

In Midnight's Silence

Los Nefilim, Part 1

Chapter 1

October 1931

Barcelona

The second hand crawled around Señora Ferrer's art deco clock with excruciating slowness. Blue, brown, and orange geometric shapes decorated the base and did little to help Diago's headache. From where he stood beside the grand piano, he counted the seconds as they ticked across the clock's face: *fifteen, fourteen, thirteen ...*

All the while, Enrique Ferrer—a vindictive boy who hated his stepmother and piano lessons—executed a murderous attack on the sonata Diago had assigned. The child didn't play the piano; he tried to kill it.

Enrique looked up at Diago and deliberately missed the next chord.

Diago, lost within the seconds of the ticking clock, said nothing.

Enrique stopped playing. "I don't think that was correct, Maestro Alvarez."

*... seven, six, five ...*

Enrique made room on the bench for Diago. "Could you show me again?" He smiled, but the child was too immature to camouflage the spite in his eyes. He'd already tried to slam the fallboard on Diago's fingers at the start of their session. This was almost certainly another ill-

disguised attempt at a maiming.

Not that Diago hadn't experienced his share of hostilities through the centuries. He had survived Torquemada, an encounter with a Borgia, and numerous altercations against both daimons and angels. *At least I had a fighting chance against them.* He considered Enrique's wicked grin, and decided he would gladly revisit them all to avoid sitting beside this child again.

Unfortunately, he had little choice. The bourgeoisie had tightened their purse strings of late. Jobs of any kind were hard to find, harder to hold, and he needed the work. Miquel already bore the brunt of their expenses as Diago tried to establish himself in Barcelona, and while Miquel never begrudged Diago a *peseta*, Diago was determined to generate his own income. His pride demanded it. The Ferrer family was his key into the Casa Milà's residents and their deep pockets. And so, ironically, he swallowed his pride and found himself Enrique's teacher for the next six weeks.

Diago took a deep breath and steeled himself to sit beside the boy. He glanced at the clock just as the second hand swept over the number twelve. "Six o'clock, Enrique. We are done for today." He wasted no time in rescuing his sheet music from the stand.

"But I'm not finished." The boy's cheeks turned blotchy with rage.

Diago foresaw a hellish tantrum rising. He hoped to make it out of the apartment before the squall arrived.

"Enrique!" Señora Ferrer stood between the living room and the foyer with a glass of sherry in her hand. A beautiful woman with dark eyes and high cheekbones, she was given to dressing with all the flair of the Casa Milà's *nouveau riche*. Today's ensemble included a narrow skirt and silk blouse, both of which were just tight enough to leave nothing to a man's imagination. "We are paying Maestro Alvarez for his time. Your lesson is over for today. Go

with Elena.”

Enrique slammed the fallboard hard enough to vibrate the piano’s strings before he stomped out of the room. Another premonition told Diago the instrument would have to be tuned if the child continued to abuse it; although he had to admit, having Enrique vent his rage on the piano was preferable to another of the boy’s vicious kicks. Diago exhaled slowly as Enrique’s malice followed him out of the room like a dark cloud.

Episodes like this always made him grateful he was childless. Neither he, nor Miquel, had the necessary patience to deal with ill-tempered children. Whenever it came to a battle of wills with a youngster, Diago resorted to negotiations and Miquel bribed them with sweets or toys. Miquel had observed on more than one occasion that while they made wonderful uncles, they would be terrible parents. Diago had to agree.

Señora Ferrer turned and spoke to her maid. “See to Enrique, Elena. I will escort Maestro Alvarez out.”

*Oh, God, no, not again.* Diago’s heart pounded harder as he picked up his metronome and stored it in this briefcase. The last thing he needed was a moment alone with Señora Ferrer. In the few seconds it took him to arrange the sheet music beside the metronome and latch his briefcase, he felt as if she’d stripped him naked with her eyes. As he walked toward her, his face warmed with blush.

She mistook his embarrassment for pleasure and smiled. For such a petite woman, she possessed a remarkable ability to block a doorway with her presence. “Has anyone ever told you what beautiful eyes you have, Señor Alvarez? They are a most lovely shade of green and seem to change color depending on the light. I think it is because your lashes are so black.”

Odd that she spoke of his eyes when her gaze remained fixated on his crotch. Diago

moved his briefcase in front of his hips like a shield as he halted in front of her. “So I have been told, Señora.”

She raised her glass. “Do you have time for a glass of sherry?”

Navigating a daimon’s lair was less treacherous than this apartment. Diago knew that Enrique’s violent temper had descended directly from his father. He could just imagine Ferrer’s displeasure should he return home to find his young wife entertaining his son’s music teacher over sherry. Christ. Was the woman trying to get him killed?

“I’m afraid not, Señora.” Diago moved to step around her, and she slithered to block his path again.

“I’ve been trying to convince my husband to trim his beard as neatly as yours, but he insists on keeping those outdated muttonchops. Of course, his hair isn’t fine and black like yours.” She lifted the glass to her mouth and tongued a drop of sherry from the lip. “He’s more wooly. Like a sheep.”

“Perhaps if you spoke to his barber.” He took a step closer and when she didn’t move, he said, “I hope you will forgive me, Señora, but I would like to catch my roommate before he leaves for the evening.”

Señora Ferrer pursed her lips, disappointed that he wasn’t rising to her seductions. “I see.” She turned sideways but made sure to press her breasts against his arm as he passed. “This roommate of yours must be someone very special, since you’re always hurrying off to catch him.”

*More than you know.* Diago grabbed his coat and hat. He offered her a genuine smile at the thought of spending some time with Miquel. “Good evening, Señora.” Without waiting for her reply, he slipped out the door and closed it behind him with a relieved sigh.

No sooner had the latch clicked into place than Diago fled down the stairs. He didn't slow his pace until he reached the lobby, and paused there only long enough to put on his hat and coat.

Outside, an October fog, heavy with the smell of the sea, inched through the streets. Diago turned up his collar against the northern chill. He missed Sevilla's warmth more with every passing day, but Miquel had needed to come to Barcelona—Guillermo had ordered it.

As a member of Los Nefilim, the group that monitored daimonic activity for the angels, Miquel was bound by his oath to go wherever he was assigned. So when Guillermo had called him north in August, Miquel insisted that Diago come, too. Alone, Miquel noted, he was easy prey for either angel or daimon, both groups that were seeking to press Diago into their service.

And it was that point, which Miquel had hammered into Diago over and over, that had led him to endure the three most miserable weeks of his life. Unlike Miquel, Diago had made no oath to either side and could live wherever he chose.

*Unless your lover is an officer of Los Nefilim,* Diago mused as he maneuvered through the crowd of pedestrians. In that case, his choices narrowed to following Miquel, or living alone. Although he had initially resisted the move, in the end he knew he'd made the right choice. Being without Miquel was akin to living without love, and that was an existence he never wanted to endure again.

Picking up his pace, he left the main avenue and took a shortcut. He crossed a narrow street, barely avoiding a truck carrying several men and women in the bed. As they passed, he paused to watch them. They shouted slogans and waved signs advocating membership in CNT, the workers' union responsible for violent strikes throughout Spain. Cans of petrol rocked heavily between the legs of the riders.

With vivid clarity, Diago recalled the smell of churches burning in the south. The summer had been a vicious one for Spain. Now it appeared the flames would reach Barcelona once more. Like the angels and the daimons, the mortals never seemed to tire of war.

*Well, I'm tired,* he thought as the truck and its dangerous cargo disappeared around the next corner.

“Anarchists.” A man halted beside Diago and spat in the gutter. “They should be shot.” Then, without further ado, he launched into a fierce tirade about the Bolsheviks, Masons, and Jews being the architects of Spain’s ruin.

As the man’s words washed over Diago, the weight of the centuries bowed his shoulders. Exhausted by mortals and their perpetual hatred for one another, he turned his back on the man and resumed his journey. More than ever, he needed some time with Miquel. Just a word or a touch from his lover always lifted Diago from these black moods.

The afternoon’s tension rode the cords in his neck all the way to the Carrer de Montsio in the Gothic Quarter. There, he and Miquel rented a room from Doña Rosa Iniguez in her once grand home. The noblewoman had fallen on hard times—primarily due to her son’s gambling—so she rented rooms in order to make ends meet. Diago and Miquel had been fortunate enough to secure the attic’s loft.

Diago glanced upward out of habit. The loft’s window was dark. Had he missed Miquel? Disappointment slowed his steps.

He debated dropping off his briefcase and going downtown to the Villa Rosa where Miquel played guitar, but after today he wasn’t sure if he was up to fighting his way through the noise and press of mortal bodies on the Paralelo. No. If Miquel had already left, Diago would simply wait up for him. Right now, he wanted nothing more than silence and a glass of wine.

He let himself inside the house and closed the door as quietly as possible ... but any hopes he'd entertained of simply heading straight to the loft were immediately thwarted by his landlady. No matter how he tried, Diago found he could never avoid her, and there were times Miquel joked that she had a bit of daimon blood in her. But Diago knew better. She was just a lonely nosy woman. And tonight was no exception. He stepped through the door to be immediately accosted by the scent of Doña Rosa's talcum, which she used to cover the odor of urine that followed her like a stray dog. Dressed from head to foot in black, her pale doughy face floated out of the hall's dimness like a benevolent ghost.

She stood in her doorway and offered him a coquettish smile. "Good evening, Señor Alvarez."

Diago tried not to flinch. He dreaded these tête-à-têtes almost as much as Enrique's playing. However, Miquel emphasized it was best to remain in the doña's good graces. The rent was relatively cheap, and the room relatively spacious. Perhaps more important, her home had one of the few telephones on the street, and the doña was generous enough to place it in the hall so that her tenants could make use of it as well. Diago couldn't help but agree that they would be hard put finding another house with so gracious a proprietor.

Besides, the words cost him nothing. A few minutes of his time in the morning and evening were a small price to pay to maintain the peace with Miquel. Still, he hoped to keep tonight's chitchat to a minimum. He removed his fedora. "Good evening, Doña Rosa."

"I'm glad I caught you."

Caught him, indeed. She had been lying in wait with her ear pressed to the door. He forced a smile and feigned what he hoped was a look of polite inquiry. "Oh?"

"You had visitors today. They left something for you." She turned to the occasional table

by her door, where she retrieved a small rectangular package wrapped in plain brown paper. She presented it to him as if it was a personal gift.

Diago took the box, surprised by its weight. No address or name. “Are you sure it’s for me? I am expecting nothing.”

“The gentleman who left it said that it was a belated birthday gift.” She brightened. “I didn’t know you had a birthday recently.”

Neither did Diago. He’d never considered birthdays until Guillermo had insisted they all acquire passports. When pressed for a date, Diago had chosen April eighth, simply because it happened to be the first date he noticed on the calendar in Guillermo’s kitchen.

Doña Rosa leaned forward expectantly.

“I, um, haven’t,” Diago said. He cleared his throat. “My birthday is in the spring. That is what makes this so odd.” He seized the excuse. “And disconcerting. Did the gentleman say who was?”

“He said he was your father.”

Diago’s fingers tightened around the box. As far as he was concerned, his father was a nonentity, a figure as ephemeral as God, and with a presence just as opaque.

A thin line of anger wormed its way beneath his uneasiness. If this was a joke, he wasn’t amused. Someone played a very dangerous game tonight. “My father?”

“Yes. Your father.” Doña Rosa tilted her head and scrutinized Diago’s features. “You look very much like him.”

Diago felt his cheeks warm beneath her gaze.

“And he had a young man with him.”

“I see,” Diago said, not that he did.

A shadow moved behind Doña Rosa, and Diago made out the hulking shape of her twenty-eight-year-old son, José. He and Diago had developed a visceral dislike of one another within minutes of being introduced. Even Miquel had not managed to warm José with his charm.

Now José paused and narrowed his eyes at Diago. He rubbed the knuckles over the large signet ring he wore on his right hand and regarded Diago warily.

Doña Rosa continued. “The younger man claimed to be your brother.”

Diago chose his words carefully. “I had many *brothers*. I was raised in an orphanage.” It was a convenient lie, one he had used often enough. In truth, the woman who had called herself his aunt had sold him to slavers sometime early in the twelfth century, because she hadn’t wanted another mouth to feed. He’d been five years old when she abandoned him. She had promised that if he did what he was told, he would be fed. In his ignorance, he thought she planned to come back for him at the end of the day. He never saw her again, and his hard-won meals soured in his stomach. Sometimes it was better to starve.

José smirked. “I hope it’s a nice gift to make up for leaving you there.”

Doña Rosa tossed José a nasty glare before she turned back to Diago. The pity in her eyes was not insincere, and Diago felt somewhat chastised for his earlier thoughts about her. She was not a bad woman.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “I had no idea.”

No, not a bad woman. And yet he found her compassion harder to bear than José’s insults. More than ever, he wanted to be with Miquel. “If you will excuse me, Doña Rosa.”

“Of course. If you need anything—”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

She hesitated, and for one frightening moment, Diago was certain that she intended to

hug him.

“I’m fine,” he insisted, hoping to neutralize any maternal urges she might act upon.

“Very well then, Señor,” she murmured, and bowed her head to him. “Good night.” She stepped back into her apartment and shut the door.

The low staccato of her rebuke burst like machine-gun fire and reached through the walls into the hallway. José’s protests were barely audible. He wouldn’t raise his voice to his mother, but later in the evening, he would drink himself into enough courage to beat a prostitute.

It disgusted Diago, knowing that José would somehow blame him even as he abused a young woman. Yet there was nothing he could do about it. He had more pressing concerns. Someone had found him, knew his name, and the apartment he called home. The fact that the individual came in the guise of a father Diago had never known did nothing to ease his nerves—if anything, it only increased them. As much as they distrusted him, none of Guillermo’s Nefilim dared ridicule him with such a charade.

Diago hurried up the stairs and forced his key into the lock with a shaking hand. Inside, he shut the door and bolted it. The heavy shadows of the furniture loomed in the pale gray light leaking through the windows.

The easy chair Diago had claimed as his own sat in the corner that faced the door. A low table squatted before the chair and was strewn with musical scores. Diago’s guitar leaned against the wall, stored neatly in its case. Miquel’s guitar rested on the short sofa beside the chair.

“Miquel?” Diago called softly, not really expecting an answer. When Miquel was home, the rooms overflowed with his presence. This silence was heavy enough to be felt.

A low hum of panic seeded itself in Diago’s heart. He closed the curtains in each of the windows, his movements slow and deliberate. He paused before the glass and looked down into

the fog. Nothing moved, and even if it did, he would be hard put to see it. As he walked through the rooms, he noted the wrongness of the scene.

Miquel's empty guitar case was still on the bed beside the clothes he had selected for the evening. His hat and coat hung by the door. Wherever he'd gone, he had not intended to be gone long.

Had he seen the visitors? Diago castigated himself for not asking Doña Rosa when the alleged father and brother had arrived. It was possible they'd left minutes ago and that Miquel had gone out to follow them. Yes, that was plausible. In the fog, Diago might not have seen them. Miquel could be back any moment.

Diago clutched the package against his stomach and told himself these comfortable lies, hoping they were true. A half-empty cup of coffee sat on the dining table next to the day's newspaper. Diago touched the cup. It was cold. His hope tumbled into a pit of black thoughts he didn't want to indulge.

Of course, maybe the cold cup meant nothing. Miquel was often distracted and sometimes left his plates behind for Diago to wash and put away. It was one of his more irritating habits: a forgotten sandwich left to draw flies, coffee grounds littered around the pot, a half-empty mug turned cold by neglect, because he had left in a hurry, had not even taken the time to write a note, because he had not intended to be gone long ...

*Keep telling yourself that, Diago.*

"Where are you, Miquel?"

In answer, the package grew heavy in Diago's hand. He carefully placed the box on the scarred tabletop beside Miquel's mug and sat. His mouth was dry as he peeled away the paper to reveal a mirrored box.

A richly engraved calling card had been carefully placed on the lid. The raised script said “Beltran Prieto.” The name meant nothing to Diago. He turned the card over and examined every ridge. The paper carried the faintest odor of rosewater, but there was nothing distinctive about the scent. It could have just as easily come from Doña Rosa. Diago set the card aside and turned his attention to the box.

The casket was made of mirrored panels, and on the lid, a triptych had been etched in the glass. Diago went to the table in front of his easy chair and rummaged through the sheet music until he found a brass medallion that fit comfortably in the palm of his hand. It had been a gift from Miquel sometime in the late seventeenth century. He’d thought the magnifying glass concealed within the brass case to be most cunning.

Diago returned to the table. He pivoted the glass free of the cover in order to enlarge the tiny scenes. The detail of the relief was amazing, and executed with the skill that only a supernatural creature could possess.

The first panel showed the silhouette of a woman poised to dance, her arms raised over her head, her face turned upward as if looking at the sky. She was dressed in rags that rose behind her, which gave her the illusion of having wings. The ethereal figure seemed to twist and turn in the light. Around her throat was a small serpent with golden scales.

Chills rippled down Diago’s back. He had known only one Nefil who could evoke such a pose while dancing, a Gitana named Candela.

She had owned a little yellow snake with eyes the color of blood.

Diago had blocked the memory of her from his mind, partly from shame and partly from guilt. They had met in the slums of Triana where the music was deep and wild, like a cry in the night, and had known one another as Nefilim the moment their eyes met.

Beneath the open stars, she had whispered to him that she alone possessed the secret to a song that would end the conflict between the daimons and angels. She promised to teach him, and he, in his lust for peace, had believed her.

He had gone there to search for a song, and instead he found her.

Acutely aware of the sound of his breathing, Diago steadied the magnifying glass and moved to the next panel. The second scene showed two figures dancing together. The couple's features were indistinct. They were shadow-people who embraced one another beneath a frosted moon. The golden snake encircled their throats like a lemniscate, the symbol for eternity, and bound them together face-to-face. Diago recalled the supple scales against his skin. Once more, he tasted Candela's mouth on his and thought of anisette and honey and almonds.

She had wanted to take him to her bed. She needed his dreams, she said, the whisper of his darkness. His father had been a Nefil, the son of a daimon, and his mother had been an angel, who had taken her mortal form to give birth to him. He was the only Nefil who carried the power of both angel and daimon in his magic. Candela insisted that his unique heritage gave him the ability to understand the song, and no other Nefil would do.

He had objected that he belonged to another, yet his protests had sounded feeble even to his own ears. The lure of the song proved too hard to resist. If peace came to the angels and the daimons, then Los Nefilim would be free like the mortals, who lived their lives as they chose. No longer would they be forced to exist in shadow-armies, always looking over their shoulders, distrusting all whom they met. Infidelity to Miquel seemed a small price to pay for such a song.

Throughout their lovemaking, the little yellow snake had wound itself into her hair, then curled around her throat and mesmerized Diago with its ruby eyes. Candela's assurances had been low and gentle, like the sweep of the desert wind, or perhaps a snake, burnished by the sun.

She had seduced Diago into her bed with a tongue filled with lies.

Humiliation flushed his cheeks. He clenched the brass case in a white-knuckled grip. For days he had submitted to her attentions, and done all that she asked without question. He recalled the smell of the carnations she kept by her bed, the odor of rotten wood, and the sharp hard scent of tin.

And then, one morning, she was gone. The little yellow snake lay dead on the windowsill, and Candela had disappeared as if she had never lived. Too late, Diago realized the serpent had been an enchantment. When Candela had achieved all that she desired, the spell broke, and the snake had died.

She had made a fool of him. Ashamed of his culpability, he had never spoken of the tryst, not with Guillermo, and especially not to Miquel. Such a betrayal would have broken his heart. How did one explain an allure such as Candela's, one that made Diago go against his very nature? The truth was complicated, and he had no faith in his ability to convey the misery he'd felt when he realized what he'd done. So he had hidden his sin behind lies of omission, because lies were easier.

Unless the truth drove them into the light.

Diago wiped his sweaty palm across his thigh before he continued. The third panel showed a child around the age of five. A heavy mane of hair framed a face just beginning to lose its baby fat, to take the angular form of a youth. He stood with his arms raised over his head in the male form of Candela's pose—a boy pretending to be a man. Like Candela, his clothes weren't much more than rags, and around his throat was a little yellow snake with eyes the color of carmine.

Diago frowned. He didn't remember a child.

*I will give you a song*, Candela had said. She'd held Diago's face between her palms and pressed her mouth against his. *With your dreams and the whisper of your darkness*. She had kissed him again and took him down beneath a velvet moon.

Diago put his hand over his mouth and stared at the boy etched in glass. The child's features were as indistinct as the other figures on the triptych. Yet no lack of detail could hide the bold thrust of his chin, the tilt of his hips. He exhibited an unconscious grace of form ... which Diago recognized as his own.

"A son?" He dropped the magnifying glass. It clattered to the tabletop, the glass pivoting halfway back into the case like an eye that wanted to close against the truth. Diago's heart rapped staccato beats as his gaze wandered again to the snake around the boy's neck.

"This can't be." Maybe he was mistaken. It was possible that he read far more into this triptych than was true. Surely if he had fathered a child, Candela would have found him before now.

He picked up the magnifying glass again. In the first panel, etched within a miniature scroll beneath Candela's feet were the years 1895-1929.

"Jesus Christ." If the dates meant anything at all, Candela was dead. "And if Candela is dead, where is my son?"

Diago glared at the calling card that bore Beltran Prieto's name. The ink bled into the fibers of the paper, and the lines eddied like ripples across a pond. Prieto's name disappeared as the ink took the shape of an hourglass, the sand rapidly running out. In a series of seemingly random swirls, the lines formed new words: *He needs you. Come alone or not at all.*

Diago reached for the card, but before he touched it, the words dissolved and spelled out the name Beltran Prieto. He withdrew his hand.

What did that mean? An hourglass? And who needed him? His son, or Miquel? Or both?

The answer lay within the box. He knew that now like he knew with a terrible certainty that Miquel had not left to follow the two strangers who had brought this tainted gift. Miquel was not coming back.

The room felt cold in spite of the radiator ticking against the wall. Diago's gaze fell to the casket's latch. He hummed a low and deadly note, and parted the air with waves of sound. The timbre of his voice took the form of silver light and hung suspended over the box. Diago used his finger to manipulate the waves into a sigil of protection. Moving with confidence, he quickly traced four vertical and horizontal stripes in the air. He surrounded the lines with a circle that ended in an elaborate tail.

The glyph spun lazily and covered his hands as he lifted the lid. Inside, settled atop a bed of white silk, was a ring that Diago had given Miquel. The wedding band was an exact match to the one that Diago wore on a chain next to his heart.

A cold wash of fear flooded his stomach and spread down into his thighs. Did Miquel know about Candela? Had Beltran Prieto told him? Suddenly, Diago saw nothing but the hurt on Miquel's face. The image settled against his mind like a blow.

Diago took the ring from the box and slid it onto his index finger. *Calm down and think.* He couldn't imagine Miquel taking off his ring and placing it in the mirrored box, no matter how angry he might be about Diago's adultery. That simply wasn't his way. Miquel was too emotional for such a cold good-bye.

Diago examined the silk within the box. In one corner was splash of blood. Diago licked his finger and touched the blood. He lifted his finger to his tongue and tasted silk and parchment and the bitterness of rosemary. Diago knew the taste of his lover's blood. Miquel was hurt.

He pressed the ring to his mouth. The metal was cold against his lips. Miquel had not left him, not voluntarily. Perhaps even now he was with Diago's son, but where?

The faint sound of chimes interrupted Diago's thoughts. From the downstairs hall, in its niche beside the phone, Doña Rosa's great clock tolled seven times.

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