

THE BEGINNING

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Greece, 7382 BCE

Acheron felt a presence behind him. He spun around, staff ready to strike, expecting it to be another Daimon attacking him.

It wasn't.

Instead, he found Simi hanging upside down in a tree, her long, burgundy bat-like wings folded in against her child-like body. She wore a loose black chiton and himation that rippled gently with the night's breeze. Her blood red eyes glowed eerily in the darkness while her long black braid dangled from her head, down to the ground.

Acheron relaxed and set one end of his staff against the damp grass as he watched her.

"Where have you been, Simi?" he asked sharply. He'd been calling for the Charonte demon for the last half an hour.

"Oh just hanging about, akri," she said, smiling as she swung herself back and forth on the limb. "Did akri miss me?"

Acheron sighed. He liked Simi a great deal, but he wished he had a mature demon as his companion. Not one that even at three thousand years old functioned on the level of a five year old child.

It would be centuries before Simi was fully grown.

"Did you deliver my message?" he asked.

"Yes, akri," she said, using the Atlantean term for 'my lord and master.' "I delivered it just as you said, akri."

The skin on the back of Acheron's neck crawled. There was something in her tone that concerned him. "What did you do, Simi?"

"The Simi did nothing, akri. But..."

He waited as she looked about nervously.

"But?" he prompted.

"The Simi was hungry on her way back."

He went cold with dread. "Who did you eat this time?"

"It wasn't a who, akri. It was something that had hornies on its head like me. There were a bunch of them actually. All of them had hornies and they made a strange moo moo sound."

“Do you mean cows? You ate cattle?”

“That’s it, akri. I ate cattle.”

“That’s not so bad.”

“No, it was actually rather good, akri. Why didn’t you tell the Simi about cows. They are very tasty when roasted. The Simi liked them a lot.”

“Then why are you worried?”

“Because this really tall man with only one eyeball came out of a cave and was screaming at the Simi. He say the Simi was evil for eating the cows and that I would have to pay for them. What does that mean, akri? Pay? The Simi know nothing about pay.”

Acheron wished he could say the same for himself. “This really big man, was he a cyclops?”

“What’s a cyclops?”

“A son of Poseidon.”

“Oh see, that’s what he said. Only he had no hornies. He had a big, bald head instead.”

Acheron didn’t want to discuss the cyclops’ big bald head with his demon. What he needed to know was what to do to make amends for her voracious appetite. “So what did the cyclops say to you?”

“That he be mad at the Simi for eating the cattle. He said the horny cows belonged to Poseidon. Who is Poseidon, akri?”

“A Greek god.”

“Oh see then, the Simi is not in trouble. I just kill the Greek god and all’s fine.”

“You can’t kill a Greek god, Simi. It’s not allowed.”

“There you go again, akri, saying no to the Simi. Don’t eat that, Simi. Don’t kill that, Simi. Stay here, Simi. Go to Katoteros, Simi, and wait for me to call you.” She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a stern frown. “I don’t like being told no, akri.”

Acheron grimaced at the ache that was starting in the back of his skull. He wished he’d been given a pet parrot for his twenty-first birthday. The Charonte demon was going to be the death of him...again.

“So why were you calling the Simi, akri?”

“I wanted your help with the Daimons.”

She relaxed and went back to swinging on her limb. “You didn’t seem to need any help, akri. The Simi thinks you did quite well with them on your own. I particularly liked the way that one

Daimon flipped up into the air before you killed him. Very nice. I did not know they were so colorful when they exploded.”

She flipped off the limb and came to stand by his side. “Where we go now, akri? Will you take Simi somewhere cold again? I liked that last place we went. The mountain was very nice.”

Acheron?

He paused as he felt Artemis summoning him. He let out another long-suffering sigh.

For two thousand years, he had been ignoring her.

Still she insisted on calling out to him.

There was a time when she had sought him out in the “flesh,” but he had blocked her from that ability.

Her mental telepathy to him was the only contact he couldn’t sever entirely.

“Come, Simi,” he said, starting his journey that would take him back to Therakos. The Daimons there had set up a colony where they were preying on the poor Greeks who lived in a small village.

Acheron. I need your help. My new Dark-Hunters need a trainer.

He froze at Artemis’s words.

New Dark-Hunters?

What the hell was that?

“What have you done, Artemis?” his voice whispered along the wind, traveling to Olympus where she waited in her temple.

So, you do speak to me. He heard the relief in her tone. I had begun to wonder if I would ever hear the sound of your voice again.

Acheron curled his lip. He didn’t have time for this.

Acheron?

He ignored her.

She didn’t take the hint.

The Daimon menace is spreading faster than you can contain it. You needed help and so I have given it to you.

He scoffed at the idea of her help. The Greek goddess had never done anything for anyone other than herself since the dawn of time.

“Leave me alone, Artemis. We are through, you and I. I have a job to do and no time to be bothered with you.”

Fine then. I shall send them out to face the Daimons unprepared. If they die, well, who cares for a human? I can just make more of them to fight.

It was a trick.

And yet in his gut, Acheron knew it wasn't. She probably had made more Dark-Hunters and if she truly had, then she would definitely do it again.

Especially if it would make him feel guilty.

Damn her. He would have to go to her temple again.

Personally, he would rather be disemboweled.

He looked to his demon. “Simi, I need to see Artemis now. You return to Katoteros and stay out of trouble until I summon you.”

The demon grimaced. “The Simi don't like Artemis, akri. I wish you'd let the Simi kill that goddess. The Simi want to pull out her long, red hair.”

He knew the feeling.

Simi had only met Artemis once, back when Acheron had been mortal.

The event had been disastrous.

“I know, Simi, which is why I want you to stay at Katoteros.” He stepped away, then turned back to face her. “And for Archon's sake, please don't eat anything until I get back. Especially not a human.”

“But—”

“No, Simi. No food.”

“No, Simi. No food,” she mocked. “The Simi don't like this, akri. Katoteros is boring. There's nothing fun there. Only old dead people who want to come back here. Bleh!”

“Simi...” he said, his voice thick with warning.

“I hear and obey, akri. The Simi just never said she would do so quietly.”

He shook his head at the incorrigible demon, then willed himself from the earth to Artemis's temple on Olympus.

Acheron stood on top of the golden bridge that traversed a winding river. The sound of the water echoed off the sheer sides of the mountain that rose up all around him.

In the last two thousand years, nothing had changed.

The entire area at the top of the mountain was made up of sparkling bridges and walkways, covered by a rainbow fog, that led to the various temples of the gods.

The halls of Mount Olympus were opulent and massive. Perfect homes for the egos of the gods who lived inside them.

Artemis's was made of gold, with a domed top and white, marble columns. The view of the sky and world below was breathtaking from her throne room.

Or so he had thought in his youth.

But that was before time and experience had jaundiced his appreciation. To him there was nothing spectacular or beautiful here now. He saw only the selfish vanity and coldness of the Olympians.

These new gods were very different from the gods Acheron had been reared with. All but one of the Atlantean gods had been full of compassion. Love. Kindness. Forgiveness.

There was only one time when the Atlanteans had let their fear lead them—that mistake had cost all of them their immortal lives and had allowed the Olympian gods to replace them.

It had been a sad day for the human world in more ways than one.

Acheron forced himself across the bridge that led to Artemis's temple. Two thousand years ago, he had left this place and sworn that he would never return to it.

He should have known that sooner or later she would devise a scheme to bring him back.

His gut tight with anger, Acheron used his telekinesis to open the oversized, gilded doors. He was instantly assailed with the sound of ear-piercing screams from Artemis's female attendants. They were wholly unaccustomed to a man entering their goddess' private domain.

Artemis hissed at the shrill sound, then zapped every one of the women around her.

“Did you just kill all eight of them?” Acheron asked.

Artemis rubbed her ears. “I should have, but no, I merely tossed them into river outside.”

Surprised, he stared at her. How unusual for the goddess he remembered. Perhaps she'd learned a degree of compassion and mercy over the last two thousand years.

Knowing her, it was highly unlikely.

Now that they were alone, she unfolded herself from her cushioned ivory throne and approached him. She wore a sheer, white peplos that hugged the curves of her voluptuous body and her dark auburn curls glistened in the light.

Her green eyes glowed warmly in welcome.

The look went through him like a lance. Hot. Piercing. Painful.

He'd known seeing her again would be hard on him— it was one of the reasons why he'd always ignored her summons.

But knowing something and experiencing it were two entirely different things.

He'd been unprepared for the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him now that he saw her again.

The hatred. The betrayal.

Worst of all was the need.

The hunger.

The desire.

There was still a part of him that loved her. A part of him that was willing to forgive her anything.

Even his death...

"You look good, Acheron. Every bit as handsome as you were the last time I saw you." She reached to touch him.

He stepped back, out of her reach. "I didn't come here to chat, Artemis, I—"

"You used to call me Artie."

"I used to do a lot of things I can't do anymore." He gave her a hard stare to remind her of everything she had taken from him.

"You're still angry at me."

"You think so?"

Her eyes snapped emerald fire, reminding him of the demon who resided in her divine body. "I could have forced you to come to me, you know. I've been very tolerant of your defiance. More than I should have been."

He looked away, knowing she was right. She, alone, held possession of the food source he needed to function.

When he went too long without food, he became an uncontrollable killer. A danger to anyone who came near him.

Only Artemis held the key that kept him as he was. Sane. Whole.

Compassionate.

"Why didn't you force me to your side?" he asked.

“Because I know you. Had I tried, you would have made us both pay for it.”

Again, she was right. His days of subjugation were long over. He’d had more than his share of it in his childhood and youth. Having tasted freedom and power, he’d decided he liked it too much to go back to being what he’d been before.

“Tell me of these new Dark-Hunters,” he said. “Why would you create more of my kind?”

“I told you, you need help.”

“I need no such thing.”

“I and the other Greek gods disagree.”

“Artemis...” he growled her name, knowing she was lying about this. He was more than able to control and kill the Daimons who preyed on the humans. “I swear...”

He clenched his teeth as he thought about the early days of his conversion. He’d had no one to show him the way. No one to explain to him what he needed to do.

How to live.

The rules that bound him to the night.

The new ones would be lost. Confused.

Worst of all, they were vulnerable until they learned to use their powers.

Damn her.

“Where are they?”

“Waiting in Falossos. They hide in a cave that keeps them from the sunlight. But they’re not sure what they should do or how to find the Daimons. They are men in need of leadership.”

Acheron didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to lead anyone any more than he wanted to follow someone else’s orders. He didn’t want to deal with other people at all.

He’d never wanted anything in his life except to be left alone.

The thought of interacting with others...

It made his blood run cold.

Half tempted to go his own way, Acheron knew he couldn’t. If he didn’t train the men on how to fight and kill the Daimons, they would end up dead.

And dead without a soul was a very bad existence. He of all men knew that one.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll train them.”

She smiled.

Acheron flashed from her temple back to Simi and ordered her to stay put a little longer. The demon would only complicate an already complicated matter.

Once he was sure she would stay, he teleported to Falossos.

He found the three men huddled in the darkness just as Artemis had said. They were talking quietly amongst themselves, grouped around a small fire for warmth and yet their eyes watered from the brightness of the flames.

Their eyes were no longer human and could no longer take the brightness that came from any source of light.

He had much to teach them.

Acheron moved forward, out of the shadows.

“Who are you?” the tallest one asked as soon as he saw him.

The man was no doubt a Dorian with long black hair. He was tall, powerfully built, and still dressed in his battle armor that was in bad need of care and repair.

The men with him were blond Greeks. Their armor was no better than the first man’s. The youngest of them had a hole in the center of his breast plate where he had been stabbed through his heart with a javelin.

These men could never go out and mix with living people dressed like this. Each of them needed care. Rest.

Instruction.

Acheron lowered the cowl to his black himation and eyed each man in turn.

As they noted the swirling silver color of his eyes, the men paled.

“Are you a god?” the tallest one asked. “We were told a god would kill us if we were in their presence.”

“I am Acheron Parthenopaeus,” he said quietly. “Artemis sent me to train you.”

“I am Callabrax of Likonos,” the tallest said.

He indicated the man to his right. “Kyros of Seklos.” Then the youngest of their group, “and Ias of Groesia.”

Ias stood back, his dark eyes hollow. Acheron could hear the man’s thoughts as clearly as if they were in his own mind.

The man’s pain reached out to him, making his own stomach tighten in sympathy.

“How long has it been since you men were created?” Acheron asked them.

“A few weeks for me,” Kyros said.

Callabrax nodded. “I was created about the same time.”

Acheron looked to Ias.

“Two days ago,” he said, his voice empty.

“He’s still sick from the conversion,” Kyros supplied. “It was almost a week before I could...adjust.”

Acheron stifled the urge to laugh bitterly. It was a good word for it.

“Have you killed any Daimons yet?” he asked them.

“We tried,” Callabrax said, “but they are very different from killing soldiers. Stronger. Faster. They don’t die easily. We already lost two men to them.”

Acheron winced at the thought of two unprepared men going up against the Daimons and the horrific existence that awaited them when they had died.

It was followed by the memory of his first fight...

He blocked the thought out of his mind.

“Have the three of you eaten tonight?”

They nodded.

“Then follow me outside and I’ll teach what you need to know to kill them.”

Acheron worked with them until it was almost dawn. He shared with them everything he could for one night. Taught them new tactics. Where and how the Daimons were most vulnerable.

At the end of the night, he left them to their cave.

“I shall find you a better place to hide in daylight,” he promised them.

“I’m a Dorian,” Callabrax said proudly. “I require nothing more than what I have.”

“But we’re not,” Kyros said. “A bed would be most welcomed to me and Ias. A bath even more so.”

Acheron inclined his head, then motioned for Ias to join him outside.

He stood back as Ias left first, then directed him away from the others’ hearing.

“You want to see your wife again,” Acheron said quietly.

He looked up, startled. "How do you know that?"

Acheron didn't answer. Even as a human, he'd hated personal questions as they most often led him into conversations he didn't want to have. Pricked at memories he wanted to keep buried.

Closing his eyes, Acheron let his mind wander out, through the cosmos until he found the woman who haunted Ias's mind.

Liora.

She was a beautiful woman, with hair as black as a raven's wing. Eyes as clear and blue as the open sea.

No wonder Ias missed her.

The woman was currently on her knees, weeping. "Please," she begged to the gods. "Please return my love to me. Please let my children have their father home."

Acheron felt sympathy for her at the sight and sound of her fears. No one had told her yet what had happened. She was praying for the welfare of a man who was no longer with her.

It haunted him.

"I understand your sadness," he said to Ias. "But you can't let them know you live now in this form. They will fear you if you return home. Try to kill you."

Ias's eyes welled with tears and when he spoke, his fangs cut his lips. "Liora has no one else to care for her. She was an orphan and my brother was killed the day before I was. There is no one to provide for my children."

"You can't go back."

"Why not?" Ias asked angrily. "Artemis said that I could have my vengeance on the man who killed me and then I would be alive to serve her. She said nothing about my not being able to go home."

Acheron tightened his grip on his staff. "Ias, think for a moment. You are no longer human. How do you think your village would act if you returned home with fangs and black eyes? You can't venture out into daylight. Your allegiance is to all mankind, not just to your family. No one can meet the obligations of both. You can't ever go back."

The man's lips quivered, but he nodded in understanding. "I save the humans while my innocent family is cast out to starve with no one to protect them. So, that was my bargain."

Acheron looked away as his heart ached for the man and his family.

"Go inside with the others," Acheron said.

He watched Ias return while he thought over the man's words.

He couldn't leave it like this.

Acheron could function alone, but the others...

Closing his eyes, he willed himself back to Artemis.

This time when her women opened their mouths to scream, Artemis froze their vocal chords.

"Leave us," she commanded them.

The women rushed for the door as fast as they could, then slammed it shut behind them.

As soon as they were alone, Artemis smiled at him. "You are back. I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"Don't, Artemis," he said, curbing her playfulness before she started with it. "I'm basically back to yell at you."

"For what?"

"How dare you lie to those men to get them into your service."

"I never lie."

He arched a brow.

Looking instantly uncomfortable, she cleared her throat and leaned back into her throne. "You were different and I didn't lie. I merely forgot to mention a few things."

"That is semantics, Artemis, and this isn't about me. This is about what you've done to them. You can't leave those poor bastards out there like you have."

"And why not? You've survived quite well on your own."

"I am not the same as they and well you know it. I had nothing in my life worth going back to. No family, no friends."

"I take exception to that. What was I?"

"A mistake that I've been lamenting for the last two thousand years."

Her face flushed. She came off her throne and descended two stairs to stand before him. "How dare you speak to me that way!"

Acheron whipped his cloak off and tossed it and his staff angrily into a corner. "Kill me for it, Artemis. Go right ahead. Do us both a favor and put me out of my misery."

She tried to slap him, but he caught her hand in his and stared down into her eyes.

Artemis saw the hatred in Acheron's gaze, the scathing condemnation.

Their angry breaths mingled and the air around them snapped furiously as their powers clashed.

But it wasn't his fury she wanted.

No, never his fury...

Her gaze drifted over him. Over the perfect sculpted planes of his face, his high cheekbones, his long, aquiline nose. The blackness of his hair.

The eerie mercury of his eyes.

There had never been a mortal born who could equal his physical perfection.

And it wasn't just his beauty that drew people to him. It wasn't his beauty that drew her to him.

He possessed a raw, rare kind of masculine charisma. Power. Strength. Charm. Intelligence. Determination.

To look at him was to want him.

To see him was to ache to touch him.

He had been built to please, and trained to pleasure. Everything about him from the sleek muscles that rippled to the deep, erotic timber in his voice seduced anyone who came into contact with him.

Like a lethal wild animal, he moved with a primal promise of danger and masculine power. With the promise of supreme sexual fulfillment.

They were promises he delivered well on.

In all eternity, he was the only man who had made her weak.

The only man she had ever loved.

He had the power in him to kill her. They both knew it. And she found the fact that he didn't intriguing and provocative.

Seductive and erotic.

Swallowing, she remembered him as he had been when they first met.

The strength of him. The passion.

Defiantly, he had stood in her temple and laughed when she threatened to kill him.

There before her statue, he had dared do what no man before or since had ever dared...

She could still taste that kiss.

Unlike other men, he had never feared her.

Now, the heat of his hand on her flesh seared her, but then his touch always had. There was nothing more she craved than the taste of his lips. The fire of his passion.

And with one mistake, she had lost him.

Artemis wanted to weep with the hopelessness of it all. She'd tried once, long ago, to turn back the hands of time and redo that morning.

To win back Acheron's love and trust.

The Fates had punished her severely for the audacity.

For the last two thousand years, she had tried everything to bring him back to her side.

Nothing had worked. Nothing had ever come close to making him forgive her or to journey back to her temple.

Not until she thought of the one thing he could never say no to— a mortal soul in jeopardy.

Acheron would do anything to save the humans.

Her plan to make him responsible for more Dark-Hunters had worked and now he was back.

If she could just keep him.

“You want me to release them?” she asked.

For him, she would do anything.

“Yes.”

For her, he would do nothing.

Not unless she forced him to it.

“What will you do for me, Acheron? You know the rules. A favor requires a favor.”

He released her with an angry curse and stepped back from her. “I've learned better than to play this game with you.”

Artemis shrugged with a nonchalance she didn't feel. At this moment everything she cared about was on the line.

If he said no, it would destroy her.

“Fine, they will continue on as Dark-Hunters then. Alone with no one to teach them what they need to know. No one to care what becomes of them.”

He released a long, tired breath.

She wanted to comfort him, but knew he would reject her touch. He'd always rejected comfort or solace.

He was stronger than anyone had a right to be.

When he met her gaze, it sent a raw, sensual shiver over her.

“If they are to serve you and the gods, Artemis, they have things they need.”

“Such as?”

“Armor for one. You can't send them out to fight without weapons. They need money to procure food, clothes, horses and even servants to watch over them in the daylight while they rest.”

“You ask too much for them.”

“I ask only for what they need to survive.”

“You never asked any of that for yourself.” She was hurt now at that fact.

He never asked for anything.

“I don't need food and my powers allow me to procure everything else I need. As for protection, I have Simi. They won't last alone.”

No one lasts alone, Acheron.

No one.

Not even you.

And especially not me.

Artemis lifted her chin, determined to have him by her side no matter the consequences. “And again I say to you, what will you give me for what they need?”

Acheron looked away, his gut tight. He knew what she wanted and the last thing he wanted was to give it to her. “This is for them, not me.”

She shrugged. “Fine then, they can do without since they have nothing to barter with.”

His fury ignited deep at her casual dismissal of their lives and well-being.

She hadn't changed at all.

“Damn you, Artemis.”

She approached him slowly. “I want you, Acheron. I want you back like you were before.”

He inwardly cringed as she cupped his face in her hand. They could never go back as they had been. He'd learned too much about her since then.

He had been betrayed one time too many.

He would say he was a slow learner, but that wasn't true. What he'd been was so desperate for someone to care about him that he had ignored the darker side of her nature.

Ignored it until she'd had turned her back on him and left him to die.

Some crimes were even above his ability to forgive.

His thoughts turned from himself, to the innocent men who were living in a cave. Men who knew nothing of their new existence or enemies. He couldn't leave them there like that.

He had cost enough people their lives, their futures.

There was no way he could let them lose their souls and life too.

"All right, Artemis. I will give you what you want, if you give them what they need to survive."

She beamed.

"But," he continued, "my terms are this: you are going to pay them every month a wage that will allow them to buy whatever they need or desire. As stated earlier, they will need shield-bearers to care for them personally so that they won't have to worry about scrounging for food, clothes or arms. I don't want them to be distracted from their work."

"Fine, I will find humans who will serve them."

"Living humans, Artemis. I want them to serve of their own free will. No more Dark-Hunters."

"Four of you are not enough. We need more to keep the Daimons in check."

Acheron closed his eyes as he felt the endlessness of this relationship. All too easily he could see into the future and where this was headed.

The more Dark-Hunters, the more he would be locked to her. There was no way to keep her from tying him to her forever.

Or was there?

"All right," he said. "I'll give on this, if you will agree to provide them a way out of your service."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to establish a way for the Dark-Hunters to regain their souls so that they are no longer bound to you if they so choose it."

Artemis stepped back. This wasn't something she had foreseen. If she gave him this, then

even he would be bound by it.

He could leave her.

She'd forgotten just how devious Acheron could be. How well he knew the rules of the game and how to manipulate them and her.

He was truly her equal.

And yet if she failed to give him this, then he would leave her anyway. She had no choice and well he knew it.

However, there were still things that could keep him by her side.

One way she knew that would ensure his presence in her life for all eternity.

"Very well. Let us make the rules to govern them, then." She felt his thoughts drift back toward Ias.

He pitied the poor Greek soldier who loved his wife.

Pity, mercy and compassion would always be his downfall.

"Number one, is that they must die to reclaim their souls."

"Why?" he asked.

"A soul can only be released from a body at the moment of death. Likewise, it can only return to a body that is no longer functioning. So long as they 'live' as a Dark-Hunter, they can never have their souls again. That's not my rule, Acheron, that is simply the nature of souls."

He frowned at that. "How do you kill an immortal Dark-Hunter?"

"Well, we could cut off their heads or expose them to daylight, but since that damages their body beyond repair, it rather defeats the purpose."

"You're not funny."

And neither was he. She didn't want to release them from her service.

Most of all, she didn't want to release him .

"You have to drain out their Dark-Hunter powers," she told him. "Make their immortal bodies vulnerable to attack, then stop their hearts from beating. Only then do they die in a manner that will enable them to return to life."

"Fine, I can do that."

"Actually, you can't."

"What do you mean?"

She fought the urge to smile. Here was where she had him.

“There are a few laws you need to know about souls, Acheron. One is the owner must freely give it up. Since I own their souls...”

Acheron cursed. “I will have to barter with you for every soul.”

She nodded.

He looked less than pleased by the knowledge. But he would come around in time.

Yes, he would definitely come around...

“What else?” he asked.

Now for her one rule that would bind him to her forever. “Only a true, pure heart can release the soul back into a body. The one who returns the soul must be the one person who loves them above all others. A person they love and trust in return.”

“Why?”

“Because the soul needs something to motivate it to movement, otherwise it stays where it is. I use vengeance to motivate the soul into my possession. Only an equal and as powerful an emotion will motivate the soul back into its body. Since I can choose that emotion, I choose it to be love. The most beautiful and noble of all emotions. The only one worth returning for.”

Acheron stared at the marble floor as her words whispered around him.

Love.

Trust.

Such simple words to say. Such powerful words to feel. He envied those who knew their true meaning.

He had never really known either one. Betrayal, pain, degradation, suspicion, hatred. That was his existence. That was all he'd ever been shown.

Part of him wanted to turn about and leave Artemis forever.

“Return my beloved to me. Please, I will do anything to have him home...”Liora's words rang in his head. He could hear her tears even now. Feel her pain.

Feel the pain of Ias as he thought of his children and wife. His worry over their welfare.

Acheron had never known that kind of unselfish love. Neither before nor after his death.

“Give me Ias's soul.”

Artemis gave him an arched look. “Are you willing to pay the price I ask for it, and to the

terms for their release?”

His heart shrank at her words. He remembered the youth he had been long ago.

Everything has a price, boy. Nothing ever comes to anyone for free. His uncle had taught him well the price of survival.

Acheron had paid dearly for everything he'd ever had or wanted. Food. Shelter. Clothes.

Paid with flesh and blood.

Some things never changed.

“Yes,” he said. “I agree. I'll pay.”

Artemis smiled. “Don't look so unhappy, Acheron. I promise you, you'll enjoy it.”

His stomach tightened even more. He'd heard those words before too.

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It was dusk when Acheron returned to the cave.

He wasn't alone as he walked up the small rise. He led two men and four horses.

“What is all this?” Callabrax asked.

“These are to be the shield-bearers for you and Kyros. They've come to show you both to the villas where you will live. They will see to anything you need and I will come by later to finish our training.”

“What of me?” Ias asked.

“You're coming with me.”

Acheron waited until the other two had mounted their horses and left before he turned back to Ias. “Are you ready to go home?”

Ias looked surprised. “But you said—”

“I was wrong. You can go back.”

“What of my oath to Artemis?”

“It's been taken care of.”

Ias embraced him like a brother.

Acheron cringed at the contact, especially since it aggravated the deep welts on his back. The even deeper welts that resided in his soul.

He'd always hated for anyone to touch him.

Gently, he pushed Ias away.

"Come, let us see you home."

Acheron flashed them back to Ias's small farm where his wife had just sent their two children to bed.

Her beautiful face paled as she saw them by her hearth.

"Ias?" She blinked. "They told me this morning that you were dead."

Ias shook his head, his eyes bright. "Nay, my love. I am here. I've come home to you."

Acheron took a deep breath as Ias rushed to her and hugged her close. It went a long way in ebbing the pain of his back.

"There's still a couple of things, Ias," Acheron said quietly.

Ias pulled back with a frown.

"Your wife will have to release your soul back into your body."

Liora scowled. "What?"

"I swore myself to serve Artemis," Ias explained, "but she's going to let me go so that I can come back to you."

She looked baffled by his words.

"What must we do?" Ias asked.

"You'll have to die again."

He paled a bit. "Are you sure?"

Acheron nodded, then handed his dagger to Liora. "You'll have to stab him through the heart."

She looked horrified and appalled by his suggestion. "What?"

"It's the only way."

"It's murder. I'll be hanged."

"No, I swear it."

"Do it, Liora," Ias urged. "I want to be with you again."

Her face skeptical, she took the dagger in her hand and tried to press it into his chest.

It didn't work.

All the blade did was prick the skin.

Acheron grimaced as he remembered what Artemis had said about Dark-Hunter powers. An average human wouldn't be able to hurt a Dark-Hunter with a dagger.

But he could.

Taking the dagger from Liora, he drove it straight through Ias's heart.

Ias stumbled back, panting.

"Don't panic," Acheron said, laying him down on the floor before his hearth. "I've got you."

Acheron reached up and pulled Liora down by his side. He took the stone medallion that contained Ias's soul from his satchel. "You have to take this into your hand when he dies and release his soul back into his body."

"How?" she asked.

"Press the stone over his bow and arrow brand mark."

Acheron waited until the moment right before Ias died. He handed the medallion to Liora.

She screamed as soon as it touched her hand, then dropped it to the floor.

"It's on fire!" she shrieked.

Ias gasped as he struggled to live.

"Pick it up," Acheron ordered Liora.

She blew cool air across her palm as she shook her head no.

"What is wrong with you, woman?" Acheron asked. "He's going to die if you don't save him. Pick up his soul."

"No."

"No? How can you not? I heard you praying for him to return to you. You said you would give anything for your beloved to return."

She dropped her hand and eyed him coldly. "Ias is not my beloved. Lycantes is. It was he whom I prayed for and he is dead now. I was told the ghost of Ias murdered him because he killed Ias in battle so that the two of us could be together to raise our children."

Acheron was dumbstruck by her words.

He looked at Ias and saw the pain in his eyes before they turned blank and Ias died.

His heart hammering, Acheron picked up the medallion and tried to release the soul himself.

It didn't work.

Furious, he froze Liora into place before he killed her for her actions.

"Artemis!" he shouted at the ceiling.

The goddess flashed into the hut.

"Save him."

"I can't change the rules, Acheron. I told you the conditions and you agreed to them."

He motioned to the woman who was now a human statue. "Why didn't you tell me she didn't love him?"

"I had no way of knowing that anymore than you did." Her eyes turned dull. "Even gods can make mistakes."

"Then why didn't you at least tell me the medallion would burn her?"

"That I didn't know. It doesn't burn me and it didn't burn you. I've never had a human hold one before."

Acheron's head buzzed with guilt and grief. With hatred for both himself and her. "What happens to him now?"

"He's a Shade. Without a body or soul, his essence is trapped in Katoteros."

Acheron roared with the pain of what she was telling him. He had just killed a man and sentenced him to a fate far worse than death.

And for what?

For love?

For mercy?

Gods, he was such a fool.

Better than anyone, he should have known to ask the right questions. He should have known better than to trust in the love of another person.

Damn it, when would he learn?

Artemis reached down to him and lifted his chin with her hand until he looked up at her. "Tell me, Acheron, is there anyone you will ever trust enough to release your soul?"

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