

THE
UNDERWILD



BOOK 1

RIVER OF SPIRITS

SHANA TARGOSZ

ALADDIN

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FOR CALDER, MY LIGHT IN THE
DARKNESS WHENEVER I NEED IT MOST



THE RULES FOR FERRYERS

RULE NUMBER ONE:

Avoid Questions from the Dead.

RULE NUMBER TWO:

Ferryers must collect payment for the crossing.

RULE NUMBER THREE:

Never let a Living mortal cross the river.

RULE NUMBER FOUR:

Beware the Underwild.

RULE NUMBER FIVE:

Never follow the river to its end.

RULE NUMBER SIX:

Don't gawk at the ghosts.

RULE NUMBER SEVEN:

Do not form emotional attachments with those we ferry.

RULE NUMBER EIGHT:

What happens in the Under-After stays in
the Under-After.

RULE NUMBER NINE:

Ferryers are not allowed to worry.

RULE NUMBER TEN:

Respect the rivers of the Underworld (and avoid the Styx).

RULE NUMBER ELEVEN:

At all costs, Ferryers must prevent the Living
from becoming mormo.



CHAPTER ONE
NIGHTMARES

THE RIVER IS THE COLOR OF DEATH. YOU'D think this wouldn't be unusual for the Acheron—the long, wide river that flows through the Underworld—but you'd be wrong. The river that divides the Shore of the Living from the gates to the Under-After usually bubbles in shades of silvery blue. Today its waters are too still; its mirrored surface colorless and cold as a ghost. I should know. I'm around ghosts all the time.

Now you're probably wondering if *I* am a ghost. I most certainly am not. My fate is to walk amongst ghosts but to never become one myself. My name is Senka, and I am a Ferryer of souls.

That is, I will be a Ferryer soon. I'm the one and only

assistant to Charon, the Ferryer of the Underworld. Well, I'm *almost* his assistant. Once he teaches me how to transport souls, I will definitely be his assistant. It's the reason I'm here, after all. Every immortal in the Underworld serves a purpose; each of us is given a responsibility we're committed to do for eternity.

Charon ferries souls. One day I will too.

I just need to convince him I'm ready to begin my training.

As the boat rocks beneath me, I tear my gaze from the motionless waters and shiver.

"Senka, are you cold?" A figure shrouded in a cloak the color of spilled ink dips his oar into the death-still river.

Don't be alarmed by Charon's appearance. Yes, he's the immortal who ferries souls through the realm of the Dead and he seems scary, but he's really a big nerd who likes drinking coffee, reading books, and playing board games on his days off. If you ignore the dark cloak and bone-pale hands and the lightning-blue gleam of his eyes, you'll notice other features that aren't so scary. Like the necklace I made out of hollowed-out bones painted in a rainbow of colors draped around his neck. Or the yeti-print T-shirt he's wearing—a gift I ordered from the realm of the Living, with Mortimer's help, of course.

Mortimer is our friendly neighborhood messenger-raven, the best mail service in the Underworld. Unfortunately, there aren't many shops down here, unless you want some-

thing from Medusa's Marvelous Menagerie (mostly snakes) or Nyx's Shoppe of Nightmares (I have plenty of nightmares of my own, thank you). Everything Charon and I own either comes from catalogs Mortimer picks up for us in the realm of the Living or is gifted to us from the passengers Charon ferries through the realm of the Dead. Pro tip: If you want something without skulls on it, your chances are much better obtaining it from outside the borders of the Underworld.

"Take this. It will warm you up." Charon pauses rowing and shrugs out of his long, hooded cloak.

I rub the goose bumps from my arms. "No, I'm okay." The truth is, I'm afraid. Not of ghosts or the Underworld, obviously; it's the weird stillness of the river. It has never been like this before. I know this sounds cliché, but it feels like a bad omen, like something wicked this way comes. I can't let Charon know I'm skittish—no matter what happens, I'll prove I'm ready to become a Ferryer, just like him.

I peer at him through my eyelashes. My guardian is tall and has biceps that make even Hercules jealous. (It's true, Hercules said as much last time he dropped by for a visit.) I guess rowing a boat across the Acheron for thousands of years builds muscles. I frown at my own stick-thin arms and once again wonder why I fall epically short in the bicep department.

My origin story, as is the case with all denizens of the Underworld, is that I was created when someone was needed to do a job. Charon needed an assistant, and boom, here I was.

Though why I sprang up as a scrawny twelve-year-old girl and not some buff, ancient dude like Charon is a bit baffling. Whenever I've asked Charon why this is, he dodges my question by commenting on the weather. Which, in case you're curious, is always: *Gloomy, with a chance of soup-thick fog.*

As I get ready to state my case that today is indeed the day we should begin my training, he interrupts my mental preparations with a "Hmm." The sound rumbles like thunder as he tugs his cloak back onto his shoulders.

"You seem quiet. Did you sleep okay?" he asks.

I fidget with the bracelet tied to my wrist. I've worn it ever since I can remember. The bracelet holds a single charm, a silver circle with a star stamped upon it. Charon claims it's a charm of protection. I rub my thumb over the deep scratch running through its center.

Charon once said the charm would chase away nightmares, but so far it hasn't worked—they still haunt me every night.

"When can we start my training?" I blurt, avoiding his question. "I'm ready to learn how to row the boat!"

Charon steers the boat back to our tiny island in the middle of the river, smack between the realm of the Living and the realm of the Dead. "Soon."

I sigh. For immortals, "soon" could mean anywhere from one week to a hundred years. At this rate, it'll take forever for me to become a Ferryer.

Oh, I should probably explain what this job entails.

Ferryers are tasked to shuttle souls across the river that divides the two realms. Once across, passengers disembark into their Under-After, a location in the Underworld where newly arrived souls go to start their ghostly afterlife. Right now Charon is the only official Ferryer. He's been at it a long time—for like an *eternity*. Whenever I ask if he's old enough to be my grandpa or great-grandpa or great-GREAT-grandpa, he sighs, then tells me my tiny brain would break if I knew the real answer. I still ask, though. He's the only person around here to talk to. Aside from the souls of the Dead, that is. But technically I'm not allowed to ask them questions. So he'll have to deal.

This is Rule Number One for Ferryers: Avoid Questions from the Dead. And yes, when Charon repeats the Rule aloud, “Questions” is capitalized. Always.

There aren't any passengers with us right now. It's our tradition to hang out together once we complete our tasks for the day: Charon's tasks being the Ferryer stuff (naturally), while my tasks include making my bed, cleaning up after breakfast, and trying not to fall asleep on my giant stack of home-schooling workbooks while Mortimer (who is also my teacher) squawks at me. On a normal afternoon, Charon and I play darts behind our cottage or pull out a board game if it's too misty out, *or* we go to the Shore of the Living to skip rocks, which is what we decided to do today. And every night without fail I ask when I can become a Ferryer just like him.

He always answers, “Soon.”

And don't think I've been sitting here, patiently waiting for that day to come. Secretly, I've been doing research and forming a plan. Okay, maybe not research in the standard sense of the word; there isn't a *Ferrying for Dimwits* guidebook or anything. The "research" is stuff I've compiled on my own, taken from my observations on how Charon does his job, and includes the things I'll need to master before becoming an official Ferryer.

These are:

Step One: Learn to row the boat.

Step Two: Get myself a fancy cloak like Charon's.

Step Three: Ferry a soul to their Under-After.

Step Four: Collect payment for said ferrying job.

Step Five: Get Charon to admit I'm the best Ferryer ever and immediately promote me.

And if you're thinking "Rowing a boat isn't hard! You can learn without Charon's help!" then you don't know our boat at all. It's one of a kind and it knows it. It is finicky, moody, a bit of a diva, and it won't let just anyone hop on board and paddle around to their heart's content. You have to have *permission*. Otherwise you could promptly end up *under* the boat rather than inside it.

And whose permission do you think it requires?

Charon's, of course.

I can't learn how to row the boat without his say-so (trust me, I've tried).

As of now, I'm on step one of my plan. Well, *almost* on step one. Let's say I'm on step zero-point-five: Convince Charon to start my training already.

"Mortimer says you've made great progress in your Underworld history lessons," Charon says, interrupting my internal plotting. "What's your favorite thing you've learned so far?"

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Mortimer's been riding me to memorize historical events along with all the deities of the Underworld, including the ones currently locked up in Tartarus. Honestly, it's not a subject I particularly enjoy. Every time I get events out of order or mix people up, he fixes me with his one eye (he wears an eye patch over the other), caws, and makes me start over.

I open my mouth, fishing for something to pull out of my long, painful lessons that could qualify as my "favorite" thing about Underworld history when the boat beneath me gives a mighty jolt.

"What was that?" I scan the river. Ripples slice across the water's surface.

I gulp. Nothing has ever hit our boat before. Ever. There's nothing in these waters *to* collide with it.

Slowly, I peer over the side. Something long and scaly streaks through the depths beneath us.

A scream tears from my lungs.

"Sit down!" Charon roars, gripping the oar and plunging it into the river.

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I scramble from the edge and clutch the bench beneath me, my heart pounding. I can't show Charon how scared I am. Ferryers are *never* scared.

But what I saw was impossible. It can't be real. It can't be *here*.

With an ear-splitting creak, our boat veers to the side, narrowly avoiding another collision as the scaled creature scrapes the hull. The wood groans, water lapping over the gunwale and drenching my boots. Silver scales erupt from the water as the creature leaps, then crashes back into the river. In that split second I spot a long snout, slitted eyes, and two horns protruding from its dragonlike skull.

Sweat breaks out across my skin—I've seen this creature before. Not in real life, but in my nightmares.

I struggle to breathe as countless other nightmare creatures emerge from the water. More swarm our boat, edging closer. Splinters from the bench pierce my palms, telling me I'm fully awake; my worst dreams have chased me here.

"There are so many!" I cry.

"Hang on!" As Charon's powerful strokes steer us through the waters, the silver-scaled nightmares scatter.

The long, sleek body of the dragon slams against our boat. I scream as the world tilts. My hands scrabble at air as I'm hurled over the edge.