What if the baby was Claire’s brother? What if his dad knew he was the Trollhunter and was using the real Enrique as bait?

He wouldn’t put it past Stricklander. Manipulation was his forte. Not to mention he had lied to Atlas more than once these past few weeks.

Claire give him an odd look. “Jim, seriously, is everything okay? Do I need to call this off?”
“What? Yeah, yeah, yeah. It’s fine,” he replied shakily. Atlas tried to change the topic. “Oh, uh, what should I do if he gets out of the swing? Does he know how to crawl yet?”

“Oh, don’t worry. He’s buckled in good.” Claire said as she checked herself in the mirror.

Atlas hid a chuckle as she snapped little barrettes into her hair. Like she needed more. Human girls were strange creatures, he decided.

He scratched the back of his neck. “Do I need to feed him later or…?”

“Nah, I think at this point he’d rather play with his food than eat it. My parents are at some kind of fundraiser, so they won’t be back until ‘late’ late. I’ll be out for two or three hours max.” Claire paused before counting things off with her fingers. “What else am I forgetting? He loves games. Peek-a-boo, hide-and-seek. What else?”

He opened the door for her. If Stricklander taught him anything (besides espionage and knife throwing) it was that etiquette went a long way with people, especially girls. Not that he was trying to woe Claire or anything. No way.


Was she wearing mascara tonight? Her eyelashes were so full up close.

“I’ve got this.” He added, “Enjoy the concert.”

“And help yourself to anything in the fridge,” Claire replied, shaking her head when her ride blared their car horn. “I’m coming! Sheesh-kebab, can’t a girl catch a break?”

He smiled, watching her walk down from the house to the street, only to immediately lose control of his jaw at the sight of her driver.

“What the—” He clenched his teeth, cutting off the curse.
Steve smirked, the gap between his front teeth visible. “What's up, my Juliet?”

“You're going with him? After all the things he’s done to—Eli?” He swallowed the ‘me’. Atlas frowned. He would not make this about himself. It didn’t make it any better however. It burned. A lot.

Claire and Steve being together, side by side, at the concert? What if they touched? What if they held hands?

Atlas froze.

What if they kissed?

“He, um, bought the last tickets,” Claire said, wincing at his tone. “He’s really not so bad, once you get to know him.”

“Like my ride, buttsnack? Last on the showroom floor. Handles like a dream,” Steve sneered, though his lisp made the action far less threatening.

“Stop it, Steve,” Claire admonished.

Cool. He was cool. Good thing Stricklander taught him that breathing trick for his anxiety. He counted off the seconds, inwardly listing all the reasons he was here. This was a favor to Claire. He needed to talk to the new changeling without her interference. Getting her out of here was the best possible option. He told himself he was only doing this for the future of his people.

He could feel his mask settling into place. Perfect.


“That’s only for theater, dumbass,” Steve said.
While Atlas retained his calm demeanor, he couldn’t help but answer dryly, “I know.”

Claire furrowed her brows, rubbing the arch of her nose before getting up on the backseat of Steve’s ride. “You guys are ridiculous. But thanks again, Jim. Really. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Steve started up the moped (all the while Atlas silently judged his mismanagement of the vehicle), letting out a whistling “Buttsnack!” as they hit the road.

Whatever. Atlas crossed his arms; he had bigger things to take care of.

Nonetheless, he still watched them leave. For a moment, he imagined himself on that scooter, Claire’s arms around his chest, her chin at his shoulder—an impossible dream, yes, but that didn’t make the desire any less painful. He released a long sigh.

Claire made him peculiar. This ‘crush’ was beginning to take over his life. Honestly, he shouldn’t even get too attached. Especially considering what happened with her real brother.

Atlas shot a look over his shoulder. He dropped his backpack beside the door.

“I don’t care who you are, but we leave Claire and her family out of this,” Atlas commanded whilst slamming the front door.

The baby gurgled, still pretending to be human. It was rather believable; a normal person would have second-guessed themselves at this point. Even Atlas had second-guessed himself at the beginning.

But Atlas was a changeling.

The unbuckled belt was his first indication. Claire’s words haunted his thoughts.

This was dangerous territory. What he did he could either help him or destroy him.

“You’re good. I’ll admit, I’m impressed you’re still keeping a straight face in front of the
“Trollhunter.” He said, keeping his attention on the baby. “Gladysgroe didn’t.”

Enrique (or rather, Not Enrique) threw one of the toys, possibly as a distraction. He began to snuffle when it wasn’t returned to him. An excellent ploy. But Atlas knew better.

“How does Gunmar treat you, really treat the changelings in the Darklands? Scratch that, he probably doesn’t even know your name. Has he even looked at you, even once? I doubt he has. I doubt Bular even said anything when you left the Darklands. It was probably Stricklander or Nomura who handled you, right?”

There! The changeling’s expression became guarded, his hand halfway down to the buckle holding him in. Now he’d gotten his attention.

Atlas hunched down in front of him. He pulled off his gaggetack from underneath his shirt, holding it out.

“You know what this is? Good. Maybe this will make you listen.” He held the horseshoe closer to the child. “The Gumm-Gumms don’t care about the changelings. You’re disposal to them. All changelings are. You might think you have some immunity here, playing Claire’s baby brother, but I have news for y—”

His head jerked back, nose stinging. He fell backwards, hitting his head against the wooden floor. Pain shot through his side as Blood filled his nostrils. He wiped the liquid with his sleep. It wasn’t broken, but it sure as hell wasn’t good. A few tears threatened to escape as he struggled to realize what just happened.

How had he not seen that coming? Here he was trying to bargain and the dick sluged him.

He growled. That little asshole.

Atlas got up, but found the changeling had vanished. Damn. He clenched his shirt in frustration, only to realize a second later what had also disappeared.

Dread clawed at the edges of his mind. He crawled over to his backpack, reaching into the pocket he normally kept the amulet, only to find that, too, was gone.
He checked the watch on his phone. Fifty minutes. He had five before his human form was gone. Ten, if he was lucky. He just needed to stay focused. He had kept his human form once before, right? He just needed to recreate that.

Soft baby laughter echoed down the hallway.

He swung his legs around, using his forearms to pick himself up. His nose still hurt like the dickens, but the longer he waited the more advantage the other would have over him. Phone in hand, Atlas tiptoed through the house. Each step creaked beneath his feet. Whatever element of surprise he had was gone. The changeling had his amulet and his gaggletack.

Sweat gathered at his temple.

Metal pots clattered together. Atlas immediately turned into the kitchen. He flicked on the lights.


He crept closer, his hand perched to pick up the paper cup.

Except something else got to it first.

He jerked his fingers back. The creature hissed, retreating around the kitchen island. It was a cat. Well, kitten, but whatever.

Oh sweet Pale Lady. Atlas placed a hand to his chest, hoping to calm his heart, only to discover a new problem.
His nails were lengthening, the pale pink cuticles darkening at a rapid pace. His jacket had grown
tighter too. He was running out of time.

Tiny footsteps creaked from the floor above. A door slammed shut. Atlas jumped to his feet, heading
back down the hallway and up the stairs.

He stopped halfway, his eyes traveling to the window. He was transforming too quickly now. He
reached up to his hair. Two horns were slowly sliding out of his skull.

Fingers slid down to his cheeks. Patches of skin were already transitioning back to his old form. He
couldn’t face the changeling like this. Not now. He hadn’t even finished his speech yet!

Atlas huffed. He stomped down the stairs, leaving the house for the bushes. Not too far though. He
would spot the changeling if he tried to take one step out of the place. Which left them both at a
stalemate.

But not for long. Atlas clicked his phone on.

It appeared part two would be needed sooner than expected.

He winced as a tusk broke through his gums, cutting his still human lips.

Yeah. A lot sooner.

Toby should have known.

Chompsky hurried behind Toby’s legs with his plastic girlfriend in tow, chattering angrily in reaction
to what happened only moments before.
AAARRRGGHH!!! looked up from the broken device in his hands. “Sorry.”

Aw, it was almost sort of cute. The big guy’s sorrowful eyes and lowered ears. It kinda reminded Toby of a puppy. A big five hundred pound puppy with sharp tusks and horns.

Oh, who was he kidding? AAARRRGGHH!!! was cuter than a puppy. Even if he did get angry at the game and nearly destroyed Toby’s room.

Well, he thought, it wasn’t as bad as the time I brought home the feral cat. Wait, was it a cat or a raccoon? He couldn’t remember. He’d only been six or seven. Nana had to bat the creature off of him with a broom. The scratches healed, but the memory of his first rabies shot would forever haunt Toby. It’s probably were he got his fear of doctors too, now that he thought about it. Dr. Lake had been the first doctor he liked.

Shoot. Jim—Atlas’s mom. Toby’s stomach grumbled, and it wasn’t because he was hungry (though he could totally go for some pizza right now).

Did she remember what happened a few nights ago? He hoped not. Nana didn’t seem to at least, so it was pretty safe to assume she wouldn’t, right?

AAARRRGGHH!!! lowered his head, trying to put the pieces back to together.

Shoot, he got lost again in his head, didn’t he? Dang it, he needed to stop that. Toby tried to speak, but nothing came out. This was awkward. He made everything weird now, didn’t he?

Toby brushed back his hair with both hands. What should he do now? He stared down at his feet.

In truth, he didn’t really know all that much about Wingman. Atlas, while different from old Jim, was similar in personality and mannerisms that Toby could easily settle into place as the other’s best friend. It just felt natural. Even if he didn’t remember Toby, his body did, or so Toby liked to believe. He wasn’t sure how his friend’s amnesia worked exactly.

But AAARRRGGHH!!! was different. He only knew the troll from his connection to Atlas. He had been excited when he learned that the other would be staying with him, but the reality was far different.
He could tell AAARRRGGHH!!! was distressed. The troll was completely out of his element. It was up to Toby to make sure he was alright.

“Hey, Go Go Sushi is a good concentration game,” Toby said. “Let’s play that.”

Toby nodded to himself, his mind set. It was up to him to take care of AAARRRGGHH!!!.

“You know,” Toby began as he took out the old game from its cartridge. “It’s really cool to have a roommate. I mean, Atlas comes over sometimes and sleeps in the corner, in full body armor too, which is kinda strange, maybe it’s a changeling thing or something? Anyway, he usually leaves after a while to go back to his secret evil changeling hideout. So I guess he half-sleeps over? But you’re gonna be here almost all the time and that’s awesome sauce! I know it’s a little cozy, but that’s part of the charm.”

He regarded the magic hat and card tricks in a fond manner. He used it earlier to entertain the troll. Or at least, he thought he did. Maybe he should have learned some better magic tricks.

“It’s always been just Nana and me. I don’t remember my parents. It gets lonely once sometimes, but I’ve got a whole lot of fun things we can do together.”

He glanced over at AAARRRGGHH!!!, who gave him a soft smile. Atlas was his bestie, amnesia or not, but AAARRRGGHH!!! was a whole nother guy. He was kinda like an older brother. Not the kind that picked on you and gave you wegies, but the kind who listened patiently or joined in on the antics once in a while. Or maybe he was more of a fun uncle?

Carefully, AAARRRGGHH!!! handed Toby the broken controller. It was smashed to bits, looking less like a part of a video game console and more like a piece of abstract art.

“Fix?” He asked in a hopeful tone.

“Uh, sorry big guy. I don’t think it’s possible.” Toby shook his head, then joked, “But hey, at least we now know when you get into a game, you really, um, commit.”

“Sorry,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, mumbling, “pacifist, pacifist, pacifist.”
“Hey, hey,” Toby waved his arms. “It’s cool dude, I’m your wingman. Look, I get it. You got angry. Well, so does everyone else. Atlas got angry at me earlier this week, remember that? And I got angry with him and punched him in the nose yesterday.”

“Different,” he said. “Have bad temper.”

“Is that why you’re a pacifist?”

AAARRRGGHH!!’s shoulders hiked up. “Should go. Not safe.”

“No, no! It’s cool,” he handed a new controller over to the troll. “Let’s do Go-Go-Sushi. You have to tell Blinky we did some concentration exercises, right? Well, in this game, we have to dodge sushi as we’re serving hungry tourists. It’s pretty darn awesome sauce.” He nudged the troll in the stomach. “And the best part is, we’re on the same team.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! returned to sitting on the floor, taking to the game much faster than the previous hack-n-slash. “Sushi?” He inquired.

“Yeah, wingman. Ever had any?”

“No.”

“Ah man.” Toby began, “You gotta try some. Listen, I know this really cool place not too far from here. It’s called Little Tokyo? Dude, their spicy tuna rolls are out of this world! Seriously.”

He licked his upper lip. “Sounds yummy.”

“It totally is,” Toby said before noticing his buzzing phone. He paused the game, placing the call on speaker. “Yello, this is WarHammer and Wingman, over.”

“Tobes—”
“WarHammer,” Toby corrected.

“WarHammer,” Atlas groaned. “Fine. Whatever. Trollhunter is in need of assistance, over. Early communication did not go well, over. At all, over.”

“Do we need do initiate Operation Alpha Wolf Nine, over?”

“We’re not calling it that,” Atlas said. “I never even agreed to that.”

“What, over? It sounds cool, over.”

“Stop it with the ‘overs’,” he said. “It sounds cheesy. Why not just call it Plan B?”

“How is Plan B any less cheesy?”

“Are we seriously having this conversation right now?” Atlas sighed. “Just get Blinky from Trollmarket and meet me at Claire’s house. Pronto.”

“Anything I should bring?”

“An extra gaggle-tack,” he paused. “And some clothes.”

“Why?”

Atlas let out a mirthless laugh. “You’ll see.”
Atlas crept out of the bushes to greet the group.

It was not a happy reunion.

“Did you have a growth spurt?” Toby cackled, holding his stomach. “Oh my gosh, you look like you got in a fight with a bear.”

“Shut up,” Atlas said, trying to pull down his shirt to no avail. His jacket had split in two before he could remove it, leaving him with what could quite possibly be the world’s tightest muscle shirt.

“Master Atlas, while it is important to be confident in whatever you wear, I fear this outfit lacks…” He coughed, trying to hide his amusement. “Sufficient protection, as it were.”

He rolled his neck, giving the four armed troll an annoyed glare. “Not you too, Blinky.”

“Now like AAARRRGHHH!!!” the last member of their group said, his giggle causing a cascade of laughter from the other two.

Atlas put up both his index fingers, shaking them like a teacher at a group of terrible students. “You all suck. You are the worst Trollhunters ever. Now give me my gaggle tack and some damn clothes.”

Toby tossed him the horseshoe. Atlas caught it, a sensation of relief washing over him. Being without the gaggle tack and amulet left him feeling exposed, and for good reason. It only took a few minutes for his secret to get out.

Atlas resolved to be more careful. He was lucky the changeling didn’t see him. At least, he hoped he didn’t. His entire outfit was torn to shreds, shoes included. Atlas took the new clothes from Blinky’s arms. Thank the Pale Lady Blinky had so many of the same clothes. How he came across so many identical garments (how does one troll own so many red sneakers he never wore?) Atlas had no clue, but he appreciated it all the same.

After a few minutes, the stranglehold of his human clothes vanished. He tore off the scraps, sliding into the new set behind a nearby tree. He patted down the gaggle tack underneath his shirt, now safely secured, before zipping the jacket up.
Returning to the group once more, he asked, “Alright, do we have the argyle socks?”

“Affirmative,” Toby said, patting his backpack.

“Blinky, do you have the troll binding spell with you?” Atlas said.

“Ready and waiting, Master Atlas,” Blinky replied, rubbing his hands together. “Would you like to use it or…”

Atlas shook his head. “I can’t use magic.”

“Wait, you literally just magically turned into a human,” Toby said. “You’ve used the horngazel more than once. How can you not use magic?”

“I am no expert on magic, but I postulate Master Atlas’s ability to change is an inherent one. Physical magic, like Horngazels, can be used by everyone, human, troll, or changeling. But this is a spell. It relies on our own inner energies in order to—”

Toby nodded, rubbing his chin. “Like mana then.”

The troll blinked. “Pardon?”

“Mana. Magic. The ability to use certain magical stuff, like spells and things,” Toby explained.

Blinky’s eyes took on a delighted shine. “I’m impressed, Tobias. You seem to understand this subject rather well. Have you been going through my library without my knowledge? I would not mind if you did. In fact, I highly encourage it. Books are, after all, our civilization’s bastion of—”

“Nah, I just played a lot of video games,” he turned to Atlas. “So why can’t he use his?”

Blinky visibly deflated, but took the response in stride. “I can only hypothesize as to why, Master
Atlas most likely has a better answer than I.”

Atlas scratched his neck, his cheeks burning. It was embarrassing and a bit of a problem at the Order. “Nah, Stricklander wasn’t sure either. We just chalked it up to being more than one species.”

“That could be one possible conclusion. Even if they can reproduce with humans, changelings are trolls. Think of the two species as two separate currents. One is going north and the other south. The problem is, in Atlas’s case, as someone who is both half-human and half-changeling, these two currents clash, inadvertently inhibiting his ability to cast trollish spells.”

Toby patted Atlas on the back. “Dude, that sucks.”


“We should get into positions,” Blinky advised.

“So what’s the plan?”

“We need to corner him. After that, we explain the situation. The socks are insurance,” Atlas said.

“So you’re just gonna buy his loyalty with socks?”

“Argyle socks tasty,” AAARRRGGHH!!! wisely pointed out.

“Indeed,” Blinky added. “It is a delicacy amongst our kind.”

“It’s the best chance we got. We don’t know anything about him. Socks are our best option,” Atlas said.

“Hey, quick question, how long has he been in there?” Toby asked in a nervous tone. “What if he calls his buddies?”
“Unlikely,” Atlas said, though the idea did linger in his mind. The changeling did have his number. It wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility for him to call Stricklander or Nomura there. Atlas suppressed a shudder. He really hoped it didn’t come to that. “It’s probably fine. You and I will get inside while AAARRRGGHH!!! and Blinky guard the perimeter unless we need them.”

Atlas turned the front door knob. He jiggled it a few times before letting out a deep sigh.

“The door is locked, isn’t it?” Toby said.

“Yes,” Atlas stated in a stilted manner. “Bushigal. I should have known.”

“Well, that puts a bit of a damper on our plans, but not to worry, boys,” Blinky assured, swinging one arm in a cheerful manner. “I’m certain we can find another way inside.”

They rounded the home. The backdoor was also secured. Wonderful. After checking all the windows in the back and front yards, Atlas took a step back, scanning the second story until he found an opening.

“We have to climb through Claire’s window,” Atlas stated. Though small, there was a gap. If he could open it, then both he and Toby could get inside.

“Climb?” Toby gestured to his physique. “Why not pole vault while we’re at it? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m pretty fleshy and breakable.

“Get your head in the game, Tobes,” Atlas said, nudging him in the shoulder playfully.

“You are not quoting High School Musical at me,” Toby retorted.

Atlas paused. “High School Musical?”

“We seriously need to get you a jumpstart on twenty-first century teen culture,” Toby lamented. “How are we going to get up there?”
“Up,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, picking up both boys and placing them on the roof.

Blinky patted AAARRRGGHH!!!’s shoulder affectionately. “Excellent idea, old friend.”

Toby high-fived the troll joining Atlas at the window. “Thanks, Wingman! You’re the greatest!”

Slowly, Atlas lifted the glass, careful not to make too much sound. Once inside, he did a quick three-sixty. His stomach bubbled with nervousness. This was Claire’s bedroom. His eyes fell upon the photos of her, his lips turning upwards in response. Her first day of school, her first bike, her first spelling bee award—She looked so happy. His gaze lingered over the knickknacks and posters on her wall. Everything was so personal. It was almost jarring how different they were. Claire had this entire life in this room and Atlas had…something else.

Toby squeezed through the opening, falling out with a loud thud. He scampered around like a kid in a candy shop, excitement exuding off his character. He hopped onto Claire’s bed, then whispered in awe, “Holy cheese, I can’t believe it. I’m in a real girl’s bedroom.”

Atlas snorted. As he examined the room, Toby rummaged around behind him. When he looked to the boy again, a line of pink lipstick edged out of his mouth. He waved the tube around.

“This touched a girl’s lips, dude,” Toby gushed.


Toby didn’t hear him. “Eli totally owes me five dollars.”

“For what?”

“We bet each other in freshman year that neither of us could get into a girl’s bedroom.”

“What, have you ever been in a girl’s bedroom before?” Toby said.

Atlas nodded. “Yeah. I clean Nomura’s place every month. Do you know how many teacups she leaves out? She doesn’t even finish half of them, so they get all moldy and stuff.”

He stuck out his tongue. She wasn’t the worst changeling whose bedroom he cleaned, but she certainly wasn’t the best.

“I’m talking girl-girl. Like, our age and not old as heck.”

Toby was lucky Nomura wasn’t there, otherwise, he wouldn’t be wearing his head right now.

“No,” Atlas admitted. Hell, he hadn’t even spoken to a human girl before until Claire. “Why does it matter?”

“Because it’s a girl! They’re mysterious and do things to us dudes. I saw one guy in Freshman year give his entire summer savings to get a date with Mary Wang. One date, can you believe it?” Toby rubbed his chin. “What if human girls, like, have some sort of magic? Oh! What if they got it from the aliens?”

“I think you’re overimagining things, Tobes.”

“Nuh-uh. Case in point: you say you’re trying to keep your other identity secret, but told Claire your other name,” Toby pointed out.

“That’s different,” Atlas protested. “Claire is just...Well…”

“Well, there you go,” Toby gestured the lipstick at him. “Want a taste? It’s not so bad. This one is strawberry flavored.”

“This is the weirdest conversation we’ve ever had.” Atlas mumbled.

Toby shrugged. “I don’t know, the time we argued about the GunRobot crossover movie with the
Ninja Turtles was pretty strange.”

He cringed at the memory. As an avid fan of the series, that particular mashup left a bad taste in his mouth. “It was a terrible crossover. End of story."

“It wasn’t that bad,” Toby replied before pausing, his face unreadable. Lifting a finger to his lips, he whispered, “Hey, is it just me or do you hear something too?”

Carefully, Atlas pressed his ear to the door. Toby was right. Someone (or something) was choking on something. A moment later, he heard a series of loud hacking sounds.

Atlas pushed open the door. The hallway was dark, the air cold and still. The sound had vanished. Atlas flashed the light on his phone.

In the corner of the stairway, the kitten from earlier jolted into Claire’s room. He flinched as the tiny claws latched onto his leg. Atlas almost batted the creature away, but its frightened expression got to him.

This is my fault, he grimly reminded himself. The kitten had very nearly become a certain changeling’s lunch, if the saliva covered coat was any indication. Like Claire needed to lose more of her loved ones. He placed the animal underneath the bed. Once he and Toby were outside the room, he closed the door, locking it from the other side. It wouldn’t take much for a changeling to break through, but it would at least deter him from using the room.

A light flickered on in another room. Soft crying could be heard, slowly transitioning into a chilling giggle. The hair on his neck stood straight. The changeling was trying to lure them in. A darker thought emerged. He’s playing with us, Atlas thought. A regular changeling would have already gone for the kill.

Still, Atlas approached the room, Toby following close behind. The pair stayed silent as they entered the baby’s room. The giggle came again, louder this time. He followed the noise to the crib, staring down at the fake human child.

Not Enrique stared up in amusement, Atlas’s amulet nestled between his toothless gums.

Toby frowned, picking up the baby before shifting his focus to Atlas. “Are we absolutely positively
sure he’s the changeling? Maybe they brought back the real one when they found out you knew, and the troll version switches out or something. I mean, look at him, he’s so cute. Cooohie choochie coo.”

Atlas looked between the uncertain Toby and smiling baby, still chewing on his amulet without a care in the world.

He gently pulled the amulet out of the baby’s hands, placing it into a pocket. Once satisfied with its security, he unzipped his shirt.

“Toby, I understand your reservations,” Atlas said. “Can you please hold Enrique still?”

“Okay, but what are you—

Atlas smacked the baby across the face with the gaggle-tack. Almost instantaneously the magic hiding his form cackled and broke. Toby screeched in response, throwing the creature at the wall.

The changeling groaned, holding his cheek before growling, “Stupid flesh things.”

Toby backed behind Atlas. “That is not Enrique!”

“No, really?” Atlas snarked, placing the gaggle-tack back under his shirt. “I never would have guessed!”

“Didn’t your mother teach ya any manners, ya little brat?” The changeling snarled.

“Toby, get out the socks.”

“What, why—oh!” Toby rummaged through his bag before presenting the offering. “Lookie, lookie, yummy yummy, right?”

The changeling looked between the two before settling on Atlas. “You think you can win me over with a couple of socks? Fat chance!”
Atlas pulled back as the creature made a swipe at his face. Instead, the changeling landed against the window before clawing his way down the curtains, leaving sharp groves in his wake.

He made another go, this time at Toby, but Atlas was quicker, bringing up the amulet and chanting the incantation. The force of magic, pushed the troll into the hallway. Before Atlas even landed back on the ground, the changeling had squeezed through the stairway bars, smacking against the first floor with a loud crash.

“Come on,” Atlas called back at his friend, running to the stairs. “We can’t let him get away.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re the one in armor.”

Atlas jumped over the steps. Almost immediately, the changeling flew in with a flying kick. He blocked the blow with his arms, but still fell back. Toby yelped as Atlas smacked into him, causing them both to tumble to the bottom.

“Could you get off me please?” Toby squeaked out. “This is not awesome sauce.”

“Stop fighting us,” Atlas yelled at the changeling. “We just want to talk. We know you’re from the Darklands. We understand your situation isn’t the greatest. Let’s just handle this like civilized people.”

In the opposite side of the room, the home office chair swerved around, revealing the target of their objective.

He knew changelings were kept in their original size in the Darklands, but to actually see it under the artificial light was disorientating. Here was a baby troll, big eyed and still carrying its youngling fluff around his neck. The only thing off about the scene was the bottle of gin and adult magazine at his side.

“You talk about the Darklands but have you ever actually been there?” The changeling lectured. “Do you realize how good you boys got it here? It’s a party compared to those troll-turds in the Darklands. This place is great! I never want to leave.”
“Give me back the other gaggletock and we can talk all night about it,” Atlas offered, stepping forward.

“Fat-chance, Trollhunter!” He retorted, dodging Toby’s surprise lunge at him. He pinballed around the office, destroying everything he could. Atlas barely avoided getting hit in the head with a lamp.

The battle soon entered the kitchen. Atlas batted away the food with his forearm, ducking behind the counter when the troll threw a perfectly good blender at him.

“We’ve come to bargain,” Atlas shouted. “I get that we probably didn’t start off on the right foot earlier, but—”

The small troll tossed a tomato from the refrigerator in an arc, splattering against Atlas’s face when it hit the ground next to him.

Cheeky asshole.

Cackling in glee, the changeling began, “You think you’ve got me cornered? I’m her baby brother. What do you think is gonna happen when they come home and see something’s happened to their precious? I’m untouchable, baby. I—”

Atlas jumped over the table separating them, summoning the sword whilst pointing it at the changeling’s throat. “You were saying?”

“You kill me and you’ll unleash the fury of a thousand changelings,” he challenged, chest puffed up.

“A thousand?” Atlas let out a dry laugh. “The main branch barely has five hundred. And you can bet even less would actually come to your aid.”

The changeling (Not Enrique, anti-Enrique, what the hell should he call this guy?) narrowed his eyes. “How do you know that?”

“I’ll explain why if you act civilly,” Atlas challenged, moving the blade closer to the troll’s jugular.
“Okay, okay, okay!” The changeling placed both hands up. “Can’t blame a guy for looking out for himself. But you can’t tell anyone I told you. I’ve got a pretty sweet deal going here. If bossman hears that I squealed, he’ll feed me to Bular.”

“We’re not here for information. Well, not entirely,” Atlas said. “We just want to talk—"

A frying pan grazed his chin. He fell back, bringing the sword up to block the changeling.

“You son of a bitch!” Atlas snapped.

“Ha! Think again, fleshbag!” The changeling yelled.

Atlas’s phone rang. He reached down to where it was supposed to be. Could he even get to it in all this armor? A second later, it appeared in his hand.

Okay, he thought. That’s actually kinda cool.

He checked the number and gulped. The hour wasn’t even up yet. Why would she be calling so early? “Oh, hey, Claire! How’s the concert?”

“Jim, my parents just called,” Claire said, her voice muffled by booming background music. “They’re coming back early.”

“What.” He nearly dropped the phone.

“You think you humans can tell me what to do?” The changeling yelled. Toby made another lunge at him, but got hit with one of the cabinet doors. Not Enrique clanged the pots together. “I’m invincible, baby!”

“Who’s there?” Claire asked. “Jim, do you have people over? What—”
The door slammed open, AARRGGHH!!! letting out a fearsome growl. Blinky followed behind, two hands settled across his hips while the other two were holding a glowing crystal, which he gestured menacingly at the changeling. “Back, vile creature!”

“Nice entrance,” Toby said, holding his bruised head.

“We’re here to help!” Blinky tried to point the rock’s tip at Enrique’s replacement, but the changeling was too fast, bouncing from surface to surface in the kitchen.

“Bleh, stupid smelly trolls,” the changeling spat.

“Jim, what was that? Is there an animal in the house?” Claire asked, her voice taking on a fearful tone.

“Stay safe, Claire,” Atlas urged, turning off the phone.

This was bad.

The changeling jumped out of AARRRGHH!!!’s reach, twisting in the air before landing near the living room’s home phone.

He dialed a series of numbers, his face the picture of evil amusement. “I ain’t gonna bargain with the likes of you twerps. I’ve got backup and you’ll never guess who it is.”

The Trollhunters all gave each other a collective look of horror. A series of metal cups tumbled out of one of the cabinets. To say Atlas had a bad feeling would be putting it lightly.

Just as the changeling waited for the phone to ring, Atlas’s phone reacted.

*Please be stupid, please, be stupid,* he inwardly chanted.

The changeling paused, his ears flicking upward. He glanced down at the phone in his hand, then at Atlas’s own. It took a moment, but the dawn of realization was there.
“Oh sweet Pale Lady,” Atlas thought.


“I was going to explain,” Atlas tried to defend. “if you just listened. I have a reason. Really.”

“Goblin guts,” NotEnrique exclaimed. “Oh, this is rich.”

“If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

“Not just rich, this is practically poetic!” He twirled around, the phone cord wrapping around his waist. “The commander’s assistant is playing for the other team. I can’t believe they haven’t figured it out yet. The bossman is gonna blow a fuse when I tell him.”

“Alligrubra!” Blinky enchanted, the crystal finally working. It immediately sectioned off the area. “It worked! Did you see that, old friend? I finally got it to work!”

“Good job,” AAARRRRGGGHH!!! replied.

It was only a temporary binding spell, but it was enough to keep Enrique’s double in close proximity. It didn’t look like the changeling was going to leave anytime soon however. In fact, he looked pleased, like a cat with a canary.

The others might not understand yet, but Atlas knew that look. They had misjudged the situation completely. Not Enrique was not a normal changeling.

This could go either way for them now.

Atlas drew forward, brandishing his blade. He threatened, “I’ll hang you if you even speak a word.”

“It’s going to be hard to replace someone like me. Claire will be so disappointed,” he tutted.
“I believe what Master Atlas means to say, is what would you like in return?” Blinky lifted all hands up, including the one with the crystal. “We want no fight here.”

“Easy for you to say. Take down the spell,” the changeling said. “Unless you’re scared?”

“You said you didn’t want to go back to the Darklands. Well, if Gunmar gets released, he’s gonna bring that here,” Atlas said. “I think we can both agree that’s a really bad idea.”

The changeling paused, giving him a look-over. While distrust could be seen in his gaze, his curiosity and interest was even stronger. They both had each other over the barrel. Normal trolls would fight to the death in such a situation.

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” the changeling remarked. “But I ain’t gonna just risk my neck out for anyone.”

“You won’t have to.” Atlas explained. “They don’t know I’m the Trollhunter.”

“True. I could just feign ignorance.” The changeling crouched down, rubbing his hands together. “What’s in it for me?”

Yes! Atlas could work with this. He deactivated the armor. “What do you want?”

“Well, for one, Trollmarket.”

“What?”

“Uh, I don’t think we can get you Trollmarket. It’s kinda big,” Toby said, using AAARRRGHH!!! as a support.

“No, ya dingus. I wanna go to Trollmarket,” he reiterated. “You want me to keep ya secret? Then take me to Trollmarket.”
“You are insane,” Blinky finally responded, crossing his arms. “Of all the foolish—"

“Oh, bossman,” the changeling crooned in a shrill voice. “You won’t believe who the Trollhunter is. The boy you’ve been taking care of pulled the wool over your eyes. He’s the Trollhunter!”

“If I take you to Trollmarket, I want your word that you won’t hurt anyone, especially Claire,” Atlas said.

The changeling looked him up and down before letting out a deep laugh. “You really like her, don’t you. It’s not going to end well for you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t I? My second demand is something a little more difficult to find.”

“How many demands do you have?”

“Depends on how well you treat me,” he jeered.

Atlas shook his head before asking, “And what would that be?”

“Dragon’s Blood.”

Toby’s nose scrunched up. “Ugh, you drink that stuff?”

“The Darklands isn’t exactly loaded with the stuff,” the changeling shot back. “If I’m gonna keep my mouth shut, I gotta have something to put in me bottle first.”

“You’re like, a baby,” Toby said, gesturing to the creature’s body.

“Physically yes,” he said, tapping his head. “mentally, not so much.”
Atlas drew closer. “How long have you been in this form?”

Not Enrique used a single claw to dig out a piece of food between his gums, giving Atlas a patronizing look. “Longer than you’ve been alive, whelp.”

“How many changelings are still in the Darklands?”

“A few. I’ve got one or two drinking buddies down under. Used to have three but trolls get hungry sometimes.”

“Trolls eat changelings?” Toby exclaimed. “Seriously?”

The changeling laughed before coughing into his hand. “Trolls will eat anything that moves if given the chance.”

“That is not true,” Blinky said. “There may be many a thing we eat, but we do have standards.”

“Any other demands?” Atlas asked.

Not Enrique laid back against the table he sat upon, as if he were on a beach. Smug little asshole. He grinned. “I’ll let ya know when I think of them.”

“Then do we have a deal?”

“As long as my demands are satisfied, then I won’t rat you out to the Order.” He added, “For now.”

Atlas gripped the amulet. Enrique’s replacement would need to be watched. Even if he wasn’t necessarily allied with Gunmar didn’t mean he wouldn’t turn tail and tell Stricklander if things went sour. They were walking on ice with this guy.

But Atlas never expected anything less from his brethren.
“Blinky, remove the spell,” Atlas said.

“Are you certain?” Blinky asked.

He nodded. The moment Blinky released the magic, Atlas bit down on his thumb. The changeling smirked before doing the same. They interlinked arms, grasping each other’s wrists. Not Enrique yanked him closer.

“You gotcha yourself in a right bit of trouble, half-breed,” he said in their tongue.

Atlas bristled. “Don’t call me that.”

“It’s what you are. It’s what we are called.”

“We’re more than what the Gumm-Gumms impose upon us.” Atlas urged, holding the changeling’s unblinking gaze.

“Are we now? Do you truly believe that, especially after what happened to little ol’ Gladys?”

“How much do you know?”

“I ain’t no fan of Bular or Gunmar, but I ain’t about to risk my life for you. You take me to Trollmarket and get me some Dragon’s Blood, then we’ll talk about how far this lie continues,” the changeling said. “They’re going to find out sooner or later, even without me snitching. You can’t keep this up forever.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” Atlas said, ignoring the other part. The last thing he needed on his mind right now was that thought, especially since it pledged him enough already.

“You seem pretty desperate to keep your secret.”
Atlas smirked. “I could say the same for you as well.”

Squeaking tires met asphalt.

“Someone’s home.” Toby announced.

The two changelings released their holds.

“We’re going to have so much fun together, kid,” Not Enrique said, licking up the small droplet of blood on his wrist.

Atlas copied the move, resisting the urge to gag from the taste. “Fun for you, perhaps. You keep your end of the bargain and I’ll keep mine.”

“Ahem, I suggest we make our egress,” Blinky said, rushing Toby and AAARRRGHH!!! out the door.

“Wait,” Atlas looked around. The kitchen was a mess, as where many of the downstairs rooms. “What am I supposed to do? You can’t just leave me with all this.”

“Make something up, Atlas,” Toby said.

“Yes, Tobias is correct. I’m sure you can think up something,” Blinky picked up the door, trying to fix it back into place. “You’ll be fine, Master Atlas. I have complete confidence in your acting skills.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! threw the Trollhunter a thumbs up.

Atlas looked between his group and the smug changeling on the table before saying in a tired voice, “I hate you all.”
“See you back at my place,” Toby said before Blinky shut the door.

Just in time too.

“Claire, where are you?” A female voice called out.

“Crap,” he whispered. He picked up the changeling, who had already transformed back to his disguise. A disgusting smell reached his nose. He looked down at Not Enrique accusingly, who gave him a big satisfied smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Nuñez stepped back at the sight of him, or rather, the sight of their house.

Mrs Nuñez was the first to find her words. “What on earth is going on here?”

“Hi, I’m Jim. The ah…” He looked down at NotEnrique. “The babysitter.”

And just to make his life even worse, Claire popped up behind them. She bit down on her bottom lip, letting out a long “f” noise until she noticed her parents presence, ending with a carefully played, “fudgenuckle.”

“You destroyed our house! And Claire, where the heck were you during all this?” Mr. Nuñez yelled. “Dios mio, what did you do to my kitchen?”

“Actually, that was the coyotes,” he said.

Mrs. Nuñez gave him a disbelieving look. “Do you really expect us to believe that?”

Claire paled as she surveyed the damage. Atlas felt a twinge of guilt about the state of her house. Mr. and Mrs. Nuñez glared between the two of them, as if unsure of who to be more angry at.

All and all, this was shaping up to be a pretty terrible night, all things considered.
The changeling turned baby gurgled in his arms, wicked delight gleaming in his eyes.

What fresh hell had he signed up for now?

“Well?” Mr. Nuñez prompted.

“Ah,” Atlas started, shrugging his shoulders. “Yes?”
Barbara rested her forehead atop the keyboard.

The keys bit into her flesh. She wondered if she fell asleep, whether or not she would wake up in the morning with QWERTY imprinted on her skin. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Despite her exhaustion, now was not the time for sleep. Reluctantly, she sat back up, her right hand reaching for the Merlot. The bottle wasn’t anything special; the grocery store had a sale and, being the wine connoisseur that she was, decided she needed the entire box.

Well, she thought, perhaps less of a connoisseur and more of a wino.

Placing the aerator above the glass’s bowl, she carefully poured the drink, watching the liquid slosh and twirl. She stopped just below the rim.
Looked like waitressing through college came in handy after all.

She chuckled behind a sip of wine. The red wasn’t the best she’d had—the dry burning aftertaste lasted too long for someone with her palette—but it did the trick, and in the end, that was all that mattered.

Right?

Ugh. Barbara groaned into her drink.

The nice buzz only helped to deal with her current frustrations, not solve them. Hours of research provided little content. No matter where she looked, it was all the same: fake. After all, how many people believed monsters were real?

Correction: how many normal people did.

Though at this point, could she even consider herself “normal” anymore? She had started putting together a small binder to organize her findings. She had no doubt others would consider her investigation obsessive, if not outright insane. Not that she cared, but the possibility of rejection from her peers and friends…intimidated her. It was one of the reasons she hadn’t shared her information with anyone else. Who would believe what she had seen?

Not many.

Her hand traveled to the binder, flipping the top open with a flick of her wrist. Jim’s letter was the first page, followed by photos she had taken of the smashed clearing in the woods and the patient records of the men who had claimed to see a monster not so long ago. To a casual observer, the information appeared dismal, but to Barbara, it was the best lead to her son she had left. The only one at this point really.

Nonetheless, searching down those avenues left little to nothing for her to latch onto, other than that something big was happening in Arcadia Oaks. She had gone past the clearing yesterday only to find everything had been burned. The local fireman said that it had been a bushfire, but dry season ended months ago and it rained several times these past few weeks, more so than in the last ten years combined. A bushfire simply appeared...strange. Out of place, as it were.
But that wasn’t as damning as the old patients. Every one of them had disappeared, including their families. She tried finding their new addresses, but nothing came up. Their social media profiles had mysteriously disappeared as well.

She knew it sounded crazy. Hell, most nights, she wondered if she was simply imagining it all. It wouldn’t be the first time. Barbara placed her elbows against the desk, head nestled between her palms. She turned her attention to the window.

*No,* she realized.

Too many things didn’t add up. The car’s hood was scratched to hell and one side had an obvious dent. Barbara rubbed her index and thumb against each other. No delusion could fake blood either.

Jim was alive.

Jim was real.

Which meant monsters were too.

But how? Even though she had seen them, or at least she thought she did, it just didn’t make sense.

She massaged the bridge of her nose. Yeti sightings, Bigfoot’s footprints, missing gargoyles—Nothing described the creatures she saw. She only got a glimpse, but they were huge. The larger one easily dwarfed her car.

If only she knew the right words to jam in to the search bar. Alas, she lacked the google-fu prowess her colleagues possessed.

Her phone flashed, followed by a soft buzzing noise and five second violin solo. Barbara smiled. She reached over to her cell. Giddiness bubbled within her stomach. God, she hadn’t felt like this since high school.
She swerved around in her computer chair, holding the phone to her ear.

“Oh Walt, hey,” she stammered. A hand smoothed down her unkempt hair. Damn, did she forget to shower this morning? Not that he could see how she looked right now. “I can’t believe you’re still up. It’s nearly midnight. Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“I could say the same for you. I was only going to leave a message,” he sighed. “Unfortunately, I cannot make our coffee get together tomorrow.” He paused then answered, “Something came up at work.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” God, did she sound too dismissive? Barbara added, “I mean, I completely forgot we had one.”

Dang it, that was even worse. Barbara covered her mouth before she could bury herself even deeper.

“Barbara,” Walt began, “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course, I was just…ah…” She looked down at her binder of messy findings. Her computer screen wasn’t much better. Tens of articles sat waiting in her browser tab while hundreds more were saved between dead end and future readings. “Doing research.”

Please don’t ask, please don’t ask, please don’t ask, she inwardly pleaded.

“Oh? What kind?” He asked. Barbara very nearly moaned. Instead, she covered it up with a yawn.

What should she say? Remember that son I told you about, Walt? Guess what, he’s back in town. Oh, and he also wears armor, is running around with monsters and goes to your school. Maybe you know him? Does Jim Lake Junior ring any bells?

Barbara glanced over at the mail she brought in this morning, an idea slowly forming amongst the chaotic mess she had for a brain.

“R-Restaurants,” she said, rummaging through the papers for an ad, a sale, anything she could use in conversation. “I hear there’s a new café in town called…Chez Janette?”
He chuckled. “I wouldn’t exactly call Chez Janette a ‘café’, but I have been craving some fine dining.”

“Me too, that is,” she coughed. “I would also like to try some fine dining. It’s been awhile since I’ve gone out with anyone.”

The line went silent.

“Barbara,” Walt began, his accent accentuating the vowels of her name. She melted right then and there. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Her heart raced. Barbara brought her legs up beneath her chest, her chin resting against her knee. “Do you want it to be a date?” She finally asked.

“I asked you first.”

Barbara rubbed the back of her neck. How long had it been since she’d dated someone? Too long, her mind supplied.

She licked her bottom lip. In a low voice, she answered, “What would you say if I said yes?”

A date with Walt. It wasn’t as if she never thought about it. He was handsome, intelligent, kind, witty—all the traits she wants in a guy. The British accent didn’t hurt either.

“I wouldn’t say I’m averse to the idea,” he responded.

She nearly dropped the cell. She held it tighter, hoping she didn’t sound as girlish as she felt.

“Great!” Damn, too high. She took a deep breath then said in a calmer tone, “I mean, good. Sounds like a plan. When are you available?”
“One of my colleagues is getting back from a trip abroad tomorrow, but I should be free this weekend.”

“How about Friday night then?”

“Perfect,” he responded. “I look forward to it.”

Barbara tucked back a strand of hair. “Me too, Walt.”

“You should get some sleep.”

“Same to you,” she said, her smile now stretched from ear to ear.

“Good night, Barbara.”

She bid him farewell before setting the phone back down. Immediately, she did a small dance in her chair. Well, less of a dance and more of a jiggle, but who cared in the end, right? A slight squeal escaped her lips.

Walt was interested in her.

And here she was, chasing something completely outside the world of possibility.

She stopped dancing as reality began to step in. Jim was still out there and here she was, excited about dating. Guilt rose from her esophagus, twisting and turning like a snake. She looked back to the binder again. Carefully, she brought it to her chest, hugging the contents.

First things first: she needed to find her son.

She owed it to him.
She owed it to herself.

Her computer screen flashed. The day had come to an end. She couldn’t help but sigh at the date. Her eyes widened.

Barbara took off her glasses, shaking her head. Everything had been so crazy lately. It didn’t change the fact that she’d forgotten her son’s birthday.

What a terrible mother she was. She sent a quick text to the head doctor. Not that she really needed to (she always requested this day off), but it was common courtesy.

“Happy Birthday, Jim,” she whispered.

Sixteen years. Her baby boy was almost an adult. How many milestones had she missed? What kind of person was he now?

Did he even know who she was anymore?

She leaned her head back. This was way too much to think about, especially this late at night.

Picking up her glass of wine, she left the office to wander into the kitchen. Dishes were piled up in the sink, along with several takeout boxes. She dumped what was left of the wine into the sink, before placing it inside the washer.

It had to be tomorrow, or rather, today. She had held off doing to the Domzalski’s again, in fear that the boy would be scared off. She knew Toby had some inking of her suspicions, which meant Jim did too.

So then, what were they waiting for? The letter had been addressed to her the day she went over the Domzalski’s. At first, she’d been terrified, thinking that she’d lost him before she would ever get to see him again, but he was still alive.

Additionally, from what she gathered through Walt and her own investigations; Jim was participating in a play and would, presumably, have rehearsal at the school tonight. All she had to do was wait
nearby at the school and corner him there.

But what if he ran? Her stomach clenched. She didn’t think she could bear losing her son a third time.

No.

No more waiting.

She was too damn exhausted, worrying about her baby boy, day in and day out. This had gone on far enough. Too long, in Barbara’s opinion.

If monsters truly were after her son, she needed to get to him before them.

She stared longingly at her graduation photo in the hallway. It had taken hundreds of sleepless nights to get her medical degree, which only got worse when her ex-husband left. Her son grinned back. He was so young. She still remembered her graduation day like it was yesterday. Jim had called out her name, waving his arms like a madman from the crowds of families.

Her fingers rose to meet the photo, only to stop midway. No. No more hesitation and self-doubt. It had to be today. She turned away, hand slowly forming a fist.

“I’m coming for you sweetheart,” Barbara whispered.

“Come on, come on!” Toby urged, his voice echoing off through the tunnel.

“What’s going on?” Atlas asked, jogging behind the other, thoroughly confused. He had woken up to a barrage of texts from his friend an hour before dawn, calling on him to come to Trollmarket as
soon as possible. He knew it was important, he just didn’t know why.

“No time to talk,” Toby said. “We’ve got a DefCon One situation, dude! We have to get to the forge. Hurry!”

Soon enough, the tunnel opened up to the spacious training hall. Unlike its normally empty appearance, several trolls were frantically running about, as if Bular himself were at their heels. The training equipment wasn’t much better. Something, or someone, had turned on all the machines. Blades of all shapes and sizes were turning out. No direction was safe. It took all of Atlas’s skill to avoid them. If there was anything he had taken away from training under Blinky, it was narrowly avoiding death.

“Wait, Tobes, stop!” He brandished two daggers. If danger was afoot, he needed to be ready. “What’s a DefCon One? Is that a human SAT word I should know?”

“Duck and cover!” Tobys said, diving as a familiar scythe flew through the arena.

Atlas jumped, flipping off one of the walls to avoid the large blade. Once the weapon returned to its starting position, he made a move towards the center of the room.

By dumb luck, he caught sight of his trainer, who waved his arms frantically above his head. If Atlas weren’t so caught off guard, he might have laughed.

“Tis a disaster!” Blinky bemoaned. “Oh, what wrong have we done to deserve this cruel fate?”

Atlas tried to placate the troll, though it was hard to do when holding knives. “What’s wrong? How can I help?”

“Save yourself,” Blinky advised, panic overriding all six eyes. “AAARRRGGHH has lost his mind!”

“Wait,” he said, turning to Toby. “I thought he was at your place.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! roared, his fur jutting straight out of his body. He smacked a fist against the
floor before setting out in their direction.

“Watch out, Master Atlas!” Blinky warned.

Atlas tried to back away from the incoming troll. While he might have been able to handle a throw or punch from AAARRRGGHH!!! in this form, he didn’t want the pain that might come with it. He switched out the daggers for his long sword, both hands firmly encircled around the pummel.

“Stand down, AAARRRGGHH!!!,” Atlas cautioned. His heart lurched, breath increasing with every step. While not as close with the troll, Atlas considered him a friend of sorts. He was the listener of the group, which, considering the other twos’ talkative nature, was a godsend.

Atlas gulped. He lifted the longsword in front of him, using the flat side to defend. It was a formidable blade, forged out of the blackest of stones and sharp enough to cut rock. How that would work against someone like AAARRRGGGHH!!!, however, Atlas was unsure.

He was afraid to find out.

He bumped into one of the floor blades, losing his focus. It was something AAARRRGGGHH!!! took advantage of, making a running leap for the teen.

“Gah!” Atlas sputtered. He tried to dodge, but the troll was faster. He picked the teen up before he could fight back, holding him in a tight hold.

His brows came together. No, wait a second.

AAARRRGGGHH!!! smiled down at him, the fury in his eyes replaced with playfulness.

Atlas’s brows came together, his bottom lip tugging down. What the hell?

It only took a second later to find out. Behind the troll, the Soothscryer rose into the air, it’s platform separating from the floor. Below the circular stage, an assortment of balloons were released. Several trolls also appeared from beneath it, tossing the objects into the air. In the corner of his eye, Blinky and Toby pulled two long ropes, revealing confetti and a banner in Trollish that he would have read, if he wasn’t being squeezed to death by AAARRRGGGHH!!!.
“Big guy, not that I don’t appreciate the hug, but can you…” He coughed. “Let me go?”

AAARRRGGHH!!! nodded, relinquishing his hold. Atlas stretched his neck from side to side, a series tiny pops reaching his ears.

“Surprise!” Toby said.

“Happy birthing day, Master Atlas!” Blinky remarked.

“Wait.” He looked over to the larger troll. “What?”

“Excellent work, old friend,” Blinky said, nudging the troll in the side. “You nearly had me fooled for a moment.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! posed, his head flung back while one arm rested upon his forehead. “Good actor.”

“I’m confused. What is this? Is this a troll thing I should know about?”

“Tobias informed us of the human surprise birthday customs.” Blinky said.

Atlas turned his attention to the human. “Birthday customs?”

Toby laughed nervously, touching his pointer fingers together. “I knew you wouldn’t come down without a reason, so I made one.”

“Are you not surprised?” Blinky asked.

“Uh, that would be one word for it,” Atlas muttered.
“I was convincing?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked.

Atlas nodded. “Yes, very.”

He looked around and gulped. Bagdwella, he recognized, but the few others in the room were a bit more obscure. He remembered seeing one from the bar Draal use to frequent, however the rest were unknown to him. They did not appear to be merchants nor were they related to his two troll friends. Thick bushy fur coated their shoulders and heads, their skin ranging from a pale yellow to a brownish red.

Bagdwella and him exchanged pleasantries, discussing her business and when the next shipment would be. He still hadn’t gotten around to signing the contract with RotGut’s, largely because he didn’t know how wifi worked.

It also meant he was down to one gaggletrack. NotEnrique (he wasn’t sure what the changeling’s actual name was yet, so they were sticking with that one) had been tight lipped on where he hid the magical horseshoe. Therefore, Atlas needed to find someone with experience or at least better of the subject than him. It was a daunting task, but he had still gotten this far. Just another thing to add to his growing list of objectives.

After Bagdwella left, the rest of the trolls approached in a group, bowing their heads slightly. One troll, the largest, moved a few feet in front of the rest. He placed a fist to his chest, addressing him in Trollspeak with, “Honored Grandson.”

Oh, it’s that kind of thing. Atlas straightened his back, copying the movement. “May Deya’s Light guide you this day.”

He hummed, scanning Atlas up and down before nodding.

“And also with you,” the troll said. “Thank you for the invitation. It is not often our tribe is invited to festivities such as this,” he remarked. Beside him, a female bit into the balloon, resulting in a loud pop.

A smaller clan then. Outside of the Red Caps, who were uninvited on purpose, the troll tribes were ranked by population in Trollmarket. Those with more members got a better slice of the pie so to say. That still only narrowed their tribe down to a dozen. If only he could remember which one.
Atlas curled his hand into a fist against his chest. He tried to recall his Trollspeak. Finally, he answered, “You’re…welcome?”

The troll’s mouth pulled together. He passed a look of pity to one of his compatriots.

“Tell your grandfather the *Karzelek sends their warm regards,*” he said, giving Atlas a swift bow before leaving the vicinity. His clan followed, leaving Atlas flushed and uncomfortable.

That could have gone better. Shit. Atlas brushed back his bangs. It stung. No matter how much work he put into his studies, he could never reach the level others wanted him to be.

They didn’t come there for him, not really. If there was one thing he’d learned from Vendel’s teachings, it was that trolls were just as invested in gaining power as changelings.

Changeling. The only reason he was still alive was because of Vendel. Atlas’s mouth twitched at the thought. He owned a life debt to the troll now, one he would probably never be able to repay, which only added to his frustrations with the other. Unlike Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!!!, he could never predict Vendel’s motives. He was similar to Stricklander in that regard. Not that he would ever tell the old goat.

He pushed down his annoyance, back to the furthest reaches of his mind. He was a changeling. So what? It didn’t make him any less of a troll. Different, yes, but they had far more similarities than they would care to admit.

Nonetheless, this served as a reminder of his place in Trollmarket. The only reason he wasn’t dead yet was his position as the honored grandson of the leader.

It was a sobering thought.

Blinky entered his field of vision. He gave the teen a small comforting smile.

He laid a hand on Atlas’s shoulder then said, “Don’t mind them, Master Atlas. Change takes time.”
“It’s okay, Blinky,” Atlas said, shrugging half-heartedly. “I’m used to it.”

“Well,” Blinky began, coughing into one hand. “I must say, I cannot believe you are sixteen years of age! A propitious milestone,” Blinky remarked. “Why, for us it is when a young troll masters gets command of his bowels.” He looked Atlas up and down. “I… cannot say I know what that means for a changeling such as yourself.”

“I’m sixteen?” Atlas wondered aloud.

Blinky cocked his head to the side. “You didn’t know?”

“I don’t remember my birthday,” he explained.


Atlas examined the Forge and his friends. Part of him felt happy Toby would organize such a thing, but the rest of him was apathetic, which was bizarre. Stricklander (and to a certain extent Nomura), had surprised him in the past, but the latter’s surprises normally leaned toward a more terrifying kind.

He felt out of sorts. Were these his own personal feelings or Jim’s? He really hoped it was the former.

Atlas finally settled with an awkward, “Okay.”

The group let out a deep sigh.

“You are not excited,” Blinky said in a dejected manner.

“Sixteen is just another number.” Atlas explained, “Changelings don’t celebrate birthdays or most holidays for that matter.”

Toby’s shoulders drooped. “Seriously? Oh man, dude. That sucks.”
“It’s not really something we care about. We—well, they don’t really have any friends and families to celebrate with, so what’s the point?”

“Well, do you know what else sixteen means, right?” Toby asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Atlas shifted his stance, placing a hand on one hip. His lips turned upward into a bemused smile. “Can’t say I do.”

Toby drew closer, pulling out a folder from his backpack. “Guess who gets to try out that new moped?”

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

Atlas leaned down, trying to hide his excitement. “I thought I needed one of those human permits?”

“I got ya covered,” Toby said, showing him the folder’s content. “Eli knows a guy who knows a guy who knows a girl who makes fake permits and signed permission slips.”

Atlas patted his friend’s back. “You’re the best, Tobes.”

And he meant it. He couldn’t help but give the other an eager grin. He actually had something to look forward to today.

“I know,” Toby replied, flipping back his hair. “We can stop by the store on the way to school and see if they’ll let you test one out. Let me do the talking.”


Maybe birthdays weren’t so bad.

“I leave for one hour,” a familiar voice bemoaned loudly. “And our sacred Forge is reduced to a
mockery!”

Spoke too soon.

Blinky swooped in first, walking up to Vendel with a mollified expression. “Many apologies, Master Vendel, but it is Master Atlas’s birthing day. Tobias said that sixteen is a huge stepping stone for humans on their way to adulthood. We didn’t mean to—"

Vendel picked up a blue balloon, examining it with a mixture of curiosity and disgust. He popped it not a second later. “What are these things?”

“Balloons,” Blinky supplied.

“You will remove them post-haste. As for you,” he turned around, pointing at Atlas’s chest. “Your first council speech is within days and you are not nearly ready enough to walk the stage, let alone speak. Come with me. We’ve no time to waste.”

Any other day he might have protested. Learning about his birthday was eye-opening and something he needed to think about. Sixteen. He knew he was around that age, but having it defined gave him a strange fluttering sensation throughout his body.

“I’ll talk with you later, Tobes,” he said, joining Vendel at the entrance of the Forge.

Toby rolled his head from side to side. “Aw, man. I was hoping we could do cake too.”

Blinky turned to Toby. “I fear we have no cake in Trollmarket, at least one that would be edible for your kind. What else might we do for our young Trollhunter’s important day?”

“Well—"

Vendel cleared his throat, motioning Atlas to walk in front of him. His friends voices lessened the further they ascended, bringing them back to Trollmarket’s shopping district. He eyed the various stores. Even in the early morning trolls were working. It amazed him how little sleep they needed. Stricklander, Nomura, and the rest of his kind needed a few hours every day or two at the very least.
Perhaps it was because of the Heartstone.

The walk was a quiet one, with few trolls noticing their presence. The ones that did bowed their heads ever so slightly before returning to whatever task they had set out for. Once they reached Vendel’s home, the troll led him to his desk.

Atlas stood quietly as Vendel shuffled through the mess on his table.

“You are sixteen years old now,” Vendel stated.

“I guess,” Atlas said.

Vendel fixed an unreadable gaze at him. “You are not happy to be older? And here I thought you wanted to be treated like an adult.”

“I don’t know what to feel. Age hasn’t ever been something I’ve thought about.” He stopped, giving Vendel a calculated look. “How old are you?”

Vendel waved his staff at Atlas’s face. A disgruntled scowl emerged on the troll’s lips. “Never ask an old troll their age, boy.”

“Too embarrassing?” Atlas said.

“Too heartbreaking,” Vendel responded. He placed a group of scrolls onto an open chair. “We are a long-lived race. You will likely outlive your fleshbag friend.”

It was as if someone poured cold water over him. He knew, as a creature of both worlds, he might have a longer lifespan, but the idea of outliving his best friend was…unsettling.

“You don’t know that.” Atlas protested. “What if I age like the rest of humanity?”

“Do you want that?” Vendel asked, one brow raised.
Good question. It wasn’t as if he would mind living longer than the rest of humanity. Hearing his father’s stories of times long past was always a treat. Both he and Nomura had seen so many exciting things. Atlas lacked that. He had spent his entire life here, forbidden to leave Arcadia Oaks. Living hundreds of year would give him the chance to see all those things.

“I don’t know,” Atlas admitted.

“You don’t seem to know a lot of things today. But perhaps we can fix that,” he said, handing Atlas a small book.

He turned it over, recognizing the worn leather. “This is from your library.”

“No need to point out the obvious, Trollhunter.” Vendel sighed.

“You’re giving this to me?”

“I recently received a load of ancient Jötnar scrolls from a traveling trader. You seemed interested in its contents and considering your terrible understanding of our written language, I thought it pertinent to your education.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Truly, it was nothing at all.”

Atlas smiled, holding the book close to his chest. “Thank you. Really. I promise I’ll read all of it.”

Vendel scoffed, moving a pile of documents onto his desk. “See that you do.”

Atlas’s phone beeped. He checked the time and cursed.

“Let me guess,” Vendel said in a dry tone. “Changeling business?”

“Sorry, I gotta go. I can’t believe I forgot I had a meeting with my dad today,” he said, smacking his palm against his face.
Vendel shook his head. “Continue your reading on the Battle of the Green Isles then.”

“But that’s like a hundred pages,” Atlas said, his ears lowering.

“Just because it’s your birthday does not mean you get to skip out on your learning,” Vendel lectured.

Of course. Atlas rolled his neck, lips drawn into a thin line. “You’re a slave driver.”

“Go,” Vendel ordered, no longer looking at him. “The longer you talk, the bigger a headache I get.”

Atlas smiled. It was nice to know the old goat cared. Maybe one day he could even earn the troll’s respect.

On the way out, Atlas called out, “Thanks for the birthday present, old man.”

Vendel rolled his eyes. “Consider it your last, whelp.”
Bittersweet Sixteen (II)

Chapter Summary

Stricklander and Atlas discover a threat to the Trollhunter's life. Atlas tries to enjoy his birthday with Tobes, but underestimates how dangerous this new threat is to him.

In other words, Stalklings suck.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! New chapter and just after the 3below announcement gahhh! So excited for December 21st. Big thanks to Charlie and Vici for helping me with this chapter. Ya'll are awesome. Check out my tumblr tunafishprincess where I post all the fanart by myself and other lovely artists for this series.

Thank you for all the lovely kudos, bookmarks, and reviews. They mean a lot. I'm happy so many people are enjoying this series. You guys are the best. Hope you enjoy the chapter.

Stricklander paused at the clearing.

Once pristine and green, the remains of Bular's presence were burned to oblivion, just as he had ordered. Sad, yes, but necessary. They would grow back one day, as all trees did. But it didn’t take from the fact that it marred his view of the canals and the rest of valley.

Not that it truly mattered. It would have been nice to have taken Barbara here before, but there were other viewpoints in Arcadia he could showcase.

Barbara. He was pleasantly surprised by her invitation last night. Even more surprising, he actually
found himself almost eager for it. Their first date. Of course, it could never unfold into anything more than flirtations. Not that he hadn’t dated in the past. Some information could only be retrieved through more intimate relations. Nonetheless, fraternizing with fleshbags outside of their work was frowned upon. Already he was thinking of excuses for the Order.

Not that he needed to make them. He was the head, Gunmar’s second in command. Anyone who questioned him openly wouldn’t leave the room alive.

But that didn’t mean the others wouldn’t use it against him in some fashion. Nomura especially. He could tell she wasn’t happy with her current assignment. Not that it was his problem. As long as she did what she was told, everything would go smoothly.

Smoothly. A month ago, perhaps, but the crux of the matter was the current situation was anything but smooth. His brethren were chomping at the bit for Gunmar’s return and their subsequent elevation in troll society. Stricklander could understand the sentiment. Finally, they would have access to the histories and magicks they were so long denied.

Despite the anticipation that flowed through his blood, dark storm loomed above his mind. The human Trollhunter and Trollmarket were but minor obstacles to the true issue at the forefront of his thoughts: power. Bular had undermined him about the new changeling in front of Gunmar, and despite Stricklander’s well thought out explanations, the Gumm-Gumm king chose his son over his second-in-command. Even now, the irritation had yet to leave him. Typical troll nepotism.

_He_ was the one who had coordinated the discovery and retrieval of the pieces of Killahead Bridge. _He_ was the one who studied the ancient scrolls on how to put them together. _He_ was the one who led the Order to its Golden Age, opening several Order branches throughout the world whilst gaining hundreds of loyal changelings in turn.

None of this insanity would have gone on if the Pale Lady had chosen him to lead instead of their lord. He could have doubled— no— _tripled_ their numbers and implanted themselves into all of human and troll society. A true secret organization. The lady would have long been freed from her prison if he had been in charge.

But that wasn’t what she wanted. Gunmar was powerful, and despite Stricklander’s numerous strengths, brutality was not one of them.

A shadow passed over his path. The swaying trees and rustling leaves betrayed the other’s presence.
“You need to work on your entrances,” Stricklander warned, his gaze rising. “I could hear you following me all the way from the car.”

Two blue eyes regarded him with a mischievous air. He would have chided him on a regular day for being so out in the open, but he relented.

Atlas grinned, jumping down from a young redwood. His landing dispersed a flurry of fallen leaves. Stricklander couldn’t help but smile. Such a child.

“Dad, I—”

Stricklander pressed a finger to the teen’s lips. “Not here.” He examined his charge, growing dismayed at his less than tidy appearance. “Look at you. Your cloak is crooked. And what’s this? Where are your pauldron and greaves?”

“I left them back at the Order,” Atlas admitted, his chin tucked back.

“You’re missing half your armor.” He walked around the boy, tutting all the while. What on earth was the daft boy thinking? “Honestly, Atlas, what did I tell you about keeping up appearances?”

“It’s not like anyone’s going to see me,” he argued.

Of all the—Stricklander shook his head. Teenagers. One would think as a high school teacher he would be able to deal with them, but he supposed things were different when they were your own, adopted or not. He adjusted the boy’s hood over his horns, making sure everything appeared somewhat presentable. Atlas rolled his eyes.

“You’re rather early. I wasn’t expecting you for another hour,” Stricklander said before turning back on his path, arms pressed tightly together behind him. “Come along then.”

Atlas fell to his side. “Well, you did say it was important.”

“Indeed I did,” he remarked. Bypassing over a fallen tree, his eyes fell upon an open area half encircled by a rock formation. His attention flew to the sky. “I don’t suppose you’ve noticed
“anything peculiar today, have you?”

“This is Arcadia. When has it ever been normal?” Atlas said, slouching against a tall oak.

The boy had him there. “Touché. Allow me to reiterate. Have you noticed anything off about the city? Anything about the skies that seems strange?”

It was as if the temperature dropped several degrees. He could see the wheels turning in the boy’s head. Atlas stood straighter, shoulders squared back.

“What would you like me to do?” He asked.

He patted the boy’s shoulder. “Stay at my side for now. I suspect Bular wants to expedite the retrieval of the amulet.”

“Do you really think he’s smart enough to—” Atlas’s ears flicked backward before lowering sharply. “He’s behind us, isn’t he?”

“I’d wring your neck, abomination,” Bular growled from the shadows of the canal tunnel. “One more comment like that and not even Stricklander can save you, lest he risk his own life.”

Blast it all. He had hoped to catch the troll in a decent mood, or at least one he could manipulate. Sadly, like the rest of the Janus Order, Bular too was growing increasingly impatient.

It didn’t help matters that his teenage protégé never kept his bloody mouth shut. Quickly, Stricklander placed a hand the back of Atlas’s neck. The boy startled, flashing him a look of confusion.

“Apologize for your thoughtless words,” Stricklander ordered.

Bular paced within the tunnel entrance. Did the boy have any idea how dead he would be if he continued to blather? Obviously not.
“But—”

He tightened his hold. “Do it.”

After a second of hesitation, the teen bowed his head. Through clenched teeth Atlas said, “I apologize for my thoughtless words, Bular.”

“That’s lord to you, maggot,” Bular barked.

The teen looked up, his expression unreadable. “Lord Bular.”

“Let’s get back to the matter at hand, shall we?” Stricklander said. His eyes widened at the oddly shaped rocks on the ground. He picked it up, a growing horror eating at his gut. “This is a scale, isn’t it?” He accused, anger riding his voice. “You’ve summoned a Stalkling.”

“To do what we should have done long ago,” Bular stated frostily.

His mind was already going through a million different scenarios of how this would play out, none of which reflected well for them. It completely went against all he and his brethren had done up unto this point, which was very likely the reason why Bular chose it.

Insolent fool.

He relaxed his hold at Atlas, who shot him a glare in response to his earlier action. Atlas, at the very least, had age at his side to explain for his moments of stupidity. Bular had no excuse.

“Stalklings are as dangerous and unpredictable as they are uncontrollable,” he said carefully. Best not to anger Bular anymore than he already was.

A distant roar soared through the trees.

The hair on the back of his neck stood. Even in the bright sunny California day the land around him felt dimmer, darker almost. The trees swayed ominously. He could not see the creature yet, but he
knew that sound by heart.

Centuries upon centuries of living, and nothing came close to the discomfort of a Stalkling’s scream. It was primordial in nature, calling out his every instinct, both human and troll, to hide, to flee, to do anything but stand still, waiting for its sudden and quite deadly arrival.

Bular didn’t have the connections to get a Stalkling. Someone in the Order must have lured it here from its homeland.

Someone who wanted to uproot his plans.

It could be Otto, it could be Nomura, hell, it could be anyone at this point. However it was, they must have planted the idea in the brute’s head. Had they no respect for the secrecy he worked so hard to protect? Whoever it was, the moment Stricklander found out, there would be hell to pay.

They needed to shut this down before Bular completely ruined everything he had done. But how to reason with the brute?

And, of course, the boy failed to understand that. “Uh… I agree with Stricklander,” the teen said, nearly backing into him. “This is a terrible idea.”

As he predicted, Bular tried to round on the boy, but balked when even the smallest of sunrays hit his skin. He settled with a contemptuous snort before saying, “No one asked your opinion on this.”

“Young Atlas,” Stricklander began. “If you want to keep your life, I suggest you shut your mouth.”

Atlas pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. If he was understanding the boy’s body language correctly, and he almost always was, then it appeared his words were finally getting through. “Yes, sir.”

“We agreed that any attempt on the boy’s life would bring too much scrutiny,” Stricklander lectured, motioning the scale at Bular before pointing it at his ward. “It is why we chose Atlas. He’s already infiltrated Trollmarket and gained the Trollhunter’s trust. If you could just be patient, I’m certain that —”
“Which is why I summoned the stalking. I’m sick of hiding in shadows while this fleshbag stumbles close and closer to my father’s bridge.” He scoffed, “No thanks to you half-breeds.”

He pinched the arch of his nose before continuing, “You are playing with fire, Bular. Our entire operation could be put into jeopardy if the humans catch sight of that creature.”

Atlas inched closer, clearly unsettled by the revolting monster. How Stricklander and that mindless beast shared ancestors he would never understand. “How do you know it can even identify the Trollhunter? I mean, lots of the fleshbags look pretty similar.”

“Stalklings have highly advanced smell and sight,” Stricklander explained. “Once they have a target, they won’t stop hunting them.”

Atlas gulped, eyes trained on the circling monster. “You sure about that?”

No, but he had been less certain of things and they turned out fine, or as fine as they could be.

Without warning, Bular reached around him, straight for Atlas. Stricklander froze up.

Bular dragged the teen into the shadows by the hood of his cloak. He brought the boy to his eyelevel. Atlas coughed as Bular’s stranglehold tightened. Stricklander’s heartrate increased as Bular continued to choke his son. His fingers itched. He needed to do something, anything—

Wait, his mind urged, wait to see what he wants.

Stricklander could see the boy reach into his pocket. The poor fool. No knife or dagger would wound a troll like him. If anything, it would only incite further violence from the Gumm-Gumm. Thinking fast, Stricklander placed a hand on Bular’s arm.

“Don’t,” he warned.

“Or what? You’ll kill me?”
“The boy’s intel has been vital to us,” Stricklander began. “Even if your father is released he will still need a way into Trollmarket. The more we know about the city’s layout and defenses, the better we can prepare.”

Atlas clawed at Bular’s hand, his face turning an unusual shade.

Finally, the troll loosened his hold, though only just. He brought the boy back to the ground, his mouth to one ear, whispering, “You are disposable.” He squeezed the boy’s head, leaning even closer. “You are nothing. But I am a merciful lord. Your life is mine. If you take another step out of line, I will end your pathetic existence once and for all. Is that clear, Impure?”


“Pathetic whelp,” Bular scoffed, turning his attention back to the beast. “When she gets her prey alone, no one will ever see or hear from the Trollhunter again. Lest they find his rotting bones.”

“It’s a she?” Atlas croaked.

Bular scowled, tossing the boy at Stricklander, who barely caught the teen in time. “Begone, both of you.”

“Of course, Bular,” Stricklander said, walking away from the scene(not running, dear god, he had more self-respect than that). Atlas stuck to him like glue, his attention still on the flying creature above their heads.

It only took a few minutes to get back to the road, thank goodness. Sweat still dampened his brow however. He would need to freshen up once he got back to the Order.

The Stalkling continued to circle above their heads. Stricklander shuddered. The Lake boy was doomed.

“Is that thing gonna attack us?” Atlas asked in a hushed tone.

“I doubt it, but don’t try to provoke it in any way. Stalklings aren’t like other trolls. They are
mindless beasts, untamed and uncivilized.”

“That’s not true. I saw one on my way through Trollmarket.”

“Unlikely. Most likely you saw one of its several cousin species,” Stricklander explained. “But fear not, young Atlas, it will not strike just yet.”

They watched the Stalkling circle them a few times before heading northward to the more residential part of Arcadia.

“See?” He said, peeling the teen’s claws off of his coat. “Honestly, child. What am I going to do with you? First Bular and then the Stalkling? Speaking of, why do you keep challenging him? Do you want to die?” He sighed. Atlas’s ears lowered in response. Settling both hands on the teen’s shoulders, Stricklander stated calmly, “Atlas, please, this has to stop. You cannot keep pushing Bular’s buttons. Sooner or later, he will kill you. My protection only goes so far.”

“I know,” Atlas whispered.

“Then do better.” He gave the boy’s shoulders a quick squeeze before releasing him. “Be better.”

Atlas grasped his arm as he turned to leave. “Wait, dad, I—”

“What did I tell you about calling me that in the open?” Stricklander lectured, scanning the area. They were too far away for Bular to hear them, but one could never be too careful.

“Sorry. I just…” His shoulders hiked upwards, eyes downcast. “I’ve been thinking about a lot of things today and I discovered something about myself.”

“You have?”

“I think…today’s my birthday.” Atlas said. “I was remembering things earlier and after talking with Toby, I’m pretty certain of it.”
An unusual development, but not unwelcome. Having a more precise date for the teen’s age could help in understanding his development. The boy’s gaze rose to greet his own before looking away.

A soft chuckle escaped his lips. He patted Atlas’s head. “Congratulations then. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?”

“I just…I’m sixteen. Tobes said that was important. Humans celebrate birthdays, so I was wondering…” He paused before softly asking, “Well, I was wondering if we could maybe do the same?”

Of course. The Trollhunter and his friend again. It was troublesome, having to deal with their antics in both his professional and personal life. The gamble of allowing Atlas to get close to them meant he would, in turn, learn more about humans. While not necessarily bad, it caused him some unease.

Ever since Atlas had gotten to know the human boys he had become…different. He sent numerous ‘memes’ from current movies and shows, something Atlas had never shown any interest in before. Not to mention the boy’s musical taste had drastically changed as well. He was becoming more and more like a human teenager in a way.

Stricklander wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Young Atlas,” Stricklander began.

“Forget it. Forget I said anything. It’s stupid. I’m stupid. Changelings don’t celebrate birthdays, right?”

Blasted—oh dear pale lady. Stricklander’s eyes widened at the image in from of him.

Was that…was that the puppy dog look? Who on earth taught him that? He tried to look away, but the guilt in his gut stayed.

Stricklander cleared his throat. “Perhaps…I wouldn’t be opposed to it,” he relented.

And just like a dog, the teen’s ears turned upwards, his expression more than matching his earlier
display. “Seriously? Is tonight okay?”

Warmth filled his chest. Was this what it was like for human parents? This strange mixture of exasperation and fondness?

“I won’t make any promises,” he said. “but yes.”

He clicked the button on his car keys, headlights blinking a second later. Atlas looked over his shoulder at the automobile, chewing on his bottom lip with a wary stare.

“Also, can I get a ride with you back to the city?” Atlas asked.

Stricklander laughed, opening the driver’s door. “Don’t push your luck.”

“What if Bular tries to come after me again?”

“Unlikely.”

“And are you sure the Stalking is gonna find the Trollhunter? What if he attacks the Trollhunter’s friend, or,” Atlas gulped, “me?”

“Trust me, child. A Stalkling always finds its prey.”

“Always?” Atlas said.

Stricklander adjusted his coat before slipping the Stalkling scale into his pocket. “Always.”
“Are you ready for the ride of your life?” Toby asked.

Atlas checked the skies before turning to his friend.

“You’re exaggerating, but yes,” Atlas said. “You’re gonna be riding with me, right?”

The Stalking had yet to find him. Good. Maybe Stricklander and Bular were wrong. As long as he could get back to Trollmarket later, he and the gang would be able to come up with a plan to deal with it.

It hadn’t attacked him on his way here. It had taken some pleading, but in the end, Stricklander drove him to the Order, albeit by trunk express.

For now, he would relax. It was his birthday. The creature couldn’t be stupid enough to attack him in broad daylight, right?

“You got it, chief.” Toby said, rubbing his hands together in a gleeful manner. “You ready for your birthday gift?”

Best not to worry his best friend about it yet. They were here to have fun.

“Do we have all the required things?” Atlas said.

“I wouldn’t have gone through all the trouble of putting this whole thing together if I didn’t. Do you know how much I spent on this stuff?” Toby wiped his right eye as if he were crying. “My piggybank is hurting man.”

“Piggy…what?” Atlas inquired, his head tilted ever so slightly.

“Piggybank. It’s a little ceramic pig you put money inside of, to save up for things.”

“But why? What does a pig have to do with saving money?”
“Google it.” Toby responded, his focus shifting to the store in front of them. He took a few steps in front of Atlas before turning around. “Alright, let me do the talking here.”

“Why can’t I do it?”

“You…” Toby pressed his fingers together in a sharp angle underneath his chin. After taking a deep breath, he asked, “How do I put this nicely?”

He placed a hand on his hip. “What?”

“You know how sometimes when you’re talking to humans, you call them ‘fleshbags’ or talk about things they’re doing, like ‘human school’ and ‘human restaurants’?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not exactly nice. I mean, it’s not mean, but it’s just weird, ya know?”

Had he truly been so obvious?

“Have there been other times I’ve screwed up?” Atlas inquired.

“Well,” Toby stroked his chin. “There was that time last week at school when you put a dagger in my locker.”

“What’s wrong with that? You need to protect yourself,” he defended. The boy had no defensive measures. A dagger was practically nothing in comparison to what he had originally wanted to put there.

“I don’t know, the no weapons at school policy? Dude, come on. Plus, remember that time you tried to trade a real skull with the ice cream man? I don’t think I’ve ever seen a trunk go that fast.”
That one was probably…true. Damn it. Being human was harder than he thought. “Okay. Maybe you’ve got a point.”

“Hey, it’s no biggie. You’re my best friend. Let me do this, okay? I mean, you save my butt a bunch already. It’s the least I could do.” Toby said, playing hitting him in the arm before approaching the salesman. “Good day to you, sir! Lovely weather we’re having.”

The employee glanced over at them, lips pulled into a sour grimace. He was gangly and of medium stature, somewhere in the strange land between teenagerhood and middle age, though his outfit leaned more towards the latter. Not that he could judge on fashion. “You again? I told your friend he can't do a test drive unless you have a learner's permit.”

Atlas covered his face. Of course the guy remembered him.

“You came here before?” Toby asked.

He tilted his head to the side, arms crossed. “I was bored.”

“Well, have I got news for you, good sir.” Toby presented the fake permit, waving it in front of the man. “Hot off the press.”

“Yeah, I also need an insur –“

“An insurance card? Luckily, he's still on his mother's plan.” Toby tossed the man another document.

The mention of his mother gave Atlas pause. How was she doing today? He had wanted to stop by her home, but the thing with Bular and Stricklander prevented him from making the trip.

Was she thinking about his birthday too?

Toby handed the man another card, shaking Atlas out of his thoughts. “His Social Security card.”

In actuality, that was Toby’s, but a little photoshopping and the right paper was all they needed for that
one, or so his friend explained earlier.

The man inspected the document, scowl growing ever larger.

“Trust me, he’s got good credit,” Toby said, handing the man the rest of the folder. “And just for fun of it, I also have his library card, along with signed testimonials from his teachers and friends.”

After a quick review of the materials, the man said sharply, “Happy birthday.”

Atlas and Toby grinned.

Alas, their fortune was never that perfect.

He returned the folder to Toby. “But he's still only sixteen. Needs a signature from a parent.”

And just when Atlas thought it was over, his best friend pulled out a wad of cash. “Would you accept the signature of Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Washington?”

They waited as the man inspected the money, holding it up to the light before pocketing it. A wave of elation hit him.

“Ten minutes.” He passed Toby the keys. “And it better not come back with a scratch. Enjoy the ride, birthday boy.”

Toby was…he couldn’t describe it. He could kiss the boy’s feet right now. Not that he would, (being stuck in a backpack with Toby’s gym socks still gave him nightmares), but the feeling was there.

They highfived.

“Was that not awesome sauce?” Toby said as he picked up two helmets from a nearby rack before passing one over to him.
“That was almost changeling of you, Tobes,” Atlas responded. They approached one of the mopeds, a shiny red model he’d been eyeing since it appeared at the storefront. He stroked the seat before settling both hands on the handlebars. “Ready for the ride of your life?”

Toby passed him the keys, hopping on the back. “You know how to drive one of these, right?”

“Theoretically,” Atlas responded as he adjusted the helmet to his head.

Toby turned his head sharply and squeaked, “Theoretically?”

Atlas revved the engine. Before Toby could say another word, he shot out of the store lot, speeding down the main road.

The wind, the smell of gasoline, the bright sunny day—for the first time in a long time, he was happy. Really happy. There was still the Stalkling situation to consider, but he had Toby, Blinky, and AAARRRGGHH!!! at his side. And maybe Draal if he begged the troll off with some lightbulbs.

He wove in and out between the cars, relishing the rush of adrenaline that followed. Sure, the drivers weren’t too happy (and neither was Toby, if the yelling was any indication), but it was all in good fun.

Taking a sharp turn through downtown, his attention shifted to the woods. A cold shiver ran down his spine. The Stalkling continued to linger on his mind. Ugh, why did something like this have to happen on his first birthday in memory?

The cars thinned as they approached the end of the street. It surprised him how small the town truly was. He had spanned the majority of the main road within minutes.

“Ugh, stop! Stop!” Toby smacked a hand against his back. “I think I’m gonna hurl!”

He veered off to the sideway. Almost immediately, Toby stumbled off the moped onto the grass. His face was an unsettling shade of green.
“What’s wrong?” Atlas said.

“Other than your crazy driving?” Toby held his mouth, releasing a series of loud burps. “Too many breakfast tacos. Go on without me, brother.”

Atlas looked back to the tree line. “I thought we would do this together.”

“Dude, when are you ever gonna get another chance like this? It’s only for a couple minutes.” He pulled his legs up, bag pressing against his stomach. “I’ll be fine. Go have fun.”

“You got your phone on you?”

Toby nodded.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you to the pharmacy or something?”

“Ride on, cowboy. I saw how much fun you were having. We’ve got five minutes before we need to get back.” Toby waved his hand. “Go, go, go!”

“I’ll only be going to the bridge and back, okay?”

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll just…” Toby spread out, cheek brushing against the grass. “Wait over here, on the nice ground.”

Atlas hopped back on the moped. The canal was just around the corner. Toby would be in full sight of him. That was technically not being alone, right?

Taking a deep breath, he stood up on the vehicle, taking in the cool air and warm sun. For a few moments, he was just your average sixteen-year-old. It was nice.

But nice never lasted long for him.
It happened so fast. He only caught the movement from the shadow it, or rather, she, cast against his road.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Atlas chanted.

The shrill roar silenced the area. Even the birds were quiet. It was as if the Stalkling had sucked in all the sound.

She dived. Atlas narrowly dodged her attack. “Fuck you! Fuck you so hard! Today is my birthday! Why can’t the universe give me a damn break?”

“Fuck you too!” A voice called back from behind.

Atlas looked over his shoulder. “Steve? Oh sweet Pale Lady, can this day get any worse?”

Of all people, it had to be the guy Atlas disliked most. The boy quickly caught up to Atlas’s ride, giving him the stink-eye.

“Nice wheels, understudy.” Steve sneered, the whistle in his pronunciation even more evident. “Wow. This is creepy. I knew you wanted to be me, but I never thought you were pathetic enough to try.”

“Human, for the last time, fuck off! This is really not a good time right now.”

“Time for what?”

“Just go away.” He waved the boy off then checked the rearview mirror. Damn. The Stalkling was steadily gaining on them. Atlas increased his sped. “Leave! Go! Find someone else to harass.”

“Whoa! You calling me out? You want to race?” Steve said. “Is that it? Huh, loser?”

“No!” Atlas yelled, trying to lose the boy. Steve continued to follow him. “What part of what I just said had anything to do with racing?”
“You think you can take me, buttmunch?” Steve growled. “Bring it! I’m not afraid of you! You don’t intimidate me. I’m the most popular guy in school! Look at you and your fancy little bike. You think you’re better than me? Ha! I bet you think you’re so cool, with your snobby French and good looks.”

“I don’t want to bring anything! Also, what was that last part?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m totally gonna crush you!” Steve said, roaring his engine.

Wait, the Stalkling wouldn’t attack him as long as he was with someone, right? Atlas speeded up, keeping a lookout for the creature.

A claw narrowly scraped his cheek. He jerked his head back. The creature dove back into the woods. Atlas turned sharply around the corner. Not wanting to be outdone, Steve copied him.

Atlas’s eyes widened as an incoming car approached. “Hey, dipshit, look out!”

Unfortunately, Steve was too off to the side. The other teen lost control of the moped.

“No, not my wheels!” Steve cried out. He jumped off just in time, though his landing was less than graceful.

Atlas cringed as Steve bounced off the gravel before rolling into the bushes. That had to hurt. He almost pulled over, but the monster on his tail clipped his ride again, pushing her body against the back.

Seeing the creature up close was even more terrifying than he imagined. The glowing red eyes were wild and hungry. Despite their beastly nature, they never strayed from his own. She knew who he was. Simply being near another human wasn’t enough.

She snapped at his head. Atlas ducked, summoning the amulet to his right hand. He enchanted, “For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”
Her jaws snapped shut, wings drawing back as he swung his sword at her form.

She rose, higher and higher, before diving once again, her claws aimed directly at his throat.

*Rule One: Always be Afraid*, his Inner-Blinky reminded. The adrenaline boosted his swing, blocking her attack.

Just as she tried to maw him he braked. She flew forward, her back to front. Using the blindspot to his advantage, he swung down. The Stalkling screeched as a part of her was sliced open. She bled, but not enough apparently. She lifted herself skywards, retreating into the horizon before Atlas could plan another attack.

He tried to search the skies, but it was futile. She was gone.

Oh, this was just wonderful. Atlas ground to a halt. The moped was scratched, but he had escaped with his life. For now. No doubt she would be coming back again.

Which meant he needed a plan.

Atlas sighed, deactivating the amulet and returning it to his pocket. He left an anonymous call to Nine-One-One for Steve, hoping the human hadn’t died. He may not like the bastard, but he certainly didn’t wish death on him. Thankfully, they had already received a call about it, confirming that an ambulance would be coming for him soon enough.

At least that wouldn’t be plaguing his thoughts for the rest of the day. He didn’t need another death on his conscience.

His lips thinned into tight line as he pocketed his cell.

So much for a sweet sixteen.
Chapter Summary

Vendel and NotEnrique 'talk'. Atlas and the gang discuss what to do about the Stalkling.

All and all, this is shaping up to be the worst birthday ever.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hello! New chapter! Unfortunately, because of midterms, I won't be able to update next week, but I promise for the week after I will update with a new Blue Moon Rising chapter and a new Fallen Too Far chapter! Thank you for all the wonderful kudos, reviews, and bookmarks. Big thanks to Vici, Charlie, and my bf for helping me with the chapter and giving me feedback. Ya'll are the best.

And another shoutout to all the wonderful artists who have done fan art. :O Oh my gosh, you guys should see this stuff. It's amazing. These artists are wonderful. If you haven't, go follow them.

http://caerulai.tumblr.com/post/178942811897/i-just-couldnt-help-myself-i-guess-%E3%83%84

http://hiddenwriterspirit.tumblr.com/post/178811876352/this-was-inspired-by-the-amazing-trollhunters

https://shackjt.tumblr.com/post/178590363652/some-tear-flooding-from-ch-4-of-the-night-doctor

https://brothebro.tumblr.com/post/178355648580/another-blue-moon-rising-scene-d

Brothebro did a fantastic commission piece for Fallen Too Far which I'll post in that fic's next chapter. Honestly, this fandom is just the best. If anyone ever wants to drop a line and say hello, I'm on insta, tumblr, amino, and twitter under the name tunafishprincess.

I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Just when he thought the stupidity in Trollmarket reached its limit, the two worst offenders blocked
his path, proving him wrong.

Vendel had enough trouble in his life as it was. The Oni clan caused quite the ruckus today in the eastern district after a member of the Red Hats punched one of their clan’s leaders. And of course, as usual, the Red Hats were being tight-lipped about the entire affair. If he had to listen to another of Webgrowl’s ‘philosophical’ rants about gnomes and the seizing the means of metal can production, he was going to kill someone.

But no. Vendel took a deep breath, held it for a few moments, then released it. He had to think logically. Thousands of years of tiny annoyances were far better than any war. Trolls got angry with each other; it was a fact. He was Trollmarket’s leader for a reason. They chose him. He could not let them down. Especially not now, in the midst of Gunmar’s very possible return.

Which was why he slowed his pace, allowing AAARRRGGHH!!! and Blinky to catch up with him. He was there for the people, including those that irritated him.

“Dare I ask the reason you two are following me?” Vendel asked dryly. The two trolls stopped in their tracks, most likely surprised he noticed them. While his eyesight was poor, his smell and hearing were still going strong. Well, for now.

Blinky’s eyes brightened. “Ah, Vendel! Just the troll we’ve been looking for.”

“Don’t stop looking on my account,” he muttered, continuing his way down the street. The two males followed, catching up to him within seconds.

“We have someone important to show you,” Blinky explained, two hands pressed together under his chin while the others were gripped firmly behind his back. A discouraging sign. “It is imperative that you look upon this.”

AAARRRRGGHH!!! let down the bag he carried across his shoulder. A small moving bag. By Deya’s Grace, what had these two fools done now?

His mind ran through several ideas of what it could be—a gnome, a goblin, a human babe—but none of them fit the sounds the bag was making.

Vendel leaned forward. His mouth twisted, as if he had eaten something sour. “Something tells me
I’m not going to like whatever *thisis.*”

A moment later and the creature was revealed. Vendel recoiled, hit with a shock of dismay. A troll babe. From the scruff and lack of horns, he couldn’t be more than a decade old. The exact tribe was difficult to pinpoint, but it was definitely Old World. That was what Vendel thought, at least, until the child opened his mouth and spoke.

“Oi, easy on the scruff!” The whelp growled in a decidedly adult voice. He pulled himself out of AAARRRGGHH!’s hold, crawling up and around the larger troll’s arm until he reached his mossy green shoulder. “And what are you staring at, goat-face? Ain’t ever seen a changlin’ before?”

Had Vendel been made of softer stone, he would have fainted. The baby was talking. The baby was not a baby. His stomach rolled in response.

“Deya’s Grace, Blinkous!” Vendel barked. “Are you insane?”

“So, this is Trollmarket,” the creature said, scanning the area with an evil gleam.

Vendel poked a finger into Blinkous’s chest accusingly. “You brought a changeling.”

“He is Atlas’s newest coworker,” Blinkous remarked, then added, “and a fellow hater of Gunmar.”

The changeling smacked his hand down on AAARRRGGHH!!!’s shoulder before pointing at Blinkous. “Oi, don’t go putting words in me mouth, six-eyes. I just don’t like the guy. Ain’t no way you can get me to say anything.”

Vendel surveyed the street. This was too out in the open. He stood in front of AAARRRGGHH!!! to hide the menace, but that could only last so long. They needed to get somewhere more secure. His library was the first thought to come to mind. Still, it was far away from here. Oh, why did he choose to take a stroll at this hour? His eyes settled upon a small cavern. It was hollow, but certainly better than out in full view of the public.

“Put that thing away!” He ordered in a softer voice, pulling them into the small nook. “Are you trying to incite another panic?”
“Ey! I ain’t a thing, ya brute,” the baby growled before turning over to Blinky. “I only came here cause you promised me socks to eat.”

“And you’ll get them,” Blinkous promised.

“Better be argyle and smelly,” the changeling grumbled.

“Blinkous, of all the insane things you’ve done, this, truly, is by far the worst,” Vendel scolded. “What on earth possessed you to bring such a creature to our home?”

It had taken a grand deal of political clout to convince the public of Atlas. If he or any of them were caught with another changeling, the results would be dire, if not deadly, for all of them. He thought Blinkous knew better. Apparently not.

“I know you’re worried, but time is running out. The bridge is nearly complete. We need to act.” He gestured to the changeling with all four hands whilst explaining his argument to Vendel. “This means Atlas isn’t the only changeling willing to switch sides. It means we could have another spy in the Janus Order.” He looked in the changeling’s direction. “Right, NotEnrique?”

“Not…Enrique?” Vendel inquired. What sort of name was that?

“He has yet to disclose his true name to us. Master Atlas and Tobias have been using it as a placeholder until such a time.”

“I ain’t no snitch.” The changeling now known as NotEnrique squeezed out of AAARRRGHH!!!’s hand, shaking his fur before jumping to the troll’s other hand.

AAARRRGHH!!! provided him a sock.

“But, ah,” NotEnrique backpedaled, snarfing down the treat like a hungry troll in a room of cats. He licked his fingers before remarking lazily, “I wouldn’t be against giving ya some tips and the like.”

Vendel eyed the strange creature. Another spy would do Trollmarket some good. Though he did not approve of the changelings’ methods, sometimes, in order to win, one must get one’s hands dirty.
Vendel knew this first hand. Of all the trolls in Trollmarket, he was one of few who lived before Gunmar’s reign of terror, who knew many a warlord, some nearly as terrible as the king of Gumm-Gumms himself. It was not the best of circumstances, but it would have to do.

“Give me the changeling, Blinkous. I would like to have a few words with him.”

“But—”

“I want to speak to the changeling,” he said. “Alone.”

NotEnrique bared his fangs. “I ain’t saying nothing.”

“It will take us a few minutes to acquire the Dragon’s Blood if you go with Vendel,” Blinkous said.

“Well, I suppose I could hang out with the goat for a little while.” He gave Vendel a look over, scoffing, “No funny business outta you, Grandpa.”

Blinkous pulled him aside as AAARRRGHH!!! struggled to insert the changeling back into the bag. “Vendel, are you certain this is wise? Being alone with a changeling could prove dangerous. This fellow is quite the trickster.”

“Are you doubting my abilities, Blinkous?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then go. I shall deal with our,” Vendel paused, reluctantly taking the bag. “Unsavory guest.”

The climb to his library was quite laborious without his staff, but he made do. Each step reminded him of his age. As a youth he never thought about the importance of self-care after battle, but now, one of the oldest living trolls in Trollmarket, he felt every one of them. Rock could only be reshaped so many times. His knees were shot, his back bent from centuries of scroll deciphering, and he was fairly certain most would categorize him as blind. But he still had his mind, and if there was one thing that had been honed in all his years, it was that.
Once in his library, he tossed the bag to the floor. It hissed and groaned. Vendel ignored him, choosing instead to close his door and close the curtain to his window. He tapped a finger to the glowstone at his desk. Almost immediately it let up, casting a soft orange light throughout the room. His shoulders lowered. His hand absorbed the soft warmth it emitted. A weak imitation to the true thing, but it lifted his fowl mood for the moment.

First things first. Reaching into one of the compartments in his desk, Vendel pulled out an old bottle of Rocgut. A potent, if not average Trollish brew, but he wasn’t going to waste any of his good spirits on the changeling. Vendel took out two large mugs, pouring half of the beverage into each one. Once finished, he settled into his chair and waited.

The changeling scuttered around, letting out an eerie laugh. He darted back and forth between the shadows, as if trying to goad him. Vendel stayed seated. He took a sip from his mug. Once NotEnrique noticed he wasn’t getting the reaction he wanted, he jumped onto Vendel’s desk.

“You’re no fun, old-timer,” the changeling said. His gaze flickered over to the drink in front of him.

Vendel placed both hands under his chin. “What do you call yourself?”

“Didn’t you hear from ol’ four arms back there?” He snickered, gesturing to his ears. “Or are you deaf too?”

“No, not that. I mean your real name. Your true name.”

It was good he chose this spot, otherwise he wouldn’t have seen the minute change in the other’s features. The hair on NotEnrique’s neck stood up, alerting Vendel of the changeling’s defensiveness. Even though he appeared young, his eyes spoke of a much older male. He reached for Vendel’s offered mug, swirling the alcohol before chugging the entire thing in one gulp. He belched.

“Ain’t got one,” NotEnrique grumbled, voice hoarse. “Changelings take the name we’re given when we get a human to replace.”

Interesting, if not slightly sad. He may have no love for changelings, but he could at least admit the poor bastards got the worst lot in life. Changed by dark magicks into Gunmar’s spies and assassins at such a young age—Vendel almost pitied them.
Almost.

“I suppose NotEnrique will have to do then,” Vendel said.

“I ain’t answering to that,” NotEnrique said frostily. “It’s stupid. The Trollhunter and his friend are the ones that coined it, not me.”

And yet here he was. A lot of ‘no’s from someone who willingly came to Trollmarket (more or less).

It could mean several things. Atlas was far easier to read in comparison to NotEnrique. That didn’t mean the changeling was completely closed off to him however. He was still fresh from the Darklands, a green member (figuratively and literally, he mused) , jaded, but not to the level of his brethren.

Vendel leaned forward. “What is it you are here for?”

“Just brushing through. Enjoying the sights. Eating the food,” NotEnrique sneered, laying down at his side, one hand on his hip. “Ya know, tourism.”

“You are spying on us,” Vendel stated.

He laughed. “Like you don’t do the same with your pet Trollhunter.”

There was a dark edge in the changelings tone. What that meant, Vendel couldn’t say. He dug deeper. “He is not a pet. Atlas is...” He waited a second before answering, “My grandson.”

“Your grandson?” He looked him up and down. “Bushigal. You’re killin me, goat-face.”

“Believe what you will, impure.”

“They’re going to find out you know. The others I mean. The Janus Order ain’t nothing to sniff at.”
They the real deal. Only the best of the best getta be one of them.” NotEnrique swirled his mug as if it were still full. “Just one word from me and your little Trollhunter is gone. Puff. Well, more like eaten, but hey, who’s keepin track?” He leaned closer. “So, what’s in all this for me?”

Ah, there it was. A small fire lit in Vendel’s stomach. The gall the changeling had. His younger self would have thrown the impure out the window. But Vendel had learned long ago that words could be far more threatening than actions, especially when the other didn’t expect it.

“Your life,” Vendel said. “We know where you live.”

“Ha! I got the Order behind me,” he said, crossing his arms. “‘Sides, the Trollhunter’s got a crush on Enrique’s big sister. Ain’t no way you can touch me.”

Vendel stood. He reached for his staff behind the bookcase before rounding the table over to NotEnrique’s side. He bent down until he was inches from the changeling’s face. “How pathetic. You come here, into my home and try to intimidate me with nothing but empty threats.” Vendel’s lips twitched upwards. “You miscalculated, impure. Atlas may not hurt you on account of his sympathies for his people and your human sister, but I will act to protect Trollmarket, whatever the cost. Kidnappings are not unheard of. Your people would write you off as another casualty between our kinds.”

The changeling’s ears lowered, though his expression was still mocking and arrogant. He tapped Vendel’s staff with his knuckles before replying, “You’re kinda terrifying for an old guy.”

“Trollmarket must be protected,” Vendel said, disregarding the imp’s comment.

NotEnrique jumped from the desk, landing in Vendel’s seat. “Why not get another Trollhunter? Sounds like this kid causes a bunch of problems.”

Vendel rose to his full height. “I do not have control over Merlin’s choices, but I do try and keep to our laws. Our Trollhunter is a child.”

A child caught between a millennia-old war. In the back of his mind, the faces of those young trolls flashed in quick succession. Each one different, but all with the same haunted look. So many dead. So many lost. So many damaged. All because of his desperation to win. He was the one who led them into battle after battle against the Gumm-Gumms. He was the one who buried their bodies. He was the reason for the huge generational gap in tribes from Gastonbury Tor, their previous
Trollmarket. Their blood was on his hands. And it always would be, until his dying breath.

His fingers tightened around his staff. Never again.

“A child? That’s your excuse? Do you really expect me to believe that hogwash?” NotEnrique’s mocking smile took on a sharp edge. “Your Trollhunter is a changeling and you’re using him to root out your enemies.”

“I cannot deny his knowledge has been useful,” Vendel spoke.

Atlas’s intel had given them a jumpstart against the Order and Bular. Already he and some of his most trusted guardsmen were scouring Arcadia for its location. He knew they were close. He could taste it.

“He’s been leaking out secrets to our side. Bossman already has a good idea of Trollmarket’s layout from all the kid’s photos.”

“I know,” Vendel said. “An unfortunate loss, but the discovery of the bridge and its location is far more important. You may have an idea of our local sock markets, but I know where you are hiding the Bridge.”

A bluff, but the changeling didn’t know that.

“No you don’t.” The changeling narrowed his eyes.

“Oh? Who do you think warned us? Who do you think has been updating me on its completion?”

“Putting a lot of trust in some snot-nosed brat.” NotEnrique snorted, features obscured by the position of his face. “He thinks he can change us, do you believe that?”

“Not in the slightest. Your kind were doomed from the start.” Vendel returned to his seat, though not before dumping the changeling out of it. The creature protested, but he paid him no heed. “But Atlas is different. He has something you will never possess.”
NotEnrique scoffed, “And what’s that?”

“The ability to change.”

The changeling roared with laughter. He rocked back and forth, gasping for air.

As his voice died down, Vendel continued, “Believe what you will. I have faith that with time and dedication, he will make a decent Trollhunter for Trollmarket.”

As long as he finished his lessons, Vendel thought, and stopped evading the guards. Atlas, while improving these past few weeks, was not nearly at the level Vendel needed him yet. It was imperative the boy master his TrollSpeak. Otherwise, who knew what the council would do to him.

“Making some mighty brash assumptions there,” NotEnrique commented. He rolled back onto his stomach, chin relaxed against his claws while he kicked his legs back and forth. The dichotomy of his childish body language and harsh words jarred Vendel. It raised the fur on his back.

“Am I?” Vendel inquired in a monotone manner.

“You’re just like the rest of em. Janus Order, Trollmarket, Darklands— a bunch of old geezers playin with the rest of us like a game of Maces and Talons. Word in the grapevine was Ol’ Kanjigar got sunned cause he got too set in the his ways. Bular took advantage of that. Was fine before, but now you got us movin in on your territory, eyeing your nice pretty house and all them yummy socks. So what are you gonna do when a new kid comes along? You can’t fool me. You want some newbie to do your dirty work. Why get your own hands bloody when you got the changelingTrollhunter to do it for you? Doesn’t hurt that he’s immune to sunlight and can switch forms.”

Vendel struck the floor with his staff, startling the changeling. Good. The impudent upstart needed a good scare. “Your implications are as frivolous as they are false,” Vendel said.

“Are they? You might have everyone else fooled, but I’ve dealt enough with changelings to see what you’re doing. You don’t think he can convince any of us. You’re banking on him abandoning our kind.” NotEnrique shook his head. He smirked. “He won’t. He can’t. Stricklander got him wrapped round his little finger. Ain’t nothing that can separate them two. Kid would cut his own arm off ’fore he hurts his daddy.”
Ah ha! So that was the name of the changeling’s leader. The alcohol had been a good choice then. Vendel restrained himself, careful not to reveal anything. The name would need to be investigated. In the meantime however—

Vendel cocked his head to the side. “Are you so certain of that?”

“Are you?” NotEnrique snapped back.

Both males eyed each other suspiciously. NotEnrique assessed the room, though not without keeping Vendel within his line of vision in case he attacked. Smart changeling.

NotEnrique stole Vendel’s mug, drinking it down before Vendel could snatch it back. He crossed his legs, drumming his fingers across the desk. Finally, he said, “Threat of Gunmar above ya heads and all this place has to protect itself is some stupid whelp.”

“Atlas will never be Kanjigar,” Vendel said. Sad, but true. Kanjigar was sorely missed, but in their current situation, he would not be the kind of Trollhunter they needed. It was harsh, yes, however Vendel never considered himself a good troll, merely a pragmatic one. “But I have faith, in the greatest of dangers, he will weather whatever storm your Master and his son send his way.”

And of course, just his luck, the biggest idiot of them all barged through his door, nearly slamming it off its hinges. Again.


“You were saying?” NotEnrique sang in a mocking tone.

Vendel sighed.
He was screwed.

He was so screwed.

And not even the Pale Lady could save him (if she ever could. He still wasn’t sure whether she was their goddess or queen? Stricklander was kinda vague about that part).

His armored feet clicked against the cobblestone path. His nerves were on fire. The armor snapped into place the moment he entered Trollmarket, if not sooner. Even the softest of sounds set him off.

Relief filled him at the sight of Blinky amidst the antique section of Trollmarket. In his hurry, however, he very nearly ran into AAARRRGHHH!!! along the way. The troll caught him before he hit the ground thankfully. Toby jogged close behind, his breathing rough and choppy. Blinky startled at the commotion of it all. He looked between the boys, bewilderment in his brow.

Blinky approached the two, guiding them over to a quiet alley. “Is everything alright, Master Atlas, Tobias?”

“Blinky, how do I evade a Stalkling?” Atlas asked between breaths. “I asked Vendel, but he told me to talk to you. Also, why was NotEnrique with him?”

“Stalkling?” AAARRRGHHH!!! asked, eyes wide and alert.

He nodded. “Yeah, and out in the open too. Bular released it.”

“What’s a Stalkling?” Toby asked.

“Stalklings are one of the only species of troll immune to the effects of sunlight. They are expert trackers, with sharp talons and even sharper teeth,” Blinky explained. “Quite terrifying. Many a troll have emptied their bowels from even the sound of them.”
“Yikes,” Toby hissed, before patting Atlas on the back. “Well, it can’t be too bad, right? You fought Draal and lived. Compared to him, this should be a piece of cake.”

“That was different. Draal isn’t a beast. That thing—she—is unpredictable,” Atlas said, clenching his hands. “Strick—My dad told me it will try to get me alone. Even when I’m not completely alone she’ll attack. She’s lightning fast too.”

His hand reached up to where she scratched him earlier. He flinched as his fingers made contact. Even now, it stung like hell. He would need to clean it before returning topside.

“There’s gotta be a way to defeat it right? Some weakness?” Toby asked.

“Stalkings bad,” AAARRRGGH!!! said, giving a full body shudder. “Hard to kill.”

“Yeah, figured that one out when she tried to claw my eyes out,” He deadpanned.

“A she? Oh dear.” Blinky scratched his chin. “The females are much larger and more ferocious than the males. I don’t know any troll who’s managed to escape one of them.”

Atlas paled.

“Dude, probably not the best time to tell him that,” Toby mentioned.

“There’s gotta be a way around this?” Atlas glanced down at his hands. He could feel the sword’s presence in the back of his mind, rearing to escape. His growing fear only made it worse. He lifted his head, attention back on the blue troll. “Do I have to kill her?”

“Once a Stalkling marks its target, it well, ‘stalks’ it till death. There is no reasoning with the beast.” Blinky scratched his chin. “Though I am curious. How is it you’re not disemboweled?”

“I hit her with my sword,” Atlas provided.

“Where is she now?”
“She flew away.”

Blinky seemed to deflate in front of his very eyes. He rubbed all four hands together anxiously. “You did not try to strike the final blow?”

“I didn’t get the chance to.”

“We will need to hunt it down then,” Blinky said. “You must fight her before the day is up. She is wounded and angry. The longer you wait, the longer she learns how you fight.”

“She flies. How am I going to stop a flying monster? Plus, she won’t come if all you guys are with me,” Atlas pointed out.

Blinky motioned to Atlas’s form. “Yes, though as long as you are not alone, you will remain unharmed.”

Not exactly. She still attacked when Steve was there. But Steve didn’t even see her coming. Was she merely a mindless beast, or something far more? Whatever she was, it meant his actions were restricted.

“I don’t think that’s possible.” Atlas explained, “I have things to do at the Order and for the play today.”

Toby raised an eyebrow. “Whoa, you’re still doing that?”

“It’s good practice in dealing with humans,” Atlas said.

Toby raised his other brow, a knowing smirk emerging. He turned to AAARRRGHH!!!, whispering (too loudly, in Atlas’s opinion), “Is it Claire? It’s totally Claire.”

In response AAARRRGHH!!! flipped his hair back, batting his eyes. Toby snickered. Atlas glared.
“Be serious, my friends,” Blinky said, a hand coming to rest on Atlas’s shoulder. “Master Atlas, I must admit, this rehearsal of yours will be putting you in harm’s way. It would be unwise.”

“I promised myself I was going to do it, even if I’m not technically acting in the play anymore.”

“Yes, but—”

He brushed Blinky’s hand away. “It’ll be fine. There are tons of humans there. It’ll be safer there. At least until we go out and find it.”

“It is still dangerous. You need to stay here, at least until—”

“You’re not my dad, Blinky,” Atlas snapped. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

Blinky pulled his hand back. He closed his eyes. “Very well,” he said softly. “I trust your judgment, Master Atlas. AAARRRGGHH!!! and I will need to return NotEnrique to the surface at sunset. You know where to find us.”

Atlas clenched his teeth before nodding. His cheeks burned, a mixture of embarrassment and guilt flooding his conscious. Blinky didn’t deserve his anger, but being told what to do by everyone all day was getting really frustrating. A changeling father was one thing. Adding a well-meaning (if slightly overbearing) trainer and grumpy strict grandfather was like putting oil into a fire.

As the two trolls walked off, Toby pulled him to the side.

“Everything okay, dude?”

“No,” Atlas admitted. He brushed back his bangs. “It feels like everything is falling apart today. Everyone keeps telling me what to do. No one asks me what I want.”

“Well, what do you want?”
“Honestly,” he let out a sad chuckle. “I don’t know. To live?”

“I don’t think Blinky was trying to control you,” Toby said. “He’s just like that. Yeah, it can get annoying, but he wants you safe. We all do. Well, as safe as you can be as the Trollhunter.”

Atlas groaned. “And there’s the other thing! Blinky can’t, not really. It’s like everyday something new is out to kill or maim me. I could avoid Bular in the old days,” Atlas said, his mouth twisting into a scowl. “But I can’t anymore. It’s getting harder and harder to keep from talking back. He choked—”

He stopped. No, he couldn’t burden his friend with that knowledge. Toby already worried about him enough. As if he needed to look even weaker in the other’s eyes.

“He choked a changeling today. He’s getting worse. The Bridge is almost complete. We need to figure out how to get him away from the changelings and get rid of him,” Atlas said. He bit down on his bottom lip, brows bent sharply. “But we can’t fight two fronts. We need to get rid of the Stalkling first. I…I’m not sure I can take that thing on alone.”

“Why go to the play then? Why not just hang out at my place until we can all go and fight it together?”

Atlas crossed his arms, his chin tucked into his chest. He mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s Claire,” he said.

“Wow, really? I never would have guessed,” Toby said dryly.

“She’s not talking to me anymore,” Atlas grumbled. “She won’t answer my texts. I’m afraid of approaching her at school. What if she’s not just mad? What if she hates me?”

“You’ve got it bad,” Toby said. “Like, really really bad. I’m pretty sure you’ve gone from crush to terminally lovesick.”
“Tell me about it,” Atlas groaned.

“And...you got another problem too,” Toby confessed, scratching the back of his head before stuffing his hands into his pockets. “The, uh, the Vespa guy kinda sorta...wants you to pay for the damages.”

“But I don’t have any human money.”

“Yeah, I know. I told him you became a monk and renounced all earthly possessions, but he didn’t believe me.” He threw his hands up in a what-can-you-do sort of gesture. “He says he’s gonna call the police if you don’t cough up the cash.”

“Great. Another problem I have to worry about.”

“I’d help you out, but...” He pulled out the white insides of his pockets, shrugging. “I’m all out of cash.”

“It’s fine, Tobes. I can deal with the human,” he said, a soft smile emerging on his lips. “I forgot to tell you, but thanks for riding along with me on the moped earlier. It was fun.”

“Yeah, but this is your birthday and I wanted it to be special,” Toby said, kicking a nearby stone. “And now evil Toothless is out to get you.”

“It’s just a birthday.”

Toby’s gaze turned somber. His shoulders hitched upwards. “It’s not though. Not to me. It’s supposed to be special. It haaasto be special. I planned everything. We were gonna eat pizza and popcorn and watch the rest of the Lord of the Rings tonight and maybe play Mario Party or Pokémon or something until bedtime, I don’t know. I guess...” Toby paused. “I guess I just wanted you to enjoy today, that’s all.”

“Did I enjoy birthdays...before?”
“No. Not since your dad left you on one,” Toby confessed.


Toby threw him a long silent side-eye before saying, “You really don’t view yourself as Jim, do you?”

“I don’t know. I guess...It’s kinda weird?” He admitted, throwing up one hand. “It’s like, everything I do these days is about Jim, Jim, Jim, and not me.”

“You’re still you. You’re just…more,” Toby said. “You’re both Jim and Atlas.”

“That’s just it. You make it sound so easy, but I do have to be one or the other. Outside of Trollmarket I have to be either the human Jim or the changeling Atlas. Even in Trollmarket I’m expected to act a certain way as Vendel’s ‘honored grandson’. Most of the trolls around here still call me Jim, even though I’ve corrected them a hundred times. It’s like, in their eyes, Atlas isn’t my real name.”

“But you are Jim,” Toby said.

Atlas looked away. In the darkest regions of his mind, he wondered if that was the only reason Toby hung out with him. He knew it was wrong of course, but being compared to his past-self hurt. A lot. What if he never got his memories back? What if Toby figured out Atlas wasn’t the person he thought he was and left him?

“You don’t understand. I keep telling you but you just don’t—Look, I’ve spent six years wondering who I was and building up my current identity, and now, I’m thrust into the human world with all these human things and going to human school.”

Toby’s shoulders slumped. “Is it really so bad, spending time with us?”

“No, I, no, Tobes, I do like spending time with your kind. It’s just…I don’t know how to explain it.” Atlas scratched his arm. “I feel like I spent more time as a human than a changeling these days. And sometimes—”
“Sometimes what?”

Sometimes, he wished he really was human.

It hadn’t hit him until recently, the last few days really. Hanging out in the Order was growing stale. He actually preferred going to school now, despite the homework and classes. In the Order, he had to watch his back every chance he had, but in Arcadia High, he was safe. People said hello to him in the hallways. The lunch ladies asked him about his day in the cafeteria, and they weren’t just angling for information. They actually appeared to be interested in him. Señor Uhl, while scary at first, helped him with his Spanish homework during study hall, free of charge.

Humans were nice. Humans cared. And in the end...Humans weren’t as bad as changelings thought they were.

His people were wrong. Worse, he was wrong. In comparison to humans, it was the changelings who were the cruel ones.

Atlas wasn’t sure what to think about that.

“It’s nothing.” Atlas said.

Toby drew closer. “I don’t mind. Come on, dude, you can tell me.”

Atlas glared. “Remember what I said about dropping things?”

Toby put his hands up. “Okay, okay, okay. But if you ever want to, I’m always willing to listen.”

“Look, we get rid of the Stalkling later tonight, okay? You, Blinky, and AAARRRGHH!! can meet up with me after rehearsal,” Atlas stated.

“Whatever you say.”

“I need to go. Rehearsal is tonight. Claire and plenty of other people will be there, so it shouldn’t
attack me anytime soon.” Atlas began to walk before stopping a few feet away. He turned around, arms folded. “Uh, could you…?”

“Walk you there?” Toby provided.

“Yes.”

Toby patted his back. “Anything for you, birthday boy. I’ll protect you from the demonic Big-Bird.”

“Cute, Tobes. Real cute,” Atlas said, though he hadn’t a clue what the boy meant. Who the hell was Big-Bird?

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Toby clicked his phone on, gesturing to a picture. “Nana sent me this earlier. She said the Weatherman says it’s gonna rain tonight.”

“Yeah, maybe if we’re lucky the Stalkling will lose interest,” Atlas joked. “And if we’re really lucky, find someone else to stalk. I hear Steve’s been looking for a new stalker. They would be perfect for each other.”

“Heroic plan.”

“I try.”
Bittersweet Sixteen (IV)

Chapter Summary

Claire and Atlas rehearse for the play, later, Atlas drops by a few people's homes, all the while trying to fight off the stalking.

Who knew lightning could hurt so much?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters. I also don't own any of the lines quoted from Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet.

Guess who's back? Back again. Yeah, she's back, tell a friend. Hey! Finally a new chapter! Midterms are over so I should more or less be back to my old updating schedule on Fridays. Big thanks to those helping me with this chapter. And thank you for all the bookmarks, kudos, and reviews! Wow, you guys are just fantastic. Seriously.

This was going to be a 5-part story but in order for me to tell everything, it has been changed to a 6 part one, so expect two more chapters in this part before we get to the next episode. Also, if you see any glaring grammar errors or spelling issues, please alert me. I try and catch them but there's always a few that slip through the cracks.

Fallen Too Far will hopefully be updated around Halloween next week.

I hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Claire tapped her foot against the locker.

Her forefinger drummed against the cellphone case she got last Christmas. She checked the screen again. It was a quarter to four. Rehearsal was in five. She bit down a curse.
Normally, she was never this impatient, but today was different. Atlas hadn’t been at school at all that day. The same went for Toby. Where on earth were they?

Suspicious. Definitely suspicious.

Despite her anger at him for trashing her house, despite the mysterious circumstances, despite everything he did—he was the only one who could play Romeo now.

Her dream of being an actress was dependent on this. Being the lead actress of a school play could open so many doors for her, and with her high grades and other extracurriculars, she knew she could get into at least one of the top universities for acting, right? It would show her dedication to the art.

Santa Maria, she really needed this to work.

Darci and Mary glanced up at her before returning to their phones. Claire started to pace back and forth. Her fingers nervously combed through her bangs, a habit she had yet to break. She could have texted him, she mused, but she wasn’t sure what to say. She didn’t want to threaten him, yet she needed him to know how badly she needed this. It was why she wanted to do it in person.

Not to mention she was still pretty pissed about him trashing her house.

A soft bicycle bell dinged. Her eyes flew to the school entrance. Her prayers were answered. Atlas hopped off the back of Toby’s bike, giving the boy a quick salute before heading in. Claire immediately jogged (ran, her mind supplied, don’t lie) over to him.

“There you are!” She called out. He paused at the doors to the auditorium.

Atlas stood up straighter, a cute little crinkle developing between his brows before smoothing out into a look of surprise. “Claire?”

“You’re early. For once,” she said, her frustration riding her words. To be fair, he wasn’t exactly the easiest guy to find.

“Did you,” he began before stopping midsentence, fiddling with the sides of his backpack. Finally, he continued, “Did you get my texts?”
“I did,” she confirmed.

An empty silence ensued.

Atlas avoided her gaze. “If you don’t want me here I can leave.”

Claire scanned the boy, biting her bottom lip at what she saw. He was paler than normal, with a fresh cut across his cheek from ear to nose. She uncrossed her arms. As much as she wanted to ask, she needed another answer first.

“So you’re just going to leave again?” She asked softly.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You’re not making me uncomfortable. You’re just—” She groaned. “Ugh! Can we talk someplace?”

“Not sure. Looks like you’ve got chaperones,” he mentioned, nodding to the two girls behind her.

“Mary, Darci,” Claire motioned her head toward the door. “Go. I need to talk with Jim.”

“You sure about that, girlfriend?” Darci said, folding her arms. She threw Atlas a lifted eyebrow, clearly unimpressed.

Mary glanced up from her phone. She reached for her bag menacingly. “If he tries anything I brought my taser.”

“Girls,” she warned.

Mary sighed, waving her hand. “Fine. Come on, Darci, I need someone to take pictures of me for my new profile.”
Darci followed after, though not without rolling her eyes. Claire couldn’t blame her. Mary changed profile picture practically every day.

Atlas watched them leave before fixing her with an unreadable stare. “Is there something you’d like to say to me?”

She placed a hand on her hip. “What, no apology?”

“I already apologized, but if you want me to say it I—”

She put up a hand.

“I was upset,” Claire confessed. “You totally wrecked my house. My parents blamed me for leaving Enrique with you. I would’ve gotten in less trouble if you’d let him get kidnapped.”

“Really?” He said with a curious tone before shaking his head. “I-I mean No, you're right. You're right. You're totally right. Toby and I should never have...fed those coyotes. I never would have thought they would follow me to your place. I'm sorry, again. Truly.”

“You’re doing it again. You’re lying,” Claire accused, brows pushing together as her earlier frustration took hold.

“I’m sorry?”

“Things aren’t adding up, Atlas. Coyotes don’t do that kind of damage. I found claw marks in my brother’s bedroom, but they don’t match any animal around here. At least not the ones I’ve seen. I checked my backyard too and found footprints. Big footprints,” she said, brushing back her long bang. Inhuman footprints, she wanted to say but kept it to herself. She came closer, voice low. “Be straight with me. What really happened?”

And of course, once again, her question went unanswered.
“There you are, Jim! So glad you're here!” Ms. Janeth interrupted, pushing the doors back dramatically. “I hope the two of you are ready to recreate the tragedy of true love.” She turned to Atlas, ducking her head slightly. “Jim, I…About how I acted earlier. It was unprofessional. I let my frustrations get the best of me. You are a child and I am an adult and I was wrong to call you out in class. I apologize. Truly, not just because of the play.”


Ms. Janeth patted his shoulders before turning around, calling out, “Places in five! Eli, move those blocks to upper stage. No, no, no, not that upper stage. Ugh! Nevermind, we’ll do them later. Move people!”

Atlas blinked, once, twice, before asking, “Uh, what was she talking about?”

“Steve totaled his Vespa. He's got a concussion. And Ms. Janeth says he can't be Romeo anymore. We can't do Romeo and Juliet without a Romeo, Jim,” Claire implored.

“Ha, ha—oh, oh man, that’s terrible, poor Steve,” Atlas corrected after a glare from Claire. “Okay, but I'm still confused.”

“You're the understudy for Romeo, remember?”

He folded his arms. “Why not get Eli to do it? I'm pretty sure he knows both Romeo and Juliet’s lines by heart.”

“Eli gets stage-fright if he’s on stage for too long. That’s why we need you. You’re the only one who can do it. Please,” Claire pleaded. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I—We need you to come back. I'm willing to beg.”

He held his palms up in a placating gesture, worry on his brow. “No, of course. Of course I will.”

She smiled in relief.
To her surprise, Atlas actually knew all his lines now. Sure, he struggled with putting the right amount of emotion into them, but once he got going she found herself mesmerized. The sway of his hips, the way he walked—it was as if someone else had taken the reins.

Now this was the boy she saw at tryouts. The slight tilt of his head, coupled with the unmeasurable blue of his eyes, made her heart pound all the more.

Atlas.

Jim.

Romeo.

Everything about him was different. He was the personification of a question, mysterious and alluring. The other girls may not see it (and perhaps Claire was making it all up in her head), but something was up with her co-star.

Something magical.

“He jests at scars that never felt a wound,” he quoted. His gaze flickered over to her before returning to the audience. Her skin heated up in response.

Claire barely heard the rest of the monologue, too preoccupied with thoughts of the boy in question.

She shouldn’t be feeling this way about the guy who trashed into her home. Coyotes her ass. Did he really think she would believe such bull? Hell, she shouldn’t even be forgiving him. The only reason she wasn’t grounded from the play was Ms. Janeth pleading with her parents that the show could never go on without her there. She should just focus on her part instead of wondering about the weird Canadian transfer student.

But every time she looked into his eyes, her curiosity grew. The way he gazed at her, as she were the most important person in the room, made her short of breathe at the worst of moments.

Ms. Janeth let out a soft whistle. Claire froze. Shoot, it was her turn now, she nearly forgot!
“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name, Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,” she clenched a hand to her heart. “And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”

“Shall I hear more,” Atlas spoke, his voice alit with hope that sent shivers down her spine. “Or shall I speak at this?”

He was getting better. Good. With the play fast approaching, she—they needed him to be at his very best.

Claire raised her hand, resting it against her cheek. She licked her lips before continuing, “Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What’s Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name Belonging to a man. What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title. Romeo, doff thy name, and, for thy name, which is no part of thee ,take all myself.”

Her heart danced as Atlas swerved around, his intense gaze searing her soul. She covered her chest with her forearm, legs shifting together. Her stomach flooded with a giddy warmth she couldn’t identify.

Yes, she thought, this was acting. Perfect acting, really. She almost believed it.

“I take thee at thy word,” Atlas said, his steps echoing across the stage. She shifted her back to him, watching his shadow grow bigger with every second passed. She felt his breath against the nape of her neck. It took every cell in her body not to shiver. “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized. Henceforth I never will be Atlas.”

“Romeo,” Claire whispered.

Atlas pulled away, hand rising to his mouth.

Ms. Janeth snapped out of her trance. “Again, Mr. Lake. And this time, a little further away from each other. Juliet must be surprised by your presence, not expecting it. Ms. Nuñez, back to your place.”
“Oh, sorry,” he coughed, no longer facing Claire. “Henceforth I never will be Romeo.”

They continued through the rest of the afternoon, though something about that moment stuck with her. Why did he say that? He didn’t mess up like that on his other lines.

Ugh. Right when she thought she finally had a handle on understanding him he did something different, causing her to step back and reevaluate.

Even after rehearsal had finished, she couldn’t stop from watching as he downed a water bottle. His throat bobbed with each sip. He had a larger Adam’s apple than she expected. Maybe it was because he was so skinny. His hair glistened with sweat from the lights, long bangs brushed back, emphasizing his pale skin and high cheekbones.

*Down girl,* she told herself.

Claire zipped up her backpack. For a moment, she clicked on her cell to read the messages before returning to stare at the boy. Darci and Mary left her a few texts before they went home, mostly ranting about Mary’s love life and tomorrow’s quiz. Her mouth twitched upwards. It was strange how the three of them clicked, even though they were all very different people.


“Do I have something on my face?”

“Huh?” Claire said.

“You’re staring.”

“Oh, wow,” Claire chuckled, cheeks burning. She adjusted the straps of her bag. “I guess I was thinking.”

He swung his bag over one shoulder, teasing, “And what is on fair Juliet’s mind?”
“Something her Romeo said earlier.”

Atlas paused halfway down the stage’s steps. “What do you mean?” He asked.

“Back there earlier. You didn’t mess up on any of the other ones except that one line.”

His shoulder rose, features smoothed out into an unreadable wall. “Which one?”

“You know exactly which one I’m talking about.”

“It’s nothing. Just a slip of the tongue.”

“It wasn’t a slip,” she asserted. “Atlas, is everything okay?”

Once again (could the woman not read the mood? Ugh. Adults), Ms. Janeth broke up their conversation, clapping for the students to gather around. Claire sighed.

Once the remaining members formed a semi-circle, she announced, “Great rehearsal. No, in fact, stupendous! Ms. Nuñez, make sure to remember your blocking. Mr. Lake, remember to go over your lines. As for the rest of you: memorize, memorize, memorize. Opening night’s just around the corner, thespians.”

By the time she caught up again with Atlas he was standing at the exit. She was taken back by what she saw. The confident mysterious teen from earlier had been replaced with a ghost. Atlas’s skin was washed out and gray. His back was erect, legs body twitching at the slightest of noises.

They both jumped as something flew by. Claire looked to the sky. Was that a hawk or an eagle? Maybe bigger. She couldn’t tell. Vultures weren’t native to this area though.

“Shit,” Atlas whispered, glaring at his phone screen.
“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just…Toby’s caught up with something, I think,” he glanced up at her. “Uh, maybe I can walk you home?”

“I think my parents would kill you if they saw you with me. And anyway, they’re picking me up,” Claire said.

“Oh, well,” he laughed nervously. “I just Maybe we could keep each other company, until your ride comes.”

Claire was getting sick of this. “Alright, seriously, is everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah, just, um I’m worried about the weather,” he tried to assure.

“You’re lying again,” Claire said. “What’s wrong? I thought we were friends.”

Suddenly, she found Atlas inches away from her. She took a step back. How had he gotten so near to her without her noticing? “Are we?”

Oh wow.

She gulped.

Good question.

Where was Ms. Janeth when you needed her?

“I…right now, I’m honestly not so sure.” She reached out, her fingers lightly touching his face. He flinched back a moment, but didn’t stop her. Her heart clenched. “Who gave you that?”
Atlas pulled back. “I…I fell down the stairs. It’s no biggie.”

Her heart sank, another one of her theories confirmed. “It looks like something cut you. It’s new too. Did it happen today?”

“I made a mistake. I won’t make the same one again.” He turned his head. “Can we drop this? I don’t want to talk about it.”

Was it his dad? Without warning, all the memories of his past bruises and scrapes came flooding back. What if…what if the monster Atlas was talking about was his family?

What if the coyotes had been something his family cooked up? Was he covering for them in some way?

He crossed his arms, eyes guarded. As much as she desperately wanted to ask, she knew enough about abuse victims to not pressure them. She clenched the sleeves of her jacket, relenting to the request with a soft nod.

The stood in silence, side by side. What should she do? What could she do? Should she tell her parents? CPS? The police?

What if they didn’t believe her? Bruises and cuts could easily be explained away by something else.

Her line of thought was broken by her parents driving up to the pickup lane, honking along the way. She covered her face. So embarrassing.

“Well, thanks again for stepping up today. You really saved the play,” Claire stressed. “It’s supposed to rain soon. Toby might not get here in time. Is there someone else who can pick you up?”

“My dad is too busy. I’d ask to go with you,” he said, gesturing to her ride. “but your parents are glaring like they want to kill me right now.”

Thunder rolled above them. Atlas flinched back.
Claire placed a hand on his arm. “Atlas…”

He took her hand off his arm before giving it a soft squeeze of what she guessed was reassurance. “You should go. I don’t want you to be caught up in my problems.”

“Take care of yourself,” she whispered.

“I’ll try.” His eyes flickered past her to the school. “I think I’ve got another ride in mind in the meantime. Eli! Hey, Pepperjack!”

The boy balked at the sound until he saw it’s source. Hesitantly, he answered, “Yeah?”

“Remember that invitation to come over to your place?”

“I’ve got homework,” Eli said.

Atlas wrapped his arm around the other boy’s shoulder. “So do I, what a coincidence! Let’s work on it together.”

“Really?” Eli asked, perking up.

Atlas waved goodbye, his attention no longer on her anymore. Was it ever? Not since they left the auditorium she thought. She followed his line of vision to the sky. Though she couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary, something in the back of her head caused the hairs on her neck and arms to stand up. She couldn’t understand why. It was just a thunderstorm, right?

Even still, she closed the curtains to her bedroom for the night, unable to shake the primordial unease within her.

Once again, Atlas was a mystery. Was he being abused by his family? Or was he hiding something else?
Any normal girl would have dropped him.

But Claire had never been a normal girl.

Not by a long shot.

While he hadn’t planned on visiting Eli’s place so soon, the timing couldn’t have been more perfect.

Eli bounced around the room. Literally. Atlas wasn’t joking. He was like a ball of energy and nerves, condensed into a short nerdy teenager that couldn’t have weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. They spent the last half hour going over the little trinkets in his room, which, while not boring in context, was inevitably *more so* when one added Eli’s long elaborate descriptions of each and every doll he possessed.

Atlas checked his phone again. Toby had only texted him once that he was on his way, but how long that would take was still unknown. It had already been thirty minutes. Not good.

Had the stalking gotten to him? No, he distinctly reminded the creature hovering nearby on his way to Eli’s. At some point it disappeared, though Atlas had an inkling it was still around. Watching. Waiting. It was only a matter of time. They would need to catch it off guard somehow.

“This is my collection of superhero action figures, limited edition by the way, but the Superman one is even rarer because it was made during the Golden Age of comics, “ Eli babbled, his voice high and words blending together so quickly Atlas wasn’t sure if he could keep up for much longer. “And this over here is my board of mysteries, and—”

“That’s nice, Eli, but I thought we were going to do our homework together,” Atlas interrupted.

Eli visibly deflated. He scratched the back of his head, looking away. “Oh, right, sorry. It’s just, I haven’t really had anyone over before. Most of my friends are online. I mean, Toby and I talk at school every once in awhile, but he mostly has been hanging out with you, so we haven’t really
talked much outside of our shared classes. Which is fine, by the way, we weren’t ever close, not like you and him seem to be.”

Atlas sunk his teeth into his inner cheek. The familiar guilt began to eat at his insides. He was so going to regret this.

“Oh hey, “ Atlas remarked, hoping his voice wasn’t as monotone as he felt. He pointed to the third row of figurines. “Are those Gunrobot figures? No way. Where did you get these?”

“Oh man, have I got a story for you!” Eli exclaimed, his cheerful demeanor returned.

As the boy continued his explanation, Atlas took a step back, using the peripherals of his vision to examine the room. It was quite normal by all accounts. Sure, the ‘board of mysteries’ was a little weird, but nothing on it could be traced back to him.

Yet, his mind provided.

The room was relatively safe sans the large window near the bed. A gust of wind rattled against the glass. Atlas shuddered. Though he could not see past the area lit by streetlights, he could sense the stalking’s ominous presence. It was like an itch he couldn’t scratch at the back of his head. Or perhaps he was simply paranoid. Probably both.

“You know, I didn’t think you would ever visit,” Eli said, interrupting Atlas’s train of thought. “Most people don’t. Most people think I’m crazy.”

Atlas gave the boy a sympathetic smile. If only he knew. “You’re not crazy, Eli.”

His words must have meant something to the boy, if the glistening eyes were any indication. Eli rubbed the sides of his arms, his vulnerability displayed for all the world to see.

How human. Atlas envied how he and the others could be so open about their feelings. Even with Stricklander he did not have that luxury, not completely. He could never talk about his work as the Trollhunter or all the stresses that came with it. Neither could he discuss what he went through with the human scientists or the Janus Order with Blinky, Toby, and the rest of their group. They could never understand. Not really.
Sweet Pale Lady, he would give anything to forget today. Once the damn stalkling was done with he was going to have a nice long nap.

“It’s just…” Eli started, licking his lips. “I see things, you know? Weird things. Things that don’t make sense.”

Atlas settled his back against the wall. This was one of the reasons he was here. He pressed deeper, “Would you like to talk about it?”

“Really? You’re not messing with me?” Eli said, eyes narrowed.

“No, not at all. Why don’t you tell me all about it?” Atlas implored.

Without warning, Eli began to word vomit everything and anything he saw since he was a kid. Inwardly, Atlas groaned. Once he reached the present however, his dialogue changed. “And then, a couple of weeks ago, I saw these creatures made of rock fighting each other. It was intense!” Eli exclaimed, waving his fists in excitement. “The battle was insane. I was so scared. I couldn’t move.”

Atlas leaned forward. “What were they fighting about?”

“I don’t know, but I wasn’t the only person there either. Some hooded person was in the trees too I think.”

Ah oh. “A hooded person?”

“Yeah, and get this, just a little while ago, I saw the hooded person again, only this time, I have proof!”

“What kind of proof?” Atlas asked, arms folded tightly to his person.

Eli beamed, pulling out his cell. He clicked it on, before showing Atlas the picture.
In the back of his mind, he cursed in every single language he knew. Still, he continued to retain his mask. Only Stricklander’s training had protected him from outwardly portraying his thoughts.

It was him alright. Definitely him. He had hoped the image would be blurry, maybe even unrecognizable, but humans and their phones were too good these days. He could make out his glowing eyes, even against the flash of the camera. His horns were easily distinguishable, as was part of his armor. It was strange, seeing himself crouched over, his claws outstretched, eyes blown wide in surprise.

Stricklander would have a conniption if he found out.

*If.*

“I think it’s a demon or something,” Eli explained.

Atlas shook his head. “It’s not a demon.”

Seriously, why did everyone associate horns with demonic creatures? It was almost insulting, to be compared to the little impish creatures of legend. They were changelings. Or trolls. Not…*demons.*

“Huh?”

“I mean, it’s, uh,” he stuttered, scratching the back of his head. “It’s gotta be a devil or something, right? Look at the horns. It doesn’t have a tail either. Demons usually have tails, right?”

Crap, why did he chose devil? He should of gone with troll, but he didn’t want the boy coming any closer to the truth than he already had. But come on, devil? As if that was any better than a demon. Honestly, there wasn’t really much of a difference when one got down to it. Still, devil sounded way better than demon.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Eli affirmed, holding the phone close to his face. He adjusted his glasses. “He’s kinda handsome too, in a weird, monstrous sort of way. Devils are supposed to be, right? Fallen angels and all that. Makes more sense I guess. I thought he was incubus demon or something.”


“Wait, Eli—”

The door slammed shut. Atlas’s gaze zeroed in on the phone, still attached to the charger at the desk.

It would be better for everyone if the phone mysteriously disappeared.

But Eli would easily figure out who stole it. Atlas looked around the desk. Smashing it against the floor would be suspicious, as it had been connected to the charger. So would turning it off and hiding it somewhere Eli couldn’t reach.

Atlas’s gaze landed on a coke-can a little ways from the phone case. Hmm. The gears in his head began to move. Now, that could be plausible. He picked it up for a moment and shook it. It was three-fourths empty. Taking out the water bottle in his bag, he filled the can to the brim before ‘accidentally’ knocking the drink over onto Eli’s phone.

A simple mistake on Eli’s part, Atlas imagined. Just for insurance, he rolled the can’s remaining liquid over to the computer’s CPU. Once finished, he poured the rest of his water bottle into fan vents. The monitor immediately shut off, the entire device shutting down not long after. He tried turning on the cell. It was dead too.

It was a necessary evil, he reasoned. That kind of information getting out to the public would be detrimental for everyone, Eli included. He knew Eli had good intentions, but he knew many humans would think differently. Best to nip this at the bud, as his dad liked to say.

Atlas picked up a paper and pen, jotting down a quick excuse. He chuckled. This actually went better than he expected. Now all he had to do was fight the stalkling.

Fight the stalkling.
Wait, Atlas’s eyes widened. How long had Eli been away?

The sinking feeling returned to Atlas’s gut. The window behind him shook. A bright burst of light pierced through the sky, followed by a roll of thunder so loud his teeth rattled within his head. The lights switched off. He could hear a small explosion nearby, the powerline for the entire neighborhood going off.

The wind picked up, changing from a high pitch scream into a low wail. Atlas’s heart rate quickened. His gaze traveled to the computer monitor, his image reflected back at him.

He sucked in a gasp.

She sat so still he almost thought it was a statue before she arched her long neck, inclining her head to the side like a swan, wings wrapped around her long extended claws. She waited behind the thin strip of glass, not even a meter away from him. How had he not noticed her presence?

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

Atlas dropped to the floor as the window was blasted open by her powerful wings. His hand immediately reached for his bag. Pulling out one of his daggers, he slashed from behind, catching her off guard. She screeched, nearly breaking his eardrums.

She bulldozed into him. Atlas grunted as all the air left his lungs. Waiting for his friends was no longer an option.

He summoned the amulet, enchanting, “For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to—”

Her jaw snapped forward; he jerked back, empty-handed.
Atlas looked between her and his hand, dumbfounded.

Oh no.

Oh hell no.

That *bitch*.

Atlas growled. Using his feet, he kicked her in the place he’d injured her earlier today. She screamed, pulling away. Atlas snatched up his bag, examining his possible exits. She had positioned herself between him and the door, which meant that escape was a no go. Great. This was stupid. Incredibly stupid, but what other choice did he have?

Atlas made for the window and jumped. The drop wasn’t so terrible as the thorny bushes that bit at his flesh. He hissed, rolling out of the bushes onto his side in the grass.

He heard her above, struggling to get out of the small window. On the first story, he heard Eli’s mother rushing the both of them into the basement, despite Eli’s loud protesting. Something about tornadoes?

The stalking would be down soon enough, which meant Atlas needed a plan. One that didn’t involve the amulet apparently.

Just his luck.

Groaning, he picked himself up, sprinting for the other side of the street. Along the way, he jerked off his gaggle-tack, stuffing it inside the backpack. Once behind a large, discreet (he hoped) tree, he changed out of human clothes. For once, he was actually prepared.

He dressed out of his human clothes within seconds, revealing baggy black sleeves and pants underneath. It would only be a few minutes before he turned back, meaning he needed to get the armor on in less. He slinked into the chest plate first, followed by his armguards and bracers. His fingers were fluid and quick, adrenaline fueling his body. His body had already started shifting too. Good. He would need that strength. Just as he was about to reach for his cloak, the tree above him
creaked.

Atlas gulped.

She crashed into him, using her chest as a battering ram. Atlas screamed as her talons dug into his side. He could feel his ribs crack under the assault.

Her nose brushed against his face. She reared back, cocking her head from side to side. It was at this point he came to a horrible newfound realization: she’d discovered his secret. He hadn’t finished transforming, so she had connected the two scents together.

There was no turning back from this.

He needed to finish her off. And soon.

Lightning flashed from above. She tried to spear him with her beak, but only caught the side of his hood.

He pressed down on the compartments in his armguards, triggering the two hidden daggers inside. Bringing up his arms, he crossed them and stabbed down hard enough to break the troll’s skin. She loosened her hold, allowing Atlas to slip out of his cloak.

He almost laughed. Not only did she have his amulet but now she had his cloak.

*Happy Birthday to me,* he thought bitterly. Weren’t birthdays supposed to be about getting things and not having flying stone monsters taking shit away from you?

She thrashed and span around in mid-air, trying to dislodge the cloak that had tangled itself around her neck, which was hard to do considering she was also trying to dislodge the daggers in her feet. It gave Atlas just enough time to escape with his things, into the woods he knew like the back of his hand.

Atlas needed to regroup and plan. She might be faster and stronger, but she didn’t know this city like he did. He leaped from tree branch to tree branch before breaking through the forest to another row
of houses. His feet clamored against the roof tiles. The rain had yet to fall, but the humidity was there, casting a soft mist across the town.

His phone rang. He pressed speaker.

“What the fuck, Tobes?” Atlas growled. He looked behind. In the distance, he saw her break through the trees, rising higher and higher into the sky before she vanished into the clouds. “Where the hell are you guys?”

“Sorry, sorry. AAARRRGHH!!! got stuck in my room and I had to go get Blinky from Trollmarket to help me get him out. We’re almost at Eli’s house though. Where you at?”

“Running for my life, currently,” he said, stopping on top of a nice two-story home only a street or two away from the canals.

“A bit more specific?”

Atlas sent him his coordinates. “She’s gaining on me. I’m not sure how much longer before she—”

Too late. She dived down, her atrocious roar shaking Atlas down to his core. Every cell in his body warned him to run. She opened her mouth, ready to swallow him whole. It was only by mistake that he survived, his foot falling through one of the rooftops. A second later and his entire body went through, smashing against the hard ground below.

Atlas hissed. If his ribs hadn’t been broken before they certainly were now.

His eyes flickered toward his phone. The screen was cracked, but overall it appeared to be in workable condition. Whew.

A girlish scream startled him. He bared his fangs in alarm. At first, he’d thought it was the stalking, but the pitch was completely off. It also sounded familiar. He pulled himself off the floor, examining his landing area.

It was a bedroom. A guy’s by the look at it. There was a dozen sports trophies on top a plain
bookcase. Ribbons adorned part of the wall as well. Atlas could hear a pitiful muttering from the bed. It didn’t take him long to figure out who it was. The bandage around his head could not disguise the boy in front of him.

Steve Palchuk.

He fell into Palchuk’s bedroom.

Oh wow, so his birthday could get worse. Who knew?

“The power of Christ compels you!” The boy yelled, throwing a water bottle in Atlas’s direction. He caught it.

Oh, this day was just getting better and better.

“What the fuck, dude?” Atlas said. He squeezed, destroying the plastic container in mere seconds. The bottle cap shot off into the corner of the room.

Steve froze, arms brought up in a bid for protection. “Please don’t kill me.”

The stalkling circled above, looking for a way inside. Shit. They didn’t have much time. He looked around.

There were two options he could take here.

One, he could use Steve as a meat shield against the stalkling, especially since it didn’t seem to mind attacking him when certain others, like Steve, were in the vicinity. Perhaps it didn’t consider Steve a person? Or maybe it was a dumb stalkling? Either way, it could easily provide him a few minutes to escape and find his friends. Steve was larger than the average fleshbag teenager. He would provide decent sustenance and iron to the stalkling’s diet. Really, he was doing the monster a favor. In Bular’s words, Steve was as they say, “a tasty snack”.

A month ago, old Atlas would have chosen the first option in a heartbeat. Steve was the personification of everything he hated about humanity: their arrogance, their disgust, their hatred, their fear—he found little to no redeeming qualities in the boy.
Sadly, he was no longer that Atlas.

With great reluctance (really great, he wanted to emphasis, because he was pretty sure he was going to regret this), Atlas went with option numero dos.

“Okay, you,” he gestured between Steve’s form and a small door to the side. “Into the closet, now.”

When the boy didn’t move, Atlas picked him up. The teen kicked him in the shoulder. In the end, Atlas had to half drag, half carry Steve over to the small room.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Steve stammered. “Put me down! Mom! Mom! Help! I’m being kidnapped!”

“Shut up,” Atlas ordered. “I’m not kidnapping you. It’s for your own good, human.”

“I’m not gonna—holy shit, what is that!” He said, pointing to the shadow at the window.

Crap. They didn’t have time then. She was already here.

Atlas dropped the boy into the closet, shutting the door.

“Stay quiet, unless you want her to eat you,” he advised.

Steve opened the door slightly, one eye peeking out. “Who in the hell are you?”

“A monster,” he answered.

“Are you…” Steve gulped. “Are you a good monster?”

Atlas let out a painful laugh, grasping his ribs. “I try to be.”
Shards of glass flew through the room as the creature of the hour made her appearance. Her wingspan was even more fearsome up close, with powerful muscles and sleek bones highlighted by the lightning streaking past behind her. It must take a lot to keep her in the air. That or magic. Probably magic, he thought.

Atlas pulled out more daggers. He should have brought his great sword. While it was no Daylight, it sure as hell could cut through stone better than what he had now.

She lunged for his throat, but Atlas was faster. He did a half-pirouette underneath her right wing, grabbing hold of his cloak that still hung her neck to hoist himself onto her back.

While no ‘Mother of Dragons’, Atlas reacted to every move she made. She reared upwards, trying to dislodge him. Still, he held on. Well, more like rode, but same difference right?

Unfortunately, he forgot to take into account that she could fly and Atlas?

Well.

Atlas probably shouldn’t have jumped on her back in the first place.

She soared out of the bedroom, gliding over the street. Thunder boomed around them; his insides jumbled around, teeth clattering together. She smacked one of her wings against a streetlight, sending both of them into a downwards dive toward the concrete.

“Atlas!” A familiar voice called. It didn’t take him long to find the owner. Toby straddled AAARRRGGHH!!’s back as they approached the two.

“Jump, Master Atlas!” Blinky yelled a few paces behind.

“I can’t.” Atlas called back, “She has my cloak!”

Blinky shook all four hands in the air. “We can get you another bloody cloak!”
“Oh, she’s also got the amulet too,” Atlas added.

Blinky audibly smacked his forehead.

The stalkling evaded AAARRRGGHH!!!’s grasp, rising to the sky once more, though not without picking up another passenger.

Toby leapt for the creature’s leg. Atlas tried to reach for the boy, but the upward motion and the stalkling’s beating wings made the action impossible.

As they flew higher and higher, a new terrifying thought emerged.

Atlas could survive higher altitude. Toby couldn’t. Not for long at least. Not to mention the drop was already deadly. Which meant only one thing.

“Holy Crapple Sauce, we’re going to die!” Toby screamed, his arms constricting around the creature’s ankle. She tried to throw him off, but Toby held on.

“Tobes, you have to jump,” Atlas ordered. “Now. Any higher and you’ll get killed”

“Only if you jump too.”

“I can’t,” Atlas said. “She has the amulet. She has my cloak. If she returns to Bular with them, then it’s game over. For all of us. I have to finish this.”

Toby shook his head. “No way! The amulet isn’t worth your life!”

“Tobes, just…” Atlas pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re my best friend. I need you to trust me on this, okay?”

After a moment’s pause, Toby nodded hesitantly. “Alright, I believe in you. Just…don’t get fried by
any lightning, okay?"

The teen let go, shrieking as he fell down to earth. Up ahead, the clouds swallowed them whole. Thunder rumbled forth. The stench of ozone sizzled the air.

Even though his best friend was gone, the words clung to Atlas’s breast, soaking into his thoughts as a new plan formed.

It was crazy.

No, it was insane. But what if it worked?

“Tobes,” Atlas laughed under his breath. “You’re a fucking genius.”

Lightning streaked across the clouds. Every hair on his head stood up. This was his last chance.

“Hey, you, yeah, you, ugly ass bitch!,” Atlas yelled, holding his longest blade into the air. It would be missed. “I don’t know about you, but it’s been a long ass day for me and you know what I’m craving right now?”

The stalkling’s eyes widened.

Atlas smirked.

“Some fried chicken!” He yelled as the lightning struck his blade.

The deadly current burned his skin and seized his muscles. It was more pain than he had ever experienced in memory. Every nerve screamed as the energy took over. His entire body went into full on spasms, traveling upwards into the stalkling. He wished he could have seen her face, but all he could remember afterwards was the view of the fast approaching ground below him.

“Catch him, AAARRRGGGH!!!” Blinky directed.
“Hurry, hurry, hurry!” Toby yelled.

Atlas smacked against AAARRRGGHH!!!’s mossy chest. A few moments later, the stalkling smashed onto the ground, breaking off into a million pieces. In its wake, the amulet shined, rising up to rejoin its owner.

Toby crashed into him. “Oh man, oh man, oh man. I thought I was gonna lose you, dude.”

“Ugh,” Atlas voiced. His tongue felt numb. He began moving it around, trying to find his speech again.

“But dude, you did it. I can’t believe you did it! I mean, I knew you could, oh you know what I mean,” Toby said, wiping his eyes. “That was close. Way too close. How do you feel?”


“Uh,” Toby scratched his cheek sheepishly. “Could you be a little more specific?”

“I don’t think I can feel my arm,” he coughed.

Toby inspected the limb before letting out a low whistle. “Is it supposed to be that color?”

“Master Atlas!” Blinky called, peering over Toby. “Is everything alright?”

“This has been the worst birthday ever,” Atlas moaned.

AAARRRGGHH!!!’s ears dropped. “Sorry.”

“Well,” Toby scratched his head. “At least you got a cool lightening scar?”
“What, no ‘gee, Atlas, that was amazing, you’re so cool and strong’?” He tried to joke, wincing in pain as AAARRRGGHH!!! shifted him into a sitting position.

Toby smiled warmly, his arms coming loosening into a soft hug. “Gee, Atlas, that was amazing, you’re so cool and strong.”

He patted the boy’s head, ignoring the pain it produced. “Much better.”

Atlas finally peered down at the damaged arm. A thin pattern of white veins traveled up from the top of his hand to his shoulder. The clothing had been charred, but at least he still had all his limbs.

Whether they would be functional or not was a different story.

Blinky seemed to voice his thoughts on the matter. “Not to worry, Master Atlas, I have just the solution for something like this. There’s a recipe in my library I’d gotten a century or two ago for just this kind of situation and with a day or two of rest and relaxation, I’m certain you’ll be good as new.”

“Try explaining that to Stricklander,” he mumbled.

“Stricklander?” Blinky said, lips pulling upwards.

Atlas sighed, resting his forehead against AAARRRGGHH!!!’s chest.

Later.
Chapter Summary

Toby is ambushed (kidnapped) by a familiar face on his way home. A changeling delivers the news of Atlas's secret.

In short, shit goes down.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Thank you for all the reviews, kudos, and favorites! I really appreciate them. A shoutout to Vici, Charlie, my bff memequeen and Inco for helping me with this chapter. Also, big thanks to moonlight_wings and curry-llama for giving me ideas, which helped formed this chapter. I've drawn some pics of the oc changeling featured in this chapter on my tumblr tunafishprincess.

The rest of Fallen Too Far has been written, but I will spend the next week revising and lengthening it. Next chapter will definitely come out sometime next weekend however. Sorry for the long wait.

As said before, because of the length, I had to add another chapter to this part of the story. So there will be 6 parts in total for Bittersweet Sixteen. So stay tuned for next week's chapter!

I hope you enjoy this week's chapter!

Toby yawned.

There were no words to describe how thoroughly put out he was. Well, there probably were words that described it, he just didn’t know them yet. He wouldn’t be surprised if it was one of those S.A.T. word he needed to learn, but he digressed.
Normally, Toby thought he was pretty darn quick at bouncing back from stuff. Even gym, his most hated subject, only required him a couple minutes rest before he was up on his feet and ready to face the world, or rather, the rest of Arcadia High. Plus, ever since his best friend returned it was a lot easier to get in the swing of things. Every day was an adventure with him.

Even today (despite the near death experience of riding a Toothless’s ugly brother) had been one, though, he had to admit, this was probably one of the top five times in his life he’d worried about falling asleep while walking.

*But hey, Toby thought, look on the bright side!* He’d lost five, count them, *five* pounds since last week, bringing him up to a total of ten for the month. Running for his life was apparently paying off. He hadn’t lost that much weight since getting mono in middle school!

He knew it wasn’t much in the grand scheme of things, but it motivated him to do better. He had to be. Atlas needed him to be, especially after what happened tonight.

Holding down his friend as Blinky smeared some troll medicine on Atlas’s arm had been nerve racking. Vendel’s dry commentary didn’t help matters either. Atlas passed out near the end of the treatment—a god-send, seriously, that guy’s lungs were powerful—then was later placed on Blinky’s bed. The troll in question tried to assuage Toby’s fear of his friend’s injury, explaining how the salve’s fast-acting nature would help, but the words fell on deaf ears. The event left him feeling even more drained than the fight with the stalkling. Atlas’s pained expression only reminded Toby of his current uselessness.

He wished he could have stayed longer, but he knew Nana would get worried if he didn’t come home before midnight.

After leaving the market, he’d instructed AAARRRGGHH!!! to go home before him. He said it was out of concern for his Nana, but really, in all honesty, he just wanted some time to think.

The wind began to pick up; condensation filled the air. The rain had yet to fall, but he knew it was inevitable, just as how another fight was inevitable.

Every week, a new problem arose. Toby clenched his fists. Reviewing the past few weeks in his mind, he remembered making so many mistakes, so many errors he should have seen coming a mile away.
Events he could have avoided if he wasn’t so freaking stupid. The dentist assistant’s death continued to haunt him, even now. He nearly lost his friendship because of his overeagerness to help.

No, he reasoned, you’re his best friend. He needs you. Toby knew he couldn’t allow himself to wallow like this. Positive thoughts, positive thoughts, positive thoughts, he inwardly reminded.

Positive thought: they defeated the stalking. Negative thought: Atlas would always be in danger. It was a tough pill to swallow, but it was the truth.

Toby knew he had to be better. He needed to be smarter.

He just had to be.

There were two choices: run or fight, and Toby knew the first would never be an option for him.

Mostly because you suck balls at running long distance, his head provided.

Also, he really wanted to move into using weapons instead of dodging Atlas and his knives (which, by the way, were very pointy and very sharp, attributes that, like in Pokémon, were super effective against him). Seriously, he was like one of those bug types or something that always got beaten by all the other types, since bug was weaker than something like ghost or dark. He was pretty sure he was the Metapod of their group. Huh, why did they even call it bug anyway? Are there actual non-Pokémon bugs in the Pokémon world?

He paused mid-step. Okay, that thought-tangent went way off topic. Probably shouldn’t have done that Pokémon Blue speed run on his computer last night.

Toby regrouped, trying to return to the main subject at hand. Ultimately, weapons would be a must in the upcoming fights, since, all in all, being terrified was kinda sorta getting a little old for him.

The image of himself with thor’s hammer or magical flaming fists came to mind. Ah yeah, that would be super badass.

He smiled, even as his eyes began to droop. Arms burned with exhaustion from his recent adventure.
His body was on autopilot, slowly ambling his way down the street like his Nana after three shots of vodka on New Year’s. Except, unlike Nana, he wasn’t trying to kiss every available cat in the vicinity.

A bright beam flashed up ahead. He flinched back, squinting.

Who in the—

The car slowed, rolling up to his left side. He tried to look inside, but it was too dark for him to see. A moment after that thought the window began to shift down; a familiar redhead came into view. A very familiar redhead.

Atlas’s mom.

Ah oh.

“Oh crap,” Toby cursed before covering his mouth.

Dr. Lake pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. The car’s headlights reflected off them, shielding her expression. Or maybe he was just too tired to see clearly. Something about the situation made him on edge. Her smile was too stiff to be actually happy. Hell, he hadn’t seen her real smile since Jim disappeared.

“What are you doing out here so late, Toby?” She asked nonchalance.

“Oh you know ah,” he started as he looked around the neighborhood, hoping for an answer. Shit, what should he say? Think, think, think, Toby inwardly chanted. “Night…walking? No, jogging, night jogging! Trying to get in shape. Wanna be ready for some marathons.”

That was a good excuse, right?

“Exercise is good for a healthy life but I would suggest doing it during the daytime. Crime has gotten worse recently,” Dr. Lake lectured.
Toby chuckled dryly, “Tell me about it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, sorry, I totally agree, which is why I’m heading back home right now,” Toby assured. He threw her a half-hearted wave, returning to the sidewalk. “See you later, Dr. L.”

Please, please, please don’t follow.

Alas, predictably, his response didn’t appear to work. Instead, Dr. Lake drove alongside him, cutting him off at the intersection to the next block.

Goosebumps crawled up his arms.

“I’ll take you home, Toby, here,” she said, unlocking the car door. “Hop on in.”

“You really don’t have to Dr. L. My home is only a few blocks away.” Well, more like a ten, but hey, whose counting? Certainly not him.

“I wasn’t asking,” she said, features darkening. “I’m telling you.” She reached over and flung open the front passenger door. “Get in the car, Toby Domzalski.”

Toby swallowed. His heart hammered against his rib cage. He knew something was off about their meeting.

He had never seen Dr. L so terrifying. What if—

His face paled. What if she had been replaced by a changeling?

No way. It couldn’t be possible, right? Changelings only had one human form, at least, from what he’d seen so far.
But that didn’t mean it wasn’t possible, his mind countered. Sweat beaded at his temple. Holy smokes, what if they were, like, body snatchers? But they needed a human in the Darklands in order to do something like that, right? Could they switch babies out like batteries? What about full grown adults?

Could his Nana be a changeling? What about his teachers? He wouldn’t be surprised if Señor Uhl was one in all honesty.

That didn’t make sense though. If adults could get into the Darklands then that stood to reason Gunmar could get out of the Darklands, unless the guy was like, a gazillion feet tall.

Wait, how tall was Gunmar? Did anyone really know? He’d have to ask next time he saw Blinky. Surely he would know.

Another thought began to develop. What if they were using magic to look like Atlas’s mom? What if Gunmar was pretending to be Dr. Lake?

Hell, if trolls, gnomes, and goblins existed, why not transfiguration too?


Toby snapped out of his reverie at the tone of her voice. Yep, definitely Dr. L.

He hoped.

“Yes ma’am,” he yelped, nearly tripping along the way.

He shut the door, back ramrod straight. His hands drummed along his lap, his knees drawn together to hide his nervousness.

She revved the engine.
“So, crazy weather we’ve been having,” Toby mentioned before immediately blurring out, “Quick question, when did I break my arm on the see-saw in Arcadia Oaks Park?”

She threw him a strange look. “You’ve never broken your arm on a see-saw.”

“Whew,” he said, shoulders relaxing. “Just checking.”

That made things a lot easier then.

Until the next words that came out of her mouth.

“I know you’ve been seeing Jim,” she stated. Her fingers tightened against the steering wheel.

His eyes widened. Not good.

“Oh…How much do you know?” He probed.

“I remember what happened, that night your art teacher came over,” she paused, her brows forming a sharp V. “If she was ever an art teacher in the first place.”

Toby smiled nervously. His hands traveled upwards to his sweater-vest, fisting the material. “Oh, Ms. Nomura! You guys were drinking pretty heavily on that tequila, ha, ha, ha…you’re not laughing.”

She reached into her pocket, pulling out a crumpled letter. It was the same paper as Toby’s own. He recognized his best friend’s handwriting immediately.

“Drop the act, Toby,” she said. “Monsters and magical armor? What are you two involved in?”

Toby sighed. Damn it, Atlas. He thought the other had destroyed it. Not nearly enough, apparently.
“It’s a long story,” he answered.

“Good,” she said frostily. “You and Jim can tell me all about it at my house.”

“Dr. L, things aren’t safe right now. At—Jimbo, he’s trying to protect you,” he tried to reason.

After a sharp right turn, Dr. Lake responded in a stern tone with, “I appreciate the thought, but I want to see my son.”

“I don’t think—”

Dr. Lake placed up a hand to silence him. Once they pulled up to the next stop sign, she began, “I don’t need your excuses, Toby. Jim has been missing for six years, ten days and twelve hours. Believe me, I’ve counted. Every day I wake up wondering if today is the day I would find him or a police officer at my door delivering the news. I searched everywhere. Every news article, every lead I could find,” she confessed, voice cracking. “Do you know how it feels? To have someone you love ripped away, only to get to see them again, but unable to approach them for fear they’ll run away again?”

Toby stared down at his lap, nails biting into his palms. “Yeah, I do.”

“Oh no, Toby, I—” Dr. Lake touched his shoulder for a moment before pulling away. “I’m sorry.”

Toby made an effort to sound reassuring. “It’s okay.”

“No, not it’s not. I can’t keep doing this…this thing we’re doing.” She said with a gloomy sigh.

“What thing?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

No, he didn’t. He had been up since before the crack of dawn and now it was nearly midnight. At this point, his brain was mushier than Nana’s Thanksgiving mashed potatoes and gravy.
His stomach growled.

Dang. That sounded really good right about now.

“Uh, I’ve kinda had a long night, Dr. L,” Toby explained. He couldn’t prevent another yawn from escaping his lips. “Could you spell it out for me?”

“Jim and you know I know,” She said, gesturing to herself.

“Know what?”

“Ugh! Are you serious?” She threw up one hand, the other gripping the wheel. “Jim! I know he’s alive and I know he’s going to school in Arcadia and I know you two are involved in some crazy world with monsters and who knows what else. I’ve waited long enough. More than enough. This is getting ridiculous.”

“It’s for your own safety, Dr. L.”

“My safety? What about your safety? You two hang around monsters. I saw you riding a giant… green…rock thing for gosh sakes! I know you both have some belief you’re protecting me from something or someone, but I can protect myself.”

“This isn’t something you can protect yourself from, Dr. L. These guys are crazy strong. Even Jim can’t fight them by himself.”

“I think you underestimate how far I’m willing to go, Toby. I know that, whatever you two boys are involved in, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to see my son again,” she assured.

“Dr. L, I…” His eyes caught the glint of something in the backseat. He turned his head, mouth dropping as he took in what he saw. “Uh, is that a shotgun in the backseat?”

She nodded. “Whatever monsters are out there, I can handle myself.”
Toby pulled up the tarp covering the rest of her arsenal. “Holy shit you’ve got grenades back there, too? Where did you buy these things?”

“My father is ex-military. So’s my brother. I spent half of my childhood growing up on a base. All I did was make a few calls to their old friends,” Dr. Lake said, as if it were a conversation about the weather and not the stash of illegal weapons in her middle-class sedan. A moment later, she added, “I wasn’t expecting so much stuff though, but they were insistent that I have it.”

“Is…is that a missile launcher?” Toby leaned over the center console to get a better look. Yep, if his knowledge of weaponry was accurate (and he was pretty sure it was, considering how many videogames he’d played), that was definitely some U.S. military grade artillery.

How high up in the ranks had her dad and brother been? Where missile launchers even legal to the general population?

And if so…

Could he possibly get one?

Now, Toby didn’t cuss nearly as much as Atlas did (seriously, his best friend had a dirtier mouth than their boy’s bathroom at Arcadia High). In fact, outside of his best friend, he tried to limit his curse words, especially when he was around his Nana.

This wasn’t one of those times.

“What the fuck, Dr. L.?” He yelled, much like any sane person in his position.

“Language,” she chided.

“Sorry, but for real,” Toby replied, motioning both hands at the backseat and it’s contents. “This is insane.”
“Toby, you’re going to call Jim and get him to come over to my house. I don’t care how you do it. Make up an emergency for all I care,” she demanded in the universal voice all moms and grandmas had in their parenting repertoire. Dr. L side-eyed him; Toby squirmed in his seat. “Just do it.”

“Yes ma’am,” he squeaked.

Dr. Lake ordered, “Now.”

Scrambling for his cell, he immediately smashed his thumb several times against the call button. It began to ring. The air in the car fell still. A minute or two later, it went to voice mail. Toby let out a silent exhale of relief. Blinky said he should be waking up soon, he recalled. How long it would take him to leave Trollmarket was another matter entirely. He knew if it were up to Blinky the teen would spend the entire night there. “He’s kinda busy right now.”

“I’m sure he can postpone it.”

“You’re not gonna take no for an answer, are you?” Toby asked.

She glared.

“Okay, okay. I’ll leave him a message. Sheesh,” he said. “Hey, it’s Toby. There’s an emergency. You gotta get to your mom’s house ASAP, dude. There’s a, ah, non-troll issue, okay? So don’t bring Blinky or AAARRRGGHH!!!. Oh, and wear the armor please. It’s super urgent. Get here as soon as you can.” He hung up. “Happy?”

She exhaled, a small smile forming. “Relieved. I wasn’t sure this was going to work.”

“How did you know how to find me?”

“Small town. And also texted your grandmother what street you were walking on and she texted it to me.”

“Wow,” Toby said, shaking his head. He thought something was fishy when she asked for his exact location. “I can’t believe Nana sold me out.”
“She’s worried about her grandson, just as I worry about Jim,” Dr. Lake said.

Her eyes roamed the dashboard before settling on him. Seeing her now, underneath the harsh streetlights, he noticed how pale and tired she appeared.

Atlas and Dr. Lake meeting like this could spell trouble. He wasn’t sure how his friend was going to react to this reunion. Would he even come?

No, if there was one thing Atlas never failed to do, it was coming to his rescue. Still, Toby hoped his friend wouldn’t blame him for this.

“Word of warning, Dr. L. Jim’s not the same Jim you remember,” Toby cautioned.

“I know.”

“Something happened to his memory. He doesn’t like to talk about it. So don’t ask him about things from before or make any comparisons with old Jim and new Jim. He hates that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She asked, “Is there anything else I should know?”

A lot. An entire boatload of information, but that wasn’t his right to say. He already revealed more than enough.

“I’ll let him fill you in on the rest,” Toby remarked tiredly.

He checked his phone, waiting for a response.

This was gonna be a long night.
They thought they were protected.

Idiots, the lot of them. As if their little caverns of stone and magic would guard them from the wolf at the door.

They believed themselves better, superior than their poisoned cousins. In reality, they were simply plump ignorant dogs eating from the scraps of humanity’s dinner table, looking down on them like some ill-begotten mewling son of a bitch.

And now, even half-bloods were welcome. Some mongrel was better than them.

How disgusting.

Decades of work in Trollmarket brought her to this point. Her brothers-in-secrecy were not so lucky. Only she had survived after their admittedly disastrous mission into the biggest city in Trollkind. Entering through the secret Kubera caverns, walking hundreds of miles to the closest gyosphere to Trollmarket, working their way into the eyes and ears of the city—all her plan by the way—took years of planning. And all it took was one bumbling idiot in the group to reveal themselves.

But she wasn’t bitter. No, she would never let her emotions get the best of her. Not like trolls and humans did. She was calculative. Precise. Everything she did she did for the cause.

Few knew about her mission; most of them were already dead or missing. It was inevitable. Their names were now but distant memories.

So she dedicated herself to the work. She gathered information, sending whatever scrape of interest she could find through little bottles she dropped into the underground streams to the surface.
In the meantime, she worked her way up from cat herding to owning a small stand in the outermost
deal of the commercial district, no small feat considering her competition. Her home had been
pleasant and cozy before she left tonight. It was modest in comparison to other trolls’ homes, but it
sued its purpose. It held a tiny library of things she’d collected over the past decades. Additionally,
it was where she spent her resting hours, with a book in one hand and a mug of gulg in the other.

She read—no—absorbed everything she could about the world around her. It was her specialty after
all. The breadth of Troll History had been one of the positives of her assignment. Though a spy by
trade, she’d previously been a historian at a small college.

She missed those days. Still, she had made the best of her situation. Relationships with the other trolls
were kept at a distance. She’d been courted once or twice, but she rejected them, knowing nothing
would have come out of it. She was a changeling first and foremost. Her dedication to her race’s
success meant she had to be constantly vigilant.

That didn’t mean she was alone throughout her time in Trollmarket. She had been a terrible cat
herder, largely because of her fascination with the furry beasts. More than one had lived with her in
her tiny apartment. Ugly little creatures, but humorous. They kept her company on the worst days.
The days when she wondered if she would finally be found out. The days she remembered all her
regrets over the centuries.

Many came and went, while others spent their entire lives with her. Each had a unique personality,
with different likes and dislikes. Much like changelings, in a way. The heartache of losing each of
them never faded however. Her last one died in her arms just last year. She would have gotten
another, she supposed, if current events hadn’t been what they were.

It was better that way. She never could have left any of them alone in Trollmarket once she left.

A cool breeze brushed her face. She shivered. Unfortunately, she had not thought to bring a jacket. It
wouldn’t matter though. Soon, she would be inside, addressing the highest ranking members of her
newfound information.

She checked her map. It was old, but the landmarks were familiar. It was times like these she wished
she’d learned to use those “smart phones” she’d heard so much about.

Any communication with the Order was sparse. Not to mention dangerous. It had taken all of her
favors and several bribes to get a meeting with one of the higher ranked members. Her contact had
been adamant she come alone.
Her gaze traveled down the street. She took a deep breath of fresh air. How long had it been since she’d seen the sky? Too long. Trolls weren’t meant to spend their entire lives underground.

Getting out of Trollmarket had been a synch. She took the tunnels, a treacherous journey if one didn’t know the way. They moved and shifted constantly, the magic of the Heartstone waxing and waning like the moon. She lay in wait for several hours until a band of scavengers opened up a door. She followed quietly behind them, disappearing the moment they touched the other side.

Seeing the changes of the world above was alarming, but she pressed forward. The destination was a little out of ways, a concrete lot in front of an abandoned strip of storefronts.

She adjusted her skirt. It had been so long since she had been in this form. Human flesh felt so strange now. Her senses were significantly muted, as was her strength and speed. It was a vulnerability she detested. She was shorter than normal as well, and she didn’t have much height to lose in the first place.

Tires rolled across asphalt. She stepped out from behind the streetlamp. A car (she thought, though it’s appearance was quite different than what she remembered.) drove into the lot, circling around before settling several feet away from her.

A purple clad woman stepped out. Her heart raced. Her eyes took in the taller changeling’s human form, black hair short and lustrous just as she remembered.

“Ms. Nomura,” she said breathlessly.

Changelings did not have feelings. The Janus Order forbid any kind of fraternization that interfered with The Plan.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but admire the changeling before her. Nomura was legendary amongst them. A fearsome female that fought her way through the ranks. Nomura was everything she wanted to be and more.

Perhaps the admiration rose from their shared heritage. Nomura was a rare gem, colorful and tall. In comparison, she was a dull reddish brown, her figure deformed by the transformation she had undergone as a young whelp. Sometimes, she wondered how she would have looked naturally, but she immediately perished the thought.
Dwelling on the past only caused heartache. She was better than that.

“This better be worth it,” Ms. Nomura huffed.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she stuttered. Wow, she was talking to Nomura. The Nomura.

She glanced down at her nails, leaning against the side of the car. “Out with it then.”

“Oh, yes,” She began, trying to control her nerves. She was speaking to Nomura. The Nomura. “Well, I first began devising a plan to infiltrate Trollmarket one hundred and two years ago—”

“I don’t care about that. Give me the information you promised,” she ordered.

The shorter changeling’s shoulders lowered in response. Collecting her thoughts, she asked in a soft voice, “You don’t want to hear my report?”

“You said you had important information. World-changing information,” she said, air-quoting for emphasis.

She had spent decades underneath the earth. She had discovered so much about their kind. The information she had send them was but a drop in the sea of knowledge she’d learned. Her recent news would be lifechanging. It was something she refused to put on paper. It was too precious, too valuable to be written down.

“I just thought—”

“My time is very precious to me,” Ms. Nomura interrupted, edging closer to her. “Gunmar’s return approaches. The Eye Stone will soon be delivered to Arcadia.”

“So soon?” She said with astonishment.
How had she not learned of this?


She waited, but no explanation was given. The sides of her lips dropped ever so slightly. How foolish. Despite all the work she had done she was still a low-ranking member. Of course they wouldn’t reveal such information to her.

The sting was no less painful however.

“If you’re not going to tell me, then this meeting is meaningless,” Ms. Nomura remarked, reaching for the car door.

“No, wait!” She exclaimed, placing herself between the changeling and the car. “It’s the hybrid. Alfred or whatever he calls himself.”

“What about him?”

She had hoped to use that as her trump card with their commander, the kind of secret that could send the Janus Order into a frenzy, but she needed Ms. Nomura’s attention.

“He’s the Trollhunter,” she stressed. “He revealed himself after defeating the former Trollhunter’s son.”


“The Trollhunter fought Draal the Deadly in combat and defeated him. After the battle, he changed. He revealed himself as a member of the Janus Order.”

“And he survived?”

“Trollhunter’s leader claimed the whelp as his grandson. Otherwise, I have no doubt he would be
dead,” she recounted, recalling the event in her head. Trollmarket was still split on the hybrid and his place as Trollhunter.

“That is a shocking turn of events,” Ms. Nomura remarked, rubbing her chin. “What does he look like?”

“Dark hair, bright blue eyes,” she described. “He has horns, skin, claws, and tusks like us, but the rest of him looks more human. Too human, if you ask me,” she said in a dark tone. “He’s a traitor. He’s fooling all of you. You need to eliminate him now, before Gunmar returns.”

“This is a grave accusation. What proof do you have?”

“Only my word,” she admitted. “But I promise on my life and the Pale Lady that all of what I said is true.”

“That doesn’t amount to much.” She tutted, one hand rested on her hip. “Ah well. I’ve worked with worse.”

“Lord Stricklander will want to know. He’s a danger to all of us,” she urged.

“Lord Stricklander is a very busy busy man. He would never meet with some low-level member on the drop of a hat,” she remarked, patting the other changeling on her shoulder. “But not to worry. I will tell him of your concerns.”

As much as she admired Ms. Nomura, her pride won out. This was her mission. She was the one who’d discovered this piece of information. Decades of work and finally she had something she could use to elevate herself significantly. She had been walked over by more than one changeling over the centuries trying to get a leg up in their society.

Never again.

“I think it’s better if I do so. It is, after all, part of my report,” she said, pulling away from the other.

“What makes you think he’ll listen to you?”
She flipped a stray lock of hair, giving the other a knowing look before turning away. “I have my ways.”

Before she could even take a step, Ms. Nomura grabbed her arm, her grip iron-clad.

“Fräulein,” she remarked in a sickeningly sweet tone. “This is not up for discussion.”

Her eyes narrowed. She felt as if her stomach had suddenly filled with lead, weighing her down in the spot. She wanted to run, to kick, to scream, because everything about the situation smelled wrong.

The muscles underneath Ms. Nomura’s face twitched in such an unnatural way that she flinched back instinctively. The realization hit her like a bucket of ice water.

“You’re not Ms. Nomura,” she accused.

The changeling in front of her gave her a calculating look. “Oh?”

“Ms. Nomura is a high ranking member of the Order,” she said, eyes widening as she realized what sort of situation she’d placed herself in. “She’s…she’s a high ranking member. She never would have agreed to meet with me. I can’t believe…Who are you really?”

“Tut, tut, tut,” the fake said. “And here I was going to let you live.”

Before she could defend herself a sharp hot pain enveloped her right side. She doubled over, holding the wound.

“Stop,” she wheezed. “Please.”

The imposter twisted the knife deeper. She cried out. Her hands scrambled to apply pressure to the wound, only to find an even worse fate awaited her. Creeper Sun. She could feel her body turning to stone as her blood left her body. It was cold. So cold.
No, no, no. This could not be happening. Hadn’t she devoted herself to the cause? Why did this have to happen to her?

Why, why, why?

The false Nomura drew close to her ear, whispering, “You should know better, Fräulein. Trusting a changeling is deadly.”

She watched as the fake in front of her shifted, soft Asian features replaced with a pudgy round European face. The dress transformed into a dark suit, feminine curves smoothed down into a boxy masculine body type. He was chubby, unassuming in nature, but she knew better now.

Never before had she hated someone so deeply. Even as her vision began to blur she kept glaring at the polymorph.

In her last thoughts, she hoped there was an afterlife for their kind. Because she knew she would wait, centuries, if not millennia, to see her murderer again, with a smile and her own dagger in hand.

Once she was well and truly solidified, the man pushed the statute over. She clattered to the ground, breaking into millions of pieces.

There was some guilt in the act. Losing a changeling was always a somber affair. He hadn’t wanted to kill her, but she already knew too much. Pity. There were only a finite amount of them in the world. He couldn’t remember the last time one had been created. Certainly not in the last few hundred years or so.

But it was necessary, just as it was necessary to investigate this matter with the hybrid.

Were they the ramblings of a no-name changeling or something of value? He suspected the later, but without proper evidence he knew Stricklander would ship him back to the old world for even suggesting such an accusation.

“Poor jünger Atlas. A child in a game of adults.” He pulled out a cigarette, placing it in his mouth as his hands dug into his pockets. He never enjoyed the taste of them, but the nicotine helped him focus
on the plans ahead.

Convincing Stricklander would be impossible as of now. The man was compromised. Though he would never admit it, he viewed the hybrid boy as a child, if not a son.

Which meant he had to take a different route. Someone who would consider his words. Someone who could help sow the seeds of betrayal into their commander’s mind.

“Oh, you handsome fool, you already know who. Don’t kid yourself,” he said aloud. He took the lighter out of his coat, lighting it with sharp flick. He held the cigarette between thumb and forefinger to light it then immediately inhaled the fumes, relishing the burn.

He slowly exhaled. “Erst denken, dann handeln, Otto,” he told himself.

Acting brashly would only get him killed. He needed to think, to plan, to strategize his next plan of attack.

He couldn’t help but admire the poetry of it all however. If what the other changeling said was true, that meant the commander’s pet was the Trollhunter. One of the Janus Order’s very own was a double-agent.

His lips edged upwards, a devilish gleam in his eye.

How Shakespearian.
Bittersweet Sixteen (VI)

Chapter Summary

Blinky tries to comfort a disappointed Atlas. Atlas’s birthday ends up being a lot better than he originally thought.

Warning: Tears may or may not be shed.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter and some awesome fanart of Anko, the OC from the previous chapter! Big thanks to you two. Also, go check out these guys' art! They're awesome!


http://vvvici.tumblr.com/post/179694528073/please-talk-to-me-about-your-ocs-i-will-love-them

A new chapter of Fallen Too Far will be published tomorrow or Sunday. I'm currently revising all the grammar. Big thanks to Charlie, Vici, memequensupreme for helping me with this chapter. Ya'll are great.

I hope you enjoy the chapter! I've been working on it for awhile and am so happy to finally publish it!

Clouds loomed low over the grassy knoll, obscuring the lights below. Such a lovely view, he thought, or it would have been, had the fog not blanketed the valley.

Blinky took a deep breath. It was not often he could savor the scent of an approaching storm. The dusty aftertaste stuck to the rough of his mouth like a fine brew of glug. Rain was something he cherished, like an old sock on a cold winter morning. Unlike the lands above Glastonbury Tor,
Arcadia’s weather seldom changed. It was times like this he could almost pretend he was back there, playing with his brother in the muddy puddles or sitting next to his father by the fire as he read to them.

Regrettably, he was not here to enjoy the weather. His eyes scanned the meadow before resting on his runaway charge.

Somehow, the teen had snuck out under his careful watch. As exasperated as he was with Master Atlas’s propensity of disappearing without notice, he understood why. At least, he believed so. Teenagers were difficult to predict at times. Thank Deya he and AAARRRGGHH!!! never had any. Though, considering present circumstances, that truth might need to be amended.

It was hard not to care. Master Atlas and Tobias were children, brought into a war that should have ended centuries ago.

He shook his head; no use dwelling on the past. What’s done is done.

There was no doubt in his mind that their new Trollhunter grew stronger every day, but, to Blinky’s dismay, his conviction did not. Blinky could not lie; he was rather displeased with the boy’s continued entanglement with the Order. It was risky. Dangerous—even in comparison to the boy’s role as the Trollhunter. Every day he worried if Master Atlas would return to them. It was positively nerve-wracking.

If it were up to Blinky, Master Atlas would be in Trollmarket indefinitely. Safer there amongst trolls than in the proverbial lion’s den.

Alas, such things were not up to him. He was only the Trollhunter’s trainer.

Blinky laid down the bag he’d been carrying behind one of the bushes. Discretely, he’d like to add. A second later, he clapped his hands together, alerting the boy of his presence.

“What a charming view,” Blinky remarked in what he hoped was a friendly tone.

Master Atlas glanced over his shoulder before he threw Blinky a half-hearted shrug. Unfortunately, all the movement earned was a sharp reprimand from the boy’s injured arm, if his wince and following curse was any indication. The limb hung close to his chest, his cloak used as a makeshift
sling.

“You followed me?” Master Atlas said.

Blinky nodded. “Of course, Master Atlas. I was worried. You are, after all, rather injured.”

He could not help but look intently at the teen’s arm. Master Atlas rolled his eyes.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve had worse. No, really. Once, Bular smashed me into a wall for looking him in the eye. Broke my collarbone and fractured a few bones in my arm. It healed in a week or so, but damn I was so bored recovering. Dad caught me making pastries with one arm in the Order’s Kitchen. It was a complete mess. The flour went everywhere,” Master Atlas said in a matter-of-fact way. “Kind of funny looking back on it. And then there was my whole Initiation into the Order, but I’ve already told you about that story. So really, I’ll be okay. You don’t have to worry.”

Blinky did not agree in the slightest. In fact, he was particularly appalled. Aghast even. He knew Master Atlas had a messed up home life, but hearing more about the emotional and physical abuse churned his stomach. No one deserved to be treated like that.

He prodded deeper into the current issue, “How does your arm feel?”

“Burnt,” Master Atlas replied, his nose scrunched up as he took a whiff of his arm. “Ugh, this stuff smells disgusting. Why didn’t you tell me it would hurt like hell?”

“Would you have taken it if I told you?” Blinky inquired with a raised brow.

He grumbled dismissively. Blinky covered his mouth to hide his smile.

Thunder rumbled above. The teen took a step back on instinct, cradling his injured arm.

“No need to fear,” he remarked lightly. “I highly doubt you shall be struck by lightning a second time.”
“Easy for you to say,” Master Atlas retorted, though his shoulders did relax a tad.

“Other than the pain, how is the movement?”

Master Atlas took the hand out of the sling, turning it side to side. “More than earlier, I guess? Still kind of tingly though.”

“It should help prevent any permanent scarring, though I do not know how that will work on your kind,” Blinky admitted casually.

Blinky immediately regretted his words.

Master Atlas tensed; he stepped away.

“An impure, you mean,” he responded frostily.

“I believe the correct term is changeling,” Blinky said, taking a few steps closer. He placed two hands together beneath his chin. “but I was referring more to your mixed origins.”

The boy tightly grasped the shoulder of his injured arm, claws digging into the leather of the pauldron.

“No one cares about that, you know. Half-changeling or not. I’ll always be an,” he spat out the next word, “Impure.”

Blinky took a step closer, hands ahead of his person. While it had taken awhile to understand the teen, his body language was clear. He could tell from boy’s gait to the tightness in his eyes that something had happened sometime between his journey between Trollmarket and here.

“Is something wrong, Master Atlas?” Blinky said, curiosity in his tone. “You seem to be on edge. The stalkling has been defeated. You did wonderfully. You used the environment around you, just as I’ve instructed during training. It was commendable. You should be proud.”
“Yeah, and I nearly lost my arm,” he laughed bitterly, hand lowering to his injured ribs at the action. “Some birthday, huh?”

“The life of a Trollhunter is full of danger. Nevertheless, you did well today. Better than well, you did—”

“My dad said he was too busy to meet me here,” Master Atlas blurted out.

The teen’s shoulders hiked up after the proclamation, expression tense and guarded.

Ah.

Blinky rubbed his chin, thinking very carefully of his next words.

“This Stricklander you talk so much about?” Blinky asked.

Master Atlas’s eyes widened. He released an angry groan, the look on his face telling Blinky his realization of tonight’s earlier conversation.

“You can’t tell Vendel,” Master Atlas ordered, though his heart wasn’t in it. He made a swift heel-turn, cloak billowing behind him, as he walked over to the ledge.

Carefully, he sat down at its edge, feet dangling off its cliffside. His claws sank into the grass. “I know I shouldn’t be upset, I didn’t even know it was my birthday before today, but I guess,” He stopped. A moment later, he threw a handful of grass and dirt over the ledge. “Ugh! Fuck. This is so stupid. I don’t know…I guess I wanted him to acknowledge it? I mean, it’s a stupid human celebration, but we don’t celebrate much of anything at the Order. I only wanted to have some time alone, like before. Just me and him.”

“I’m sorry,” Blinky said, and truly, he was. While birthing days were not celebrated in the traditional human manner, troll families still acknowledged certain milestones, though how and when differed from tribe to tribe.

Changelings, apparently, did not. And how could they, Blinky realized in growing horror. They were
taken from their families as young children. Forget birthing days, how many of them even remembered their troll parents? Of course they wouldn’t have the same traditions. Their cultures had been wiped clean from them, not unlike how certain humans did with the certain groups in their own societies.

It was a disheartening truth; one he wished he had known much sooner.

“Are you? Or are you just trying to get more information out of me?” Master Atlas accused, eyes bright and searching.

“Not at all,” he declared. “I understand your relationship with him is complicated.”

Master Atlas picked himself off the ground, shaking his head. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m willing to listen, if you would like,” he offered.

The shielded look the teen’s eyes lowered. His brow had yet to relax, but his mouth loosened, no longer as angry.

“You won’t tell anyone?” Master Atlas said in a cautious tone. “You swear?”

“I promise on the Heartstone.”

He licked his lips, then began, “All I asked was to meet up for a bit on this hill. That’s all I asked. It’s where he used to take me as a kid. It’s kind of like our spot? I don’t know. Anyways, I told him today was my birthday and I thought he would take it seriously. He seemed to at the time.”

Blinky was about to speak up, but Master Atlas put up a hand.

Taking a moment to breath, Master Atlas said, “And Do you know what his excuse was? I’m busy. Not, ‘oh I have too much homework to grade’, or ‘the goblins got out and we have to go find them’. Not a single reason.” He grasped his horns, ears lowering. “Fuck, am I even important to him? I want to make him proud, but he’s the leader of our kind, and I know the moment he finds out he’s gonna hate me and I don’t think I can handle that.” Atlas released a soft moan, grabbing fistfuls of
hair. “What am I gonna do when he finds out? I don’t want my dad to get hurt but it’s like, there are no other options other than hurting him. Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Blinky placed himself in front of Master Atlas, lifting his index finger to accompany what he hoped would be a good idea. “Perhaps an explanation then? He could take the truth better if you told him why.”

“Yeah, right,” he chuckled mirthlessly. “As if he’d ever listen. I kept trying to tell him, but it’s like there’s this wall between us. How can I get him to see that we were wrong?” The teen paused. “Well, not wrong, I mean, he has the right reasons, he’s just on the wrong team. He’s so loyal to his team though, even when they’re dragging us down like Bular does.”

“I wish I had an answer. Sadly, it takes time to change people’s hearts.” Especially the leader of a group of cultists, but Blinky chose not to voice such thoughts.

The boy released a heavy sigh, his shoulders loosening. He returned his injured arm to the sling. Finally, he gave Blinky a tired glance.

“How do I change the minds of people centuries older than I am?” He asked softly.

Blinky placed a hand to his chest. “You changed mine.”

“You’re different, Blinky.” Master Atlas said, gaze traveling to the sky. A few droplets of rain splashed against his face. “Nomura and my dad are all that I have at the Order. Everyone else doesn’t care. They’ll never care. All of them are so focused on this bridge bullshit and bringing back Gunmar. It wasn’t like this before. Ever since I’ve found the amulet, things have become worse. Nomura’s more on edge than ever before. Dad’s so focused on his work that sometimes, I think he forgets about me.” His voice cracked. “What am I going to do?”

That was the crux of the matter, was it not? What was their Trollhunter going to do?

The Janus Order was a formidable foe. At the beginning, his greatest fear was the Trollhunter turning to them. Now, he feared it would be them turning on the Trollhunter.

“That, Master Atlas, is up to you,” Blinky remarked. An open-ended answer to be sure, but he knew anything else might provoke a more emotionally charged retort.
A gust of wind blew through the area, shaking the trees. Atlas turned his attention to the ground, mouth drawn into a thin line.

“Maybe Bular was right,” he whispered. “Maybe I am nothing.”

If only he could he would bundle the boy in blankets and light a warm fire, just as his father did. Though the memories of his parents had largely faded, both having left his life earlier than most, he valued every single one.

But Master Atlas was skittish. What worked for Blinky might not be the same for the Trollhunter.

Still, he would not leave this conversation on such a sour note. He placed a two hands on the boy’s shoulders, his remaining ones the teen’s face. Inwardly, his heart sank at what he saw.

Young.

So young.

Great Gronka Morka, their Trollhunter was so young. And yet, despite this youth, he had pressed forward with the strength of a mountain troll, taking on every obstacle in his way.

Could he weather the storm that brewed in the distance?

Yes, Blinky believed, but not without help.

“Never ever tell yourself that, Master Atlas,” Blinky stressed in a firm tone. “You are not nothing. You are important to me, to AAARRRGHHH!!! and especially to young Tobias. We care about you, Trollhunter or not.”

Master Atlas searched his eyes. “You barely know me.”
“True, but that doesn’t mean we don’t care. My old friend Kanjigar is gone,” Blinky said, and oh, the pain he felt at the news came rushing back once again.

Kanjigar would know what to do in this kind of situation. In spite of his strained relationship with Draal, he would have had the right words to say to their young Trollhunter.

But Kanjigar was no longer here, which meant Blinky’s following words have to suffice. “Kanjigar was a good Trollhunter, but he is dead. His story has ended, there is no changing that. But here you are, taking up his mantle and continuing his and his predecessor’s legacy. You protect Trollmarket and you protect the human world, as he did.”

“T’ll never be Kanjigar. I’ll never be like any of them. I’m not a troll,” Master Atlas said, as if trying to find something wrong with himself.

Blinky’s ears sank. Was this what Master Atlas had been holding in lately?

“And you don’t have to be. I…” Blinky swallowed. “I should have been a better trainer, at the beginning. I too, was wrapped up in my own beliefs and prejudices. But I was wrong. Atlas, you are becoming a fine—no, a wonderful Trollhunter. Everyone has doubts starting out. Why, I dare say you have already built a name for yourself. For most, it takes decades, if not centuries, to do what you have done. You defeated several foes already, and in such a short amount of time. It is commendable.”

Master Atlas’s lips edged upwards. He patted Blinky’s arm. “I couldn’t have done it without you guys.”

“And we couldn’t have done it without you,” Blinky replied.

A toothy smile finally emerged. “Thanks, Blinky.”

“Now, close your eyes,” he said, excitement filling him. “If my calculations are correct, there’s only a few more minutes left to your birthing day. Time for one more present.”

Master Atlas obliged, shaking his head. “You didn’t have to, you know. Presents are a human thing.”
“Well, Tobias said gifts were an important part of one’s sixteenth birthday,” Blinky said, before scoffing, “and I certainly do not want to be upstaged by Vendel.”

He placed the bag he brought earlier a few feet away from the boy, releasing the tie with a sharp tug.

“Ta-da!” he said, grinning at the human word. He had always wanted to use it. “You can look now.”

Silence greeted him. He watched Atlas approach the gift, Blinky’s nervousness rising with each step.

Had he chosen wrong? He had seen the boy with the magazine laid out between the pages of his Troll to English dictionary more than once. Toby and he also spoke of it frequently in their discussions in the Forge.

But he did not ask Master Atlas what he wanted, did he? Oh dear. Perhaps the model was not to his liking at all.

Blinky scratched the side of his face. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but—”

“You got me a Vespa?” Master Atlas said, emphasizing the last word loudly.

The boy picked up the pieces, inspecting them not unlike he would with a new shipment of scrolls from the traveling merchants.

“I thought perhaps one day we could built it together,” Blinky suggested. “After your training of course.”

Master Atlas looked up, eyes alight with what he presumed was excitement. “Seriously? Yes, yes, yes. I can’t believe it. Blinky, this thing is vintage. Do you know what that means? Oh man, look at that classic long saddle and original handbars. Oh sweet Pale Lady, you even got the headlamp unit! I can’t believe you found all these parts! This is insane. Where did you get this?”

The troll pulled at his suspenders, a flurry of satisfaction filling him up from top to bottom. He felt, as
the humans liked to say, like the cat’s *bark*. “I have my ways.”

“Thank you,” he gushed. “This is the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“Not so bad for a first birthday then?”

“Well, it’s the only one I’ve ever had,” Master Atlas said. “I mean, the stalkling stuff was kind of sucky, but this Vespa certainly improves today.”

“I should hope so. I’m happy you’re happy, Master Atlas.”

The smile he received was genuine. Blinky’s chest puffed out ever so slightly in response. The boy rarely gave such an open expression.

Sadly, it vanished the second Master Atlas’s phone beeped. He made a grab for the phone, eyes wide and excited, before noticing who the message came from.

“Oh, it’s just a message from Tobes,” Master Atlas said, the happiness in his voice significantly muted. His ears twitched up and down as he took in the message, before ultimately rising up, alert and stiff. “I gotta go. Tobes wants me over at my mom’s home. Says it’s urgent.”

“Is it Draal?” Blinky asked, then added, “Do you need me to come?”

“He said it was a non-troll issue,” Master Atlas explained. He placed a finger underneath his mouth, biting down on it before saying, “But just in case, go over to Toby’s place for a bit. AAARRRGGHH!!! should be there now.”

Blinky nodded, turning to leave. “Well, if that’s all, then—”

Two hands grasped his middle. Master Atlas dug his face into his shoulder. “Thanks,” he mumbled, not meeting Blinky’s eyes. “You’re not so bad for a trainer, Blinky.”

Blinky patted his head. “And you are not so bad for a student.”
The hug was barely a few seconds. Almost immediately Master Atlas shot off the ledge, leaping from tree to tree.

The drizzle above the hill turned into rain. Blinky quickly wrapped up the present, hoisting it over his shoulder.

Once again, a new problem emerged at the end of an old one. But strangely, this time, Blinky felt no nervousness like the previous. Instead, a ball of warmth settled within his chest.

*Not so bad for a trainer, huh?*

Blinky smiled, jogging after the boy.

Atlas tried to climb over the fence.

*Tried* being the key word here.

It was harder in human form. The Trollhunter armor didn’t help either. His flexibility, while improving, lacked in comparison to his other form. It was even moreso now since his arm was out of commission, but he managed. Kind of. Maybe?

Half-way over the wall, his foot slipped. Gravity did the rest.

Stricklander’s voice rang through his mind. *Never take on more than you can handle, young Atlas,* he had once said.
His face and chest hit the grass with a soft thump. He got a mouthful of mud and leaves. The taste left little to be desired. Atlas gagged. Cold rain drenched his hair and face, the storm finally in full swing.

*Dumbass*, his inner-Nomura added.

She was right. Why hadn’t he used the amulet after he climbed over the fence? It would have saved him the additional bruises at the very least.

Oh sweet Pale Lady, today sucked balls. No, *more* than sucked balls. This was his worst day ever, even worse than that time he was shrunk or that time he fought Draal (*twice, he reminded himself*) and Nomura (*more than twice*, he thought, *if you counted all our training sessions*).

Well, maybe not the worst. For one, Blinky’s gift had been pretty awesome. Sure, it would take some time to assemble everything, but it would be *his*. His very own Vespa. For another, almost getting cut in half by Bular during Initiation had been traumatic. Lightning was nothing in comparison to Bular’s wrath. The scar he left ached at the reminder. That particular memory wasn’t going away anytime soon, especially since he saw the asshole so much.

Bular wanted him dead, Trollhunter or not. Stricklander was right. The only thing keeping him alive was his mission.

He shivered, and not simply because of the cold.

Yeah, today was pretty damn miserable, presents aside, but he pressed through, just like he always did.

He looked around. The house was dark. No car out front either. Maybe it was in the garage? Shouldn’t his mom be home by now?

Worry began to build.

Perhaps that was the reason Toby called him. He did say it was a non-troll issue. Still, just to be safe, Atlas instructed Blinky to be on standby nearby.
His gaze traveled to the Toby’s house across the road. In the boy’s bedroom window, two trolls watched anxiously, their eyes glowing eerily against the foggy glass. The discomfort waned slightly. If things were truly bad, he knew those two would have his back.

Atlas threw a half-hearted wave to the duo before heading further into the backyard.

His stomach rolled with every step closer. Without his normal senses, everything was dark and silent. Too silent, in his opinion.

The moment he reached the steps, the backlight switched on, damn near blinding him. Atlas’s heartrate went through the roof. Reaching for his sword (ow, ow, ow, other arm, other arm, he hastily corrected), he jumped back, ready to face whatever danger that lurked.

Just as he was about to whistle for his companions, someone pushed open the door.

Atlas pressed the palm of his uninjured hand to his eyes, stumbling back a step at the sight. He squinted; he could barely out the figure. Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

“Hey! You’re here! Wow, I didn’t think you would actually come, you know, with the whole getting hit my lightning,” Toby said, scratching the back of his head. “Sorry, sorry, did I scare you?”

Atlas motioned his injured arm at the boy. Even under his armor he could feel the bandages. It should hold no matter his form, or so had Blinky mentioned while applying them earlier. If worse came to worse he could always tighten them. “I’ll be alright, I think. I’ve had worse.”

“That is both terrifying and relieving at the same time,” Toby said.

Even under the blanket of night and glaring porchlight, Atlas saw that something was wrong with his best friend. Toby kept trying to avoid his gaze, when normally the boy gave him his complete attention.

Atlas took the boy’s sleeve with his uninjured arm and pulled him closer. Using the same hand, he firmly squeezed the other’s shoulder.
“Toby,” he began, eyes searching the backyard. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing bad,” he laughed.

A flare of anger erupted. Atlas threw him a dark glare. He had not walked through the rain and mud with only one working arm for fucking *nothing*.

Even now, the smell of burnt hair clung to his skin. His arm throbbed to the beat of his heart, the magic salve slowly etching back the damaged nerves and muscles. It was better than Stricklander’s potions, but damn did it hurt ten times more.

Atlas caught Toby by his collar, giving him an unblinking stare. The shadows blanketed his expression. “Don’t tell me this is a joke.”

“No, no,” Toby assured, patting the hand. “It’s not.”

He let out a sigh, releasing his friend. Damn, Blinky was right. He really was on edge right now. One would think, after the stalking, he would be thrilled.

Truthfully, however, he’d never felt more anxious. Everything about today left him feeling off. He couldn’t wait to get home, shower, and forget all the terrible things that had transpired.

“What’s the problem then?”

“I need you to prepare yourself,” Toby warned, pushing Atlas back slightly. “You sure you don’t want to sit down? Cause this is kinda big.”

He inhaled slowly, his mind running a million different scenarios. Had his mom been kidnapped? Had she gotten hurt? Was she in the hospital or someplace else? Was she dying?

“Okay,” Atlas said, nodding to reassure both Toby and, to a lesser degree, himself. “What happened?”
“Dude, I’m not kidding. You really might want to sit down for this,” Toby suggested.

He stood up straighter. “Thanks, but I’ll stand.”

“Okay, how do I put this.” Toby rubbed his hands together. As if a light bulb had gone off in his head, his eyes widened, his fist hitting against the palm of his other hand. “Remember how today you fought the stalking?”

“How could I not?” Atlas grumbled. Nothing broken, by the grace of their lady, but nothing felt good either. It was as if his entire body was a bruise personified.

Toby continued. “And then you got electrocuted and Blinky had to fix you up back at Trollmarket?”

“Of course I remember. Hell, you were there with me.”

“Okay, so after you passed out, I walked home and—”

Atlas interrupted, “Yeah, I heard from Blinky. That was dumb, by the way. Seriously, you know how dangerous it is right now. What if Bular or Nomura got to you? What if it was one of the goblins?”

“Are you going to let me tell the story or what, dude?” Toby said, crossing his arms.


“So, after the whole stalking thing, while I was walking back home your, ah…Dr. Lake…well…” Toby twiddled his thumbs together.

He leaned closer to his friend, brow furrowing. “Well what? Is she okay? Did she get hurt or something?”
“No, no, nothing like that,” Toby answered. “Your mom just…um…” He took a deep breath, then confessed, “She kidnapped me.”

“What?” Atlas was immediately hit with a wave of new thoughts.

Toby was captured? By his mom? For real? Barbara Lake was a kidnapper?

No, there must be a reason. There had to be.

Atlas pressed on. “What happened?”

“She snuck up behind me in her minivan, dude,” Toby said, shoulders dropping. “Dr. L wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

He resisted the urge to smack his forehead. Instead, Atlas settled for dragging a hand down his face.

How had she gotten the drop on Toby?

Atlas pinched the arch of his nose. Part of him wanted to be angry. How much had Toby revealed to her? The rest of him was worried. This was too early, too soon.

Had Bular gotten to her?

“You couldn’t outrun her?” Atlas asked. “Hide somewhere she couldn’t find you?”

Toby gestured to his legs. “Have you seen me run? Domzalskis are not runners. We are hardy fighters. Also, I don’t think most humans can outrun a freaking car.”

“Okay, okay,” Atlas placed a hand up, gesturing for him to continue with the story. “So, she kidnapped you? Then what? Did you escape or something?”
“Well, I mean, technically, I went willingly,” Toby professed. “Because she was pretty terrifying, dude.”

“You’ve faced Bular, Nomura, and a stalking.”

“She has a missile launcher, dude.”

“Wait, what? Hold on,” Atlas shook his head. He couldn’t seriously believe—No, Toby was probably exaggerating.

Right?

Taking a moment to regather himself, Atlas said in a hesitant tone, “What happened then?”

“Well, we got to talking. She knows you’re in Arcadia. Plus, she remembers what happened the night Nomura came, at least in part. She doesn’t know everything, but—”

Atlas grabbed the shorter boy’s vest, face ashen. “Please do not tell me that is the reason you called. Fuck, Tobes. How much did you tell her?”

“Not everything. Also, don’t grab my sweater, dude. That is so not awesome sauce. This is cashmere,” Toby chided, lightly smacking Atlas’s hand before he removed it. “Just the basics. I was hoping to leave the rest of it up to you.”

“Leave the rest?” He croaked.

Toby stepped to the side, glancing back at the door.

Atlas squinted before his eyes blew open in shock. Weakness took hold of his legs. The rain and heavy armor only made the feeling all the more apparent.

Through the foggy glass, the feminine silhouette approached.
No, no, no, no.

He wasn’t ready.

His breath caught in his throat. Even though he was soaking wet, his mouth was dry as a desert. He tried to make a sound, but nothing came out.

The door started to open. It was a slow creak like the ones in Toby’s films, right before a pivotal scene or dramatic moment.

His gaze traveled up the stairs before landing on her face.

Atlas didn’t want to insult his mom, but damn did she look awful. Red eyes, dark circles, and the swallow appearance of her skin added years to her face. She looked thinner than he remembered since their last meeting. Had she been eating? Why hadn’t she been eating? Was she sick? Was she dying? Was she—

“Jim,” she whispered in a soft voice, and it wasn’t a question.

She was addressing him.

She was seeing him.

His stomach rolled and shifted like the storm above them.

She was here. Really here. Not a dream, not a memory. She was here.

Here. In the flesh. Seeing him.

He scraped a hand through his bangs, suddenly aware of how terrible he must look. One injured arm, his face and armor covered in mud, grass, and leaves, not to mention all the bruises—this wasn’t how
he viewed their first real meeting at all.

He had—well—he had hoped to meet her after destroying Bular and the Killahhead bridge. It was a silly dream, walking up to her door, introducing himself, both of them happy and crying and no fear of her being endangered. He had wanted her protected (it was why he tolerated Draal in his mother’s home).

And now look at him. How pathetic he must appear. Approaching her after everything that had happened today. She didn’t deserve this. She deserved a son without the baggage of his life, a Jim who wasn’t burdened by his crossed loyalties and dangerous relations.

A stab of guilt cut through him. She was only seeing Jim, her son, and not Atlas. He was an imposter. In a way, Atlas had taken away her heartwarming reunion with her human son, not the pale imitation he had become.

Still, was he not her son too? Did he not share their same blue eyes in both forms?

But that would mean admitting that he was Jim Lake Jr., always and truly, and not merely two people who happened to share the same body. He understood, in theory, he was…Jim, but it was as if there was a split between them, the old Jim and the new Atlas. He was Atlas and Jim was, well, his past. His backstory. The one before him. His previous incarnation.

The door shut behind his mother with a loud bang. Her gaze were trained on him and no one else. There was a softness there, so familiar his heart ached at the sight.

Damn it. Screw Jim. Screw Atlas. He would pretend to be whoever she wanted him to be, as long as she continued to look at him like that, as if he meant the world, as if he mattered more than anything else.

It was addicting, this attention. He would have given up the amulet for his dad to look at him like that.

Was it wrong, to crave such affection? His Janus upbringing would say so. Feelings were obstacles in the way of the mission. He had spent the last six years amongst them, with only his dad and Nomura for comfort, neither of whom were very comforting themselves. They had their own lives, their own agendas, their own missions to worry about rather than some half-breed kid. He knew they merely tolerated his desires for physical affection, much like an adult does to an annoying child. A
pat on the head, a soft smile, a new dagger—he cherished each and every one of them.

But this wasn’t the Janus Order, was it?

He took a step forward, then another, until he was at the bottom of the steps. His eyes never strayed from hers, even as he lifted his neck. She was tall for a human. Taller than him by a head. In this form, at least.

His breathing became choppy. Despite his training, he knew his composure was shot to hell. Maybe it was because of nearly dying at the hands of Bular’s stalkling, or his father not showing up at the meadow like he’d asked. Or maybe it was the whole Trollhunters job in general, a cascade of problems in its own right.

Most likely however, it was her.

Mom.

Sweet Pale Lady, he was so close to her now. He could reach out and touch her if he wanted.

He thought he was stronger than this. He fought Bular (however brief) and lived. He defeated Draal the Deadly and Nomura. He killed a stalkling just an hour or so ago. He could craft a mask like the best of his kind.

And yet none of that mattered in the end. It was a terrifying sensation. It was as if she stripped away his titles and achievements, leaving him the scared frightened boy he was so long ago.

Would she accept him?

After all this?

After everything he had done?

The words bubbled forth without a thought, voice cracking. “Mom?”
She answered the call before he even finished the word, her warm arms tight and comforting in the face of the cold shower beating down on them.

Gods.

Nothing could beat this feeling.

His face dug into her chest. He was numb and sensitive all at once. Her right hand rested against the back of his head while the other one was wound firmly around his back. The hand on his head grasped his hair, not tight enough to hurt, but fixed, as if reassuring her that he was real and solid.

Atlas lifted his head, his uninjured hand coming up to reach her face. He stopped an inch away, but his mother must have noticed his hesitancy and rested her face against the grimy cold metal that encased his fingers.

“Happy Birthday, dude,” Toby called out before slipping back inside the house.

His mother raised her own hand to his cheek, holding it gently. His eyes traced her face, taking in every detail. He noted their similarities, wondering how he hadn’t picked up on it the first time he saw her. They were so alike.

“Hey,” he said before silently cursing out how stupid that sounded.

“Hey yourself,” she replied, her voice every bit as choked up as his. “Let’s get inside, shall we?”

She released him, though not without keeping a firm arm around his shoulder. He wondered if she was as afraid as he was of this all being a dream.

Before he entered through the backdoor of his home (his, he thought, now where had that come from?), he sent one last look at the sky.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle as the moon emerged, brilliant and luminous over the night sky, like
a beacon in the darkness.

“Some birthday, huh?” He said aloud.

His mother brought him closer. “Happy birthday, sweetheart.”
Young Atlas (I)

Chapter Summary

Barbara and her son finally talk, though it goes as well as one might expect. Later, Nomura begins questioning Atlas’s loyalties, and whether her workmate’s hints are perhaps more than a mere political ploy.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Back with a new chapter! Big shoutout to all the wonderful reviewers, favorites, and kudos. You guys are fantastic. Thank you Vici and Charlie for helping me with this chapter! You guys are awesome. Shoutout to brothebro for doing some awesome fanart of her changeling! Jim and Atlas interacting. I should have Fallen Too Far done soon enough. Check out my instagram, tumblr, and twitter where I post my art for the show and for this fanfic. I go by tunafishprincess.

Link to fancomic: https://brothebro.tumblr.com/post/180143154045/for-sketch-thing-maybe-blue-moon-rising

Hope you like the chapter!

The microwave dinged.

Immediately, Barbara reached inside and pulled out the three mugs. The steam brushed against her skin, warming her rain-soaked body. Even though her fingers trembled, she pressed forward. After carefully balancing the drinks on a tray, she left the kitchen.

Her breathing picked up at the sight of him.
It was one o’clock in the morning and her son was sitting in her living room.

Don’t panic, she reminded herself, just stay calm.

But how could she? The chill of her body battled the adrenaline pumping through her veins. Her son was here, in the flesh, no longer some phantom who’d haunted her dreams for more than six years. It was everything she wanted and more.

She couldn’t resist scanning her son’s body. Several contusions peppered his pale face. Most were red-blue or purple-black; one injury in particular, a long scratch across his cheek, pulled at her heartstrings. There were one or two older bruises, but the majority were new. She wasn’t sure if she should be relieved or horrified. Currently, she was leaning towards the later.

Jim paused at her reappearance, towel around his shoulders. They cleaned off the mud and grass on him, but she knew there would be quite a mess that morning. Better to focus on the now and not the later, however. Still, it was so strange. She glanced back down the hallway; little footprints led from the back porch to her couch, more evidence of his realness.

She placed the drinks in each boy’s hands, lingering on her son’s. They locked eyes.

Toby coughed. Jim broke away, his attention focused on the ground. Barbara’s heart sank.

Had she done something wrong? As much as she wanted to gather him up in her arms like before, she resisted. Overwhelming him with love might drive him away again.

He picked up one of the spoons she’d set out earlier, twirling it with a contemplative look on his face.

Did he like the tea? What if he preferred coffee? God, she hadn’t thought of that. What sorts of drinks did he like these days?

She took a sip of her own Earl Gray. A moment later, she remarked in what she hoped was a friendly tone, “So.”
Her son jolted back slightly. His gaze rested on the drink in his hands.

“So,” Jim repeated. He copied her movement, though his nose scrunched up when the tea met his lips. Barbara sucked in her lower lip as Jim placed it on an open coaster.

_Must not be a tea fan_, she realized. Strange, he had always loved making chamomile tea for them. People’s tastes do change however.

Toby settled his own mug on top of some nearby books, jumping to his feet with a slight hop in his step. Stretching his arms as high as they could go, he yawned. “Wow, look at the time. I think I’ll leave you guys alone for a bit. Nana’s probably wondering where I am.”

“No, wait,” Jim said, scrambling out of his own chair. Both of his greaves accidentally banged against one of the legs on her coffee table. “You’re just leaving me here?”

The other boy clasped Jim’s shoulder, giving him what Barbara supposed was an encouraging squeeze. “You’ll be okay, dude. I believe in you.”

“But…” His gaze flickered over to her before returning to his friend.

Barbara’s fingers tightened around the mug. Did her son truly not want to speak with her? Had she been too forward? Was she the reason he had disappeared?

Had she driven him off like her ex-husband?

_No, she realized, he’s just nervous, like I am._

She hoped.

Toby confirmed the thought by replying, “It’s alright. She’s cool. I promise. Don’t be so nervous, dude. Besides, I don’t think you’ll really need me for this part.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay,” her son muttered, his expression contrary to such words.
They both watched as Toby headed for the front door, shutting it with a soft thump.

And then there were two, she mused.

Her gaze traveled to Jim once again, bypassing the injuries this time (Though not forgetting. Who did this to her son?). God, look at how big he’d gotten. She remembered when he was barely up to her waist and now his head reached her shoulder. No doubt he’d grow taller, if her family’s genes had anything to say about it.

Six years. Her lips twitched. She’d missed so much of his childhood. Would he ever view her the same again? Could they go back? Did he even want to? Barbara had been so busy at the time, working overtime to pay for the mortgage and her student loans. Looking back, she cursed herself for not doing more.

Noticing her silence, Jim gave her a hesitant smile. Her heart fluttered. Oh, how she missed that; his slightly crooked two front teeth were just as she remembered.

Sighing, Barbara’s fingernails clicked against the side of her cup. How to begin? What should she say?

Finding no perfect solution, Barbara simply went with, “How are you doing?”

The set of Jim’s mouth tightened as Barbara settled onto the cushion next to him. Was she too close? She scooted closer to the armchair.

“Good,” he answered, eyes flickering over to the limp arm at his side. “I guess. Yourself?”

She couldn’t stop herself from focusing on the limb. Why hadn’t she noticed it before? What was wrong with his arm? Did he need medical attention? The clinic wasn’t too far away. She had some supplies here too.

Stop it, she inwardly berated herself. He would tell her if he needed medical attention, right?
But Jim, despite his long disappearance, was still a child. He might not know whether he needed treatment. She suspected he was more injured than he let on, but asking outright might put him on the defensive. She had no clue of what he’d experienced these past few years.

“Good.” She added, “Better now that you’re here.”

Jim’s eyes crinkled. The tightness in them loosened into a more cordial expression. “Same.”

Her eyes grew wet as a new wave of emotion crashed into her; tears threatened to escape post-haste. She rubbed away the wetness with the back of her hand. Her son was here. He was home. He was—

Without warning, her arms wrapped around him again. He froze up for a moment, but soon leaned into the gesture, his head perched against her shoulder. Barbara exhaled, her shoulders lowering. The armor wasn’t suited for hugging—the left pauldron dug into her collarbone painfully—but that didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Her son was with her and that was all that mattered.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Barbara admitted, pulling back to see his face. “I searched for you. I never stopped looking.”

Her son tucked back his bangs behind one ear. “I know.”

If he did then why hadn’t he come to see her, the more critical part of her judged. Barbara immediately stuffed such thoughts into the furthest corners of her mind. Jim had his reasons. Hopefully, he would be comfortable enough to reveal them.

“Toby says you have memory problems,” she said. She drew back her arms, folding them tightly against her body. She knew if she didn’t she would continue to hang off the boy. “Do you… remember me?”

The look he gave her that fateful day haunted her dreams. No acknowledgement at all, as if she were a stranger.

It was the worst sort of feeling.
“Well,” he said, biting on his bottom lip. “Bits and pieces.”

“Bits and pieces?” How much did he remember? What memories stood out the most to him? A tsunami of questions threatened to wash out of her lips regarding the new information, but she held off. She could already tell he was overwhelmed with the situation, if his foot tapping and hiked shoulders implied anything.

“It’s hard to explain. I don’t even know where to begin,” he confessed in a soft tone.

A light bulb lit up inside her mind. She reached over to her purse, shuffling through the contents until she found what she was looking for. Placing it on top her lap, Barbara flattened it out as well as she could before passing it over for him to see.

“How about here, then?” She said.

Jim turned the paper from front to back, amazement written in his features. “You found my letter? How?”

“It was in the trash,” Barbara professed, further commenting, “You didn’t do a very good job of hiding it.”

Jim shook his head, smacking his forehead with his good palm. “Yeah, I’m beginning to realize that now.” He groaned, “I’m such an idiot.”

“No,” Barbara said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not. Don’t put yourself down. You’re smart. You always have been.”

“Oh,” her son replied in a soft tone, cheeks reddening. “I…Um…Thanks.”

“It’s the truth,” she remarked.

Jim tilted his head in her direction. He crossed one leg over the other, cradling his injured arm.
“Whatever we talk about stays in here, okay? Don’t share it with anyone else,” he said, searching her eyes for any hint of betrayal.

Barbara sat straighter, giving him a sharp nod. “I understand.”

“You have to promise on your life you won’t tell a soul,” he pressed.

“Alright.”

His mouth sat open for a moment before he closed it. His brows drew together. “Really? You’re okay with that?”

“I just found out magic and the supernatural exists,” Barbara stated, hoping her voice didn’t sound as shrill and nervous as it did in her head. She took off her glasses, cleaning them with her shirt before readjusting them on the bridge of her nose. “As a doctor, well, I can’t say it’s been easy to wrap my head around, but I trust you and I trust the things I’ve seen with my own eyes. I won’t tell anyone. You have my word. You can trust me.”

“That’s sort of the problem right there,” he mumbled, using his one hand to cover his eyes before waving it at her to continue. “Right, what do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

Jim snorted, a small smirk emerging. “A bit more specific? ‘Everything’ is kind of broad.”

A smaller scope then. She asked about one of the main points in his writings, “You said something about magical armor and monsters?”

Jim scratched his head before explaining, “Oh, I was talking about this armor.” He tapped on the glowing disk at his chest. “It’s part of the Amulet of Daylight. It chose me to be the Trollhunter.”

Barbara gestured her hand at the object. “It chose you?”
“It’s magic. Made by Merlin. I don’t really know how it all works, but it gives me protection.” He winced, as if the words weren’t entirely accurate. “Well, some protection. I’m still working out the kinks.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Barbara said, both hands up. “Merlin? As in the wizard Merlin? The Arthurian legends were real?”

“Some of them, yeah. I wouldn’t put too much stalk in it though. From what I’ve gathered, he’s some crazy old dude who thought giving me a magical amulet would somehow be a good idea.”

Barbara filed that specific info away for her next research topic. She too, wondered why some mythical wizard would chose her son for what sounded like an important task. What else existed besides trolls and wizards? Bigfoot? The Loch Ness Monster? Knowing Arcadia it would probably be aliens or something, she thought dryly.

“You said you were the Trollhunter,” Barbara said. “Do you hunt trolls or…?”

“Sort of. Mostly bad trolls, gnomes, goblins, stalklings,” he listed off then paused. “Changelings too.”

Barbara could really go for some aspirin right now. Fairy tales monsters were in Arcadia—she knew, of course, especially after catching her son and his friend running away from some, but to have it confirmed…

Forget aspirin, a bottle of wine might be a better alternative.

“Are the little green creatures that chased after you one of those things?” Barbara asked.

“Little green creatures?” He said, nose scrunched up in confusion before his eyes widened. “Oh! You mean the goblins! You were there?”

“You guys were running through the street. You’re lucky no one else was around. You, Toby, and whoever your monster friends are. They are your friends, right?”
The two larger creatures hadn’t seemed dangerous to the boys. In fact, from what she remembered, they were working together to evade the tiny beasts.

“Oh yeah. Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! are great. Blinky is my trainer for all the Trollhunters stuff and AAARRRGGHH!!!, well,” he shrugged. “He’s there for a lot of moral support.”

“I see,” she said, fixing her fingers together underneath her chin. “How did all of you meet?”

“Amulet, again. They’re from Trollmarket, an underground city for trolls in Arcadia.”

An entire civilization underneath their town. Who would have thought? Their very own mole people.

“I never would have guessed, what, with a name like that,” she joked, even though, inwardly, she was freaking out.

“Yeah, can’t say I disagree, but it works, at least for them. Trolls are…” He paused, licking his bottom lip. “They’re different. Way different. At least in comparison with the Order.”

The crux of her questions loomed overhead. Barbara took a deep breath, her son following in turn. She smiled. It was heartwarming, despite the time they’d spent apart, he still subconsciously linked up to mirror her body language. It was a small discovery, and probably couldn’t hold water under any scientific study, but nevertheless her stomach fluttered with warmth and anticipation.

“What happened? Really. I’ve been dying…I want, no I need to know,” she said, her left hand gripping the arm chair.

“It’s complicated,” he responded, the edges of his lips descending.

“Please, I…” She bent forward, elbows digging into her legs. She grasped both hands together, trying not to shake. “You were gone. I couldn’t find you. It’s like you just vanished.”

“I don’t like talking about it. The things that happened were…I don’t like thinking about it either.” A bitter expression deepened his frown.
“They hurt you?”

His silence answered the question. It was strange, almost alien to see her son close in on himself, as if he were trying to dissociate from the conversation entirely.

She moved closer. He tensed, but relaxed as she reached out to stroke his hair. Noticing how intimate she was being, she pulled away then asked, “Sorry, is it alright if I—?”

“Yes, I mean, sure, it’s fine,” he trailed off, rubbing his injured shoulder sheepishly.

Barbara continued to stroke his hair. She fixated on the stubborn knots and tangles at the back, gently combing them out with her fingers.

Jim’s shoulders loosened, his hands falling to his sides. Believing she had finally gotten him to relax, she processed with her next question.

“Is it this Order you’re a part of?” She asked.

“What? No, no. They saved me. It was flesh—"His jaw tightened, mouth set. “Sorry. Humans. It was a group of humans. They’re the ones that took me.”

Flesh-what? Barbara bit down on her inner-cheek. Her gaze became blurry once more. A tiny, terrible part of her had hoped it was the monsters’ fault. It was wrong, she knew, but it was so much easier to face the wolf at the door than the one in sheep’s clothing. What was wrong with her?

Was this why Jim didn’t want her to meet? Had he been subconsciously afraid of her? Barbara moved her hand from his hair to her eyes. Emotionally, she was drained, the high of finally reuniting with her son battling the newfound revelations of what life he had been living up until now.

Her baby was hurt by people and she never knew. Had he called for her? Had he wept? Had he ever thought she’d given him up to the group? Barbara wiped her nose, trying to regroup herself. He shouldn’t be seeing her like this.

But he was, so she had to make the best of what she had. Barbara inched closer.
“I’m so sorry,” she said after taking in a steady inhale. “I wish I had been there. I should have been there. If I had only gone out with you that day this might never have—”

“Are you crying? Shit, I could have worded that better.” He waved his hands. “Look. It’s done. We can’t go back. The place is gone. I’m alive. That’s all that matters.”

She disagreed vehemently. Still, Jim had said he didn’t want to talk about it. Pushing him into it now could hurt whatever relationship they had. Barbara swallowed, closing her eyes for a moment before continuing.

“Who are the Order exactly?”

“They’re a group of shape-changers. There were others in the place I was held, but they didn’t make it. The Order found me there and took me in.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m one of them.” He shrugged. “Half of one that is.”

This…was not what she expected. Sure, son fighting monsters in magical armor made sense, but being half-monster himself? How could she not have known? Was it genetic? Was it created through magic or scientific means? She was going to have a tough time sleeping tonight, if she did at all.

“Half shape-changer?” She reiterated with a questioning tone at the end.

“Relatively speaking, though we prefer to call ourselves changelings.”

“And changelings are what?” She asked, trying to recall one particular folklore class she had in college. Who knew it would come in handy in this kind of situation? “Like the fae or—”

“No, they’re trolls too, but, ah, changed.” He motioned his hands around what she speculated was gesture symbolizing magic. “Taken in by the Pale Lady.”
“You’re half troll too?”

“No, half-changeling, which in itself is also a troll, but trolls don’t consider them trolls so…” He messaged his temple with two fingers from one hand, an awkward lopsided smile on his lips. “It’s complicated.”

“This is a lot to take in. How did you become half?”

“It’s, ah, um,” he stumbled over his words. His cheeks were practically rosy now. Finally, he mumbled. “By blood I think?”

“Your father,” she answered.

Jim nodded.

“You’re saying my ex-husband was a troll?”

“ Probably? Unless you slept with someone else at the time,” he said.

“I screwed and got screwed over by a troll,” Barbara could help but giggle. “Of course. God, how stupid could I be? The lack of any relatives, his strange personality changes, the long disappearances—Have you spoken with him? Does he work for this organization?”

“No, at least, I don’t think so. I have no clue if he works for them or not. No one’s come forward to claim me,” he admitted.

“So, you’ve been living with this organization since then?”

“For the moment, yes,” Jim said.

“Well,” Barbara began, giving the boy a soft smile. “I’m glad you’re back.”
Jim returned the expression. “Me too.”

“Are you,” she paused. Would it be too forward? They hadn’t seen in each other six years after all. But she was dying to know. She had to ask, “Are you going to move back in?”

He stuttered. “O-oh, uh, I haven’t really thought that far ahead yet.”

“I would love it if you did.”

His face paled. He looked so unsure, so vulnerable.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea right now,” he said in a low voice.

“Why?” She blurted out before pulling back. “Sorry. I just…I don’t want you to leave again.”

“The thing is…” He looked away. “The Order’s been home for me for so long. Dad, oh not my birth dad, but the guy who took me in, he’s been talking care of me all this time. I can’t leave him. It would break his heart.”

Barbara asked, “Could you consider it at least? If you’re ever in trouble, you’re welcome to come here.”

“I’ll think about it,” he conceded.

It wasn’t what she wanted, but it was better than nothing.

“You said you were half-changeling which were shape-changers. Can you change too?”

“Yes.”
Barbara’s eyes widened. “Could I see?"

“What? No!” He scrambled. “I mean, sorry, it’s just. You can’t.”

“Why not?”

The redness in his cheeks returned, this time reaching his ears. “You just found out about all this stuff. Besides, the more you know the more trouble you could be in. You shouldn’t have found out in the first place.”

“But I have, so there’s no reason for you to keep it from me.”

He crossed his arms. “You just can’t, okay?”

“Does it hurt?”

“I mean at first yeah, but now not so, um…I…it’s…” His hand rose, inching toward hers before drawing back to his side. “Please. Don’t ask me to.”

“Okay,” she said, bowing her head slightly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Maybe…maybe one day, when I’m not…but I’m not…I don’t know.”

“I won’t pressure you anymore about it. I was just curious.”

“I know,” he sighed.

“It’s getting late, would you like to sleep over?” She said, gesturing to the stairs.

Had he been curious about his bedroom? Would it perhaps jog more memories?
“I can’t. I have to report back. Strict—ah, curfew,” Jim said, trying to get up.

Barbara put out her hand. “I wish you could stay longer.”

“I know. Me too,” he replied, taking her offered assistance. She could hear his back pop as he stretched his arms and legs.

“When can I see you again?” She asked.

Jim paused mid-stretch. He looked over his shoulder at her, expression serious. “Me coming here already puts you in danger. If any changeling saw us talking you could be put in mortal danger. I can’t let that happen. It’s better if we keep our communications to a minimum.”

A fire erupted in the pit of her stomach.

“And what happens if you get hurt or knocked unconscious or worse?” She argued. “I haven’t spent the last six years to watch you get hurt. Don’t think I don’t see those bruises and the way you’ve been holding your arm. At least let me check it before you go.”

“It’ll be fine. I heal faster than humans,” he retorted. “I don’t need your help.”

“I respect that,” Barbara said. She came closer, eyes pleading. “But please, let me in. Just a little. I don’t want to lose you again.”

They stood awkwardly at the back door. Barbara caught his eyes, hoping her words got through to him in some way.

Jim looked away first, shaking his head. “How about I give you my phone number?”

Not exactly what she wanted, but it would do.
For now.

“Thank you. I know you’re going through a lot right now.” She reached out, smoothing down the stubborn cowlick at the top of his head. “I wish you had come to me sooner.”

“I was afraid of scaring you.”

She dragged him back into a tight hug.

“Sweetheart, I could never be scared of you,” Barbara said fondly.

“Too tight,” he squeaked.

She pulled away. “I mean what I said. You won’t scare me. I’m a doctor.”

He gazed down at his feet. “I hope you’re right.”

She couldn’t help but give him one last long hug, though not nearly as tight as the previous one. Who knows when they would see each other again? Barbara couldn’t help but fear for her son’s future, especially after all she’d learned tonight.

A minute later, she tore herself away. “Stay safe, Jim.”

“You too.”

Right as he was halfway down the steps, she called out, “Wait, Jim!”

He turned halfway. The porch light highlighted the strange glow of his armor. A portion of his face was obscured by the darkness of night. “What?”

“I know I don’t understand everything yet, but I’ll try.” She sucked in a deep breath, then continued,
“You have my number. If you ever need something, just ask. Be careful.”

“Alright,” he chuckled.

“This conversation isn’t over either. I want you to tell me more about this Trollmarket of yours,” she added.

“Oh,” he said, coming to a stop halfway between the backyard and the woods. “I’ll talk with Vendel, see what he has to say.”

“Vendel?”

“Another story for another time,” Jim replied, retreating into the woods. She squinted, trying to see his form.

She yelled, hoping he would hear her. “You promise?”

Suddenly, a blue flash erupted from between the trees. Just as she was about to walk down the porch to investigate, she heard him yell back, “I promise, mom!”

Barbara leaned against the door.

It wasn’t what she had hoped for, but she would take what she could right now. Her son was back. Her son was involved in some magical world full of fairytale creatures and he was part one himself. Her son was in danger. Her son needed her help but wouldn’t take it.

Barbara brushed back her hair. *Baby steps, Barbara, baby steps.*

Nomura plucked the bacon up from the tray, savoring the mix of salty sweetness with a light crunch. While no comparison to raw meat, her human taste buds couldn’t resist the breakfast food.

Atlas rolled his eyes, taking the tray and its contents out of her reach.

“Those are for Stricklander,” he admonished, though his heart wasn’t in it. The brat looked exhausted, his skin a shade paler than normal. The bags under his eyes seemed worse than normal too.

Nomura smacked his back, earning her a sharp hiss from the teen. “You look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks,” Atlas growled.

Nomura smirked, snatching another piece of bacon. The boy’s sour expression provided excellent amusement after yesterday’s hours long showcase of the bridge and their final additions. As expected, the changelings oohed and aahed. Fuck, she almost fell asleep thirty minutes into Stricklander’s stupid monologue. The asshole would have gone on forever if he’d been allowed. “You missed last night’s announcement.”

The teen’s ears twitched upward, his eyes suddenly more alert. “There was an announcement?”

She flicked one of the ears, resting her arm on his shoulder. She couldn’t help noticing his wince at the movement. “Strickler didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Atlas mumbled, mouth drawing into a thin line. “He didn’t.”

Trouble in paradise, she thought. Stricklander normally kept the teen up to date on most public meetings.

“Well, it was boring as hell. Just a bunch of pandering and ass-kissing,” she remarked dryly.
Atlas’s lips inched upwards. “Isn’t it always?”

She hooked her arm around his own, dragging him down the hallway. It had been ages since she last got a good workout. She needed something to take her mind off of everything, that something being her favorite punching bag. “Come on, I’m itching to kick your ass.”

“I really wish I could but—Ow! What the hell, Nomura?” Atlas said, pulling out of her grip. Her eyes narrowed. She scanned the boy’s appearance. While the arm appeared mostly normal, she saw the hint of bandages underneath the teen’s armguards.

A hand rose to her hip. “You’re injured.”

“No fucking shit,” he grumbled. “Yeah, turns out, stalklings are assholes. What a surprise.”

She disguised her guilt with a grimace. The stalkling had been her idea. She’d only mentioned it to Bular as a joke. To think the guy actually took her opinion seriously.

It could mean several things. It could mean nothing.

But that didn’t change the fact that the whelp fought what was supposed to kill the human Trollhunter.

“You tried to intervene,” she said, flicking his nose. “You’re an idiot.”

“It was going to kill the Trollhunter. It had already shown itself to another human too,” Atlas professed.

“You’re growing attached to them,” Nomura noted, tutting. “As long as it does its job then who cares?”

“I’m not growing attached,” Atlas argued, shifting the tray closer with his uninjured hand. “I was thinking about how a missing kid or two would attract attention.”
Nomura picked at her fingernails. So? “Humans will forget about them in a month or two.”

“You don’t know that. He has friends and family,” the boy tried to reason.

It was Nomura’s turn to roll her eyes. No wonder Stricklander hadn’t invited him. The old man was losing his grip over the teen. Not even the new recruit appeared to be changing the course of Atlas’s newest ‘ideas’.

*A reeducation course might need to be added, she thought, if the whelp is actually trying to protect these fools.*

“Trust me, I do. Friends and family will forget,” she said, unable to hide the bitterness from escaping her mouth. “Humans’ memories are short.”

“We can do this another way. I just need a little more time,” Atlas stressed.

A flare of annoyance shot up. Was he seriously doing this now? Didn’t he understand the situation?

Ugh, Stricklander was going to have her hide if she didn’t put a stop to it. It was her job to babysit the brat. Sure, she had skipped a couple times, but she hadn’t expected he would still be trying to protect these losers.

“We don’t have a little more time.” She snapped, eyes flashing a sickly green. “The bridge will be ready soon. All we need is the amulet. Gunmar is returning.”

Atlas lifted an eyebrow. “You don’t know that. None of us even knows how it works.”

“We know enough. The eyestone is here. The Trollhunter has the amulet. What else do we need?” Except for him to steal it of course.

Atlas slumped against the wall. His gaze shifted downwards. “I just think we can do this another way,” he admitted.
“You really do care about them.” She sneered mockingly, “You think they’re your friends.”

The teen reared at her, eyes shrinking into slits. “And if they are?”

Was he seriously challenging her? Her? Nomura could feel the itch to shift at the back of her mind. Had he not noticed where the Trollhunter did to her? Her position was in jeopardy. Her job, if not her life, could be forfeit if she took one more step out of line.

“You,” she snarled, anger simmering in her voice. She thrust her finger into his chest. “You need to cut this off now, brat. Get the amulet. You’ve got three days.”

They would do it sooner, but Stricklander had planned it on a full moon, a sacred symbol for Gumm-Gumms and changelings alike. Even Bular, as irrational and daddy-worshipping as he was, knew such day would bode far better according to tradition.

Bah, tradition. Who cared if most Gumm-Gumm victories were won during the fullest face of some rock in space? It was superstition. Nomura knew enough about magic and science to tell the fact from fiction, and lunar cycles didn’t mean shit for trolls.


“If you don’t, I will,” she warned, giving the brat a sharp flick to the horn.

He nodded, scurrying off to serve their oh-so-important leader. Once his footsteps disappeared from her hearing range, she shot her hand out around one of the corners. A short familiar yelp resounded.

Otto stared, blinking owlishly. Had the fool really thought he could get one over her?

“I thought I smelled a rat,” Nomura drawled. A flash later, and she towered over him. Her claws dug deeper into his stupid trench coat.

The polymorph laughed nervously, patting her hand. “So feisty. I missed your brazen tongue.”
“The feeling is not mutual,” she spat. Otto was a rival, a challenger to her position under Stricklander. Before the fight with the Trollhunter, she was a rising star, one of the top ranking members of the Arcadian branch. Not that it was that hard. Everyone here were idiots.

But now that position was in jeopardy. Her continued failure and Otto’s appearance bode bad omens.

“Atlas appears particularly secretive today,” Otto commented in a friendly manner, as though they were friends. As if changelings had friends.

“Why do you care?” She said, “You hate him.”

“Au contraire, fräulein,” Otto remarked. She dropped her hold; he stumbled, but recovered quickly, adjusting his coat whilst saying, “I merely wish to protect the secrecy of our Order. The boy risks that. I’m surprised Stricklander even lets him outside.”

Nomura sighed. She was not doing this. It was only a few hours before her next shift. Nevertheless, her curiosity won out. “What do you want, Otto?”

The polymorph wouldn’t approach her otherwise.

“Can’t a changeling have a heart-to-heart with one of his brethren?” Otto asked.

Nomura crossed her arms, flashing her fangs. “State your business.”

“Atlas is not who he seems,” Otto warned in what she supposed was his version of cryptic. For her, it just sounded like an gossiping old auntie.

“That’s it?” She clapped slowly, wanting to emphasis his astounding information. “Wow, I’m impressed. How long did it take you to come up with that bullshit?”

“Tell me,” he began, rubbing his hands together. “Have you ever seen the Trollhunter and Atlas
“together, at the same time?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you implying?”

“How much do you trust him?”

“I trust no one,” she scoffed.

While the Janus Order were united by their shared devotion and race, that was it. They were a mish-mashed group of rejects, with one foot in humanity and one foot in trollkind. A broken lot of assassins and spies who crawled through the muck to reach their goal.

Or, as one dipshit put it, *the strongest man upon the earth is he who stands alone.*

Besides, changelings weren’t fucking kintsugi cups. Whatever trust she had was destroyed long ago.

“He is a wild card, that one. You and Stricklander dote on him too much. The trolls in Trollmarket are likely filling his head with ideas,” he observed, adding in a low voice, “Traitorous ones.”

“I know how much you want to be head, Otto,” Nomura sighed, waving him off. “Whatever you’re trying to do, stop it. I am no one’s puppet.”

Otto nodded, giving her a fake smile. He took off his hat, giving her a slight bow before heading off. He called out, “Auf wiedersehen, fräulein.”

She threw him the bird.

Their history was more volatile than oil and water. She knew what he wanted. She knew his game.

Yet even then, she couldn’t help but wonder: what if he was right?
It was strange that she never saw Atlas and the Trollhunter at the same time. They were supposedly buddy-buddy after all, or at least according to the boy’s reports. But Atlas couldn’t change, at least, not ordinarily.

Right?

She tapped her index against her teeth, brows crossing as she pondered the possibilities. If Atlas was the Trollhunter, it would explain how he knew where the Bridge was, how he had survived the fight with Draal and her, how no matter what they threw at the human, he still continued to live.

How much did they even know about this James Lake’s history anyway? Did they even know where he lived?

Her eyes traveled down the hallway Atlas left through.

Maybe it was time Nomura did some investigations of her own.
At ten years old it was hard to sleep in the empty room.

Every sound of footsteps that passed his door brought forth a rolling, ever growing terror. Was there going to be another ‘physical’? Would he have to do more ‘tests’? He didn’t like tests. He didn’t like the scientists either. They called themselves doctors, but they weren’t like his mom.

He knew he was lucky to have a room. In the hallways, there were these big cages. At first he thought they were for animals, but he knew better now. They were barely large enough to contain the creatures inside them. They hissed and growled and roared. At least, in the beginning. He preferred them to the older patients, those who’d been here longer. Their screaming and crying carried down every corridor, sometimes so soft he would mistake them for the air conditioning, and sometimes so deafening his ears rang for hours.

A few tried to talk to him. He never answered back. Early on one of the scientists threatened to put him inside with one of the creatures if he ever tried.
Jim believed him.

At ten years old he started to play the pretend game.

It wasn’t like there was anything else to do. There weren’t any games or books he could use to pass the time. Outside of his daily ‘tests’ it was just him and the room.

At ten years old he was alone with only himself for company.

It wasn’t exactly make-believe, not really. He simply let himself go. It helped during the worst parts. If he faded enough he won’t remember all the bad stuff, and there were lots of bad stuff.

In a way, it was like having an imaginary friend. Though he doesn’t talk to himself or anything like that. He just disappeared. At first, it was only for a minute or two at best, but after a while he could do it for hours, sitting in the room, dazed out, emotions muted. He doesn’t even have to think about it anymore. He was that good.

The door creaked open. Jim tensed, snapping out of the foggy daze. It was a nurse, though not one he knew. None of them ever lasted more than a week before someone else took their place.

“How are you feeling today?” She asked in the same upbeat tone they all used with him. As if he didn’t know what was going to happen.

Jim remained silent.

She chuckled nervously. She tapped a pen against her clipboard. “I see. Well, up and at ‘em! Dr. Mordred wants to run another diagnostic.”

The words slipped out without warning. “Why?”

Her fingers clenched the sides of her clipboard. “I’m sorry?” She asked.
They continued to fall out of his mouth. He couldn’t stop talking. He didn’t want to. “I don’t wanna do this anymore,” Jim stressed, hands balled into tight fists. “I wanna go home. I wanna see my mom. Where’s my mom? Why won’t you let me go see her?”

“Oh sweetie,” she cooed, bending down to his level. “I’m sorry, but you can’t.”

Frustration blossomed in his chest. No matter how many times he asked, they wouldn’t let him go home. He missed his home. He missed his best friend. He even missed his mom’s cooking.

How was she going to feed herself without him? Who was going to do the laundry or wash the dishes or mow the lawn? She needed him. Without him, she would be alone, and that could never happen.

His eyes teared up. “Why not?”

“Because you’re sick,” she answered gently in that same sickeningly sweet tone.

During the first few days of his stay, he believed them. Why else would he be here? But now he began to doubt such words.

He felt fine. He didn’t have a fever or a stomach ache or any other symptom of illness.

“No, I’m not,” he insisted.

She tried to pat his head, but he pulled away, giving her a sour scowl.

Someone knocked at the door. A man in a lab coat peered inside. “Nurse, Dr. Mordred is here. Do you have the specimen prepped?”

Jim swallowed, throat dry.

“Just give me a minute,” she replied in a curt manner.
No, no, no. Jim scanned the area for an escape, even though he knew it would be next to impossible to do so.

He had to get out. Dr. Mordred ran the worst tests imaginable. No matter how much Jim would scream for him to stop, the man never listened.

“Please, please, please, don’t make me go with him,” Jim pleaded. Of all the people here, he feared Dr. Mordred the most.

Footsteps echoed through the hallway. The hair on the back of his neck rose. His heart thumped against his chest, so loud he could hear it in his head. Cold sweat dripped down his brow as the man of the hour appeared.

While a seemingly ordinary man, Jim knew better than to judge by appearances by now. His dark hair was swept back over his forehead, emphasizing his long angular face.

The Doctor cracked his knuckles with his thumb. “Alright. Let’s get this started. We don’t have time to spare. The sixth experiment needs to be done today.”

The nurse grabbed Jim’s arm. He tried to pull away, but her grip was like iron. “Yes, Dr. Mordred. We’re ready when you are.”

Jim looked up.

"Excellent." Dr. Modred smiled down at him. “I have a good feeling about this one.”

The robust human (Tabby?)’s backyard was smaller than the Trollhunter’s but better secluded amongst the trees. It had been the Trollhunter who suggested it. Draal didn't care where they trained.
Now, Draal normally stayed out of the Trollhunter’s business outside of their training, but something had to be done.

What was supposed to be a five minute break had turned into ten and then fifteen, until finally, he decided to act.

He lightly smacked the Trollhunter’s shoulder. Not lightly enough however, since the Trollhunter immediately fell forward into the grass.

“Wake up,” he ordered.

The Trollhunter groaned in response.

A quick flare of annoyance arose. If Draal had been Trollhunter, he wouldn’t be lazing around like the boy. He would be out there fighting the Janus Order, fighting Bular, fighting Nomura, fighting—

No, he would not do this. Not now. Draal stifled the emerging thoughts. He had lost, fair and square. Merlin chose the hybrid for a reason, even if Draal didn’t necessarily agree.

Atlas rubbed his arm, casting an angry glare at him. “What the hell, Draal? What was that for?”

“You were making sounds,” he replied curtly.

The teen’s bravado quickly disappeared. His ears lowered as well. Atlas dragged a hand down his face.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “Did I fall asleep again?”

Draal begrudgingly lent him a hand; Atlas rolled his eyes, getting up on his own.

“Had I been Bular you would already be in the void,” Draal said.
“You really know how to encourage a guy,” Atlas replied, sarcasm evident.

“I’m not here to encourage you. I’m here to teach you how to survive, Trollhunter,” he explained.

Atlas scoffed, “That’s ironic, coming from you.”

It was Draal’s turn to roll his eyes. Teenagers. He picked up his spear. “Less talking, more fighting.”

He swiped at the Trollhunter, who escaped his attack with a dodge to the right. The amulet reacted in turn, switching out the hybrid with his human alias.

“You need to stop backing away,” Draal grunted, jabbing the spearhead forward.

Atlas ducked, scurrying off to the side. “Hmm. Yeah, no. I like my head on my shoulders, thank you very much.”

“The armor will absorb the shock,” Draal explained. “Weapons will not cut you in this form.”

“Maybe not the armor but I’m pretty sure my head is free game,” he retorted.

“Why do you continue to chatter?” Draal said as he struck again, this time hitting one of the trees.

The boy laughed; Draal growled. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled the weapon out of the bark, swinging it around. The teen stopped laughing.

Draal cornered him to the fence. He tried to jab the butt of the spear into the teen’s ribcage, but the boy dropped down, rolling underneath his legs. When he tried to round on the boy, he found Atlas frozen in place, gawking whilst pointing behind him.

“It’s Bular,” he cried out.
Swerving around, Draal released a fierce battle cry. Bular was a fierce opponent, one even Draal felt weary of fighting, despite his desire to smack the Gumm-Gumm’s face in. He could not allow his rage to control him.

He flashed his tusks. His father’s murderer would not live to see another day—had he been there in the first place.

It took him a moment to figure out that he’d been tricked.

A sword poked at his back.

_Bushigel._


Draal slapped the sword out of his hand.

“That was a changeling move,” Draal stated sourly. “It may work on them but it will most certainly not work on me, Trollhunter, nor will it with Bular. You must fight like one of _us_ if you ever hope to win.”

This time, he didn’t go easy on the boy. Pressing forward, he unleashed a series of blows, each more powerful than the last. As expected, the armor repulsed most of the damage, but that didn’t mean the Trollhunter wasn’t rattled by the attacks. As a final blow, he grabbed the boy’s arm, throwing him down to the ground before leveling the forked head of his weapon at the teen’s chest.

Atlas glanced between the spear inches from his heart and Draal’s face before sighing.

“I think my everything is broken,” the teen admitted.
“Were this an actual battle, Trollhunter, you would have been deprived of your right leg, three fingers, and your gronk-nuks,” Draal said, motioning the weapon at each of them. “You look like you have something on your mind. Speak.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s it to you?”

“I am living in you fleshbag mother’s basement with her junk as company.” He rubbed his chin. “You being unfocused is a concern of mine, especially as your trainer.”

*A good excuse,* he thought.

“You want to know? Fine,” he said. “Things have been pretty crazy. No, more than crazy. *Insane.*”

Draal crossed his arms. “Bular will use your distraction as an opportunity to cleave your head from your shoulders.”

“I know. Why do you think I’m here?” The teen asked morosely.

Draal closed his eyes. It was he who had decided to take on the young protégé. If the Trollhunter was troubled, it was his job to find out.

“What has your distracted this night in particular?” He asked.

Atlas sat up, cradling one of his arms. His gaze passed over Draal, focusing on the skyline. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“I am a son of the former Trollhunter, Trollhunter,” he reminded. “Tell me.”

The teen’s gaze traveled across the street, over to Draal’s current home. “I met mom last night.”

Draal nodded. He heard some of the hubbub upstairs, listening in near the stairway. Of course, he would never admit to such a thing. Spying was beneath him.
“This Bar-Ba-Ra?” Draal inquired.

He visibly swallowed before answering in a shaky breath, “Yeah.”

“What does she know?” Technically, he already knew, but even he knew he hadn’t caught ever word from the conversation.

“She knows trolls and Trollmarket exists,” he admitted.

“What else?”

“I told her I’m the Trollhunter.” Then said in a voice barely above a whisper, “And that I’m part-changeling.”

“She was not upset?”

“I don’t think she understands. If she saw what I really was…” His voice drifted off. “It doesn’t matter. She won’t. At least not anytime soon.”

Draal pressed to the most important issue at hand. “And does she know about me?”

The Trollhunter froze. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed,” Draal sighed. He had hoped some of their conversation pertained to that, but apparently not.

Atlas scratched his cheek, giving the troll a what-can-you-do sort of gesture. “I should probably get on that soon.”

“A wise idea.”
Cicadas chirped as the sunset finally descended across the horizon. It was strange, despite his self-imposed banishment from Trollmarket, he was not as upset as he thought he would be. Living above ground held many dangers, but he found they weren’t as terrible as he once believed. It reminded him of his childhood, his father bringing him to the surface for midnight strolls. It was before Gunmar’s forces had taken his home and his mother.

Shadows of the night were cast in stark contrast to the Trollhunter’s skin, making his injuries all the more apparent. The scratches and bruises from a recent battle, he presumed. Still, he did not pry. It was none of his business.

But wasn’t it? He was protecting the Trollhunter’s mother, and, in turn, doesn’t that mean he should be protecting the boy in question as well?

As much as it pained him, Atlas was the Trollhunter. Draal had challenged and lost against him. In Trollmarket, his life would have been taken, had the opponent been a troll or any regular changeling even.

So what made Atlas different? Was it his human heritage, or something more?

What is it like to be human, Draal wondered, does it hurt as much as it looks?

Using his sword as leverage, the Trollhunter got up from the grass.

“There’s more,” the teen professed. “We’ve got trouble.”

“We always do,” Draal replied dryly.

Atlas brushed back his bangs, brows furrowed together in what Draal determined to be a pensive expression. The next words out of his mouth were, “The Order wants to open the bridge in three days.”

Draal tensed. Had he any hair, he was certain it would be standing straight up right now.
“That is more than trouble,” he hissed. “That is catastrophic. Who else knows?”

“Just you,” Atlas said.

“You must tell Vendel.”

“We can’t. I don’t want Trollmarket to go into a war with the Order.”

“So you indeed to keep this secret?”

“As long as Bular doesn’t get the amulet then he can’t open the bridge.”

Draal banged the end of his spear against the ground. “You’re a fool.”

“No, I just don’t want my dad or Nomura to get killed,” he retorted. “You know Trollmarket won’t spare the rest of my kind.”

“Nomura can handle herself.” Draal said in a gruff manner, “I guarantee she will kill you if she finds out you’re the Trollhunter. You father too.”

“They’re not like that,” Atlas argued, shaking his fists. “They care about me.”

“They are imp—changelings who have spent centuries trying to resurrect Gunmar. You are taking a risky gamble. They will betray you. It is in their nature.”

Atlas pulled the sword out of the ground, pointing the tip at his face.

“Stop stereotyping my kind. That’s like saying all trolls are murderous monsters,” he said.

Draal crossed his arms. “It is what I’ve learned in my experiences with them, nothing more.”
And that there was the true puzzle. Atlas was not like his brethren. Sure, he had changeling tendencies, but they didn’t define him like they did them.

“You’re different.”

“Or maybe, just maybe,” Atlas began in a dry tone, “you’re categorizing an entire species based on stupid ass logic. If another troll betrays you does that mean all trolls will?”

“No, of course—"

“Then how is it any different with us?” He interrupted.

“You…” Draal growled. No, he would not sink to his old mindset. “Fine. I will think on this.”

“Please do.” Atlas let out a deep exhale, whispering, “We’re not all bad.”

“Why are you sighing now?”

“Everything. Nothing. I don’t know. Not sure which is harder,” he said, motioning his hands like a measuring scale. “being a changeling or being a human.”

“Having trouble fitting in with the fleshbags?”

“In a way,” Atlas said. “It’s girl stuff.”

Draal’s jaw tightened. Trolls and changelings he understood. Girls, however, were another matter entirely.
“Girl…stuff?” Draal asked, hoping he didn’t sound as uneasy as he felt.

“I’m gonna be kissing Claire and I’m really nervous.”

Kissing? Draal tried to rack his mind for the word, but it was too foreign for him to place.

“I don’t understand,” he finally admitted.

“Well, there’s this school play, Romeo and Juliet, and we’re rehearsing the kiss scene tomorrow. The thing is, I’ve never kissed anyone,” he said, covering his face. “Ever.”

“And kissing is?”

His shoulders slumped. “Seriously?”

“Humor me.”

“Alright. Okay, it’s…when two people like each other, they put their mouths together. Toby says it’s a way humans show affection. It’s in all his human movies too. With families it’s usually really quick, but with people you like, it’s supposed to be longer.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know,” Atlas admitted. “But Toby says it can go on for a long time. Maybe even hours.”

“Disgusting.”

“I know, right? Pft, fleshbag kissing. Totally not attractive at all,” the Trollhunter laughed nervously. “But Draal, I really like her. I don’t want her to hate me. If I blow this, I might not get a second or third time.”
“You’re afraid.”

Atlas folded his arms, his jaw set. “Changelings aren’t supposed to have feelings for humans. It’s forbidden.”

“And yet, here you are.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I once had similar stirrings for an Impure.”

“Oh yeah, how was dating Nomura like anyway?” He asked, a hint of cheekiness in his voice.

Draal merely answered, “Interesting.”

“That’s it?”

“Do you want me to help you or not, Trollhunter?”

Atlas stood up straighter, his face barely hiding his curiosity.

“Alright, what have you got?” He asked, rubbing his hands together.

“I may have something that can help. If these ‘girls’ require you not to be afraid, then you shall need a Grit-Shaka.”

“I’ve heard of those,” he said, squinting in recollection. “They’re supposed to help with fear, right?”

“It is a totem used by the Gumm-Gumms. When you wear it, all cowardice is banished. You will be made fierce and ready for battle.”
“That sounds amazing! Why didn’t I think about using one before? So, you wouldn’t happen to have one of these lying around, do you?”

Before he could answer, the Trollhunter’s phone bleated.

_Bleated._

Draal’s eyes widened. What manner of sorcery was this? Had he trapped a goat inside the tiny device?

“Crap. Um, Draal, I need to go,” Atlas said, vanishing the armor.

Draal looked away as the teen returned to his normal self. The transformation was faster than he’d seen before, but he could still hear the bones and muscles popping and stretching. How unpleasant.

“Trollhunter business?” Draal inquired.

“More like Vendel business. I’m speaking in front of the council,” Atlas said, voice shaky. “May or may not die of embarrassment. Hey, maybe the amulet will chose you then.”

Draal shook his head, reaching inside one of his side pockets for the item. “Catch.”

Atlas caught it with one hand. His lips turned up. “Seriously? You had it with you this entire time?”

“You look like you’ll be needing it more than me.”


“You’re welcome, Trollhunter,” Draal called, then added, “Try not to get killed.”
“Take care of my mom, rockhead!” Atlas over his shoulder, jumping over the fence.

The moment the boy was out of sight, Draal groaned, running a hand down his face. The only thing worse than a changeling Trollhunter was a teen one it seemed.

Deya's Grace he hoped this didn't come back to bite him in the Gronk-nuks.

Vendel was very rarely left speechless.

He had lived longer than all his predecessors. He had fought wave after wave of enemy trolls in his youth. He had seen Trollmarket destroyed and renewed again, twice as big and twice as wonderous as its previous home.

But he hadn’t accounted for the Trollhunter to actually act like, well, the *Trollhunter*. His speech was confident and strong, echoing throughout the hall. The changeling accent was no longer as harsh on Vendel’s ears. Even his grammar had improved. It was as if the hybrid had changed overnight.

Sure, he was a little over the top at times, but that was to be expected, if not assumed, with young trolls. He would grow out of it with time.

The important thing was that the council was satisfied. The Trollhunter left remarkably quickly soon afterward, leaving Vendel to speak with any remaining representatives. By the time he was done and back in his library, Atlas was ready to leave, zipping up his backpack near the door.

“I’m impressed,” Vendel remarked.

The teen looked up in alarm before letting out a nervous laugh.

“See? I told you I could do it,” Atlas said.
Atlas had done well. Better than well. He’d won over several key representatives, which was not an easy feat.

The better he behaved, the more people began to accept their relationship.

Now, if only he could get the boy to give up the location of the bridge.

“Your Trollspeak has improved tremendously,” Vendel complimented.

The Trollhunter nodded, adjusting the straps of his bag. “It was all thanks to Blinky.”

“You look distracted, young Trollhunter.”

“Yeah,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “This book you gave me. I’ve been reading it and it’s got me thinking—”

“Oh dear,” he sighed. “I hope that didn’t hurt you.”

“Ha, ha, funny,” Atlas said. “Anyways, this guy, the writer, he’s apparently some brave warrior. Rescuing folks, killing Gumm-Gumms,” he listed off his fingers.

“A former Trollhunter perhaps?” Vendel suggested.

“No, at least, he’s not mentioned it yet,” he passed the book over to him. “Is it Kanjigar’s secret journal or something?”

He perused the insides of the novel. The language and writing was unlike anything Kanjigar would have written. It was too jagged, too informal. He was surprised the boy could make anything out of it in the first place. Or perhaps it was merely Vendel’s poor eyesight.

*Getting older,* Vendel thought, *is most annoying.*
“No, Kanjigar was a scholar before he received the mantle,” he explained, returning the book. “His writing style was far less…colorful.”


“Yes. I’m surprised Blinkous never told you. It is how he and Kanjigar became friends,” He said, twirling his hand around in an vague manner. “Of sorts.”

“Who could it be then?” He asked, turning the book on its back before flipping through the pages once again. “There’s no name or anything.”

“How far have you gotten?”

“Only a chapter. He uses a lot of old words and my dictionary doesn’t have all the translations.

“You did not ask Blinkous?”

You seem like the kind of Troll who knows the most about languages. Do you know what a *Binda kavr sálgal* means?”

A bubble of pride formed in his chest. While true, it was always nice to be valued for his other traits. Being a leader had stifled his other intellectual pursuits significantly. Glancing over the boy’s shoulder at the word itself, he searched his mind for the word and its best translation.

“It is…” He paused, eyes glazing over as old memories mingled in with the new. “I believe it is a binding ceremony.”

“Binding what?”

“An old term. I doubt anyone calls it that anymore. Deya’s Grace,” he said, softly chuckling. “I haven’t heard it since I was but a young whelp. Not much older than you really. The best way I can describe it to you is what the humans call marriage.”
The teen’s brows rose. “So the writer has a lover then?”

“A mate. Lover is a more specific term, for not all binding ceremonies are made out of love. It could be one for political reasons, or perhaps monetary ones.”

Atlas shrugged, placing the book back in his bag. “Guess I’ll have to read and find out.”

Vendel clapped him on the back.

“You did decently, today,” Vendel commended before shaking a finger at the boy. “But make no mistake. I will expect more from you from now on. You will have new challenges in the future.”

He had no doubt Bular and the Janus Order would strike now that the bridge was near completion. The when and how, however, were still uncertain.

“I’ll meet each of them head on,” Atlas challenged, a smirk emerging. “I’m not afraid.”

“Oh, Trollhunter,” he replied. “You should be.”

Sunlight streamed through the canopy.

NotEnrique chewed his toy.

A finger scratched his chin affectionately. Ms. Nuñez handed him another treat, which he ate up with gusto. His familiar’s mother was easy to fool, as all humans were. Even if they did notice something wrong they’d just chalk it up to growing up. The whole baby thing was as easy as pocker against a Gumm-Gumm guard. Sure, the babytalk got old after a while, but free room and board, and he didn’t have to clean up after himself?

 Fucking paradise. Or, it would have been, if it wasn’t for the hybrid and his merry gang of losers.
Stupid humans. Stupid Trollhunter. Stupid everyone really. All he wanted was an cheap ticket outta the Darklands and what’d he get? Playing both sides sounded a lot better than it actually was. But a deal’s a deal. ‘Sides, he could always rat on the boy to save his hid. He had the upper hand in this scenario. Ol’ Vendel scared the dickens outta him, but as long as he avoided getting on the troll’s bad side things would be fine.

Mrs. Nuñez brought the stroller over to a park bench, all the while cooing and awing his adorable arse. Now, part of him wanted to throw the toy at her for all the yapping she was doing, but he relented. He was undercover.

A new problem surfaced however. In the corner of his eye, the bossman approached, sitting down next to his familiar’s mum. He couldn’t help but tense up at the sight. Bossman was tall, taller than him, and everything about him was professional. NotEnrique heard stories about him back in the Darklands.

Stricklander was not a guy you wanted to piss off.

Just as Mrs. Nuñez got up to take a call, the bossman pulled his carriage over, bending down. Not enough to be eyelevel, oh no, but enough for NotEnrique to see the changeling’s carefully controlled mask.

Must have taken a lot of years to master something like that. Hopefully NotEnrique would catch up soon enough. It didn’t look so hard.

“We are meeting today to activate the Eyestone,” Stricklander whispered. “Preparations for our lord’s return are nearly complete.”

Throwing a blanket over himself, NotEnrique shifted to his more able-bodied self.

“You mean, we’re gonna finally be able to talk to the big honcho?” Notenrique said excitedly, only to remember his current situation. “Oh, crap. I can’t, bossman. At—the familiar’s place, the Trollhunter did a number on me new home and now I can’t leave the house.”

Whew. Didn’t want that particular secret leaking out just yet. Still, the timing was bloody rotten.
Stricklander threw him a nasty glare. “You’ve been exposed.”

“What was I supposed to do? The fleshbags used a Gaggletack on me,” NotEnrique argued.

Stricklander crossed his legs. “Bular will be most upset. I have half a mind to remove you from your post.”

Shit. NotEnrique began to scramble for an idea. “Wait! This could be a good thing. A really good thing. They think I’m helping them.”

Technically not a lie.

“Do they now?”

“Met the Trollhunter’s friends,” he said, rubbing his chin as he tried to remember their names. “Mr. Four Arms McSmarty Pants and the overgrown moss guy.”

“Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!!,” Stricklander provided.

“Well, the big one don’ like to talk very much but Blanky’s taken to the chap. He’s protective of the brat. Seen it with me own eyes,” he said, adding, “So’s the old goat man.”

Stricklander’s eyes widened; NotEnrique smiled. Gotcha.

“Vendel?” He asked, leaning closer. “You’ve been to Trollmarket?”

Not wanting to lose the troll’s interest, he continued.

“They take me all the time now. I’m practically a member of their little crew,” NotEnrique fibbed. Sure, it was stretching the truth a little, but who didn’t? “Even got drinks with Vendel. Saw ol’ Atlas last trip too. He kicked the goat’s door right open. You should have seen the look on that troll’s face!”
The bossman’s mask stayed in place, though there was a bit of hesitancy in his answer, “Did he now? That boy. Honestly.” Stricklander paused. “He didn’t get into too much trouble I presume?”

Ha! NotEnrique knew there was something between the two of them. He’d heard the rumors, but to actually see if for himself was surprising, if not also hilarious in retrospect. Bossman cared for the whelp.

Which meant several things to NotEnrique. If he played his cards right, he could launch himself up the ladder faster than any changeling before him. If he didn’t…well…hopefully it never came to that.

“As much trouble as he’s usually in,” NotEnrique admitted. “Your favorite pupil is a handful.”

“I can’t argue with that. He’s certainly something,” Stricklander remarked wistfully. He placed his hands together into a steeple underneath his chin, eyes lidded. Golden flicks danced about in his pupils. “What has he been doing lately?”

NotEnrique looked left and right before pointing to himself. “You’re asking me?”

“Yes. You are the only other changeling working with him on this mission.”

Right. Mission. He’d almost forgotten about that.

“You really want to know?” NotEnrique said.

Stricklander shrugged, a playful smiling at his lips. “Humor me.”

Well, for one, the bloody arsehole smacked him with a gagglestake. Kid was a bottle of repressed emotions and anger, though, to be fair, most changelings were.

Even though he’d only been part of the Janus Order for a short amount of time, NotEnrique could see it wasn’t at all as glamorous as it was made out to be. He thought there’d be more fighting, more action, more thrill in being a member of the most secret society of their race.
The reality was grimmer in comparison.

How did they keep going, day after day, with one goal in mind? As much as NotEnrique would like to be the crème de la crème under Gunmar’s rule, sometimes, it felt like an impossible dream. A fool’s errand.

And Atlas was the greatest fool of all.

Not that he could tell bossman all that. So he settled for something more digestive.

“He’s doing alright,” NotEnrique explained. “Cozying on up to the trolls and the fat one for information. He and the Trollhunter are getting to know each other real well. Learning all about the Trollhunter’s past.” He rubbed his hands together. “Is he, uh, gonna be at the meeting later?”

“No,” Stricklander said firmly. “Gunmar will not take too kindly to his mixed blood.”

“Gunmar won’t know if he can’t see him though, right?”

“Bular has forbidden the boy from coming,” he added.

NotEnrique folded his arms. “He’s not gonna be happy when he finds out.”

The bossman’s eyes flashed yellow. “He won’t find out.”

“Okay, bossman, whatever you say,” NotEnrique scrambled, putting up his hands.

“Still, the fact that you’ve infiltrated Trollmarket intrigues me. From now on, you report only to me,” Stricklander ordered. “Perhaps there are some things Bular doesn’t need to know.”

NotEnrique gulped.
Playing games with Gunmar’s son? Wasn’t that treason? Was this what Janus Order operatives were used to be doing?

Maybe joining the Janus Order wasn’t such a good idea.
Young Atlas (III)

Chapter Summary

The Grit-Shaka suddenly turns out to be a bad idea, as Toby finds out first hand. Meanwhile, the eyestone is added to the bridge. Blinky learns of Draal’s gift and jumps into action.

That doesn’t stop Claire and Atlas from having the biggest fight of the century though.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Back with a new chapter! Thank you for all the lovely reviews, kudos and favorites. Seriously. Unfortunately, since I have exams and papers around the corner, there will not be a new chapter next week. Big thanks to Charlie and Vici with this chapter. If you notice any big grammar errors, let me know.

Also, check out this awesome fanart by Castellia on Amino. Thank you! I'm so honored. Seriously!

http://aminoapps.com/p/jv0hmk

http://aminoapps.com/p/dizh09

Another shoutout to Vvvici’s awesome fancomic of the last scene in Bittersweet Sixteen between Atlas and Barbara. I cried a little. Go check it out. It's seriously gorgeous.

http://vvvici.tumblr.com/post/180659757558/another-beautifully-written-scene-by

Thank ya'll so much. You really made my week. :D

I hope you enjoy the chapter!
There were few things Toby regretted in life.

Well, probably a lot more than a few, but he was thinking about the kind that really stood out in his fifteen years of existence. The big ones. Lifechanging situations, ya know? Things that haunted him in those dark hours of the night, between the medium of awake and sleep, replaying over and over and over again like a bad 90s pop song—those kinds of thoughts.

The first was not protecting Nana’s cat from his chocolate stash. A terrible fate, that one. He couldn’t look at an Easter egg without feeling a teensy bit guilty. Sure, he was a kid then and couldn’t have known the feline had a craving for sweet chocolatey death, but he could have been more careful.

The second was that time he ate three Diablo Maximus Breakfast Burritos back to back, destroying not one, but two toilets. Oh man, he couldn’t sit down for a week without wincing. His butthole would never be the same. Seriously, like, he learned his lesson after that caliente catastrophe. One Diablo per day, max. Even the most ironclad of stomachs could barely withstand the heat.

The third was when he led Atlas to killing one of his kind.

He….he didn’t like to think about that one very much.

And this—

Well. This might well be the very worst of them all.

The day had started off fine, or at least as fine as it could be considering all the crazy stuff in their lives. Trolls, a magical destiny, changeling history teachers, mythical bridges, and a best friend tied up in the thick of it all. Not to mention the whole thing with Dr. L.

Atlas didn’t seem angry on that end at least. For now. He hadn’t asked how much the other boy told her yet.

What did it mean now that another human knew about the supernatural world? Would she be coming to Trollmarket with them at some point?
He remembered speaking to Blinky and AAARRRGHH!!! about the possibility when he returned home that night, but neither had a definite answer. Blinky was all, blah, blah, blah, secrecy and stuff, while wingman was hesitant but more open to Atlas’s mom joining them in the long run. At the end of the night, no one had an definite answer. Sure, Toby had adjusted to them well enough, but what about others?

Was humanity ready to find out what crept in the shadows, or, in Arcadia’s case, underneath them?

Maybe.

Or maybe not.

But that wasn’t what had him hung up right now. No, the Dr. L situation was nothing in comparison to this.

His best friend started out alright that day, if a little fidgety, his attention focused on Claire throughout their morning history class. Fortunately, Mr. S was out today, which gave both boys a bit of reprieve. Toby was never really sure how to act around that dude now. Sure, he was Atlas’s mentor and father figure, but he was also kind of a bad boss dude who would probably feed him to Bular if given a chance. And considering how he treated his best buddy, Toby wasn’t sure he would have won father of the year either.

But he was going off topic again wasn’t he?

Toby egged the boy to make a move, and, to his surprise, Mary Wang, one of Claire’s friends, helped out by changing seats. Of all the bad things that had happened over the past week, watching his best bud cozy on up to the object of his affection was a nice positive. Yeah, he might be coming on a little strong with the gal, but what guy with a huge crush didn’t?

He too had tried to turn the ol’ Domzalski charm on Mary, but that ended in failure soon enough.

Was it his smell? His braces?
He wished he had a ‘girl’ friend he could talk with about girlfriends. What was he doing wrong? He’d seen hundreds of chic-flics and none of them seemed to answer the age old question: what did girls like?

Toby sighed. And that was when things took a turn for the worst. After class, Atlas continued to act stranger and stranger.

The Grit-Shaka, Toby soon learned, was not, as Atlas described, all that “crispy.”

Now, Toby knew he wasn’t exactly Mr. Popular at Arcadia High (yet), but even he knew cringe, and Atlas—well—cringe wasn’t even the half of it. It was like the drunk episode all over again, except this time, in front of the entire student body.

Yikes.

Toby tried to follow the boy, but since Atlas was like acting third grader on a sugar high, keeping up was next to impossible. He lost him halfway through fifth period, and by then, all the school had witnessed some part of his antics.

He checked another hallway, only to find, once again, a lack of the Trollhunter. His path took him to the outside lockers. Maybe he would find him there? He grabbed his head.

God, how were they going to fix this?

Was it even fixable at this point?

By a struck of luck, he ran into Claire underneath the canopy by the lockers. In all honestly, it was more him trying not to have a meltdown over Atlas’s drastic personality shift and her finding him before it came to that.

But hey, everything would be fine. Something told him (Atlas, his mind reminded, he literally told you what it does) that as long as he got his hands on the other’s Grip-Shaker-thingy, then his best buddy would turn back to normal.
“Hey, Claire,” he started, nervous laughter leaking out. “Have you seen Jim? I kinda sorta maybe lost track of him.”

The girl stared at him strangely before slowly nodding. “Yeah, what’s going on? Everyone’s talking about him. He’s been all over school making a spectacle of himself.”

“He’s going through some things at home,” he lied. Well, no, not lied exactly. Technically, it was the truth. Between the whole double (or triple if you counted the Vendel’s grandson stuff) identities Atlas was juggling, Toby could easily say the guy had more than a few issues right now.

“Is it true he trashed Eli’s room?” She asked. Her mouth pulled down. She drew closer, her arms tightening around the books she carried. “Or was it the tornado? You know, the one that blew through Arcadia? Everyone’s talking about it. Destroyed Steve’s room too. Lots of property got damaged too. Crazy, huh?”

Toby threw her what he hoped was a convincing smile. For some reason, her tone set off little alarms in his mind. What was she implying?

“What? Jim trash Eli’s room? No way. He would never do that. Must have been some tornado.”

Claire’s eyebrows crossed sharply. She squinted, as if trying to get a read on him.

Ha! Fat chance! Toby was a master of composure! Most of the time.

“You’re hiding something,” she accused.

Ah oh. He leaned against one of the lockers with one arm.

“How much do you know, Tabby?”

He frowned, irritation evident. Seriously? How could she keep forgetting his name like this? It wasn’t like his name was difficult. To-by. Was that so hard? “Okay, for the last time, it’s To—”

The school sound system screeched on without warning. Both teens jumped, shaken out of their conversation.

Students looked around, as did Toby and Claire. Hadn’t the principal already done his afternoon announcements? Was there a fire drill later?

“Sup, bitches,” Atlas’s voice rang through the courtyard.

Toby covered his eyes.

Oh crude.

There went any hope of this mess disappearing from the school’s collective memory.

“This is A—” The audio cut for a moment. “I’m here to chew bubble gum and kickass and I’m all out of kickass…Wait, is that the right human phrase? Well, whatever. Keep it crispy, my radical fleshbags. Got bored so I taught myself how to play the bass guitar! This one goes out to you, my Juliet.”

Claire’s shoulders hunched up as high as they could go. She hid her face, ears turning redder by the second. Toby felt a rush of sympathy. Better her than him though.

“Did he just cuss?” Someone in the area asked in awe.

A guy (one of Steve’s friends maybe?) remarked, “Oh my god, he’s my hero.”

Toby did not share that sentiment.
“Oh my god, we’re screwed,” he groaned in a low voice.

It got worse. Atlas began to sing what Toby would describe as a ballad of pure cringe, and wasn’t talking about the kind of everyday cringe. This was some youtube-worthy cringe of the not so awesome sauce variety.

And considering the amount of kids recording this on their phones, it would soon hit all of Arcadia.

Principal Levit’s voice interrupted Atlas’s solo (oh thank god, Toby thought). “How did you get in here?”

“Through the power of love,” Atlas answered. “And the janitor’s key.”

“Give me that thing!” The Principal commanded.

Sounds of a brief scuffle reverberated over the speakers.

Toby paled. Forget embarrassment, what if Atlas got detention for this, or worse, expulsion?

Atlas didn’t stop there (oh my gosh, you idiot, can’t you see you’re making a fool of yourself?). His voice resonated through the speakers once more, his last words being, “You can’t stop the passion man, you can only fuel the fire. You’ll never take me alive, fuckers!”

“Oh yeah? Watch me,” the principal angrily retorted.

The sound system screeched, ending transmission.

Toby wished he could feel relieved, but all he had was dread.

What the hell with Atlas doing? It was like he had no filter, as though he were reverting back to himself from a month ago, only ten times worse. He wasn’t even funny. He was crispy or whatever
he liked to call himself now.

“This is bad, this is bad, this is bad,” Toby chanted. Claire cast her gaze back on him, eyes searching.

Oh fudge nuggets. He gave her a half-hearted shrug and salute as he made his way to the exit. He needed help. Big time. “Wow, would you look at the time. I gotta go. Bunch of errands and stuff. Whew, super busy. Nice seeing you Claire.”

“Wait, Tom!” She called, taking a step forward. “We’re not finished talking.”

“Raincheck on that okay, sister?” He waved, now running towards the school entrance. “Alright? Great! Bye.”

Blinky would know what to do, or at least help him catch Atlas somehow.

He only hoped he wasn’t too late.

His footsteps echoed across the museum floor. The room’s volume dropped into a soft hush. One would almost think it was empty. But he knew better.

Stricklander pulled the curtains back. His subordinates relaxed, if only slightly. Everyone knew the risks of doing such an event in a public area, and in the daytime at that. Humanity could not learn of their meeting. All it took was one human to throw their entire operation into disaster.

Despite what Bular might think about humans, Stricklander had a healthy respect for the fleshlings. Living among them had given him expert understanding of their strategies. If The Janus Order and Gunmar were to win this, they would have to act fast and hard. They were strongly outnumbered and outgunned and while trolls (and changelings by extension) were the superior species, they lacked the vast technological prowess of humanity. Magic could only do so much against an AK-47.
Thankfully, their lord had someone on his side who knew all the dangers: him. If this was to work, Gunmar needed to be informed of their current predicament, especially in regards to Bular’s encroachment on their operations and the Trollhunter.

Stricklander took in a deep breath. Today was the beginning of the end.

But first thing’s first.

“Nomura,” he acknowledged, adjusting the lapels of his coat. This was the first time Gunmar has seen him outside of the fetch. He smoothed down his hair. Presentation and precision would be his sword and shield this day.

The woman in question side-eyed him, her mouth drawn into a tight scowl.

“We've been waiting,” Nomura remarked, her foot tapping against the floor. “What took you so long?”

A flare of annoyance rose up, but he suppressed the emotion. Letting Nomura get to him was exactly what she wanted. He could not lose control now, not when he was so close to the prize. He must be the adult in the room.

“Unlike you, I have commitments,” he replied coolly. He turned to Otto. “How are the preparations for tonight?”

The German changeling rubbed his hands together gleefully. “All the Janus Order will be watching, sir.”

“Thank you, Otto,” he replied. The polymorph, as annoying and devious as he may be, did prove to be somewhat useful to their plan. He shot a glare at Nomura. Unlike some changelings.

“This will be Gunmar’s first audience with us in a thousand years,” Stricklander stressed, moving into position next to Bular. “You cannot mess this up.”
“Then why are we doing this now and not then?” Nomura said.

“Our lord must be prepped. The Janus Order needs incentive. Besides, a leader does not go on without an idea of the situation at hand.”

“Stricklander is correct,” Bular spoke up. “For a change. There are certain things father needs to know before talking with the rest of the Impures.”

“Of course, Lord Bular,” Otto gushed, the bloody asskisser. “Everything is ready when you are.”

“Excellent. We’re very nearly at the endgame,” Stricklander said, raising a fist. He couldn’t help the smirk developing upon his lips. “Victory is nearly in our grasp.”

“Not near enough,” Bular grumbled.

“Are we quite ready?” Otto asked excitedly, laying a hand on Stricklander’s shoulder. He glared back. The changeling immediately removed it. “Then let’s party.”

They all looked on as Otto opened up the suitcase. The soft pulsating glow of the stone captured their attention. Stricklander’s eyes widened. His heart skipped a beat. They had truly done it.

“The Eyestone!” Otto gushed, holding the piece up. “The last piece, it is complete.”

The stone flashed blue, drifting upwards towards the bridge. Like a puzzle, it locked into the bridge, perfect and whole. Stricklander’s breath caught in his throat. Bular laughed behind him.

A few moments of silence passed before Bular grumbled at Otto, “It doesn’t work.”

“Bular,” Otto addressed, gesturing to the bridge. “Patience.”

The stone lit up, its glow slowly spreading to the rest of bridge. It crackled and popped, the ancient runes coming to life once more. He could feel the power underneath his very skin, thick and immeasurable. Whoever designed this device must have been a master of the black arts.
Beneath the bridge, at its center, a blue light began to grow. Almost immediately, it spread out like wildfire through the bridge’s middle, before flashing outwards as the sorcery settled. The very strength of the magic blew them back. The sound, a thunderous and explosive roar, nearly broke Stricklander’s eardrums. He was thankful the noise covered his audible gasp at the display, especially as their lord’s image came into view.

“Son,” Gunmar’s voice rebounded through the museum, sending shivers down Stricklander’s spine.

The troll in question lowered his head, replying in reverence, “Father.”

He bit back a smile. While he might dislike Bular, he could appreciate the two’s bond. Perhaps, once Gunmar returned, he and Atlas could have something like that. As Second-in-Command, surely he had that sort of power under Gunmar.

“He voice is so scary,” Otto whispered.

Bular raised his head. “Father, your release from exile will soon be at hand—”

“Your dark excellence,” Stricklander interrupted as he came forward, giving a deep bow. “I am humbly in your service. Killahead is nearly complete and you soon will be free.”

“This pleases me, Stricklander,” Gunmar remarked, appreciation in his tone. “You have done well.”

A burst of pride developed in his breast. Finally, after all these years, someone respected his work.

He began, “You hum—

Bular shot his elbow out, nearly knocking Stricklander to his knees. He rubbed the injured spot, glaring venomously at the other.

“Father,” Bular said, throwing an identical look at him. “The mantle of Trollhunter has fallen to a human. And this Impure has ordered me not to harm the boy—"
“Your Excellence, killing a human child will bring too much scrutiny down upon us,” Stricklander argued. “It is why I have my assistant on the case. He can—"

“Your assistant is useless.” Bular growled, “Father, he has forbidden me to take the Amulet from him.”

“Lord Gunmar, until the Bridge is complete, it is ill-advised to—

“Enough!” Gunmar yelled, the magic sizzling and spewing forth upon them. Stricklander groaned as the almost burning magic flew through them. Stricklander opened one eye, just in time to see their lord shake his fist at both of them. “You make my exile even all the more intolerable for your bickering.”

The image stabilized once more. Stricklander straightened up.

“Stricklander is correct,” Gunmar remarked. Stricklander smirked. “Nothing is more important than preventing our plan from being discovered by our enemies—"

Just as Stricklander was about to chide Bular, Gunmar added, “—But from now on, my son will be giving the orders.”

Bular chuckled. Stricklander kept his eyes trained on their lord. Showing weakness now meant failure and that was the last thing he wanted to do in front of their king.

“But sir, what about tonight?” Surely he understood the importance for their people?

“I am preparing my armies as we speak,” Gunmar said, voice rumbling and rough. “I do not have time to spare for a mere chat. It is why I employed you. Go. I will speak with my son, alone.” He emphasized the demand with another blast of power. “Now.”

He bowed once more, even if every cell in his body wanted to scream at the idiocrasy of it all. Bular in charge? Was he mad?
“As you wish, Your Greatness,” Stricklander answered, leaving through the way he came in. His fingernails bit into his skin. Still, he kept his head high, not allowing Bular an inch of insight into his feelings on this slight.

His entire event was in shambles. How was he going to rescue this? *He could prepare another long speech,* he supposed, *but on such short notice?* Inwardly, he sighed. Perhaps there were some lying about in his school office. He needed to go over there anyway.

Beyond the curtains, his two underlines grinned, teeth sharp and sharklike. *Likely pleased at seeing their leader punched down a peg or two,* Stricklander thought.

Idiots. All of them. Did they not understand the severity of this? Bular was a brute. A dumb brute. Unlike his father, he lacked the finesse for tactics and secrecy. Stricklander knew he would have to work overtime to keep the Gumm-Gumm in check, or at the very least constantly monitored.

“Ouch,” Nomura remarked. “Want some ice for that burn?”

“Shut up, Nomura,” Stricklander snarled, rounding on the woman.

“Yes, Nomura. Can’t you see our leader had his feelings hurt?” Otto chided. “Be more sensitive.”

Stricklander glared, lording his height over the other. “That goes for you too Otto.”

The polymorph didn’t seem to mind. If anything, he appeared to enjoy it. He cocked his head to the side. “Where is your pet?”

“Assistant,” he answered. “And Atlas is busy doing his job, unlike you. Get back to your station. That goes for you as well, Nomura.”

“Is he now?” Otto asked, cocking his head to the side. “Then where is the amulet?”

Stricklander rolled his eyes. Must he explain this *again*? “He is working on getting the human’s trust, but I can assure you—”
“He doesn’t need the Trollhunter to trust him. He needs to get the amulet,” Nomura said in a low tone, her eyes flashing a sickly green. “Everyone can tell he’s gone soft on them, just as you’re soft on him.”

His glare turned glacial. He pulled out his pen, clicking it with his thumb.

“Careful, Nomura,” he stated, motions the tip at her face. “You’re treading in dangerous waters.”

Nomura didn’t back down. Instead, she edged forward. “Isn’t it? We would have the amulet right now if someone didn’t give the mission to the brat.”

He balanced the pen between his fingers. “Are you trying to argue that my reasoning was wrong?”

Her stance froze. He could tell she was thinking about her next moves. It was what set her apart from the rest of his underlings. Not soon enough however. “I’m just saying—”

“Bular may be in charge of the operation, but that doesn’t mean he’s the leader of the Janus Order, Nomura,” he said in a snide manner, poking the end into her collarbone. “One more step out of line and you can find yourself doing Goblin duty for the rest of your life. That goes for you as well Otto.”

“Understood,” she said in a monotone manner, ending with a soft “sir.”

“Atlas will do his job.” Stricklander said, clicking his pen close and back into his pocket. “And if he doesn’t, then I will do it for him.”

He let out a hiss as the wheel piece fractured in his hands.
And of course one of the training machines broke just hours before Master Atlas was due to arrive.

Blinky brushed back some of his hair, languishing a time when it was long and full. Stress and family genetics left him with less than he’d like, but he made due with what he had. Besides, it was not the hair of a troll, but their size that mattered.

Except—

His height wasn’t much to speak for either. Darn his vertically challenged species.

AAARRRGGHH!!! didn’t appear to mind however. He valued Blinky for his intelligence, unlike the rest of Trollmarket. A conspiracy theorist? Ha! He was far more than a mere conspiracist. If not for him, Trollmarket never would have learned of the nefarious gnome nesting grounds beneath the Forge! Alright, yes, they were abandoned, but it showed that the bloody vermin could breed.

But that didn’t matter anymore. He was the Trollhunter’s trainer and teacher. Which meant he must focus on today’s training: dwärkstone dodging. A little unorthodox, but Blinky figured it be best to mix things up a tad. At least, that’s what his books recommend. Not that he needed books to be a trainer however.

Back to the matter at hand, Blinky tried to reach for the contraption again, but fell just short of a few inches. Drat. Alas, he was the only one who could fit inside to fix the bloody thing.


“Arms hurt,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, a sulking frown emerging.

“Focus on how much Master Atlas’s arms will hurt should this training equipment malfunction,” Blinky reminded.

AAARRRGGHH!!! sighed, lifting the piece once more.

And of course, just when he’d gotten back to fixing the machine, young Tobias interrupted their engagement.
“Blinky! Blinky! Wingman!” Tobias yelled, running into the Forge. Oh dear. He’d never see the boy run like that unless there was danger afoot. “We’ve got trouble! It's Draal. I mean, it's Atlas. But it's Draal's fault.”

“No, you don’t mean—Did Draal kill him?” Blinky asked, eyes wide. Great Gronka Morka. His heart sank. “I-I never should have consented to Draal supplementing Master Atlas's training. This is all my fault. Tobias, I’m so so—”


Both trolls looked at him blankly.

“More than usual,” Tobias reiterated. “He’s acting crazy.”

“Crazy?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked.

“Yeah!” he confirmed, matching his hands to the rhythm of his voice. “It's like he's drunk or something, but not. It’s like he’s not afraid of the consequences of his actions. There’s no impulse control. Oh, and he's totally ‘crispy’, whatever that means.”

"Tobias,” Blinky began, jumping out of the machine. He bent down to the boy’s height. “This totem you speak of, was it a Grit-Shaka?”

“Yes! That's it!” The boy exclaimed, snapping his finger.

“No fear,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said, dropping the piece he’d been holding up for Blinky. His expression had taken a serious edge.

Had the other ever used one? Blinky wanted to ask but dismissed the thought. If AAARRRGGHH!!! wanted to share, it was him and him alone who should bring it up. Probing the other for information could prove detrimental to his mental state, something he learned quite early in their relationship.
“That's how it works on troll physiology, but what about a hybrid?” Blinky stroked his chin with one hand while his other two began to reach for his pockets. “And one that’s in human form? I thought something was off about Master Atlas last night. He was almost Draal-like in manner.”

“Not good,” AAARRRGHH!!! said, shaking his head.

“What should we do?” Tobias asked.

“Well,” Blinky remarked, flexing his fingers until they popped. “Finding him is a start.”

All Claire wanted was to finish rehearsal. It didn’t help that Atlas was being kind of a dick, but she’d dealt with Steve before him and anything was better than that.

She thought.

The First Act went alright. It was when they got into the Second that things began to unravel. Still, she tried to ignore it. When he interrupted her lines and began making up his own for the play however, Claire reacted. She had to.

Shakespeare wasn’t perfect, but damn was she going to let some new guy tarnish her favorite playwright.

“Everything about this play is ridiculous,” he said, gesturing the rolled up script at the crowd. “Romeo and Juliet die for stupid reasons. Anyone can see that.”

“Are you serious?” Claire groaned, shaking her head. “They died for love.”
“And what ‘love’ was that? They barely knew each other. Hell, Juliet was a child. Why not age the characters up a little and give them a happy ending?”

Claire couldn’t help but gape at his gale. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“It’s a romantic tragedy,” Claire explained slowly, fists clenched. “Two star-crossed lovers from opposing families.”

“They were foolish children who believed they could run away from their problems,” Atlas retorted.

“They were in love.”

“No, Claire,” he said, stepping into her personal space. She pulled back. “They were in lust.”

She tried to avoid his gaze, but found it impossible. His pupils were blown and intense. Her stomach clenched, and not in the warm fluttery manner like before. Was he high or something? A moment later, he turned his attention back to the audience.

“It’s dated. Everything about the play is old and stagnant. Why can’t the characters change? Why didn’t Romeo save Juliet before all this heartache?” Atlas asked.

“Mr. Lake, we’ve spent months rehearsing the “dated” pages,” Ms. Janeth spoke up.

Atlas paused. He glanced down at the script in his hands. “Has...has it really been months since we began this?”

Ms. Janeth nodded, trying to take advantage of his shift in tone. “How about we do it the way it was original written?”

“Sure,” he bit back, snark returned. “What’s say we bore the audience too while we’re at it?”
Finally, Claire hit her boiling point. How dare he. How. Dare. He. She stomped over, arms crossed.

“What’s going on? You used to be the nicest guy.” She threw a hand up in exasperation. “Now you’re throwing parties, trashing my house, and now this? This isn’t you, Jim.”

“Atlas,” he mumbled, his voice barely above a whisper. He turned away. “My name is Atlas.”

“Not right now. You’re not you,” she stressed.

The spotlight glared down, highlighting his features. She squinted. Was it just her or was his jawline and nose sharper than before? She blinked and it was gone. Weird.

“This is me,” he said, emphasizing his words whilst gesturing his thumb to his chest. “Just...a better me.”

She shook her head. “It’s really not.”

“I disagree.” He inched forward, a dreamlike smile on his lips. He opened and closed his hand, a blissful gleam in his eyes. “I can control it now, you know. I don’t even need the stupid horseshoe.”

“Uh, what?” Claire backed away, hands up. “Look, I know you think you’re being cool and all, but you’re really not.”

“You’re right, Claire.” He said, grabbing her waist. “I’m not cool, I’m crispy.”

He dipped her, face coming close. Her heartbeat skyrocketed. No, no, no. The shift in gravity and churning stomach only added to her current discomfort. Oh god, was he going to—

Claire pulled out of his hold. Remembering a move she learned in an old self-defense class, she grabbed his jacket and pumped him forward. Placing her feet far apart, Claire flipped him over. His jacket yanked open from the force of it all.
His back hit the ground with a soft thud. He groaned.

She gasped. From the audience, it was just a throw, but up close, she could see everything. A cold sweat developed on her brow.

Scars. So many scars. His torso was littered with them. The most prominent one was long and curved, as though someone tried to intentionally cut him open. The taste of vomit pooled at the back of her throat. There were several bruises as well. Santa Maria, what the hell was this?

“Oh my god, Atlas,” she whispered.

Who did this to him? Was it his dad? Was Atlas being abused? Her stomach rolled.

“It’s fine,” he said, brushing off his clothes. His mouth pulled into a fine line when he noticed her reaction. “I’m all the better for them you know.”

“Them? Who did that to you?” She asked, hoping to gleam more information.

“Dude’s totally crazy,” Mary said from the audience.

Atlas got up to his feet, eyes bright and angry. He hissed, “What did you call me?”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Claire snapped. Whatever issues he had, he didn’t need to take them out on Mary.

“Why?” He turned his gaze towards her once more, now twice as intimidating. She froze. His eyes were bluer than she’d ever seen them before. The light of the stage cast his sclera in a golden glow, only adding to the eerie way he looked at her, like a predator and its prey. “It’s not like you care. You keep trying to act like you do, but the only thing you care about is how it will make you look good with everyone else. Oh, look at me, I’m helping the weirdo new guy.”

“That’s not true,” she argued.
He laughed. It was cruel and wrong and Claire hated it. This wasn’t like Atlas at all. “Is it? I gotta say, Claire. You’re a great actress. You have all these people fooled into believing you’re a good person. But you’re not. No one is. Everyone has an agenda.” He motioned to Mary. “Your little friend over there keeps dating multiple guys because she has low self-esteem.”

“Shut up!” She yelled. What was he trying to do? This was cruel.

The auditorium doors burst open, Mary’s figure quickly retreating.

“The other one can’t make up her mind about things so she hangs out with people who can.”

“Hey!” Darci said, standing up. “Screw you.”

“But you,” he took a step closer. Was he always so tall? “You’re the worst of all. You pretend to be some perfect girl, but you use people like props in a play. You use Mary and Darci’s flaws to make yourself look better. You used me to babysit your baby brother because you wanted to go to watch some band with Steve. Steve, the guy who bullies Eli and Toby and the rest of the school.”

Her face burned. Anger spilled forth.

“You’re an asshole,” she spat, raising her fists.

“And you’re a self-centered bitch.”

Her hand moved before her conscious could stop her.

The sound of her slap brought her back to reality. Oh shit. Her heart pounded. Claire brought the hand to her chest. Had she really—?

“Oh my god,” Claire whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Red dripped from his nose. It was as if he’d put up a shield. The emotionless mask was back in place, his expression closed off.
“It’s fine,” he said, rubbing the blood from his nose. “I’ve had worse.”

“Ms. Nuñez, Mr. Lake, principal’s office,” Ms. Janeth’s voice rang out from the audience. “Now. Physical violence and name-calling are not tolerated in my—”

Atlas was already gone through the doors before she could finish.

Claire looked down at her hand. She physically hurt someone. Of course, he had been an asshole, but she should have known better. Hadn’t her parents taught her physical violence wasn’t the answer?

Ugh. What the hell was up with him? She rushed down the stairs, her mind wrapped up in his words. He was reacting to her, she knew that, but she couldn’t help but think—

What if he was right?
Chapter Summary

The group tries to stop Atlas, but their efforts prove futile. The Trollhunter has his first official battle with Bular, but ends up losing his cool and his grit-shaka during it.

Barbara picks up her son.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Finally back with a new chapter. Thank you for all the wonderful reviews, oh my gosh! Been really busy. Still have exams next week so next chapter might be delayed, but not to worry! After that we will hopefully be back to our normal weekly schedule. Big thanks to Vici, Charlie, and brothebro for helping me with this chapter! You guys are awesome. If there are any spelling errors, please alert me. I know I always miss a few, lol.

Also, shoutout to Idren for the lovely fanart on twitter here: https://twitter.com/CookieNinjaElf/status/1071690890283024385

I'm doing an fancomic of the first chapter with Trickiricki (who writes a cool jeves fic called Any Other Way, go check it out) and post it on my instagram, tumblr, etc...Here's a link to the first page: https://www.deviantart.com/tunafishprincess/art/Blue-Moon-Rising-Page-One-775212234.

Thank you so much for all the views, kudos, fanart, comments, etc...Seriously, ya'll are amazing. Sorry for not publishing this sooner! I wanted to get it right. :)

His life was going down the tubes.

At least he had the amulet. As long as he was the Trollhunter, he still had some purpose. Sure, his human social life was in tatters, but it wasn’t like he actually wanted to hang out with the fleshbags.
Yeah, who cared about Claire and her stupid play? All she cared about was herself. Why hadn’t he seen it before? Humans were almost as good as changelings in deceiving others. Thankfully, the Grit-Shaka showed him the truth.

That didn’t change the fact that his chest ached from her rejection however.

Well, whatever. He had better things to do anyways.

Atlas moseyed on into the tattooist parlor, planting himself right on the first stool. Immediately, the other clients dispersed, avoiding his intense gaze. Atlas scoffed. Cowards. In one fluid movement, he shrugged off his jacket and backpack and casted them off to the side. The troll in charge threw the teen a dubious look. He examined Atlas’s arm, as if uncertain of where to start.

“You sure?” The troll asked, voice gruff and low. He presented his mallet and chisel to the teen, as if to poke a hole in Atlas’s crispiest idea to date.

“Yeah,” Atlas confirmed, waving a hand at the bare skin of his arm. “Everyone else has cool tats. I should get one too.”

“Not tats,” he gestured to his own markings. “Tradition.”

Was it? He knew a few of the changelings had them, but most were rudimentary, either inherited from their race or self-inflicted. Atlas tried making some of his own when he was younger, but all he had to show for it was a scar vaguely made in imitation of Stricklander’s own. Of course, the changeling in question had been horrified at the discovery and quickly put a stop to it, since Atlas’s skin was significantly softer than his brethren’s and therefore bleed more than he’d anticipated, but the damage was done.

Instinctively, his right hand grazed his chest. He smiled bitterly. It felt so long ago, even though it had only been a few years.

“Give me one in the shape of a bleeding heart,” Atlas started, rolling up the sleeve to his shoulder. “And add a crack down the middle. Oh, and make it flaming and black, like my soul.”

Unfortunately, somebody just had to ruin his mood.
“You’re so extra it hurts,” a familiar voice remarked, emerging from the crowded market with the other two not far behind.

“Shut up, Tobes,” Atlas growled. How dare he. Couldn’t he see how tortured Atlas was? “You don’t understand my broken heart.”

And how could he? Toby had never been in love like Atlas had. Sure, he’d been a little harsh with Claire, but the slap was unwarranted and her words left him simmering with anger. Him? The asshole? Did she not appreciate all he had done for her? He tried out for the play for her. He babysat her changeling baby brother so she could go to a concert.

And for free too, to boot. Changelings didn’t do free.

Well, except him.

But not anymore. From now on, Atlas was pay-to-play. Trollmarket wanted someone to clean up their gnome infestation for free? Fat chance. He was charging now.

Blinky elbowed one of the trolls blocking his path, earning him a low grunt. It didn’t appear to perturb the shorter troll, whose attention lay focused on Atlas. “Cease this madness,” Blinky ordered in what the teen presumed was a command.

Ha. He snorted.

Too bad Atlas didn’t take well to commands. Instead, he slumped forward, giving the tattooist a solemn grimace.

“My life is a black hole of misery and lies,” he bemoaned, clenching a fist.

Toby was the first to approach. “Dude, you need to calm down. Plus, I’m pretty sure you’re underage for a tattoo.”
“On the contrary,” Blinky said, lifting up a single index. “Trolls are allowed to decorate their bodies the moment they are—”

“Not helping,” AAARRRGGHH!!! commented, nudging Blinky in the shoulder.

“Ah, yes, my apologies,” Blinky coughed.

“Hey,” Atlas said, sitting up right. He motioned a hand towards them then back to the artist. “Let’s all get tats.”

Atlas could see it now: a badass group of flaming skulls with broken hearts around them. Ah yeah. Now that would be totally crispy.

“If you would give us a moment,” Blinky spoke to the tattooist. The other troll shrugged, clearly not as invested in Atlas’s amazing idea as he had once thought. Atlas rolled his eyes. Figured.

“Great Gronka Morka, it's even worse than you said,” Blinky mentioned in an off-hand manner to Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! (as if Atlas wasn’t right there in front of them). “Master Atlas, the Grit-Shaka.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, motioning to the glowing crystal. “Pretty crispy right?”

“Crispy? Deya’s Grace, no!” Blinky criticized, his lips pulled back in disgust. “I was thinking more along the lines of ‘unholy’ and ‘disturbing.’”

AAARRRGGHH!!! agreed, pointing at Atlas’s necklace with a look of concern. ”Dangerous.”

“That, too,” Blinky said, pushing his friend’s hand down before getting in Atlas’s face. “Master Atlas, that is a Gumm-Gumm totem, which is reason enough to be wary of it. But the fact that you are a human form makes its effects unpredictable! Erratic! Volatile!”

“Crispy,” Atlas corrected.
“And that necklace is not a good look for you,” Toby said, swishing his hand out like a judge on a modeling show.

“Excuse you,” Atlas said, flipping back his hair. He pulled the tattooist back over. “What is this? Some kind of intervention?”

“If need be,” Blinky warned, pushing the artist away.

“Well, need not be! I’m fine. Hell, I am better than fine.” Atlas got up, cracking his neck side to side. “I don’t even need the gaggletak anymore. I can change without it. Look.”

He snapped his fingers on his right hand. Immediately, the skin transformed, toughening into his normal form. Muscles and tendons popped, bones elongating and shifting into their rightful place. His nails thickened at a rapid pace, transforming into sharp claws, their color darkening by each second passed. It ceased it’s expansion at his elbow, but the reveal was more than enough. The group jumped back.

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“Holy cheese,” Toby gaped.

The tattooist backed away. “Not worth it,” he grumbled, returning to the inside of his shop.

“Oh come on,” Atlas moaned. “Look, I can change it back. See?”

The reversal didn’t appear to make things any better sadly. AAARRRGGHH!!! covered his mouth, his face a shade paler than before.

“Master Atlas, be that as it may, it’s changing you,” Blinky stressed, all of his hands waving about in what Atlas presumed to be some sort of placating gesture. “You are not yourself.”

“I am myself. You just want to take it away. You don’t want me to be happy. You guys are just like the rest of them.” Atlas pulled out the amulet, hiding it behind his back. “If you want the Grit-Shaka, you’re gonna have to take it from me.”

Toby sighed. “Come on, dude. Let’s not go there.”
Atlas recited the incantation, adding a “Holla!” at the end for extra coolness. He landed on his feet, twirling around.

“Or I guess we do need to go there,” Toby said. “Guys?”

“That's right! Uh-huh! I just went there!” Atlas motioned his hand in what he believed to be the universal gesture for ‘bring it’ or at least, that’s what Toby’s movies taught him. “Let’s go. You want it? Come and take it from me.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! growled, pushing the other two back.

“Be gentle with him,” Toby asked.

If Atlas were the same hybrid as yesterday, he might have been wary.

But yesterday wasn’t today.

The moment AAARRRGGHH!!! jumped, Atlas did a half-pirouette, dodging the troll’s grasp. AAARRRGGHH!!! looked stunned for a second before lunging again, only to lose to Atlas’s superior mobility. The teen bounced off the troll’s back, using him as a spring board into the air. Tucking in his knees, and landed in a summersault, the momentum carrying him to his feet.

“Ha, ha!” Atlas yelled, blowing a raspberry at the group. “Suck it!”

He couldn’t help but catch Blinky’s thoughtful expression, his words echoing through the narrow tunnel as he ran. “Grit-Shaka has changed him, indeed. Master Atlas has improved tremendously. So nimble—”

“Seriously?” Toby groaned, breaking off into a run. “Come on! We got to catch him!”

“Oh, I mean, this is terrible!” Blinky said, chasing after Atlas with the rest of the group. “After him!”
And thus the pursuit began. Despite his human body’s limitations, the adrenaline and confidence boost of the Grit-Shaka proved adequate, providing him a leverage over the group. Utilizing the sharp corners and twisting corridors to his advantage, he soon gained a sizable lead, every once and awhile looking behind to taunt them.

“Dude, stop running!” Toby shouted, his breathing heavy from running.

“Never!” Atlas replied.

Blinky tried to keep up, but even he was unable to keep up with Atlas’s speed. “Yes, Master Atlas, you are losing yourself in this madness.”

“Losing myself?” He paused in the middle of the market street. “No, you’re the one who doesn’t understand. I finally found myself! I’m complete. I can change without the gaggletak now. I’m a full changeling.”

“The Grit-Shaka's effect on you is false, which makes it dangerous. You must take it off.”

“You just want me to go back to relying on all of you. Well, it’s not going to work. I’m fine. I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m not afraid of anyone now. Do you know how calming that is? I can go to sleep without leaving an eye open at night!”

“Atlas, bro, don’t let this control you,” Toby begged.

He shook his head. Why didn’t they understand? “I’m not letting it control me. I’m controlling it. I’m not afraid now. I can fight anything or anyone now.”

You should always be afraid!” Blinky said. “If Bular attacked you in this state you would not be able to defend yourself.”

“Oh, yeah? Wanna bet?” Atlas called out, his pace matching the beat of his heart. “I'm not afraid of Bular! I'm not afraid of anything!”

He eyed a small group of gnomes atop one of the market’s awnings. Wait a minute,” he said to
himself, an idea forming. Summoning his sword, he swiftly cut one of the lines, launching the creatures into the air and into the path of his so-called friends.

Blinky was accosted by the gnomes, crying out “Scum of the Earth!”


Toby leaned against the large troll to catch his breath, only to be scooped up by him in one hand a moment later. “He’s right. That thing is bad news. You can’t do this alone, dude.”

Can’t do this alone? Hadn’t it been Atlas who defeated Draal alone? Hadn’t he won against Nomura twice? Hadn’t he faced Bular and the other changelings before and lived? Were they truly so mistrustful of his abilities?

Well. Time for a reality check. Atlas squared his shoulders, lifting his sword above his head.

“I’ll show you! I’m not afraid of anything!” Atlas challenged. “I…I will fight Bular. And I’ll defeat him. All by myself. You’ll see!”

In the gathered crowd, one troll cheered him on. Good. At least someone out there believed in him.

The group called after him, but Atlas was already halfway back to the entrance to Trollmarket, his mind made up.

Atlas didn’t need them. He didn’t need anyone. As long as he had the Grit-Shaka and the amulet, nothing could harm him. He was complete now. Once he got rid of Bular and then the Bridge, things would finally go back to normal. His dad would be normal. Nomura would be normal. Hell, maybe he could introduce his mom and his dad to each other.

He took in a deep breath, savoring the relaxing sensation the grit-shaka produced. No more fear. No more tears.

Everything would go back to normal.
The next few hours flew by quickly. Atlas would like to say he could find Bular all by himself, but that would be a lie.

NotEnrique had provided some intel after a fresh helping of gym socks, but even then it took Atlas awhile to find the scoundrel.

The tunnels beneath Arcadia never seemed so dark and gloomy. The air was stale, the stench of mildew and mold permeating his nostrils. Admittedly, he could have done the search above ground, but that would draw unnecessary attention. He wanted to be discreet. Tactful. Professional.

“Bular, you fucking waste of rock,” Atlas called out, hitting the end of his sword against the concrete wall. “Show yourself.”

He jumped at the sound of splashing behind him, relaxing a moment later when he recognized it for what it was: a rat. It scurried off at the sight of him.

“Yeah, you better run,” Atlas muttered, placing the sword atop his shoulder blade. It wasn’t the most comfortable position, but dang did it make him look cool.

The echoes of his friends voices carried through the tunnels. Atlas ignored them. They doubted him. Just like everyone else in his life. They didn’t understand who he was, none of them did. Not really.

In the corner of his eye, he caught sight of one of the goblins watching him. Atlas leered. It hissed, releasing an ominous “Waka Chaka.”

Surprisingly, it ignored his taunt, choosing to continue down the narrow route. Strange. Atlas followed.

As he traversed the underground pipes, he began calculating how he would take down Bular. Probably a good ol’ smack in the face with the broadside of his sword, then a big slice down the middle. Part of him was tempted to name the attack something like “Trollhunter Blast” or “Changeling Alpha Strike”, but even he knew that was probably a bit over the top.

He suspected wherever the goblin was taking him was a trap. The goblin wouldn’t be stopping so much otherwise. Which meant he was on Bular’s trail. Good. No, better than good. Great!

His blood sang with excitement. Finally. How long had he waited for this moment? Even now, the scars Bular had given his body stung; even the thought of them brought back the pain the troll had inflicted upon him time and time again. And for what?

It wasn’t as if Atlas asked to be what he was. He didn’t ask to be taken in by the Janus Order. He was thankful, certainly, he owed Stricklander his life, but he owed nothing to Bular and Gunmar.

The sounds of the city began to dampen the further he walked. His steps reverberated off the walls. It would have been eerie if Atlas wasn’t so pumped for a fight.

The trail ended in a large multi-tunnel room. Probably one of the main sewer lines, Atlas surmised. It wasn’t one Atlas had used before, largely because of how close it was to Bular’s territory.

The goblin chittered, drawing back as a large figure approached. Atlas squinted, barely making out the figure before he figured out who had finally decided to show up.

“Bular,” he drawled in a mocking manner. “Finally decided to show yourself?”

“And here I thought it would be I looking for you,” the troll said, fully emerging from the shadows. The tunnel lights were dim, but still bright enough to give Atlas a few meters of visibility.

Bular’s red eyes gleamed, calculating and thirsty. Had Atlas not been wearing the Grit-Shaka, he might have run away.
“This ends tonight,” Atlas announced, swinging his sword.

Bular crouched to the ground. “My thoughts exactly.”

The troll tried to squash him with a full body smash, but Atlas evaded, positioning himself underneath to jab at the troll’s side. Bular blocked his every attack, as though he were toying with him, before throwing the teen backwards with one punch.

Atlas grunted. The hit was hard, nearly knocking the air out of him, but he persevered. The next time Bular came at him, Atlas slid underneath his legs, running in the other direction. He needed higher ground. Anything to allow him some sort of maneuverability over the larger male.

“Running for your life again, Trollhunter?”

“Ha! In your dreams!” Atlas said, blocking another strike with the side of his blade. His eyes flickered over to one of the smaller sewer lines. The narrower the tunnel, the easier Atlas could slip between the troll’s blind spots. At least, that was what he reasoned.

Unfortunately, someone just had to ruin his following battle cry.

“Dude, get out of there!” Toby’s voice echoed from above.

“Go away,” Atlas said. “I’m finally ready to fight him.”

“No, you are most definitely not,” Blinky’s voice joined in, tunnels away. “The Grit-Shaka has made you overly arrogant.”

“That’s not true. I’m better now,” Atlas argued. “I can defeat him.”

“Now I understand why you are so quick to race to your death,” Bular chuckled, glowing gaze stealing a glance at the Grit-Shaka at his chest.

“Excuse you,” he scoffed. “This isn’t a race. This is a fight.”
Bular blinked, once, twice, then narrowed his eyes. “You’re as stupid as you are brave, I’ll give you that, fleshbag.”

Light flooded the area as Toby began raising one of the storm drains. Bular stepped back instinctively.

“Run! Now’s your chance!” Toby yelled.

“You talk too much,” Bular growled, picking up a rock and launching it upwards. Toby yelped, dropping the top in response.

Atlas gestured his sword at the troll. “I was going to say the same.”

“Come, Trollhunter,” Bular beckoned, slamming his fists against the wall. Each time he did, a small dent appeared in the concrete. His fangs flashed, all the more eerie under the shadowy aura of the area. “So I may squash your pathetic body between my palms and drink of your blood.”

“Oh yeah? Well I’m gonna cut off your head and do terrible things with it,” Atlas countered, raising his blade.

Bular cocked his head to the side. He lifted a brow, apparently not impressed with Atlas’s response. “What?”

“I think he means he’s gonna skullfuck your head,” Toby provided above them.

Atlas gaped, mouth ajar for a few moments before he clicked it shut.

“What? No! What the hell, Tobes?” He waved his sword-free hand around in the air to emphasis his words. “I was just gonna send it to Gunmar in a box or something.”

A dark chuckle reverberated off the walls. Atlas tensed.
“You talk a big game, but can you match it?” Bular mocked, suddenly disappearing from Atlas’s line of sight. Shit. “Watch your back, Trollhunter.”

Sensing movement behind him, Atlas dropped forwards, tucking into a roll to escape Bular’s strike. Water splashed, trickling down his face. Pulling himself back up, he ditched the open area for another smaller corridor. Bular followed close behind, his dark laughter warning the teen of his proximity.

Once he hit a narrow corner, Atlas put his plan into action, forwarding with a heavy slash against the troll’s arm then ducking underneath the other’s swinging arm. Bular growled. Atlas laughed, until the other used his pause as time to hit him in the solar plexus.

Unlike previously, this strike was more potent, his lungs burning as his chest seized in pain. The sword flew, vanishing into thin air as Atlas smacked against the ground, his armor screeching against the rough surface.

As the dirty water splashed his face, so too did the reality of the situation.

The Grit-Shaka was gone. Frantically, he searched for the piece, only to find it several feet away. He tried to move closer, but Bular got to it first. Atlas watched in horror as the Gumm-Gumm crushed the totem in one stomp.

The amulet blinked on and off, its light slowly dying.

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

“At—Jimbo! Jim! Run!” Toby yelled.

“Where am I? What’s happening?” Atlas said, scrambling to his feet. It was as if his mind was covered in a hazy blanket. What happened today?

Bular crept closer, licking his lips. “Yes, cower, Trollhunter. I will rend your flesh from your bones.”

“Uh, Tobes, a little help?” Atlas squeaked.
“I can’t get it open!” Toby answered frantically.

Panic set in. Atlas tried not to hyperventilate as Bular drew closer. He could smell the rotten meat off the troll. He tried to back away, but found his legs immobile.

Was this how he was going to die?

“Tobes!” Atlas cried out.

Bular pounced. As if in slow motion, Atlas watched his death draw near, the troll’s fangs wide and open, aimed directly at his head.

“For the Glory of Merlin!” His friend yelled, finally picking up the manhole. Sunlight flooded the area. Bular growled, pulling back as the sunbeams grazed his face.

Atlas closed his eyes, savoring the heat of the sun.

For the Glory of Merlin indeed.

Toby thrust an arm down the hole, waving it frantically. “Grab my hand!”

Dodging a side-swipe by Bular, he tried to leap. Unfortunately, he barely made it halfway before he fell back to the ground. His stomach dropped as his feet hit the floor once again. “It’s too far. I can’t.”

In the corner of his eyes, Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! arrived on the scene. Sadly, his hopes of a rescue were dashed as one of the goblins pushed open one of the other manholes, sealing Atlas’s fate.

His breathing quickened. Sweat gathered at his brow as Bular closed in.
“Master A—Jim, believe in yourself. You can do this,” Blinky called from the opposite side of the tunnel.


“Fear is but the precursor to valor,” Blinky added.

Bular swung his sword down. Atlas sidestepped. The blade sunk into the ground. Bular growled, eyes fixated on his weapon as he tried to dislodge it.

They were right. Of course they were. Atlas had let his lack of fear rule him, and look where that brought him?

For so long he had been controlled by his fear in some fashion. Fear of failure, fear of loss, fear of death—these were the things that constantly sat at the back of his mind.

He might not ever be ready to control his fear like the Trollhunters before him had, but he sure wasn’t going to allow it to kill him right now.

“You’re right,” he said. “Be afraid. Be brave. I can definitely do that.”

Atlas vanished his armor, returning to human form. Just as Bular pulled the sword out, Atlas stepped on the edge. Like a see-saw, the blade went up, as did the teen. Using the added height, he jumped, this time catching Toby’s hand.

“Gotcha!” Toby cheered, pulling the boy up out of the sewers.

Almost immediately, they kicked the pothole back in place. And not a moment too soon, if Bular’s angry fist knocking it back up was any indication.
Below, a thunderous roar shock the ground. Atlas flinched back. There would be retribution for this. For now, however, they were safe.

Above, Car horns sounded. One of the drivers yelled out them. Atlas and Toby scrambled into one of the alleyways. Once hidden from view, they collapsed behind one of the dumpsters. Safe. Oh sweet Pale Lady, they were alive.

Catching his breath, Toby remarked airily. “You did it!”

“We did it,” he corrected, placing a hand on the other’s shoulder.

The edges of his best friend’s lips perked up. “Glad to finally have you back.”

Atlas groaned, placing an arm over his face. “Oh sweet pale lady, I’m remembering all the terrible shit I did.”

“Yeah, you were kind of a douche. Like, Spiderman 3 bad. Never go Spiderman 3 dude.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Tobes,” Atlas sighed. He smacked his face with an open palm.

Toby picked himself up. Well, more like leaned against the wall as he caught his breath. “It’s okay. We’re okay. We’re alive, right?”

“You’re right, we’re—”

His body seized. Fire ran down his hands and feet. His teeth clenched.

“What’s wrong?” Toby asked. His friend came over, rolling him to his side. Atlas curled up.

“Uh,” he groaned, twitching and jerking with every beat of his heart. “Transforming.”
“Ew, that looks painful.” Toby remarked, trying to keep Atlas’s head from hitting the wall. “What happened to your gaggle tack?”

“I may have misplaced it,” Atlas admitted in a breathless tone.

Toby leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “Define misplaced.”

Atlas squirmed underneath the other’s gaze. He bit down on his bottom lip, wincing as one fang broke through his gums.

“I kicked it into the school garbage dump,” he confessed.

“You yeeted your gaggle tack?”

Atlas groaned, trying to get over another series of pops and cracks as his body returned to its regular shape. “Yeeted?” He asked as they began to abate.

“It’s like a hee-yah, ya know?”

“I don’t,” he whispered. His head pounded as pressure began to build at his temples.

“Fudge, okay, it doesn’t matter. We need to get you out of here though.”

“How?”

“Doesn’t your mom work nearby?”

Atlas glared. “We are not involving my mom.”

Toby rolled his eyes. “Come on, dude.”
His eyes flew to his changing hands. No, no, no. Why couldn’t he keep his form? Atlas tried to focus, but the pain overrode any effort he put in. Finally, he said, “I don’t want her seeing me like this.”

“Well, it’s not like we can keep you out here in the open.” Toby pulled off Atlas’s backpack, passing it over to the boy. “Here, you go change while I call Dr. L.”

“You got my bag for me?” Aw, that was sweet, Atlas mused.

“Change,” Toby ordered.

Atlas rolled over. He tried to get to his feet, but found the cramps too much. “Tobes, no. I don’t… what if she doesn’t accept me?”

This was too soon. They barely met. Showing her this could destroy her.

What if…

What if she rejected him?

Sure, she said she wouldn’t, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t happen. Atlas had been around this world long enough to know words were sometimes just for face value.

“Trust me, she’s your mom,” Toby said. “Moms are supposed to be accepting. At least that’s what the movies say.”

Atlas lifted his head. “You think?”

Toby smiled, turning on his phone. “I know, dude.”
Late twentieth century boyband music played faintly in the background of her van. As soon as she turned onto the street near the address, she switched it off.

Did Jim still like her taste in music? She hoped he did. They used to play nineties music in the car on the way to school all the time. She smiled fondly at the memory.

Well, even if he didn’t, it didn’t matter. They could always discover new music both of them enjoyed.

Barbara drummed her fingers along the steering wheel. Pulling into the alleyway, she waited.

Toby had called and explained the situation to her. Well, sort of. Something about a magical necklace and her son going cuckoo for cocoa puffs? It was heard to believe a piece of jewelry could affect the mind, but she tried to be open to the idea.

Magic was real.

Her son was some sort of chosen one trying to keep both worlds safe.

Her son was also part-changeling. And now, he couldn’t transform back to his human form and needed her help until he could secure a new magical horseshoe.

Right.

She could do this.

A figure passed her rearview mirror. Barbara jolted back slightly in alarm, only to relax once she recognized the person. Toby knocked the back of his hand against her passenger door window. She lowered it.
“Special delivery for a Ms. Barbara Lake?” The boy joked.

“Cute,” she said, looking around. “Is he alright?”

Toby shrugged. “The transformation is done now. He should be ready.” He turned his head. “Dude! Your mom’s here! Get your butt over here!”

“I’m coming,” her son answered. She squinted. His voice was deeper than she remembered. Had he hit puberty? Or was this simply part of his other form?

Goodness. She had so many questions. How did the transformation work? Was he more of a mesh of human and changeling or was it more like mermaids who were half-human on top and half-fish on bottom? Did his genetics act differently? How close were humans and trolls in the aspect of DNA?

So. Many. Questions. Her lips thinned. She couldn’t ask them yet. Not right now. It was too soon to dump something like that on her son, if ever.

Immediately after the thought, her backdoor swung open. Jim ducked behind the backseat. She tried to glance back, but he was hidden beneath an old cloak, features obscured. Barbara sighed. Dang, she had hoped to see what he looked like.

“All ready then?” Barbara asked.

Toby nodded. “Yeah, dude, you gonna be okay?”

“No,” her son grumbled.

“Too bad,” Toby said, closing the door with a sharp click. “Good luck, Dr. L. Head’s up, he’s a bit moody.”

“Shut up, Tobes,” the boy growled. Barbara almost startled at the sound of it. There was a rumble in his throat, something distinctly inhuman about it.
“Adios!” He called out as Barbara reversed and pulled back onto the main street. Keeping a straight face, she drove on, trying to make sense of it all.

Her son shuffled around behind her. She couldn’t help but cast a glance or two at the rearview mirror. Unfortunately, she still couldn’t see past his hood.

Was he embarrassed of how he looked? He shouldn’t be. Barbara would love him, even if he looked like some creature from the black lagoon.

But did he know that? Judging from his terse body language, she determined her answer.

They traveled in silence. The sun slowly dipped past the valley’s edge. It had been cloudy for most of the day, but it dispersed near the end, leaving Arcadia with a lovely purple sunset. Maybe her and Jim could watch one together one day. He always did like sunsets.

“You shouldn’t be involved with me.”

Barbara almost pumped the brakes. Regathering herself, she answered with, “Huh?”

Her son’s shoulders rose, head inching upwards.

“Being around me is bad for you,” he reiterated in a monotone manner.

She lifted an eyebrow. “And why’s that?”

Her son paused. Finally, he answered, “I’ve killed someone.”

Her fingers gripped the steering wheel. She tried to pick apart his answer in her mind, but found herself unable to finish the thought. Instead, she responded with a question. “Does that have to do with your role as the Trollhunter?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.
Alright. Not what she hoped for (an explanation would have been nice), but she suspected his job was more than just a fancy title.

She adjusted her glasses. “Do you like it?”

“Killing?” He shook his head. “No. It makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Good, I mean, not good, but I’m glad you understand that.” She paused, licking her lips. “I’ve killed someone before as well.”

His head rose another inch. Faintly, she noticed blue eyes glowing underneath the darkness of his hood. “You?”

“A year into my residency. I made a mistake and didn’t catch it in time and someone died because of me.”

“But they would have died if you didn’t help.”

“Doesn’t matter. I had a chance and I failed,” she admitted.

It was something she would forever regret. The way the patient’s family looked at her would stay with her forever.

He leaned closer, remarking softly, “You did your best.”

“Sometimes, even the best isn’t enough. What I’m trying to say is that it doesn’t matter to me.” Barbara came to a rest at the stoplight. She turned around. Jim pulled back. “You’re my son. I love you, regardless of whatever you may do, good or bad.”

“I could hurt you, you know,” he mumbled.
The light flashed green. She returned to her drive. “Losing you was more painful than anything you
could do to me.”

“My people will kill and eat you if given a chance,” he remarked ominously.

Barbara rolled her eyes. “I’m prepared to face them if it comes to that.”

“You’re a human.”

“You’d be surprised what us humans can do,” she laughed.

They returned to silence, though this time the tension wasn’t nearly as thick as earlier.

What could she say to make him understand? Considering his upbringing, perhaps it would take her
longer than she thought to get through to him. What did she know about changelings? Hell, what did
she know about trolls?

God, she wished there was some sort of support group for mothers of half-human sons. ‘Mothers of
Supernatural Sons Anonymous’ perhaps? Her lips lifted up at the thought.

Minutes later, she pulled into the garage. Before he could evade her, Barbara quickly got out to move
into the backseat. Jim sighed, then scooted over to provide her room.

“Will you show me now?” She asked.

He pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. “You won’t like what you see.”

“I’m sure I’ve seen worse.”

The hood was lifted. She held her breath to keep from gasping.
She wouldn’t have recognized him if it weren’t for the eyes. Though the glow was a tad unnerving, they were the same color and shape. At least until they dilated. She could make out some of his face too, though his features were far more angular and longer than before.

Her hand slowly made contact with his own. The small warm hand she remembered was replaced with a cooler, rougher version, his nails nearly an inch from their beds and so dark she almost thought them painted. She took his hand into hers. It was so much bigger now. She had no doubt, if they had been standing, he would be the taller of them.

Jim’s shoulders rose the longer she inspected him. He watched her every expression. Her heart nearly broke at how vulnerable and tense he was. He was so much different than she remembered.

But, then again, so was she.

“I didn’t want you finding out like this,” he muttered, his gaze lowering. He let go of her hand. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

Her son. Even now, he was trying to protect her.

Barbara leaned forward, kissing his forehead lightly before resting her own head against his. He froze, eyes wide and confused.

“You don’t scare me. You could never scare me, sweetheart,” she confessed. “You’re my son. I can’t say this won’t take me awhile to get used to, but it doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

“Really?” His voice cracked.

She smiled. “Really, really.”

Before she could move, he buried his face into her shoulder, his arms suddenly around her back and neck.

With one free hand, she brushed his hair, welcoming the closeness. She hummed softly.
“Thank you,” he mumbled.

No, Barbara thought as she brought him closer, thank you.
Recipe for Disaster (I)

Chapter Summary

Atlas and Barbara bond over Chinese food, leaving the former in good spirits and the later in another mood entirely. Consequently, Barbara takes the initiative. Later, NotEnrique and Atlas haggle.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Finally back on a normal update schedule. Big thanks to Vici and Charlie for looking over this chapter and giving me feedback. Ya'll are awesome. Thank you for all the reviews, kudos, and favorites. Also, 3Below was fantastic! Staja was adorable.

Also, big thanks to Jeeb who did a fantastic art piece of Atlas. Here's a link: https://jeebdoesart.tumblr.com/post/181375754692/mine-to-command-hey-go-check-out

And Vici did another comic which is super awesome. It's from the last chapter. They've done other comics for Blue Moon Rising as well. I totally recommend checking them out. Here's a link: http://vvvici.tumblr.com/post/181486765836/blue-moon-rising-commission-for-tunafishprincess

If you've got any fanart for the fic, send me a message! I'll happily post a link to your tumblr, insta, etc...:D I really appreciate these you guys. Ya'll are the best fans a gal could ever hope for. Thank you for continuing to read. Seriously.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Atlas eyed the meal suspiciously.

Chicken wasn’t supposed to be that color. Nevertheless, he trusted Barbara’s choice. Takeout wasn’t something he normally did (with the exception of pizza), but ever since he became friends with Toby he had become more open to the concept.
Deciding to take the plunge, he picked up a fork and stabbed at the meat. It slid on well enough. He tore it open; releasing out a soft sigh, he was relieved to find the outside did not match the in. Good. While he enjoyed cooking human meals, there were many he had yet to encounter; case in point: Silly Panda’s orange chicken.

A second later, he plopped it into his mouth. Carefully munching the strange dish, he found it to be adequate. Atlas made a mental note to try his hand at the dish at some point. While it wasn’t nearly up to par as his Poulet de Provencal, the sauce provided enough flavor to cover what would otherwise be a rather bland piece of poultry. If they had really wanted it to delicious they should have cooked it at a different temperature and with far less salt.

Still, Atlas persevered. He had eaten worse.

“Is everything alright?” His mother inquired, brows drawn. The couch cushion creaked as she sat down next to him, shrimp fried rice in one hand and a fork in the other.

“Ah, yes,” he stammered, shoveling another piece into his mouth. A sprinkling of shame flowed through him. His mother had gotten this for him. He should be more appreciative. “Oh, so good,” he tried to moan. “I’ve never eaten Chinese takeout before.”

“You don’t have to pretend. I won’t get angry at you,” she remarked.

Giving up the act, Atlas set it down on the coffee table. His fingers drummed against his knees. “It’s not bad or anything. I just prefer to cook things myself.”

Of all the things he could do for his dad, cooking was the only useful thing he was able to do. He wasn’t the best fighter or the best spy, but damn could he make a good fennel and lemon risotto. It was his specialty. His gift. After all, what else could he offer?

The edges of his mother’s lips edged upwards, her eyes taking on a soft sheen. “Some things never change.”

His gaze traveled to the carpet. “Was I like that before?”
Nerves battled the growing curiosity at the pit of his stomach. Sure, talking about his past made him uncomfortable, but damn did it answer so many questions, like how he knew so many recipes when he’d arrived at the Order.

“For your eighth birthday you asked for a chef knife.” She let out a giggle. “You surpassed my cooking skills before you hit third grade.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’m pretty much the best cook in this town,” Atlas joked, one hand moving his fork back and forth between his fingers like his father did with his favorite pen.

She raised an eyebrow, her smile much more apparent. “Such modesty.”

“I try,” he answered, releasing a small chuckle.

This was nice. Was this how it was with moms? Barbara Lake was an enjoyable person to be around. After the car ride she had been so attentive to him, treating the cuts on his face in an efficient manner and helping him wash out the sewer water from his hair. It wasn’t like his other experiences with doctors. She was friendly, caring, relaxed—it put him at ease.

“So,” she said, turning her head toward him. “What happened today?”

And just as suddenly, the good feeling evaporated. Guilt and shame clawed at his insides. Sweet Pale Lady, he really screwed up today.

“And just as suddenly, the good feeling evaporated. Guilt and shame clawed at his insides. Sweet Pale Lady, he really screwed up today.

“A lot of bad decisions,” Atlas confessed, measuring each word that left his mouth. “I guess you could say I tried to change myself, but the new me wasn’t exactly the person I wanted myself to be.”

Understatement of the century, if not the millennia. Even now, just the thought of the word ‘crispy’ made him cringe. Gunmar’s saggy gronk-nuks, how was he going to fix this? He made a fool of himself at school today, and, to make matters worse, most likely destroyed any chance he would have had with Claire.

Not that they ever could have been anything.
She was a human. He was a changeling.

Right?

Atlas stared down at the chicken, appetite gone.

Right. It wouldn’t be fair to her. It was Atlas’s fault her brother got switched with a changeling. His hand tightened into a fist. If only he had stopped it sooner. He should have known. All the signs were there.

“And who do you want to be?” His mother asked, bringing him back to the subject at hand.

Atlas took a deep breath. Who did he want to be?

Every day it was harder and harder to stay with his brethren. Ever since becoming the Trollhunter, he became critical of them. Cynical almost, thought not quite. Atlas didn’t know how to describe it. He disliked humans before, but now, after interacting with them, he learned he was wrong. They were wrong. Humanity didn’t deserve Gunmar’s wrath. No one did.

Ice seeped into his veins as he continued through these thoughts, falling deeper and deeper into himself.

Since he wasn’t going to go with Gunmar’s plan, what did that mean for his position with the Janus Order? Atlas was technically at odds with them. Could he really lead them to changing their ways? He had changed. It wasn’t easy to accept the truths about his kind, but he got through it alright.

Who would listen to him though? Well, NotEnrique might be a good place to start. If he could convince him, maybe Trollmarket wouldn’t be against changelings so much. Maybe, if things went well after defeating Bular and destroying the bridge, he could convince Nomura and Stricklander to join too.

But how would Nomura and Stricklander react to his betrayal? It wasn’t like he had normal human relationships with them. Changelings were a multifaceted species. If he had to equate his relationship with Nomura, it would be a blend of older sister, trainer, and aunt all rolled into a prickly cactus who liked to beat him up from time to time. He knew—no, feared—what will happen when she found out. It ate him up at nights, almost as much as the thought of Stricklander discovering his secret.
It was one of his biggest regrets. He should have told them before he got so entangled with all the Trollhunter business.

He had to tell them when he defeated Bular.

No more waiting around.

He looked back down at his meal. Nausea rolled in.


Who was he?

“Good question,” he muttered aloud.

Something in his voice must have alerted his mother. Barbara scooted over; her hand rested upon his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I want you to know that no matter what happens, I love you,” she whispered.

Atlas smiled, the sudden chill in his blood no longer so frigid. Not gone, but abided.

For now.

“You barely know me,” Atlas said, gesturing to his body. “This me that is.”

Adjusting the glasses on her nose first, she answered in a warm tone, “Then let’s catch up. What’s your favorite color?”
“My favorite color?” Atlas couldn’t help but laugh. It was such a simple question. He’d been expecting something a bit more…more.

“Sorry, that’s probably a terrible question to start with,” she sighed. “As you can see, I’m not a very good conversationalist.”

“You’re fine,” Atlas said. “Plus, I’ve heard worse. You should hear some of Toby’s pickup lines.”

Fondness glinted behind her glasses. She shook her head, the emotion soon bypassing her eyes to take over the rest of her face. “Oh, believe me, I have. Nana tells me all of them. Almost every conservation we have she mentions something new he’s said.”

“Poor Tobes.” It was Atlas’s turn to shake his head. Somehow, it didn’t surprise Atlas that Toby’s Nana talked about her grandson so much. It was cute.

“Can I…” She covered half of her face, eyes traveling to the ceiling. “Oh, this is going to sound silly. Forget it.”

“You can tell me. I won’t laugh, mom. Promise,” he said.

Her eyes lit up at the familial title, an expression that continued to thaw out the freezing fear within himself. Atlas resolved to use it more often.

Finally, she blurted out, “Can I touch your ears?”

Atlas snorted. “My ears?”

“You said you wouldn’t laugh.”

“Okay, okay, sorry. Yeah, sure, just ah, be gentle? They’re sensitive.”

Atlas tried not to tense up as her hands came close to his head. To his surprise, the touch was not as bad as he thought it would be. Sure, it was strange, but her warm soft fingers were adept and gentle.
Subconsciously, he leaned in closer to her.

“Your skin is so different,” she said. “And they’re so pointy.”

He licked his lips before answering her earlier question. “It’s blue.”

“Well, that too,” she said.

“No, I was just…” He shaded his face like she did before, mumbling in an embarrassed manner, “Forget it.”

“I’m sorry?” Her brows rose as she realized what he meant. “Oh!”

“My favorite color. It’s blue.”

She tucked a stray bang behind his ear before pulling back. She nodded, then remarked, “Well, at least that’s not changed.”

“Let me guess, blue has always been my favorite color?” What a surprise. Another thing he shared with Jim.

How many things did he share with the person he was before? Was any of Atlas really him or something contrived from Jim?

And was that weird vision more than a dream? Atlas bit down on his inner cheek. No use dwelling on it now. He was already up to his eyeballs in problems. Thinking about how his existence came to be was…difficult.

She hummed in confirmation, adding, “since you could speak.”

“It’s really weird. Knowing about who I was, I mean,” he gestured to himself once more. “Before all this.”
“How has it been?”

“Oh, uh, okay,” he shrugged. “I’m still alive.”

“Still alive?” Her voice took on a worrying tone. She edged forward, one hand clenched to her breast.

“My…the changelings are a lot different than humans. Really secretive. Being allowed into their organization had bothered more than a few of them. I’m the youngest one too, so I get pushed around a lot,” he said. Noticing her discomfort, he added, “It’s not so bad though. I’ve got Ms. Nomura and dad. They protect me from the worst of it. I would trust them with my life.”

*But not with your secrets,* a small voice inside him snidely added.

Things had ebbed off since he was big enough to fight back now, but the teasing and whispers persisted. In the beginning, he had been surprised no one had figured out his secret yet, until he remembered why: Atlas was the lowest changeling in the picking order. His earlier inability to change marred any of his usefulness to his brethren. Had he not picked up the amulet, he probably would have ended up working under Stricklander for the rest of his life, doing odd jobs around the Order and the like.

Atlas would have been satisfied with that before. He had owed the older changeling his life.

But now, somehow, that kind of life didn’t seem as interesting. It was as if he had outgrown the shell he once occupied. Being the head’s assistant no longer held the same allure. He wanted more.

What he wanted more of he had yet to figure out however.

“And this dad is the mentor you spoke of, right?”

“Right,” he confirmed.
“What’s his name?”

He swallowed, throat closing. “I can’t tell you that,” he said. It came out colder than he intended.

Barbara brought her hands together atop her lap, staring down at them. “Is there anything you can tell me?”

He almost flinched at the sound of her solemn voice. He hadn’t meant to push her away. If anything, he wanted to pull her close. Having a mom was something he never thought could be possible for someone like him. Now, finally being able to be with her drove home all the worst kinds of thoughts imaginable. This was his mom. He couldn’t lose her.

His breath hitched.

Bular would kill her if he knew.

And Atlas knew he wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop him.

Bular was strong. Arrogant, but rightly so. His battle prowess was legendary. Even with the Grit-Shaka Atlas barely survived.

“I meant what I said before. Being around me is dangerous. Tobes has been targeted already. It’s why AAARRRGGHH!!! lives with him, to keep him safe,” Atlas voiced.

It was why Draal lived in her basement, despite Atlas’s earlier reservations.

His mother’s gaze greeted his, both brows coming together. “AAARRRGGHH!!!?”

“Uh,” Atlas scratched his cheek as he tried to figure out the best description for the other. “The big green hairy troll.”

“The one Toby was riding on the night with the goblins?” She asked, her voice no longer so forlorn as previously.
Atlas nodded. “Exactly.”

“And the six eyed troll, what’s his name?”

“Blinky.”

She pursed her lips. “Blinky?”

Her hand reached down to the table, picking up a glass of water. Atlas watched as she took a sip.

“Technically, that’s his nickname,” Atlas spoke up. “His full name is Blinkous.”

She choked on her water. Atlas couldn’t help but laugh. She threw him an annoyed glare.

There. He smiled. He preferred this kind of reaction to the previous one.

“I know. I thought the same thing,” he said, recalling the moment he heard it.

Taking a moment to recollect herself, she answered, “You’ve got a pretty interesting group of friends there.”

Atlas blinked. “Friends…” It did seem that way now, didn’t it? They had only been together a little while, but he was surprised how well he got along with them. Sure, they all had their quirks and they didn’t always see eye to eye, but he respected them and they him. It was nice. “Yeah, I guess they are now.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Now?” He yawned involuntarily. Suddenly, all the day’s activities bared down on him. His chest ached from where Bular hit him earlier. His hand, the one burned by lightning, throbbed to the beat of his heart.
But the pain could not override his exhaustion. How long had it been since he had a full night sleep? Sweet Pale Lady, he would give anything for a few good hours of rest.

“Maybe find a tree and rest until I have to get back to the Order,” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“You could rest here,” she suggested.

He glanced up, eyes wide.

“Are you sure?” He asked hesitantly.

“Jim, you’re always welcome here. This is your home,” she stressed.

She brought their foreheads together for a moment. Atlas closed his eyes, savoring it. The action was both familiar and alien. Was it weird he felt so comfortable with her?

Was it because she was a woman? No, that didn’t make sense. He never felt this way with Nomura, and Claire—well—that was a different feeling all together.

“Oh kay,” he said. “But just for tonight.”

She got up, moving to a nearby closet. Atlas watched absentmindedly, his body sinking into the couch. He turned his head into one of the pillows. Her scent faintly clung to the material. His shoulders loosened, eyes drooping. Faintly, he heard the pitter-patter of feet in the basement. Draal, he realized. How long had he been down there? Had he been listening to their conversation?

Had Atlas been more alert, he wouldn’t have chosen such a spot to rest, especially when his enemy—well, former enemy—walked but a few meters below him.

As it was, he kicked his feet up on the coffee table, sliding down further into the old furniture.
“Would you like a pillow?” She asked, handing it out carefully. Atlas took the offered item graciously, placing it between his head and the couch cushion. *Hmm,* he thought, *soft.* He tucked his arms underneath his cloak, curling in on himself as he slowly drifted off.

“Do you need anything else?” She said, stroking his hair.

He grumbled a soft “no.”

The cold in his blood was gone now, replaced with a thick, sluggish warmth. It was as though his entire being was encased in heated honey.

It was a rare instance, one where Atlas didn’t feel the need to keep his attention to the doors or windows. Bular would not find him here. For now, he was safe.

“Alright,” she said, stroking his cheek. “Good night, Jim.”

Atlas opened his eyes ever so slightly. “Hey,” he mumbled, his words slurred by exhaustion. “Can I tell you something?”

She brushed his bangs once more. He liked that. “Sure, sweetheart.”

“I don’t really go by Jim anymore. Between us, can you call me Atlas?” He asked.

She paused mid-stroke, her eyes wide. Shit, had he said the wrong thing?

“Atlas?” She said. “That’s an unusual name.”

He rolled over on his side. “My mentor gave it to me.”

“Did he now? It’s a nice name,” she said, her voice once again fond and gentle.
His shoulders relaxed. It continued to amaze him how accepting she was.

“Yeah, I think so too.” Atlas smiled before finally drifting off.

Her phone buzzed, alerting her of the time. Not that it mattered. She was too alert to sleep, especially with her son so close by.

And the new information he told her still echoing through her mind.

Jim—Atlas— was Walt’s son. Barbara couldn’t believe it. It couldn’t be true.

Could it?

Her fingers rattled against the keyboard, her laptop perched on the arm of the couch. Not too loudly, for she didn’t want to wake the boy, but the steady clicking noise kept her mind sharp and awake. That and the coffee.

Actually, it might just be the coffee.

Nevertheless, there were too many coincidences for them not to be connected. If there was one thing Barbara had learned over the past month, it was that.

She analyzed everything Walt had ever mentioned to her about his ‘son’. Allergies her ass.

Her gaze settled on her son’s prone form. He looked so peaceful. So young.

Barbara swallowed the growing hysteria inside her throat.
Oh god. Her baby boy was sixteen and fighting monsters.

It was a tough pill to swallow. Everything she knew about Jim had changed. The soft sweet boy had become a rough secretive teen.

Her fingers traveled to his head. She tried to brush back the more stubborn hairs, but they refused to stay down. The best she could do was tuck it behind his ear, which comically twitched every time she tried.

A soft ringing noise startled her. Her cell! Shoot, she forgot to turn off the sound.

Atlas groaned. Barbara immediately hurried out of the room, settling into the downstairs bathroom. Closing the door, she answered.

“Walt, hi,” she stammered, heart thumping wildly against her chest. This wasn’t like the other times however. No flutter erupted within her belly. Not this time.

Walt was very possibly (no, certainly, she thought) a changeling.

A changeling who knew about trolls and the Trollhunter.

A changeling that wanted to kill her entire species.

A changeling she had been crushing on for almost a month.

A cold sweat broke out.

She needed to control the situation. Think, she told herself. She was a doctor. She had dealt with unruly patients. This should be a piece of cake, right?

This could be something she could use. She had wanted to learn more about her son’s other side. If
she could only get him to confess—

But how? What could she do to make him tell her?

Interrogation? Threats? Poison?

Seduction?

Her cheeks burned.

“Barbara,” Walt began, tone apologetic. “I am deeply sorry about last weekend. The dinner, it completely skipped my mind. With all these papers, I—”

“It’s okay. Everything’s fine. I forgot too.” She hadn’t, but she’d been more focused on other things at that point. Not that he needed to know that.

“Oh, well,” he chuckled, voice deep and rich. “Look at us, two scatterbrains.”

She adjusted her glasses, looking at herself in the mirror. She could do this. “W-Would you, ah, still like to come over?”

Did she sound sexy enough?

She covered her eyes. God, did she seriously ask herself if she sounded ‘sexy’? It was high school all over again.

He paused for a moment before remarking in a shaky, “Pardon?”

“For dinner,” she replied. “You and me. I mean, it won’t be as fancy as a French bistro, but I figured we didn’t really need all that anyway.”
“Something more intimate I take it?” He asked, accent thicker.

She held her breath before answering an airy “yes.”

“Barbara, there’s something I need to speak with you about. I’m not so sure a dinner—”

“I want to talk to you as well,” she interrupted. “I’ve got so many questions.”

“What kinds of questions?”

Shit! *Improvise*, Barbara thought. “Well, where are you from?”

And, once again, her conversation skills failed her.

Immediately, he answered, “London.”

“Oh, really?” Liar. He was probably from Changelandia or where they came from. How had she not seen it before?

Who was Walter Strickler?

Was that even his real name?

“You caught me.” He amended, “I was originally born in Greece.”

“I can never tell if you’re telling me the truth or not, Walt,” Barbara admitted.

“Barbara, I would never lie to you.”
But you just did, Barbara thought mournfully.

No, don’t focus on his lies, Barbara told herself. She was going to get information, no matter what. She understood why her son refused to give her much information, but that didn’t stop her from trying to find out more.

She lost her son once.

Never again.

“Tomorrow—er, tonight. Bring the wine,” she said. “I’ll cook.”

“So demanding,” he joked.

Barbara flicked back a stray hair, remarking airily, “I suppose I could invite someone else to dine with me.”

A bit bold of her. Walt wasn’t lacking in the looks department. If he wanted, Barbara suspected he could ring half the town’s population of women. It wasn’t like Barbara was exactly a looker. Long hours at the clinic gave her little time to do makeup or style her hair. It was why she always set it in a low bun.

“But I could never turn down such a lovely invitation,” he laughed, voice husky. “Tonight it is then. Ta-ta, love.”

The line ended. Barbara stared down at her cell.

She did it.

Now was the hard part.

What, exactly, was she going to do once he got here?
Drugging him was a possibility. Still, what if she used too much chloroform? Where could she even legally get it? It wasn’t like the clinic had any readily available and even if it did, she wouldn’t be able to walk out of the office with it.

But he raised her son. Maybe he could be reasoned with in some manner. They both cared for him after all.

Closing the door, she nearly jumped out of her body at the sight of her son in the kitchen, rummaging through her refrigerator.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“Oh hey. Sorry for sleeping on your couch.” He said. “Who were you talking to in there?”

“You were listening?”

He gestured to his ears. “Not too much. I was too busy trying to figure out what to cook. There’s, like, nothing in here. When was the last time you went grocery shopping?”

Barbara rolled her eyes. Was her son actually judging her ability to feed herself? “Awhile. I’ll go later today.”

“You still didn’t answer my question,” he said, pulling out a carton of eggs. “How old are these?” He checked the label and gasped. “How do you live?”

“Oh shush,” she said, pouring herself another cup of coffee. “It was just a friend.”

A friend who she was cooking a romantic dinner for then planning on grilling for information regarding trollkind and changelings, with or without his consent.

Wow, Barbara thought, that sounded a lot worse when summarized like that.
“You have friends?”

“Cute,” she said, playfully punching him in the arm. “Since you’re rummaging through my kitchen, I take it you want something to eat?”

His ears twitched upwards, eyes alert and focused. “Wait, what time is it?”

She checked the clock on her phone. “A quarter to six.”

“Shit,” Atlas cursed, standing up to his full height. “Sorry. I need to get over to a certain someone’s house before daylight. He’s got something of mine that I need to get back before I go to school.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you there?” Barbara offered.

He shook his head, heading for the door. “Better not. It could put you at an even greater risk.”

She followed. “What’s going to happen?”

“Huh?”

“When you defeat whoever it is you need to defeat? What then?”

He folded his arms, eyes cast toward the floor. “I don’t…it’s hard to explain. I’ll tell you another time.”

“Fine, then,” she said. Seeing his discomfort, she switched the subject. “The school is going to find out sooner or later. What about Parent-Teacher conferences?”

“Parent-Teacher what?” He said, shoulders hiked in alarm.

“Your teachers are going to want to meet with me soon enough,” Barbara voiced in concern. She
drew closer, reaching out to stroke his cheek. “You can’t keep this going forever.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure it out,” he said, placing a hand atop her own.

“I can’t help but worry.” She said. “I’m your mom.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Well, if you moved in…”

He pulled away, opening up the backdoor. Outside, the night sky had already begun to brighten. “I’m not so sure this is a good time.”

Barbara sighed. And once more, she’d pushed him too much. It was as if she were interacting with a skittish animal. As much as she wanted to envelope him in her arms and never let him go, she knew what sort of power she had here.

*Soon*, she hoped. But for now, she would settle for this. She had to.

“Alright,” she said, leaning against the door. “Well, you know you’re always welcome here.”

His shoulders lowered, his eyebrows no longer so wary. “Thanks.”

With a flick of his hand, the hood returned. It amazed her how fluidly he moved, like a mountain lion stalking its next meal. Right before he hit the fence, he turned back, the glow of his eyes the only detail she could pick out.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot to tell you.” He sucked in a deep breath. “I sorta let a troll live in your basement. His name is Draal. He likes to eat metal cans and stuff. Sorrygottagobye!”

He leaped the fence a second later, cloak billowing behind him as he ran off into the woods, the morning dawn steadily rising.
Barbara stood at the door, not entirely certain of what just happened.

Who was Draal?

A dark shadow loomed behind his bedroom window.

“Let me in,” the shade said.

“What’s in it for me?” He asked.

“You son of a—”

NotEnrique pushed the window up, giving his visitor a toothy grin. He knew the brat would be back, he just didn’t think it would be so soon. Atlas swung himself forward, summersaulting inside before landing on his feet.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” he cheekily remarked in their native tongue. “You look like crap.”

Atlas rolled his eyes, checking the perimeters of the room before settling his attention on NotEnrique.

“Good morning to you too. I see you’re getting the hand of human idioms,” Atlas answered back in English.

“I’m a fast learner,” he sneered. “Whatcha doing here, Trollhunter?”
“You know why I’m here.”

NotEnrique picked at his teeth. “Humor me.”

The other rolled his eyes. “You’re really going to make me say it?”

“Say what?” He batted his eyes, enjoying the disgruntled reaction of the boy.

“I need the gaggle tack,” Atlas stressed. “I know you have one.”

NotEnrique jumped, landing on the other’s left shoulder. Atlas tried to throw him off, but the changeling merely crawled to the other side, chuckling deviously. He flicked the teen’s ear, cackling as it twitched erratically. A low growl interrupted his merriment. NotEnrique sighed, raising both hands. What a party pooper. Well, at least his reactions were more interesting than the rest of the Order.

“What happened to the other one?” NotEnrique said.

The teen crossed his arms. “It disappeared.”

“Not a good enough answer,” NotEnrique drawled. “Gaggle tacks are rare. I ain’t just gonna hand mine out all willy-nilly without a little more information.”

“Your gaggle tack? You stole it from me,” Atlas accused.

NotEnrique remarked in a sing-song manner, “Finders keepers losers weepers.”

Atlas paced around the room for a moment before admitting, “Fine. I lost it.”

He broke out into a fit of laughter. “You…You lost it?”
What was Merlin thinking, choosing this guy? NotEnrique was surprised he hadn’t been caught yet. More and more, he was beginning to wonder how competent their Order truly was, especially if they couldn’t stop some guy who hadn’t even hit a century yet.

“It was an accident,” Atlas defended.

“I’m not giving you shit until ya tell me more,” he countered, rubbing his hands together gleefully. This should be good.

“Fine, I might have…” He paused. “Well, I might have ‘yeeted’ it.”

“Yeeted?”

His shoulders hitched up, his gaze focused on the window. “I kicked it into the garbage while using the Grit-Shaka, okay? I thought I didn’t need it anymore.”

NotEnrique gave the other a long look before cracking up. He hadn’t had this much fun in decades.

The ends of the Trollhunter’s ears turned a darker color, his mouth twisted into an annoyed scowl. A regular changeling wouldn’t give him so much emotion. It was part of the reason NotEnrique liked to mess with the brat. He could be so easily frazzled.

“You’re a bloody idiot,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. How Bular hadn’t killed this fool he had no clue. Hell, it was a surprise he even lived with that old goat as Trollmarket’s head. Eh, NotEnrique shivered at the thought, best not to think about him for a while. Bossman was hard enough to deal with, but Vendel, man, that troll was something else.

“You’re a dick,” Atlas responded dryly.

NotEnrique fluffed his hair, replying, “You’re a worthless loser.”
“You’re a fucking muppet reject,” Atlas sounded out.

His brows drew together, the words meaningless to him. “A what?”

The teen pointed to him, releasing a loud “Ha!”

Footsteps echoed through the hallway. Atlas and NotEnrique froze. Thankfully, the owner disappeared, descending down the staircase.

“Keep it down, will ya?” NotEnrique whispered.

“Just give me the gaggletack and I’ll go,” Atlas said.

“How about a game then? You look ‘round the room and I’ll tell you if you’re close.”

“Or,” Atlas said, flashing his fangs. “I could make you.”

“I’ll scream if you do. Sides, ain’t giving away anything without something in return.” He cocked his head to the side, hands rising to his hips. “Speaking of something, you got the goods?”


Catching the delicacies, he immediately snarfed the first down, savoring the smell aroma and fluffy texture. Noticing Atlas watching him, he said, “Yummy. You want a piece?”

“I don’t eat socks,” he stated, taking a step closer to the window.

“Colder,” NotEnrique said.

“What?”
“Thought you wanted the gaggetack.”

Atlas shook his head, shifting back to where he was.

“Now you’re slightly warmer,” he teased.

NotEnrique jumped off the teen’s shoulder onto the top of his crib. Picking up his baby bottle, he motioned it at the Trollhunter’s face. “You’re a strange one, ain’t cha?”

Atlas pushed the bottle aside then continued around the room, opening up NotEnrique’s toy chest. As he searched for the gaggetack, he answered back, “Well, you’re not exactly like the other changelings either.”

“I’m my own changeling. Thought the Order was gonna be exciting and stuff, like the others used to say, but all everyone talks about is Gunmar this, Bular that. Bloody bullshit. Where’s the excitement?”

Here he’d been expecting high level espionage and subterfuge and all he got was eating and sleeping most of the day. Sure, he enjoyed the freedom to laze around, but he had been hoping for something a bit more fun, yeah?

“The Janus Order has never been about excitement,” Atlas stated. “We’re trying to hide from humanity’s watch, remember?”

“’Cept you.”

He lifted his head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Can’t even change without help. What kind of changeling are you?”

“I can change,” Atlas said defensively. “I know I can. I did it before.”
“Not without a grit-shaka.”

“No. There was one time, before, I—” Atlas huffed, turning away from NotEnrique. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like I’ll ever be able to do it again.”

“Colder.”

Atlas threw up his hands. Brushing off his pants, he got up, switching his focus to the small wardrobe in the corner. As he shuffled through the clothes, NotEnrique jumped on his shoulders, using the other’s horns to steady himself before he peered over Atlas’s head.

“Didn’t anybody teach you?” NotEnrique inquired.

“Teach me to change? Hardly.” Atlas raised an eyebrow. “Why do you care?”

“Don’t care. Just interested is all. Ain’t never met a hybrid before.”

“How do you change?”

“I just do it. Nuff said. Easy Peasy-like,” he said, waving his hand in the air.

“Gee, thanks for the help,” Atlas said dryly.

“Wasn’t offering any. Look kid, it’s like an emotion. A feeling,” NotEnrique described. “You’ll know it when it happens. Every changeling knows it.”

“A feeling?” Atlas said.

“Ask bossman.”

“Easy for you to say,” Atlas scoffed.
“Then why not ask someone in the Order?”

“I doubt anyone at the Janus Order would be willing to help me without something in return,” Atlas replied.

“Then talk with changelings outside of it.”

“There are changelings outside of the Janus Order?” Atlas asked, eyes wide with interest.

Did the kid seriously not know? Wow, talk about a shitty education.

“Course there are. Not everyone can get into the Order. Only the cream of the crop guys. The best of the best,” he sniffed. “’Cept you of course.”

If the barb bothered the teen, he didn’t show it. Instead, he appeared intrigued, asking, “How many of us are out there?”


Using the other’s shoulders as a springboard, he flipped backwards, landing on the carpet on all fours.

“What do you mean?”

“Either Gunmar lost interest or the magic to make us died with the Pale Lady. I was one of the last batches.”

Atlas crouched down until he was eyelevel with him. “Did you…did you ever see any changeling who looked like me?”
“Like you? Pft, ain’t any changeling who looks like you,” he answered, giving the teen a hard look-over. His features were a blend of the two races, more than any other changeling he had seen yet. No wonder the other members of the Order were bothered by the kid. He was like some uncanny valley shit made real.

“I mean the troll part of me,” Atlas said.

“Nope. Maybe a European breed. Buncha fancy fluffers those are,” he stated.

“What’s your breed?”

A flare of anger spiked within him. NotEnrique crawled back a top his crib, hitting the mobile lazily. He watched it spin for a moment, then muttered darkly, “Don’t know, don’t care. S’not like it matters. Once you’re made a changeling, that’s what you’ll always be. It’s in our blood. We were made to be Gunmar’s servants.”

“Were we though?” Atlas settled his forearms against the top of the crib, head leaning to the side. “What if we’re meant for more?”

“More?” NotEnrique scrunched up his nose. “What else could there be?”

Atlas’s eyes brightened. He got up, arms open wide. “We could be more than what we were made for. We could be better. We’ve got the technology and magic to give Gunmar a run for his horns. We could start a revolution.” He lifted up a fist, a hopeful smile emerging. “We could rule ourselves.”

Rule themselves? Changelings?

“That’s crazy talk.” NotEnrique muttered, “Should give you up to bossman right now.”

“You could, but then they’d find out how much you knew,” the brat responded.

“I ain’t gonna defend your ass,” NotEnrique spat.
Did the kid seriously think the Janus Order would betray Gunmar? Sure, one or two changelings might join (the crazy ones), but all of them? Together?

Hogwash. It was an impossible dream. NotEnrique looked away, no longer interested in messing with the brat. It wasn’t worth it.

It was only a matter of time before the kid was dead, and NotEnrique sure as hell wasn’t gonna be joining him anytime soon.

“We just have to take Bular out and destroy the bridge,” Atlas explained. “Once he’s gone, the Janus Order will break apart.”

“Have you met the bossman?” NotEnrique asked in an incredulous manner. While not as worldly as the other changelings, he knew enough about power vacuums to predict what would happen. Stricklander wasn’t a changeling you wanted to fuck with.

“We could do it though,” Atlas urged. “We don’t need Gunmar. We can rule ourselves. We can be free.”

Free? What a childish concept. Atlas was the only one whose human form wasn’t tied to the Darklands. How could the rest of them be free when Gunmar held their familiars under his thumb? No, there was no freedom for the likes of them.

“We’re finished.” NotEnrique growled, fishing beneath the crib’s mattress for the gaggetack.

Atlas’s brows shot up. “What?”

“Take your stupid gaggetack,” he said, throwing the horseshoe at the boy. Atlas caught it mid-air. “This is the last thing I’m doing for ya. I ain’t gonna squeal but I aint’ gonna help ya either. I don’t want nothing to do with your ‘changeling revolution’. Now you’re just courting death.”

The Trollhunter looked down at the iron piece, bangs clouding his eyes. Finally, he nodded.

A minute later and the other was gone, the only evidence of his presence the scattered toys he left behind. NotEnrique glared at the mobile above the crib before smacking it so hard it broke off its string, spinning off into the corner of the room. Great. More for him to clean up.

He really screwed up this time. Playing the two groups hadn’t gone the way he expected. NotEnrique groaned. Pale Lady’s bottom, he was in over his head. Why oh why did he get himself into this?

Releasing a dramatic sigh, NotEnrique fell backwards into the crib. His back hit the material with a soft thumb, sending his blankie skywards. Snatching it, he carefully nestled inside of it, resolving to sleep the rest of the morning.

Screw the Trollhunter.

Screw the bossman.

Screw everyone.
Recipe for Disaster (II)

Chapter Summary

Claire is crafty and Atlas is anxious and Strickler, well, he's getting ready for a date.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter! Big thanks to brothebro, vici, and charlie for helping me with this chapter! Thank you for all the awesome reviews and favorites. The stuff you guys write every week brings tears to my eyes. Also, bunch of cool fanart, oh my gosh! You guys are fantastic!

ghostdog did a lovely rendition of Atlas on instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/BsGSsXFn_JG/

It-is-dark-again also did a gorgeous commission of Atlas which I positively love and is now my phone's lock screen: http://it-is-dark-again.tumblr.com/image/181631921385

jhfhffjhdhl! brothebro, I love you! They did an awesome Atlas/Code Geass crossover which is now my phone's home screen and it is pure adorbs: https://brothebro.tumblr.com/post/181642278080/atlas-of-the-rebellion-first-artwork-for-2019

Please follow and support these artists! They are all wonderful and I think they all do commissions. Seriously. I feel so blessed by so many awesome folks in this fandom.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Claire wasn’t watching Atlas. No, that would be weird. Observing. Yes, that was it. It sounded scientific, without the emotional add-ons any other girl might have.
While still angry at him (furious, actually, how dare he call her that word in the middle of rehearsal), she couldn’t help but feel anxious. His face carried more Band-Aids than yesterday, and as much as she would rather be done with that asshole, her heart clinched at the sight of him having difficulty getting into his chair as class started.

As he shuffled around through his backpack for a notebook and pen, she caught sight of the additional bandages around his hand. Her eyes widened. It struck her that she’d nearly forgotten about them yesterday. When did that happen? It hadn’t been too long. Were they there that night he went home with Eli?

This didn’t strike her as normal teenage clumsiness.

Ugh! Claire ran a hand down her face. This was ridiculous. She was ridiculous. Why did she even care? Especially after what happened. Anger built within; her face burned in remembrance.

The rumors about yesterday continued to run wild. Someone ‘spiking him with acid’ was the most prevailing one, though ‘trying to get on tv’ and ‘bringing attention the school play’ weren’t too far behind in the polls.

*Bringing attention.* Yeah, that was one word for it. Instinctively, she covered her reddening face. Good thing most of the class was too busy being bored to care. She snuck a glance back at the object of her anger. Did Atlas get the gravity of what he did? As much as Claire wished that their play would be successful, she never wanted it *this* kind of attention. If someone called her *Juliet* one more time, Claire swore she was going to—

"War is constant chaos,” Mr. Strickler said, drowning out her thoughts. Her eyes flickered up before settling back on her notes. Claire settled her cheek into one palm as she listened on. “The winner will be the one who controls the chaos, both his own and his enemy's. Napoleon's words show an unquenchable need for conquest. A man who could not be stopped. So, what was the French general's downfall? Did he stare down the barrel of a cannon?” He paused, then added in a dry tone, “Did he die from the deafening silence of a classroom?”

The class laughed. Even she couldn’t help but giggle.

As Mr. Strickler continued his lecture, Claire found herself lost in thought once more, though this time for another reason. Her ears couldn’t help but pick up a conversation a few seats behind her. Recognizing the voices, she leaned back.
“He miscalculated,” Atlas answered, so softly she could barely hear it. “Napoleon made a mistake. He forgot Britain had friends.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” he sighed. “Doesn’t matter anyway. Whatever answer you give him will be wrong.”

“Man, look at him. He’s got them all eating out of his hand,” Toby grumbled. “His creepy troll hand.”

“Speaking of trolls, I met with you-know-who this morning.”

“You talked to him?” Toby asked. “How’d it go?”

Atlas released a soft groan. She pretended to stretch, catching sight of his somber face. Toby looked up from his cell, giving the other a small pat on the back.

“That bad huh?”

“Yeah, looks like we’re back to square one again.”

The other boy whistled. “Yikes. Really bad then.”

“He said the deal was off. Shut me down completely. I thought…I thought he would be easier to convince, you know? Since he was new and all. But I was wrong. Fuck, Tobes, if he reacted like that how do you think dad is gonna be?” Atlas’s voice hitched. “He’s gonna kill me, Tobes.”

Claire resisted the urge to swerve around. Something in his tone didn’t sound like Atlas was expecting a typical grounding. It was too subdued, as if he fully expected the meaning of his words.

Santa Maria, how had she ignored this? Atlas’s dad was physically and emotionally abusing him. She had inklings of it before, but now, as she listened in, the pieces all linked together. It was much bigger than she could have ever imagined.
This was the real deal.

She clenched her pencil. The absences, the bruises, the hurtful emotional outburst yesterday—they were clues. She still didn’t forgive him for his words, but she could at least understand subjectively where they came from. Compassion flowed through her.

Already Claire began to put together what she would tell CPS. She presumed the male they spoke of to be someone in Atlas’s family. Maybe a cousin or uncle? Was it about the play? She returned to eavesdropping.

Toby scratched his cheek. “What are you gonna do about the bridge?”


Bridge? Claire’s nose scrunched, confusion rising.

“You’re still on that? Dude, what if they move it again?” Toby pressed.

“They won’t.”

“I’m still kinda peeved you won’t tell us where it is.”

“That’s not my problem.” Atlas’s voice took on an aggressive edge.

Claire instinctively sat up straighter. This conversation was veering into unknown territory. Was the bridge a metaphor for something?

Toby whistled softly. “You’re moody today.”

“Thot calling the cattle snack much?” Jim said before snorting at the end of his words.
“That’s…” All Claire could hear was Toby shuffling in his chair, or was that laughing? “That’s not how that saying goes at all. That doesn’t even make sense,” Toby whispered back. “You’re messing with me again, you sonava—”

“Boys, is there something you would like to share with the class?” Mr. Strickler interrupted frostily.

Both boys sat erect, eyes wide as saucers. The class (including Claire) watched the event with bored fascination.

“No, sir,” they answered.

“As I was saying,” he turned his back to the two. He clicked the monitor button. Immediately, a mosquito appeared on the screen. “Malaria. The world’s most powerful army felled by the bite of an insignificant insect.”

The bell rang as soon as he finished his sentence. She watched as Atlas tried to get out of his chair, only to be held down by Mr. Strickler’s firm grip.

“One last lesson,” he looked around the class, a bemused smile at his lips. “Who can tell me where Napoleon kept his armies?” He waited a moment before delivering the punchline. “In his sleevies.”

Claire chuckled, but only because the rest of her classmates did. Something about that move bothered her for some reason. Atlas’s complexion was a shade paler, his gaze fixed at the hand on his shoulder.

Her eyes narrowed. Curious.

Mr. Strickler settled his attention back to Atlas, his hand still on his shoulder. “Mr. Lake, if I could have a brief word before you leave.” He looked to the frozen Toby at Atlas’s side. “Alone, please.”

“Um, could it be some other time, Mr. Strickler?” Toby said in a shaky manner, reaching out to grab Atlas’s arm. “Jimbo has to go make up a quiz. A super important one.”
“I see, well,” he smiled. Claire’s gaze locked on Atlas’s. Pure unadulterated panic stared back at her. Alarms immediately began going off in her head. “A raincheck then. How does tomorrow sound?”

“Yeah. Sure, Mr. Strickler,” Atlas said, voice cracking at the end.

The second he released Atlas’s shoulder the two boys shot out of the door like bats out of hell, not even acknowledging the rest of the moving students as they brushed past.

Claire tried to follow, only to be stopped at the threshold.

“Looks like someone still has eyes for Jim,” Darci remarked, the pain of yesterday’s remarks making themselves known in her tone. “Didn’t you learn anything from yesterday? That guy is bad news with a capital B.”

“Remember that letter I was telling you about? The one where he was fighting all of those inner monsters?” Claire replied, tucking a lock behind her ear.

Mary joined the conversation, eyes locked on her phone as she said, “Girl, why are you still obsessed with that weirdo?”

“You don’t think he’s crazy, do you?” Darci whispered as they walked through the corridor. Claire scanned the crowd for the two. How had they disappeared so quickly?

“Oh yeah, after yesterday? Like, I’m surprised Principal Levit only let him off with like, a week’s worth of detention,” Mary spoke up.

Claire shook her head, frustration building. “No, guys, I don’t…”

Darci reacted first, her hand gently resting atop her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I think something’s wrong with his family,” Claire admitted. Inwardly, she breathed a sigh of relief, despite the guilt it accrued. This was Atlas’s secret. Talking so openly about it felt wrong, almost like gossip. Nevertheless, she needed to tell someone, and why not start with the two people she trusted the most in the world?
“What? They’re a bunch of loonies or something?” Said Mary.

“Doesn’t anyone else notice how many bruises he comes to school with? I’ve talked to him about it. I think…Listen, you can’t tell anybody, okay?”

“Pinkie promise,” Darci said, linking the small finger with Claire’s own. She couldn’t help but smile.

Mary finally looked up from her phone. “Alright. What’s up, C-bomb?”

“Jim is being abused. The signs are all there,” Claire confessed. She knew she was right. She was about everything else. What else could it be?

The monsters were a metaphor for his father and the other members of his family. Claire was certain of it.

“Are you sure?” Mary raised an eyebrow. “He doesn’t look abused to me.”

“I aced AP Psychology, Mary. Besides, looking abused isn’t what abuse is about. Most of the time, people don’t even see it, even the victims themselves.” She sighed, brushing back her bangs. “I think yesterday was a cry out for help. I know that sounds insane, but all the facts add up. His strict, absent dad, his weird family, all the excuses and injuries—there’s just something missing. I can’t put my finger on it.”

Once Darci adjusted the strap of her bag, she suggested in a thoughtful tone, “You should tell the school guidance counselor. Or maybe Mr. Strickler. I’ve seen students go to him before for help.”

Claire wondered whether Mr. Strickler was in on it at this point, especially the look Atlas had given him.


“I don’t have any evidence. And At—Jim will just deny anything I say,” she said mournfully.
Darci threw her a sympathetic look. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed, her mouth set as she came to a resolution. “But I’m going to find out.”

Tracking down Atlas was easier said than done. She struggled through the flow of student traffic, narrowly dodging a group of huddling freshmen. No matter how hard she tried, she could never keep an eye on his back, merely glimpses. He was like water. Thankfully, neither he nor Toby noticed her. Yet.

It was when they arrived at the boy’s locker-room that she came to discover how difficult this little spy mission might become. After waiting for the hallways to clear, she entered. The heavy odor of men’s body spray and gym socks struck her immediately. She pinched her nose. Ew.

Tiptoeing across the tiled floor, she placed her back against the wall, moving closer to the objective of her mission.

“You need to get to your next class,” Atlas said.

Her heart seized up. For a moment she thought it was for her, until she heard Toby respond, “What about you?”

“Dad texted me. Says it’s urgent I attend to him.”

“Attend?” Toby spat the word out like it was cursed. “Dude, why do you let him treat you like a lapdog?”

A bright light overtook the area. Claire had to cover her face. As she blinked the stars out of her eyes, she noticed a distinct change in Atlas’s voice. It was deeper somehow.

“He’s our leader. I can’t refuse a call, Tobes. Especially after what happened last night,” Atlas explained.
Wait, what just happened? Atlas’s dad was a leader of something? Suddenly, the carefully constructed image in her mind began to fall apart.

“Allright, just…” Toby released a long sigh. “Text me when it’s over, dude.”

“You know I will. And hey, Tobes?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I was a jerk.”

“Yeah, you were. Now come over here and give me a hug—too tight! Too tight! Crushing spine, dude!”

Atlas laughed. “I’ll meet up with you after school, okay?”

“Awesome sauce. Adios, amigo,” Toby answered, alerting Claire of his vicinity. Shit! He was only a few seconds away from discovering her.

“Oh no,” she mouthed. Claire frantically looked around for a hiding spot. Finding no other option than the clothes hamper, she jumped inside.

Claire listened in as Toby’s footsteps disappeared. Relief flowed through her, until she remembered the other person in the wrong. Where were Atlas’s footsteps? Once the coast was clear, she pulled herself out. Listening for a few seconds, she found no evidence of the other teen.

She spent the next several minutes checking the locker-room from top to bottom, but Atlas had vanished. Poof! As though he were never there in the first place.

Okay, something really weird was going on. How had he disappeared without her noticing? Her gaze lifted upwards. Had he gone through the vents? No, he wouldn’t have the upper arm strength to pull himself up all the way there, right? *He did knock out Steve though*, her mind supplied.
Did he leave through a different door? She would have heard it if he did though.

Claire ran a hand through her hair, the other resting on her hip. Once again, she felt as though she were grasping at straws.

It left her with only one option.

She just hoped it was the right one.

Stricklander massaged the bridge of his nose.

The metronome at his desk clicked back and forth, providing a beat to his growing agitation.

“What do you mean he didn’t come back to the Order last night?” He hissed in a low tone.

Incompetent, foolish—no, best not to continue that thought. His skin prickled with the onset of transformation. Control yourself, he thought, rise above your instincts.

“I meant what I said,” the caller answered curtly.

“Nomura, I thought you were better than this,” he lectured. Fishing out the pen from the inside of his coat, he began to click it absentmindedly, continuing on, “I put you in charge of him for a reason. First the bridge and now Atlas?”

“I’m not the brat’s babysitter, Stricklander.”

Cold fury crawled through his veins. Ever since the Lake boy picked up the Amulet Nomura had gotten cockier, pressing all his buttons. Decades (or perhaps centuries, it was hard to remember these days) of working together meant she knew his heavy distaste for disobedience.
“It is your job. You continue to disappoint me,” he tutted. He heard her growl over the phone line. A satisfied smirk emerged on his face. If there was one thing Nomura hated more, it was to be treated like one of his students.

“Oh no,” she remarked dryly, clearly not catching her cue to back down from this continued disorderly conduct. “Whatever shall I do?”

His voice picked up a frozen edge. “You are on precariously thin ice. One more word of backtalk and I’ll have you shipped to Siberia.”

“You and I both know you won’t do that,” Nomura said mockingly. “Besides, Bular’s the one in charge of this operation now, not you.”

He had to put the phone down for a moment, partially out of anger but also as a strategic move. Let her ruminate over the information, he thought. Once he figured she had enough to think about, he picked it up.

“I hate you,” she said, tongue as sharp as a viper’s as Stricklander presumed she suddenly realized the amount of trouble they had on their hands.

“You and I both know what a disaster this will be if we do not rein him in,” he explained in a levelled manner.

The bridge and Gunmar’s return frayed at his nerves. Everything was not going to his plan in the slightest. How could it when Bular was the one in charge? Already he was messing up Stricklander’s plans by getting rid of all their technological equipment at the museum. What was supposed to be Gunmar’s extravagant return broadcast throughout every branch was now stripped barren.

Tradition, his arse.

It was a power move, pure and simple. One meant to weaken him.

But Stricklander was not so easily broken by mere pettiness.
“I still hate you,” she answered.

“I don’t care. Think of the mission, Nomura. Our mission.”

Nomura huffed, “So what do you want me to do with the brat?”

“With Atlas? Nothing. I will take care of him from this point forward.”

Atlas needed a firm hand to guide him, one that had been lacking as of late. It was time he corrected that.

“Because you’ve done such a good job of that lately.”

“What is it you’re getting at, Nomura?” Stricklander said.

A pang of guilt filtered through, despite the walls he’d set up around his mind. Stricklander had allowed the bridge to get in the way of controlling the boy. While the information he brought about Trollmarket had been another essential piece into their exploration of the area, the changes in attitude brought on by the Trollhunter’s crew were considerably alarming.

“Maybe you should start watching the brat more. I don’t know,” she answered. “Something about this whole situation seems off.”

His grip on the pen tightened. “You think Atlas is helping them?”

“Or something,” she muttered.

A flurry of emotions overtook him: anger, sadness, fear—but no surprise. Atlas had continued to show signs of caring for the Trollhunter and his friends. And, as much as Stricklander hated to admit it, he had failed to rein in those feelings properly.
“I thought as much. Not Enrique has been silent as of late,” he provided.

Nomura paused then asked, “You think he’s in on it?”

“Presumably. To think, two of our own operatives—” He shook his head. “No matter. I will handle the issue at hand. You need to figure out a way to pacify Bular for the time being.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Good luck,” he chirped, ending the call with a sharp click.

His eyes flickered over to the mirror. Goodness, he needed a new haircut. Or perhaps another turtleneck?

Stricklander touched his cheek, feeling their increasing warmth. How odd. He was acting like one of his students. What was this fluttering in his belly? Could he actually be excited?

Humming an old battle tune from his youth, he fancied up his desk. Should he place the new roman helmet replica here or there? Gently, he set it a top one of the shelves, knowing his desk would be too crowded for such an object, especially during exam season.

He took a step back, admiring his work. Perfection.

Mood lifted, his thoughts settled on a new endeavor: Barbara. The dinner date had been a pleasant surprise this morning. He hadn’t expected her to take the initiative so soon. For a human she made quite an impression on him. The way she spoke sucked him in like a black hole. Never had he ever experienced such a sensation. It was nice—no—euphoric. Yes, that was it. He was actually excited for it. Him. Stricklander.

He balanced the pen between his two index fingers, moving it from one side to the other. On one hand, she was human and therefore would likely not survive Gunmar’s return. Unless—

Well, Gunmar did owe him. If Stricklander could somehow secure some sort of leniency for the woman. Mayhap as a possible breeding pair for his stock, not that Stricklander would ever let her
actually become one. He could just shuffle her off somewhere in the mountains of his homeland, away from the blood and destruction.

She would hate it, no doubt, but perhaps…

Or perhaps not.

Relationships between their kind were forbidden.

But would that rule apply under Gunmar’s new reign?

The creaking pipes above broke off his next train of thought. His attention traveled upwards as the ceiling tile was moved aside. Between the ducts and insulation, glowing eyes greeted him.

“You called, sir?” Atlas said, jumping down with a soft thump. His cloak fluttered behind him like a cape.


There was a change in the air. He could see his protégé analyzing the situation, picking out the small details in Stricklander’s body language and demeanor. Stricklander almost smiled; he had taught the boy well. Or perhaps they simply knew each other too much.

“You’re angry,” the teen noted, his ears shifting downwards.

He sighed. Punishing the boy wasn’t something he enjoyed doing, but something had to be done with his current behavior.

“It has come to my attention,” he started, gesturing the end of his pen at Atlas. “that you helped the Trollhunter with the Stalkling.”

As predicted, Atlas reacted to his accusation with an excuse.
“You said the Stalkling was dangerous. Did you not see the damage it did?” Atlas tried to defend, fists raised.

“Indeed, as well as several accounts of a mysterious cloaked figure,” he replied, picking up one of the weekly trash magazines from his bag and handing it over to the teen. The image was blurry, but it was evident from the glow of his eyes and outline of his horns as to who it was. “You’re lucky we had an operative working in the printing room when these came out. You were almost discovered!” He hissed, “What were you thinking?”


“Sorry doesn’t cut it, young Atlas,” he groaned. “You’ve gotten sloppy.”

The boy’s jaw tightened. He didn’t have to look up for Stricklander to know he was angry. “You want to take me off the mission.”

“Yes,” Stricklander said. “if we had the luxury to do so, I would have replaced you. Currently, we need all hands on deck, so to speak. You will be tasked with leading the Trollhunter and his friend into my office.”

“You’re planning something,” Atlas stated, eyes narrowing.

He clicked his pen. “Indeed.”

Atlas’s brows crossed together. “You’re not going to tell me?”

“I think you and I both know what will happen if I do,” he replied coolly.

The teen’s face fell. He slumped into the stool Stricklander set out for his students, the furniture creaking underneath him. In response, Stricklander walked around his desk, leaning against one of the corners.
“You don’t trust me,” Atlas said, not meeting his eyes.

“Young Atlas, it was wrong of me to place you on this mission. I see that now. You are a child. I should have placed a more experienced changeling on the job,” he said, fully confident in his answer.

Atlas gripped the fabric of his cape. “If you could just let me explain. Please, there’s something I need to tell—”

“Save it,” he commanded in a tired tone.

Just as Icarus ignored his father’s instructions not to fly too close to the sun, so too had Atlas ignored his warnings about growing close to the Trollhunter and his friends.

“I…” He licked his lips. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Stricklander leaned forward. “So you admit it then. You’ve grown close to them.”

“How could I not?” He answered, grabbing his horns. “I spend most of my time with them. They accept me.”

“A conditional acceptance, nothing more. You let your feelings get the best of you,” Stricklander remarked. “But now you must prove to me your loyalty. No more playing around. Lead the Trollhunters group to my office tonight. After that, I will give you your next instructions, as well as your punishment.”

He nodded, eyes taking on a watery sheen. “Understood, sir.”

Oh dear. Stricklander sighed. He was never this emotional as a child. Teen hormones truly were the worst.

“Atlas, wait,” he called out.
Stepping back, Atlas turned to face him, expression blank. “Yes?”

“I won’t be home tonight, so there’s no reason to make me dinner.” Not that he had for a while, Stricklander thought sourly.

“Oh,” he said, blinking. “Where are you going?”

“I am meeting with someone. A human.” He thought about what he said then added soon after, “Nothing untoward however. Just for appearance’s sake.”

“What’s the human’s name?” He asked.

Stricklander scoffed, ‘Why do you care?’

“Call me curious.”

“Barbara. Barbara Lake.” He paused. “Do you think she and the Trollhunter are related?”

Atlas turned away, his gaze settled at the window. Stricklander joined him. They watched as the students ran along the track, Coach Laurence yelling a string of commands too far away to make sense of, at least in Stricklander’s human form. He had no clue whether Atlas could.


His eyes narrowed. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. He loves to talk about Hockey and snow.” Atlas laughed. “He says his parents are always traveling, so he mostly lives alone.”

“Does he now?”
Stricklander could tell the boy was lying. How much of what was lies and what that meant would have to be postponed however. He had class and Atlas had his duties to attend.

“Anything else, sir?”

“No, you’re dismissed.” He fit his pen back into the inner pocket of his coat. He turned to the boy. “And Atlas?”

“Yeah?”

Feeling affectionate, he brought the boy close, giving his shoulder a sharp squeeze. He lifted Atlas’s head with a finger. Not too much though. By the Pale Lady, the boy was nearly as tall as him now. “Stay safe, son.”

The teen’s ears lowered. He leaned into his chest, resting his head on his shoulder. It was a tad uncomfortable, but Stricklander managed not to jerk away. “Of course, dad. You too.”

Despite his frustration with Atlas, a small genuine smile graced his lips.

Soon, everything would be over.

But first, dinner.
Recipe for Disaster (III)

Chapter Summary

Toby and the gang are tasked with going through Strickler’s office. It goes as well as one might expect. Meanwhile, Atlas tries to keep his mom from killing his dad. Claire overhears much of it, and would have remembered, if it weren’t for the whole head meeting pipe problem.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Vici for helping me with this chapter. Also, heads up, updates are moving from once a week to once every other week. This is my last semester of school and I don't want to get burnt out with this story. I also want to do a sequel to Fallen Too Far and maybe finish my other stories or write some oneshots. I will still continue this story, not to worry. But writing 4,000-6,000 words a week is pretty rough. I hope ya'll understand.

Thank you for all the kudos, reviews, and favorites! I super appreciate them.

Also, thank you for the lovely fanart! Oh my gosh!

Big thanks to Kimburtrach for doing a lovely sketch of Atlas and their own oc: https://kimburtrach.tumblr.com/post/181932974694/some-drawingsfanart-for-blue-moon-rising

Also, I love the Atlas that lunariablue did. Very cool! I like your design!: https://lunariablue.tumblr.com/post/181857486609/troll-jim-rising-from-the-blue-moon-i-got-the

Seriously, ya'll are awesome. I hope you enjoy the newest chapter! :D

“Dad is in the hen house, the mission is a go,” Atlas said, his voice muffled through the cell.

“Copy that, Trollhunter, over,” Toby replied.
He rubbed his hands together gleefully. This mission had to be successful. He couldn’t miss up. Not like last time. Or the time before that, his conscious provided, and the other time before that.

Okay, wow, thanks, Toby thought. Not like he needed more discouragement. Why couldn’t he have a supportive inner voice? Was that too much to ask for?

“Are you in position?”

“Affirmative, over,” Toby said, checking his wrist. Yeah, he didn’t have a watch, but it was all part of the whole spying and espionage thing in those Bond films and Toby wasn’t going to fix what wasn’t broken. “I’m nearing the rendezvous point, over.”

“He’s expecting you guys in his office. It’s a trap.” Atlas sighed. “I never should have sent you guys. You should abort.”

“Not a chance, over.”

Heck no! Toby wasn’t going to give up now. Atlas needed their help.

Plus, he spent, like, the last half hour sneaking in through the gym’s window. It was no easy feat, especially since Coach Laurence posted a bunch of scotch tape and wood over it. Toby could have waited the afternoon in the boy’s locker-room, he surmised, but then he’d get bored and honestly, playing on one’s phone in a cramped space could only distract him for so long.

So yeah, breaking and entering it was.


“And you aren’t, over?” Toby remarked in an incredulous manner. “Dude, I’m not the one about to go toe to toe with my pops. And what are you going to do about your mom?”

Toby had been just as surprised to find out Dr. L was dating Mr. S as Atlas was. Well, maybe not
that much. Looked like his buddy’s mom had a type.

Atlas groaned. “I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of options here. Do you think she knows?”

“I don’t know, what did you tell her?” Toby asked.

“Nothing, at least, I don’t think so. She doesn’t know anything about him.”

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence?” Toby supplied.

Atlas released a bitter laugh. “Tobes, there have been too many damn coincidences lately, and each time we’ve failed to see it for what it was, something bad happened.”

“Point taken. So, you take on Mr. S and we take on his office?”

“I can’t stress this enough: be extremely careful. I don’t know what he’s hidden in there. It could be anything.”

“We’ll be fine. Just mess around with a few papers, add a little blood spill, and then skedaddle out the back. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. He’ll think you fooled us and you’ll be in the clear,” Toby explained.

It was fool proof. Well, as long as Ms. Nomura or some other scary changeling wasn’t in there. How many changelings could fit in Mr. Strickler’s office? Like, maybe fifteen?

And then there were sizing issues too. All the changelings he had seen so far had been pretty small in comparison to the average troll. Those dudes were, no pun intended, built like boulders.

Actually, scratch that, pun totally intended. He almost snorted at his own joke. Well, either way, he wasn’t going in alone.

“You make it sound so simple,” Atlas said.
“You be careful too.” He added helpfully. “Try not to get maimed.”

“Over and out, WarHammer.”

“Oh my gosh, you said it! You really—” The phone hung up. Toby huffed, looking down at his phone with a sour pout. “Well, goodbye to you too, dude.”

It was hard to tell emotions through a phone, but Toby knew with one hundred percent certainty that Atlas was nervous as hell.

Humming the James Bond theme song, Toby slowly made his way through Arcadia High, carefully sneaking through the locker-room to get to the main hallway. Unfortunately, something, or rather, someone, blocked his path. The creature stood deadcenter between Toby and his destination, shooting him a lazy once-over before picking at the food in between his teeth. Oh come on!

“NotEnrique?” Toby froze midstep, taken back at the newcomer. “What are you doing here?”

The changeling threw him a scowl, crossing his arms. “Nothin’.”

Hmm...Suspicious , Toby thought, way too suspicious . His eyes narrowed. “Did Strickler send you here to stop us?”

It would make since. Why else could he be here? Unless—

“I ain’t here to cause any trouble. Just perusing the area,” NotEnrique said defensively, scooching over to lean his back against one of the lockers. “Can’t a changeling have a nice stroll bout Arcadia?”

“Thought you were done with us.”

NotEnrique scowled, baring his tusks. “I am.”
“You looking for a job?” Toby inquired, a smirk forming.

“I ain’t,” he remarked stiffly before asking, “And not that it matters or nothin’, but what’s the job?”

“You’re a changeling. Blinky says we’ll need one to find a changeling’s secrets,” Toby explained. Initially they were going to have Atlas by way of Toby’s cell to help them out, but considering the other teen’s current situation, that might not be an option anymore.

Atlas was pretty tight lipped about the operation in general too. It had taken Toby and Blinky to get the okay to go forward. They were on a time limit now.

“Trollhunter too good for you blokes he ditched you to play catch with daddy dearest?” NotEnrique snarked in a nasty tone.

Toby raised both brows. “You were listening in?”

“So what if I was?”

“Well,” he started, placing a hand on his hip. “Are you gonna help?”

“No way, José,” he answered discouragingly

“Come on,” Toby begged, both squeezed hands together as though he were in prayer. “I need this mission to go well. Otherwise, Blinky won’t let me start practicing with the weapons. Wait, wait! Okay, how about this: you lead us around, and I’ll give you both my gym socks. Fresh ones too. Just worn today for gym practice. Super stinky.”

The troll moseyed around in a circle, giving Toby a curious unblinking stare. “And all I gotta do is lead you idiots around?”

“Yep.”

“Seriously? Okay, okay.” Toby slipped off a shoe, flicking the sock at the troll’s face. “There.”

It was the strangest display. Seriously, the dude smelled the garment like a sommelier in one second than downed it like a frat boy in the next. He resisted the urge to vomit. NotEnrique licked his lips, rubbing his stomach for good measure. “Yum.”

Toby pressed forward, NotEnrique veering back and forth between in front and behind him before finally settling at his side. He couldn’t help but notice the strange way the changeling walked. It was like AAARRRGHHH!!!’s movements, an almost animalistic gait since they were larger on top than on bottom. In fact, most of the trolls he had seen so far were top heavy, with significantly smaller feet in comparison to their hands. It made Toby wonder how that came about.

At last, they arrived at the meeting point. On good time too, he thought.

He pushed open the door, saying to his two compatriots, “Sup, mis amigos.”

Blinky stepped inside, his expression excitable and awed. All six eyes looked about with evident glee. It was almost as if—Actually, yeah, this was their first time in Arcadia High. Huh. Toby couldn’t help but grin at his friend’s antics. Even AAARRRGHHH!!! appeared impressed. There wasn’t really anything like it in Trollmarket after all.

“Oh, my. By Deya’s Grace,” Blinky remarked, outstretching one pair of arms as he admired the grounds. “The fabled Halls of Alexandria could not hold a candle to the high school of Arcadia Oaks! How marvelous! Oh dear friend, have you seen anything like it?”

AAARRRGHHH!!! shook his head, following suit after Blinky. The troll in question scanned every locker, poster, and bulletin board, fascination etched into his features.

“The halls of what?” It sounded familiar, but Toby couldn’t place where. Maybe from history class? Too bad he slept through most of it, especially now that he and the group stayed up so late.

“Aha!” Blinky chuckled, shaking a finger at Toby. “Feigned ignorance. You are a funny little man, Tobias.”
Suddenly, AAARRRGGHH!!! grunted. Toby looked back to find his friend entangled in one of the school banners.

“Oh, careful wingman,” Toby said as his friend picked him up to help untangle banner wrapped around his face. “We gotta be stealthy, so we can’t leave a trace. We’re lucky that I even got us in. This is a covert operations, so you gotta be covert, wingman.”

And just like that, Toby’s luck disappeared.

Almost instantly after he said those words, shoes squeaked across the floor, echoing through the hallway.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I thought the coast was clear?” Toby said in a hushed frantic voice.

He glanced over at their changeling member, who avoided Toby’s annoyed glare instead focusing on his nails with a bored expression.

“We need to hide.” Blinky advised. “That mural, perhaps...Well, I see no other option. Tobias, AAARRRGGGHH!!!, come over here. Hurry!”

“Was that my job?” NotEnrique asked mockingly, though his ears lowered like Atlas’s did when he was guilty. “Maybe you should get a fuc—”

AAARRRGGGHH!!! placed a finger over the changeling’s lips, lifting him up in one hand and Toby in the other.

Immediately, they gathered in front of one of the school murals, posing to match the imagery behind them. It was either incredibly ingenious or incredibly stupid.

Toby’s eyes grew wide. He could feel his pulse skyrocket as sweat began to pull at his forehead. The steps grew louder.

What if this didn’t work? What if Toby failed. Holy cheese, what if they failed their mission and got found out by someone? Probably shipped off to Area 51 or whatever California had most likely.
He shivered. Toby was not ready to be anal probed…Wait, that was wrong, only aliens did anal probing and stuff.

Right? He hoped.

“What in the hallway heck?” Señor Uhl remarked, announcing his presence to the group as he picked up the banner. He stared at them for a moment, making Toby’s heart pound even more, but seemed to not comprehend their existence, instead placing the banner back up and going about his way through the hallway once more.

The group relaxed. Blinky released a soft sigh. Toby couldn’t help but join him.

“That was close,” Toby whispered.

Blinky agreed, “Yes, far too close for comfort I should think.”

“What do you think Atlas is doing right now?”


Toby nodded. Dealing with Mr. S wouldn’t be too bad, right? The dude was old, like prehistoric or something. Atlas could easily knock him out if things got too serious, and if they did, he had backup a la basement bro Draal.

Yeah, things would go fine. It was Toby and the gang that had the hard part.

The rest of their trip was thankfully uneventful. Well, as uneventful as one can be while sneaking through the school after hours. Toby was still pretty hyped on energy. Like, really, it was as though someone injected him with a V8 or something. Hell, getting into Mr. Strickler’s office was practically child’s play, especially when NotEnrique was involved. Always good to have a rogue on the team after all.
Speaking of teams, what kind of character classes would they all have? Blinky was definitely their Bard, if his yelling during training was anything to go by. Plus, he was pretty good with comforting the group with his words, so yeah, a Bard sounded alright. AAARRRGGHH!! was harder to pin down, since he had the body of a tank character like a Barbarian, but he was a huge pacifist, so maybe a Cleric? Not that all Clerics were pacifists. Atlas was their paladin of course, but where did that leave Toby?

What was his role in the group?

As the group searched the office, Toby settled down into the Mr. Strickler’s chair, lost in thought of his purpose in the group.

Was he their mascot maybe? He scowled. No way, he was way more useful than a mascot. He poured sweat, blood, and tears into helping out. He helped Atlas when he was shrunk down, he helped him with the goblins, and not to mention that time he helped with the Stalkling.

But…

Help was all he could do, wasn’t it? Atlas, Blinky, AAARRRGGHH!!—they could all hold their own against trolls and other supernatural nasties. Toby wasn’t a fighter, at least, not yet. So what did he really do for them other than make fart jokes and bring snacks to training?

Toby shook his head. No! He was worth more. He helped Atlas and Dr. L get back together, even if that wasn’t what Atlas wanted. Well, he did help—actually no, that ended in disaster since Atlas had to kill the crazy changeling lady.

Okay, wow, so maybe he hadn’t really helped as much as he thought he did. Crapple sauce, what if…what if he continued to be the weakest link in the group? What if someone replaced him at Atlas’s side?

Inwardly, he couldn’t help but go through the possible candidates. Draal was numero uno on threat level, on account of his strength, but he got banished from Trollmarket and couldn’t walk around in the sun, so his usefulness lay more in training Atlas with swordsmanship.

Dr. L might be one, but Atlas was so reluctant to let her into the world of magic and trolls. Even talking about it with the guy was like talking to a wall. Additionally, other than medical knowledge, she wasn’t trained to fight baddies. Not to mention she was a human. Toby had AAARRRGGHH!!!
for protection at least, but Dr. L? He doubted Blinky would be much help in that regard.

And Claire—LOL, yeah right. He almost snorted at the notion. Her, replace him? Not possible.

“I’m afraid to say it, Tobias, but everything here appears to be quite normal,” Blinky sighed.

Oh, great. His mission was already sucking.

“Hmm,” Toby remarked, swirling around in Mr. Strickler’s chair. Oh wow, this is a nice piece of furniture, he thought. Picking up the man’s old familiar pen, he began fiddling with it absentmindedly, trying to get in the mindset of the older man. “Okay, so if I were Strickler, where would I keep my secrets? Think, think, think. Oh, I’m Mr. Strickler and I’m so smart and British and make witty puns, ho, ho—Oh, shit.” He stared down at the pen, now in two pieces. As Atlas liked to say, oh sweet merciless Pale lady he screwed up. “I broke his—” Wait. Was that? “I found a key! I found a secret key! How spy is this thing?

He was useful! Ha! Suck on that, subconscious doubts! He waved the key above him in triumph, jumping out of the seat and running over to his two friends.

“Key? To where?” AAARRRGGHH!!! pondered aloud.

“A changeling key for a changeling lock! Look! Look for a lock,” Blinky exclaimed, hurriedly surveying the area for some sort of hole. Why he needed to look at an old corded telephone Toby had no clue, but to each their own (actually, he suspected Blinky just wanted a reason to look at all the human technology, but kept his mouth shut).

Toby searched the shelves top to bottom as the other two made work of the rest of the office. For a few minutes, Toby began to lose hope. Had it all been for naught?

Somewhere in the background, he heard Blinky remark with excitement, “Joyous day! I haven’t seen one of these in ages.”

Toby was about to ask, only to hear the troll playing the piano keys like Bach or some other musical guy. He rolled his eyes. Geez, other than fighting was there anything Blinky didn’t excel at? He almost told the dude to cool it, especially on account of Señor Uhl, but found himself preoccupied with another clue.
After removing one book from Strickler’s bookshelf, (okay, like a bunch, but those didn’t count), he discovered the hole they were looking for. Of course! Why didn’t he think of it before? A secret room. What else could it be? “Guys. I found it! What the—?” He tried to fit the key in, but it wouldn’t budge. Oh come on, he thought. “It won’t open.”

“As I told you,” Blinky counseled, removing one of the nearby books. All six eyes settled on their changeling member. “By only the hand of a changeling can one open a changeling lock.”

NotEnrique glanced up, eyes widening. “Huh?”

AAARRRGHH!!! scooped him up before he could run away. Holding him out in front of the bookcase, Toby assisted in placing the key into NotEnrique’s hand and forcing it into the hole. Almost instantly it clicked up, rattling as the key glowed ominously. Books shook as the shelf descended into the floorboards, revealing the new room and all its contents. As the dust settled, a hush ran through the group.

They stepped back, mouths agape.

“Whoa!” Toby exclaimed, eyeing every piece of weaponry. This was in their school? All this time?

“Found it.” AAARRRGHH!!! smiled, giving Toby a soft pat on the shoulder. “Good job.”

Blinky stepped into the room first, Toby following suit, because seriously, was this stuff amazing or what? A skull, cool looking artifacts on the wall—Seriously. He could squeal.

This.

Was.

Awesome sauce.

“I feel violated,” NotEnrique complained. “You guys are evil.”
“How humorous coming from one such as you,” Blinky said frostily.

“Oi, what’s that supposed ta mean?”

“Gee!” Toby commented as he waded through the items on the desk. “Look at all this stuff.”

Blinky picked up one of the items, examining it closely. “What could he be doing with these? Huh.”

Toby snagged a peek at the object. The best he could make out of it was some sort of shitty amulet replica? Was Mr. Strickler trying to make a magical amulet himself or was the dude just into cosplay? Could changelings do that?

AAARRRGGHH!!! leaned over. “What is it?”

“Curious,” Blinky said, bringing it closer. A moment later he licked it, moving his tongue around as if trying to determine its flavor. Why, Toby had no earthly idea, but maybe Trolls could taste magic or something?

Losing interest in the fake amulet, Toby turned his attention towards the worn book at the center of the room. Flipping through the pages, he was relieved to discover it was mostly pictures. Unlike the rest of the group, Toby’s Trollish was still kinda crap. Yeah, he picked up words and phrases here and there, but he wasn’t actively studying it like Atlas did. Spanish was hard enough. Perhaps one day he would, but today was not that day.

“Wow,” Toby remarked as he checked the pages, each a new and interesting illustration. Maybe picking up Trollish wasn’t such a bad idea, especially if there were books like this. “Okay, so this is freaking wicked.”


“Whoa! Is this Gunmar? Dang, look at this guy.” Toby chuckled nervously, pointing to the picture. “He looks just like you, AAARRRGGHH!!!"
“That's 'cause it is,” NotEnrique declared, snickering at the end. “Oh, this is priceless.”

“Okay, yeah, real funny. That's not him.”

AAARRRGGHH!!!’s gaze shifted to the floor. He took a step back from the group, his entire body tense.

“You…” Toby visibly swallowed. “You used to eat people?”

“You speak the unfortunate truth,” Blinky sighed. Adjusting his lapels, he continued, “AAARRRGGHH!!! was a Gumm-Gumm and a general in Gunmar's horde. But just before the Battle of Killhead, he absconded his flesh-eating ways to take an oath of peace. But, had I not met AAARRRGGHH!!!, I never would have considered a changeling Trollhunter as a possibility, so here we are.”

“Wow,” Toby answered. Because honestly, what other reaction was there. It hurt his wingman never shared such information with him prior to tonight, but he could understand a little better as to why.

Maybe that was why AAARRRGGHH!!! and Blinky so easily accepted Atlas. There was a similar history there.

“Why, If it weren't for his aid, the world as you know it would look remarkably different,” Blinky explained.

AAARRRGGHH!!! spoke up, “People ran away. Scream, ‘AAARRRGGHH!!! No. No. Stop.’”

Toby’s lower lip trembled. What kind of life was that? It made him look at his friend in a whole new light. AAARRRGGHH!!! wasn’t just a cool dude of few words, he had a dark history, one he had to break free of in order to be the person he was today. Toby could appreciate that.

“You might have been one then,” Toby started, “but you're one of us now, wingman.”
He held out a fist. AAARRRGGHH!!!’s eyes widened, the sides of his lips stretching into the ol’ familiar grin Toby knew so well.

“Boom, boom?” He asked, knocking his fist with Toby’s own.

Toby couldn’t help but replicate his buddy’s expression. “Yeah. Boom, boom, dude.”

Walking around in broad daylight in his fleshbag form never stopped being strange. It amazed him how few people even batted an eye at his presence.

As the sun began to set on Arcadia, so too did Atlas set his plan into action. Well, not exactly a plan. More of a plea, really.

He knocked repeatedly on the backdoor until his mother opened it. For a second, he froze. This was his third time coming here, yet for some reason, he found himself unable to form the words he so desperately wanted to bring forth.

She smiled softly, her eyes widening in surprise. His gaze traveled to her clothes. Unlike the pale green hospital garb she normally wore, this was fancier. Much fancier. She looked younger, her hair vibrant against the beige blouse. The soft scent of her flowery perfume filtered through the air.

His mother brushed back his hair, leaning forward. “Is everything okay, Jim—Sorry, Atlas? I apologize in advance if I get it wrong the first few times.”

He tucked his head down. “You don’t have to call me that if you don’t want to, mom.”

“But that’s the name you prefer, right?”

He blushed. “I mean, I guess, but—”
“Then I’ll call you by what you want,” she answered, guiding him towards the living room.

“Thanks,” he stated before remembering the reason he was here. “Wait, we need to talk. Now.”

“Can we delay it a bit?” She asked, not meeting his eyes. “I have a date. It shouldn’t take long.”

“With my dad, right?”

She paused, her mouth drawing into a firm line. He knew the answer even before she responded with, “Yes.”

He gestured his index at her accusingly. “So you do know!”

“When said your name was Atlas, it reminded me of what Walt said about his own son. He called him Atlas too,” she admitted, hands crossed in front of her. “So it’s true then. Walter is a changeling.”

“Aw, he tells people about me?” Atlas almost smiled before shaking his head. *Focus on the task at hand*, he told himself. “Wait, that’s not why I’m here. What are you doing with him? How did you guys meet?”

“Not long after I ran into you actually. It was over pasta sauce. He was quite the gentleman—er, gentle-changeling? Sorry, I’m new to this.”

“This is bad. Mom, you need to stop this, now,” he warned.

The doorbell rang. Atlas seized up.

“He’s early,” she said.

“Oh sweet pale lady,” Atlas moaned. “This is a disaster.”
She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Sweetheart, it will be fine. I’m just going to ask him some questions.”

He brushed it off, moving behind the kitchen wall to hide himself. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

He waited behind the corner, hoping against all hope the floor would swallow him whole. His gaze flickered over to the basement door. Was it possible he could hide there for awhile? The problem was getting there without his dad noticing.

Too late. The door opened. Atlas resisted the urge to glance over.

“Barbara, good evening. I didn’t know what varietal you like, so I brought a pinot noir, the ‘heartbreak’ grape.”

“We don’t judge here,” she said cheerfully. “All kinds are welcome.”

There was a sharp intake of air from Stricklander that immediately set the teen on edge. His heart pounded fiercely against his ribcage as the other drew closer to the kitchen. In the corner of his eye, Atlas caught Stricklander’s shadow overlooking the collection of photos on Barbara’s wall.

“Oh no,” Atlas thought in growing horror.

“These pictures,” Stricklander began, coughing to clear his throat. “Your son is Jim Lake Jr.?“

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Oh-he is,” she replied. Atlas inched closer on instinct.
“I… I thought your son was in Vermont?” Stricklander asked, a strange strangled tone in his voice.

“He was,” Atlas interjected, swinging an arm around his mother. “but he moved back home to be with his mom, ha, ha, ha! Surprise, Mr. Stricklander—Strickler! Mr. Strickler.”

Well, there went his cover.

Stricklander narrowed his eyes, his expression unreadable. “I see.”

“When you said James Lake, I thought it was someone else since he doesn’t go by that name. But wow! I didn’t think Jim decided to move out of his dad’s house back home,” his mother said, acting still holding in spite of the brewing tension within the area.

“Ha, well, you know,” Atlas began, pumping his fist. Was his expression as wooden as it felt? He hoped not. “Snow and stuff just got old. Wanted to soak up the ol’ California sun again.”

His mom carefully slid an arm around his shoulders. She gazed down, and he felt the panic from early begin to ebb. “I’m happy you’re home, sweetheart.”

His shoulders relaxed, cheeks taking on a rosy color. He looked up, soaking in the affection like sunlight after a long rainy day. “Me too, mom.”

Sweet Pale Lady, for a moment, he imagined it all working out. His mom and dad getting together, Atlas telling Stricklander his secret, everyone being one family, together and warm and all the other nice feelings things like that conjured from within him.

But life wasn’t like the movies.

His father clapped, a plastic smile stretched across his lips. Atlas flinched. This was not the man he had dealt with earlier.

Given the chance, Stricklander would kill Jim Lake Jr.

“Well, it appears I’ve walked in on something quite touching. You know, I wouldn’t mind having
your son along with us for dinner, though, I should think the meal will be decidedly less excitable as
your high school career has been.”

His mother’s back straightened, surprise in her features. “Oh?”

“Ha, ha, thanks for the offer, but really, Mr. Strickler, don’t mind me. I’ll just be in the kitchen,
cooking,” Atlas tried to excuse himself, removing himself from his mother’s hold.

Unfortunately, the move cost him, Stricklander moving in before he could escape.

“Oh no, I insist,” Stricklander said, placing an arm around Atlas’s shoulders as he guided him to the
dining room. “Join us.”

Atlas gulped. Stricklander’s eyes glinted golden.

Suffice to say, he was definitely screwed.

Underneath the house, a lone girl listened in on an ongoing conversation. Now, Claire normally
didn’t sneak into people’s houses unannounced, but after everything that had happened lately, she
had to know: who was James Lake Junior?

Her nose twitched as the smell of mildew clung to the damp air. Coals were scattered about the floor.
She very nearly tripped over one of them coming in.

Claire leaned forward, her ear ever so slightly touching the cold metal pipe. It wasn’t the best
listening device, but it would make do. Her hands tightened around the metallic piece.

The past few minutes had been painstakingly slow, but informative. Everything she knew about
Atlas had been flipped on its head. She didn’t know what to believe anymore.
“So I said to my co-worker, ‘I brought you a midnight snack’,” Mr. Strickler chuckled. “Too bad for him, he had indigestion for days. Well, that’s the problem with eating Italian.”

A soft melody began, startling her. For a moment she thought it was her phone, until she heard a chair creak.

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s the hospital.” The woman, Ms. Lake (who was alive, another of Atlas’s lies) said. “I have to take this.”

“Go, go. I’ll try not to bore Jim to death,” Mr. Strickler said.

Once Ms. Lake left, the room soon turned deathly still. She tried to imagine the scene, Mr. Strickler and Atlas at a small table, sitting across from each other with dinner in front of them.

“That’s a funny story you were just talking about,” Atlas remarked. “I think your son might have mentioned it to me.”

“Did he now?” He asked, all humor in his voice gone cold. “Let’s cut to the chase, Jim. I know.”

A pause. Claire pressed herself closer to the pipe. A few boxes fell during the action. She released a small curse.

“You know what?” Atlas commented shakily.

“I know you know.”

“Could you be more specific? Like, how much do you know?”

“You didn’t know I knew, but now you know, I know,” Mr. Strickler said.

“I know you know but which know exactly are you we knowing about, because at this point I’m not
“Sure I really know, you know?”

“I know,” Mr. Strickler stated firmly. “Cease these petty games, boy.”

“Know what?” Claire whispered to herself.

The more she heard, the more confused she was about the entire situation. Atlas had a mother who lived in town and, apparently, Atlas was from Arcadia too? Claire groaned. What about the whole Canadian thing? Was that a lie too? Did he even speak French?

And what the hell was up with Mr. Strickler? It was like he was an entirely different person. Claire shivered at the sound of his chilly tone. This wasn’t the caring history professor she was used to. There was a measured, cold manner of speaking that Claire had never heard before.

Unfortunately, someone just had to call her at the worst possible moment. Immediately, she picked it up, not reading the caller ID.

“Hey, C-bomb. What ya doing?” Mary’s voice rang out.

“Can’t talk, Mare,” Claire answered, covering her mouth. She hoped no one came downstairs anytime soon. God, what would she do if that happened? “I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“What kind of something? Oh my gosh, is that Jim I hear? You are totally at his house, aren’t you? You are pathological.”

She smacked a palm against her forehead. Dang it, there went her mission.

“Something weird is going on. I’m going to get to the bottom of it,” Claire explained.

Mary sighed. “You’re nuts. Call CPS like normal people, girl.”

“No, this isn’t just your regular run of the mill abuse things anymore. Wait, they’re talking again. Call me later.”
“C-bomb, wait—"

Claire settled back into position, the voices becoming coherent once more.

“I wasn’t expecting to meet with you until tomorrow, but tonight is just as well,” Mr. Strickler said.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh nothing. How is young Atlas by the way?”

Atlas coughed. “He’s fine. He’s with his friends.”

And once again, Claire was at the end of her ropes in confusion. Was there another Atlas she didn’t know about? Santa Maria, why did she put herself in this scenario?

Maybe Mary and Darci were right. Something was clearly wrong with this entire thing.

Still, the curiosity within Claire could not be contained. None of her thriller novels came close to the amount of suspense she was experiencing right now.

“Friends, are they? Oh, you are in for quite a rude awakening then,” Stricklander said.

Atlas growled, “What did you do, Stricklander?”

“Merely protecting what is mine.”

“Leave my mother out of this. She has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, I will. I bare no ill will towards, Barbara.” He chuckled. “On the contrary. As for you, Bular
told me, if I can’t get you to hand over the amulet, I should kill you.”

A soft thud reverberated down the pipe, almost metallic in nature. She heard Atlas curse.

“That was my mother’s cutlery.”

“Apologies, my hand slipped.”

The same sound occurred. Mr. Strickler hissed.

“Oh, my apologies. It seems mine did too.”

“Cute. Careful, Mr. Lake. One wrong move and the next will be your throat.”

“You would kill me in front of my mom?”

“Granted, your death might affect our relationship, but I will if I have to.”

Forget thriller, this was straight up telenovela, Claire thought. Holy guacamole, Mr. Strickler was threatening to kill Atlas? What kind of shit was he involved in? And what was this about an amulet?

“That’s not funny,” Atlas answered.

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

“Listen, Stricklander,” Atlas began, his voice strangled and weak. Not fearful, but hesitant. Unsure. At least, that’s what Claire believed. “We can do this another way. If the changelings and Trollmarket work together, maybe—”

A long period of laughter followed by a loud shuffling resounded from the dining room, nearly driving her back. Claire tensed. It was so cold, as though someone had driven a knife of ice into her
heart. She wondered if Atlas felt the same.

“Work together? Are you mad? Do you honestly think any of us are willing to forgive them for the pain and suffering they’ve inflicted upon us? The hatred? The isolation? You may have fooled Young Atlas but you will not fool me, Mr. Lake.”

“I don’t want to fight you, D—”

“Anything I can get for you two?” Ms. Lake interrupted. “Walt, I made some tea for you. I hope you like it.”

“Oh yes, Tea would be lovely, Barbara,” he said, taking what Claire presumed to be a sip, especially since his next words were, “Marvelous. I normally prefer coffee after dinner, but this suits just as well. This dinner has been remarkable. Did you make this yourself?”

“You flatter me,” Ms. Lake remarked warmly. “But no. This is just takeout from that bistro we talked about.”

“Really? Well, it is just divine, Barbara.”

Another chair screech reverberated through the pipe. Claire cringed.

“I need to talk with you,” Atlas said.

She could practically hear Mr. Strickler sipping the tea, as though to annoy Atlas. It certainly did for her. “Leaving so soon, Mr. Lake?”

“No, ha, ha. Just helping mom with the dessert,” he responded.

Footsteps closed in from above. For a moment she thought they were approaching the basement door, but a moment later she heard the clicking of dishes and the running of a blender.

“What is it?” Ms. Lake whispered.
“Whatever you’re planning, it needs to stop,” Atlas warned. “Right now. You need to leave.”

“Not without you,” she answered.

“He. Is. Dangerous,” Atlas said, emphasizing each word with a bang of a cup against the tabletop, loud enough for her to catch. “I can handle him, but if you get hurt, I would never forgive myself.”

“And you think I’ll just sit back and let him hurt you?”

“You don’t understand. You’re not—this doesn’t involve you.”

“Yes, it does.” Her voice hitched. “You’re my son.”

“And I’m also his. You have to let me do this. I can convince him. I know I can. Just give me a couple more minutes.” He said. “I’m the Trollhunter. Peacekeeping is part of the job. You can’t just poison your way out.”

Claire was numb. Mr. Strickler was his dad? Trollhunter? She could feel her world spinning beneath her.

“How did you—”

“Dieter’s Tea behind the coffeemaker. You didn’t do a very good job of hiding it.”

“If he tries to hurt you, I’m blowing a hole through him,” she voiced heatedly. “Mark my words.”

“Don’t worry, he won’t—” The pipe went silent.

Claire’s brows crossed. The blender shut off soon after.
“Uh, mom?” Atlas voiced in a shaky manner.

“Did he…No way,” Ms. Lake gasped.

“He left us?” A loud stomp ensued. “What the fuck?”

“Language.”

“Sorry,” he replied sheepishly.

“Maybe he overheard us?” She supplied.

“I don’t know. Something about this entire situation seems off somehow. Dad doesn’t do things halfway. He gets what he wants, no matter the cost.”

Atlas stomped another two times. Dust fell, coating Claire’s hair. She coughed.

“Draal? Hey, did you hear what happened to Stricklander down there?”

Draal? Claire’s heart caught in her throat. Instantly, the hairs on her neck and arms stood up. She jerked back, bumping into something hard. Her eyes traveled up, and up, and up, until they discovered the source of the object behind her, or rather, the person.

Monster.

“Oh…” It began, its glowing yellow eyes just as piercing as its multiple sharp teeth. “Hello.”

Claire screamed, flying back in a fright. Monsters were real. Oh dios mio!

She needed to escape, she needed to run, she needed to—
Too late. Her head hit pipe.

She was gone.
Recipe for Disaster (IV)

Chapter Summary

Toby discovers a magical hula hoop. Atlas discovers that Stricklander stole something of his. Nomura discovers something even more disturbing.

This chapter is brought to you by Discover Card. (Not really, this is a joke, please don’t get me in trouble).

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Oh my gosh, thank you for all the wonderful reviews! Shoutout to Inco, Vici, charlie, and brothebro for helping me with this chapter. You guys are the best.

Also, oh my gosh! So much amazing fanart! You guys are insanely amazing! If you haven’t, please check out these wonderful artists! :D :D :D

Here's a link to Valente Nuñez's lovely picture of Atlas. Thank you Valente!:https://www.instagram.com/p/BsygakFJnc/?utm_source=ig_embed

Ghosty did some fantastic sketches from the fanfic too. Check out their other art too: http://ghosty-graveyard.tumblr.com/post/182230398564/some-goofy-n-dumb-fanart-of-tunafishprincess-s

And Jeeb made these awesome sauce pics from scenes in the fanfic too, oh my gosh! Go check them out! They're super awesome: https://jeebdoesart.tumblr.com/post/182172055292/i-had-an-urge-last-night-so-like-yet-again

Kimburtach did some more Atlas sketches too, which are great! Thank you, oh my gosh! :D :D https://kimburtrach.tumblr.com/post/182118854199/some-drawings-of-atlas-that-i-inked-last-night

I hope you enjoy the new chapter!
Scrounging around Mr. Strickler’s office sounded a lot more interesting than it actually turned out. Sure, there were a lot of cool looking things, but in the end they were just that: things. Toby had no clue why the changeling needed so many different colored pens. Seriously, Mr. S, what the fuck?

Each one was a different make, some wood, some rock, and some—

Toby blanched. Of all that was nougat and nummy, who on earth would have a pen carved out of bone? This was some Del Toro kind of shit.

The rest of the room wasn’t much better. Lots of moldy old books. Most of the weapons were too heavy for him to lift too. It reminded Toby of a museum. No surprise there, since Mr. Strickler probably belonged in one. How old was that guy anyway?

He picked up a large circular piece that he could only describe as either Satan’s hula hoop or some troll version of a donut. “Uh, guys, is this important?”

“Oh, that's, ah, nothing,” NotEnrique remarked nonchalantly, though his body language spoke opposite. He grabbed the side, slowly bringing it towards him. Geez, for such a small dude NotEnrique had some insane grippage. “Probably just decorative art. Bossman likes to be all fancy and shit. Give it here, tubby.”

“Toby,” he responded, pulling back the so-called decoration.

Blinky approached the two, a scholarly gleam in all six eyes. “By Deya’s Grace! Tobias, do you realize what you’ve just discovered?”

He gestured to the piece. “Torture Hula Hoop?”

“No. It’s—”

“Changeling fashion accessory?”
“Of course not, it’s—"

“Oh!” Toby raised a finger in the air. “Strickler's got hemorrhoids?”

“Will you let me finish?” Blinky snapped. After a few moments of silence he cleared his throat, continuing, “No, it is none of those things. It is a "fetch," an artifact of great power, a pinhole-sized breach into the Darklands.”

Blinky took ahold of one side of the fetch, positioning it directly in view of NotEnrique. The changeling was less than amused.

“It's how our changeling friend here came into our realm,” Blinky explained. “It is how all changelings came after Gunmar was banished to the Darklands.”

NotEnrique scowled.

“Handle that with care,” Blinky advised as he released his hold.

Toby snuck a glance at NotEnrique before commenting dryly, “Well, some expert you are.”

The only answer Toby received was a disdainful scoff as the changeling swerved around in the chair, completely ignoring the group. Toby rolled his eyes. Whatever. Let him pout.

As he stared down at the artifact, it suddenly sparked to life, green magic spilling out of the sides. They whirled around in a steady hypnotic rhythm. Small bits of electricity flashed as they headed from one corner to the next.

His finger inched closer. Should he do it? The responsible part of Toby cautioned him. This could be dangerous.

Too bad that part of him was drowned out by his curiosity. Because come on, how many humans have ever held a magical item before?
He stuck an index inside before drawing it back just as quickly. His finger had disappeared! Whoa. The swirling mass of magic crackled and hissed.

Now more confident, Toby pressed his entire arm in, savoring the rush of adrenaline and excitement.

“Ooh,” he said giddily. “Feels kind of tingly.”

It was like one of the magic tricks he used to do awhile back. Holy cow, he was in two spaces at once. Einstein must be rolling in his grave. This was insane!

“Why don't you take a peek on the other side? Maybe you'll see the Nuñez,” NotEnrique commented.

He hesitated. Something in NotEnrique’s tone put him on edge. Still, when was he gonna get another chance like this?

For real, this was some sci-fi craziness. Yeah, it was magic, but this wasn’t any ordinary hocus pocus. This was messing with some space-time continuum stuff. Of course, it wasn’t like Trollmarket didn’t exist in a similar state.

Huh, now that he thought about it, what if the Horngazel and Fetch were related somehow? Both were made of crystals, though they were the opposite colors; the former orange and the later green. Hey, wasn’t the Heartstone orange as well? Did the colors correspond to the lands in which they originated from?

Oh, oh, oh! Did that mean the Darklands weren’t just dark but filled with similar green crystals?

Toby grinned. Only one way to find out.

He took the plunge, sticking his entire head through. A strange, icy sensation kissed his skin, prickles of chill running up and down his spine.

When he opened his eyes, he thought it was an empty void, that was, until his vision adjusted. Toby’s jaw dropped. Mountains jutted above and below, with a thick foggy mist that blanketed what
Toby suspected was the sky. Or maybe ceiling? He wasn’t sure, physics didn’t really appear to apply in this dimension. Either way, kind of spooky.

Holy cheese. His head was in another dimension.

*Awesome sauce.*

“Whoa.” He swerved around, taking in the full experience. “So that's why they call it the Darklands. Oh hey, I was right about the green crystals! Go me!”

His friends brushed against his sides. AAARRRGGHH!!!, he thought, if the tickly mossy hair was any indication.

Out in the distance, a bright fiery light rose above the rocky terrain.

“Enrique? You here, little dude?” Toby called out. His voice echoed.

The flaming ball floated closer. The hairs on Toby’s neck stood up.

“Who are you?” The creature moaned.

“Uh-oh.” Somehow, he knew the ghostly apparition wasn’t the welcoming committee.

While nothing but cool air met his face here, Toby could feel his friends bunched up against him. Was it possible to be claustrophobic when his head was in another plan of existence?

On the subject of planes, how did all of this work? Was the Darklands underneath the earth or in another space and time all its own? Who created it? What was its original purpose?

Gah! So many questions. Where was Vendel when you needed him?
Blinky pushed into his shoulder, nearly knocking him over. What the hell was happening now? Shit, shit, shit. How did he get this thing off?

“Who are you?” It said, chanting the words like a broken record. Toby noticed it had gotten closer. Ah oh.

Toby froze up, mouth dropped. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move. A cold fear gripped him, even as the heat coming off the creature licked his face. It was mere feet from him now.

Just as he thought he was about to become a well-done human steak, someone jerked his body backward. A large stone arm grabbed him by the waist. Toby began to panic. He turned around, pumping his legs, even though he technically didn’t need to do so. Whatever was carrying him was bringing him away from the ghostly creature.

“What’s happening?” He frantically searched around, trying to find an escape. “Blinky? AAARRRGGH!?? Someone?”

A large rock blocked road he was traveling—or floating, he wasn’t exactly sure what verbiage to use in this scenario—and if he were to guess, with the speed he was going at, would knock his head off completely.

Death was calling and Toby couldn’t call in a buddy.

“Agh-hh!” Was the only sound he could make before the fetch was lifted. Praise whatever deity was out there, Toby was alive.

“I’m okay,” he sighed, touching his sweater as AAARRRGGHH!!! settled him onto the floor. God, if he didn’t feel like he was about to faint he would be kissing it right about now.

In fact, he probably would have, had a dark ominous cloud-thingy not burst out of Mr. Strickler’s office. The smoky creature—who eerily reminded Toby of Galactus from the second Fantastic Four movie, hey don’t hate, it was leagues above the remake—spread out, heading towards them at breakneck speed.

Gunmar’s Gronk-nuks.
Toby looked to his friends, shaking his head. “I’m not okay. This is not okay.”

“Don’t worry, Tobias,” Blinky tried to comfort. “AAARRRGGHH!!! and I will lure it away from you. Follow us, you gaseous cretin!”

He didn’t need to be told twice. Toby rushed down the hallway, pumping his legs as fast as they could go, which, with how much adrenaline was in his veins right now, was pretty damn fast.

Sneakers kissed vinyl flooring, arms moving to the beating of his heart. They knew some sort of trap had been planned, but not this…Care Bears 2 rip-off.

Of course Mr. Strickler would employ magic super smoke. The guy had classic villain written all over him. Tall figure, British accent, evil laugh—Toby would bet good money the guy had a cape or cloak or some shit.

He turned a corner, nearly running over NotEnrique. The changeling in question turned his head, eyes widening as he yelled out, “Gorblimey!”

“Gorblimey yourself!” Toby screamed. NotEnrique had taken the lead, running on all fours, which in Toby’s opinion was totally unfair.

“This is your group’s fault. Leave me out of this!”

Toby gasped, his breathing harsh. “You knew?” He asked between breathes.

“Not my problem you all didn’t see it coming. The way I sees it, you bunch had it coming, ya stinky little interlopers.”

The smoke was hot on the trail, creeping at the edges of Toby’s vision.

Focus, he told himself. Trollhunter rules. Wait, what was Rule Number One? Always be afraid? Pretty sure he had plenty of that. And Rule Number Two didn’t give him a whole lot of options
either. As for Rule Number Three, Toby was fairly certain smoke monsters didn’t have gronk-nuks.

Fortune must have been smiling on him (probably in a pitiful manner after the lousy mission they were currently experiencing) because the doors of the gymnasium greeted them like a beacon in the dark. Safety. For now.

Toby and NotEnrique barreled inside before backing up against it to keep the monster from entering. It banged against the door, hissing.

“I can't believe you left us to be eaten by a fart cloud!”

“I can't believe you trusted a changeling. Haven’t you learned? Your little buddy is the exception, not the rule.”

“Good point.”

Tendrils of smoke slithered out below their legs and through the tiny corners of the door.

“Here comes Silent-But-Deadly,” NotEnrique remarked.

Right. What would Blinky do in a situation like this? Plan, plan, plan. Not his strong suit, but what other choice did he have? Thoughts began to formulate an escape route. The locker-room wasn’t far away. If they could hide out there, maybe the spooky smoke monster would lose interest. “Okay, if we work together, we can—”

And just like that, his plan evaporated. NotEnrique was already halfway up one of the gym ropes. Toby ran over, holding the end of it. Maybe NotEnrique could pull him up?

Once the other reached the top, he pulled the vent off like it was paper. Damn, were all trolls super strong? NotEnrique mocked a salute, remarking in a sing-song manner, “See you, Tubby. It's been grand!”

Oh come on! Toby groaned, “You've got to be kidding me.”
The doors slammed open as the creature emerged, expanding across the gymnasium.

Life flashing before his eyes, Toby began to climb.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” he chanted.

His hands and legs burned with exhaustion. Even breathing was difficult.

Why had he ever thought he could do this? Atlas and the others would have been able to fend off such a monster. All Toby had was his body and “Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh,” he looked down, already halfway up. “I'm doing it! I'm really doing it! Oh, my gosh! I'm really doing it. Holy crap! This is amazing…But I'm terrified. Holy cheese, such conflicting emotions!”

Reaching the top, he couldn’t help but jingle the bell before escaping through the vent. Coach Lawrence would be proud, if Toby lived through this.

With not a moment to spare, he crawled, all too aware of the monster right at his heels. Catching sight of NotEnrique, he immediately followed in the same direction, only to find that the changeling disappeared. Where had he—

Too late. His hands met air, the rest of his body soon falling in after him as he descended down the shoot. The landing wasn’t too far but damn did it hurt. Thankfully, he had NotEnrique to cushion some of the blow. They rolled out, back into one of the school corridors. Toby bounced against the floor, smacking right into the lockers. Dazed, he tried to reorient himself, only to find himself once again staring down the black fog as it surged forward.

He flinched back, arms raised.

Suddenly, a fetch appeared, carried by two figures he knew all too well. Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! pressed forward, but the force of the deadly ghost monster pushed back. Instinctively, Toby twisted sideways, rolling to his feet to help the two. To his astonishment, NotEnrique did the same. They grabbed the open sides of the fetch, putting all their strength into it.

The creature tried to throw them off, but the power of all four of them withstood the action as the
fetch swallowed up every last bit of it. As soon as it transferred over the portal shut off, producing a deep sigh of relief from the group.

“Good timing,” Toby gasped, falling back. His entire body ached, completely spent.

“I knew you had it in you, Tubby,” NotEnrique said, nudging him in the side.

He looked down. The betrayal of the night and the changeling’s actions had not gone unnoticed. NotEnrique nearly got him killed, not once, but twice today. And he still insisted on mocking Toby about his weight?

Really?

“It's Toby,” he answered as he got up. NotEnrique appeared unfazed, not prepared for the sudden kick that would have made Coach Lawrence proud.

Soaring through the air, NotEnrique bounced off the flooring until he found his feet once more. Shaking off the attack, he threw Toby a venomous glare, then scampered down the hallway.

“Eat me, bitch,” Toby called out, channeling his inner-Atlas. “Yeah! Run you coward!”

“Well, I can safely say, the Antramonstrum has just been…” Blinky stopped, raising both eyebrows. “Schooled. Hah! Get it? Schooled?”

Toby and AAARRRGGHH!!! both glanced at each other. It was a shared moment of cringe.

“What about Atlas?” AAARRRGGHH!!! asked.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine,” Blinky assured.
“We’re fucked,” Atlas groaned into one of his mother’s throw pillows. “We’re so fucked.”

He sank into the soft material of his mother’s couch.

How could he be so stupid? Especially with a changeling of all things. Atlas had personal experience with Stricklander’s tactics. He should have foreseen this possibility.

His throat closed up as the reality of the situation came in full bloom within his chest. What if Stricklander had been listening in? And they were so close to finally getting around to defeating Bular.

Well, maybe not ‘close’ per se, but they were sure to figure something out soon enough.

Barbara pulled the pillow away from his face, replacing it with her gentle hands, one on each side of his face. “Calm down. I’m certain there’s a logical explanation.”

He nodded. Right. She was right. Maybe. At this point, he wasn’t sure what the hell he was doing anymore.

Trollhunting meant betraying his people but were they really his people anymore? Hell, most of them didn’t even want to be associated with Atlas.

He hadn’t been able to convince NotEnrique, so what chance did he have with Stricklander and Nomura?

Already he could imagine their anger—no, their fury—at his betrayal. And that was what it all came down to wasn’t it? Atlas was a traitor. By becoming the Trollhunter and keeping his identity a secret he was ruining the relationships he so dearly coveted. In order to protect the ones he loved he had to risk those he cherished.

Atlas touched his mother’s hands. They were soft and everything he could have ever hoped for in a
mom. He never wanted to let go.

There was no going back point anymore. Every chance to tell Stricklander and Nomura had been squandered, be it by his fear or events he could not control. His lips curled in disgust at his actions.

This was on him.

And man did it suck.

“He probably knows.” Atlas sighed. “This is my fault.”

Barbara switched positions, wrapping an arm around his shoulders as she pulled him into a loose hug. “You don’t know that. There could be a million reasons why he—”

A soft buzz resounded, coming from her side pocket. Both parties looked down.

Wow, Atlas thought, that was fast.

“Did he just text you?”

“Looks like it,” she said, slipping the phone out. “Dear Barbara, a thousand apologies, but the school has called me for an emergency meeting. I hope you can forgive me. Sincerely, Walt. Guess I put in a little too much of that dieter’s tea.”

“What were you going to do with him?”

“Question him while he was trapped on the toilet seat,” she said airly.

He blinked. “That’s…rather changeling of you, mom.”

“I thought it was a good idea too at the time. Apparently it didn’t work.”
“Oh, it will, but he was pretty focused tonight. I’m surprised he didn’t kill me. What do you think he was—Oh no.”

Atlas immediately reached for his belongings. On a good day he would have been cleaner in his actions, but considering his situation Atlas knew he had to be quick about it. Picking up the backpack, he unceremoniously emptied it across the carpet. His armor and cape toppled out, along with all his school supplies. Shit. It wasn’t there. Maybe his front pocket? He unzipped it.

“What is it?” His mother asked, bending down to assist.

“Oh thank the Pale Lady, it’s here.” Atlas said, the amulet cupped between his two hands. “But then what was he—crap.”

A familiar song played on his cell.

Her brows knitted. “What’s wrong?”

Atlas rose to his feet, cloak and armor tucked under one arm. “He’s calling me. I need to transform. Can I use your bathroom?”

“Of course. Down the hallway.”

Trollhunter form to changeling form was the fastest option. Atlas pulled off his gaggle-tack and stuffed it into the rest of his clothes.

“For the Glory of Merlin, Daylight is Mine to Command,” he commanded.

He waited for the magic to envelop him as it had so many other times.

Nothing.
The amulet sat in his hand. He tried again, all too aware of the cell repeating the same violin solo in the background. *Come on, come on, come on*, Atlas thought. Stupid piece of junk.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s not working. Guess I gotta do this shit manually,” Atlas grumbled as he headed to the bathroom, handing Barbara the gaggetack.

“Do you need any help?”

“Nah, I’m only changing,” he said as he began to move the door.

His mother peered inside before he could completely close it. “Changing your clothes? Now?”

“No, I mean, yes, but you know,” he answered, zipping off his jacket. “Changeling? Magical transformation? Horny me, ha, ha, ha…”

“You did *not* just say that,” she said sternly, crossing her arms.

“Sorry, that was bad. I like to joke when I’m nervous,” he said before looking her up and down. His shoulders rose. “Uh, mom. A little privacy?”

Her eyes widened. She backed away, cheeks pinkening. “Oh. Oh! I’m so sorry, Atlas. Jesus, Barbara, how dense could you be?” She asked aloud. “Well, yell if you need anything. I’ll uh, be in the kitchen.”

Atlas snorted, finally shutting the door. He began to switch out of his human clothes, replacing them with the familiar dark cloak and armor. During this, his mind began to wander.

Stricklander knew Jim Lake Jr. was now Barbara Lake’s son. How was this going to affect his school life? *Certainly not for the better*, he thought sourly. His dad now had better leverage over his other identity.
As he if needed more. At night they would be protected, but during the day? Atlas could only be in so many places at once. What if his mom was kidnapped while he was at school with Toby? What if Toby got pulled into Mr. Strickler’s office while Atlas was with his mom?

Too many variables and too little time. While he didn’t want to look at them as liabilities, the more changeling part of his mind wouldn’t dismiss the notion. Neither Barbara nor Toby were going to be safe starting tomorrow. He had to make a choice of who to guard.

Atlas’s nose scrunched up as the onset of change ensued, breaking his line of thought. Fortunately, the transformations were getting better (that was to say, less painful), but Atlas still grunted as his back popped. His legs and arms lengthened at different rates, making his gait unbalanced. Thinking fast, he gripped the sides of the sink, unintentionally raising his gaze at the reflection before him.

Oh.

Wow.

He felt more sympathetic to his friends’ reactions now. A reflection on a window wasn’t nearly as horrifying as seeing it in front of a bathroom mirror. Jim Lake Jr.’s shocked face appeared to melt away, replaced with features Atlas knew all too well. Muscles expanded and stretched to accommodate his form, creating ripples underneath his skin. Hearing his jaw crack, he turned away, no longer willing to watch.

It was another testament to his freakish nature. Whereas regular changelings could switch efficiently, his was wrong, like something out of a horror film.

For a second, Atlas couldn’t help but imagine a better life, one where he wasn’t always shifting between two forms—two worlds—to keep up the status quo.

But which one would he be willing to give up?

James Lake Junior?

Atlas?
His friends and mom didn’t mind his two-natured self, but Atlas did. Being half-human meant he would never be fully accepted by the changelings and being half-changeling meant he could never truly understand humanity, especially after what their so-called scientists did to him. Wouldn’t it be better just to stick to one side? To be fully one, whole and truly.

Because in all honesty, Atlas was tired of this. All this. Pale Lady’s tits, Toby had no idea how good he had it. To be able to fit in, to live without constant fear of discovery, to fall in love: he envied the other for such freedoms. Toby could be anything he wanted to be while Atlas was stuck within roles destiny bestowed upon him. Stricklander’s assistant. Trollmarket’s Trollhunter. Jobs assigned to him, with no choice in the matter.

He bit down on his lower lip. And that was what it all came down to, wasn’t it? Freedom. The ability to choose one’s path.

The violin solo played once again. Atlas picked it up.

“Young Atlas,” Stricklander began, his voice strained. “What on earth took you so long?”

“Dad, h-heyy, what’s up?” Atlas answered. To his relief, his voice was back, as rough and gravelly as ever.

“I have good news; you are dismissed from the mission,” Stricklander announced in what would have been a proud voice, if a round of gas hadn’t make itself known over the receiver.

Atlas tried not to laugh. This was serious.

“What? How?” His fingers tightened around the cell.

“I’ve obtained the amulet from the Trollhunter himself. Oh, you should have been there. I can’t believe the Lake brat was so stupid.”

Heart pounding, Atlas couldn’t help but pick up the amulet a top his human clothes. His brows came together.
“How? I mean, he said he still has it on him,” he said.

“Did he now? Marvelous. I cannot wait to see his face when he figures out the truth.”

“What do you mean?”


He examined the device. Once again Atlas tried to will it to life, but the clock-hands (he couldn’t think of any other term to describe them) stayed put. A chill crawled up his arms.

This wasn’t his amulet.

Son of a—

“You replaced it with a fake,” Atlas stated. His hand clenched the side of his cloak as he struggled to restrain himself.

“And they wonder why I call you my prized protégé. Return home. We’ll have pizza to celebrate,” he said before another groan. “Well, you can have the pizza. What on earth. Never should have tried Lawrence’s stupid health drink for lunch. Blasted fool. That idiot better not have given me food poisoning.”

Atlas’s jaw tightened. If he left now, Stricklander would immediately find out he was the Trollhunter. And if he didn’t—

Either way, he was hurting his dad. Now it was merely delaying the inevitable.

“I can’t,” he mumbled.

“Pardon?”
“I can’t, dad,” Atlas sighed, shaking his head. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Atlas—”

“Look, I’ll talk with you later, I just…” He swallowed. “I can’t do this right now.”

Shutting the phone off, he leaned forward, horns hitting the wall.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Oh, this is just perfect. Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

He heard a knock. “Atlas, is everything okay?”

“No,” he said, opening the door. His mother stepped back to accommodate him in the narrow hallway. “Dad has the amulet. The real one. Which means this one—”

“Is a fake,” another gruff voice finished, the basement door opening to reveal Draal’s disgruntled face. The troll stood halfway out, his arm and shoulder hidden by the door.

A flurry of movement erupted, mostly from his mother, who scrambled for a nearby broom, positioning herself between Atlas and Draal.

“Oh my god,” Barbara screamed. “Jim—Atlas, stay behind me.”

Draal raised one stony brow, throwing Atlas an unimpressed glance. “I take it this is the Bah-Bah-Rah.”

“Wait, mom, no. It’s okay. That’s Draal, the troll who lives in your basement,” he explained, lowering her makeshift weapon. “I told you about him this morning, remember?”

Barbara gestured her broom at the troll. “Him?”
Atlas nodded before stating to Draal in a grave voice, “Stricklander stole my amulet.”

“Yes, I heard,” Draal mumbled. “This is a disaster.”

“I know.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Noted.”

“Still, without the Trollhunter…I cannot say for sure, but from what I remember…Killahead seemed to require the amulet’s wielder.”

He blinked, brows raised. “You’re certain?”

“Yes, I remember that battle quite well,” Draal said, shoulders lowering. “I was rather young at the time, but old enough to fight with my father. It was chaotic. But from what I can recall, the Trollhunter had to do something.”

“Do you happen to remember what that something was?”

“No.”

“Gee, great,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his tongue. “So we’ve got time.”

“No. You need to take the fight to Bular tonight. Surprise him.”

“And get myself killed? Hell no!” Atlas answered. “I have enough problems in my life. We can destroy Bular soon, but not now. First I need to get back my amulet.”

“I’d hate to add onto your oh so important problems, but it appears you have another one.” Draal
lifted his hand. An unconscious girl hung down like a limp ragdoll in his grip. “I found a human down there, sneaking about. Don’t look at me like that. It was her own damned fault. She knocked herself out.”

Atlas was at the her side in a flash, Draal distributing the girl into his arms.

“Claire? Is she okay? How did she—” He paused. “She must have followed me here after school.”

“A Atlas, put her down on the couch. She could have brain damage,” Barbara instructed. Draal stood awkwardly in between the hallway and living room as Atlas placed Claire on the sofa.

“What are we going to do about her?” Draal asked as Atlas’s mother examined Claire.

“I’ll take her home.”

“Are you sure?” Draal asked, switching to his native tongue. “The fleshbag saw me. We do not need any more of them finding out.”

“She will think it dream. All do,” Atlas answered back similarly. His Troll speak had gotten better, but he still struggled to organize his thoughts. Translating from English to Changeling to Troll was a big headache at times.

“You’re a fool. She was listening in to your conversation with the changeling. She knows.”

Clever girl. Atlas had underestimated her. A part of him gleefully absorbed the news. Most of him was worried however.

Draal’s gaze flickered over Atlas’s shoulder to his mother before returning on him. “When were you going to tell me you told your fleshbag mother?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why do you care?”
“I am protecting her,” he defended. “I do not ask for much, but I would like to be kept in the loop when concerning your human family. I made a promise. I will not back down from that.”

“Aaw, care now? She grow on you?” Atlas joked.

“She is loud and opinionated. Much like you,” Draal commented before switching the subject. “You should go to Vendel tomorrow. He will know what to do about this.”

“And start war between Changelings and Trolls? No thanks.”

“Vendel is one of the oldest members of Trollmarket. If there’s anyone who knows about the Killahead bridge, it’s him.”

Ugh. He hated when Draal was right. “Fine.”

“What are you going to do about the girl?”

Atlas rolled his eyes, switching back to English. “Her family will be suspicious if she doesn’t come home tonight. We don’t really have a lot of options right now.”

Atlas approached his mother, taking a knee next to the couch where Claire slept. He watched his mother work, checking her pulse, careful not to move her neck, before lightly examining her head. To be honest, it was almost cool. This was her element after all.

Releasing a small sigh, his mother pulled away whilst adjusting her glasses.

“I think she’ll be alright. There are two small bumps on the front and back of her head. I suspect the shock of that and hitting the ground was what knocked her out. Still, I would prefer she stay here so I can keep a close eye, but from the look on your face I can tell that’s not going to be possible, now is it?”

“Mom, you and Toby are the only ones who know about this and already it’s put both your lives in danger. I can’t do that. Not to Claire.”
“I’m a doctor. I could take her to the clinic, make sure she’s stable,” Barbara argued. “I just can’t leave a patient alone like this. It’s not right.”

“People will ask questions. If it makes you feel better, I can keep an eye on her through the night. Keep you updated by phone.”

“That’s…not what I want, but it’s acceptable I suppose.” His mother reached out, patting him on the shoulder. “You really care for her, don’t you?”

“She’s my theater partner. That’s it,” he defended, though his voice held no conviction.

His mother smiled knowingly.

Gently, Atlas lifted Claire, carefully adjusting her so that her head was higher than her feet. Sweet Pale Lady she was so tiny. So fragile. He hoped he didn’t break her on the way to her home.

The moment he reached the outside his mother stopped him.

“Atlas,” she whispered, squeezing his arm. “One last thing, before you go.”

“What now?” He shook his head. “Sorry, I’m just…This is a lot to take in tonight.”

“I know you’re overwhelmed. I want to help, but the only way I can see how is knowing more about your world. I can’t continue to be left in the dark. Please,” she stressed, eyes tense. “You’re not alone in this.”

Atlas released a long exhale. He didn’t have time to explain much, not with Claire in his arms. He needed to figure out how to get back his amulet. He needed to figure out a proper explanation to Stricklander before someone else got to him or he found out himself.

But his mother was in this now, wasn’t she? Despite his warnings, Barbara Lake had stepped into the world of trolls and magic willingly. If she accepted him and Draal, then it stood to reason she
could handle the rest of the information regarding the role of the Trollhunter and the two worlds he was charged to protect.


“Yes?”

“Could you answer some of her questions?”

“All of them,” Barbara interjected.

Draal crossed his arms. “You expect me—”

Barbara growled.

Draal amended his previous answer. “But I can make an exception for Lady Bar-Ba-ra.”

“Thank you,” Atlas said as he turned back to the outside.

“Oh! Sweetheart, I almost forgot” his mother stood on her tippy-toes, planting a small kiss on his cheek. He could feel his cheeks flush. “Stay safe.”

“That’s no longer an option, mom,” Atlas answered.

She looked him in the eyes, mouth set. “I’m scared for you.”

“Me too.” He sighed. “I’ll come back once I make sure Claire is okay.”

“What are you going to do about the amulet?”
Atlas averted his gaze. Things were moving way too fast. He wasn’t ready. He needed more time.

“I’ll get it back. Or something,” he replied, setting off into the night.

*Wow, good job,* he inwardly berated himself. *Or something? Did he seriously leave with that?*

The wind whistled around him as Atlas made his way to her home. He jumped from house to house in a strategic manner, making sure not to bounce Claire around too much.

Her breath warmed his chest. Atlas’s cheeks began burning once more. Why did she do this to him? How could even being near her when she was unconscious create so many strange reactions within him?

*Girls,* his mind supplied, *are terrifying.* Maybe Toby was right about girls and magic, because she had certainly cast a spell on—Shit, now he was making terrible jokes like his best friend too.

Once he reached her home, he adjusted his hold to open the window. Silently slipping inside, he gently laid her onto the bed. He brushed her blue bang out of her face. Did she know how pretty she was? It reminded him of the story Stricklander spoke of as a child, about a woman whose beauty started a war.

The young him had laughed at such a notion. Starting a war over love? Who did that? Now, he was beginning to understand why.

Just as he was about to leave, her eyes fluttered open.

His heart skipped.

“Hmm,” she mumbled, eyes glassy and glazed over. She reached out in a fumbling manner, grasping part of his cloak. “Where am I?”

“Your bed,” he answered steadily. For safety’s sake, he pulled up his hood.
Her head bobbed, eyes half-lidded. His shoulders relaxed.

“My head feels funny. Who are you?”

Atlas paused, then lied, “A dream.”

If Claire was as sleepy as she was, then perhaps everything that transpired tonight would be taken as a dream. And if she asked tomorrow, Atlas could pretend not to understand. It was the perfect plan in his opinion.

“A dream?” She wondered aloud before nodding. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“How’s your head?”

“Hurts a little bit,” she answered drowsily. Her hands came up to his face, bringing him forward. “Oh wow. Your eyes are pretty. So blue.”

“Oh?” He couldn’t help but smirk. This Claire was adorable.

“They remind me of my kitty’s,” she admitted, patting his cheek.

“You know what,” he laughed. “I’ll take it.”

A compliment was a compliment. Even if she did compare him to her cat.

“Night, night, Dream boy.” She yawned, releasing her hold on his cloak. Her head dropped, eyes fluttering before sleep finally claimed her.

Chest warm and giddy with confidence, he couldn’t help but plant a small kiss on the back of her hand.
Atlas got up, though not before leaving her with a soft whisper of, “Night, night, Claire.”

She appeared to be okay, but remembering his mother’s words, he spent the rest of the night on top of her roof, listening to her breathing and checking inside every hour or two. By early dawn, he left, satisfied with her safety for now. His secret was safe.

At least, he hoped so.

As with every morning, dawn began to edge over the tiny valley of Arcadia Oaks.

She scowled. Nomura was not a morning person. As a changeling she required sleep when using her human form, which she spent more time in then she cared to, especially with her daytime hours at the museum. Her recon mission was supposed to be solo but somehow, Otto found her. He had claimed he was tracking Stricklander.

Bullshit.

Atlas jumped out of the trees as she predicted, landing in the backyard of a fleshbag’s home, unaware of the car parked just out of view. Back home to mommy. How cute. Nomura’s hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“You see?” Otto whispered. “I was right.”

Nomura’s pulse slammed in her neck, anger roaring through her. Rage and betrayal poisoned her veins. How dare he.

How dare he.

“So you were,” she answered stiffly.
Atlas was the Trollhunter, which meant James Lake Junior and Atlas were the same damn person. Suddenly all of the brat’s actions made sense. The disappearances, the excuses, the lies—everything fit together, which only fueled the fire building within her.

Of course the brat would betray them. She always knew little Peer Gynt hated Bular, but she hadn’t expected that hate to encompass the rest of them.

The Janus Order had given him a home, just as they had done for her. Did he not have any loyalty? Any shame?

How dare he throw it all away. Throw away everything Nomura taught him. Thrown his lot in with the humans and Trollmarket the first chance they showed him an ounce of kindness.

Her chest burned. He made a mockery of her.

Well, she thought spitefully, not for long.

“So?” Otto prompted.

Nomura fixed him with an annoyed glare. “We will deal with him later.”

Otto scowled. “Don’t you want to eliminate him?”

Eliminate him? Like some wishy-washy PA in a company? Oh no, Nomura wanted to annihilate the brat. Wipe him off the face of the planet.

The Janus Order ran on credibility and he had destroyed hers, tarnished her pride and place within the organization. She was the laughing stock of the Order now, and to make matters worse, Stricklander humiliated her at every turn, assigning her grunt work instead of what she deserved. Her fellow brethren would soon be gunning for her job. It was only a matter of time.

All while pretending he cared. Disgusting. Revulsion filled her stomach. She could taste bile
developing in the back of her throat. He was exactly like the humans. Half-changeling or not, he betrayed her like his kind. Betrayed them all. And for what? His fleshbag companions and the two dumbasses from Trollmarket? Pathetic.

Otto looked at her expectantly.

“What I do to him has nothing to do with you,” she said.

“I could kill him now. Save us the trouble.”

“We don’t have time. Stricklander will be expecting us back at the Order to gloat,” she remarked frostily.

Even in the dark she could see Otto’s brows knit together sharply. “What do you mean?”

Was he seriously that dense? She got out of the car, shutting the door with a soft click. “He switched out the amulet, you nitwit.”

“How would you know?” he asked, joining her on the sidewalk.

“I looked over his plans. He was never going to kill the Lake boy.”

No, Stricklander didn’t have the stomach to kill one of his students. He cared more about his image with humanity than his position in the Janus Order in Nomura’s honest opinion. He was almost as bad as Atlas.


“I’m leaving. Do what you want.”

“Can I kill him?”
“No,” she answered immediately, then paused. A flash of feelings greeted her. The thought of the brat’s death, while satisfying in part, left the rest of her cold. Fuck, was she actually fond of the little traitor?

No. It had to be done. He betrayed the Order.

He betrayed her.

A moment later, she answered, “the Trollhunter’s life is mine. You should focus on our lord’s return. Isn’t that why you came over from Germany in the first place?”

“You’re no fun,” he pouted, lower lip extended.

Nomura sneered, “You and I both know you are no match for him, Otto.”

Otto could change into anyone but the one thing he couldn’t do was change into a good fighter, no matter how much ‘bulk’ he took on. Like most Changelings, Otto preferred trickery, using his skills of deception to lure in his prey. A model changeling, which meant a horrible troll.

“I could kill the boy with a flick of my wrist,” Otto defended, eyes flashing gold.

Nomura couldn’t help but smirk. Sore spot was it? She knew he had never forgiven Stricklander for bringing in the brat. It was an affront to their laws. To see their head so easily bend them without repercussions must have been maddening for a rule-follower like Otto.

“He would defeat you easily,” she said. “Atlas isn’t the same child he was six years ago.”

Otto sped up, grabbing her sleeve. The jovial mask he so perfectly crafted had fallen, leaving behind a deeply insecure changeling, or at least, that was how Nomura saw it. “You dare underestimate my abilities?”

“To call you out for overestimating yours,” she retorted, her hand shifting just as she grabbed his hand and pulled back.
Otto hissed, cradling his injured hand.

“His mother—"


“It almost sounds like you’re protecting the brat, Nomura,” Otto said.

Nomura barked a cruel laugh. “That lying brat disgraced and demoted me. The only thing I’m protecting is the chance to slit his throat myself.”

Her colleague searched her eyes, then blinked, pulling away as he relented.

“You’re scary,” he muttered.

“And you’re pathetic,” she replied, shifting to her natural form as she sank into the woods behind them. “Auf Wiedersen, Otto.”

“It’s Auf Wiedersehen, Nomura,” he corrected.

She flipped him the bird.

Nomura left the fool standing there, no longer willing to tolerate his presence. Otto and Stricklander always knew how to push her buttons, but now she had someone even higher on her shit-list.

One thing was for sure: Nomura wasn’t going to let this go.

Not now.
Not ever.
Chapter Summary

Stricklander’s plan falls through, inadvertently dooming his son. NotEnrique kills a goblin, inadvertently dooming his sister.

Things are set in motion that cannot stop.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! New chapter is here! Lots of fun plans regarding this arc. Thank you for all the lovely reviews, kudos, and bookmarks. I truly appreciate them. :) Big thanks to Vici for helping me with this chapter. Check out my tumblr tunafishprincess for fanart for the fic. If you have any questions, you're welcome to ask them in the review section. I'm always happy to answer things.

I hope you enjoy the chapter! Next one is gonna feature Vendel and Claire's POVs. ;)

The bell tower sang in the ending of the old and the beginning of the new day.

Tonight was the night. *It had to be*, Stricklander thought, for no other night could do. He had planned this down to the very moment. Clouds parted like water, their white lady full and luminous, a lily amongst the vast pond of space.

Arcadia Oaks Museum sat in the middle of town, smack dab between the commercial and residential districts. It was the perfect place for them to conduct their ceremony; humanity would be shaken to their core right outside their front door. Built in the late nineteenth century, it had withstood many an earthquake, largely because of the vast support beams and countermeasures the Janus Order put in place over the past few decades. A white pristine structure, it stood out amongst the drab, modern
businesses nearby, whose blocky architecture did nothing to enhance the town’s appeal to tourism. No, Arcadia Oaks was a sleepy little valley, unaware of the incredible amount of leylines and creatures that would soon burst forth from the shadows.

Time was of the essence.

Goblins chanted, their voices echoing off the walls, a chorus to go along with their approaching victory. He chuckled.

Look at him, being poetic. He hadn’t felt this alive in ages.

Behind the curtains, Stricklander watched as his kind filled in the shadows. The only clue of their presence was the slight shiver of their quaking bodies. How many were in there? Twenty? Thirty? It was difficult to say.

Alas, someone just had to ruin the moment.

“Ah! Tonight is the night! Exciting, yes? I know I am.” Otto whispered, nearly stepping on Stricklander’s cloak.

He pulled it behind himself, hissing, “Why aren’t you in position?”

Damn fool. He could only hope the polymorph didn’t make a mockery of himself in front of their lord.

“Oh, I will be. Not to worry, sir. I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Otto exclaimed, taking a peek through the curtains before Stricklander drew him back with a sharp tug. He adjusted his lapels, throwing Stricklander what Otto must have thought as a beguiling smile (it was anything but). “Where is your darling assistant?”

“He’s around. Not trying to postulate himself into the ceremony like you are,” he said in a measured tone.

On the contrary, Atlas was elsewhere, likely pouting in some tree over Stricklander doing his job for
him.

Or, perhaps he was still pretending the Trollhunter’s group actually cared about him. Stricklander would have to assuage the boy of such notions, after he gave the boy his proper punishment. A few decades in his room seemed proper enough.

But punishment would wait. He had bigger problems, namely, one portly polymorph.

“So touchy,” Otto playfully remarked. “You’ve changed, Stricklander. You used to be so much more menacing. Why take so long to get the amulet? What purpose could you possibly have to delay our grand beginning?”

“Not everyone is as trigger-happy as you, Otto. Some of us like to be precise. It is the Changeling’s moon. A blue moon. Our magic is highest now.”

“Precise is it?” Otto cocked his head to the side.

“As the leader of the Janus Order—

“Are you now?” The other changeling tapped his chin. “I thought Gunmar elected Bular for that position.”

“Bular is the leader of our cause, not of our organization. You will do well to recognize that, lest you step on the wrong foot,” he threatened, baring his tusks prominently. It was a trollish gesture, one Stricklander normally preferred to deter from, but it did the trick. Otto raised his hands, head lowered.

“Of course, sir. Many apologies.” He added, “Best of luck out there.”

“I don’t need it,” he answered, whipping the cape around with a flourish, smacking Otto in the face. The oaf glared. Stricklander smirked.

This was his moment. His time. And Otto wasn’t going to ruin it.
No one would.

They had done it. He had done it. Stricklander could feel the euphoria within the room, soaking up every bit of praise, even if it wasn’t necessarily directed at him.

The weight of the amulet hung heavy in his hands. Stricklander couldn’t believe his luck. The poor fool had left it in the front pocket of his backpack. He almost snickered at the memory.

As one Chinese General once said, *the supreme art of war was to subdue the enemy without fighting.*

His bladder tightened. Thankfully, he had nothing left inside him to purge, but whatever he ate left him sick for most of the night up until the morning. He even had to cancel class. Next time he saw Coach Laurence he and Stricklander were going to have some words.

Actually.

Stricklander paused.

Oh dear.

That didn’t really matter anymore, now did it? Soon, the entire town would be enslaved.

He pushed back the curtains, catching sight of Nomura. She stood at the side of Bular, arms crossed, gaze as venomous as ever. The shuffling of feet in the darkness alerted him of the others around them. All the high ranking members of the Order were here now. None were as important as him of course. Still, it was an impressive feat.

As he searched around the room, a small inkling of disappoint hit him. Even though he knew Atlas wasn’t here, the evidence—or rather, lack of—left a bitter taste in his mouth. Where the bloody hell was he? Despite Stricklander’s insistence (how dare that boy not answer his texts) the teen had not shown up to the event. No word. Not even an apology.
His chest burned. The betrayal hurt. Had Atlas truly gone over to the Trollhunter’s side? He couldn’t help but frown. Once Gunmar returned, he would rid the boy of his so-called friends. Surely Gunmar will grant the teen some leniency. He was a child. Nothing more than a silly boy, poisoned by the kind words of others.

That had been him too, once upon a time. But like all changelings do, Stricklander grew up.

Head up and arms raised, he walked towards the bridge. Bular stood at the ready near Nomura, arm outstretched. There was a wild neediness within those eyes. This was as important for Bular as it was for Stricklander after all.

He quivered in anticipation. Gunmar’s silhouette stood just beyond the portal. His remaining eye glowed, pulsing to the power of the bridge.

Kneeling with his right foot, he presented the amulet. After bowing his head, he looked above, both awed and terrified at being so close to his lordship. This was it. He was doing it.

Gunmar lifted his arms. Like a primordial god, his eye flashed, power emanating from every molecule.

“Open the bridge!” He commanded.

Stricklander’s back straightened. Chin tilted and chest forward, hoping his appearance would be satisfactory to their lord.

Bular cast an unimpressed glance, tearing the amulet from the changeling’s grasp.

“It is my honor, Father,” Bular said dutifully.

It took everything in Stricklander’s body not to roll his eyes at Bular. It was he who had done the work. Shouldn’t it be him who brought Gunmar back?

Regrettably, there was nothing he could do about that. There were ranks for a reason. Instead, he stood by Nomura, arching his back to appear as tall as he could be.
“Where is the new changeling?” Nomura said, giving him a toothy scowl. “He should be here.”

Indeed, he thought with a scowl. Where was the Nuñez family changeling? He had never seen such sloppy showmanship from one of their kind. Normally changelings would kill for such a place of honor.

“Fragwa, take your brethren and fetch that vile little beast,” he demanded curtly.

Bular leaped, landing on the top of the bridge, “For centuries, Father, we have awaited your glorious return. I have awaited your return. Tonight, we take back the surface lands.” He thrust a fist into the air. “Tonight, we feast!”

The goblins broke out into a chorus of “Waka chaka”.

A cruel laugh escaped Bular’s mouth as he lowered the amulet into the bridge. Stricklander stifled a gasp as the bridge whirled to life once more. The air grew still for a moment before the force of magic blew out, very nearly blinding Stricklander and Nomura. He resisted the urge to flinch. This was dangerous magic in front of them. Potentially lethal.

“Finally…” Gunmar began, “After centuries of being in the Darklands—"

The glow grew brighter. Stricklander’s horns itched, his neck cold as he realized what was happening.

He wasn’t the only one. Bular leaned forward, concern riding his gaze (a rare expression for the brute). “Something is wrong!”

Stricklander tried to get to the amulet, pressing against the fury of mystical energy that blasted out of the bridge. “Take out the amulet! Take it out now!

“The portal is closing!” Gunmar rasped.
The structure wobbled. He had to spread his legs to keep steady. The blue cracks along its body began to fracture, threatening to collapse. After a moment of shock, Bular jumped into action, claws digging into the bridge’s keystone. It was futile. The amulet continued to move, releasing a heavy pulse that knocked Bular off.

In the corner of Stricklander’s eye, he watched his brethren file out of the room in quick succession. A smart move, he thought guiltily. This would not be forgotten anytime soon. He only wished he could join them.

In the midst of all this, the bridge started to die down, the amulet slowly losing power.

“'My son—' Their lord cried out, arm outstretched.

It was painful to watch. Still, Stricklander kept vigil. Inwardly, he felt a mess. He should have known. It was so obvious.

“Father!” Bular yelled, voice breaking.

“'My son, what have you done?’ Gunmar’s last words struck deeply, painting Bular’s face in deep sorrow. The blue glow faded, the amulet falling to the floor with a sharp metallic click.

Stricklander picked it up. Shame twisted his lips. He almost pitied the younger Gumm-Gumm. They had come close.

“Father!” Bular repeated mournfully. His expression lay bare. For a moment, Stricklander saw the raw anguish of the other, something he had never seen in all his centuries of working with the troll. But, like most of his weaker emotions, they were soon covered by a fiery glare.

"'Daylight is his to command,’” Stricklander recited, ready to explain the reason for Bular’s failure to open the bridge, “'Bular—'

Sharp claws seized his throat. Bular lifted him upwards, slowly constricting his airflow.

“'You said the amulet would open the bridge!’ Bular growled. “You have failed me again, Impure.’
“Wait, Bular,” he coughed. Air. He needed air. “I know what we need.”

“What?”

“The Trollhunter,” he explained between breaths. “The amulet won't work without him. He is the key.”

“I know where he lives, sire,” Nomura spoke up.

Bular cast a dark glare over his shoulder. “Bring the Trollhunter to me.”

“It will be my pleasure,” she answered, presenting a deep bow.

Stricklander very nearly snarled, (how dare she) but noted the raise of Nomura’s eyebrow and instead cleared his throat. “I…Yes. Excellent idea.”

“Pray that you're right, impure, or Arcadia will burn in my fury.”

“He still has the fake amulet,” he answered, struggling to find his feet. His throat ached. Still, the pain was nothing in the wake of this new humiliation. He had failed. Again. “The Trollhunter is weak. Nothing will protect him now.”

“So you say. Your word has been less than trustworthy as of late,” Bular said, eyes burning.

The hushed words were caught in his fists and in sharpness of his fangs. Stricklander could do nothing however. Better to leave the room with a wounded pride than a wounded side. He bowed low (humiliating, shameful, disgusting) before taking leave.

As he limped out of the curated area, a shadow followed. He stiffened, reaching for his blades. The clip-clop of familiar feet closed in. The tension in his shoulders eased. He knew those footsteps.
“Stricklander, I need to speak with you,” she growled.

What a coincidence, so did he. They edged over into one of the corner exhibits. It was a reflexive habit, allowing them some small protection against any uninvited listeners. Nevertheless, it made Stricklander uneasy. Nomura wouldn’t seek him out so soon after receiving a mission from Bular. What did she want?

Either way, it didn’t matter. He had bigger issues, namely, one missing teenager from their ranks.

“Atlas has gone missing,” he said.

“I know,” she huffed.

“Find him,” he ordered. “Bring him home.”

“That’s the problem.” Her fists clenched, teeth bared. “He’s fooled us. Fooled all of us.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Atlas. Is. The. Trollhunter,” she enunciated slowly, as though he were daft.

Impossible. Stricklander scoffed. What a load of hogwash. How could his son be the Trollhunter? *He* would have known.

She continued. “Have you ever seen them in the same place at the same time? Why is Atlas never around when the Trollhunter is near?”

“He’s hiding himself. What evidence do you have?”

“I saw the Trollhunter enter the house and Atlas leave. I was there all night and never saw Atlas come into the house either. It has to be him.”
Preposterous. What sort of explanation was that? Stricklander couldn’t believe Nomura would throw Atlas under the bus so easily. Had she truly lost her marbles?

Atlas was too ingenuous to keep such a secret. The Trollhunter was human and Atlas wasn’t. He couldn’t be. Whatever the humans did to him left his powers inert. Magic could do nothing. He had tried.

“That’s it? Did you really think coming to me with such scant evidence will turn me against my protégé?”

Nomura stepped forward. “Otto was with me. He can vouch.”

“Of course he was. And was he the one who convinced you he was the Trollhunter too?” He remarked snidely.

Ah, now it made sense. Who else could create such dissent into his ranks?

His shoulders arched. Irritation rode his brow. He thought better of her. Apparently, he miscalculated.

“I can think for myself,” she snapped. “You can’t lie. The coincidences line up. All the lies, all the missed meetings,” she crossed her arms, claws tightening. “It all adds up.”

“I see,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. “You do?”

“You’re trying to usurp me,” he accused, voice rising.

Sowing seeds amongst the ranks was nothing unusual in the Janus Order (even he had been known to participate once or twice) however Nomura had never been so insidious. Otto yes, but Nomura always acted to protect her interests, superseding others for survival, not malice such as this.
She growled, eyes flashing a light green. “You blind idiot. For once get your head out of your ass and listen. Atlas and Jim Lake Jr. are the same person. You can’t deny the thought hasn’t hit you.”


But hadn’t Jim answered from Atlas’s phone? There was also the strange way Jim acted around him and the humans at school. And the way he handled his pencil was also eerily similar to—

No. Atlas would have told him.

“Never,” he answered.

“Then you’re an even bigger idiot than I thought you were,” she barked a laugh.

Quickly, he wrapped his cloak closer, shifting out of the shadows. He flashed his fangs. “Leave, Nomura. I’ll tolerate you no longer.”

“He’s going to betray us,” she said, pressing a claw into his chest. “Watch.”

Stricklander’s face was drawn into a glacial fury “Out,” he ordered.

She sneered, presenting a mocking bow before disappearing back into the darkness, leaving him to contemplate her choice words.

This was ridiculous. She was ridiculous.

Atlas couldn’t be the Trollhunter, because if he was the Trollhunter Stricklander would have known.

He flashed, returning to his human form. Sweat gathered at his temple.

If Atlas were the James Lake Junior, it would explain many missing puzzle pieces in the jigsaw that
was the Trollhunter.

But it could equally be wrong.

Right?

His eyes flickered down to his cell. The screen grew bright as he began to type.

Whilst Stricklander brewed over the new information, another changeling was faced with an equally difficult task.

“You’re late,” NotEnrique tutted, flicking imaginary food out of his tusks.

“Good evening to you too,” Toby called back. He approached the house as quietly as he could, which in tubby’s case was about as loud as an alley cat in heat. The only reason they weren’t discovered was the humans were all busy watching some stupid movie and NotEnrique was supposed to be all tucked in for the night. Supposedly.

He eyed the boy’s backpack. “You got the goods?”

The human wiggled his eyebrows, flashing a metal-laced grin.

“Let’s see,” he began, pulling out the bag. “Oh, ho, ho, now what have we got here? Ooh! Got some argyle, polka-dots, extra-long tube, and these—” Toby held his nose, cheeks taking on a greenish pallor. “Oh, now, these have never been washed. It practically stands up on its own. We’re talking months of toe sweat and gym classes.”

“That’s it?”
“Dude, these are practically all my good pairs. You gonna tell us more about Killahead or what?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Tell you? Stop the trolley! You want me to spill the beans about the bridge for a few pairs of smelly, stinky, never been washed?” The temptation was there certainly, but not for this kind of trade. NotEnrique crossed his arms. “Fat chance, Tubby.”

“Oh, come on! It’s only the location.”

“Ask your friend.”

“Atlas can’t tell us without risking his life,” Toby defended. “Plus, he’s in Trollmarket.”

“And somehow I won’t be risking my life if I tell you? Are you nuts?” NotEnrique shook his head. “No way! Already got bossman breathing down my neck. No amount of socks are worth that kind of information. I like my body in one piece, thank you very much.”

“Come on, dude. Not even a hint?”

“Hmm, let’s see, risk my life and freedom for a bunch of losers or spend the rest of my life in the lap of luxury. Gee, I wonder which one I’ll choose? Real difficult choice there, Tubby.”

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re gullible. Run back home to mummy dearest, Toby-kins.”

Toby’s lips dropped, shoulders soon to follow. A second passed before he answered softly, “I don’t have a mom.”

Crap. Of course the chubby one didn’t have a mom. What was with all these fleshbags and their sappy tragic backstories? Ugh.

Not wanting to be outdone or without the last word, NotEnrique replied dryly, “Wow, what a coincidence, neither do I.”
He shut the window immediately. Ha! Let the human stew on that response.

Leaping back into his cot, he began to settle in for the night. Above his head, the crib mobile danced around, highlighted by the moving pictures of stars on the wall. It was hypnotic, almost soothing.

Changelings didn’t grow up in snazzy places like this. The Darklands were cold and lifeless, food only going to the toughest while he and his nest fought for the scraps left over. For a moment, he pondered their fates. There were few changelings left in the Darklands, most had already found human hosts. Well, that, or were some Gumm-Gumm’s meal. He shuddered in remembrance.

But he wasn’t there anymore. He was in Arcadia, and fat chance he was gonna go back there willingly.

“I’m tellin’ you, Suzy Snooze,” he said to the toy. “Give ’em an inch, and they want the whole Sunday roast. Greedy bunch o’ bastards.”

As he tucked Suzy in, he regarded her figure, worn by years of use. His fleshbag’s sister must have loved this thing for a long time. It surprised him she would give up such a possession to her younger brother. Any changeling wouldn’t.

“What’s that Suzy? I should just tell bossman?” NotEnrique’s chest puffed out. “You know what, I should, shouldn’t I? Be done with this whole stupid farce of a game? Gotta protect numero uno, right?”

Suzy stared on, as though mocking him.

NotEnrique’s ears lowered. “Yeah, that would be a stupid idea too, innit? Well, what do you think I should do, Suzy?” His eyes widened as a new thought came. “Wha? Join them? Are you crazy, Suzy? You been sipping too much juice lately. Who cares about the others back in the Darklands. They’re there and I’m here and I don’t feel an ounce of guilt about it. I got mine. It’s not my fault they couldn’t make it into the Order. Ugh, stop looking at me like that.” He frowned. “You know what? I think it’s time for a little me-time, Suzy, so why don’t you go nap and I’ll have some fun.”

He tucked the doll underneath the blanket then lifted out his newest steal this morning. Its cover practically shimmered, as if dancing to grab NotEnrique’s attention.
“Oh, yeah baby,” he cooed. “Been waiting all night for you. Sweat sock edition!” He opened it up, relishing the different footwear. “Ha, ha, ha! I knew it. Plaid is back in season.”

But, like all good things, his pleasure dissipated as a newcomer made his presence known.

It took him a moment, but he could recognize the other’s smell well enough. As the mobile sang softly from above, the rocking chair swayed eerily. It was his first clue something was off.

The hairs on his back stood. Holding his breath, he frantically searched the vicinity. There!

Disgust brewed in his mouth. Straightening his back, he gave the goblin an unimpressed glare.

“Fragwa,” he drawled, distaste in his tone. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

His little goblin intruder grinned. In a low voice, he mumbled a series of undistinguishable words.

Damn. Should have paid attention more in his changeling studies. The goblin language was a mess of sounds and emotions.

“Wow, fascinating,” NotEnrique answered dryly. He lowered his magazine, standing up from inside the crib. He pointed at the goblin, brows crossed. “Actually, hmm, no. I have no bloody idea what you just said. You know I don't understand that "waka" stuff, ya stupid coot.”

Fragwa jumped from the wall to his crib, no longer keeping up with the pretense of a civil conversation. He hissed loudly, “Waka chaka!”

“Oh, Strickler sent you to come and get me, eh? Well, who says I want to go? Maybe I'm startin' to like it here. Got myself some food, a nice bed, loads of entertainment—no reason for me to leave all this behind, now is there?”

The goblin’s brows crossed. He drew further into the crib.
Did this bloody fool seriously think he would make NotEnrique do what he wanted? Ha! First the Trollhunter’s crew and now this.

Fuck that! He was tired of being dragged around by folks who wanted to do with him as they pleased.

“You insist? Right, then.” He picked up the magazine, calling over his shoulder at his doll. “You don’t want to see this, Suzy.”

Presenting the cover of the magazine to Fragwa, the goblin cocked its head to the side, pupils growing huge.

“Would you like to see my magazine? Sweat sock edition. Fresh off the newsstand.” Carefully, NotEnrique dropped the first page, eliciting a delightful growl from the entranced creature before him.

The changeling smirked. Cocking his fist back, he slammed it into the goblin’s nose.

Fragwa fell back, holding his face.

“Well, Sorry to disappoint, but this baby ain't goin' quietly,” he jeered.

In one swift movement he bounced off the goblin’s head onto the mobile, using its momentum to carry him a few feet away on the floor. The goblin didn’t take too kindly to his attack, shaking off its confusion and diving headfirst for NotEnrique once more.

He tried to dodge, but the goblin was faster, wrestling him to the floor. A series of wild punches and kicks did nothing to deter the bastard either. They rolled, smacking against the door, which allowed NotEnrique a small escape.

Not for long however. The smacked each other around, first on the rocking chair then to the top of the dresser. No matter how much NotEnrique pushed, Fragwa refused to give him. The persistent little fucker was vicious about it too, never allowing NotEnrique out of his sight.
Pulling back his feet, he launched Fragwa into the wall once more. This time, the damage was more severe. As if in slow motion, the structure upholding all his stuff collapsed in on itself, hurtling to the floor. He barely got away from it in time. Fragwa wasn’t so lucky.

Goblin splattered against the carpet. As it oozed out, NotEnrique approached, glancing back up from where the cases had collapsed.

He couldn’t help the flood of relief that filled him. He was safe.

“Definitely not childproof,” he joked. “Ew. Looks like Mummy has some cleaning up to do.”

Pitter-patter hit the rooftop. NotEnrique’s ears flicked upwards. Something, or someone, was coming. Dread pulled at the insides of his stomach. Quickly, he hid in the nearby closest, though not without carefully positioning himself to watch.

Moments later, two goblins entered from the window. He watched as they explored the area. Of course bossman sent more than one. Guy always seemed to have more than one plan up his sleeve.

The goblins soon zeroed in on their fallen comrade. They picked up one of the fallen frames.

His heart lurched as he noticed whose frame it was.

Crap.

The goblins looked between their dead mate and human girl in the photo, simplistic logic connecting the dots. Goblin dead must mean human girl killed him. NotEnrique would have dragged a hand down his face, but feared the sound would alert them.

Once one of the goblins took up the position of Fragwa (*what in the bloody hell was with the marker mustache?*) he presented the picture to the rest of his brethren outside the room.

“Waka chaka!” The newly christened Fragwa yelled.
Red eyes glowed in the distance. Even in the closest, NotEnrique could hear the small chorus of echoing “waka chaka”s.

As soon as they left, he peered around the door. Immediately, he crawled to his toy, carefully setting her up against the bed.


The toy’s head flopped to the direction of the window.

His fleshbag’s sister would be goblin chow if he didn’t do anything about it.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I thought you’d say that.”
Chapter Summary

Vendel tries to force Atlas to tell him the location, only to be interrupted by NotEnrique, causing Atlas to take action. Unfortunately, kidnapping your human crush isn't exactly kosher.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Vici, Trololololololoz, and Charlie for helping me with this chapter on grammar and characterization. Also, yey! Fanart!

Vici did another lovely comic for this chapter here:

Also, big thank you to the lovely Kittypop for two fanarts of the fic!

https://www.instagram.com/p/BuH47Nqgszy/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BuH7cUcgjoM/

Also, ghostpajamas did a lovely couple of sketches you should check out here:
http://ghosty-graveyard.tumblr.com/post/182676720159/sketch-page-commission-fortunafishprincess-0

Huge thank you to all those who have reviewed, kudoed, and bookmarked the fanfic. For real. I love reading your reviews and answering them. You guys are the best fandom anyone could hope for. :D

Hope you enjoy the new chapter!

“You did what!” Vendel couldn’t help but yell.

His fist shook the desk, scattering the scrolls and books he had pulled together so meticulously. Hours of work and reading he would have to reassemble. The candles that lit up the space wobbled,
the flames shifting sideways from the force of his action.

Now, Vendel considered himself rather composed for a troll—but this—even the most pacifist of their kind would be pulling at their hair from the Trollhunter’s actions.

Of all the ridiculous things Atlas could have done.

By Deya’s Grace, what in the void was Merlin thinking?

Blinkous stepped forward in reaction to Vendel’s outburst, which only served to increase the his frustration with them on a whole. He leveled a glare at the other. To his astonishment, Blinkous stayed.

Oh, this was simply wonderful. Of all the people Blinkous could have gotten attached, it was a half-changeling whelp with a chip on his shoulder.

He wasn’t sure if Blinkous’s current self would fall under brave or foolhardy. Likely a bit of both.

Vendel sighed, shoulders sagging. Well, there was nothing he could do about that now. Covering his eyes, he restated his question into something more palpable. “You mean to tell me you lost it again?”

“That was not Master Atlas’s fault,” Blinkous contended, waving his hands up and down with each word to emphasise their meaning. As if he needed to do so.

Vendel very nearly rolled his eyes.

“And it wasn’t lost,” Atlas said, lifting up two fingers. “It was stolen. Both times.”

“Ah, yes, because there is such a difference between the two.” He asked dryly, “Well then, who has it now?”

Both males shuffled around, neither looking him in the eye.
Brilliant. Exactly what he needed: another emergency. Changeling Armies, Killahead Bridge, Gunmar’s possible return—all the things he feared would happen since they threw the dark warlord into the Darklands in the first place.

Blinkous brought two hands underneath his chin, the others folded to his chest. “It is a precarious and complicated situation.”


Vendel would feel furious if he weren’t so damn tired with it all. Six or seven centuries ago he might have tolerated such incompetence from a Trollhunter (Blinkous’s infamous tutee came to mind), but Kanjigal had set a standard in their new Trollmarket, one Vendel had hoped to instill onto the boy.

If only they had more time. The threat of Gunmar tightened his throat. ‘Twas a noose of their own creation; the blind (quite literally) leading the blind towards their own mutual destruction. Memories of the previous war flashed through his mind. His mouth grew dry.

In the end, there would be no winner in Gunmar’s kind of war, only death and chaos for both humans and trolls.

Which meant they had to act sooner, rather than later.

Atlas’s adopted father, while indeed a complicating factor in their mission, meant of little consequence to Vendel. He needed the bridge’s location.

“Ah, yes,” Vendel said as he leaned against his staff. “Of course. Why did I even ask?”

Atlas raised hands, drawing them into fists. “I can get it back, Vendel. Please. Just give me a day.”

“A day and Bular will have already opened the bridge. No. We’re doing this my way now.”

“The bridge would already be open had Bular been able to use the amulet,” Blinkous spoke.
Atlas nodded before hitting his fist into an open palm. “Draal said something about the Trollhunter being connected to it. You or Blinkous must have some idea. You guys were at the battle too, right?”

“We were.” He rubbed his chin. That notion wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility actually. Nonetheless, it held little water without more proof. “Go on.”

“The Killahead Bridge activated in Deya’s presence,” Blinkous explained. “Presumably, the role of the Trollhunter and the bridge are connected.”

“How is that even possible?”

“This is merely theory, but I suspect it has to do with our race. Trolls have an affinity to bridges as gateways to other lands. Merlin created the amulet for Trolls. It would stand to reason he made it for such an event.” Blinkous’s eyes widened, sparkling at the prospect. “We’ve no clue how old the Darklands are in comparison to the Amulet. Mayhap they were created by the same person.”

“Then we have time,” Atlas stated.

Vendel shook his head, hitting his staff against the floor to emphasis his opinion. “No. Absolutely not. If what you say is true then Bular will already be searching all of Arcadia for you. We cannot allow you to fall into his hands.”

“So what? I should just hide out until he gets bored?” Atlas threw up a hand, jaw tight.

“I will gather our strongest warriors. Bular won’t suspect a group of us,” he answered.

Atlas glowered, striding over towards the window that overlooked the city below. Vendel gave him an unimpressed glance. Did the teen truly think such a tactic would work? Bular wasn’t stupid. Walking into that Gumm-Gumm’s layer without a war party was like serving the boy up on a silver platter.

A tense silence overtook the room.
Atlas continued to ignore them, eyes glued to the city. Vendel was starting to think that was the boy’s favorite spot these days. Well, he couldn’t blame him. It was a rather nice view.

Vendel joined him. The hustle and bustle below helped soothe his nerves.

Yes, Trollmarket was in danger and yes, their Trollhunter was without his amulet, but they had a solution. If he could gather enough of their people’s strongest warriors they might have a chance. Including Draal into the equation would make their odds even better.

But that all depended on Atlas’s next answer.

“You’ll need the location of the bridge,” the teen surmised, eyes narrowing.

His brow rose. He was getting better at reading his intentions. How much “better” was yet a mystery. A start in the right direction nevertheless.

“Yes,” Vendel admitted.

Atlas scowled. He pulled at the sides of his cloak, twisting it between his fingers. “I won’t give it. You’re going to storm in and kill everyone.”

“We won’t kill all of them. Those who surrender will be placed under imprisonment.”

“Under whose authority?”

“The Council’s,” he said. Truth, in part. Vendel had considerable control over any and all prisoners, as per his status. He could make a case for some of Atlas’s kind to stay alive. Trollmarket could do with a few bargaining chips.

Atlas flipped a tongue against his left tusk. Vendel’s left eye twitched. He let the blatantly rude gesture slide. “You and I both know no changeling would yield to Trollmarket.”

“That is a possibility I have pondered, yes.”
“Nomura would rather die. Believe me, she’s that stubborn,” Atlas said. His brows furrowed, vulnerability displacing the teen’s mask of defiance. “My dad will be there.”

A while ago Vendel would be more sympathetic to the boy’s plight. Presently, they had no time to negotiate surrender from the changelings. This would have to be fast, and soon.

Though he would never admit it, getting rid of the boy’s father figure would do them all a world of good, if the teen’s physical and emotional state was anything to go by. Even the Red Hats were a more sensible bunch than the fanatics in the Janus Order.

“Your father is about to raise the worst monster imaginable,” he stated. “Open your eyes, boy.”

“You don’t know him. He’s not a bad person. He’s just on the wrong side,” Atlas defended, fists raised.

Vendel couldn’t help it; ire fueled him. His brows came together. Centuries of peace would be ruined if the boy’s father was allowed to get his way, centuries Vendel had spent rebuilding Trollmarket from the ground up. Only recently had they returned to their pre-war population levels. All of that would be ruined if they screwed up. Why didn’t the boy understand? Why couldn’t he see what was right in front of him?

In a moment of weakness, he grasped the base of the teen’s horn. Atlas reacted as expected, a low growl leaving his mouth as he bared his fangs. It was a deep invasion of privacy, be one troll or changeling. When the teen made a swipe at him with one of his claws Vendel strong-armed him into wall, using his weight to keep the boy from escaping.

He might not be as quick as the young Trollhunter, but he definitely outweighed him.

Atlas thrashed around, releasing a litany of curses in all three languages. Blinkous tried to intervene, but Vendel flashed his own tusks. The other wisely backed down.

Once the boy finished lashing out, Vendel set him back to the floor (though not without keeping him in place with the side of his arm).
Atlas glared venomously.

“Real mature,” Atlas spat.

“You’re no better,” Vendel stated frostily. “Stop this nonsense. We must do this now. Tell me where the bridge is.”

Atlas growled. “Over my dead body.”

Blinkous moved closer, placing a hand over Vendel’s arm over to the boy’s shoulder.

“Master Atlas, you have a strong heart, a rare and admirable quality rarely seen in Trolls, but trying to retake the Amulet from Bular without aid would be a nigh impossible task of its own. You would be killed.” He gulped. “Or worse.”

The defensive glower dimmed. He could see the color leave Atlas’s face as reality set in. Vendel loosened his hold.

“I don’t want to force you, but I will if I have to. My entire people’s lives are at stake, Atlas.”

His ears descended as he spoke, “I know.”

A sharp boom interrupted their conversation. The doors shot open, throwing a whirlwind of dust into the air. Everyone froze. As the air cleared, three figures came into view, none of which Vendel particularly wanted to see right now.

“Oh! I got’s important news!” The changeling (NotEnrique, Vendel remembered) strode into the room on all fours, chest puffed out like he owned Vendel’s small abode.

It took every bit of civility not to punt the little gremlin out the window.

“AAARRRGGHH!!!!? I thought you were staying with Tobias?” Blinkous asked.
The fleshbag in question poked his head out behind the Kubera. “Oh, no worries. I’m here too.”

“Lovely,” Vendel sighed. “Do any of you understand the concept of knocking?”

“And Great Gronka Morka, what is he doing here?” Blinkous said, gesturing widely at the changeling before settling on their resident Kubera. “AAARRRGHH!!!”

The troll shrugged sheepishly. “Got info. Important. Need to hear.”

“A goblin came at me. Made mincemeat out of the sonofabitch, but now, the rest of ‘em want their pound of flesh. I’m lucky to have escaped with only a soiled diaper,” NotEnrique explained, jumping onto Vendel’s desk.

“You’ve drawn the ire of goblin vengeance? Directly to Trollmarket?” Blinky said, voice rising. He held his head between all four hands. “What if they get in?”

“Relax! They think the girl did it. Now, they’re after her,” NotEnrique explained.

“The girl?” Vendel asked.

Atlas pulled out of his hold, bolting right over to NotEnrique’s spot.

“They think Claire’s responsible?” Atlas hissed, “You fucking asshole! I’m going to kill you!”

Claire? Another human? Vendel filed the name away.

“Take it easy. She’s still alive.” NotEnrique paused. “I think.”

Slamming his hands against the table, Atlas threw Vendel a fixed expression.
Oh dear. He knew that look.

“They’re gonna go after her. I have to save her,” Atlas stated.

Before Vendel could react Atlas made a running leap for the window.

Vendel reached out, just barely touching the threads of the teen’s cloak. Alas, he was too late. In seconds he was jumping from house to house.

“Atlas, wait!” Blinkous called out, trying to wave the boy down.

The boy looked back for a moment, face guilty.

“Atrollhunter if you leave there will be serious consequences for your actions,” Vendel yelled.

Atlas turned away. Once he dropped into a busy corner of the market they completely lost sight of him.

Vendel’s head lowered. Bushigal.

His entire plan, gone to shreds. Frantically, Vendel tried to calculate their next moves. How were they going to get the Trollhunter back? If he fell into Bular’s hand—

Over. Everything they’d done up to this point would be demolished.

His heart raced. The younglings and their mothers would need to be evacuated first, followed by the elderly and those too sick to fight. But what about food and shelter? Leaving the Heartstone would no doubt weaken them. Their supplies would dwindle faster than a hundred barrels of gulg in a room of ten Oni. This was disastrous. This was—

“Ain’t no one goin’ after him?” NotEnrique so wisely pointed out. “Bular’s got all the bridge pieces.”
“We know,” Vendel growled.

The changeling tilted his head to the side, a smug smile appearing on his lips. “And now, I hear all they need is the boy.”

“He’s right. We mustn’t lose sight of Master Atlas.” Blinky commanded, “Tobias, AAARRRGGHH!!!, protect the Trollhunter. Bular must not get his hands on him.”

The little rotund human flashed a grin before saluting Blinkous. “Roger that. Onward, wingman!”

The two set off right away, not even bothering to wait for their third companion, if he could even be called that. That didn’t appear to bother NotEnrique very much. In fact, if Vendel might be so bold, he thought the changeling appeared to be jovial.

Which meant one thing.

Vendel tightened his hold on his staff. It brightened, casting an orange light over the remaining occupants.

The changeling came to trade.

“So,” NotEnrique started, drumming his claws along Vendel’s desk. “Guess I’ll just be heading out now.”

He got up, stretching his arms out in an exaggerated manner, all the while laying a smug side-eye on Blinkous.

Vendel observed the interaction. Whatever the changeling was up could mean many things. Blinkous, the ever curious troll that he was, would no doubt try to dig into that. It was a trait Vendel had spent centuries trying to discourage, especially since most of his theories tended to end up in a chaotic mess. In spite of Blinkous’s high intellect he never could see the mountain for the tunnels.
As predicted, Blinkous blocked the exit, shutting the door with a sharp slam. Vendel winced. Did no one care about proper etiquette in these times?

“You,” Blinkous began, “Are despicable.”

NotEnrique cackled. Resting his head in between both palms, he sneered, “What are you gonna do? Hit me? I’m invulnerable, baby. You need me.”

Ah, so that was the other reason he was here, Vendel thought.

“He’s right. We do need you,” Vendel said, motioning to the chair across from his larger one. “Come, sit.”

He followed directions, settling onto the chair like he owned it. “Now that is more like it.”

“You aren’t here to merely warn us,” Vendel surmised.

NotEnrique grinned. “I like you, goat. You don’t mince words.”

Vendel sat across, leaning forward, his hands steepled underneath his chin. “How goes your Master, Impure?”

“Bular wants blood, Bossman wants power, and everyone else wants a piece of the pie,” he replied wryly, listing them off on one hand.

“And what do you want?”

“Me?” His eyes narrowed. “Why do you care?”

Vendel leaned back. He crossed one leg over the other. “Changeling, I’m going to be honest with you. I despise you.”
“Feelings mutual, goat-face.”

“You are going to tell us where it is,” Vendel commanded in a soft tone.

The changelings scoffed. “Or what?”

Vendel cocked his head in the direction of the other troll. “Blinkous? Could you open up my chest? No, not that one, the one over there. Yes, that’s the one.”

“With pleasure,” Blinkous replied, pulling out one of items. Vendel almost smiled in fondness. He hadn’t seen that in ages. “Would you like to use the axe or would something smaller suffice?”

NotEnrique’s expression fell. Still, he kept his composure, an admirable trait, even in one of the Impures. “If I tell you, none of this leaves this room, got it?”

“I don’t believe you’re in a position to negotiate, Impure,” Vendel said as Blinkous closed the chest, returning to his side.

“And, If I do decide to tell you in this room, I want something in exchange.”

Vendel frowned. “This isn’t a negotiation. Did you not hear me? Or are you as deaf as you are daft?”

“I’m putting my neck out by telling you this,” NotEnrique shot back, the fur on his back standing up.

A hand came down upon his shoulder. He looked back. Blinkous’s shoulders rose, but his face was set. “Let us at least listen to his demand, Vendel.”

He sighed. Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile, he thought. Nevertheless, they were on a schedule. Atlas was likely already out of Trollmarket by now. They needed to act fast, with or without the Trollhunter. “What is your request?”

“When shit goes south, I want into Trollmarket,” NotEnrique said.
Vendel waved his arm dismissively. “By no means would I ever agree to such an idea. Out of the question.”

“Fine,” he amended, expression sour. “Safe Passage then. I never wanted to stay in this dump for very long anyway.”

“That could be arranged,” he replied, “If things did end up that way.”

NotEnrique cracked his fingers against his face. A bittersweet melancholy came over his features. “They will. Kid’s got no chance against Bular. He’s too green.”

“You are correct in that regard, but it won’t be merely the Trollhunter up against Bular.”

“He’s right,” Blinky added.

This time it was NotEnrique whose brows rose. “Oh?”

“We are not so foolish as to let a child fight Bular without protection. Tell us where the Bridge is and we will let you return to your home in one piece.”

“And my request?” He asked.

Vendel shrugged. “Acceptable, if your so-called intel is correct.”

Now was the hard part. Vendel watched as a cascade of emotions passed through the changeling’s face. It wasn’t easy to read, changelings were masters of deception after all, but a green member like NotEnrique had yet to acquire the stealth and acting prowess his brethren possessed.

In a way, it reminded him of Atlas.

NotEnrique’s bottom lip lowered. After a few seconds, he whispered, “It’s the museum.”

“They moved it,” he mumbled, shoulders lowering.

The fight within him had disappeared. It was almost as though the changeling had shrunk a bit, no longer so boisterous as before.

Ah, yes. This was particularly treasonous, wasn’t it? If word got out that the changeling gave intel to Trollmarket, well…

NotEnrique would not be in a very good position soon enough.

“You better be right, changeling,” Vendel responded, one hand stroking his beard. “Blinkous, take this one back to Arcadia. I need to call in the council.”

As he rose from the chair, Blinkous drew close, using his body to block the changeling’s view.

“Wait, Vendel. I have an idea,” he said in a low tone.

Vendel brushed a hand through his beard. “Can’t it wait?”

“Let me scout for the Bridge.”

By the void! Vendel nearly gaped at such a suggestion. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Think about it. We’ve no clue whether the changeling’s words are truth. Allow me to merely sneak a peek so to speak,” he explained, shaking two hands in front of him whilst the others were brought squarely behind his back “I will be here and back within a few hours.”

“This is mad, if not outright insane. What if they capture you?”
“I’ve six eyes, Vendel,” Blinkous chuckled. “Nothing could sneak up on me. I’ll be completely alert.”

“You’ll go even if I forbid it, won’t you?” Vendel released a long exhale. “I will await your return then.”

He nodded, eyes bright with determination. “Thank you, sir.”

Vendel paced around the room. Blinkous was right. It was the best shot they had. In the end, keeping Trollmarket from erupting into chaos was the top priority. He could put off gathering the war party for a few hours.

Once Blinkous reached the door (NotEnrique in tow), Vendel tapped his staff against the floor.

“Best of luck, Blinkous.”

“Thank you, sir. I won’t let you down,” he answered.

NotEnrique chuckled, his normal devious expression returned. Both hands placed behind his back, he swung his body side to side like a young whelp, a particularly eerie image in Vendel’s opinion. “Hasta la vista, baby.”

“I should certainly hope not,” Vendel retorted.

Ultimately, everything would come down to Atlas in the next few hours. The amulet was a powerful artifact. As Trollhunter, Atlas would need to step up in this fight. No more waffling between trolls and changelings anymore.

He had to act.

Vendel dragged a hand down his face.
Gods, he needed a drink. Anything to make this night go better. He returned to his desk, reaching below for the ages old Dragon’s Blood he’d acquired for an event such as this.

His hand met air. He bent down. Nothing. Nothing but dust.

The changeling.

“By the void. He stole my prized spirits,” Vendel noted solemnly.

Did no one respect the damned rules of hospitality anymore?

Alarms rang in her mind.

Her eyes snapped open. Cold fingers encompassed her mouth. She tried to claw at them, but their grip was as strong as steel and just as unyielding.

Two glowing eyes emerged from the darkness of her room.

The hand muffled her responding shriek.

Dios mio. Someone had broken into her room. Claire’s heart hammered against her chest. Her eyes flickered to the direction of her baby brother’s room. Would the person go for him if he started to cry? What were they doing here? A cold sweat broke out.

Was she going to die?
Her hand reached for the decorative skull near her bed. Grabbing hold, she threw it at the person. It hit it’s mark. Unfortunately, the damages didn’t appear to deter him or her.

The intruder cursed.

A him then.

“Okay, wow, that really hurt,” he spoke in a soft manner. “Alright, listen, I know you don’t trust me and I don’t blame you, but your life depends on it. I’m sorry, for all of this.”

She looked around. The room was pitch-black aside from the stranger’s eyes. As her vision began to adjust, she noticed light coming from beyond her door. Her parents? She could just barely make out television sounds.

“You’re going to obey?”

Claire’s nails dug into the sheets. She bit down on her bottom lip. Don’t scream? What kind of logic was that? Still, the fear of reprisal held her back for the moment.

She nodded.

Yeah, scary asshole, that’s right, I’ll play along, Claire thought as she sat up. Her feet immediately snug into the bunny slippers nearby.

Slowly, he lifted his hold on her mouth.

Moving her jaw from side to side, she scanned the room. Unfortunately, the closest object to her was Señor Oso, her totally not a substitute for Suzy Snooze because she was sixteen years old and merely liked having something soft to hug while she slept.

Somehow, she doubted sacrificing the toy would make much difference.

He pulled away, rising to his full height. Her jaw dropped. She amended her previous description;
tall scary asshole. The hood hiding his face only made it all the more intimidating.

The intruder paced back and forth, arms crossed. “I know this is all really terrifying for you. I wouldn’t even be here like this if Not—if not for my friend telling me. But there’s no other choice. They’re coming for you. I don’t have much time to explain.”

Claire leaped from her bed to the door. She had to get out. Fear twisted her gut when she found herself stopped by a long arm. In response, she pushed back. He didn’t move.

Her annoyance flared.

“Who the hell are you! Get off!” She called out desperately, “Mom! Dad!”

“Claire, you have to believe me. I know we’re not on good terms right now, but you need to get out. We need to get out of here.”

The voice was way too familiar. She’d heard it before. Her mind scrambled to match its face. Raspy and deep, yet soft, like he was afraid of scaring her (big fail, she was fucking terrified). Where had she heard it before? She knew this. How did she know this?

Recognition dawned: yesterday afternoon. Her spy mission.

“Atlas?” She answered wearily.

He appraised her. Though she couldn’t see his face, she could tell she surprised him. “How did you know?”

“The boy’s locker-room. I heard you and Toby speaking. Is that your real voice?”

“One of them.”

For one delirious moment, Claire thought back about her parents’ rules. *I’m not supposed to have boys in my room*, she thought.
It passed as the panic of being kidnapped took hold once more.

He gently made a grab for her arm. “Come on.”

She slapped his hand away. “No! Don’t touch me. I don’t want you near me.”

Nothing about the boy in front of her made sense. And why was he hiding his face?

Oh my gosh.

Her eyes widened.

Was he a serial killer?

“Please don’t do this. We need to leave before they get here.”

Claire’s lips tugged downward. She shot him a scathing look whilst folding her arms. “No.”

Did he seriously think she was going to willingly follow him? Especially after all the shit he’d pulled with her. Not only was he a terrible co-star but a terrible lying asshole too.

Atlas threw his hands up, shaking his head. Though she couldn’t see his face, she guessed he was less than pleased with her response. Good. Let him stew over that. Claire was in her home. He couldn’t tell her what to do here.

Her eyes glanced over to her backpack. Her phone was in there. Should she call the police? No, she would never make it in time. She looked back at the door. Maybe if she yelled loud enough, she could get her parents attention.

“I always suspected there was something different about you,” Claire said, inching forward.
He cocked his head to the side. “Oh?”

“You’re insane!” She made a reach for the door once more. “Mom!”

Atlas blocked her move. She tried to slap him but he caught her hand.

“Okay, that is not nice,” he whispered. “I’ll try and explain everything later, but right now we have to escape.”

“Over my dead body,” she retorted.

He leaned in closer. Though she couldn’t see his face, his eyes spoke volumes.

“That is a very real possibility right now. We can either do this the easy way or the hard way, Claire. Your choice. But you’re not staying here.”

“Mom! Dad! Help!” She called again.

Why weren’t they coming? Didn’t they hear her?

A dark part of her mind asked ‘did they even care?’

Atlas cursed again. He walked both of them (more like pulled her over) closer to the window. “Listen, I don’t want to do this anymore than you do, but you’re in danger.”

“The only danger I see here is you, you psycho asshole,” she spat.

He flinched, or at least, she thought he did. His breathing slowed.
What the hell was Atlas doing? Her mind racked through possible scenarios, but none of this made sense. Hell, nothing about the boy seemed logical.

How did she end up in her bed last night after sneaking into his house? Why couldn’t she remember what happened?

He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment before setting his strange glowing gaze on her once again. “Looks like we’re doing this the hard way then.”

Without warning he lifted her up by the armpits. Her legs dangled below her before she realized what was happening.

How dare he! Claire lifted her leg to kick his groin but he managed to dodge.

“How dare you!” she snarled. “Put me down!”

“How about you come willingly then?” he said. Though she couldn’t see his face, she could tell he was smiling.

“Tall, arrogant, and scary asshole,” her mind amended.

“If I say yes, you won’t hurt my baby brother or my parent?” she inquired.


She wanted to believe him, but after everything he had done it was hard. Nevertheless, it meant her family wouldn’t be harmed. It was a risk, a huge one.

“Okay,” she answered hesitantly.
He set her back against the ground. Relief flooded her.

The sound of tiny feet brandished against the rooftop. Claire watched as Atlas shifted his head upwards. All she could see was his raised eyebrows and strange irises (what kind of contacts could shine like that?). If the room wasn’t so dark she would be able to make out more of his features. Something was off about them, just like the rest of him. When did he have such a huge growth spurt for one? Was he wearing stilts or something?

“Shit. They’re here,” he said in a hushed tone, no longer containing the earlier playful ring in it.

Claire lifted a brow. “Are you serious? Those are raccoons, Atlas.”

“We need to leave. Now.” He picked her up without warning. “Sorry, but it’s faster if I carry you.”

“No! Where are you taking me? Stop! At least let me grab a bag or something.” She tried to wiggle, but he gave her no escape.

Atlas pulled her back for a moment, bringing her level with his eyes.

“My mom’s place,” he explained. “She’s parked across the woods. If we can make it there, we can get you to safety.”

Claire smacked her face. Dumb kidnapper. She was dealing with a dumb kidnapper. Oh her friends would have a field day with this, especially Mary. “Oh yeah, sounds real safe. Gonna stick me in your basement too? Gag me and tie me so you can sell me off to some human trafficking organization?”

“Basement, yes. Gag and tie maybe and what the fuck? Do I look like a human trafficker?” He paused, brows crossed. “Don’t answer that.”

She glanced back once more at the door. Did her parents even care she was being kidnapped?

Would probably make things easier. No more moody teenager. *They could give their full attention to precious Enrique,* she thought.
A wave of shame hit her. No. It was better this way. As long as her family wasn’t harmed, she would go with Atlas. At least until she figured out a way to escape from him.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness better, she noticed her earlier escape would have been for naught. Her dresser had been knocked over and pressed in front of her entrance. There was no exit. She was trapped.

“You blocked my door too?”

“Sorry,” he said, though it didn’t sound very apologetic.

“This is illegal on so many levels,” she said, shooting a nasty glare at Atlas.

In response, the teen merely shrugged. “Your human laws mean nothing to me. Upsie Daisy.” He adjusted his hold (which Claire greatly protested) until he had her in a fireman carry.

They approached the window. Her eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

“Dios mio, are we going to jump? From this height? Are you crazy?” She began to smack his back with her fists. Her fear from before was nothing in comparison to the deathly dread in front of her.

“Possibly,” he answered, eyes crinkling in delight. Ugh! What an asshole! “Hold on tight, Princess.”

Claire screamed.
Chapter Summary

Atlas and Claire take a stroll through the woods. Goblins were bad, but an angry changeling?

Janus Order life insurance ain't gonna cover this fight.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Big thanks to Vici, Trololololololz, and Charlie for helping me with this chapter. You guys are awesome. Vici is a Nomura expert so I consult them a lot for her character. Also, thanks for all the lovely reviews! Wow, I'm so glad people really like the fic. I had no idea it would get this much traction. I appreciate all the kudos and favorites too. Like, wow, you guys are just awesome. And oh my gosh, so much awesome fanart! Seriously, holy cheese.

Aqrilene did this lovely commission of Atlas. They're a super amazing artist and you should totes check out their stuff. I recommend commissioning them too!: http://aqrilene.tumblr.com/post/183316199513/%EF%BD%81%EF%BD%94%EF%BD%8C%EF%]

Moonlitwing also did a great pic of Atlas in the best shirt ever! They have an awesome fic called Becoming The Mask! Go check it out! Here's a link to their fanart:https://moonlitwing.tumblr.com/post/183151708461/back-when-tunafishprincess-posted-midnight-men-i

Eurazba did a glorious Atlas pic which I absolutely adore. Here's a link: http://eurazba.tumblr.com/post/183109171760/some-fanart-of-atlas-from-tunafishprincesss-blue

Watercolor_Mess did some fantastic fanart too as well as a cool troll claire! oh my gosh! I love all of it! Here: https://www.instagram.com/p/BujvPAJhysb/

Space-Alex is also a brill artist and did this lovely pic of Atlas. I loveeeeeeeeee it. Thank you, dude! Here: https://space-alexander.tumblr.com/post/183072687595/from-tunafishprincess-s-fanfiction-blue-moon

Also, the awesome Kittypop did more fanart and oh my gosh I love it. Seriously, go follow them on insta. Kittypop I do not deserve all your good art. Thank you.

- Scene from Wherefore Art Thou Trollhunter: https://www.instagram.com/p/BumwYq-A2wI/
- Adorable portrait of Atlas: https://www.instagram.com/p/BuuhpqKg0My/
Fallen leaves rained down. Layers of dead pine needles and twigs crunched underfoot, though he could barely hear them above his thunderous heartbeat.

An earthy smell of decomposing plants, wild mint, and cedar floated through the air, followed by the undertone of a certain foul decay. Bile rose in his throat. Goblin was a distinct odor. Every changeling knew it well. To the average human it was more alike to skunk. A dangerous, if not fatal mistake.

Night heightened his other senses. That, or adrenaline.

Eyes glimmered from crooked tree hollows, the scurrying of animals and other creatures dispersing at his approach. He wasn’t sure if it was animal or goblin. All he knew was he wasn’t going to stop and find out.

“¡Dios mío!” Claire yelled as he jumped over a fallen log, heading into a heavily wooded part of the area. The more trees between them and their pursuers the better. “You’re going to fast!”

Atlas glanced back at her. “Watch your head.”

He wanted to say more, explain more, do more—but the sting of her rejection earlier silenced his tongue.

His lips pursed. It burned.
Theoretically, he got it. Claire didn’t know what was happening. She was just some teenage girl who’d been dragged into his world because goblins decided to play CSI and somehow mistook NotEnrique’s fuck up for hers. He still had no idea how that came to be, but it doesn’t matter.

Claire was in danger, and it was his job to save her. He owed it to her.

“Maybe you should watch where you’re going, first,” she advised before frantically hitting her fists against his back a second later. “Tree! Tree! Tree!”

Atlas did a half-pirouette around the thick oak, ignoring the branches that scrapped across his armor. He snuck a peak over his shoulder. Claire spat leaves in his direction; he grinned.

“It’s okay. I do this all the time. You’re safe,” he assured.

To emphasize his point (and to show off a little), he took a running leap, landing gracefully atop a thick branch, his grip on her body firm and protective.

“How are you doing this?” She asked, voice in awe. “What are you, Tarzan?”

His head cocked to the side. “Who’s Tarzan?”

Was this someone at school?

Was it someone Claire liked?

For some reason, his stomach curdled at the thought.

Unfortunately, their trip took a turn for the worse. The stench of goblins was growing stronger, not weaker, which meant he needed to change direction. Atlas bit down on his bottom lip. He had only asked his mother because he thought it was the safest and fastest option. Dozens of red eyes glowed in the distance. Atlas swerved right, towards a new safehouse. At least he hoped.

“Looks like mom’s car is out of the question,” he said. “Hold on tight.”
He jumped. His feet hit the ground running. He winced as Claire’s fingers dug into the cloak, straight into the soft leathers that held his armor together.

“Oh, great,” she muttered. “Where are you taking me now?”

“To Toby’s house. Your so-called brother should be there now.” He thought for a moment. “I think. Well, he was with Toby and AA—our other friend earlier. Who knows with that guy though.”

Immediately, he felt a change in the girl he was holding, her muscles tightening up. Her nails dug deeper. “My brother?”

“Well, he’s not really your brother. He’s a changeling—and forget I said anything. Whoops. Wow, did not mean for that one to slip out.”

“Changeling? Wait, so if he’s with you guys does that mean you kidnapped him too?”

“Kidnapped? Is that what you think this is?” Seriously? She was still on this? Once they were far enough, he slowed to a brisk walk. He looked over, stating, “I’m saving you.”

“You took me away from my home,” Claire ground out, tossing herself around once more. “Me and my baby brother.”

“Rescuing without permission,” he corrected, eyes widening as she landed a direct hit in the soft area between his armor, straight into his solar plexus. It was a lucky blow. If he were human it would have knocked the wind out of him. “Ow! Stop. That was my stomach.”

“Oh, like that so much better.” She growled, thrashing increasing by the second. “Put me down! Now!”

“But we gotta—” His mouth dropped as an elbow pulled out in front of him. “Not the face!”

After walking a few more paces, he finally placed her back on her feet. Geez, were all humans girls
this way? So demanding.

Atlas sighed, readjusting his hood. He threw his hands out, asking in a dry tone, “Happy?”

“No,” she retorted, arms crossed. “I’m not leaving from this spot until you tell me everything.”

Great. Atlas resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“What the fuck, Claire?”

Annoyance flared. Why didn’t she understand the stakes? Why couldn’t she—oh yeah, he thought, she doesn’t know.

Huh.

Maybe he didn’t think this whole thing through.

“What the fuck?” If she wasn’t furious before she certainly was now. She stuck her forefinger into his chest. “No, fuck you, Atlas. Do you know what I’ve gone through these past few weeks? My theater partner never appears for rehearsal and then he trashes my home. Plus he embarrasses me in front of the entire school and insults me. And, oh yeah, he kidnapped me from my home and is now leading me to god knows where for who knows how long.”

Each word flung smacked directly against his mask. His face began to drop. Shit. Atlas scratched his cheek. Sure, he had excuses, but what did those mean to someone who hadn’t the slightest idea of who he really was?

Not much apparently.

Atlas looked away, kicking the dirt. “Are you done?”

Claire pulled at her hair, shaking her head. “You scare me, Atlas. I remember what happened last night. The whole dinner with Mr. Strickler. I even heard you and your mom, who, by the way, lives
with you in Arcadia, another one of your lies. Does your dad know about this? Do you even have a
dad? Was that part made up too?”

She was right. Damn it. Well, it wasn’t like he did a very good job of hiding his secrets with her.
Guilt began to fester. His lies had come back to bite him. He had been so worried about Claire liking
him that he didn’t even spend a moment to consider how it affected her.

“You remember?”

“How could I forget?” Claire said, throwing her arms in the air. “Not to mention, how did I even get
from there to my house? Did you think I would think it was a dream or something?”

Atlas rubbed the back of his neck. “How much did you hear?”

Crap, had they really been that obvious? Barely any time at all since his tenure as Trollhunter and
already humans were finding out about his world, which, Atlas had surmised from Vendel and
Blinky’s teachings, was a big no-no. His jaw clenched. Claire knowing could put not just her but
everyone she knew and loved in trouble. Toby and his mother had already been targeted by the
Janus Order.

The memory of Enrique floated through his head. His throat tightened. It was a permanent reminder
of his failure to read the situation. Claire would be happy and safe in her home right now if Atlas
hadn’t inadvertently caused her real brother to be whisked away by the goblins.

She stomped around in a circle, giving him pointed looks before answering, “I don’t know. I don’t
think I even understand. Everything you guys talked about was weird. There’s so much information
that’s missing. Plus, I saw something in your basement.” She grabbed a fistful of his cloak.

“Claire—” He reached out.

Claire slapped his hand away. “No, don’t try to comfort me. Everything is a lie! You aren’t
Canadian.” She gestured angrily at his entire body. “You don’t even speak French!”

“Yes I do,” he defended, hastily thinking up an answer. What was that song Toby had on his phone
again? “Uh…Bonjour. Voulez-vous coucher avec moi.”
She lifted an unimpressed eyebrow. “Do you even know what that means?”

No. No, he did not. “Do you?” He countered defensively.

“Drop this charade. Who the hell are you? I can’t…this has to stop. I’m sick of being in the dark. What do you want from me? Why does nothing about you make any sense?”

He glanced, stricken by her expression. Her delicate features were marred by the fear and confusion of the day, and Atlas hadn’t helped in the least.

Part of him desperately wanted to tell her. The changeling inside him was already calculating the ways he could use this to grow closer to her, to gain another ally and maybe…something more?

No, he wouldn’t fall back to such habits again. She was his friend.

Sort of.

But keeping her in the dark was doing more harm than good now. Keeping this from her seemed more and more unlikely. It was either sooner or later.

“Okay, alright.” He sighed, waving his hand. “I’ll tell you, but we have to get out of this forest. They’re coming for us.”

“Who?”

“The goblins.”

“Goblins?” She asked incredulously. “Do you expect me to believe—”

He groaned. Even now, she ignored his warnings. Did she not realize their lives were at stake right now?
His right hand reached for the edge of his hood.

You know what?

Fuck it.

Ever since he picked up the stupid amulet he had been lying, which, you would think for a changeling would be pretty damn easy.

But Atlas made a terrible changeling, and if the past month and a half was anything to go by, lying was by far his worst trait. Not to mention it was tiring as hell. All these different identities had caught up with him one way or another. Always looking over one’s shoulder was a pain in the neck. When was the last time he had a decent night’s sleep for more than a single night?

He took a deep breath. If Toby and his mom accepted him, what was to say Claire wouldn’t?

“Fine. You want proof?” In one fluid motion he yanked back the hood. “Believe this?”

Silence answered him. Atlas’s shoulders tightened, rising with every second passed as Claire stared on.

Shit. His heart hammered against his chest. What was she thinking? Her brows were furrowed and her eyes were wide but Atlas wasn’t sure if that meant surprised or afraid. Maybe a little bit of both?

Sweet Pale Lady, he probably looked terrifying. His cloak and armor probably didn’t help either. Maybe he should have come in human form. He did have his gaggetack with him. Maybe if he transformed now she would feel better about going with him?

She took three steps closer. Atlas stilled. Carefully, she raised a hand to his face, fingers trembling.

“Can I…?” She asked softly.
He nodded.

Soft digits brushed against his lips. A sweet floral scent met his nose. He savored it. Slowly, her fingers traveled over to touch his tusks. His heartrate continued to climb. They had never been this close before.

A pink blush overtook Claire’s face. Atlas couldn’t help but grin. It was cute. He was thankful it was dark. Otherwise, she might see the same across his own features.

His body began to relax. Her hands traveled to his ears, tapping on the lobes before gliding up to the tips.

Ah oh. Blood rushed to his face. Maybe he should have told her about those before she began touching them.

“All the better to hear you,” he joked.

*Oh yeah, all the better to hear you with,* he privately chided himself, *very clever.* He would have covered his face if she wasn’t looking at him so intently.

She stepped on her tippy toes, gesturing to the top of his head. “Are these real?”

“No, they’re cosplay.” He made a pull at one to show her its sturdiness. “Of course they’re real.”

Her hands retreated to press against her mouth. She gasped, “Oh my gosh. Your letter. What you said about being trapped between two worlds. Fighting monsters. All of it. It was *true.*”

“Yes.”

“And you’re a monster too.”
Atlas flinched. Geez. Not the kind of thing a guy wanted to hear from his crush.

“Half,” he said, then added, “We prefer to call ourselves changelings though.”

“Dios mio. I can’t believe it. Changelings and goblins are real. This is insanity,” she whispered.

“Trolls too. There’s a lot in this world humanity doesn’t know about. As Trollhunter, it’s my job to keep your kind safe from the bad ones in mine.” His ears twitched. Ah oh. “Unfortunately, it might be too late for that.”

Her lips formed a thin line. “What do you mean?”

He swerved around, trying to find an exit. Their smell was suffocating however. Shimmering eyes began to dot the horizon, casting the bushes and trees in an eerie red light.

“Looks like we’re out of time,” he said, stepping forward. He brandished his blades. “They’re here. Quick! Get behind me.”

“What’s going on? You mean the goblins?” She said, trying to check over his shoulder.

A chorus of grunts and hisses filled the air. Slowly, they began to chant, “Chaka, chaka, chaka, chaka.”

They descended upon them, some quite literally. Atlas batted off the ones that landed near him and Claire, but that did little to deter the rest. The moonlight highlighted their deadly smiles. Claire clung to his back.

“That is not a raccoon,” she remarked in a high-pitched tone.

He shrugged. “Like I said, goblins.”
“You were serious?”

Without warning a figure shot out from one of the branches, reaching towards her. Claire screamed. Oh hell no. Instincts flew into overdrive. Atlas’s hand shot forward, slitting the creature’s throat with a twist of his dagger.

The goblin gurgled, holding its throat before passing moments later.

His features grew serious. How pleasant. Another death on his hands. The ire of the goblins turned to him. Atlas bared his fangs. They replied in turn.

“Stay close to me,” he ordered, flipping his cloak behind him.

“Goblins don't exist! They shouldn’t exist,” she blabbered, holding her head.

“Claire, now is not the time.”

A goblin broke away from the pack in front of them. He withdrew a knife from his cloak, flinging the blade with deadly precision.

Claire tugged on his arm. Twirling around, he kicked the next creature approaching from behind. The goblin splattered against the tree.

“Whoa!” Claire called out.

“Don't worry,” he said, patting her on the shoulder. “I got this.”

Or he did.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t expected the practical army in front of him. There appeared to be no end in sight of the little assholes.
He puffed out his chest. Claire was watching him. He couldn’t screw this up.

“I can’t believe you guys are fighting me. After everything I’ve done for you? I cleaned your rooms! I gave you chocolate!” Atlas listed off. A wave of goblins tried to make a surprise attack from the side. In response, Atlas rained down another flurry of knives. “You ungrateful fucks!”

Two snaked through way through the grass and grasped his feet.

“Waka Chaka!” The biggest one sneered.

Atlas gasped. “What did you call me you little shit?”

Such language. He punted the little asshole.

Unfortunately, four more took his place, crawling up his limbs at a record pace. He tried to shake them off, but they refused to let go. One grasped his horns. Atlas growled. The goblin chuckled, scoring a scrap across his cheek.

A dark object smacked the creature right between the eyes. Atlas looked to Claire.

A pile of bunch of rocks sat in her arms. She rolled her shoulders, waving one of them sheepishly.

“Sorry,” she said. “Thought I could help.”

Another round of goblins drew near. She pelted them back. Atlas killed the ones that survived.

“You've got a great left,” he complimented.

A soft smile blossomed. “Thanks.”

Tens became twenties became thirties—shit, he lost count. No matter what Claire and Atlas hit them
with, they continued to gain the advantage. Claire brushed against him, throwing her last rock into a group of them.

“They’re growing in number.” She turned to him. “How are we going to be able to fight them all off?”

“Don’t worry. I’m an expert fighter,” Atlas explained.

“Waka Chaka!” A series of goblins charged, ramming straight into them.

Atlas lost his footing. His head hit the base of the tree, horns scrapping against the roots. He tried to move around, but the weight of them held him down. More and more weight piled on top of him.

He couldn’t get out.

He couldn’t breathe.

Oh Sweet Pale Lady, he couldn’t do this without the amulet.

“Atlas!” Claire screamed.

“Claire,” he yelled back. His teeth clenched. “Damn it.”

His gaze lifted to the sky.

“For the glory of Merlin, come back you shitty excuse of a medallion!” He called out, desperation riding his tone.

Nothing. Fucking great. Of course, not like the amulet could hear him this far from the Janus Order. He pressed a thumb down, releasing the hidden blade inside his armor. Goblin blood poured over him as he gutted the ones on top of him. Vomit built up in his mouth. The smell was disgusting.
Claire yelled again. Atlas tried to move toward her, only to be stopped by the Order’s little foot soldiers.

Fuck. Atlas grabbed his head. As much as it pained him to admit this, he couldn’t fight this kind of number.

He needed to be stronger.

He needed to be better.

Atlas closed his eyes.

He needed to be the Trollhunter.

A bright light emerged above the horizon. Hope grew in his breast. Was that—

“Get down!” He ordered.

The blue light zoomed towards them, bursting through the tree line not a moment too soon. Goblins were thrown back by the energy. Atlas smiled. He caught the amulet in his right hand.

Immediately, its magic enveloped him. Magical spheres floated around. Silvery metal formed out of thin air, attaching to his body. The smell of O-zone accompanied it all, fueling the adrenaline within him.

He could do this.

The entire troop made a desperate rush for him, but they were too late. Atlas ripped through them like butter, hacking and slashing the goblins at a pace that would make any sushi master proud. Each movement felt natural, precise, like he could do this all day and never tire out.

The sounds of goblins slowly fell to a hush as he finished off the last. Once he caught his breath he scanned the area for any more. Goblin gunk dripped from the trees, the rest smeared around the
grass. His shoulders dropped. No more goblins. Good. Hopefully the rains or forest animals would take care of the remains.

A soft body ran into him. Atlas looked down. Claire’s head popped out. Noticing her actions, she pulled away.

“I can’t believe it. How…what the…” Her jaw dropped as she surveyed the carnage.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“This?” She motioned her hands at his amulet. “This is—Wow.”

Atlas leaned against one of the cleaner trees. “Pretty much.”

“And you’re human again!” She exclaimed.

Claire’s hands met his face once more. They were soft and warm and—Atlas blushed. Heat pooled in his stomach. Thank the Pale Lady he was wearing armor.

A second later she removed them, coughing into her hand instead.

“This is amazing,” she said, gesturing to his outfit.

You’re amazing, Atlas thought. Especially with those rocks.

Feeling giddy, he did a small twirl. “Ta-da.”

“I have so many questions.” She shook her hands in front of her. “Like, so, so many.”

“I know. We have to get you out of here though. There could be more of them.”
Atlas held out a hand. Claire took it. He couldn’t help but grin. Claire was holding his hand. Sure, she probably only took it because he was leading her to safety, but that counted for something, right?

“Toby’s home shouldn’t be too far from here,” he remarked.

They walked around the leftover goblins carefully.

“This was never a costume,” she said, flicking off the remaining goo on his chest plate.

“Ugh,” he said, nose scrunching up. “Goblins make such a mess.”

Claire nodded. “Agreed. They’re all over my pajamas.”

She squeezed his hand. Atlas glanced over.

“My brother—” Her voice trembled. “You said he wasn’t my real brother.”

“Oh wow, that’s an entire story in itself. Basically these guys—” he motioned to the splattered carnage across the trees. “Take infants, and the occasional cat.”

“These things took my brother? Do you know where he is?” She asked frantically.

“Yes and no. It's complicated.”

She pulled away, grasping her arms. “Oh my god, oh my god—"

“Take a breath.”

“Don’t tell me to—” She shook her head. After a deep breath, she answered, “I should’ve believed you. You really were trying to protect me.”
The amulet flashed. A moment later, Atlas was a head taller and a lot more exhausted. Claire slowed her pace.

“It’s okay. I probably could have done that better,” Atlas admitted.

“I didn’t I see it before? And why does something that makes no sense make so much sense now? I thought you were just some weird foreigner, but you’re half…”

“Changeling,” he supplied.

“Exactly! When you destroyed my house—”

“That was more NotEnrique’s fault than mine,” he defended.

“And when you missed so many rehearsals—You wore that knight suit to tryouts! Ugh! Like, being in a stupid play is suddenly some high priority.”

“No, it is! The play must go on! I mean, yeah, it’s not really my biggest priority, sorry, but we have to make it look like everything is normal.”

Claire grabbed her head. “Dios mio, what am I supposed to tell my parents about Enrique? That-That he’s a change-thing? I don't even know what that is!

“If flesh—If people knew then Arcadia would be thrown into chaos.” He took a deep breath. “I'm sorry, Claire, but you can't tell anyone about this. Not your friends, not your parents.”

“Am I ever going to see my real brother again?” She asked softly.

“Like I said, it's complicated.” He grasped her shoulder. “But I can assure you, he is safe.”

From what Stricklander told him, the Darklands treated familiars quite well. Better than the places the
children originally came from in certain cases. Goblins took care of the babies and attended to their every need. The familiars would never know hunger or sadness or loss. They would exist eternally innocent.

But what if Gunmar found out he was the Trollhunter? He shivered. Atlas might not have a familiar, but Stricklander and Nomura certainly did. There would be repercussions.

There always were.

“Who else knows?” She asked. “Toby? Strickler?”

“I'll explain everything later. Don’t look at me like that. I promised I would. You've been through a lot tonight. But right now, we have to—"

A gust of wind brushed past his ear, carrying a haunting tone. For a moment he thought it was merely the air, until it continued, familiar notes played in a menacing and slow manner.

His heart skipped a beat.

No, no, no, no, no—not now.

“You need to run,” he said, pushing Claire away. “Run and don't look back.”

“I'm not leaving!” She shifted her head, brows coming together. “Who's whistling?”

Too late.

The voice was rough, raspy and dripping with rage.

“Did you really think you could get away with this, Peer Gynt?” She chided.
Atlas’s blood fled from his face, but he stood tall, instinctively shifting his legs into a fighting stance. He knew he couldn’t beat her, but if it bought Claire enough time to escape—Then so be it.

“Nomura.”

Venomous green eyes bore into him.

Fury fueled her soul. Bular had sent her on this mission but she would have done it anyway, with or without that troll’s permission.

This was personal.

Her jaw tightened. How dare he.

She couldn’t help but hiss at the two figures below her. Atlas stepped in front of the girl. Ha! To think, the brat who used to hate fleshbags was helping one.

Disgusting.

“Hello Atlas,” she sneered. She leaped, hooves landing without a sound. Her right hand inched towards her blade. “Or should I say, Trollhunter.”

Atlas froze. Up this close, she could read each emotion as if flickered across his face—from surprise to fear before finally settling on a remorse. Such an unchangeling expression.

His arm shot out to guard his little lady-love. Nomura placed her other hand on her hip.
“How cute. And they say chivalry is dead,” she mocked.

“Run, Claire!” Atlas yelled, pushing the human to the side.

“Not without you,” she answered.

Instead of running away, the Claire girl picked up a chunk of rock, hurling it forward. Nomura barked a laugh. The object missed her by a foot. So much for good aim. Nomura had to give it to the fleshbag though. She had guts.

If Nomura were in a friendlier mood she might have let the girl live.

But Nomura was anything but that tonight.

In one flowing arc she unsheathed her blades, driving towards them at unparalleled speed. Her ex apprentice barely reacted in time, blocking her blades with two daggers. She pressed down. To her surprise, he didn’t buckle.

“Rule Number Three, brat,” she hissed, leaning forward. Her mouth pressed to his ear. “Don’t fuck with Nomura.”

Too close. Her face burned. A new cut adorned her cheek, courtesy of the boy in front of her.

Fucking damn it. She never should have taught him that move. Her mind couldn’t help but travel back to all their lessons. Everything he knew she’d taught him; all those times she dressed his wounds, all the different defensive stances, all those tricks with a knife—that was her. She did that.

And now it was turned against her.

No more playing around.

“Claire, put the fucking rocks down and run away as fast as you can. You cannot fight her. Only I can,” Atlas warned, backing away.
Nomura cornered him. Atlas recoiled. This time, she scored a cut to his leg. “Let’s see how you handle yourself in a real fight, Atlas.”

She went for a drop-kick, but he jumped, using her back as a spring-board. Nomura growled. As he twisted in mid-air, she attacked him, throwing both against an old cedar. The tree creaked. Branches and leaves fell upon them.

“Impressive,” she said, grinding her blade closer to his neck. Only his dagger prevented her from chopping off his head. “How you’ve grown, little Gynt.”

“Stop this,” he bite out.

Her gaze traveled to the terrified human. “Look at her. She’s terrified of us.”

“She’s terrified of you,” he growled, snaking his hand underneath the khopesh to grip her neck. Nomura balked, rolling to the side. Fuck, she should have seen that. He must have used her blind spot.

“Is that what you think? How cute.” She mocked, making a dash for the girl. “Bular only wants one person alive.”

Atlas blocked her path. “Leave her out of this. She’s unimportant.”

“But not to you,” she said, smirk growing as Atlas’s eyes widened.

Nomura jumped once more, barely escaping the blast of energy that erupted from Atlas. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the boy’s other form once more. How could she have been so stupid? As changelings their forms were configured to have some resemblance to their familiars. Atlas was no different. The features were smaller, dainty like all fleshbags were, but the same dark hair and blue eyes persisted. Not obvious, but it should have been for her. Yes, she could see it now, which only served to fuel her feelings of betrayal and anger all the more.
“So you finally got the amulet back.”

Atlas put up his hands, as if trying to placate her. She didn’t believe it for a moment. “Nomura, listen to me. We can—"

“And who would have thought? A changeling Trollhunter? That must've broken Draal's heart.” She laughed mirthlessly.

Seeing it made it all the worse. It was like Draal all over again. Fuck.

“What do you want?” He said, studying her. Good. At least he learned something from their training.

“We tried to open the bridge, but, apparently, it needs you to do it.”

She made another swipe for him but Atlas dodged, summersaulting several feet away.

“Then why are you trying to kill me?”

“Not kill.” Not yet. No, she would drag out his death. “Take.”

Nomura stepped forward, swinging her swords in semi-circle rotations.

She attacked, jumping upwards. Atlas barely had time to react. She was a blur, fury personified.

Nomura twisted right, relying on her superior speed, believing he would swing. Instead, Atlas leaned back, evading her swipe, before stepping forward whilst thrusting the blade upwards.

Despite her murderous rage, her heart felt like it was dying from the inside out. Fucking human emotions probably. It burned, sore and open like a seeping wound.
Twice he’d defeated her. A humiliating blotch on her record. Centuries of respect had been lost. Her job, her rank, her life—he’d taken everything from her.

And yet.

She growled. Fucking shit.

Atlas batted the blade aside, slipping into one of the stances Draal taught him. Nomura came for him again, both khopesh aimed for his neck. He did a half-pirouette around her. She paused. His sword was only a few inches from her neck.

“Please, Nomura. You have to understand—”

“Understand? I understand you betrayed us. I understand you made a fool of me. Is that what you mean, little Gynt?” She spoke in a mocking manner. “We took you in, feed you, clothed you—we gave you everything you could ever ask for, and for what? You turned on us. How honorable.”

Of course, few changelings were actually honorable. Backstabbing was their national pastime after all. But no one had betrayed her to the level Atlas did. Right underneath her nose. If changelings were all traitorous scum to trolls, then Atlas was the worst of them all.

“I couldn’t let Bular get the amulet. You know what he’ll do to humanity,” Atlas said, voice desperate.

“Humanity? What about us?” She spat into the grass. “Repulsive. Not only are you a traitor, but you like them. You love them.”

“Not all of them. It’s not black and white, Nomura. There are good and bad humans. I see that now.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“We have a chance to live in peace. Humans, trolls, and changelings. Please, you have to believe me.”
Her soul clenched at the thought. A small hint of hope arose in her stomach. There had never been a changeling Trollhunter before. What was Merlin’s reasoning behind that? Did it mean the wizard wanted to make an alliance with them?

Fuck. Here was this thin scrap of a changeling. What if they could rise up against the people who kept her—them down? What if they could be free?

Was freedom even something changelings could hope for these days?

The hope shriveled up a second later. Her eyes darkened.

Did he think she was stupid? There were always good and bad for every race. But only the strong survived. It was how she was alive.

Racism was no stranger to her in either form. Shit, she was tired of it. Tired of all the bickering her comrades did, tired of Stricklander and his dumbass overcooked plans, tired of Otto’s manipulative attitude—Better under Gunmar where she has a place instead of now, in this strange in-between state. She could be a troll under the Gumm-Gumm King, instead of this half-breed she was now.

“You see nothing but your own success. Suddenly you’re made the Trollhunter and you have the high ground? You don’t get to pick and choose a moral code.”

“Morals change. I changed. Trollmarket is changing too.” He stretched out a hand. “So can you. Please, Nomura.”

Her? Change? She had changed. Her mouth twisted into a bitter frown. She was always changing and she was so damn exhausted with it all.

“Everything I’ve done for you—wipe it from your memory.” She said in a chilling tone. “You mean nothing to me now.”

The color in his face fled. “I—”
“I don’t want to hear it,” she answered.

He visibly swallowed. A moment later, he stepped back, returning to his battle stance. “If it means anything, I’m sorry it has to end this way.”

Nomura’s eyes burned.

“It doesn’t.”

Switching hands, he blocked her. Her eyes widened as he leaned in, bringing the sword down. Nomura screamed as Atlas’s devastating cut met the side of her leg.

Shit, shit, shit. He had gotten better since she last saw him. Her skin began to tingle as the onset of transformation began. What the—

A gaggle tack. Of fucking course. Atlas kicked her square in the chest. Her back smacked against a tree. Her spine burned. Stupid fleshbag body. It was too weak. She immediately switched back. Atlas tried to use it again, but she knocked the object out of the boy’s hands.

“Did you really think I would fall for a trick like that twice?” She said as she parred another powerful blow from his sword.

“Worth a shot.”

If they were matched in blade, that only left one thing left for her to do.

Nomura threw her swords, tackling the teen’s middle. Atlas wheezed. Her hand tried to come down upon his face, but it glanced back, as if blocked by some invisible force. Thinking fast, she twisted his arm behind him and pushed him headfirst into a tree. Atlas groaned. The scent of copper filled the air.

Nomura locked her hand around Atlas’s throat, pulling him off his feet, then slammed him down onto grass. His breath caught within his lungs. The back of his head hit the ground with a loud thud.
She should just kill him here, amulet or not. Regain her tarnished honor.

A real troll would be done with this betrayal.

Her hand hesitated. Something was holding her back.

Fuck. Why couldn’t she do it?

Leaves rustled behind her. She flashed her fangs.

A human woman rushed out. Nomura wouldn’t have been bothered if it wasn’t for what she was carrying.

Oh, now this was just such bullshit.

Nomura’s back straightened, body rigid. How long had that fleshbag been there? Claire joined at the newcomer’s side. Great. Now she had twice as much cleanup to do.

“Release my son,” the woman ordered, cocking her automatic. “Now.”
Claire and Present Danger (IV)

Chapter Summary

Barbara saves her son, but at what cost? Blinky finds trouble, but at least he’s not alone.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey, back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Charlie for helping me with the writing and a shoutout to Keep it Crispy on the Trollhunters discord for giving me feedback on Blinky's pov. Also big thank you to everyone who kudos, favorites, and reviews my fanfic. You guys are some of the most supportive people I've ever met. I love this fandom.

Also, oh my gosh! Fanart! You guys are amazing! Seriously!

Kittypop is so amazing, oh my gosh! They did two more fanarts. Like, wow. You own my soul now.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BvIW2kVAHtv/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BvKZNLJAqk3/

Mirradragnil did some fanart of my fic as well and oh my gosh dude, that shading is gorgeous! I love how you drew him! Спасибо!

https://mirradragnil.tumblr.com/post/183341538002/fanart-for-tunafishprincess-blue-moon-rising

https://mirradragnil.tumblr.com/post/183355452167/hey-i-enjoy-drawing-atlas-d-looking-forward-to?is_related_post=1

Also shoutout to the lovely Merlinuwus for the adorable Atlas they did! Great job! He looks awesome! :D Here: https://www.instagram.com/p/BvSgiTG5R8/

Seriously, you guys are all amazing. I am extraordinarily grateful you guys like my story so much and did such lovely fanworks for it.

For anyone interested in checking out more fanart, I'm tunafishprincess on tumblr and instagram!

I hope everyone enjoys the new chapter.
Fear.

It wasn’t so much the feeling as the randomness. As a doctor she knew the physiological changes quite well: accelerated breathing and heart rate; increased muscle tension such as those attached to hair follicles to create the sensation of goose bumps; perspiration; alertness —the list was extensive. But she was getting ahead of herself.

One couldn’t always predict how fear manifested. Barbara, for example, had a fear of snakes.

Nevertheless, there were very few things that terrified her. Working in the medical field lent itself to that. However, like most humans, she too felt that instinctual sensation borne from the days man had only fire and caves to save them from the boogeymen of their nightmares, monsters created by creative minds to torture themselves with the what-ifs of life.

Sadly, this was no nightmare.

It was the iridescent shine of this boogeyman’s appearance that alerted her first. A polished pink serpentine intermixed with lighter and darker shades. No human or animal had skin like that.

Sweat trickled down her back. The creature in front of her hunched forward.

Whereas J-Atlas was more or less humanoid, the monster (changeling, her terrified mind supplied) was too long, lithe in areas that should be muscle and strange proportions that didn’t seem possible on any living creature. She was more than a head taller than Barbara and could probably throw her around with little effort.

She had known—evidence of her son and the creatures she’d seen prior were evidence enough—monsters existed, but to actually see one in front her was immeasurable.

Heaven help her, Barbara feared.
The creature’s slit eyes dilated, nostrils expanding like a predator near its prey, which wasn’t too far from the truth in this situation.

A cruel smile stretched over her (she was a she, right?) lipless mouth. She hissed, “Or what?”

Or what indeed. The amulet attached to her son’s chest blinked, reminding her of the reason she came. Her back straightened.

Atlas needed her. The call had been urgent; she’d left work almost immediately. Excuses could be made later. When he didn’t show up at the rendez-vous point, Barbara knew something had gone wrong and decided to investigate. A good thing too, she thought.

The magic sparked, her son’s armor and appearance transforming once more. She bit down on her bottom lip; the damage was worse than she thought.

She tensed as the changeling’s claws inched closer to Atlas’s neck. In response, Barbara’s thumb switched off the safety.

The young girl behind her shuffled closer, staring at her son in concern, but Barbara put out a hand. Not yet. She leveled her shotgun. No shaking, no shaking, she repeated inwardly. “Stop that. I’ve got a mean aim.”

“Mom,” her son croaked. His left eye was swollen shut, his right not much better. “Run, Nomura’s dangerous.”

“Not until she lets you go,” Barbara demanded.

She only hoped changelings were vulnerable to bullets. Wait, did bullets work against their kind? Would her missile launcher work? Damn. Maybe she should have brought that instead.

“Do what he says, fleshbag. I don’t take kindly to threats,” the monster stated, reaching out once again towards her baby.
A mixture of adrenaline, fury, and panic leaked through. She pulled.

The sound reverberated through the forest, Claire’s scream following it. A rising stream of smoke from the tree above Nomura’s head was Barbara’s first and final warning. A pretty good one too, she thought proudly. Nomura jumped nearly a meter away, no longer viewing her as prey. She was a threat.

Good. Barbara couldn’t help but smile. While being understated was better in this scenario, it felt pretty damn nice to be taken seriously by this creature.

“That was a warning shot,” she said in a measured tone.

Nomura turned its head back to her son. “That’s your mom?”

Atlas coughed, “Yeah.”

Her lips twitched. “Isn’t she dating Strickler?”

An awkward silence passed before he answered in a high pitched manner, “It’s complicated.”

Barbara watched their exchange in confusion. Weren’t they fighting? Hadn’t this Nomura tried to kill her baby a moment ago?

Her trigger finger loosened. Maybe this was how changelings interacted. Most of her knowledge about changelings was split between Atlas and her new basement tenant’s information. According to Atlas, changelings were misunderstood, led to believe their only route to acceptance and salvation was fulfilling their creator’s wish. According to Draal, they were heartless cunning monsters whose goal was to release some evil warlord from a magical bridge. Barbara wanted to believe her son, truly, but the way he startled at her movements and froze during affection worried her deeply.

Did physical violence mean something else in changeling culture? No, going by her son’s wounds and Nomura’s earlier words, this was more than just a mere friendly scuffle.

Her brows furrowed. It was hard to reconcile the idea of her son being raised by such beings with
what she saw before her.

Nevertheless, this person knew her son. Knew him in a way Barbara hadn’t—couldn’t really. What was this changeling’s relationship to him? Had she cared for him? Her shoulders relaxed. Perhaps… perhaps she could be negotiated with in some manner.

It was an unfortunate mistake. Before she could raise her gun once more the changeling shifted towards her, her speed liquid in a way no human could match. Barbara seized up, ready to fight, only to miscalculate who the woman was going for.

“Looks like we’ll have to settle our fight later,” Nomura said in a sing-song tone, adjusting her grip. “But for now—”

Claire gasped, her next sounds muffled by Nomura’s hand. The green glow of the changeling’s eyes made her smirk all the more sinister.

“Claire!” Atlas yelled.

Nomura’s voice took on a barbed edge. “I’ll be taking this one. You know where to find us, little Gynt.”

Leaves scattered as Nomura leaped into the air, moving at a pace Barbara could never hope to match.

She bit her inner cheek. Damn it. If only she were stronger. She should have taken the shot.

“No! Stop, Nomura!” Atlas said in a desperate tone, “Please. Please, don’t do this. Claire!”

Barbara came to his side. “Sweetheart, I—”

“This can’t be happening. Claire’s just a kid. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he groaned, trying to get up. His legs collapsed up from underneath him. His claws dug into the soil. “I have to save her. I just have to.”

It took effort for her to release the shotgun, but she does. Her hands ache from holding it. Though a
new problem took place of the old, she can’t help the rush of relief building within her. He was alive. Her baby was alive. They both were.

Her cheeks flushed. Here she was thankful her own son was safe when someone else had taken his place. Shameful.

Claire was gone. Barbara had failed to keep both children safe. Who knew what the changelings would do with her.

Her relief dissipated as the sounds of others made themselves known. They weren’t alone. A man’s muffled calling reminded her of how close they were to the residential area. Police sirens rang from far away. When the flashlights went on she pressed herself over her son’s body, heart beating like a rabbit’s, caught in a trap with only minutes to escape.

What would they do if they found them there? Her throat dried. Atlas wasn’t in his human form. If someone saw—

They wouldn’t. Barbara settled her gaze back on her son, analyzing his injuries.

Contusions covered the visible areas of his body. He cradled one of his arms, body crouched defensively. Even in the darkness she could see the blood slid down the side of his head.

Her breath caught. A concussion, even a mild one, could be potentially dangerous. Going by the amount, he would need stitches too.

Damn it. She should have brought her sutures. Too late for that now.

Or was it? Barbara subconsciously patted her pocket. She did have a key to the clinic. It was closer there than to her house right now. Barbara eyed the wound once more, mind settled.

“People are coming,” she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Can you transform? I don’t think I can carry you in this form.”

“The amulet…I don’t have enough energy.” He paused, eyes widening. “Oh crap.”
“What now?”

Atlas tried to move about, hands moving through the grass frantically. “She threw away my gaggletack. It’s somewhere, I just have to find it.”

The voices grew louder. One in particular called out for Claire. Barbara’s heart sank. She knew that voice.

But she couldn’t explain. They had to move.

“We don’t have time. We need to get you to my clinic.” She stated, mind slowly shifting to doctor mode. “You’re injured.”

“But I can’t transform without it,” he said, eyes pleading.

Sweat rolled down her temple.

The lights drew nearer.

“Yes, you can. You said you could once, right?”

“I’m not sure. It’s been so long.” He grabbed his head. His ears lowered, flattening against his head. “I’m not sure how I did it. NotEnrique mentioned something, but it didn’t make any sense.”

Barbara brushed back his bangs. Atlas flinched. She tried not to take it personally. “Forget about what he said. Focus: what did you do the first time? What triggered it?”

Atlas leaned forward. “I…it was a memory. A scent. It was…”

“Yes?” She egged on.
He blinked, looking back at her. “It was you.”

She tried to smile. “Well, I’m here. What can I do?”

“I don’t know.” He fisted his hair, body pulling in on itself. “Maybe Bular was right. Maybe I am just a useless half-breed. Here I’m supposed to be the Trollhunter but I’ve been winging this entire thing, and now, everything is going to shit and I can’t do anything and Claire’s been kidnapped and —”

“Breathe. It’s going to be okay,” Barbara said.

“But it’s not.” His voice broke. He laughed mirthlessly. “It’s really not.”

Her gaze flickered over the small hedge hiding them. She could see her headlights through the shrubbery. It wasn’t far. They needed to move soon though. “My car is parked nearby, but you can’t walk like this and I can’t carry you. You need to change.”

“How?”

Good question. She wished she had the answer. For one small moment, she imagined one of those self-help parenting books in her mind: how to teach your half-changeling son how to transform without a gaggle-tack. Geez, what a mouthful. It was the one and only time she wished her ex was here.

Thankfully, the moment passed soon enough.

“Take a deep breath,” she instructed. Being stressed probably didn’t help. “Now exhale. Good. Do it again. It’s alright. We can solve this. You have me now. I’m here for you.”

Her hand lightly rubbed circles into his back. His shoulders lost their tightness.

“I…I’ll try,” he said, closing his eyes (well, eye. She would need to check that soon to see if the
Nothing changed in the first minute. Nevertheless, his erratic breathing had lessened, body loosening with every second passed. Barbara continued rubbing his back. She couldn’t help but hum along with it.

Barbara’s mind couldn’t help but fill with concern over his earlier words. What kind of life had he lived that he had such low self-worth? It burned, knowing he viewed himself so poorly. If she ever had the chance, she and Walt were going to have words about this.

Before long, her hand warmed, heating up to a near scalding temperature. Electricity thrummed underneath. Light began to spark, alerting her of what was too come. Barbara barely had time to cover her eyes from the ensuing light that consumed his body.

She blinked, trying to adjust to the darkness. Her son gave her a half-hearted smile and thumbs up, human once more.

Swinging the gun over her shoulder, she reached down, helping him onto his feet once more. Shifting his arm around her shoulder, they wobbled through the woods. The voices grew fainter with each step they made. They couldn’t relax just yet though.

“I did it,” he said, head resting on her shoulder.

Barbara pulled him closer, taking on more of his weight. “Good job.”

“I feel so exhausted.” His head bobbed.

“Don’t fall asleep,” she warned, shaking him slightly. “You have a head injury.”

She was sweating up a storm by the time they made it to the car. As Barbara opened up the passenger’s door, a sharp pang startled her. Her eyes landed on Atlas’s closed fist and troubled features.

“I failed to protect her,” he told her. “It’s all on me. I have to go rescue her. I promised I would get
her to safety and now she’s going to the most dangerous place on earth.”

Barbara led him inside. He sighed as he settled into seat. She couldn’t help but glance at the way he held his arm. She hoped it was merely a sprain and not broken. “We will. But you can’t right now. You’re injured.”

Atlas tried to get out of the seat. “But Claire, she’s—”

“Won’t be hurt.” She got into the driver’s seat, starting the engine. Noticing her son’s discomfort, she amended her answer. “At least not anytime soon. This Nomura took her, right? She knows she’s important to you. She’ll use Claire to get to you.”

“This is so fucked up. I screwed up. What if Bular kills her?” He asked.

“Walt—” She swallowed. Don’t think about him, she thought. “He’s a smart changeling, right?”

Atlas paused before responding quietly, “Yeah.”

“Then he’ll figure out a way to keep this Bular from killing her.”

“But he doesn’t know I’m the Troll—” Atlas froze. His shoulders slumped forward as the redness in his cheeks faded to a sickly white. “Nomura knows.”

Barbara’s lips drew into a narrow line. “Yes.”

“I can’t go back to the Janus Order. Either they know or they will know. Dad’s going to think I betrayed him,” he stated, voice cracking with every word.

She reached out for his hand. “Oh sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

He dodged her hand, curling forward to grab his head. Barbara closed her eyes. He wasn’t rejecting her, she reasoned, he was just frustrated. Trying to keep her mind off the reaction, she pulled onto the road.
In the corner of her eye she watched him shuffle his legs. The armor and cloak looked almost ridiculous on his smaller body, giving him the appearance of someone far younger.

Her throat closed, eyes growing blurry.

God, he was so young. Sixteen wasn’t that different from fifteen. Were all Trollhunters chosen at such a young age, or was her son unlucky?

“I never should have picked up that stupid amulet,” he said abruptly.

Barbara kept her eyes on the road, replying softly, “We can’t change the past. Only the future.”

As she reached for the stick, a hand grasped her wrist.

“What do we do, mom?”

Barbara’s lips trembled. If only she could bundle him up like she did when he was younger. Her protective side warred with her inner cynical thoughts. If it were up to her, she would have called the police on this entire thing. Ha! Walt in cuffs and a black and white stripped attire was a humorous notion. Sadly, she doubted the police could handle these kinds of beings. She doubted the military could arrive in time to be of much help either.

They needed to regroup. They needed to figure out how to rescue Claire and avoid her son getting killed.

They needed to do a lot of things.

“Right now?” She turned left, the clinic’s sign coming into view. “Let’s get you stitched up.”
The structure spanned nearly the entire width of the room. Blinky’s jaw dropped. It had been several centuries since he had last seen the bridge. Even then, he was too distracted with the ensuing battle and lose of his brother to truly take in its build. Books did not do it justice.

Marvelous, intricate, horrendous—so many adjectives to describe it. The intricate linking parts, all hooking together at the eyestone, sent chills down his spine. Its concave piece meant only one thing: the amulet was the last piece.

Amulets, bridges and trolls; what a combination. As he marveled at Killahead, his thoughts couldn’t help but wander. Celtic and Scandinavian myths about their people had explored the reasons for their species and the structure’s connections, but even they didn’t know how they could create interdimensional holes through space and time. Most trolls merely left it as magic, but not Blinky. It had been one of the biggest questions in his life. Indeed, he’d even written an entire paper on the matter. Sadly, no troll publisher would consider his work (too controversial, Vendel once remarked) but still he preserved. One day, he thought, one day.

“Great Gronka Morka,” he exclaimed. “I never—the changeling was correct. No wonder Atas couldn’t tell us. It’s been here this entire time.”

A pen clicked. Blinky froze.

“Ah,” a British voice began. “What luck.”

Blinky tried to back away, but he was blocked by another. “Oh, dear—"

Changelings. He put up a valiant fight, but they got the better of him. Honestly, who would have thought a changeling’s punch could hurt that much?

Certainly not him.

His stomach churned. How disgraceful. A troll as old and clever as he, captured. His jail was less of a cell and more of a storage area. Wooden boxes circled the area, creating a tight jagged corner. Once the shorter changeling finished tying his hands behind his back (enchanted, he noted), Blinky smacked his head backward, earning a shocked yelp and litany of German curses.
Ha! Served him right.

AAARRRGHH!!! would have been quite useful at present. Though Blinky was loathe to place his old friend out of his comfort zone, his fighting capabilities would have prevented an event such as this. Not that Blinky couldn’t hold off another. His skills with Dwörkstones were no laughing matter. Alas, he failed to prepare for two sneaky changelings. Drat.

He inwardly sighed. Vendel would no doubt be furious with him. His first espionage mission and he got imprisoned.

“Right when I thought the Amulet was truly gone, an alternative appears,” the taller remarked.

Blinky rounded on him. “You won’t get away with this. The Trollhunter—”

“Doesn’t know you’re here, does he?” He tutted. “Such a fool, that one.”

Blinky bared his tusks, eyes burning. “Master Atlas is no one’s fool.”

His mouth tightened. Going by the taller changeling’s expression, he should not have said that. The other left a different impression. If Blinky were to guess, he was almost smug. But that was merely conjecture. Human expressions were not the easiest to decipher at times.

The color left the taller one’s face. “So it’s true then,” he said softly.


Something in the other’s tone must have angered him, for the next words that left the taller’s mouth was: “Leave, Otto.”

“But Stricklander—”

A quick flash and the shorter was thrown across the room, smashing against the wall with a loud smash. Blinky kept two eyes on the transformed changeling. A deep seated anger began to bubble
within him. This was the man who raised Atlas.

The thought did not sit well with Blinky.

Stricklander approached the other, lifting him by his coat. In an icy manner, he ordered, “I said leave.”

He didn’t have to tell this Otto twice. The changeling scurried out the room, leaving Strickler and Blinky as the sole occupants.

The hairs on his head stood up. Seeing a changeling this up close made his lifeblood quicken. *Unnatural*, his mind supplied. Skeletally thin and gangly, the changeling appeared like a mesh-mash of human and troll. His cape bellowed out behind him. Well, now he knew where Atlas got his peculiar fashion choices.

The way he stalked toward him spoke everything. This wasn’t Atlas or NotEnrique. This was an *elder* impure. If he could be so bold, he would say this one was one of the first.

He transformed just as quickly back to human, an unimpressed sneer across his lips.

“So it was you who turned him against us,” Stricklander said. In one fluid movement he unclicked his pen, fingers wound around it so tightly his knuckles turned white.

“I did nothing of the sort. I merely facilitated his learning. He’s a bright lad,” Blinky defended.

“That he is,” Stricklander said, a ghost of a smile passing over him before it gained a bitter edge. “But that doesn’t excuse his behavior,”

“All the disappearances, his reluctance to kill the Trollhunter—it all makes sense now.” His eyes widened. He walked around in a circle, clicking his pen in an erratic rhythm. “Yes, yes, yes, why didn’t I see it before? How foolish of me.” He stopped. His shoulders rose. “I won’t make the same mistake again. I take it the Amulet controls his forms?”

Blinky threw him a disdainful scoff. “As though I would tell you.”
Stricklander approached, close enough to look down at him but far enough that Blinky could grab him between his teeth. Blinky crossed his legs. The less distressed he appeared the more information he might receive.

“You must be the infamous Blinky I’ve heard so much about,” he noted in a bored tone.

Blinky cocked his head to the side, voice equally unimpressed. “And you must be the infamous father.”

A red blush overtook his features. He growled, “I am not that traitor’s father. Not anymore. He has lost that privilege.”

Blinky scooted forward. As the changeling schooled his features, Blinky remarked, “How pitiful. He loves you. Do you understand what that means? He protected you the most, not that you deserved it. And you would throw it all away for this? This power?”

“You know nothing.”

“I know everything!” He shouted, anger getting the best of him. How could it not? “You, sir, are one of the worst fathers I have ever had the acquaintance of, and I knew Odinum the Child Eater! Good conversationalist, yes, but a terrible father figure.” He huffed. “I digress however. You are worse. Turning a blind eye to his abuse, allowing Bular and the others to hurt someone who is no more than a child—you and your organization disgust me.”

“Your words fail to move me, troll. I think we’ll offer you to Gunmar first. Not as tasty as a human, but certainly plump enough,” he spat.

Blinky shot back, “How am I not surprised. Cease this madness, impure. You and I both know what will happen if Gunmar returns. No one is safe from that monster, not even you.”

He clicked his pen. “Gunmar will lead us into a new era—”

“Hogwash! Gunmar will lead everyone to ruin. You’re playing with people’s lives! Humans, trolls, and changelings! Have you no sanity?”

“Sanity? I am the sanest of all, you daft buffoon. Do you think humans or trolls would ever accept one of us? Not one troll has offered us a home, save Gunmar. Our creator tasked this to us for a reason. We have spent millennia working towards this.” He thrust his pen at Blinky, eyes tight. “One child means nothing. It cannot. I’ve worked too far to turn back.”

“And all it takes is one to put an end to it. Atlas believes you can change, all of you, but especially you. He trusts you.”

“And you believe him?” He scoffed bitterly.

“I believe Master Atlas can do anything he sets his mind to,” Blinky answered, head held high.

The changeling frowned. He turned away. “If Young Atlas won't open it for us, maybe he'll open it for you.”

“You’re making a mistake.”

“No, it was Atlas who made the mistake,” he replied. “Not I.”

An angry scream broke their argument. A pink changeling (Nomura, he thought, oh dear) strolled in, dropping a young human to the floor.

The child blinked owlishly, scanning the room. She raised her fists. When Nomura made no move for her, the girl examined the room. Her eyes landed on Stricklander.

“Mr. Strickler?” She asked, brows coming together.

“Nomura,” he started in an admonishing manner, gesturing the pen at the human. “What is the meaning of this?”
“Yes, Nomura. I thought I told you to bring me the Trollhunter.” A dark figure loomed behind her.

Blinky gulped. Bular the Vicious. A sudden chill ran down his back. By the Void, he wished AAARRRGGHH!!! were here. Selfish yes, but his life was now on the line.

The troll threw a glance at him before switching to the human, licking his lips. The girl tensed, but kept her defensive stance.

Oh dear.

“The Trollhunter is—” Nomura paused, eyes widening.

“The Trollhunter is—” Nomura paused, eyes widening.

“Protected by humans,” Stricklander responded tersely.

“A very difficult situation,” Otto said, arms behind his back as he entered behind Bular. “My apologies, sire.”

“This one is further insurance. He’s soft for her,” Nomura explained.

“Humans will get suspicious, Nomura. She’s the daughter of the councilwoman. The police will be swarming the town for her by tomorrow,” Stricklander argued.

Bular crossed his arms. “Good. More fleshbags for us to eat. Father will be pleased. He always did like it when prey put up a fight.”

“Yes, sire. Such a brilliant idea!” Otto remarked merrily.

Bular slammed a fist to the ground, startling everyone. When he lifted it, rubble appeared.

Great Gronka Morka.
“Strickler, Nomura.” Bular said distastefully, “You two have displeased me. Your incompetence time and time again has tried my patience. Father will hear of this.”

“He’ll come, sire.” Stricklander urged, motioning back to Blinky. “The troll is his trainer.”

Bular signaled to the human, stepping closer. The girl tried to move away. “Then we don’t need two hostages, now do we?”

Blinky sucked in his breath as Bular picked the human up by her hair. He dug his claws into her head. A shrill painful noise left her lips before the troll shook her. The child fell silent. Blinky would have thought she’d fainted, but her shaking legs said otherwise.

“Stop! Please! She’s just a child!” Blinky yelled, rising to his feet.

All three changelings stiffened. A look passed between the group. Something was going on between them. What that was remained a mystery however.

“Killing her would be meaningless. If anything, it would drive the Trollhunter to bring his allies,” Stricklander tried to argue.

Otto nodded. “The troll is right, sire. Not to mention she’s practically skin and bones. There’s not much there to eat. She wouldn’t even qualify in the caliber of a snack for you, my lord. You deserve far better.”


Blinky shouted above the trio, “And Trollmarket is already gathering their forces. We know about the bridge. You won’t get away with this!”

Bular appeared to dismiss the changelings words, responding to Blinky’s words with an anger look before replying, “Lies.”
“No,” Stricklander said, stepping forward. “Atlas has…defected to their side.”

“How am I not surprised,” Bular grumbled.

Stricklander bowed deeply, heading for the exit. “I will deal with him—”

“No,” Bular interrupted, pushing Stricklander away forcefully. “I will. You’ve done enough, Strickler.”

With a flick of his wrist the human was tossed into the makeshift jail. She landed on her hands and knees, immediately curling up into a ball. Blinky winced. A handful of hair and a few hairclips sat in Bular’s palm. The troll looked down, shrugged, then downed the contents. Blinky inwardly shuddered.

The girl hugged her legs even tighter. The scent of pennies filled the air.

“You,” Bular addressed Otto with a nod of his head. “Make yourself useful and get me something to eat.”

“Of course, sire. Whatever you desire I shall endeavor to retrieve for you,” Otto said dutifully, following after the troll whilst heaping compliments towards his physique.

The tension decreased a fraction, but only just. As Bular’s footsteps disappeared, Blinky switched his full attention to the changelings.

Their body language said everything he needed to know.

“Oh dear, he doesn’t know yet,” Blinky began, brows rising. “Yes, of course. It wouldn’t bode well for the Janus Order if one of their own turned out to be the Trollhunter.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Stricklander spat. “Don’t answer that.”

He harrumphed.
Stricklander tossed one last look of distaste at him before turning to Nomura. “Keep them under
guard. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Me? Why not you?”

“Unlike you, Nomura. I have work to do,” he replied curtly.

She threw him a disdainful glower. “How fun.”

“I trust you know what to do.”

Stricklander’s exit sucked the energy out of Blinky as he realized the helplessness of his situation. It
had been ages since he felt this despondent, not since—

No, best not to dwell on such thoughts. His shoulders slumped forward. His brother was dead and
gone. Such thoughts would only discourage him.

Nomura slammed a fist into the wall, startling both captives. Her glare could melt glaciers, he
thought. “Sit down and shut up,” she ordered, muttering beneath her breath, “Fucking stuck with
babysitting.”

The girl shivered; somehow, it softened his frustration with the situation. Poor child. She hadn’t done
anything to be caught up in this. First her brother and now this.

A rush of confidence filled him. Even if he didn’t make it out alive, he would be damn sure the child
would, mark his words. She was small enough to escape. If ever the opportunity arrived, he would
make sure she would get to safety.

One of them had to at least.

“So,” Blinky began in a soft tone, rubbing his hands together. She looked up. He tried to appear as
nonthreatening as possible. “You must be Lady Claire.”
The Battle of Two Bridges (I)

Chapter Summary

The curtain rises on Arcadia as the battle looms. Atlas nurses his wounds. All is not well however. Atlas finds his human identity under threat in town, only to receive help from unusual allies.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hola! Back with a new chapter! Thank you for all the wonderful comments, kudos, and favorites. And we're finally getting to the showdown between Atlas and Bular! Shoutout to Vici and Charlie for helping me. Also, big thanks to Vici for sending me some tea post-surgery. You are an awesome friend.

Also, holy cheese, more fanart! You guys are just absolutely fantastic. Seriously. I love ya'll.

Ceru_draws did a fantastic trio of sketches based on scenes from the fanfic that are jaw-dropping amazing. They look like official concept art! Totally recommend following them. Here's a link:http://ceru-draws.tumblr.com/post/183919114257/some-doodles-based-off-scenes-from

Squabasaurus made an amazing 3-page comic that is absolutely brill and lovely. Seriously, their art is fantastic. This looks like a professional comic. Check out their other works too. Here: http://squabasaurus.tumblr.com/post/183904675962/a-snippet-of-the-amazing-fanfic-blue-moon-rising

MirraDragnil did a lovely sketch of Atlas and Claire that I love. So cute! They really capture the dynamic! Please follow them. Here's a link: https://mirradragnil.tumblr.com/post/183915008317/sketch-for-tunafishprincess-and-blue-moon-rising

Guardian_of_da_gay also did a lovely commission sketch of Atlas and Claire dancing and it's sooooo adorable. They also did the cover of my fanfic.net version of this story. Please commission them. Their prices are really reasonable and their art is amazing! Here's a link: http://guardian-of-da-gay.tumblr.com/post/183636913753/i-got-commissioned-by-tunafishprincess-the

Kittyypop did another lovely picture of Atlas that is so cute! You gotta check it out. Kitty you are so awesome. Here's a link: https://www.instagram.com/p/BvnAxUOgmaC/
Raindrops slid across the glass. Dawn broke minutes before. Not that anyone would have noticed. Dark gray, light gray, blue-gray—everything was muted to hell and back again. It brought back all his frustrations to the surface once more. *Yey,* Atlas inwardly grumbled, *exactly what I need.*

A voice disrupted his thoughts. His ears twitched at the sounds coming from the bedside table.

“Maybe you should stay in bed, Arcadia,” the radio announcer remarked. “Looks like this storm may stick with us for a while. In other news, a local high school teen went missing last night. If you have any information on the whereabouts of Claire Nu—”

Thunder rumbled. The radio became muffled by static before shutting off.

His stomach churned. He ducked his head as a familiar smell entered the room.

“We’ll rescue her, Atlas.”

He nodded before turning away, choosing to nurse the cold pack on his face. A sprained wrist and concussion were nothing in comparison to the guilt racking him. How many times had she told Atlas that today? He lost count.

Didn’t she understand the impossibility of it all? No, she couldn’t. This wasn’t just any troll, this was *Bular.* How could Atlas ever hope to defeat the likes of him? Kanjigar certainly hadn’t, nor had the previous Trollhunters before him.

He glared down at his claws. The human transformation only held up for a few hours, dissipating as the night drew to a close. At least he knew how to transform without the gaggletak now. Not that it really mattered. Neither his human nor changeling forms could ever hope to take on Bular one-on-one. Which meant he needed to think outside of the box.
The problem was, he would need a plan to do that, and right now, he didn’t have the time to make one. Which meant he would need to wing it.

Oh sweet Pale Lady.

His mother arrived at his side within moments of his reply, flashing a light in his eyes before moving on to check the bandage at his head. “How’s the swelling?”

“Minimal.” He shrugged, knocking a light fist against the side of his head. “I’m a pretty fast healer.”

Her fingers drifted downwards, tilting his head from side to side before smoothing over his cheeks. Atlas tried not to flinch. It felt too clinical, bringing back old memories he didn’t want to deal with right now.

“Amazing,” she noted, holding his face between her hands. “Even the scratches and bruises are starting to disappear, and it’s only been a few hours. Does it only happen in this form? What kind of blood clotting do trolls have? Your skin is much cooler too. Huh. The texture reminds me of clay for some reason. What sort of epidermis do changelings have? Is it different than trolls? Are your father’s people truly made of rock or is it some sort of specialized exoskeleton?”

Atlas threw her a look. “Mom.”

“Yes?”

He rested a hand on her wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Could you stop?”

Her eyes widened. Immediately she pulled away, face paling. “Oh! Oh dear. Atlas, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just—”

“Doctor’s curiosity?” He surmised, a bitter smile tugging at his lips. “Well, you’re not the first.”

It was one of the reasons he avoided the Order’s medical staff unless Stricklander forced him (which
was rare). While the memories it triggered were only bits and pieces, the feeling behind them was enough to steer him away.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked, settling onto the bed next to him. She kept her hands in her lap. His shoulders loosened up, if only slightly.

“No,” he said, following soon after with, “It’s in the past.”

“Is it? I noticed you have a lot of scars.”

“Is that why you checked every part of me earlier?” He inquired dryly. “How sneaky.”

She waved her hands frantically. “No, no, no! It’s standard procedure. You were really beaten up back there. I wanted to make sure you hadn’t broken anything.”

“Oh, give me time, I’m sure I’ll break something today,” he chuckled darkly.

His mother didn’t join him. Instead, her gaze fixed elsewhere, brows knitted in concern.

“Was it a doctor who did that too?” She asked softly.

She gestured towards the scar on his hand. At first he thought she was referring to the lightning scar, but the direction of her eyes was higher, focused on the inner portion of his arm.

It was old, faded into a jagged pale reminder of what happened when one smacked back at another changeling. Too late had he learned not to pick fights with certain people in the Janus Order.

“Well, not exactly. Being part of the Janus Order is—was complicated. Everyone wants to be on top, but doesn’t want to risk their position to get there. My entry into the ranks was because of Stricklander. Plus, some changelings didn’t take too kindly to having a half-blood in their ranks. I hold—held my own,” he explained.

“Where was Walt in all this?” She questioned, inching closer. “Did he allow this to happen?”
“You’re thinking like a human does, mom. Scars amongst trolls and changelings are normal,” he tried to stress.

“Do trolls allow their children to get maimed?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, not according to Blinky, but—”

“Then it’s not normal then.” She grasped her fingers together, knuckles white. “This kind of thing isn’t right, Atlas. You were—and still are—a child. Decent people don’t hurt children. The fact Walt allowed it to happen makes me question his capacity to raise you in the first place.”

“He did his best,” Atlas said defensively. “Dad’s…he’s not a bad person.”

Yeah, he couldn’t protect Atlas from Bular or the others, but that was because of his position. As head of the Janus Order he couldn’t show any weaknesses. Favoring Atlas would put himself in danger. So—

His heart clenched, words caught in his throat.

Why did the thought of it now feel so wrong?

“But he’s not a good father either,” she said as she pushed up her glasses, lips pulled into a tight thin line.

“You have no right to say that,” he snapped. “You weren’t there. You didn’t suffer what I had to. Dad understood. He wasn’t perfect, but don’t you dare say he wasn’t good.” His eyes blazed. In a fit of anger, he added, “A fleshbag like you could never understand.”

Shame filled him the moment the words left his lips. Her reaction was immediate, expression closed off from him.

Shit, he hadn’t meant to—
“Fleshbag?” She said, eyes lowered. “Is that what you think of me?”

No, not it wasn’t. He hadn’t meant it like that. Paragraphs of words threatened to spill from his mouth, but all he could answer with was: “I’m sorry.”

She nodded, standing up. The click of her shoes against the floor were deafening. Atlas wanted to reach out, however his hands stayed glued to his side. Sweet Pale Lady he was pathetic.

Her stride stopped at the door. Through the curtains, he saw her shoulders rise. “I see. Stay here until I get back. Most of the staff aren’t here yet, so you shouldn’t be bothered. I need to get a few things from my office, but once I do I’ll drive you back to the house.” She threw him a small smile. “We can figure out how to rescue Claire there, alright? Together.”

“Yeah,” he lied. “Of course.”

She paused for a few moments before releasing a soft sigh. Only once she was out of earshot did Atlas get out of the bed. His body protested, muscles tightening and throbbing in reaction. Still, he paid them no heed.

His feet took him to the window. The rain pelted against it, a strong wind carrying the downpour in sheets. The radio announcer was right: this storm wasn’t going anywhere.

He pressed his head against the glass.

Everything had gone to hell and he was still here. The Janus Order, Nomura, his dad—every connection severed, leaving him adrift in uncertainty.

Who was he now?

And who would he have to become if he survived against Bular? What if he had to fight his dad? No. He couldn’t let it come to that.
Could he?

A tusk tugged on his upper lip. Stricklander was a devout follower of Gunmar. As much as he cared (well, used to) for Atlas, his mission was always his priority. And now, Atlas stood in between all of that.

He…wasn’t sure how he felt about that in all honesty.

A small but growing part of himself wished he were human. Everything was easier for them. If only he could leave his changeling part behind.

Another visitor. His heart rate rose before falling once more as he recognized who it was. A familiar pair of footsteps entered the room, giving a courtesy knock on the door. “Howdy, partner.”

He acknowledged the boy with a wave of his hand. “Tobes.”

“Heard what happened from your mom,” he said, approaching at his side. He leaned against the nearby wall. “You need to be more careful, dude.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the Trollhunter,” Atlas grumbled.

The boy crossed his arms. “Yo, I get you’re upset about Claire, but you don’t have to be such a dick about it.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just...” He groaned, head tilting back. “Fuck. I got a message from dad this morning.”

“Yikes. Can I hear it?”

Atlas tossed him the phone. He fist the edges of his cloak as Toby played the recording.

“Master Atlas, you must listen to me very carefully. They’ve captured Lady Claire and I. They want you to come to the Bridge alone. Don’t come! It’s a trap—
“Gag him, Otto. Good morning, Young Atlas,” his father said, voice devoid of any warmth or familiarity. The hairs on the back of his neck stood. “Or should I say, Trollhunter? The farce is over. Meet me in the alley beside the theater if you ever want to see your friends again. Alone. Refuse to come and I will take every action within my power to find you. The game ends here.”

“No, don't open the Bridge! Get Vendel and the others! You have to—”

The line cut out.

Toby patted him on the shoulder. “Oh shit. Does your mom know yet?”

“No.” he sighed, glancing at the door. “I’m not sure I want her to know. I've listened to it a hundred times now, and I still don't know what to do.”

“Hey, hey, hey. It’s okay. You don’t have to do this alone. You’ve got AAARRRGGHH!!!, Draal, your mom, me—”

“They said I had to be alone,” Atlas interrupted. “If I’m not, what do you think they'll do to Blinky and Claire?

Toby’s lips tugged downwards. Still, he persisted, “Blinky said you needed to get Vendel. Maybe if we gathered an army of trolls, we could take them on.”

“And risk exposure? What do you think humans will do if they find out monsters like us exist, Tobes? People will die. You could die.” Atlas pressed his forearms against the window, forehead resting against one. “Enough friends have gotten hurt because of me. No more.”

“Well, it's your call,” Toby mumbled. “You're the Trollhunter.”

“Yeah,” he replied, eyes closing.
Suddenly, a cold metallic object pressed against his cheek. He looked down, eyes widening.

“Here,” Toby said, motioning the thing Atlas thought lost.

“You found the gaggleback?”

Toby shrugged. “I picked it up in the woods after they dragged you away.”

A small ball of warmth developed in his chest. It seemed no matter what happened, Toby was there to cheer him up somehow. Were all best friends like this or was it just him? Considering all the movies Toby had shown him Atlas was beginning to believe it was the later.

Just as well. His lips turned upwards.

He took the gaggleback, placing it within the confines of his cloak. “Thanks.”

“That’s what best friends are for, right?”


“I shouldn’t have brought you into this. I’ve endangered you and your grandmother,” he said.

“Hey, it was me who chose this, okay?” Without warning, the boy wrapped his arms around the other’s middle. “I lost you once. Through thick and thin, we’ll always be in this together.”

“You sound so certain,” he whispered.

Toby pulled back. He wiped his face with one arm before throwing a playful punch into Atlas’s shoulder. “You gotta be more confident, dude. You’re the Trollhunter. Plus, fighting against impossible odds is kind of your niche, you know?”
“The odds do seem pretty staked against us this time,” he remarked.

His fingers flicked upon the window locks. Toby narrowed his eyes, throwing Atlas a calculating look.

“What are you going to do?” He asked.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Atlas said, pulling up his hood. “Right now, I need someone to distract my mom so I can leave.”

“Dude, she’s gonna be pissed as hell when she finds you ran away,” Toby pointed out.

He shrugged. No way in hell was he allowing her to get into danger like last night. “I’ll deal with it.”

An idea hit him. Atlas’s bottom lip dropped, turning his head to the side to complete the look. Toby rolled his eyes.

“Ugh, Fine. On it.” Toby answered, shuffling back to the door. “But you owe me big time. No puppy dog look is worth your mom’s wrath.”

Atlas opened the window. “Hey, Tobes.”

“Yeah?” Toby looked over his shoulder.

He lifted a fist.

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

Toby bumped it with his own.

“Yeah, dude,” he chuckled. “I know.”
Eli wished for a lot of things in life.

He wished he could be taller. That would make things a lot easier, especially at school.

As a little kid he wished he could be like Spock. Heck, he spent most of fifth grade imitating the Star Trek character, complete with blue shirt and pointed ears. In hindsight, that probably hadn’t been his greatest moment (no doubt that was where the bullying began), but still, he had been dedicated, up until the MCU came out with the Avengers. Unfortunately, his mom put her foot down when he tried to give himself a moustache.

Right now, Eli just wished he could get home in one piece.

“Come on, Steve,” he said, jumping at the bag. “Give it back.”

Of all the people he could run in to today, why did it have to be Steve? The blond had terrorized him since the beginning of high school week in and week out. Most of the time Eli put up with it, but he had just gotten his new phone today. He adjusted his umbrella, reaching out once more for his backpack. The other boy held it higher. Eli groaned.

“Or what? Gonna cry to your mommy?” Steve mocked in a high pitched manner.

Eli frowned. “That’s not funny.”

“Wah, wah, mommy, mommy. I can’t take a joke like a man,” he continued, mimicking a crying baby.

“Are you two done? You’re blocking the sidewalk,” a voice behind them inquired.
Eli’s face burned. Reluctantly, he turned his head in the direction of the newcomer.

Wow.

Even in the rain he looked so cool. His wet hair framed his face, emphasizing his too blue eyes. He wasn’t conventionally attractive like the more popular kids at school, but something about the way he moved and acted made Eli’s stomach flip-flop. Arcadia didn’t get a lot of new kids and those that were never gave Eli the time of day. But Jim was different. He didn’t know why, but something about the boy was special. Mysterious.

Eli wished he could be like that.

Of course, Eli still hadn’t forgiven him for destroying his phone (and to a lesser extent his computer). While most of his data was paper-based, he had a decent amount of research on his electronics that was now lost to time, like the creeper picture he took. Man, he missed that photo. He even had it as his home screen.

“Jim? Where have you been?” Eli asked, moving away from Steve. “Ms. Janett has been looking all over for you. Everyone is.”

The play was starting in a few hours and their lead actors hadn’t shown up for rehearsals. Not that it mattered, since the lead actress went missing. Rumors had run wide through the entire student body.

“Yeah, you’re in big trouble, Lake,” Steve sneered, blocking the rest of the path.

Eli added, “Is it true you and Claire are getting eloped?”

“What?” Jim raised an eyebrow. “Where did you hear that?”

Mary and Darci, he thought.

“Around,” Eli answered.
“I heard you kidnapped her. My d—” Steve coughed, “I mean, Coach might have mentioned it.”

Jim pinched the arch of his nose. Eli couldn’t help but take in his rough appearance. Did Jim get into a fight?

“I didn’t kidnap her,” Jim said. His eyes narrowed, gaze pointed past them. “Don’t tell anyone you saw me.”

Steve’s shoulders rose. Ah oh. *Never tell Steve he can’t do something*, Eli thought. Eli couldn’t help but shrink away. The last place he wanted to be was between them if a fight broke out.

The idea of watching Steve get his butt handed to him like before did strike his fancy however.

“Oh what?” Steve said, crossing his arms.

Eli followed Jim’s line of vision. At the end of the road, an officer got out of his car, his expression mirroring Jim’s. Eli gulped.

The policeman began walking towards them. Eli froze.

Jim swerved, fast-walking in the opposite direction. “I need to go.”

Steve jogged to his side, leering. “Scared, Lake?”

“Hey you kids! Stop right there!” The officer yelled.

The teens looked amongst each other. Steve appeared torn between following the officer’s orders and disobeying authority, at least in Eli’s mind.

His heart pounded in his head. In a moment of bravery (*or foolishness*, his mind provided) Eli tugged on Jim’s jacket, pulling him into one of the alleyways.
“This way, Jim!” He yelled.

Jim nodded, taking off. Eli followed from behind.

Holy moly, he was violating the law. How was he going to explain this to his mom? His face paled as he imagined the kind of grounding she’d give him if he got caught. He should turn back. Better to face the punishment now than later.

“Thanks,” Jim said as they turned a corner.

Eli beamed. His heart thumped wildly in his chest.

Okay, so maybe the possibility of getting in trouble wasn’t so bad.

“You know, you’re really fast for a short guy,” Steve remarked airily, pulling up to them from behind.

He couldn’t help but gawk. What was Steve doing here? Eli thought they’d left him back on the sidewalk. Jim beat him to the punch however.

“Why are you following us?” Jim asked.

Steve began to pump his arms and legs, until he was neck and neck with Jim. “Can’t let you have all the fun, Lake.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

“Where are we going?” Steve said.

Eli frantically motioned his hand. “Take a left! Left! We can hide behind Stuart’s Electronics!”
“Got it,” the other two answered.

The second they came to a stop Eli fell to his knees. Exhaustion rankled his bones, muscles quivering. How strange. Eli might not be as strong as Steve but he wasn’t a slouch either. Was he getting out of shape? Maybe he should have slept more last night. He’d been so excited about the play that he barely got a wink of sleep.

Jim brushed his bangs back over his forehead. Eli bit down on his lower lip. What was this feeling?

“Did anyone follow us?” Jim asked. He peered around the corner.

“I don’t think so,” Eli said between breaths.

Steve held his nose. “Ew, what’s that smell?”

“Probably the trash,” Jim responded.

Eli examined their surroundings. He had taken this route a few times, but something about the gray sky and torrential downpour gave the area a creepy atmosphere, like someone was watching them.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood. Yeah, definitely not normal. Paranormal then? He immediately began thinking of reasons for the strange shift.

Aliens? It seemed unlikely. Eli would have noticed if there were any extraterrestrial activity in Arcadia. He was an expert on them after all.

Creepers made the most sense, but he knew so little about them other than their strange stony skin and glowing eyes. Plus, they only seemed to come out at night.

Or, as much as he would hate to admit it, he was being paranoid. Did he take his medicine this morning? He wasn’t sure he did. Man, his mom was going to be pissed if she found out he forgot them.
“Eli,” Jim said. “You okay?”

“Earth to loser,” Steve added.

Jim sighed. “Do you ever shut up, Palchuk?”

“I guess this means we’re fugitives now,” Eli stated, brushing his knees as he rose to his feet.

Steve’s face paled. Jim, on the other hand, appeared indifferent. In fact, he didn’t appear to care at all. He began to walk down the alley, backpack slung around one shoulder.

“Wait! Where are you going, Lake?” Steve said, scrambling to stop him. “This isn’t over.”

“I’m meeting up with a friend. You don’t know them.”

“What’s their name?” Eli said.

Jim smiled, placing an index to his lips. “That’s a secret.”

Eli drew closer until he was inches away from the other. “Oh! Can we meet them? Are they spies? How do you know them? What do they—”

Jim placed a hand on Eli’s mouth. “Too many questions. And No. It’s too dangerous. Besides, he likes to be anonymous.”

He removed his hand. Eli touched his mouth, cheeks burning.

Unfortunately he didn’t have time to wonder why. Steve pushed Jim, anger in his features.
“Yeah, right,” he said in a drawn-out manner. “You’re just screwing with us, aren’t you?”

Eli grabbed the other boy’s arm. “Stop that, Steve.”

Steve pulled his limb away, turning his attention back to him. “Aw, are you coming to his rescue? Do you like him?”

His face heated up in embarrassment. He replied shakily, “W-wha—No! Let’s just…there’s no need to fight here, please.”

He waved his hands in a peaceful gesture.

Steve growled.

Eli squeaked.

The other groaned, waving his arms in a dramatic fashion. He kicked a trashcan over, yelling, “Why does everyone think I want to fight? Can’t you take a joke?”

Eli looked around, eyes widening. “Uh, Steve.”

“Everyone treats me like I’m some sort of bully,” he remarked, his voice devoid of his normal bravado. “It’s not my fault people misunderstand me. None of you know me. None of you know what it’s like to be—”

“Steve!” Eli exclaimed.

Steve let out a deep exhale then answered, “What?”

“Where’s Jim?”
Indeed, while they had been talking Jim had vanished from the area. Eli was impressed. He hadn’t even heard the other’s footsteps.

Steve fell silent, mouth moving in a stupefied manner. Finally, he sputtered, “H-huh? He’s…He was right there a second ago.”

Steve picked up the trash can lid, looking inside. Eli was about to speak up, but his attention was soon drawn up above.

“Whoa.” The word barely scratched the surface of the image before him.

Blue spheres floated across the roof. Where it was coming from however, was too high for Eli to see sadly. Without warning, a flash of light overtook the sky. Eli crouched, shielding his face. Steve huddled close to him. As his vision began to return, he noted a hooded figure leaping across the rooftops. His jaw dropped.

It was him! It was really him!

Steve pointed in the direction the creeper went. “Did you see that? I’m not just seeing things, right? You totally saw that!”

“It’s the creeper,” Eli said giddily. He couldn’t help spring up and down on his toes. Holy moly, the Devil of Arcadia Oaks had been here!

“Oh my god,” Steve cried. His legs crumpled underneath him. “I thought it was a dream. Everyone said I was crazy. But he’s real. He’s really real. I’m not crazy. I know what I saw.”

Steve saw him before? Eli could feel the gears turning in his head. No one else ever believed his theories, but now, he not only had living proof but another witness to the fact!

“You know him?”

“Yeah, well,” he scratched his nose, cheeks reddening. “Not exactly, but he saved me from this huge—why are you looking at me like that?”
Eli adjusted his glasses. “Tell me everything. And don’t leave a single detail out.”

“You really believe me?” Steve said.

Eli nodded enthusiastically. “Of course!”

“Hey, do you think—” He paused, rubbing the back of his head. “No, it’s stupid.”

“What is it Steve?”

“Well, Lake said he had a friend he was meeting, right?” Steve shrugged. “What if it was the creeper-dude?”

“Steve…” Eli said, awestruck. Why hadn’t he thought of that before? “You’re a genius.”

The other boy staggered back, surprise written all over his face. “I…I am?”

“Of course! It all makes sense! Jim is friends with the creeper. He must be protecting his identity. That’s why he destroyed my phone.” Eli gasped. “What if it’s related to why Claire’s missing? Jim is in league with the Creepers!”

Steve stroked his chin. “But how do they know each other?”

“I don’t know,” Eli started, eyes roaming the skies. “But I’m going to find out.”
The Battle of Two Bridges (II)

Chapter Summary

Claire comes to find her situation is more complex than she thought and escape is impossible. Draal comes to find Atlas’s plan sucks arse and voices the fact.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter and oh my gosh! Thank you for all the lovely bookmarks, reviews, and kudos. Seriously, can't believe we hit 20,000 hits and over 1000 kudos. Big thanks to Charlie and VIci for helping me with this chapter. Y'all are awesome. Also sending some love to some awesome artists out there.

Shoutout to Kittyypop for doing so many awesome fanarts of Blue Moon Rising. You da GOAT. Kittyypop is a very talented young artist with a brill style. I really recommend checking their stuff out. It's awesome sauce.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BwVrDXSADV4/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BwYBha5gMKK/

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bwa1zflAVHT/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BwNmp-CAR5J/

Ceru linearted one of the sketches they did and I got to color it. Ceru is such a freaking amazing artist. I love their works and they blessed me with this lineart that's just so dam cool. They also released the lineart for others to practice on, who so far also did an amazing job! If you'd like the lineart to practice on just text me on Instagram. :D

My version: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bv6la5jFKV5/

Andy Messier's version (their art is also super lovely! I totally recommend following them! I really like how they did the colors here):
https://www.instagram.com/p/BwKcHAWg5w/-

Squabasaurus also did an absolutely amazing Barbara Lake with a shotgun and it deserves as much love as the rest of her art. Seriously, Squab is fantastic. Please go follow them. Their trollhunters are is phenomenal.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bv-gR8VIS1t/

Brothebro did a lovely fanart as well for my birthday. Here's a link:

Also huge shoutout to Bloody and Space Alex. They got my some awesome birthday
presents. Thank you for being so awesome. :') Also big thank you to everyone on the Trollhunters discord. You guys are fantastic and help keep me going.

I hope you enjoy the chapter!

A slamming door drew her away from slumber. Claire released a soft groan. So unfair. It had been a nice dream too; she and her family on the beach, building sand castles with Enrique, her mother brushing out her tangles after she swam in the ocean with her Papí—It was a perfect day.

“Breakfast has arrived,” Papí whispered, nudging her arm.

“Five more minutes, Papí,” she grumbled. It wasn’t like she had school today. The play wasn’t until tonight. Probably wanted her to babysit Enrique for the morning. She rolled over.

A soft chuckle resounded. “Alas, Lady Claire, I do believe you have mistaken me for someone else.”

It was as though someone had poured a bucket of ice over her. He was right. That wasn’t Papí’s voice. The words were too melodious and deep, his syllables theatrical to the utmost degree.

She twisted to one side, cheek meeting cool rock. Claire froze. She felt it move against her, like it was alive.

Dios mío. Claire struggled to breathe. She could hear her heart pounding inside her head.

It all came back to her. Last night, Atlas, the goblins—Monsters were real.

She looked up; six eyes blinked owlishly down.

Don’t panic, she told herself, he’s not going to eat you. He promised he won’t.
“I’m awake,” she croaked. Her throat was parched, though out of thirst or fear she couldn’t say.

“So you are,” he remarked, motioning his head towards a trey of food in front of them. “Apple?”

At first she wanted to refuse, but her stomach protested. Begrudgingly, she took the offered meal.

Trapped underneath the museum with a six-eyed “Troll” for company. If you had told her that yesterday she would have laughed.

Hell, she hadn’t fully believed Atlas until he took off his hood. The touch of his horns and ears, too real to be prosthetics, had driven home the gravity of the reveal. The amulet’s power had only cemented the fact.

Her lips stretched into a thin grim line.

The supernatural were real. Magic was real.

This was way too much to think about right now. She turned to her fellow prisoner.

“Blinky, right?” Claire took a bite of the apple, chewed, and then swallowed before asking, “How do you know Atlas?”

The Troll’s chest puffed out, his chin tilting up. “I am the Trollhunter’s trainer. My dear friend AAARRRGGHH!!! and I discovered him, well, perhaps ‘discovered’ is not quite the word for it.” He laughed nervously. “You see, we tried to kidnap him in the beginning, but that attempt soon failed. It’s quite a story really——”

Crack! A hoof lodged itself between them, breaking the wooden crate behind them.

Claire flinched, her eyes following the limb all the way to its terrifying owner.

Slit emerald eyes narrowed. The changeling released a fowl hiss.
Claire drew air in through clenched teeth.

“What did I say about shutting up?” The Changeling (Ms. Nomura, Claire’s mind delivered) gave a grunt of disgust, retrieving her foot to stomp back to the small chair she wanted them from.

A ball of anger built within her. Blinky tried to appear comforting, but the move fell short because of his tied up limbs. His shoulders slumped.

“Many apologies, Lady Claire,” Blinky whispered.

“Don’t be. You really care about him, don’t you?” She remarked fondly.

“Yes. Despite his touch exterior, Atlas is rather kind.” Blinky’s stony brows came together in a sharp peak, though all six of his eyes remained focused on the floor. “Sometimes too much so.”

She wanted to ask what he meant, but nature was calling. Claire’s cheeks heated up. Seriously? Right now? With a sigh she placed the partially eaten apple back on the tray. Her knees and palms ached as she picked herself up off the floor. Probably from when that monster threw me in here, she thought grimly. Her scalp burned from the memory.

Claire resisted the urge to shudder. His fiery eyes and fang ridden mouth were forever seared into her retinas, as was the way he looked at her. Like she was nothing more than food.

No, Claire resolved, I’m not going to cry. She couldn’t afford to show anymore weakness here. Not now. Slowly, she walked over to Ms. Nomura’s spot at the front of the room. The woman looked up from her phone, rising an annoyed brow.

Claire tucked a lock behind her ear. “Um, Ms. Nomura?”

“What,” she spat.

She insisted, “I need to go to the restroom. It’s urgent.”
“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Claire released the air she’d been holding in. Nomura grasped her by the arm, tugging her forward.

Before they left Ms. Nomura warned Blinky, “Stay here. Try to leave and the wards will burn you to a crisp. Not that it really matters.” She flipped back her hair. “You’ll both be dead soon anyways.”

Fear spiked within her. Claire struggled to push it back down, keeping her eyes straight and steady.

Even though Death was quite possibly around the corner she couldn’t help but think of her family. Did they know she was missing? Were they searching for her? She knew her Papi would. Between her two parents he was the most involved in her life, taking her to practice, meeting with her teachers—he would be the most devastated she believed.

A dark thought hit her. Was her mother worried? Did she care? Claire’s nails dug into the skin of her elbows. Maybe she thought Claire snuck out again to see her friends. Oh man, Mary and Darci! She almost forgot! They must be freaking out right now.

And then there was Atlas. She hoped he was okay. Ms. Nomura really beat him up. It was fortunate she found Dr. Lake in time. Not that it helped her situation.

Claire only had her words to keep her alive now.

“Ms. Nomura,” she started. “That’s a very human name.”

The changeling rolled her eyes. “Are you seriously trying to small talk with me?”

“I was just curious. Of all the names I’ve heard yesterday, only you and Mr. Strickler have human ones,” Claire remarked.

“We’re changelings,” she answered after a pause. “We take the name of our foundling. Nothing special. It just is.”
“Foundling? You mean the human babies the goblins take? Is that how you came here?”

So did that mean the changeling who replaced her brother was now Enrique? Her throat clenched. No. He would never be her baby brother. She refused to call him by that name.

“Atlas told you.” She pulled harder on Claire’s arm, leading her up a flight of stairs. “Figures.”

Claire struggled to keep pace. “Were you the one who took my brother?”

“Save your questions for someone who gives a shit.”

“I just want to know,” she pressed. Anything, really. Even the scantest of information meant something.

What was he doing? Did he miss them? Did they feed him? Change him?

Claire’s eyes grew wet. Poor Enrique. He must be so scared.

“Ew, are you crying? Seriously?” Ms. Nomura asked in disgust. “Do I look like I care? It’s not my fault you didn’t give enough of a shit to notice he was switched with one of ours. Tough luck.”

Guilt crawled up from within her. If only she had paid more attention. Her little brother hadn’t been the same sure, but she had chalked that up to babies being babies. She’d spent so much time focused on her social life and the play that she hadn’t taken the time to really look after her fake brother and see him for what he really was.

How could she be so stupid? So naïve?

Claire tugged her arm out of Ms. Nomura’s hold.

“Please,” she begged, desperation riding her tone. “Anything. Is my real brother safe at least?”
The changeling swayed her hips back and forth, a distasteful scowl emerging.

She replied in a measured (if dry) manner, “Safe is relative, fleshbag. No one is ever truly safe, especially in the Darklands. He is healthy, if that’s what you want to know. Now move.”

It wasn’t much, but the words soothed Claire’s fears, if only just.

The path took them to a secluded area of the museum. Velvet ropes portioned off the area, a ‘Employees Only’ sign hung off one of the poles. The heavy scent of cleaning supplies permeated the area.

Claire drew air in, resisting the temptation the to run. She wouldn’t get far.

A moment’s spell to relieve and clean her face and hands in the sink helped clear her mind. She was fortunate Nomura left her alone. It allowed her to regather herself and her objective.

There would be no saving her baby brother here. As much as it pained her, he was out of her current reach.

Her own situation wasn’t much better. Her family and friends had no idea where she was, which meant Atlas was her only hope.

Claire had never felt so helpless. But not hopeless.

Because no way was she going down without a fight.

A rush of confidence built up within her. She strode out of the bathroom, new energy within her. She straightened, looking the other woman directly in the eyes.

“You won’t win, you know,” she said in a haughtily tone, pulling on all her acting powers at her disposal. She flicked imaginary dust from her fingernails. “I called my parents while in the bathroom. My mother is the councilwoman. They know I’m here. The police have been notified.”
“You’re bluffing,” Ms. Nomura said, walking around her. “You don’t think we checked you earlier? What do you take us for?”

A thick tension overtook the air. Claire pressed on.

She cocked her head to the side. “Am I? Check the toilet. Unless you’re chicken.”

“Are you mocking me, fleshbag?” Ms. Nomura snarled. She grabbed her shirt, lifting Claire up off the floor. “Do you take me for a fool? Do you seriously believe that I’ll—"

A pale human hand caught Ms. Nomura’s wrist.

“Now, now, Nomura,” Mr. Strickler tutted, the normal green of his eyes overtaken by an eerie golden glow. “Let’s not damage one of my students. We’ve more important matters to attend to today. Check the toilets. I’ll take over your watch.”

“Get someone else to do it,” she growled.

“Don’t try my patience,” he remarked, voice as cold as frozen tundra. “Between us who do you think is more useful to our lord? Focus on the matter at hand. Freedom is within our grasp. Don’t spoil it.”

Despite their size difference, Ms. Nomura struggled to hold her up. Mr. Strickler’s hand tightened. With a grunt the other changeling released her. Claire fell to her knees.

Ms. Nomura glared venomously before shooting off towards the bathrooms, muttering what Claire guessed to be their kind’s curses.

Mr. Strickler shot her an unimpressed tilt of his brow. The familiar, fatherly smile he used with his students surfaced on his lips. Her stomach flip-flopped. Every moment, every gesture he’d shown her and her classmates was now tainted beyond repair. This wasn’t the AP history professor who quipped in class and gave extra credit on the fly; this was a monster. One who would kill her if it meant he achieved his goal.
No, scratch that. He will kill her if everything went to his plan.

Claire was beginning to regret egging Ms. Nomura on.

“Would you like a hand, Ms. Nuñez?” He asked pleasantly, motioning one in front of her.

Claire glared, pushing the offered limb away. “I can get up myself thank you.”

“Of course,” he replied as she rose from the floor, hands behind his back like he were giving a lecture and not keeping her hostage.

As soon as she got her bearings she recoiled. His hand was pressed against her back Yuck. It was impersonal, but there was a sliminess to it all that made her want to vomit. Most likely it was due to his outright betrayal and involvement in her baby brother’s kidnapping. He guided her down the hallway, directing her to where he wanted her to walk. His pace matched hers.

Instead of taking a left down to the basement however he steered her right, towards another area of the museum.

Claire turned her head to the side, brows beginning to intersect.

“We aren’t going back to the room?” She asked.

Mr. Strickler chuckled in a lighthearted way, as though this were a field trip. “I have a better place in mind.”

The destination was unlike the rest of the museum. What she thought was the janitor’s closet opened up into a semi-circular office. Mr. Strickler walked around the desk, tapping his fingers across the wooden frame.

“Please, sit,” he said, pulling out a chair. “I trust you slept well?”
How dare he. She couldn’t help but reach up to her hair, smoothing over the new bald spot she now sported. Rage churned within her. It hummed underneath her skin, muscles growing tense. What she wouldn’t give to throw a fist through that asshole’s smug mug. “You’re disgusting.”

“I’m the only reason you’re alive right now, Ms. Nuñez. I suggest you keep your words pleasant,” he replied in a bored tone, tapping a finger on the top of one of the seats. “Now, sit.”

Reluctantly, she got into the offered chair.

“You’re nothing like how Atlas described you.”

That got his attention. His eyes widened. He took a pen out of his breast pocket, balancing it to and fro on his indexes.

“Oh? Care to share our resident traitor’s words?”

She answered his question with a blank stare.

“Did he derail me? Disparage me?” He released a dry laugh. “Drag my image through the mud like a boar’s belly?”

“No.” She left it at that.

He settled into the armchair behind the desk, crossing his legs. “I’m curious. How about we play a game. To pass the time, so to speak.”

She turned her head to the side. Dangerous, she thought, but what did she have to lose? Your life, the more sensible part of her reasoned.

“I overheard what you and Nomura were saying earlier. I’ll ask a question and you will answer it with a yes or a no, and vice versa.”
Claire’s interest grew. Information was what she wanted after all.

“You were spying on us?” She asked.

“I was merely in the right place at the right time. Yes or no.”

“Yes.” She started, “Was it you who kidnapped my brother?”

“No.” He smiled. “My turn. Did you know about trolls before last night?”

“No. Are you going to kill me when this is all over?”

“Yes. Oh, don’t look at me like that. It will be a merciful death. Better quick and painless by my hand then Bular’s or Gunmar. They like to play with their food unfortunately. Now, did Atlas ever talk about me in a negative manner?”

“No. Is my brother safe, wherever he is?” Her fingers clenched the sides of the chair.

“Yes. So it was something pleasant then?”

“Yes. He spoke highly of you. Not that you deserve it. Is it possible to rescue my brother from the Darklands?”

“Doubtful.”

She leaned forward. “That’s not a no.”

Mr. Strickler swerved around in his chair, looking at the ceiling. “It would be a death wish to try and rescue your baby brother, Ms. Nuñez. Not that any of that matters anymore. Gunmar will soon be here.” His chair came to a stop. He twirled the pen, stopping every moment or two to click the top. “Did he talk about me often? Did he reveal my identity to you as well?”
“Yes to the first, no to the second. He never said your name. I found that out myself. Since you asked two, I have two of my own: if this evil leader comes back will my baby brother still be safe? Also, will Atlas be safe? Are you going to kill him?”

Claire watched as Mr. Strickler got up from his seat, the friendly teacher mask he’d been using from earlier gone, replaced with a more calculating one.

“I have a meeting to get to. I’m afraid our game is at an end.”

“But you didn’t answer my questions.”

“You asked three, not two. Therefore, you lose.”

What the hell? Claire smacked her hands against the desk.

“But you asked two yourself!”

“I’m the game maker. It is I who make the rules, not you.”

She shook her head. “That isn’t a fair game at all.”

“All is vanity, nothing is fair,” he remarked dramatically, rolling his hand in the air in a what-can-you-do manner. “All of this was only at my behest, Ms. Nuñez. We are done. Now, let us return to your quarters. The main event approaches.”

“But—”

His eyes flashed. “Now.”

The majority of the way back to her cell was silent. He had played her like a fiddle and she fell for it.
She tucked her hands underneath her armpits to stop them from shaking. As much as she didn’t want to show them her fear, she knew her situation’s likelihood. Atlas barely kept up with Ms. Nomura. What chance would he have against all of them together?

Behind that fear however, was frustration. This never would have happened if she were stronger. She hated being this weak and helpless, unable to fight back or escape their grasp. She didn’t have the power to save herself and it was humiliating and distressing. It was like she was Juliet herself, unable to escape her deadly ending.

No. She wasn’t going to go down that route. If Mr. Strickler had his games, then Claire had her words.

“Atlas is going to defeat you,” she spoke, looking Mr. Strickler head on. “You won’t get away with this.”

“Atlas will face his fate in due time, as will you.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

His hold on her arm tightened. “A lone Trollhunter is nothing,” he answered.

Claire pressed him. “And yet you’re scared, aren’t you?”

He threw her a glare. “I’m beginning to think we should have gagged you the moment you came.”

“I hope he kicks your ass first.”

“Do you ever—” He paused, stopping Claire with his arm. His gaze locked on a corner of the hallway, half-hidden by shadows. “Otto, I know you’re there. Show yourself.”

Short repetitious claps answered him. Claire stepped back as a stout balding man in a trench coat emerged from the shadows. It was a stark contrast to his friendly expression.
“Such astuteness,” the man named Otto cheerfully remarked. “I’m impressed, Strickler.”

“Talk the prisoner back to her cell. Keep them under guard until I get back,” Mr. Strickler said, pushing her forward.

He bowed dramatically. “Of course, sir.”

She released a shuddering sigh once she stepped back into the cell. Despite its dingy appearance she felt safer here than she had with Ms. Nomura and Mr. Strickler. When Blinky came to greet her Claire’s legs gave out beneath her.

This was too much. No matter where she looked there was no escape route. Her trip to the bathroom had been all for naught.

Blinky sat down next to her, concern in his inhuman features. “Are you alright, Lady Claire?”

“I’m scared,” she admitted.

“Fear is but the precursor to valor.”

Claire wiped away the wetness in her eyes. “I don’t feel very courageous.”

Blinky’s shoulders lowered. “I wish I could be of more help.”

She brushed her bangs back. Everything today had been more than she’d ever handled in her entire life. If Atlas didn’t save—

Claire pushed the thoughts back once more. There was still a chance. She needed to be strong, if not for herself, then for her baby brother.

But she couldn’t stop the thoughts from emerging every few minutes. Not without help. She needed
a distraction.

She sniffed, brushing her watery nose with a sleeve. “Can you tell me more about Trollmarket?”

“Of course,” he answered, huddling close. “As much as you’d like.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He nodded, eyes gleaming in delight. “Now, where do we start?”

The Trollhunter was insane.

“And that’s it?” Draal said.

Atlas nodded curtly. “Yep.”

By the void. Draal clenched his teeth. How could he not? Of all the stupid things the changeling boy had done, this one was by far the worst. “That’s barely even a strategy. Where are the tactics? I do not like this at all.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my H.R. department your concerns.”

“H.R.? Are those the initials of the fool who sold you this plan of yours?”

The boy ran a hand down his face. “Sarcasm, Draal. Sarcasm.”
“Your humor fails to amuse me, changeling.”

“Oh, trust me, I know,” Atlas deadpanned.

Did the teen not understand the severity of this? Bular was no run-of-the-cave troll. He was a Gumm-Gumm warrior, murderer of his father and several of his predecessors.

And now he had cornered them. Draal should have foreseen this. Bular would kill everyone the boy loved to get the amulet.

They couldn’t afford to lose this battle.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” he stressed. “Why not bring in Vendel and the rest of our warriors?”

“Bringing a bunch of trolls out of Trollmarket to go halfway across town would be impossible to keep quiet,” he explained. “We would be immediately discovered. No, we can’t allow humanity to learn about us. That’s why it has to be me alone.”

Draal resisted the urge to throw something.

If he were the Trollhunter, he would have taken an army to face the bastard and his impure followers. Fought them tooth and horn, then disposed of their corpses into the nearby rivers.

*But he was not one*, Draal thought solemnly.

So he kept his words to himself.

Nevertheless, he couldn’t help but comment, “You are an idiot.”

“Gee, thanks,” Atlas replied dryly.
“You’re welcome.”

“That wasn’t…” Atlas waved his hand in the air. “Never mind.”

The garage may have muffled the rain, but it did not prevent thunder. The walls shook as a particularly large one rolled passed. Draal tensed.

Though he would never admit it, being topside made him…uncomfortable. As a denizen of the night, he spent most of his life beneath the surface, where walls of rock protected him and his brethren from the elements.

As a child he had been fascinated by rain and indeed, the curiosity still lay beneath the surface, but the loudness and ferocity stifled anything more. There was more than one kind of storm in their midst, and Draal didn’t like it. There was too much uncertainty to his liking.

“Are you sure you can do this?” He questioned, motioning to the boy’s bandage. “You appear injured. Bular will take advantage of that.”

Atlas rolled his eyes, pulling off the material with a flick of his wrist. “Look, it’s fine. I’m healed—Ow! Stop that! No touching!”

“Not so healed it appears,” he remarked, removing his hand from the teen’s injury.

Atlas eyed him spitefully, baring his fangs. Draal growled in response. Though he may be Trollhunter, Draal still had enough pride as a full grown troll not to back down from a bloody whelp’s threats.

“Dick,” the boy hissed.

He crossed his arms, not budging from his spot. “Idiot.”

Atlas flicked his tongue against his tusk. “Andrake.”
“Bushmalgi,” Draal retorted.

Instead of rising to the challenge, Atlas’s shoulders sank, expression closed off. Draal looked away.

“Okay, let’s not fight,” Atlas said. “I already have enough on my mind as it is and I don’t need to start another conflict.”

Draal bent his head. Shame bled through his core. His father would be humiliated by how easily he’d been riled up by a child. By the Void, no wonder he lost.

Merlin had chosen Atlas for a reason. Perhaps it was because the boy could walk both sides.

Or perhaps because Draal had not been good enough.

His fists clenched. He would recover his honor one way or another. As long as he lived he would do better—be better—than the Troll he was before.

He swallowed, unable to leave the conversation without saying, “I believe in your strength, but this plan of yours is suicide.”

“Only partially.”

“Do not joke about this, Trollhunter,” he stated roughly. “Your mother will be worried. She already is.”

And, of course, it was her who decided to call him right in the middle of their argument. Draal wished to groan. The device buzzed in the hidden pocket underneath his faulds. Carefully, he withdrew the tiny rectangle piece out of it.

“Whoa!” Atlas drew close, mouth dropping. “No way! Is that what I think it is?”
“She calls it a Galaxy, though I do not know why.” He tilted his head to one side. “How can you fit a universe into a tiny plastic device?” He asked.

Atlas took the phone from his palm, flipping through the screen in a way Draal had yet to master.

The teen released a low whistle. “She got you a cell phone? Sweet Pale Lady, it’s brand new too.”

“I tried to refuse, but she insisted. Your mother is very stubborn.”

“No kidding,” he said, a rare genuine smile spreading across his face. How strange. Draal wasn’t sure he’d ever seen the changeling with such an expression. “She took on Nomura with a shotgun last night.”

Draal scoffed. “Bushigal.”

“It’s true. She’s pretty tough for a human. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as courageous as her before.” His eyes dimmed as realization hit. He handed the phone back to Draal. “But I can’t let her get involved. Not like this. I can’t risk her.”

“She will be angry.”

“Which is why,” he began, pressing his forefinger into Draal’s chest. “She’s not going to find out.”

Draal frowned. “You expect me to lie?”

“I expect you to follow the plan.”

“But I don’t understand. Why do you need to go it alone? There are other ways, other methods—”

“Because this is the only way it will work,” Atlas interrupted, voice strained. “You have to trust me on this, Draal.”
Ah yes, trust. By the void, it took all of his strength to put such a precious belief in the Trollhunter, but he did, despite his reservations.

“I trust you, but I also fear for you. This isn’t like with Nomura or I. Bular is desperate. He will do whatever it takes to win,” he answered, closing his eyes. “You are walking into a den of death. For what? Blinky?”

“And Claire.” He added, “I’d do the same for you.”

Draal blinked. He struggled to control his surprise, choosing instead to focus on the ground beneath him.

“I do not need protecting,” he said in a gruff manner.

“Maybe,” Atlas laughed, knocking his knuckles against Draal’s chest before drifting away. “but I’d still do it for you.”

“You confuse me, changeling. You’re either very brave, or very foolish.”

Atlas lifted a brow then shrugged. “Well, can’t say you’re wrong there. Now, do you remember what you’re gonna tell Toby and AAARRRRGGHH!! when they start to wonder where I am?”

He grumbled out the words.

“Perfect.” Atlas smirked, throwing him a thumbs up. “Make sure mom gets home safely first, okay?”

“On my honor, I swear it.” He motioned a fist to his opposite breast, like his father used to do.

The garage door creaked open. Atlas threw up his head, stepping halfway outside. A gust of wind bellowed his cape underneath him.

Atlas looked back at Draal over his shoulder.
“And, uh,” he scratched his check, leaning his head back. “If anything goes wrong, if it means anything, I hope you're the next Trollhunter. You’d be good at it.”

Draal released a tired sigh.

“And I hope it won't come to that,” he said as Atlas disappeared into the rain once more. “Try and stay alive, young Trollhunter.”

The teen threw him a half-hearted nod. Within seconds he was gone, hopping between rooftops until he disappeared over the horizon.

Draal adjusted his stance.

Time to get to work.
The Battle of Two Bridges (III)

Chapter Summary

Father and son meet once again. Atlas faces his fate.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Thank you for all the lovely kudos, bookmarks and reviews. I truly appreciate it. Reading them helps me get through my finals period. :D Also shoutout to Vici, Charlie, Bloody, and the rest of ya'll who helped me with this chapter. You guys are awesome.

Also huge shoutout to the lovely fanart these lovely artists have done!

Oh my gosh, this is fantastic iced-koffee-kat! Go check out their art ya'll. It's beautiful! :D: https://iced-koffee-kat.tumblr.com/post/184538178698/i-did-some-doodles-of-tunafishprincess-s-atlas

And holy cheese Archinloon! These are fantastic! Oh my gosh, I love them. Guys, Archinloon is an amazing artist. Please follow them. :D: https://archinloon.tumblr.com/post/184486545656/blue-moon-rising-fanart-thank-you-very-much

Thank you all so much. I hope you enjoy the chapter! :D

Atlas crouched at the edge of the building, eyes glued to the museum. He breathed, in and out, trying to control the emotions rising within him.

His phone buzzed. He ignored it. As much as he would like to talk with his mom, he knew she was worried sick about him. He had no doubt Draal had made certain she stayed home. If anything should happen—
Well, he thought with a sad smile, *at least she has that shotgun.*

It was time. Atlas leaped off the ledge. A second later, he landed on the wet concrete, water splashing from the impact. The wind brought in a hint of the nearby dumpster, intermingled with his own stink of fear. With a flick of a wrist he shucked off his hood.

Most of the humans had deserted the area, the heavy rains driving them towards warmer, safer shelters. He envied them. His damp hair hung in clumps against his face, his head wound pounding every time he turned his head.

Atlas couldn’t help but scan the area. Dreary gray buildings rose above him. He looked behind. Dead end. Damn. Seemed he was cornered in more ways than one. As if he needed any reminding. His guilt dogged him the entire way here.

The clocktower struck the hour. Atlas cringed. It rang inside his head in an uncomfortable manner. His ears twitched, flattening against his head. He dug his fingers into his ears for a moment. Fortunately, the chiming ended. The pounding in his head receded.

Just in time too.

Footsteps clacked across the nearby sidewalk. They paused at the entrance to the alley.

A small shudder ran down his spine. He didn’t have to look to know who it was.

Cold eyes overlooked his figure. Even in the rain the man was impeccably dressed, looking more alike to a traveling businessman then the friendly history professor he normally portrayed. Atlas froze. There was no fondness in his features. It was impersonal. Professional. Atlas blanched. Oh sweet Pale Lady, he knew and probably hated him.

He felt like the child he was so many years ago: confused, lost, but most importantly, afraid.

“Atlas,” his father addressed, voice polite and painful. “Or is it James Lake, now?”

He stepped forward. “Dad, I—"
“Stop,” Stricklander ordered in a chilly tone. His hand pulled his all too familiar pen, knuckles white. “Don’t ever call me that again. You are not my son. Not after this.”

His gaze zeroed in on his own, intimidating and soul-sucking—the kind of look Atlas only saw when someone truly crossed him—like Atlas had done.

Not his son.

Atlas bit down on his bottom lip. He knew how serious his actions were, but like most things, the reality was far worse than what he expected.

Not his son.

Was this what a broken heart felt like?

Focus on Claire and Blinky, he thought, focus on the plan.

He couldn’t allow himself to break down. Not yet.

Atlas swallowed, eyes blurring. He wiped it with the back of his hand. “Fine.”

“Change.”

His brows drew together, confusion evident. “What? Why?”

“That information is no longer privy to you. Not after today,” he replied, features controlled and unreadable, as though he were completely unaffected.

Atlas glanced towards the museum. If Nomura and Stricklander knew, then—
“Bular is in there, isn’t he?”

“All important personnel are to be present for Gunmar’s return.”

“Have you told him?”

Stricklander merely stared on.

The pieces began to fit together in his mind’s eye. If Bular didn’t know, then Gunmar sure as hell didn’t either. The Janus Order didn’t want this getting out. They were trying to sweep him under the rug.

Wow.

He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry at the thought.

“Nomura knows. The rest of the Order does too, don’t they?” It made sense. Nothing in the Order stayed secret for long amongst them.

Stricklander shook his umbrella, or perhaps that was merely his hand shaking in anger. Hard to tell since the man wouldn’t give him anything.

It stung. Here he was ready to break down and Stricklander appeared as though it barely fazed him.

“Enough chit-chat, young Atlas,” he said, motioning his head at the building behind them. “Your friends lives hang in the balance.”

Anger ignited in his stomach. Chit-chat? Was that what this was?

He quickly read the incantation, magic swirling around him. His features morphed as the armor incased his body. Moments later, he was once again the Trollhunter. He felt like anything but however.
Stricklander watched. His reaction, or rather, lack thereof, left a bad taste in Atlas’s mouth.

In response, he mocked a bow. “Happy?”

He should have known what would happen. But, like always, he forgot to keep his mouth shut.

Stricklander grabbed his metallic turtleneck, yanking him forward. Atlas tried to move away, but his grip was iron-clad. Golden fury glinted behind his father’s (No, not anymore, his mind whispered) scrutiny.

“How dare you. How could I be happy about this?” He asked, anger leaking through his tone. “Any of this? You were supposed to be my apprentice, and this is how you repay me?” He released a mirthless chuckle. “And now, now you decide to follow my instructions to the letter. At least you're learning, I suppose.”

“Well, you do have my friends’ lives in the balance,” he spat, grabbing Stricklander’s arm. “Kind of hard to say no to that.”

They glared at each other. Finally, Stricklander pulled away, adjusting his grip down to the teen’s upper arm as they began to walk towards the museum.

At least now he knew how the man truly felt. It was somewhat satisfying to see Stricklander frazzled. Atlas wasn’t alone in his feelings.

Stricklander leaned closer, mouth inches from his ear.

“You disappointed me most severely,” he practically hissed.

Atlas cast his gaze to the sidewalk. “I was afraid.”

“I trusted you. I cared for you for years. The time and energy I put into your training and education was insurmountable. I look back and wonder whether it was all for naught.”
He closed his eyes. His heart hammered against his chest. “I never meant for this to happen.”

“I know that,” Stricklander said, voice strained. “But it does not excuse the gravity of your treachery.”

Atlas opened his eyes, vision blurry and pained. “I wanted to tell you. Desperately.”

Sweet Pale Lady, he really did. Ever since he found the stupid amulet he had been tempted by the promise of family Stricklander offered. Making the man happy had been his goal for the majority of his memory, to repay him for letting him live.

But that was before.

Before Atlas learned the true cost of giving up the amulet.

“And yet you still kept it from me,” Stricklander remarked coolly.

His head bobbed, shoulders low. “I didn’t want it to end up like this.”

“And what did you think would happen? You would kill Bular and get rid of the Bridge and all would be well? That trolls would welcome us back in open arms? That somehow we would give up on returning Gunmar to his throne?” He snidely remarked. “That you could have your cake and eat it too? Wake up, boy. This is the real world. Trolls have been killing us for centuries. Do you think they’ll stop because their Trollhunter is one?”

“I wanted to help our people,” he confessed.

Being in Trollmarket had taught him more about intolerance and acceptance more than he ever had at the Order. There was no doubt racism against their kind still existed, but things were changing. If he and his friends could get along, why not others?

Stricklander tightened his hold on his arm. “But you didn’t. Instead, you betrayed us. You betrayed
me. Do you know the kind of humiliation I will suffer? Have suffered? Time and time again I have protected you, stood up for you against your staunchest opponents, because I believed in you. What do you have to say for yourself?"

“They were right,” he mumbled.


“I kept thinking we could rule ourselves, that we could be together, as a people, but I was wrong. None of you want to get better. None of you want to cross that bridge. We’re not good enough for that.” He shook his head. “Vendel and the others were right. Changelings can’t change.”

Lightning streaked across the sky, highlighting the deep shadows in Stricklander’s face. Thunder followed as Stricklander answered in a clipped tone, “We are about to change the world, young Atlas. With, or without you.”

“There’s more to this world than us.”

“And yet, the world doesn’t give a damn about us changelings,” He said, motioning his umbrella in the air, careful not to let the rain hit his hair. “Your logic is faulty. It seems your time as Trollhunter has gone to your head.”

His hands clenched into fists. “Gone to my head? It opened my eyes, showed me what really mattered.”

“Oh, and what’s that, hmm? You’re not going to sell me the power of friendship are you?” He barked a cruel laugh. “Do you honestly believe peace can be achieved through the pacifism those in Trollmarket so like to practice? Their words of praise are fake, just as you are. Your entire identity isn’t even yours. It was us who made you who you are. Everything you are is ours.”

“That’s not true,” Atlas asserted defiantly, even though his mind churned otherwise. “I’m me. I always have been. You may have given me a name and a place, but that doesn’t mean I’m yours.”

Human. Changeling. Troll. Atlas balanced the line between all three.
Or so he thought. Stricklander’s words cut deeper than any knife, reminding him of his fears.

Could he continue being a changeling? No doubt the rest of his kind would reject him. His support system had disappeared, leaving him deeply uncertain about his place in their society, if he was ever part of it in the first place.

Don’t let him get to you, he thought.

“Then who are you, Trollhunter? James Lake or Atlas? Because I’m beginning to wonder.”

“I’m both.” He wished he felt as confident as he sounded with that answer.

Stricklander’s lips stretched into a cruel smile. He tilted his head to the side. “Now, you and I both know that’s not true.”

He was wrong, damn it.

He gulped, mouth dry before responding, “You’re wrong. Blinky showed me what it really means to be a Trollhunter. Toby too. They’re not the bad guys. We don’t have to be either. If we worked together against Bular—”

“And now we’re back to your silly friends and their flattery. How sweet,” he derided in a sickening tone.

“If you’d just listen—”

“Listen to what?” Stricklander leaned forward. “Listen to you prattle on about your newfound humanity? About how peace and love can overcome all? Wake up. It was the humans who hurt you in the first place. It was they who stole your identity, stripped you of your dignity. You were practically feral when we found you. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t even be alive. Was it me? Did I push you into this?”

Atlas mulled over the other’s words. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Did—Did Stricklander seriously think everything was because of him?
He wanted to vomit. It always came back to how his actions related to Stricklander, as though he had no autonomy as a person.

“No,” he said, adding, “This was of my own free will. I hate Bular. I always have.”

Stricklander waved him off. “Bular is an ends to a means. It is Gunmar who truly matters. Why didn’t you just ignore him? All you had to do was keep your head down and say nothing, but you continued to egg him on.”

The dam within him broke. Fury overtook his features.

How dare he.

Stricklander wasn’t the one who had beaten within an inch of his life by the monster. Stricklander hadn’t spent countless hours awake in fear of his brethren sneaking into his room and destroying his possessions, or worse, himself.

It was the first time Atlas truly—truly—understood the man in front of him. His heart seized in pain. The image he had built up came crashing down, leaving behind a grim truth Atlas had ignored for so long.

Atlas cared more about Stricklander than he ever did for him.

Sweet Pale Lady, why hadn’t he seen it?

Atlas smacked a hand against the other’s chest. “Egg him on? Is that what you call abuse?”

“This isn’t a schoolyard, Atlas,” Stricklander commented, removing the teen’s hand.

“No, it’s not is it? You knew, didn’t you?” He accused.
The other’s brows knitted. “Know what?”

“What the other changelings were doing to me?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Atlas shook his head. Gods, he wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. But most importantly, he wanted to punch the man in his fucking face. “Did you really think all my scars are from Bular and my training sessions?”

“What are you trying to say?”

He finally pulled away from the other. Bile rose in his throat. He swallowed it down.

It was like every scar on him had reopened. The words came out without a thought, “Changelings didn’t hide their distaste with me. Why do you think I sleep with a dagger underneath my pillow?”

“You’re lying. None of my agents would do that,” he said angrily. “They are loyal to me.”

“Why is it so hard for you to believe your own brethren don’t give a rats ass about your rules?” Atlas said, voice rising. “Why can’t you just believe what I’m telling you?”

Stricklander growled. He threw the umbrella a top the steps to the museum. His eyes glowed with a rage Atlas had never seen before. “Because you lied to me! How can I trust what you say now after you kept this from me, from all of us?”

“Because I knew you would react like this!” Atlas yelled back.

He turned away. Rain pelted down against his face and shoulders. A few more steps and he would face his destiny.

This had been his greatest fear made reality in more ways then one.
The changeling part of him, the one that Stricklander and the Janus Order had trained and crafted, burned with anger, ready to strike out at his former allies to save his new ones. Everything they taught him was wrong. He wanted to throw it back in their face and show them that he was better—better than all of them combined.

But the human part felt different. He didn’t want to kill anyone, destiny be damned.

This was a battle he could very well lose if he screwed up. It wouldn’t be just his life on the line either; Claire, Blinky, Arcadia—the entire world’s fate depended on him. He couldn’t just defeat Bular. He had to kill him. It was the only way.

It made him sick to his stomach.

“I really wanted to be one of you, you know?” He said softly. “But nothing I did ever changed anything.”

No amount of cooking, cleaning, or sucking up endeared him to the others. He was different, set a part from the others and hated for it. How ironic: the people who were hated by trolls for being “half” hated him for the very same reason.

It wasn’t fair.

Stricklander approached at his side. “You were one of us.”

“Were, huh? Wow. No,” he said, choking up as he realized the truth of the matter. “No, I really wasn’t.”

“It’s only been six years. If you had waited a few more—”

“It wouldn’t have changed. You placed me as your assistant. Even if they stopped hating me for my heritage they would still hate me for my position.”

“So you’re blaming me now?”
“Listen to yourself. This isn’t about you, d—Stricklander.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Maybe if you actually listened to what I said instead of what you want to hear you could understand.”

“All I understand is that you betrayed us and now try to make excuses as for why.”

“No excuses. An explanation. You were the one who wanted to know why. You just don’t like the answers I’m giving you,” Atlas remarked.

“You’ve thought about this for a while, haven’t you?”

Atlas’s response was a half-hearted acknowledgement of the question. “Yes.”

“Were you ever going to reveal yourself to me on purpose?”

Atlas ignored Stricklander’s harsh tone, choosing to address his words instead.

“I—yes. Yes, eventually.”

“And yet you didn’t.”

“There was never a right time.”

“No, there never is, is there?” He sighed. “Fate is a fickle mistress it seems.”

They stood on the top of the staircase in silence. The wind and rain intermixed around them.
Stricklander’s pompadour, despite the weather, continued to defy gravity.

Atlas’s lips twitched. Just as stubborn as his hair was.

Finally, Stricklander rested a hand on his shoulder. Atlas resisted the urge to shuck it off.

“Come, we mustn’t keep the others waiting,” he said. “We have a schedule after all.”

“Are Claire and Blinky in the museum?” Atlas asked, continuing up the steps.

“Yes, unlike you, I am a man of my word.”

Atlas reached the top. Subconsciously, he reached to the amulet at his breast. It hummed, magic swirling inside. No more running away. “Let’s get going then.”

“Wait,” Stricklander said.

His brows rose. “What now?”

A strange expression passed over the man’s face. Atlas couldn’t place it exactly. After fidgeting with his pen, he tucked it into his pocket, clearing his throat along the way. “I cannot say if it will be possible, but when the amulet is placed into the bridge…I could provide a small distraction.”

Atlas froze. He wasn’t actually—

Stricklander looked away.

He was.

“Are you…are you serious right now?” Atlas asked, stunned by the offer.
“If you ran far enough away, there’s a chance you could live. Gunmar won’t come after you immediately. Once he’s returned he’ll have to take care of us subjects and consolidate power within Arcadia. He may even forget you even exist after a while,” he said in a matter-of-fact way, despite the reality being to the contrary.

Did Stricklander hear himself? Was he seriously expecting Atlas to run with his tail between his legs off to Pale Lady knows where?

A month ago, Atlas might have said yes.

But times changed.

And so had he.

“No,” he finally answered.

Stricklander huffed, “You fool. I’m providing you a life, boy. Take it. Place the amulet in the bridge then leave.”

“And what about Claire and Blinky?”

“There will always be casualties in war. Changelings know this. You know this.”

He did. Once upon a time he did. But not anymore. He wasn’t like them. Atlas wasn’t a changeling. Not after this.

Which meant Stricklander was right. He couldn’t just be both anymore.

He had to choose.

“No. That’s not the kind of life I want anymore. I don’t want to spend the rest of my existence hiding
from Gunmar and his armies,” Atlas answered.

“Then you choose death.”

“Wouldn’t you?” He stepped closer to the door.

Stricklander followed. “For what it's worth, I'll make it quick. You won’t... You won’t feel a thing.”

Atlas shook his head. “Don’t. This is my choice. If I’m going to die, I want it to be on my terms, not yours.”

“I see,” he whispered. “If that is the path you wish to take, then I will not stop you.”

“Thank you,” he answered.

“If it helps, when Gunmar rules the surface, I’ll do my best to look after your mother. Keep her away from his ravenous armies,” he said.

“How honorable of you,” Atlas remarked dryly. “She already knows what you are.”

“I assumed. It didn’t take me long to connect the dots once I learned your secret,” he chuckled, “Especially after that tea.”

Atlas threw the changeling a scathing glare. “She won’t back down, she’ll fight you every step of the way.”

“I would expect nothing less of her, especially considering her son.” He sighed, tilting his head back. “It will keep her alive at least.”

Atlas’s hand rested on the door handle. He hesitated. “Da—”
“Don’t. Not now.” They stood at the door. Stricklander took a deep breath before continuing, “It is over. You’ve made your bed. Now you must die in it.”

The doors swung open. Atlas hurried inside, wiping his feet on the entrance rug and ringing the wetness from his hair. He knew it was stupid, but considering the slippery floors it was better safe than sorry. He took his time cleaning himself, Stricklander watching all the while. Probably making sure I won’t make a run for it, Atlas thought. He didn’t need to. Atlas wasn’t going to run away anytime soon.

The doors squeaked. Atlas spoke up, grabbing Stricklander’s attention, “If it’s all the same to you, I would rather you enter in first.”

“As you wish,” he said.

In front of him, the dividing curtains swayed.

He took a deep breath. Showtime.

Atlas leaned forward. Blinky’s voice echoed off the walls, strong and defiant.

“He won’t come, Bular, not without the rest of our army. Let us go or fear the wrath of Trollmarket!” His faithful teacher asserted.

A pang of guilt rattled Atlas’s frame, but he continued his march. In a flash of a second Stricklander transformed, the shadow of his changeling shape overtaking Atlas’s own. He pushed the curtains aside.
“Can someone please make him stop? He’s been saying this for hours,” Nomura groaned. Her ears twitched, gaze falling to their direction. “Ah, so the prodigal son return.”

“Shut up, Nomura,” Stricklander snapped.

Bular emerged from behind the bridge, lips pulled back into a disgruntled frown.

Atlas tensed. It was a subconscious reaction, memories of his experiences with the troll rising to the forefront once more. With difficulty, he stuffed down the feeling, placing his focus on the area around Bular.

How many times had he been here? As a child, he had walked the corridors at night, cleaning after the goblins and admiring the tapestries on the wall. Not so long ago he even napped in the rafters during quieter nights, comforted by the sound of snoring goblins (and the occasional security guard).

Now, the room felt overwhelmingly large and unfamiliar. Several artworks had been removed from the walls to make way for the main attraction: Killahaed Bridge.

Atlas shuddered. Even inactivated it felt distinctly wrong. Though he saw no magic, his amulet pulsed within his chest, as though to warn him of its ominous nature.

His gaze lifted. Above the bridge, Claire and Blinky hung from the ceiling, bundled back to back in a heavy amount of rope. *Fuck, that’s gonna be a bitch to remove,* he realized.

Of course they would make it harder for him. It wasn’t as though they expected the Trollhunter to live after all.

Blinky’s yelling was cut short with a deep groan. The troll swung back and forth, dismay evident. “You—why did you not heed my warning? Where are the rest of our warriors? Surely you did not come alone?”

Atlas strode forward. A sharp frown emerged as he noticed how banged up they were, especially Claire. He tried to smile, remarking in a soft tone, “It was the only way I could make sure both of you were safe. Besides, we got that Vespa we need to finish, right? Can’t let you die yet, Blinky. You’re useful to have around.”
“Now is not the time to crack jokes,” Blinky warned.

Atlas locked eyes with Claire. “You okay?”

Her clothes had seen better days, the bottoms ragged and caked with mud from the prior night’s activities. A mixture of purple and red bruises adorned her neck and left cheek. Atlas bit down on his inner cheek. She turned her head slightly, the red irritated skin of her scalp standing out against the rest of her hair.

He saw red.

“Yeah,” she croaked, giving him a half-smile. “How’s your head?”

“Good.” To emphasize his point, he knocked on his head with a fist. It was a struggle not to wince. “I’m pretty hard-headed.”

She giggled. The tightness in his heart loosened. Even wounded she was beautiful.

Nomura groaned, “Ew. That’s disgusting. Enough flirting. Open the bridge.”

Atlas clenched his jaw. “No. Cut them down first. I brought the amulet. That was our deal.”

“Open the Bridge,” Bular commanded, striding forward, one hand reaching towards the blade at his back. “I will not ask again.”

His gaze flickered towards the door. His heart hammered, blood rushing to his ears. In the corner of his eye, he saw Stricklander shuffle his feet, no doubt realizing his mistake. Once Atlas took off the Amulet, Bular would know.

Good. Atlas no longer cared about keeping his little secret anymore. Stricklander should have been more specific in his demand. It brought a rush of bitter satisfaction he got one up on the asshole.
Finally, Atlas began his trek up to the Bridge, walking onto the wooden platform they’d laid out. Halfway, a familiar face poked his head out, hobbling over with a sheepish look on his face.

“Sorry, kid. It’s business, ya know?” The changeling motioned his hand at the other in a grabbing gesture. “Now. Gimme your phone.”

Atlas pulled it out, throwing it at his muppet-looking mug. He caught it, playing around with the controls before sticking it in his diaper.

“NotEnrique?” Atlas narrowed his eyes. “You little fucking traitor.”

“That’s the thing that replaced my baby brother?” Claire said, disgust in her features.

NotEnrique scowled.

“Goo, goo, gah, gah, sis,” he mocked, returning his attention towards Atlas. “Anyways, no hard feelings, mate. Gotta stick with my kind. Better for everyone, ya know?”

He crouched down, remarking darkly, “So you’ll let them kill Claire to further your agenda?”

It was quick, but a look of surprise flickered over NotEnrique’s features. He quickly schooled it back to his usual lax expression though.

“Move,” Stricklander barked, pushing him forward. “Get on with it.”

“Don’t do this!” Blinky begged. “If you release Gunmar and his Gumm-Gumm army, you will be unleashing a reign of darkness upon us all! There will be no coming back from this. The world will not survive Gunmar's reign! This is suicide. Think about Trollmarket! Your friends! Your own mother! Please. I trained you better than this! Master A—”

Nomura slammed the butt of her khopesh into his chin. “You. No talking.”

“Get on with it,” Bular said impatiently.
He nodded. There was no escaping here. The trade had been a rouse, not that Atlas hadn’t known that the moment he agreed to the deal. Blinky was right; going in alone was suicide.

Atlas turned his head, mere feet away from the eyestone. “I have one last thing to say to Stricklander.”

“No, we can’t—”

“Make it quick, Trollhunter,” Bular remarked curtly.

Atlas zeroed in on his former father figure. “In your history class, you asked about how Napoleon failed, but no one answered except you.”

“Can you hurry this up?” Nomura interrupted, tapping her wrist. “I did not sign up for a high school history rehash.”

“But your answer was wrong,” Atlas continued.

Stricklander threw him a calculated look. “Oh, and why’s that?”

Atlas turned around, facing the group. “Napoleon didn’t lose because of malaria. I mean, it was one reason for it, but it wasn’t the only one. You forgot to tell the class about the most important one. Napoleon lost because Britain had allies, ones who would stand up against him, no matter how dire the odds. Napoleon underestimated how powerful people could be when they came together.”

Stricklander gaped. His eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. Atlas couldn’t help but relish the rare expression. “You didn’t.”


“Oh fuck,” Nomura yelped, scrambling to her feet.
A series of crates fell. The shuffling of several feet soon followed.

Stricklander glared, tusks bared. “But you said—”

“It’s just like you said, dad.” Atlas said, spite leaking through. “I lied.”

Several things happened at once. First, to no one’s surprise, Bular roared, slamming his fists to the ground. Second, in what Atlas could only describe as a movie-like sequence, Toby rode in on AAARRRGHH!!’s back, waving a smiling sun-painted shovel in the air. The boy’s makeshift armor was a tad strange (why did he have a stereo strapped to his chest? Atlas immediately resolved to find him some actual protection if they lived through this) the message was clear: they weren’t going down without a fight.

“The British are coming! The British are coming!” He said excitedly, “Always wanted to say that.”

Draal came through the curtains a moment later, shaking his head. “Was that truly necessary?”

“It fit the mood, dude,” Toby answered.

“You said the Trollhunter was alone,” Bular growled, gesturing his fist at Stricklander. “What is the meaning of this Stricklander?”

Atlas materialized his sword. “Not anymore.”

Oh thank Pale Lady. The plan worked. He and Toby came up with it in the morning. The entire time he had been sweating bullets the moment he entered through the museum’s doors. Dumb luck, he thought, since they’d only had minutes, if not seconds, to act. The sound of the storm outside and capturing Stricklander’s attention had given them the tools necessary to sneak inside.

In all honesty, he was surprised Stricklander hadn’t caught him beforehand.

After all, it was he who taught him about the story of the Trojan Horse.
“We’re the Trollhunters,” Toby announced. “Plural. As in, more than one.”

Nomura hissed.

“Let friends go,” AAARRRGGHH!!! warned.

“I—Get them!” Stricklander yelled. “Do not let the Trollhunter escape!”

Atlas moved before anyone else. His blood pumped wildly through his veins. The battle was the acclamation of everything he was; all his time at the Order, in the Forge, under Draal’s tutelage—he channeled it all right into his right fist, cold cocking NotEnrique straight in the jaw. Smack! The changeling flew, landing on a group of goblins. The resulting squish was music to Atlas’s ears. Satisfaction flowed through him.

Atlas grinned.

It was on.
The Battle of Two Bridges (IV)

Chapter Summary

The battle rages forth. Killahaed is destroyed, but at what cost?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Big thanks to Charlie for helping me with it. Also a shoutout to everyone who has commented, kudoed, and bookmarked this story. You guys are amazing.

Also if you speak Spanish check out Blue Moon Rising in Spanish! Chapter One is up and translated by the lovely Dearsayas. :D

Another shoutout to all the lovely fanartists! Wow, you guys are amazing! sdfhalsdjkfksakfslfk!!!! Thank you!

Lost-Paracosm, you are amazing, holy cheese! I love this comic you did of Chapter 53. I'm so honored you did a comic of my fanfic. I did a little squeal when I saw it. Guys, go check it out, it's seriously awesome. :D :https://lost-paracosm.tumblr.com/post/184681777254/blue-moon-rising-ch-53-was-amazing-i-cant-wait

Also check out Lianu's lovely fanart of Atlas! I really love your take on him! Go check out Lianu's other art too. Here's a link: https://trollkidempora.tumblr.com/post/184680124437/heres-some-fanart-for-
tunafishprincess-s

Another beautiful fanart from the awesome Fiona! Wow, this is awesome! I love that you gave him a fluffy tail. he looks adorable! This is also from chapter 53 ya'll. Love your interpretation. Go check out the awesome artist and work here: https://fiona-shreksalot.tumblr.com/post/184634138046/never-made-it-as-a-wise-man-i-couldnt-cut-it-as

Also commissioned the absolutely brilliant Daedradragon. Their account is kind of wonky right now but go check them out. Their art is stellar. Seriously. I've made it my new fanfic cover too. I'm seriously in love with how detailed and beautiful it is. Please commission them if you can. :D Here's a link to the post: https://tunafishprincess.tumblr.com/post/184674386111/tunafishprincess-art-commission-by-daedradagon
“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second!” Toby’s voice split through the commotion. To Atlas’s surprise, everyone paused, likely stunned by the small human’s declaration. Not for long however. Bular slowly edged forward.

His friend slid off AAARRRGGHH!!!’s back then raised his shovel into the air, his other hand set against the smartphone strapped to the strange chest armor he sported.

_Oh Sweet Pale Lady_, Atlas realized in dawning horror, _that wasn’t armor._

Who the hell thought it was a good idea to give his best friend an ancient boombox for protection? And on that matter why did he have a cooking pot for a helmet?

Atlas threw a look back. Meters away, NotEnrique released a pitiful groan. Atlas knew with one hundred percent certainty the goblins would begin to throw themselves into a frenzy soon enough.

The other boy cleared his throat.

“_I am Toby!”_ His friend announced, voice lowered as much as possible in an attempt to be dramatic, Atlas suspected. “Grandson of Nana, Video Game Enthusiast, the Hammer of Justice, the Bringer of Pain, Sunlight’s champion…Uh, I kinda forget the rest of what I was going to say.” He slammed the butt of the shovel down against the ground. “Anyways, let’s rock this joint!”

He clicked the phone with a sharp tap of his forefinger. Right away, a familiar song filtered through the museum, though going by Toby’s face it wasn’t the one he wanted.
“You know what,” Toby said, nose scrunching up as his head nodded to the beat. “Not first choice, but this fits. Yeah, we’re gonna rock your ass!”

Several feet away Atlas heard Nomura scoff.

“Of all the fucking songs,” she muttered, striking her blades together. Her gaze zeroed in on Atlas. Sweat dripped from his temple. If looks could kill.

He swallowed, throat suddenly dry.

Bular was undeterred by the 90s music streaming through the hall. Instead, he roared, “Enough of this. Kill them all!”

Nomura lunged towards him first. Before she could make a hit however, AAAARRRGGGH!!! pushed her aside, sending her flying. She released a litany of curses in reply.

Atlas tried to keep his eyes on the group of them, but everyone was separating into their own fights. He barely dodged a rogue goblin, smashing his blade into its side like a baseball bat. It volleyed over the group, landing directly behind Nomura who—

Oh.

Ew. The goblins abandoned their trek to NotEnrique immediately. Nomura realized a frustrated yell, which only served to drive more goblins towards her. A chorus of Waka-Chakas resounded.

He turned away. Focus on what’s in front of you, he thought. Nevertheless, the chaos of battle shook Atlas out of his stance. Everywhere he looked someone needed his help. He tried to make a mad dash towards Claire and Blinky, only to be flung away by a dark blur.

His back slammed into the bridge. Atlas choked, struggling to catch his breath. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The side of his chest screamed in agony. Did he break a rib?
As his vision cleared he saw his assailant, wide and powerful in ways Atlas could never be. Bular licked his lips. He crackled his knuckles, looking at Atlas less like an opponent and more like an after-dinner snack.

Old Atlas would have been terrified. Now, the arrogant power only served to push Atlas over the edge.

It was like someone broke the chains of fear holding him back. He rose to his feet, despite the aches it seemed to produce. Time slowed as his heart paced, faster and faster until he lost count.

Son of Gunmar or not, Bular was a troll, and if there was one thing Atlas was certain of right now, it was that he was the Trollhunter.

His body flowed like liquid, eyes trained on the other like a hawk. It was as if his predecessors were fueling his soul, muscles anticipating Bular’s second blow without a second thought. For a moment, he blinked, eyes wide (holy shit, was he actually doing this? Could he really fight Bular one-on-one now?), before he returned to the thick of battle, analyzing the troll’s next strikes, taking in their measure, their strength, their speed. The amulet pulsed, light almost blinding as his attack grew stronger.

Bular flint left then dove forward into a roll. Atlas did a half-pirouette at the last second. Glass shattered as the troll smashed into a display case.

He breathed, in and out, keeping his pulse steady. He couldn’t afford to lose concentration. This would be their final battle, and like hell was Atlas going to lose. This was his stand, his first against the strength of his enemy, and no one was going to take this victory away from him, not even Gunmar himself.

Bular’s face was the picture of anger and surprise. No matter how many blows he unleashed, Atlas evaded. When he grabbed Atlas’s foot and threw him the teen used the momentum to bounce back, landing on the monster’s back and swiped sideways, earning a roar from the other.

A long gash opened, Atlas’s first blood.

He grinned in a feral manner.
Claire yelled. Atlas looked up. Goblins were on top of the bridge, crawling to the two hostages with hungry smiles.

Unfortunately, the distraction allowed Bular to gain his own blow, throwing Atlas off into a terracotta statue display. He grunted on landing. The ceramic cut his skin, but it didn’t matter. He rolled, dodging one of Bular’s kicks.

There was nothing left to hold back. Their blades clashed, sparks flying as they slid against each other. Of the two warriors, it was Bular who regained his footing first, forcing Atlas back. But Atlas was not without a few tricks up his sleeves. Pivoting with his left foot, he twisted his wrist and broke free of the struggle, slipping underneath the other and to the others side of the exhibition hall.

“You’ve gotten better, Trollhunter,” he growled, a touch of respect in his tone. “I’ll enjoy sucking on your bone marrow most thoroughly.”

“What is it with you and eating me?” Atlas yelled, waving his hand in the air. “Do you do that with all your enemies?”

He barely blinked before the troll was directly in front of him. His eyes widened. Fuck! A hairs breath separated him from Bular’s sword. Atlas would have been dead if it wasn’t for another’s intervention.

“Do you not remember what I said? Distractions will get you killed, Trollhunter,” Draal said gruffly. He backhanded Bular, earning him a deep growl.

“But—”

“Focus,” Draal said, stance shifting as Bular got back up. “You said you wanted to save them didn’t you?”

He nodded. It felt cowardly, but he knew he couldn’t take on Bular for long, not like Draal could. Atlas slipped behind the other as Draal blocked Bular from going after him.

“Out of my way, trash,” Bular snarled.
“I am not trash,” Draal roared back, pushing Bular into the stone of the bridge. “I am Draal the Deadly, Son of Kanjigar.” He leaned forward and bared his tusks. In a low growl, he added, “And you will know my fury.”

Atlas looked over his shoulder. Hot damn. He wished he could sound that cool. Sadly, Atlas didn’t have time to listen to the rest. A scream tore through the air. His blood ran cold. He knew that voice.

He rushed towards the noise. It wasn’t long before he found the scene.

Toby held his face, crouched down as red streamed from his face. Above him, Stricklander twirled his knife, shortly thereafter affixing it back into his cloak.

His stomach clenched. A ball of rage began to build, threatening to spill out at his former father’s actions.

“Toby Domzalski,” Stricklander sighed. “Did you think you could win this? You are in over your —”

He dodged Atlas’s down-slash by a mere inch, his cloak billowing behind him as he landed several feet away.

Stricklander straightened his back, pupils narrowing into thin slivers.

An uneasy pressure began to build, but Atlas ignored it in favor of his friend.

Anything else than to look the bastard in the eyes. Judging him, analyzing him, as though he were the one in the wrong.

He reached down, pulling Toby to his feet. “You okay? How bad is it? Let me see.”

“It’s fine, dude,” Toby remarked, smearing the blood and tears from his eyes. “There. Happy?”
He released a small sigh of relief. It would scar, but he hadn’t lost anything. Yet.

If only his mom were here.

Immediately, he pushed the thought away. No. It was too dangerous.

“Trollhunter,” Stricklander declared frostily, raising his dagger. “Care to dance?”

“Lay off,” he spat.

“It was you who brought this on yourself, boy.” He paused, jaw clenched. He looked towards the chaos around them before fixating once more on him. “Now both of you must face the consequences.”

Atlas bit down on his inner cheek. Stricklander was right. Both of them were in this together.

Wait.

Both of them.

He smiled as an idea hit him.

His mouth moved to Toby’s right ear. He whispered, “Tobes, you remember that move we practiced in the Forge?”

“Which one?” His good eye widened. “Oh. Oh! Yes! Hell yes! Now?”

“Wait for my signal,” he answered, switching the sword over to his other hand.

Stricklander snorted, drawing two more blades from his cape. “I’ll give you boys an A for effort, but you’re about to fail this exam.” His eyes narrowed. “Give up now and I’ll make both your deaths
painless.”

Atlas dashed forward.

“Up high!” He yelled.

One, two, three—he swung the Sword of Daylight around like a club then releasing it once he got close enough. As expected, Stricklander jumped over the sword, landing gracefully on the floor like a cat.

In the background, the chorus of male voices on Toby’s music player reached a crescendo. The boyband were in their final stanzas.

“Poor form,” he tutted. “Didn’t I teach you better than that—"

“Down low!” Toby yelled, appearing behind the changeling. With the end of his shovel he struck Stricklander directly below the belt.

The effect was instantaneous. Stricklander’s eyes grew wide. A high pitched groan soon left his lips. In a flash, he crumpled to the floor.

“Backstreet’s back, Mr. Strickler!” Toby said, kicking him in the groan once more for good measure.

Atlas pulled him back. “Let’s go. The fight isn’t over yet.”

“Rule Number Three is a terrible power,” Toby said between breathes.

Atlas adjusted the other boy’s helmet. The bleeding had slowed, but Toby’s face was white with exhaustion. He frowned. They wouldn’t be able to keep this up much longer. Draal was right. They needed to focus on the objective: getting Claire and Blinky out of here.

He sent Stricklander's body one last look before throwing a soft punch in Toby’s shoulder. Even in the midst of battle the boy brought a smile to his face. “Nice dodge by the way.”
Toby rubbed it gingerly before playfully answering in kind. “Had to learn sometime, right?”

“Looks like my teaching paid off after all,” he joked.

Toby pressed his lips together as though he had eaten something sour.

“You get Blinky and Claire,” Atlas said. “I need to take down the others.”

They still had Bular and Nomura left. Astonishingly, they hadn’t brought anyone else from the Janus Order. Did Bular or Stricklander have a hand in that? Atlas wondered what that could mean, but pushed the thought into the back of his mind. It didn’t matter now. He had to take control of this situation—and going by the look of Draal’s fight—soon.

“Wingman,” Toby yelled, letting out a sharp whistle. The troll bounded onto the scene, hip checking a pair of goblins into an old tapestry. “On me! Alley-oop!”

AAARRRRGGHH!!! scooped him up then threw him like a softball. Toby soared, smacking into Claire and Blinky with a resounding thump. All three groaned.

Pink claws flashed in the corner of his vision. Atlas ducked. They glanced across his cheek.

The smell of goblin permeated from her form. Atlas took a step back.

Nomura withdrew her blades. Atlas blocked her first attack, but her kick pushed him over to the bridge.

He’d hesitated. Damn it. Despite the bad blood between them, Atlas really didn’t want to fight her—fight any of them (with the exception of Bular).

“Nomura, please. Don’t make me hurt you,” he urged.
“Hurt me? It’s my turn to hurt you, Trollhunter,” she snarled. “I’ve been waiting all day for this moment.”

A familiar voice tore through the air. “You will not touch him, Impure!”

Nomura growled but she couldn’t evade Draal’s attack. The momentum threw her into an ancient Greek pottery exhibit.

Atlas cringed. As if they needed to piss her off even more.

“Draal, you okay?” He asked as he ran over.

The Troll nodded but even Atlas could see the weariness in his stance. Bular’s blades had nicked more than one place on him. He rested on one knee, one arm cradled close to his body.

“I thought I told you to rescue the others,” he grumbled.

“Toby’s on it,” Atlas answered. “Now we just gotta get out of here and—”

Immense pain gripped him. Something huge seized his waist. Atlas cursed. He broke out into a cold sweat as Bular’s breath tickled his neck.

Shit.

Draal tried to get up but Bular smashed the flat side of his blade into the troll’s back.

“I have spent centuries trying to free my father,” Bular growled. Atlas wheezed as he squeezed tighter. “I will not let some fleshbag and his little friends ruin this.”

“Trollhunter!” Draal roared. He tried to follow but Nomura blocked his path.
“Just you and me now, Draal. Care to rekindle what we had?” She sneered.

“Out of my way,” he replied.

Atlas tried to thrash around, but Bular’s grip was steel. His heartbeat quickened. This was bad. Desperately, he shouted, “Forget about me. Get the others and run, Draal!”

His face met wall. Atlas coughed as the taste of copper emerged. His nose and cheek ached from the abuse.

Bular crawled up the side of the bridge, swinging Atlas over to the top. He hissed as he landed hard on his side. Everything hurt.

“You have no idea the agony I have suffered, the humiliation I have experienced,” Bular said, grasping Atlas’s hand and pressing his fingers into his chest plate, where his amulet sat.

Atlas squirmed. Oh no. Shit! Panic gripped his heart. They had been so close. His gaze traveled to the side. He couldn’t see Claire and Blinky anywhere. He hoped that meant they had gotten free.

Unfortunately, that did little to help his own situation. Bular continued to force his hand into the amulet. It blinked, power pulsating in a way Atlas knew quite well now.

“You Trollhunters took everything away from me!” Bular said in a low tone, eyes tight and burning. “Enough. No longer. This. Ends. Now.”

He dragged the teen over the edge. With a rough grunt, the amulet broke free of his armor, and with it, Atlas’s human appearance.

Alarm laced his being. He could feel the blood drain from his face as Bular took in his expression.

“You,” he growled, eyes narrowing. “It was you.”
“No, no, no,” Atlas uttered as the amulet sunk into the bridge.

The scent of Magic coated the top of his mouth. Killahead began to glow as the amulet whirled to life.

“Be honored, half-breed. You are the lucky few who shall witness my father’s return,” Bular spoke, voice filled with reverence.

His fingers loosened. Atlas used the disruption to hook his legs around the other’s arms then twisting out of the troll’s grip. Big mistake. Bular noticed and, in one fell swoop, threw him halfway across the room.

It was only a few moments, but it felt like an eternity. Bular’s cruel grin, the sense of defeat, the shaking room—they’d lost.

Gunmar would return. They had failed.

Unexpectedly, his landing wasn’t hard museum linoleum but hard cool rock. Atlas grunted as Draal carefully placed him to the floor.

“He’s got the amulet,” Atlas wheezed.

“Nothing can stop his return now,” Nomura said as she limped towards them. “Give up.”

Draal’s face grew serious. He looked between Atlas and the amulet. His jaw became set, shoulders rising with every breath. “No.”

He took a step forward. Atlas struggled to sit up.

“Draal! No! It’s too dangerous!” Atlas called out. Carefully, he got to his feet. They needed to run, escape, get Claire, Blinky, Toby, and AAARRRGHHH!!! away from here.

He tried to follow but the vortex had grown stronger, sucking in anything in its path.
Looking over his shoulder, Draal threw him a bitter smile. “I made a vow, Trollhunter. I intend to keep it.”

Fear splintered his heart.

Draal turned, making a running leap for the keystone. A vortex of energy began to whirl at the center of the bridge, sucking in anything in its path.

All hell broke loose.

The museum began to shake as bits and pieces of it were sucked in. Wood and plaster rained down as the scaffolding for the bridge broke down. Atlas nearly lost his footing too. Had he been any closer, he knew it would have been his end.

In the outermost corner of his eye, he spotted long raven hair.

“Nomura!” Atlas yelled. He caught her hand midair. Locking his legs into one of the fallen stone columns, he tried to bring her closer but the force of the magic was too much. He could feel his grip slipping.

Her eyes narrowed. “Let me go, Trollhunter,” she demanded, though her heart wasn’t in it. She sounded defeated, voice softer than he had ever heard from her before. Her ears sat low, something he’d not seen from her in a long while.

A cascade of emotions passed through him. Even though she hated him, he couldn’t feel the same way.

He shook his head at her response, his mind set. He couldn’t lose her. Not here. Despite the things they’d done to each other, there had to be another way. There just had to.

“We can choose our fates, Nomura,” Atlas stressed. “We don’t have to follow Gunmar. We can build our own world. And…I want you in mine.”
“I kidnapped your girlfriend and beat you within an inch of your life,” she snapped, gaze guarded and brittle.

“We’re changelings. That’s like, every Tuesday for us,” he joked, eyes wet.

She let out a soft chuckle. Her gaze flickered downwards. “You’re such a stupid idealist. Honestly don’t know why I put up with you.”

“Please,” he squeezed her slipping hand, desperately trying to hold on. “Nomura.”

Her mouth softened, or at least Atlas thought it did. Sweet Pale Lady, he hoped so. Please don’t let go, he thought.

It would be hard, but they could make this work. Trollmarket had accepted him. Maybe if he got her a job selling pottery down there she could be accepted. Sure, it was a long shot, but Trollmarket was changing. He could figure it out. They could figure it out. All he needed was for her to hold onto his hand.

Atlas swallowed, ears flung back.

He didn’t want to lose her.

Not here.

Not now.

“It’s almost cute how much you care, even after I tried to kill you,” she sighed. “You always were the most human of us, blood aside.”

Her grip began to loosen. His fingers tried to locked into her own, but all her hand continued to slip out of his own.

“Just hold on,” he yelled.
“You’re right about one thing. We can choose our fates,” she said, giving him a dry smile. He tried to tighten his grip, but she dug her nails into his skin. A warning. “And this is mine. Goodbye, Peer Gynt.”

She kicked his hand. He let go.

He let go.

Atlas screamed.

She descended into the void, eyes never once leaving his own. Atlas grasped his chest. Darkness swallowed her form.

He let her go. If only he had held on longer. If only—

“Damn it. Fuck!” He groaned, pounding his fist into the rock. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

How had he ever thought this was a good idea? He had doomed earth to Gunmar on some stupid childish gamble.

Silt and rubble pounded against his back. He crouched down. His eyes were moist and blurry, but that did not block him from seeing the bridge in its full and horrendous glory. Draal’s spiky back could not contain the light emitting from the amulet, glowing brighter and brighter with every second passed. What was happening?

His shoulder rose. Was this still salvageable?

He tried to move, but his feet slipped. Suddenly he was sliding across the floor, edging closer to the portal. Whatever magic that created the portal, it was potent and heavy, coating his mouth and sliding down his throat in an uncomfortable manner. The best he could relate it to was ozone or rotten eggs, but even that did not describe the enormity of it.
A heavy body crashed into him. They rolled. His head cracked against the side of the Bridge.

Woozily, Atlas looked up, nose flaring as he realized who had saved him.

“Stay down,” he growled, accent thick and warning.

“Da—“He coughed, wincing. “Stricklander? What are you doing?”

The changeling regarded him with a cool glare before turning his attention back to the bridge. Draal had a foothold. His hand was inside the keystone. *Holy shit,* he thought, *he’s doing it.*

“What a mess you’ve created, Young Atlas,” he sighed. His hand reached out, forefinger a hair’s width away from his bangs before he pulled back, chest rising as he did so. “For what it’s worth, I’m —”

Draal roared. The magic pulsed, spreading across the floor. The troll was launched backwards by the force of it.

Elation filled him. They did it!

The Bridge rumbled ominously.

It was the last thing he remembered before the world came tumbling down.

A dust-cloud settled atop the remains of Killahead Bridge. The structure collapsed, the magic that once imbued gone like the portal itself.
Atlas licked his upper lip. Dirt, blood, and grime met his tongue. The air was thick with debris and visibility wasn’t much better.

But that didn’t matter.

He sucked in a sharp breath.

Alive.

He was alive.

A moment later he exhaled. Oh thank Pale Lady. His plan worked.

Claws scrambled for purchase against the rocky terrain. As he found his footing so too did he find the girl he came for.

Shades of gray blanketed her hair and shoulders yet Atlas had never seen someone more beautiful. She stopped midway, the rock in her hands falling to the floor with a soft click. A moment later and her arms were around him, head burrowed into his chest. He settled his face against her hair, breathing in her scent. She was alive too.

“Are you hurt?” He asked, tilting her head up.

“No, no. I’m fine. Toby cut us loose. What about you? I saw the Bridge fall on top of you,” she said, hands searching his body.

He chuckled, hissing as the move brought a sharp pain to his side. “It’s okay.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Well, it will be.” He gave her a small shrug. “Eventually.”
Her fingers tightened against the sides of his cloak. “Where’s Mr. Strickler?”

“He was shielding me,” he confessed.

She searched his eyes.

“Are you sure?” She asked in a dubious tone.

“I—” His mouth thinned into a sharp line. Wasn’t he?

Stricklander had never been someone who did any action out of the kindness of his heart. There was always an ulterior motive.

But what if it wasn’t?

His attention turned to the place from which he’d woken up. Sweat developed at his brow.

He climbed over the rubble, clawing at the broken rocks. “Where is he? He should be here.”

Stricklander had been right there. Atlas remembered the man covering him. Did he get up before him? Was he tossed somewhere else?

His throat grew dry.

Was he under the rubble? What if he was suffocating?

Goosebumps rode up his arms.

What if he was already dead?
“Maybe he went through the bridge,” Claire supplied.

Atlas shook his head. He pushed the rocks apart, looking for any shred of evidence of the man’s presence. “I don’t know. I was with Nomura and then she got sucked into the portal. Fuck. No, no, no. He’s here. He was right around here.” His voice softened into a whisper. “He has to be.”

First Nomura and now Stricklander.

His heart ached, throbbing as the loss became more of a reality. Were they really gone?

A small hand grasped his shoulder. He glanced up.

“Atlas…We need to find the others,” Claire said softly.

“Right.” He swallowed, jaw clenched. “Of course.”

The dust had begun to settle, giving Atlas a view of the destruction they had caused. Most of the museum’s structure was undamaged (save for some unfortunate walls) but many of the displays were destroyed, priceless artifacts lost to time because of their battle.

It wasn’t long before they located the first and admittedly the worst hurt of their crew. Atlas struggled not to flinch. A ball of guilt formed in his chest.

Draal had, admittedly, seen better days. Scratches adorned his body, as well as more than a few deeper wounds from Bular’s blades. That wasn’t the worst however. His forearm was crumbling, breaking off into lifeless pieces to reveal the treasure he protected with his life.


The troll’s eyes fluttered. His lips tucked upwards.

“I’d hand you the amulet, but,” he groaned. “That doesn’t seem possible anymore.”
Claire gasped.

Gently, Atlas retrieved the device, cradling it between his fingers. “Thank you, Draal.”

Thank the Pale Lady he didn’t lose Draal too. It surprised him how relieved he felt that the troll was amongst the living.

Atlas paused. Was it really a surprise? Draal had implanted himself into Atlas’s life, taking care of his mother and saving him more than once from death. The arrogant asshole had grown on him.

Atlas couldn’t help but snort. Who would have thought?

Four arms enveloped him from behind. He froze under the touch for a moment before relaxing as the troll’s voice rang out, “Master Atlas, you’re alive!”

He turned, returning the gesture. By the void, he thought he had almost lost him too.

“Blinky,” he acknowledged warmly.

AAARRRGGHH!!! and Toby joined the group from the side, the later leaning against the other for support.

“Alive,” AAARRRGGHH!!! said with a large grin.

Blinky pulled back from the boy, two hands resting on his shoulders while the other two smooshed his cheeks together. “I never doubted you for a moment. Fretted yes, but I always believed you would pull through. Leading the others in while you distracted them. Foolish, yet brilliant. Why, I dare say it brings to mind Strauser’s move from A Brief Recapitulation: Volume—”

“Uh, guys?” Toby squeaked.

The ground shook. Bular’s eyes showed like hot coals against the fallen remains of the bridge.
Atlas gulped.

Blinky advised, “Master Atlas, I do believe it is time to run.”

“Find escape,” AAARRRGGHH!!! remarked, frantically searching the floor.

“You,” Bular accused, rising from the rocks like a demented phoenix.

“Oh, fuck me,” Atlas groaned.

AAARRRGGHH!!! soon presented their exit strategy. The stench of the sewers reached their noses.

“Ew,” Claire muttered, holding her mouth.

“I’m not gonna jump in the sewer!” Toby argued, waving his hands. “Who knows what kind of things are down there. For all we know, Gators could eat us. There’s gotta be some other way!”

“Half-Breed!” Bular roared.

Toby’s eyes widened. “On second thought, Geronimo!”

The teen hit the water, making a big splash.

Blinky followed, AAARRRGGHH!!! picking Draal up off the floor to join him. “Onwards, friends!”

“Hold onto me, Claire,” Atlas said, grasping her waist as he leaped into the hole.

Darkness once more. The impact nearly blinded him. His face tingled from the sting of smacking
against the rushing water. It chilled his bones, thrashing him around like a leaf.

Atlas struggled to hold on tight. Claire’s fingers dug into his shoulders. He could barely make her out beneath the water. Soon, even Claire slipped from his hands, pushed into the others by the raging current while Atlas headed further downstream.

The last of his oxygen left his mouth. His chest heaved.

Air. He needed air. It felt like an eternity of tumbling and twisting before he met the exiting tunnel.

Atlas gasped as his lips met the surface. His lungs burned. The Arcadian sunset had appeared once more, warming his cheeks with its presence. The canals. He was in the canals. The crossing bridge came into view seconds later.

He swam towards it with as much energy as he could muster, his hands grasping at the metal beams that supported it.

After a few tries he finally pulled himself out of the water. His limbs shook with exhaustion. Water clung to his hair and armor, weighing him down. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to find some semblance of awareness. Sweet Pale lady, what a day. His body ached like a huge bruise. His side throbbed to the beat of his heart. Atlas winced. Broken ribs most likely.

But his day wasn’t over yet.

“It was you, “ a voice began. Bular glared from the shadows underneath the bridge. “It was always you. I should have known.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Atlas coughed.

Of all the things that happened today, this might be the worst.

Bular walked along the beam, heading straight for him. “Another Trollhunter killed under the same bridge.”
Atlas pulled out the amulet. “Aren’t you just peachy.”

The Gumm-Gumm lunged. Atlas spoke the incantation once more, directing the power directly at Bular.

Its magic knocked the troll away. Atlas backed away, summoning his sword to his right hand.

Bular hissed, “No more running, Abomination.” He looked to the sky, a sneer developing. “Daylight fades.”

“Think you’re forgetting one thing Bular,” Atlas taunted as he twirled his sword in a semi-circle. “I’ve got Daylight right here.”

“After I end you, I’m going to kill every last one of you changelings. Mark my words,” he answered, making a running leap for the teen.

Atlas ran to the opposite side, keeping his distance. “You kill me and the amulet will never open the Bridge.”

Bular spat on the ground. “There will always be others. You’re nothing special. Merely another weakling chosen by Merlin to defend the worthless.”

“Aw,” Atlas said, dragging a finger down his eye to imitate crying. “Someone’s cranky about not getting to see their daddy. I get it, trust me. But as one famous songwriter once wrote, you can’t always get what you want.”

Bular roared, fury in his gaze. No more gloating or chit-chat then.

Draal was easy in comparison to Bular. The troll smashed against him again and again, thrashing the teen around like doll. This wasn’t like before. Bular wasn’t underestimating him anymore.

“All of this is your fault.”
“Can’t say you’re wrong about that,” Atlas responded.

“I never should have let you live.” He flipped, landing on a higher beam. “I’ll need to correct that.”

Atlas motioned his fingers for the troll to approach. Let him come. If he was going to die, at least he would go out fighting. “Bring it.”

Seconds later, he regretted the words. Bular struck—one blow after another. Not even the armor could protect the force of them. Atlas twisted right. Daylight slashed outwards, its arc fast and hard, yet Bular evaded, leaping to a lower platform to avoid its mark with inhuman ease. He swung below, disappearing from Atlas’s line of sight.

“Is that the best you got, Bular?” Atlas said, breathing hard. He couldn’t keep this up much longer.

He leaned against his sword, wheezing. His heart thudded. One slip up and he would be dead.

“Do not taunt me, impure,” Bular hissed. “Else, I make your death even more painful.”

Bular roared. Once again, he struck hard and viciously, giving Atlas no advance. Finally, he cornered the teen into the farthest side of the bridge.

“Give up and die,” he ordered.

Atlas bared his teeth. “No.”

Blood broke out in his mouth as Bular rammed him into the cement. One of his back molars loosened. Atlas choked, spitting it out. Fuck, that hurt.

“You’re nothing,” Bular said, picking him up and driving his head into the wall. “You and the rest of your kind are nothing. Everything you are will be forgotten. I’ll make sure father knows of your betrayal. You’ve doomed your race. All of them.”
Atlas vanished his sword, rematerializing it in the hand Bular had yet to block. “You won’t get the chance to.”

The blade sliced open his side. Bular roared, throwing the teen into another beam. Atlas barely managed to dodge, using the momentum to press off of another to relaunch himself at the troll.

He spat out more blood. It ran freely down his lips. Once close enough to Bular, he twisted the blade upwards, just in time to deflect the blow meant for his head.

But Bular had anticipated the move. He grabbed Atlas once more, pressing him against the floor of the beam, both hands pressed underneath him.

Atlas tried to squirm out, yet Bular weighed down on him even more, effectively cutting off any escape.

His heart thumped wildly in his aching chest.

“How pathetic. I’d hoped your death would be more entertaining. The Amulet should never have chosen a half-breed.”

Half-breed. That was what it came down to. His blood. How was it humanity, despite its faults, was more accepting of others than trolls and changelings?

“Too soft,” he sneered, brought his foot up, pressing it against Atlas’s head. “Too human. Easy to crush beneath my heel.”

The amulet flickered.

Was this his end? Blackness rose at the corners of his vision. He was suffocating.

Atlas couldn’t feel anything. Couldn’t move. There was nothing he could do. He was going to die. Die crushed by Bular, like all those years before.
“Atlas!” A girl’s voice cried from atop the bridge.

Bular looked up. “She’s next.”

Every muscle tensed.

Trolls and changelings might not accept him, but humans did. Humans like Claire, Toby, and his mom.

He saw the hungry expression in Bular’s eyes and snapped.

His eyes burned. No, not burned, seared. As if someone had lit them on fire. The fatigue within him faded, replaced by a need, stronger than any he had ever felt before.

He needed to protect Claire.

He needed to save Arcadia.

He needed to hunt.

“No,” he whispered. “She’s not.”

He vanished the armor, the amulet appearing in his hand. He closed his eyes, focusing. Without even saying the incantation the power whirled to life once more, a powerful beam of magic running directly through Bular’s chest.

The troll swore. He collapsed to his side, hand over the hole Atlas had produced. Gray stone began to spread across the wound.

Atlas bared his fangs and lunged. Even though the armor did not return Daylight still appeared in his hand, crackling with energy as he brought it up to strike.
He parried Bular’s next blows. Right. High. Left. Right. Low. The blade sang as it scrapped against Bular’s arms, the troll no longer in possession of his weapons.

Atlas backed him into the sunlight. The troll roared when he noticed, trying but failing to escape its deadly rays.

He eyed the water below. “This isn’t over, Abomination.”

As he tried to leap Atlas blocked his path, driving his sword into the troll’s foot.

Bular screamed.

“That,” Atlas spat, “is not my name. I am sick and tired of hearing you call me that.”

His eyes ached with an intensity he had never felt before. Everything burned.

All reason abandoned him. The flames of emotion stroked his gut, filling him with power.

He wanted the troll to experience every broken bone as he had. Humiliate him into oblivion.

His instincts cried for death.

Pain and rage fused together, passed along to his blade as he went for his next blows.

“My name is James Lake Junior.”

He sliced off part of Bular’s horn.

“Son of Barbara.”
The troll lost half of his hand next.

“Protector of Arcadia.”

Atlas sidestepped Bular’s retaliation, roundhouse kicking the monster before slashing down on the troll’s leg, effectively crippling him.

A painful howl escaped Bular’s mouth. He tried to snap at Atlas with his tusks, but the teen blocked it with the side of his blade.

He leaned in, inches away from Bular’s face.

“Bular’s Bane,” he whispered.

“You…you…” Bular growled, slamming his good hand down. “No. I can’t lose. Father needs me.”

Atlas brought the blade to his neck. His blood sang for vengeance. Nomura was gone. Stricklander too. The darker side of him wanted to tear the troll limb from limb. It took his entire willpower to hold back.

In the last bit of kindness to the monster, he said, “Give up.”

Mercy may not be the changeling way, but humans gave it. James Lake Junior had been human once.

Bular balked, disgusted. Ah, yes, Atlas thought, offering surrender would be an affront to the likes of him. “Never. He will come back, one way or another.”

Atlas shook his head, letting the rage take hold once more. “So be it.”

He didn’t know how many blows he hit. His arms simply moved, slashing at the beast over and over again. He didn’t know how he did it. He didn’t know when Bular stopped fighting back. He didn’t know anything until the clock tower rang.
The last of the sun’s rays descended.

Atlas dropped his blade.

He sucked in a deep, gasping breath.

Whatever power that took over him had evaporated, leaving the teen even more exhausted than he already was. The fiery energy was replaced with an exhausting chill.

Lifeless stone stared unblinkingly at him.

He looked away. Slowly, he rolled the troll’s remains off the bridge.

It wasn’t the first time he had killed someone, Atlas realized, but it was certainly the most brutal. Troll-like, really.

It scared him. Even though his strength was gone the memory remained, burrowed beneath his skin to remind him of the creature that lurked beneath the surface. His inhuman nature.

He didn’t want it. Anything but this. This wasn’t a hunt.

This was murder.

Atlas swept the sweat from his brows, breathing heavy and quick. Below, Bular sank into the rushing water, disappearing from view as the manmade river carried him away from Atlas, and hopefully, away from Arcadia itself.

Atlas fell to his knees.

It was over.
A soft broken cry escaped his lips.

*Finally.*
Chapter Summary

Atlas dies. New Players enter the ring.

But time doesn't stop just because the battle is over.

The war has only just begun.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own Trollhunters or any of its characters.

Hey! Back with a new chapter! Oh my gosh, thank you for so many reviews, kudos, and bookmarks! I super appreciate it. Big thanks to Charlie for helping me with this chapter. You're the best!

No new art this week except my own, lol. I did some art on instagram here: https://www.instagram.com/p/ByAdZ1JFlGN/

If you have any questions about the fanfic feel free to drop me a line on here or any of my social medias (I go by tunafishprincess on other sites).

You'll see I've introduced some new characters into the story. One is based off of a Trollhunters sidebook character, another is loosely based off a character from the original book. I hope to incorporate them into the story as this goes on and the last is a character that only shows up in 3 Below.

I hope you enjoy the story! Reviews are always appreciated! Thank you for reading!

Sweat trickled down his temple. Night approached on the horizon, eating up the rest of the day’s light. Atlas heaved himself over the railing, nearly collapsing onto the wet cement. Everything hurt. His bruises had bruises.

He rested the back of his hand against his eyes.
It was over. At least, that’s what he told himself.

Nomura was gone. Stricklander too.

And now Bular.

His entire identity had centered around those three’s existence for so long. It didn’t feel real. If it weren’t for the pain he would have expected this to be a dream. Or a nightmare, depending on how one looked at it.

Their words plagued his thoughts.

*Goodbye, Peer Gynt.*

*Then who are you, Trollhunter? James Lake or Atlas? I'm beginning to wonder.*

*The Amulet should never have chosen a half-breed.*

He closed his eyes. His other hand gripped the hood of his cloak, pulling it tighter around himself.

Everything he had done was for the greater good, he knew that, but why did it feel like he was the scummiest person on earth? The Janus Order raised him, fed him, clothed him—and yet, he betrayed them, betrayed his father figure for people he barely even knew.

His gaze flickered over to the amulet, brows tense. Had everything he’d done truly been him? Did the amulet influence him in some manner? Why else would he have abandoned everything he’d ever known?

He shook his head. Wishful thinking, he mused. Six years he had hated Bular. It was only a matter of time before they’d butted heads once more. Luckily, Atlas came out the winner this time.
A voice in his head whispered, *and what about the next?*

Atlas paled. His jaw grew slack at the thought. *This was never going to end*, he realized grimly. Every foe that threatened humanity and Trollmarket meant someone else Atlas would need to kill.

Someone else he had to murder.

For what? The greater good? What the hell was that? Trollmarket and humanity were equally morally gray people. Apart from a few select members of each he didn’t trust them anymore than he did with the other changelings at the Janus Order.

Then what was the greater evil? He knew Gunmar was undeniably evil. Hopefully, he would never face the Gumm-Gumm King in his lifetime. Leave it to some other Trollhunter, he thought, especially after he got pounded into jelly by his son. Not to mention killing said son over his attempt at opening Killahead.

His shoulders sagged at the realization. Oh yeah, that guy was gonna hate him *big* time now. Atlas had no doubt that Gunmar would swear vengeance on him after this. As would the Janus Order now that he thought about it.

A broken giggle escape his lips. Gee, more enemies coming after his throat. What fun.

*Breathe*, he thought, as his surroundings became darker and darker. Oh sweet Pale Lady, was he having a panic attack? His throat began to close. He couldn’t help but cycle through those same thoughts, over and over again, an unending guilt festering inside the confines of his chest.

Goosebumps rode up and down his arms.

He had betrayed them.

The sweat at his face chilled. The coolness flowed through his lifeblood, aggravating his wounds.

Stricklander and Nomura were gone.
What did he do to deserve this?

“Atlas!” A familiar voice cried from halfway across the bridge.

The word broke his dark line of thoughts. He jerked his head toward the sound. Could it be?

“Claire!” He yelled, rushing to join her.

The darkness faded. The moment they embraced a rush of warmth flooded through him. She was safe. Relief blossomed in his chest.

Despite his regrets, his pains, his what-ifs, he never let go of his resolve to save his friends.

He leaned over, taking in the scent of her hair. It was dirty and wet but it was hers. All hers.

This was what he’d been fighting for.

Her fingers laced through his hair, moving his head from side to side. He rested his cheek against the palm of her hand.

“Are you okay?” She asked, brows crossed as she searched his injuries. “We saw from the banks.”

“He’s gone.”

“I know. I saw.” She rested her forehead against his chest. In a voice barely above a whisper she said, “Thank you…He…I’m glad he’s gone.”

“It’s alright now,” he assured, resting a hand on her shoulder. “And I’m fine. It’s all going to be okay.”
Maybe if he repeated it a few more times it would become true?

“Could you bend down for a second?” She asked.

He complied, words falling from his lips like a waterfall.

“Bular’s gone and the bridge is destroyed,” he summated before adding in a joking manner, “And hey, look! We even have time for the play. I mean, I’m pretty sure it’s canceled since everyone thinks I kidnapped you or something but…hey, wait, what are you—”

It was quick and small, but it felt like a bomb had gone off in his mind. He memorized the cool wetness, the strange taste, the tingle that ran up and down his spine at the completely unexpected reaction.

Sweet Pale Lady.

The movies were right.

Kisses were magical.

All too soon she pulled away, cheeks the shade of her lip tone. She tucked a stray strand behind her ear, repeating the gesture several times before she cleared her throat. “We’re alive, and that’s all that matters.”

“Uh,” was his only response, too dumbfounded by the sudden kiss.

She kissed him. That meant she liked him right? His own cheeks burned, mind in disarray with the emotional whiplash he was experiencing.

He tried to figure out the meaning. Kisses had significance with humans. Had he been upgraded from friend to potential mate now? Atlas had read up enough on troll mating and marriage rituals under Vendels’ tutelage, but his human relationship experience amounted to no more than Stricklander’s education (humans were inferior beings) and movies.
Did he need to bring her flowers in exchange? Or chocolates? Shit, what if she didn’t like those.

Gah! He covered the bottom half of his face with the palm of his hand. Why are girls so complicated?

Thankfully, he didn’t have to think much longer. His companions gathered at his side soon enough, Toby latching onto him in a fierce hug.

“Dude!” Toby groaned, shaking the teen. “Like, holy shit! Can you believe it? That battle was insane. I was like pow! And you were all, bam! And then the bridge exploded—dude, that magic was awesome sauce! Like, not even kidding, that was better than any movie I’ve ever seen in my entire life. And the sewers! We lost you and then we got to the banks and saw you and Bular fighting and dude, that fight was intense. Like, more intense then anything I’ve seen in my life, and I’ve seen some crap, like Nana smacking away a family of squirrels eating from her birdfeeder or that time I ate two Diablo Maximus Burritos—Sorry, off track. But man! I wasn’t sure you were going to make it, especially since Bular was, like, ten feet tall and smacking you around like it was nothing. AAARRRGHHH!!! almost stepped in too, but he didn’t have to because you’re alive!” He squeezed Atlas even tighter. “We’re alive!”

He laughed, swooping the boy up and twirling him around twice.

“Also, what was with your eyes back there?” Toby asked, motioning his thumb and forefinger into a circle as he peered into Atlas’s face. “Dude, I didn’t know they could change colors.”

“My eyes? No, I don’t think they ever have. Did they?” Atlas frowned. He couldn’t help but casually glance back at the water below them. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

Blinky approached the two with both arms behind his back, a warm smile across his features. Atlas couldn’t help but replicate the expression. Finding out his mentor had been kidnapped was rough. Now, seeing the troll alive and well, the stress of the day seemed to slide off him.

“I’m afraid I did not see that part, Master Atlas. I was far more preoccupied with surviving the rushing water.” Blinky noted, “Though it is not an uncommon trait amongst certain species of troll. Volume 34 of The Historical Lineages of—”

Atlas pulled the troll into an awkward hug. Blinky reacted immediately, two arms around him while
the other two rested on the teen’s shoulders.

He couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. They were safe. Everyone was safe.

The memory of Nomura and Stricklander flashed through his mind.

His shoulders lowered. Well, almost everyone.

“Thank you, Blinky,” Atlas said softly. At the very least, he was glad Blinky lived, despite the odds stacked against the group.

He patted Atlas’s shoulder, on hand reaching out to brush the wet bangs out of his eyes. “It is I who should be thanking you.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t have done what I did without all your hellish training,” he joked.

All six eyes softened.

Water began to blur Atlas’s vision. He immediately pulled out of the embrace, folding his arms as he pretended to inspect the canal.


“Can’t say I disagree, Wingman,” Toby answered, copying the troll’s reflex.

“Yeah,” Atlas mumbled, an idea forming in his mind. “One last thing.”

It was time. He had spent the last few minutes agonizing over it, but it was now or never. He unhooked the cloak from his armor. It sank to the ground. Picking it up, he carried it over to the railing overlooking the waters below.
Toby grabbed his arm. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What are you doing?” He gestured to the garment in an exaggerated manner. “Dude, I thought that was your favorite cloak.”

He shook his head. “It was Atlas’s favorite cloak.” His fingers gently stroked the soft faded material. “Not mine.”

“What do you mean?” Claire asked, joining him on the other side.

He leaned over the railing. “Atlas is gone.”

“Atlas gone?” AAARRRGGHH!!! cocked his head to the side, giving Atlas a bewildered look. His forefinger bumped against the boy’s chest. “But right here.”

“That’s not me anymore,” he answered, biting down on his bottom lip.

How many times had his changeling heritage gotten him into trouble? Stricklander’s words rang true in his mind. He couldn’t be both anymore, if he ever was in the first place.

It would be better for everyone if Atlas disappeared. He could transform freely now after all. Surely that was some sign that he should lay this part of his life to rest?

Atlas. Hell, it wasn’t even his name. Not really. Stricklander had made a joke and then it stuck. That was it.

He should be glad. Now, he would owe nothing to the man. He could move forward with his life. Be someone else. Someone human.

Someone who hadn’t betrayed his people.

His shoulders hunched, bottom lip beginning to tremble.

It was the natural order set right in a way.
Yet why did it feel like the worst?

“Master Atlas, you don’t have to do this,” Blinky whispered. He rested a comforting hand on his shoulder, giving it a light squeeze.

“No. Atlas…Atlas died with Bular,” he replied, bunching the cloth together into a tight ball. “He doesn’t belong with me anymore. Stricklander was right. I’m not a changeling. This name doesn’t suit me anymore.”

“Are you certain?”

His lips stretched into a thin line. “Yeah, I think this is how it’s meant to be.”

“So,” Claire began, “What do we call you now?”

“Jim,” He answered, a bitter smile emerging. “Just Jim.”

“What about Jimbo?” Toby raised an eyebrow.

“That works too.”

“J-slice?”

He snorted. “Don’t push it.”

Without another thought he chucked the cloak over the railing. He resisted the urge to jump in after it.

His first real gift from Stricklander. It had been attached to him for more than six years it appeared. Strange, how such a small piece of cloth had such an emotional attachment for him.
In a way, he thought darkly, it was almost as though he were throwing Stricklander away.

Another six years of memories down the drain he supposed.

*Just like the other ten,* he inwardly joked.

Maybe his life wouldn’t get any better than this—maybe he would never remember everything of his prior life to the Janus Order—but he didn’t really need to anymore, did he? He had his mom and friends, not a large group, but enough to give him pause in the most reckless of situations.

He watched the old cloak float across the rushing waters, disappearing beneath the flood.

Atlas the half-breed no longer had a place in this world, if he ever did in the first place.

His heart lurched. Even though they won the loss was heavy. This would be his burden until the end of his days.

It would be better for everyone if he were only Jim now. For Trollmarket and Arcadia.

Yeah.

“What do we do now?” Claire asked as they walked down from the Bridge, heading into the tree-shaded banks, away from any prying human eyes. “What do we tell our families? *Dios mio,* my parents probably think I’m dead! I gotta call them.”

“First things first. We’ll need a story. Something to explain everything without revealing anything,” he said, turning to his best friend. “Tobes?”

The other released a long sigh, pulling out his phone. “On it.”
Out of all the hullabaloo the detective heard in his fifteen years on the force, nothing could quite compare to the story before him.

He wasn’t joking; Detective Scott was no stranger to criminals. The Arcadian Police Force had chosen him for a reason. Sure, they were low funded and needed every spot filled, but the work trained him, molded him into the living lie detector he was today.

It was his duty to protect the citizens of Arcadia, whether they liked it or not. Every traffic ticket, every jaywalking fine, every arrest—all was out of love for his city.

But this was something else.

“A Maple Syrup Smuggling Ring?” He repeated the phrase several times to emphasis his disbelief. “Do you really expect me to believe that, Mr. Lake?”

“Yes?” The teen looked up, eyes wide. If he didn’t know any better, he would have taken the kid for some average high schooler.

Detective Scott scowled. But looks could be deceiving.

He slammed the case file onto the table. “A Canadian criminal group out to steal people’s pancake salsa?”

“I…” The teen paused, raising a finger. “Is Maple Syrup actually a salsa—”

“Answer me!” He growled.

The kid nodded slowly. “Yes, sir.”
“Do I look like a fool to you, boy?”

“Y—No, sir,” he finished, visibly swallowing.

Detective Scott’s eyes narrowed. He adjusted the light to point directly on top of the kid. Something about James Lake rubbed him the wrong way. Maybe it was his expression. The boy was too calm. Too suspicious. His face and hair were filthy but his clothes were clean. The other two had been dirty all over. It was one of the many reasons he brought the boy into interrogation.

The first was the teen’s alibi.

“Now,” he began, pressing his thumb to the top of the file in front of them. “Tell me again what the hell you and Ms. Nuñez were really doing out in the woods last night.”

“Claire was trying to convince me to leave the, uh, group I was in,” he explained.

Detective Scott folded his arms. “The smuggling ring.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And then what happened?”

Lake twiddled his thumbs together, foot tapping against the leg of his chair. “Well, one of the members N-Nina, found out and tried to take me back to the compound. I resisted and Claire and I tried to get away, but she got to Claire first and took her back to try and get me to come back with them.”

“And where was this mysterious compound of theirs?”

“Well, we didn’t meet in the compound.” He added, “We met in the woods.”
“Remind me the reason why these smugglers of yours took Ms. Nuñez.”

“To trade.”

“You for her or—”

“Me,” he answered, gesturing to his chest. “Or rather, for the key. I was the only one with the key code to get into the maple syrup storage facility.”

“And how did you come by that knowledge?”

He shrugged. “Memorized the keycode.”

“This doesn’t make sense. Why Arcadia?”

“It’s a small, quiet town. Whose gonna find out about a smuggler’s ring of ultra-grade maple syrup in this part of the state?” He explained.

Detective Scott rubbed his chin. Hm. Actually, that wasn’t too terrible of an explanation. He always suspected Arcadia was home to something bigger.

No, wait. He was getting distracted. He turned his back to the boy, shaking his head.

“I think I would know if a smuggler’s ring was in town, kid,” he stated. “I know everything that goes on in these parts.”

And then James Lake did the one thing that sealed his fate in Detective Scott’s mind.

He smirked.

“Are you certain of that, Detective Scott?”
Sonavabitch, did this hooligan think he was stupid?

He banged both hands flat on the table. “Tell me the truth.”

The teen startled, blinking. As if he were innocent. The little smarmy asshole. “I just did. You can ask my friends too.”

He leaned forward. “All of you could have collaborated on this.”

Lake raised both brows, head tilted to the side.

“Honest, sir, the smugglers are real,” he replied.

Damn. If he had more time he grill the kid, but this was going nowhere. Lake wasn’t going to talk.

Unless everything he said was true.

But Detective Scott knew the streets of Arcadia like the back of his hand. If something weird was happening in their city he would know about it.

He frowned. Still, he wouldn’t put it passed those Canucks. Can’t trust them northerners. Always coming down during the winter and clogging up the roads.

He eyed the window. Councilwoman Nuñez should be here soon, if her daughter had anything to do with it. There went the rest of his questioning. Which left him with one last mystery.

“Let’s say they were real,” he said. “That doesn’t explain the business of you calling yourself James Lake, Jr.”

“It’s my name,” he answered too curtly for Detective Scott’s tastes.
“Did you know a boy under the same name disappeared six years ago too?” He egged on, “Did you come to try and take his place?”

One of his first missing child cases. His stomach churned. It wasn’t the last either, sadly.

The kid’s jaw tightened; Detective Scott hid his smile beneath a quick cough. Gotcha.

“If you look at the file,” he said in a firm tone. “I think you’ll find, that boy and I are, in fact, the same person.”

Detective Scott snorted. Picking up the file, he pursued it to humor the boy. If this kid was really the Lake boy he would—

Oh. Black hair. Blue eyes. Even the face was the same.

He placed the file back on the table. Three things came to mind: one, he had seriously miscalculated; two, his job might be on the line for interrogating the boy without telling him his Miranda Rights (shit, the chief was going to kill him if this got out); and three, which, in his opinion, was by far the most important: how could he connect this in his own report?

Now that he thought about it, maybe he read the situation slightly wrong. Body language had never been his strong suit. Not that it stopped him from doing his job.

He scratched his chin. Yeah, now he could imagine how it all played out. The missing construction workers, strange sightings of people with glowing red eyes and little green men, the robbery at the museum—they all must have tied back to this Canadian Smugglers Ring.

The construction workers were probably contracted to build the maple syrup storage then given a scare and some hush money to keep them quiet.

Glowing eyes and green men? More like special effects and drug addicts, he reasoned in confidence. It wouldn’t surprise him if those Canucks had weird shit in their pancake salsa to boot.
He nodded, circling around the table. Maybe that was how they got people to join them. Get them addicted to the stuff. He shook his head in disgust. How had he been such a sap?

All that was left was the robbery, but that could easily be explained as either a separate crime or tied into the group’s criminal enterprise.

His eyes widened.

What if they used those old pots to transport the syrup? It would explain why the museum got so many shipments.

Yes, it all made sense now.

“I see,” he said, stroking his chin. “Ah ha! You’re James Lake Junior! I knew already, but I wanted to see what you would say.”

“You did?”

“Of course! So you left Arcadia to join this group of yours. That’s why no one was able to find you.” He slammed a fist into his other hand as he formed his conclusion. “You’d left the country!”

Lake raised a hand. “Uh, I mean, technically, I was kidnapped.”

“And you returned to Arcadia help build this storage facility of yours.”

“Amazing,” the teen said, eyes wide. “You really know your stuff, Detective.”

“Where are your kidnappers now?”

“Gone. They fled after the fight with B-Bob, our leader. Bob jumped into the canals after the fight. I don’t know if he’s alive.” Lake swallowed, eyes flickering to the floor. “My dad left too.”
“James Lake Senior,” he concluded, remembering the name on the file. “Is he the one who kidnapped you?”

The teen paused, brows lifted, before giving a slow headshake in acknowledgement. “I…Yes. Yes, he kidnapped me and held me against my will.”

“Heh, I see. Now the dots are all connecting,” he said, rubbing his hands together as he walked around the table.

“Wow, you’re a genius, Detective Scott,” he said, clapping his hands together.

He shook his head. As true as the words might be Detective Scott considered himself a modest fellow. Nonetheless, the sentiment still gave him a warm fluttery feeling in his gut. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Lake.”

A knock on the door broke the flow of their conversation. Detective Scott approached the entrance.

Once outside, he peered down; the staff secretary raised a brow. She was an old, willowy thing, with a light Irish accent and a no nonsense attitude. He frowned. Normally she didn’t come back here.

“Ms. Howerstem,” he acknowledged, tilting his head.

She adjusted her glasses, green eyes piercing into his soul. He resisted the urge to shudder. “There’s someone here to see you, Detective.”

He looked past the woman and paled.

Arcadia Oaks.
Her mouth soured in distaste. She hadn’t planned on spending her Saturday evening in this Podunk town. What was going to be a lovely night of fine dining with her spouse had been postponed for another matter, namely, the boy in front of them.

She sniffed. Thin as a beanpole this one. Quite a contrast to the detective. It was almost comical to watch the man in question puff his chest out at their intrusion, no longer allowed to play small town detective with his gangly suspect.

“This is my investigation,” he stated.

“Not anymore,” she said, flashing her badge. “Step aside, Detective Scott.”

The detective glanced between her and her colleague, sizing them up. He took a step forward.

“On whose orders?” He demanded.

She tilted her head up, responding in a clipped voice, “The Federal Government’s. We already have clearance. The control over this investigation is ours now. If you have an issue with it you can take it up with your Chief.”

His eyes narrowed. “This goes against all police protocol.”

She smiled frostily. “Well, I’m not the police, now am I? Unless you would like a reprimand from your superior I suggest you step aside.”

My my. She relished the flicker of emotions that crossed his features as he realized how insignificant he truly was. As all men did when they came across a woman in power. Of course, it did help her colleague was just as tall, if not taller, than the detective.

*Can’t hurt to have muscle when things get messy,* she thought.

Begrudgingly, the man finally did as she asked, nudging past her and her partner. The little secretary followed on after him, the clicking off her heels fading out as the door shut behind them.
She pressed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, sending the boy what she hoped was a friendly smile.

“Mr. Lake,” she greeted.

He nodded, not moving from his seat. “Ma’am.”

“Please, call me Colonel Kubritz. My companion here is—”

“Agent Jack Delagos,” he answered.

Colonel Kubritz frowned at the interruption but continued, “We are with the United States government. Now that Detective Scott is out of the room we would like to ask you a few questions.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No. We merely want to know what happened tonight,” she said as she pulled out her briefcase.

“Then ask away,” answered the boy. He arched his back, hands brought together on top of the table. “I’ve nothing to hide.”

“Can you give me your hand?”

He blinked, uncertainty in his gaze, but complied. “Uh, sure but—Ow! What the hell was that for?”

“Language, Mr. Lake,” Agent Delagos reprimanded.

In the corner of her eye she noticed the boy roll his eyes.
Ugh, children. Disgusting little things. Teenagers were even worse. Why did her superiors even send her here in the first place and not someone below her?

She checked the readings. It beeped twice. Human then. Alas, and here she’d been hoping to put her Neurometer to work. Not that she would ever do so this far from Area 49-B. The paperwork would be nightmarish at best. Too many variables.

Lake glared. “Excuse me. What the heck was that for?”

“A test for drugs,” remarked Colonel Kubritz. “You’re clean.”

He rubbed the injured area. “I should hope so.”

A moment later she pulled up a chair. Her colleague continued to stand, resting his back against the wall between the door and the table. “Now, tell us about what happened. And start from the beginning.”

As expected, the talk was disappointingly normal. Oh, she knew the boy was lying through his teeth, but not about the thing she really wanted. She had no doubt there was some truth to his statements. All lies had to start somewhere. Yet every question she asked in connection with her field of work offered no results. He merely appeared confused before moving onto the next part of his story.

Nonetheless, her eyes couldn’t help but wander to the boy’s pocket. A little blue light blinked on and off. It was too circular to be a cell phone. Interest piqued, she inquired, “What is that in your pocket, Mr. Lake?”

The teen startled before pulling it out. He released a nervous chuckle. “Oh this? Just a good luck charm.”

She reached out. “How pretty. Can I hold it?”

His jaw clenched. She almost thought he would refuse but he relented a moment later.

“Sure. Be careful though. It’s very important to me.”
A shadow past her shoulder. Her colleague had moved from the wall. He leaned over her, eyes focused on the object. “A family heirloom?”

“It’s a battery powered nightlight, sir,” the teen said sheepishly. “I get scared of the dark sometimes. You can get them at most stores.”

“How old are you, Jim?” Delagos asked.

The teen ducked his head sheepishly. “Sixteen, sir. I know it’s silly, but it’s important to me. Can I have it back?”

The boy practically snatched it from her hand the moment she reached out to return it. Colonel Kubritz clicked her pen, jotting down more notes about the boy for the official record.

Agent Delagos nodded, features smooth and unreadable. He placed his arms behind his back, walking behind the boy. “I see. A fine age. You know, in the Middle Ages, sixteen was within the age of majority for lads.”

He stopped, placing both hands on the teen’s shoulders. James Lake Jr. stiffened.

It took him a few moments to gather himself, she noticed, but he asked in a steady manner, “What are you implying, sir?”

Colonel Kubritz glared in annoyance at her colleague. She hadn’t finished her questioning. What was this fool trying to do?

He didn’t appear to notice her expression. Instead, he was focused entirely on the boy in front of them. His fingers tightened. “The American Court system doesn’t take well to liars. Many teens like yourself have been tried as adults for less.”

Just as Colonel Kubritz was about to chastise her colleague for his behavior, the door swung open, revealing a willowy redhead woman.
Mr. Lake’s reaction was immediate.

“Mom!”

She descended upon her son like a hawk. Agent Delagos wisely moved away. “Jim! Oh my god, you’re alive! So Bular is finally—”

“Bular?” Kubritz said, lifting a brow.

He froze before releasing a series of coughs. “Oh, him. He was the boss of the terrorist cell.”

“Jim got in contact with me as soon as he got in town,” Dr. Lake answered stifflly, arms wrapped around her son. “And you! You almost gave me a heart attack! Why didn’t you tell me you were going to get away from them tonight? I could have helped! You are in so much trouble when we get home.”

“Home sounds really nice right about now,” he sighed, slumping over to the side.

Her attention turned to Colonel Kubritz. “And why is he being questioned without me? He’s a minor. I’m his mother. Someone should have called me as soon as he was found.”

She adjusted her glasses, straightening up. “Ms. Lake—”

“Dr. Lake,” she corrected, her voice as frosty as her features. “Did you even give him his Miranda Rights? Do I need to call my lawyer?”

“I understand your concern, Dr. Lake,” she stressed the word, as though it had no significance to her. “However, considering the circumstances, we believed it was in this country’s best interest to confirm his story. You have to admit, a Canadian smuggling ring is a very serious accusation, if not a tad silly in context. This will need to be brought up to American and Canadian authorities.”

Fat chance. She could already see the smug Canadian Agents laughing their asses off at that kind of call. She would bet her bottom dollar it would be buried beneath her superior’s Chinese takeout by tomorrow. Arcadia would have a tiny press frenzy since nothing else ever seemed to happen here,
but afterwards it would go back to normal, replaced by the next exciting story.

The mother pulled the boy closer to her chest, chin tucked in. “My son was kept from me for more than six years,” she stressed. “It might sound silly to you, ma’am, but not to me. This is my son. Please, let us go home now.”

“But questioning isn’t—”

“No,” Agent Delagos interrupted once more. Kubritz inwardly fumed. Who did he think he was? “I believe Dr. Lake is right. We’re done here.”

Not wanting to be upstaged, she reached out for Dr. Lake’s hand. The woman offered it, albeit reluctantly. Colonal Kubritz squeezed it as tight as she could, giving the woman a satisfied smile.

Childish perhaps, but in her line of work one had to be the aggressor. She couldn’t afford to lose face, especially in front of Agent Delagos.

“Good evening, Dr. Lake,” she paused, glancing over to the boy. “You as well, Mr. Lake.”

Dr. Lake slipped her hand out, placing it on the small of her son’s back as they walked out. “Yes. Good Evening, Colonel Kubritz.”

The room fell silent. She couldn’t help but truly examine her colleague.

Blond, blue-eyed, young—he didn’t look much older than the Lake boy in her opinion. Not a wrinkle on the bastard either.

It irked her that she knew nothing about him prior to this. As someone who considered herself informed his arrival alarmed her. The agency had assigned them together on this case, but as to why she had no clue. The report didn’t even mention his rank or unit.

So many peculiarities. But she had more pressing problems in Area 49-B to attend to. The James Lake case could wait.
“Short interview,” she mentioned dryly as they left the room.

“His mother arrived. Anything more would be tainted by her presence,” he explained, pulling at his cufflinks.

She raised an eyebrow. “Tainted?”

Something about the wording irked her. Perhaps it was his poster boy smile, white and gleaming like one of those toothbrush commercials. Or maybe it was the way he dealt with the Lake kid, never taking his eyes off the boy and intruding on his personal space. Either way, Jack Delagos gave her the heebie-jeebies.

“I misspoke. I meant truncated.”

“Did you now?” She mused as they entered the parking lot.

Liar.

“What do you think?” He asked.

Colonel Kubritz crossed her arms. She glanced at her phone to see if there were any more messages before replying, “It’s obvious he’s lying, but I doubt it has anything to do with you-know-what. My team hasn’t found anything at the scene of the crime either. Museum is empty. Just a bunch of rocks. Looks like several displays got knocked over, which explains why he and his little friends looked so beaten up. Must have been some fight.”

“Anything else?”

She shook her head. “No elevated energy signatures or extraterrestrial phenomena recorded according to my current data.”

“But you’re not completely sure.”
“No one can be one hundred percent certain, Delagos. Even a Rookie like you should know that.”

“A Rookie? Is that what you take me for?” He threw her another of his brilliant smiles. It didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m older than I look, you know.”

“But younger than me,” she added.

Agent Delagos laughed, rubbing his hands together as he walked back to the motorcycle he rode in on. “I suppose it’s up to my department now then.”

“What agency you come from again?” She asked (the second time, if memory served).

He stopped in the middle of the road. He turned his neck, half of his face obscured by the night. “That’s above your clearance, Colonel Kubritz.”

“And if I decide it is my clearance?” She said, lifting her head.

His smile took on a nasty edge. “I believe you will find a letter from your superior tomorrow morning debriefing you on this matter. Leave it. It’s our jurisdiction now.”

“What? The FBI? CIA?” She rolled her shoulders. “Give me something, kid.”

The man continued his walk, whistling a strange melody.

“You do your job and I’ll do mine.”
Works inspired by this one: Unhappy Birthday by kdandsheela

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