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Shades of Silver

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# ***SHADES OF SILVER***

**Nathalie Gray**

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## Prologue

For eons they had lain in deep but fitful slumber, tormented in their bodies by hungers of every kind, in their spirits by needs yet unmet and in their hearts by work left unfinished. The world had once been theirs. Then it had been stolen. Ripped out of their grasp by jealous and vengeful gods who had usurped their place in mortals' hearts, who had relegated them to this underworld of ice and stone to become mere shadows of themselves. Shades.

But they had prospered despite the setback. Over the millennia, rituals of lustful abandon, of every excess known—and unknown—to man had restored some of their powers. They fed on mortals' emotions. Lust. Greed. Fear. Unable to deny the temptation, mortals had flocked to the Shades, wanting, yearning, ready to sacrifice everything to the altars of pleasure and hedonism so they could learn what had never been meant to be taught. And Shades had taken. Everything.

Exalted, mortals had at first come of their own volition then dragged volunteers behind when their numbers had begun to dwindle. In the end, the ungrateful mortals had stopped coming altogether, found other sources of pleasure and means of achieving it. Or perhaps they understood how each time they had sacrificed one of theirs, had touched the mirrors and given themselves over, Shades had grown stronger until the day they had become almost powerful enough to escape their prison, break the mirrors behind which they waited and take the world once more. Take it, ravish it. Rape it.

They had come close. Had failed.

So the Shades now slept, still in their home of ice and crystal, trapped behind the mirrors of their prison. Ready to feed on mortals' life force. Waiting. Lusting.

Then a change came to the air. It began in a subtle way, as portentous presages always did, subtle yet persistent.

*Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud.*

A few Shades, the most ancient and fearsome, began to stir. One raised his head. "His" for Shades had been created in the image of mortal males, impossibly strong and fierce in body with faces to make angels sing and decadent hands to damn the purest souls. Their pale silvery skin and mesmerizing eyes had lured more than one prey to them until it had been too late and the trap had been sprung. Beauty incarnate, ruse in suits of flesh, tempters and whisperers. Aching beautiful. Deadly.

*Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud.*

One, two then more Shades raised their faces to listen, to feel the subtle change caress their hardened skin. An offering long sought and hungered for, someone had

come once more into their underworld, had come visit them in their prison. How delightful. How very foolish.

## Chapter One

"Two Euros fifty," Audrey repeated as she dug around her backpack's outer pocket for the exact change. Always had to have the exact change. Another obsession of hers. That and making lists, always having a pack of tissue and compulsively labeling and stuffing into plastic containers anything that'd sit still long enough had served to make her one *organized* chick. Too bad her love life hadn't fit into a neat little container.

She chafed the back of her hand on the zipper but retrieved the appropriate coins, which she passed under the barred window for the park attendant to take. "There you go."

"*Danke schön*," said the young man who embodied every German stereotype in Audrey's book. Tall and fair with a reddish complexion. He closed the cash register with his hip then returned to his magazine. The corner of a Euro bill stuck out of the drawer. A tiny purple triangle. Couldn't he see it? Didn't it bother him?

Audrey waited for a ticket of some sort that would allow her to continue on to her Bavarian journey inside Partnach Gorge but nothing came her way.

'Kay...

"So," she ventured, shrugging, "I just go on then?"

His smile was just a bit tight when he turned to her, nodded.

Had she been back home, she would have given him *The Evil Eye*, even maybe *The Fist on a Hip and The Evil Eye*, but here in a country foreign to her, Audrey Pullman's obsession for organization and keeping receipts would have to wait. She wanted that ticket for her scrapbook, dammit!

"Well, okay then. Thank you...er, *danke schön*."

Perhaps it was her butchered yet endearing attempt at speaking his language but the man's smile widened. A little. "Be careful inside the gorge. It is much slippery." He raised himself so he could take a look at her shoes. "You have good shoes, but the walking in that time in the year is much difficult. Spring melt make the river high."

She tried not to grin. His accent was so cute. *Yoo haff goot shoos, bot zie vahkeeng...* "I'll be careful. Thanks."

High water levels? Her travel booklet had forgotten to mention that little tidbit. But she wouldn't turn back from her day's hike unless she broke something or got lost. Everyone back home was expecting her to e-mail anytime now and ask to be picked up at the airport after having shortened her "I'm still alive and recently single so watch out world" trip. She'd maxed out her credit cards—both of them—to visit Germany, she'd thumbed her nose at her friends who thought that after years of safe jobs and safer boyfriends, Audrey Pullman had no pulse left. She'd be damned if she'd poop out of

this trip and come back home with her tail tucked between her legs. So after a smile for the man, she hiked her small backpack higher on her shoulder and marched onward.

His booth could've used a bit of organizing though.

Partnach Gorge, according to the booklet she'd kept safe in a hermetic sandwich bag, never closed unless spring melt swelled the eponymous river too high. Two thousand feet long with craggy limestone walls over two hundred feet high on both sides, the river zigzagged and twisted, and over the ages had formed a sort of trail carved out of the rock along one wall ledge that allowed hikers and visitors to trek along the roaring whitewater and slip behind the many waterfalls. She couldn't wait to see the real thing! She'd been told the place would be pretty quiet this time of year with the main body of tourists still to come for the summer, which would then swell the Bavarian resort town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen's population to twice its size. Audrey would be long gone by then as she'd taken her two weeks' vacation from the store specifically in March to make sure she'd have the sights all to herself.

Which she did.

She couldn't have been more alone. A quick glance around revealed no one else but her on the trail leading to the gorge itself. Not that she was a wuss, but a shiver spread outward from between her shoulder blades. She passed a small ice-cream shack, its dark wooden shutters barred, the white and red umbrellas over plastic tables closed and tied with webbing straps. Chairs were piled high against the stone wall.

*All to myself*, she thought while she fought the urge to check behind her again.

Leafy trees hadn't started to bloom yet, and only the conifers provided the green surrounding her. Otherwise everything was brown. Brown mud, brown grass, brown sky threatening rain. But she only had two days left. She wouldn't have another chance to visit this place. And while she spent the next five years repaying her debts, she wouldn't be going anywhere period.

Her hiking boots—she'd broken them in at home and made sure to step in puddles so they wouldn't look so brand new—made squishy, sucking noises as she navigated the trail. And when the distant roar of whitewater reached her, Audrey lifted her gaze from the ground to spot the entrance to the gorge, which was basically a hole in the cliff face with a revolving iron-barred door that looked gooey with water and mud. She took a picture of the door, made sure the sign showed well in the tiny screen of her digital camera for her photo album. Had to have everything all lined up, nice and neat. Chaos and disorganization always led to troubles. For her anyway. The scars on her arms itched, but they always did when she was nervous.

But man, this was great! She couldn't wait!

Making sure the sleeve of her yellow rain jacket didn't touch—*can't get dirty right off the bat*—Audrey slipped inside the darkened tunnel-like passage, ducking several times to avoid outcroppings and rocky ledges that projected into the tight entrance. She couldn't imagine throngs of tourists in such a small place with the inescapable chicks



not wearing sensible shoes, families with strollers and middle-aged men trying to show their women they could still –

“Ouch. That’ll teach me,” she snarled, hitting her head on a point jutting down in the middle of the tunnel.

“...*taste you*...”

Audrey whirled around at the whispered words. “What?”

Only the *glook-glook-glook* of water veins running along the rock face answered her. The itch on her arms flared. She ran a hand over her forearm and swallowed hard. She could’ve sworn.

Voices drifting in from up ahead made her sigh. So she *had* heard voices. Audrey sighed audibly. Trying to find a spot where she could squeeze by the wall to let the other visitors pass, she rushed on and came to a wider spot, almost a “room” with an aperture carved out of the bedrock that allowed natural light to spill in. The sound of whitewater filled the air.

An English-speaking group rounded the corner, most of them fit-looking couples and some older kids. In front of them marched their escort—hard to miss the chick. She could have been pulled right out of an outdoors magazine, sporty shades and all. There wasn’t even any *sun* today. Especially *inside* the bedrock...

Audrey felt a smirk rising.

“You must turn back, miss,” their Fearless Leader announced, not bothering to slow down when she reached Audrey. Goal-oriented. Probably was a pushy kid. Audrey instantly disliked her.

The tone alone would have riled her on a good day filled with blue sky, a photocopier machine that didn’t jam a single time and free chocolate ice cream. And those were few and far between where she worked, a copier place too small for its clientele and too large for its own good. But the way the chick presently looked at Audrey, for some reason *knowing* she was an English-speaking tourist—*is it so damn obvious?*—a chick out of her element in her new boots and yellow rain jacket and the “miss” thrown at the end.

Audrey offered a grin even if she wanted to flip her the bird. Why couldn’t she just flip someone the bird, just one time, huh? She was too much of a chickenshit. That’s why. Just like when she should tell a rude customer off when one demanded a reimbursement for the shitty quality of the copies when the original had been crap to begin with. But noooo, of course not. Not Audrey Pullman. No, most times, she just mumbled some snarky comment and spent the night replaying the scene in her head—with proper embellishments of course.

“Hi, and a good day to you too.” At least she could pull a bit of attitude.

A few smiled, one of them a teen who’d obviously caught on to the sarcasm.

Either she hadn’t picked up the nuances of Audrey’s mocking tone or the chick had her head so far up her ass she didn’t even realize her advice was unwanted.

"You can't go on, it's too dangerous."

Years ago, when Audrey was in her early twenties, she would've thanked the woman, ignored the condescending tone and walked on. She wasn't in her twenties anymore. In fact, since she'd turned thirty-three earlier in the year and after years of "customer support", her beta personality had melded into a strange combination of snark and sniper, covered with a generous coat of cynicism. Her friends thought she was hilarious.

Audrey smiled at the woman, zipped her rain jacket all the way up. "You know what they say about free advice..."

It must have felt like a slap in the guide's face since she stopped dead in her tracks, straightened to her full height—the cow was tall—and pulled her shades up over her tanned forehead. By that time, the rest of her group had joined her. Mud covered them up to their knees. The teen had a full-fledged smirk on by then.

"I said it's dangerous up there, miss. You have to turn around."

Audrey tried not to let the fear show. Man, the cow was *tall*. She pretended not to be intimidated when in reality she was. "I'll be fine, *miss*. But thanks for your opinion."

Someone murmured the word *ouch*, which made the guide barely twist her shoulder when she stomped by, coming close to bumping into Audrey as she went.

"Did someone have too much sugar this morning?" Audrey asked of no one in particular. The scars on her arms flared. Man, she wanted to scratch at them. Bad.

When he walked by, the teen, dressed half Emo, half hiker—strange combination—rolled his index finger by his temple. "And that's a good day, man, you should've seen her yesterday."

After a brief smile—so fake too—Audrey waited until the mud-covered group had walked on by and followed the path upward, occasionally stopping to take pictures of the narrowing passage. After almost half an hour, she emerged from inside the bedrock and onto the ledge proper, which would take her the rest of the way. Outside once more, the air became colder and charged with moisture that clung to her face and clumped her bangs. She pulled the hood of her rain jacket up. The river's thunder became sharper, clearer, and when Audrey walked around a bend in the river, she stopped to admire the stunning view.

Whitewater really *was* white. She'd never seen any in person. The pictures in her booklet and on the Internet just didn't do this place justice. So raw, so powerful! Roiling fists of water slapped and hammered boulders made smooth by the passage of time and rushing river while the sky peeked in through a thin sliver far, far above her head. Gnarled trees clung to the cliff face, broken branches fallen pell-mell across the river, which was much, much wider and deeper than she'd anticipated. Where the froth didn't reach, the river showed dark gray and angry, telling of depth and hidden currents.

"Whoa," she heard herself say. As good a word as any.

Eleven pictures later, she began walking again. As much as it burned her to admit it, the guide had been right, the river was high in places and reached almost to the ledge reserved for foolish humans in search of wild nature and sprained ankles. Someone could easily fall and slip below the puny handrail. Anyway, the thing must have been put there for liability reasons for it'd never stop a body from sliding over the edge and into the rushing river.

*Happy thoughts, Pullman. Happy thoughts.*

Audrey fished around her backpack for the water bottle and cursed when she realized it'd leaked at the bottom. Of course the cell phone, map and pack of tissues were soaked when she pulled each out. A quick check revealed the phone worked still, but the wad of wet tissue wouldn't do any good now. She looked back at the river and became lost in its raw energy. Oh well. There were worse things than a pack of wet tissue.

Still, where would she get another one? What if she hurt herself and needed to dab the blood? She'd have to use her camisole. But then she'd have to take her fleece off. Denude her arms. Shit.

"Relax," she said through her teeth.

Audrey walked upriver a good hour, taking pictures, circumventing as best she could the fingers of river that clawed at the muddy ledge where some brave souls had built little concrete bridges to ease the trek. She may be wearing hiking boots and not pushing a stroller, but she was still damn glad to have the little concrete pads on which to walk. It occurred to her after a while that she was only going on out of pride in case she met the group on her way back.

*You're pathetic, Pullman.*

What could she do? She'd been born stubborn, gave her mom a hell of a time pushing her out. No one could win an argument against her without resorting to either fists—bigger sisters had mastered that art—or outright leaving her standing there arguing by herself—boyfriends had mastered *that* art. Audrey knew full well living with her was difficult. Hell, she got on her own nerves sometimes! She'd tried to change a few times, either for a worthy boyfriend or even for herself. Tried to stop fussing with stuff, make everything perfect all the time. Stopped trying to put things into neat little boxes. But every time, she'd reverted to good old Audrey, cynic extraordinaire and giver of Evil Eyes. Hence, her recurring single status.

*"...let us taste you...enter you..."*

It happened so fast she barely had time for a gasped "fuck".

The whisper so startled her, she slipped and hit the ground with a spine-compacting thud, dropped her camera and tumbled over the muddy edge. Glacial water got into her nose, her clothes, pulled at her rain jacket hood and at her backpack.

*Too heavy. Too fucking heavy!*

She should've brought only a water bottle and a cell phone. Why the hell had she loaded her pack with travel booklets, brochures, extra batteries and all the crap she never left home without? Hand sanitizer? *Lots of good it'd do now!*

"Help—!"

Audrey swallowed half a cup for her trouble. Gag reflex twisted her gut. She was hit on the shoulder, on her knees. Her whole body hurt.

Warmth at the juncture of her legs... Christ, she'd peed in her pants.

Coughing, snorting in more water, she tumbled down a sort of step in the river, collided against a smooth boulder that gave her no hand- or footholds.

High above, the strip of sky spun hard. No, *she* was spinning, sinking. A whirlpool? Her throat squeezed so tight Audrey was sure she'd choke before she drowned. The thunder of whitewater overwhelmed everything else. She was sinking. Fast.

*Please, let me go quickly.*

She surfaced once, grabbed for boulders as the river picked her up, tossed her around and over, slapped her against one rock face then across against the other.

*Quickly...*

When black water closed over her head, her numb brain could process only one last thought.

*It was too dangerous. The cow was right.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Among the awakening Shades were the twins Aegeus and Theseus, ambitious and decadent, Echion the cunning but arrogant one, silent Pallas, whose mood was constantly dark and Orias who enjoyed mockery and games the most. They raised their faces to listen and taste the air with their long-unmoving lips. Beyond the mirrors but not beyond their reach lay what they needed to not only thrive but cross over to the material plane. Only one would suffice. They would bring it to the edge of madness with lustful rituals and games of the flesh. They would cajole, pleasure and ravish, feed off the basest, strongest emotions. As they once did. With that last offering, they would rule the world. As they once did.

*Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud.*

The twins stepped off their socles to approach the mirrored pillar. Even Echion The Arrogant left his and drew nearer to the portal so he could hear for himself. The sound was unmistakable. A siren's song. A mortal's heartbeat.

"They have returned," Theseus remarked, cracking a rare smile. A mean smile.

Echion licked his lip at the thought of gorging on a mortal again. It had been so long.

He so enjoyed their soft flesh, especially the females, and the way they blushed in the throes of carnal abandon. He longed to douse his fire in one of them again, bring

them with him to immeasurable heights of pleasure, take and give, force and receive, kiss and be kissed in turn. He knew other Shades yearned more to ravish than to take their time savoring each angle. He preferred a slower approach with a mortal for he had learned that once a human was roused, he or she would give back a hundredfold.

His last encounter with a mortal still made his stonelike skin tingle. He had been so succulent...

*With the salty taste of sweat tickling his tongue, Echion licked the man's nape where the sunburned skin showed over the leather armor. On the cuirass, bronze cleats reflected the ambient light well, gave the man's tanned skin, rippling with muscles, the look of burnished gold. Echion had not been supposed to take this man, one of the Roman guards escorting the sacrificial virgins, but he had been unable to resist the tall, perfectly built body. Despite the difference in heights – Shades stood at least a good foot taller than the largest male – Echion felt this particular male was surely among the strongest of his kind.*

*He made little work of the bothersome armor and robe and soon had his mortal naked except for sandals that creaked whenever the man moved even slightly. Their differences in skin created a nice contrast that Echion spent a while contemplating. His skin resembled alabaster but with an inner glow not found in the white stone, whereas his companion's had been kissed by countless years toiling under the hot sun. A jab of envy tightened Echion's heart. How he longed to see the sun once more.*

*Unlike his brethren, he did not take the mortal by force. With much cajoling, kissing and caressing, Echion soon had the man panting heavily, trying to force their mouths harder against one another. So this one enjoyed force, did he? With just the right amount of pressure – a skill acquired over the millennia – he pressed against the man's shoulder until the knees buckled but without causing damage. He easily could have snapped the man's spine with but a hand. Why would he? He enjoyed their light touch too much to be coarse to them.*

*"Take us into your mouth," he whispered, his face downward as he watched the delightful black curls gracing the man's head. Such a lovely head. So fragile.*

*Echion hissed a breath when the man seized his member in a calloused, hurried hand – a soldier's touch could not be imitated – and reminding him yet again why he so enjoyed mortals with the most spirit and prickly attitude, rammed him down to the gullet.*

*He had taken that particular mortal enough times to lose count. Taken him and been taken. Devoured. Consumed entirely. A slew of emotions had fed him to the bursting point. And when the moment had come, when pleasure became too much, when the mortal's heart failed, Echion had sucked in the last of his companion's breath. Exquisite. Addictive.*

Theseus' voice reeled Echion back to their present situation.

"We must wait to learn more about these new mortals. So we can understand them better. They feel different." He reached out and pressed his palm against the portal.

His twin grimaced, his vicious smile belying the beautiful face. "They are no different. Same flesh, same blood, different togas."

"No," Echion shook his head. He had no idea how he could know but he did. "They are different now. Sharper. Clearer. We should take precautions."

The other twin nodded. For once, Theseus agreed with someone else's point of view.

Echion sighed when the twins began to argue. The old debate.

It was unlikely this mortal would prove as vigorous as his Roman soldier had—a dying breed, a *dead* breed, now that he remembered how much time had elapsed since the Shades had last stirred. Though they had remained dormant, they had felt every eon pass, every era, every trend and epoch, subconsciously at least. Yet energy from present-day mortals felt different. Less and more in a strange way. Less individually but more if one took count of their numbers. Such large numbers! They covered the world now. Everywhere. So many of them ready to be culled.

And take them he would. One by one.

## Chapter Two

They stepped out of the mirror in a silent row. Each more beautiful than the one preceding. Audrey sat on a large slab of stone. It was warm. So strange. The first approached her. His hair shone like purple satin. He grinned.

"Show us your secrets."

As if she no longer had control over her body, Audrey leaned back on her hands and spread her knees. He only watched her, never made a move. Lust blazed a path from her clitoris to her belly.

"Would you touch yourself for us?"

With fingers that shook from adrenaline and nervousness, she cupped her breasts.

A second man joined the first. This one smirked. His hair was green. "You are blooming for us," he whispered. "And we have yet to touch you."

With his hand angled as if he wanted her to kiss the back of it, he grazed her chin, her jaw, her cheekbone then retraced his path but didn't stop and slipped below to run it down between her breasts. She was naked. Her arms... Somehow, that they could see her arms didn't bother her. She was so turned-on. She panted hard.

"This pleases you, yes? Would you enjoy more? Would you submit to our touch and know the greatest pleasure your flesh has ever experienced?" A small chuckle left him when she swallowed hard. "We are infinitely *skilled* lovers."

She had no doubt whatsoever.

The first nodded, which dislodged a strand of purplish hair. "Do you trust us?"

In her mind, the cry "*No!*" rang out as loudly as the alarm bells extolling her to run and not look back. She stayed put and nodded.

"Then roll onto your front."

Audrey didn't even balk at the tone. This was so strange. She never let men talk to her this way.

"We are not men," remarked the second.

So she did as they instructed. Audrey rolled onto her belly and winced when stone abraded her skin and sore nipples. She was so horny.

More men joined the first two, among them a blue-haired pair who looked identical. She watched them walk around her, looking down at her. All of them naked. All of them hard. For her?

"Yes," the first said. "Such luminous beauty has never visited our home."

And a charmer too.

Fingers began brushing against her. Someone touched her inside the thigh. Another caressed her butt. A foot was kissed. A shoulder. An elbow. She looked down. No scars on her arms. How? One of the men licked her hip, lingered there.

Audrey wanted to moan by then. Need pulsed in her pussy. She wanted them. The first two more than the rest. But she wanted them all. All these magnificent men who looked like Greek gods of carnality and debauchery come to life especially to please her.

"Will you not touch us?" the first one asked. A superior arch to his perfect eyebrow made her want to raise the bar. Who did he think he was?

She climbed on all fours and stretched so she could kiss his rock-hard chest. He seemed to enjoy it since he closed his eyes and moistened his lips with the tip of a very, very wicked-looking tongue. Audrey licked his nipple, teased it with her teeth.

"You are skilled," he whispered with his eyes still closed. He cupped her chin so she wouldn't have to crane her neck so much. "But is this the extent of your capacity?"

Was he actually *daring* her to go further?

With a moan to accompany her tongue work, she made it pointed for the next series of licks then kicked it up a notch by pushing against him, crushing her mouth to his chest and mock-biting him.

She felt his heart beat hard against her cheekbone. Oh, she had him all right.

Bright teeth gleamed when he hissed a breath, grinned wide. "Pleasurable. But we wish for more."

"I'll give you more," she growled, and raised herself so she could wrap her hands behind his neck and crushed her mouth to his.

A moan he sucked out of her swelled her chest when hands claimed her sex while she kissed the one with the purple hair. Something very hot and wet parted her pussy, entered her. Two difference mouths clamped on her nipples and sucked. Tongues made for sin triggered a series of painful cramps in her back, her butt, along the inside of her thighs. The mouth fucking her accentuated its rhythm. Audrey moaned.

The one she was trying to kiss through the spasms and pre-orgasm deftly unhooked her hands from around his nape and pushed her back down on all fours. "We wish to suckle at you."

What was she supposed to say?

She watched him circling the stone slab, walking behind the other men while they went at her, fucked her pussy with their mouths, claimed her breasts, licked her everywhere. He towered behind their bent backs. After he went around a few times, he stopped near one of the identical ones, nudged him so he could go down on one knee and wrap the tip of a dangling breast with his mouth. So hot! Audrey had to bite her lip to keep from yelping. He suckled there for a long time while the rest of the men kept caressing her. They seemed to be waiting for something.

Audrey curled her spine when he sucked harder. Oh god, he was good. So good.



When he abandoned her throbbing nipple, she could've cried. "Don't leave. Please stay."

He straightened to his formidable height. His cock hung heavy over his thighs and bobbed with his breathing. Veins pulsed at its base. Saliva pooled under her tongue.

"You wish for us to remain with you?"

She nodded.

He leaned over and put his face level with hers. A mouth made for decadence curled at one corner. "Then let us revel in your beauty," he whispered. "Each of us in turn. Our own Bacchanal with you as its centerpiece. Would this please you?"

Audrey could hardly focus on the words, too busy biting her bottom lip to not start grinding herself against whatever part of these glorious visions happened to touch her.

"Receive us into your flesh," a man whispered behind her. She turned to see the one with the green hair bending over between her legs. He'd climbed with her on the stone slab.

Something incredibly hot touched her on the shoulder. She faced forward again. The one who'd spoken held his cock in a loose fist.

"Receive us."

While Audrey raised her butt higher when she felt long hands caressing her hips, thumbs parting her, readying her, she fisted the man's smooth cock. She melted between the legs. It'd be good. So good.

She wrapped her lips around the glans, sank him down her throat. Hot. Quasi burning. Hands caressed her everywhere. The one behind her nudged her sex expertly. Then he pushed in. Audrey cried out. More hands claimed a piece of her. She channeled the extra energy into sucking the glorious shaft down. Each ridge and vein. He tasted of seawater and honey.

A man's voice whispered urgings behind her. She didn't understand the words only that the one fucking her seemed to follow the words until a mantric rhythm settled, one that left her frantically pushing back to meet each thrust before it even began. She widened her knees as far as she could. She made a fist with which she held the glorious cock unyieldingly. Pumping. Pulling. Into her mouth. The taste so smooth.

A long moan left her when the penetrations slowed, lengthened, stretched her wide and took her deep. Then he left her. The large cock she wanted to keep kissing and licking was also taken from her. She was about to argue when she watched them switching sides. She didn't care as long as they didn't leave her. She didn't want to be alone. She didn't want to die alone.

*Am I dying?*

"You are being reborn," the one with the smirk whispered. "Like the butterfly shedding its chrysalis. A gem birthing from rock." He bent over and kissed her deeply. She wondered if he could taste the first man in his mouth and if he enjoyed it.

Behind her, unyielding hands gripped her hips, the heat of long, sinewy thighs pressed against her caused Audrey to roll her butt up and high. *Come on.* She widened her knees, waiting. Instead of taking her, the one with the purple hair – her favorite by far – slid his cock against her clit, back and forth until each teasing pass became pure torture. She arched her back to rub herself against him. Rub harder.

“Come on,” she whispered with a buck. “Get in.”

He towered behind her when she looked back. The two identical men stood on either side. She hissed when one leaned over and took a long lick of her rounded cheek. He grinned wide. Oh, that wicked, wicked mouth.

Then the cock torturing her zeroed in. She closed her eyes and received it into her. Large, incredibly large. Hot. Smooth. Massive. Precise.

“Ohh!”

When he began thrusting deep, demanding shoves, Audrey heard her own voice calling out a name. Always the same. She missed someone. The color purple filled her mind’s eye. Who was he?

“Please! More!”

Her knees chafed on the stone. The one with the purple hair curled his hips and took her as profoundly as the first one had, only there was something extra to his penetrations, something more than mere coupling. He wasn’t only fucking her. Audrey felt, for no good reason at all, that he was making love to her. And she to him.

“Ohh yes, yes,” she hissed under her breath. More. More. MORE!

The identical ones claimed her breasts once more, one of them biting a bit too hard. She was about to voice her displeasure when a stab of sunlight-bright ecstasy stabbed into her clit. Audrey came on a roar that filled the place.

As abruptly as they’d come, the men blinked out. One by one. Only the one taking her remained. She arched back so she could watch him. So beautiful.

“Do you want us to teach you what pleasure is?”

“Yes!”

“Will you give yourself to us? Freely? Completely?”

“Yes! Yes!”

In the back of her mind, Audrey had meant to say no. Hadn’t she?

Pleasure tightened her pussy around him. She locked her elbows.

“Open for us,” he whispered behind her.

She collapsed onto her chest and pulled at her vulva, pinched her nipples, rolled and rolled her hips. Oh god, this was good, so good, and she didn’t care what it made of her.

She cried out. That name again. What was it?

Then everything changed.

Audrey was standing naked, alone, looking at herself in a mirror yet couldn't see her reflection. She peered closer. Still nothing. She was cold. So cold. The urge to pee took her. With a sigh that created a circle of fog in the mirror, she was about to turn away when a fleeting shadow caught her eye. In the otherwise nothingness of the mirror, a tiny gray speck roiled and grew. Eyes narrowed, she watched it growing, swelling. Fear closed a fist in her gut and tried to tug it out through her navel. Yet she couldn't move. A wave. That was what came at her. No, not a wave. A veritable wall of water. Audrey tried to step back but couldn't. A whimper broke the seal of her lips—why couldn't she make a sound?

Heartbeat reaching a mad tempo and force, she braced her hand against the mirror and pushed at arm's length. Her palm stuck to its smooth surface. She was trapped! Thin cuts appeared on her forearms and started to bleed.

"No!"

The wave rose like a gray monster. Then all she could feel was cold.

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey opened her eyes just as the wave hit.

The river!

"Nooo!"

A violent spasm shook her from head to toe. But no water pulled at her, slammed into her. She wasn't in the river anymore but lay supine on dry, hard ground. Violent spasms tightened her pussy. Everything burned. A choked whimper struggled to come out. She wanted to look around but could see nothing. She clasped her hand around her other forearm... The old pain there. The itch of healing worse than the pain of the injury itself, but never as stinging as the shame. Shame that she'd secretly let the weight of life crush her this way, shame she was too damn weak to recognize the early signs of self-destruction, shame for getting help too late, or at all.

"Oh no, please." Her voice felt as if it'd fallen flat right out of her mouth. No echo. Darkness pressed against her face, tried to get into her mouth and nose.

Was she blind?

Where was she? She thought she'd had a dream but the more she tried the less she could remember. Something to do with a mirror?

With hands shaking, she touched her face, her head, neck, shoulders. Her legs hurt but could move. Darkness like a wet, heavy blanket pressed against her. She was fighting for air.

*Calm down... Calm the hell down...*

A lump hurt her lower back and she realized she lay on her pack. Trembling violently, she yanked it off one shoulder and pawed at it blindly, teeth chattering more from fear than cold. Though she *was* cold. And wet. The zipper made a thunderous

noise as she pulled it, shoved her hand in the wet opening. *Cell phone, please, cell phone, let it be there pleeeeeease.*

She hadn't programmed the emergency numbers on speed-dial but at least she'd learned them by heart. One, one, zero for police. One, one, two for fire. Or was it the other way around?

*Stay calm, Pullman, stay calm.*

It wasn't working. A whimper broke the seal of her lips. Something hot and wet accumulated in the corner of an eye. Shit. She was crying, alone in... Wherever she was. A cave? She could've tested her theory had she not been near panic, she could've clapped her hands together and listen for the echoes to see how big the place was. She could've, she should've.

Making sure to control herself lest she drop the cell – *don't even think about it, it's in your hands, don't panic, it's there, it's right there, in your palm* – she forced her breathing to regulate as she flicked it open in front of her face. The tiny green screen flickered then died. So she wasn't blind. Just in a dark, cold, wet place. Alone. With a dead cell phone.

*But at least I'm not blind.*

"Hello?" she tried timidly.

After pawing around above her head to make sure she wouldn't crack it open, she rolled onto her side then to a crouch. Her back radiated with pain. So did her knees. Another choked sob left her. For some reason she couldn't explain – who the hell gave a rat's ass if she made noise or not – she clamped both hands to her mouth, her nose fizzing as she breathed in and out quickly, harshly. She needed a tissue. But they were wet. Everything was wet. Where would she get another pack? She'd paid almost a Euro for the things. Her cell was dead. So would she be. How long would she last? Two days? No food, no water. Would she end up drinking her own urine? A panicked giggle attack squeezed her belly. She suppressed it but barely.

*Shit. Don't. Do not.*

But she did.

Audrey's spine curved under the monstrous fear settling in and she started crying. Hard. Harder than she'd ever done. Harder than the time her oldest sister Lucie had decapitated her stuffed rabbit, pulling out the white fluff to Audrey's horrified shrieks. Harder than over her breakup with Pete after he'd called her a snide little bitch. Pete whom she'd never heard raise his voice to anyone or use such nasty words. Harder than when she'd looked at herself in the mirror and had seen, under the funny and witty exterior, the brainy carapace, exactly what he'd called her. A snide little bitch.

She didn't know how long she cried only that when the worst of it was over, her head hurt and her nose was stuffed. And she had no goddamn tissue!

This time, a real giggle escaped her.

*Going nuts already? Wow, that didn't take long.*

“Okay,” she said out loud. Her voice sounded weird and small. So small. “Get a hold of yourself.”

The watch!

She pulled the sleeve of her rain jacket and fleece sweater up so she could check her watch.

“Whoa.”

The tiny aqua-colored backlight illuminated four black zeroes. With bated breath Audrey waited to see the tiny dots between hours and minutes begin to flash. They didn’t. She waited longer. Surely the minutes would change. Eventually. They didn’t.

Holy shit.

Maybe water had seeped into her watch and messed with the mechanism. Water-resistant watch, huh? Right.

Okay, so she had no idea how long she’d been unconscious. An hour? A day? She couldn’t tell. Still, she had to get her butt back out—up, down, hard to tell—and return to her hotel. She was *not* getting stuck in a cave. It was too dumb. There had to be a way out if there was one in. Logical. What did hotels do when guests didn’t return? Would they send her stuff to the secondhand store?

*Focus, Pullman.*

She’d lose her bearings and never make it back to her starting spot but what else could she do? So she shouldered her pack and stood, one hand above her head and the other in front as she crept forward a couple inches at a time. She could hear nothing but her rapid breathing. No river, which was strange.

Then a small sound froze her on the spot.

Glass landing on something and breaking.

“Glass?”

*Ohh ice. It must’ve been icicles or something falling off and breaking on the rocky ground.*

This early in the season there was bound to be some ice underground still.

If only she could see something. She’d brought pretty much everything else but not a flashlight. She hadn’t expected being stuck in a cave. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a very, very faint glow. The answer to her prayer.

Minerals? Fungi? Carcinogenic spores that would seep up her nose, liquefy her brain and—

“Whoa,” she said louder this time, her voice giving her a small measure of comfort. Small but there.

“I need real light.”

It was hard to judge the distance but as she crept closer, both hands still out and above to prevent encounters of the stalactite kind, she could swear the faint radiance was always a bit farther away yet brighter. A trick of her eyes desperate to adjust to the utter darkness no doubt.

"Too bad it can't light my way out of here."

It took an excruciatingly long time but she walked toward the glow until she could tell it must have been a reflection of something farther away because when she reached out, her fingers temporarily blocking the light, she touched nothing. Maybe some daylight hit farther away and reflected a few times against minerals and ice. Sour saliva seeped under her tongue. She closed her eyes briefly, swallowed then resumed her tentative advance.

*I'm just gonna get lost even worse. Didn't they always say, "Stay with the wreckage"?*

*"Yeah, well, it's a helluva lot better than staying put and drinking my own urine."*

*Would you stop talking to yourself!*

Breaking ice again. This time much closer. Audrey hoped whatever was falling wouldn't land on her. Damn, she needed light if she were to go on like this.

Was it her imagination or was the glow a little brighter now? After she ran the back of her hand against her mouth, she tasted salt.

"Okay, keep that thing in your sights, Pullman. If it's vegetal, it needs daylight once in a while." Unless it was some genus of no-light-required-ever grass and she was walking deeper underground.

Audrey had to close her eyes—*a lot of good that does*—and press a hand to her chest to avoid another wasted minute of self-pity. But no shit though, she was scared half out of her mind. She giggled out loud and cringed at the idiocy. Her arms itched so bad. Maybe she could just raise her sleeve and relieve the burn a little.

"No."

The firmness of the word stopped her. She wouldn't fall back down that hole. She refused to.

Bolstered by the light—and she hoped it wouldn't turn out to be some glowing mold deeper than where she'd woken in the first place—Audrey resumed her snail-speed progress, each obstacle her feet met requiring all her focus. But this was not a trick of her imagination nor was it some blood pressure problem creating funny wiggles in the back of her eyeballs. The glow intensified enough that she could actually call it light. Faint, a green-blue, funky, sinister *light*.

"I'll take any kind of light right now."

Audrey shivered but pushed on until she rounded a bend along the rock face she'd been following—cold and strangely regular. A fissure opened out in front of her, beyond which glimmered the strange luminescence that had led her there. It wasn't faint anymore. And it wasn't dim either. She felt as if she'd just walked inside one of those aquarium restaurants. Audrey crept to the fissure, poked her face in so she could see what caused the strange occurrence.

When she saw the source of the light, for the first time in her life, Audrey Pullman couldn't find anything to say.

## Chapter Three

The uncharacteristic fit of speechlessness quickly passed as Audrey put a leg through the fissure and squeezed inside.

“What the hell *is* it?”

The only word that came to mind was *cathedral*. An ice—or was it glass—cathedral spread fifty feet below the ledge on which she stood with a sort of ominous elegance that hinted at the place’s age. *Ancient* if she’d have to guess. Giant crystal formations sprouted upward all along the base of the walls, down the nave and around the arcade of columns then downward from the vaulted ceiling in glistening bouquets the length of thin, flying buttresses. The whole place looked hard and sharp and cold. Then she spotted it. Hard to miss really. Right there in the middle of the “cathedral” was...

“Holy. Shit.”

Shock suddenly forced her to sit on her heels while she kept staring at the source of light. Because if the underground cathedral was arresting—was a sheer impossibility—Audrey only had eyes for the tall pillar in the middle of it all, tapering to a pyramid and with its square sections reflecting the aquamarine glow. An obelisk of mirrors. Each face, well two for sure, covered in fragmented mirrors, as if it’d once been smooth but had been bashed until the finish had crackled to what she now saw.

“Holy. Shit.”

The words were puny and dumb. And repetitive. But she had nothing else. How did one classify the *thing* before her? What was she supposed to call it?

Now that she’d spent a good two, three minutes staring at it, she could tell the obelisk not only glowed but pulsated as well. Very, very faintly. The radiance would dim slightly, remain so for a few seconds then brighten to turquoise. Dim to deep aqua and back again. Shadows stretched and receded with each *beat*. By the marine-like light, she realized she stood on a ledge with stairs at one end and a broken balcony at the other. It must have been a mezzanine at some point. Huge and elaborately carved with figures she couldn’t quite make out. The urge to turn back and run for the dark tunnels almost won over. She didn’t like this place.

“Well, no, actually, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I just...”

She just didn’t *trust* it. How strange. But she did want a closer look. Plus, it wasn’t as though she had anything else to do with herself right now, being lost and about to die of starvation and all. If not of exposure.

“...*we would not let you die...*”

Her gasp reverberated inside the cavernous cathedral. She whirled on the spot, hands up in a caricature of a boxer guard. Who the hell was she going to hurt bitch-slapping anyway? What was going on?

"Who's there!" she demanded loudly, waited with bated breath. "Who's there!" She sounded more pissed off than scared. Her biggest lie. But she wasn't lying to herself. She *had* heard that voice. Right?

"Hello?"

This time she did sound afraid.

After a quick turn on herself, Audrey dusted her chinos, for some reason feeling as though she ought to before she stepped into the cathedral proper.

*You're imagining things, Pullman. It's normal. Get with the program.*

"Yeah," she murmured. "No sexy whispers here. Just my squeaky drawl."

Then something happened to her. It began with a tingle at the base of her spine then rose up her back, spread to her tight shoulders until heat had covered her body, rendered her nipples aching pebbles. Audrey closed her eyes, prey to the most erotic vision...

*She lay supine on a hard surface while several men took turns dipping their chins below her parted thighs. Others caressed her or seized her hands, her feet, her hair. How many were there? Five? Ten? A collection of achingly beautiful faces, all angular and male, all similar yet different filed above hers when they vied for her mouth, which they kissed according to their individual predilection, lips brushing for some, devouring for others. She arched at the blinding pleasure whipping through her.*

*"Tell us what you desire," one whispered in her ear. "Show us how you wish to be taken."*

"Ah!"

Audrey barely had time to brace a hand on the thick parapet. After a second of abject fear that she was going to fall down the stairs, she regained her equilibrium, collapsed on her knees.

"How?"

*"Forgive us... We meant you no harm..."*

"For fuck's sake!" Audrey roared as she took a few stairs, torn between the urge to look back and the need to make sure she didn't miss a step. *I'm going nuts. Totally fucking nuts.*

*"...how you enthrall us..."* a man's voice whispered all around her it would seem.

Audrey jumped the last couple of steps, spun on the spot to plaster her back against the smooth rock. Her hands shook badly when she balled them into fists.

"Who. Is. There?!"



"...taste you..." came the murmured reply. So soft. So inviting. A whisper like velvet rustling.

She pushed off the wall. The ground proved sharp and regular under her boots and reflected the light well. She realized it wasn't the ground but a floor. Tiled in a mosaic representing several long-haired beings standing around another smaller one. Stars popped at the edge of her vision. She was breathing too quickly.

*If you pass out, Pullman, what good will that do, huh?!*

Forcing herself to regulate her breathing, she entered the nave down the middle of the cathedral, every other step checking behind her. She *had* heard that voice.

*Haven't I? I mean, I did, right?*

Her soles crunched against broken bits of – what was that? Crystal? Glass? She bent and picked up a tiny piece. With a hiss, she dropped it and stared in wonder at the bead of blood pearling on the pad of her finger. Whoa, the thing was sharp. She hadn't even touched the edge.

Sucking on her index finger, Audrey gingerly navigated between the giant clusters of crystals, which had to be at least ten feet tall now that she could judge them via her own five-feet-nothing frame.

"Huge. Everything here is *huge*."

Doorways made for giants gaped along far walls, stone benches three feet high, a fountain whose ledge she could barely peek over, everything conveyed the occupants' massive size. The closer she came to the thick obelisk – her guesstimate put it at twenty feet high and at least six or eight feet wide at its base – the more she realized her initial assessment had been wrong. It hadn't been bashed. Those weren't cracks.

"They're veins," she murmured.

*"...pulsating with our need for you..."*

"Stop it," she snarled through her teeth.

She nearly started bawling. Then and there. But squeezing her eyes shut was what she forced herself to do instead. She was *not* going to disintegrate into a boo-hooing ball of pitiful chick-in-distress. She was *not*.

Think of that guide. That cow. Think of her face if she could see you. Think of her face if she could see your arms.

Desperately focused on the obelisk, she discovered the mirrored surface bulged in thin silver lines, exactly as veins did. Would. *Man, what is that?*

A fleeting movement at the very edge of her peripheral vision made her whirl around on the spot, hands in front of her. Only her own reflection in the closest crystals stared back at her.

*First voices, now visions?*

"You're not hearing voices and you're not seeing things. Focus."

She simply must have seen herself move and thought it'd been someone else.

That was when she spotted them.

Statues. Forty, fifty of them maybe. At least seven feet tall, they stood on white socles in a semicircle around a colonnaded structure where a black stone altar throned in the center. Each statue was of a man, beautiful, perfect in form and feature.

A pervading sense of déjà vu filled her. Who were they?

With her hand against her mouth, she drew near and gazed up into the most striking face she'd ever seen. Now that she could study them clearly, each statue was a different tint. All of them seemed carved out of what looked like alabaster, if a bit more silvery, yet each had a little bit of a tint to it. The first one was greenish and represented a long-haired man wearing one decadent smirk. His head was cocked down and to the side as if he listened in on some juicy gossip. She smiled in spite of herself.

The next, a bit more grayish, represented a man who could only be labeled as brooding. An air of melancholy caressed each trait. He looked so sad. Her heart squeezed. Whatever could have made the artist sculpt such a heartrending face? What kind of pain did that?

The next two were bluish. She took a step back. These two must have been carved after a pair of very, very bad boys. Capital Bs. Just as handsome as the first two but with an added layer of menace lurking under the angelic faces.

One a bit farther down caught her attention. A purple tint made this statue the most striking in her eye. A man wearing an arrogant grin and nothing else posed proudly with his hands loosely cupped on his hips. Such lean hips. All of them were so slender for their height. Like elves sans the funky ears. Still, they exuded power.

Audrey cocked her head to take a better look. The lifelike quality of the workmanship was so striking she could've sworn they weren't mere statues but men standing very, very still. Like those living statues she'd seen at a busker festival. So lifelike they were creepy. But not these here. There was nothing creepy about them. In fact, at the price of sounding ridiculous in her own opinion, they were the sexiest things she'd seen.

Gods. They looked like gods. Naughty, sexy, decadent gods. Audrey crossed her arms and stopped in front of the purple statue undoubtedly praising a Greek god she couldn't name. She didn't know much about ancient civilizations but she knew a Greek chin on a statue when she saw one. Not just the forward chin but the long straight nose planted high on the chiseled face. Plus, who else but the Greeks would put so many statues of naked, perfectly formed men around colonnaded temples? If it was a temple. Maybe some German lord had had them commissioned long ago and the place had fallen into disuse, maybe even been flooded over the years.

"Man, you're gorgeous."

She couldn't stop staring at him, his perfect features, the way his proud profile gleamed in the soft light. And that bod. Whew. A foot long of alabaster cock, perfectly formed. The artist had done a marvelous job conveying the power, the sheer *weight* of the dude's penis.

"You're quite the looker, aren't you?" she murmured.

Her palms slicked with sweat, she reached up and put her hand on the statue's thigh. She couldn't reach any higher. So smooth. And warm?! Maybe some underground hot water spring that caused the ground and everything connected to heat up? She ran her hand down the perfectly sculpted calf, down to his fine ankle and long, long foot and lingered there.

"My, how smooth you are," she murmured as she looked up into the statue's face.

His lips glistened. He looked ready to draw breath. So realistic. The artist had even rendered veins over the statue's long, graceful hands and down his neck too. An urge to sit on the socle and not ever move again grabbed her. She couldn't help her wandering mind. How would it feel to make love with a looker like him? What if she pretended a second that she was of his caliber—which she wasn't—how would his body feel pressed against hers? His hands? His lips?

She had no idea why she did it, but she leaned over and put a gentle kiss on the top of his foot.

*Okay, Pullman, stop groping statues and start thinking about a way out of here.*

Audrey turned once more toward the obelisk and jumped back a step.

"What the...!"

She nearly puked when fear grabbed her stomach and pulled it down. Her throat closed as suddenly as if a fist had squeezed it. Blood pressure plummeted to nausea-inducing lows, which triggered bursts of tiny suns in her vision.

*How the hell?*

People.

*People* had appeared in the face of the obelisk! A lot of people. Men. Huge, gorgeous men identical copies of the statues behind her. These hadn't been there before! She checked back just to make sure. Yep. Same as the statues. Her eyes were drawn to the one she'd kissed. One of his hands was turned upward, the long fingers curled in an invitation. She turned back to the obelisk.

"You... You weren't there. I would've noticed... No shit." She rubbed her eyes, blew air through pursed lips, slapped her cheeks a few times. *No there, not there.*

With her eyes closed, Audrey said, "You're in my mind. This is not happening."

Plus, she recognized them. Not just from the statues. She'd recently seen them. In her mind. Making love to her, eating her out, kissing her.

*Jesus.*

When a panicked giggle turned into a choked sob, Audrey swallowed, kept her eyes closed and took a few steps back. She almost did it. Almost went through her backpack and started organizing the contents. Small things into small pockets. Larger things, if heavy, went at the bottom of her bag. Always the bottom so it wouldn't crush the rest. Change into the little zippered opening. Had to be organized. Had to shift the focus away from her arms. *Don't let the panic come back. Push it back.*

She cracked an eye open and groaned. Still there.

But they'd been there all along, of course they had. She just hadn't noticed them. Paintings or some other decoration. She'd been too busy drooling over the statues to notice the carvings etched inside the obelisk base in some clever negative relief she'd never seen before. She was no archeologist. It could happen. Carved from the inside was all. A recurring theme to go with the statues. Made sense.

Audrey took a long breath and opened her eyes. A tear rolled down her cheek. She didn't even try to wipe at it.

They were still there. And one *moved*.

"Oh. My. Ohgodohgodohgod."

Backpedaling furiously, her heel caught one of the crystalline clusters and she went sprawling on her ass, bit her tongue and hurt her elbows. That didn't stop her though as she scooted backward, cutting her palms on the broken bits of glass lying around everywhere. She couldn't stop. She didn't care. She couldn't stay.

Her hands shaking, she flipped the backpack off her shoulder and unceremoniously dumped its content on the mosaic floor. She pawed through it, sniffing. Tears landed on her lap. She didn't care. Had to keep the panic away. Had to keep busy. Organize things, shuffle them around. *Don't think, don't think, don't think.*

"Change in the smallest pocket. Need a zipper so they don't fall out." She needed every coin too with her credit cards maxed out. The water bottle she slid at the bottom. Heaviest at the bottom. Made sense.

*They're not there. It's all in your head. You're just having a weak moment. Just a relapse. He said it could happen, the books said that too, not be too hard on yourself.*

She looked up. Pressing her lips may have kept the sobs in but not the groans of despair. Still there. Dammit. Despite the forty, fifty feet separating her from the trippiest hallucination she'd ever heard of, she easily saw their features, as if she'd known them her whole life. Angular, all sharp slants. One of the men moved from within the obelisk and came right up against the back of the mirror. But it must not have been a mirror because otherwise she wouldn't be able to see them on the other side. Right? Plus, she hadn't seen her reflection in it. So whatever it was, it wasn't mirror. Just silver glass. Or whatever. She didn't care to explain it further. Made no sense.

"That's right. It's not here. None of it is. Because it's a figment of my i-imagination. Knocked my head, that's it. Hard. Imagining t-t-things. Hearing voices. Seeing, s-s-seeing things. Oh god."

She counted the coins four times. Arrived at different totals four times. Audrey looked up at the ceiling, murmured a silent curse. Recounted her money.

The man behind the mirror grinned a mocking kind of smile that would've made her fan herself any other day. She couldn't ignore them. They kept *staring*. She'd never been good being stared at. But he was sexy! All of them were. And when she took a good look at him, she easily recognized the first statue, the smirking one.

"Oh, that's you," she pointed at the statue.

Others joined him standing at the base of the obelisk. Their eyes, from what she could tell, had irises that looked like gems polished smooth while their mouths glimmered as if they kept licking them. Which they didn't.

*Because they don't have mouths or lips or eyes. They don't exist. Just figments of your imagination. It's the statues. It's all in your head.*

"...let us taste you...kiss you...each of us...with you..." came a whisper carried on a faintest breeze that tickled her lips.

Audrey squeezed her thighs in spite of herself. That hadn't been a jab of thrill that had just poked her? Noooo, it wasn't. For Pete's sake, it couldn't have been.

*Count your money. Check the water bottle. Is it screwed tight? Can't waste a single drop.*

"Go away," she snarled at the grinning one.

He put his long hand up against the surface of the obelisk and pressed it there. It must have hurt since he snatched it back, looked at it and hung his head. Just as Audrey started to feel pity for the poor bugger – she had one twisted mind – he laughed heartily and shook his head. She couldn't hear him laugh but she saw him do it, shoulders shaking, mouth stretched wide. Had a nice mouth too.

"Would you just stop that?" she demanded of herself.

He executed a mocking bow, clamped his hand over his mouth. Laughing eyes twinkled over his pale hand. He pointed at something over and behind her. A small sound caught her attention. Sand crunching.

"Oh great, the place's gonna fall down on me now?" When everything else failed, sarcasm could always be replied upon. Well, she *was* a snide little bitch after all, wasn't she? A crazy, snide little bitch.

She craned her neck to see the statues. So beautiful. With his hand up by his mouth as if he were tasting something incredibly delicious, the one she'd kissed –

"What the hell?"

Hadn't his hands been hanging down by his sides? She'd *seen* his hands hanging down by his sides. No, that was another one. He'd had his hands loosely cupped on his hips. She'd even had a thought about how long they were. Hadn't she? Unless it was another statue? They all kind of looked the same.

*Not him though. He stands out.*

Then she heard it again. A long sound like someone drawing a line in the sand with the tip of his shoe.

She had no idea why or how she could know. But she *did*. Slowly, chanting, "*No, no, no, no*" in her head, she turned toward the statues once more and tried as best she could not to start bawling her eyes out. She dropped the coins she'd kept bunched in a fist.

One of them, the grayish one, blinked then turned his head toward her. Animated, he looked even sadder. His eyes glowed like opals.

*Holy mother of...*

"Stop," she murmured. "Please."

*Why the hell am I doing this? Am I even doing this? I'm unconscious. That's it. I'll wake and feel like a cretin when the hiking group and that cow fish my soggy ass out of the river. I'll never live this down. Shit.*

"No," she stammered, getting to her feet and backing away. "I've had it. You're not there so I'll turn around and leave, okay? You are *not* there."

But then another statue seemed to *sigh* into life. Purple Hair. The one with the foot-long... Well. Him.

In the span of a few seconds, his whole outward appearance changed, went from statue to lifelike. No longer alabaster, his body seemed to swell with an inner glow while his hair darkened to deep purple, even his eyes. He took a deep breath—she actually *heard* the air going in—which swelled his muscular chest, expanded his athletic shoulders and arched his back. Athletes had nothing on this guy. With an arrogant lift of his exquisite lips, he tipped his head at her *then stepped down from the socle*.

"Hey! Ho!" She retreated by a pace.

*Oh god, please, please.*

"Um. Stay. Stay where you are."

He nodded, stood in place, chest rising and falling with very human rhythm.

*He's a statue! For Christ's sake!*

There was no way, *no way*, she could've imagined anything like him. She'd never met or seen or heard of anyone with purple hair and eyeballs like amethysts nor could she be responsible for the feral look he gave her and the way he narrowed his eyes as if gauging her.

Then he hooked his index finger at her. *Come over here*, he seemed to say.

"Yeah, right."

Audrey peered behind his shoulder but saw none of the other statues moving. Opal Eyes seemed frozen once more.

"Oh man. Moving statues? You're losing it."

*"We want to touch you...taste you."*

Purple Hair raised his hand as if he actually expected her to take it. He had *loong* hands. Made for sin. She couldn't help the sudden flash in her fertile—obviously since she was making all of this up—mind of his how hands would feel on her. He'd know what to do with those, she was sure.

"Ugh. Come *on*," she snarled, getting annoyed with herself. Now she knew how others felt. Pete would have a field day with this one.

By the corner of her eye, she spotted Funny Guy behind the obelisk's glassy surface give another shoulder-shaking laugh.

*Get out, get out, get out*, screamed her rapidly overloading brain.

The man—statue—with the deep purple hair eyed her down from wet clothes to soggy boots then back up to her face. An arrogant, self-assured smirk played at the corner of his mouth. Oh, this one was *bad*. Bad as in great. She'd made herself a bad boy to play with in her broken mind.

"How touching."

How could her mind play these sorts of tricks? She'd never heard of underground cathedrals of mirrors and crystals, neither had she seen anything like the dazzling men silently following her. Giant Greek statues that could move? And an obelisk that *glowed*?

"Some vegetal or fungi or lichen stuff. Yeah, that's it. That's why some stone just happens to glow, that's how come a statue just stepped down from its place. Because of some damn mushroom! Please." There had to be another explanation.

Suddenly Funny Guy was no longer alone inside the obelisk base. Purple Hair and Opal Eyes stood on either side of him. God, they were just so *beautiful*. Like angels. Seven feet tall, naked, sexy angels.

*Okay, maybe not angels.*

Audrey threw a slanted glance at the one with the purple hair. He was so mesmerizing. She could've stared at that face all day. Or night. *He must make women very happy with hands like those.*

He nodded, one eyebrow quirked way up.

"Pfft!"

Her snorted laughter took her by surprise. Funny Guy threw his head back. She didn't hear the hyena laugh but could imagine it. She only had time to gasp when, with a flourish of his long hand, he turned around and *walked away*? Deeper inside. Right out the other side? Yet she didn't see him emerge behind the obelisk. How wide was that thing anyway? Then Opal Eyes blinked out. Just like that.

"I should book myself a nice padded room with a view on a Japanese garden. Some triple-stitched shirt with loooong sleeves and a bit of feng shui would do me good." There was no way this was going into a nice little compartment in her head. And she knew then as surely as the sun was bright that had she had the means, she would've started again. Started anchoring her world with pain. Her arms itched. She rubbed one. Rub, rub, rub. Chase the numbness away.

Purple Hair set his strange gaze on her and beckoned once again, this time adding one hell of a seductive smile with the yummy rest. Audrey's heart skipped a beat. His statue remained where she'd last seen it. Him. Argh, god, she was losing her mind. But the way he looked at her made her forget about everything else, including her scars.

"Come near us," a whisper floated by her.

She gritted her teeth, blinked several times. *What if?*

Trembling from head to toes, she set the backpack down, took a step closer. He nodded his encouragement, licked his bottom lip then kept it tucked in as he waited for her to come closer.

She did.



## Chapter Four

Another step. Another nod. Another lick.

"What am I doing?" she whispered so she didn't hear her own voice, which would surely break the spell. Unless she was dreaming, in which case, it wouldn't hurt to get a little closer, now would it?

*What the hell am I doing?*

Another step, this one taking her within arm's length of the mirrored surface. She could've touched she was so close. Something held her hands by her sides. Something primeval, animalistic and raw. Fear. Horror. Panic. But mostly fear.

She chanced a quick peek at the statue again. Just in case. It hadn't moved.

Purple Hair mouthed something. And when he raised his hand so he could trace the glassy surface with a long index finger, trace it down as he would her, Audrey swore she felt his finger brush down her throat, between her breasts and lower over her belly. A zing of sexual energy created a shiver down her back. Her pussy cramped painfully. Her breath escaped in a thin ribbon that created a circle of fog against the glass, which quickly absorbed it.

*"Let us touch you,"* she swore the man mouthed.

*Oh my god.*

She wanted to.

*"Come closer...let us touch you."*

Had he said this directly in her head? She heard him as clearly as if he'd spoken right there by her ear. Actually not spoken but whispered.

Goodness knew she *wanted* him to touch her. In fact, a crazy thought raced around her mind. Naked. She should be naked and let him touch her all he wanted. Yet something nailed her to the spot. Fear. He was so predatory.

*Plus, he's not real and you're a lunatic.*

*"...bring us much pleasure...as it would you."* Velvet whispers against her cheek.

She couldn't move. She could barely breathe. "I-I...I can't."

*"You can. Shed the bonds that hold your body captive. Let us pleasure you in ways no one has done before."*

"You're not even there," she countered, also whispering. "You don't exist." The last word hissed like a warning.

He shook his head. *"You know we do. Your body senses us, wants us. We know that hunger for it plagues us as well. But we can satiate it. All our thirsts could be quenched, if such is your wish."*

Audrey took a long breath and let it out slowly. The notion that the more she listened to these whispers, the clearer they became, made her want to rub her eyes. She didn't move. Couldn't. Wasn't sure she even wanted to.

*"...grace us with your name...let us in...please."*

So polite for a hallucination. Inexplicably, she could feel he was waiting for her to give her name, as if this represented something important. For him.

"Audrey."

A wicked smile flashed then was gone right away. *"We wish to taste you, Audrey."*

"Uhhh." She cleared her throat. "Taste me?"

He nodded. *"Taste your mouths, both of them."*

Her cheeks felt warm. Both mouths, huh?

Purple Hair pointed to the left and Audrey rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't imagining things. Inside a thick but low cluster of crystal, she saw a black stone altar — *you're just remembering what you saw earlier, no biggie, there's one right there in the colonnaded temple-thing* — with a naked woman on it. A brunette with too-wide hips for her petite frame.

Oh man, it was her!

A very tall man with purple hair cut in a serrated style knelt at the foot of the altar between her knees and was eating her out something fierce. With his gaze turned to the left — toward *her*, the real physical her, as she watched — he curled out his tongue, his long, long tongue and flicked it teasingly at the juncture of her lips. The woman — *her* — strained against the silver ribbons holding her wrists above her head and her feet wide apart. When the man stood, Audrey gasped and fought the urge to squeeze her thighs together. His cock was so, so beautiful. Strange because usually penises left her cold. Sure, they had their uses. But beauty? Not really. This one was.

Behind the obelisk's surface, her companion turned back to her. *"Do you wish for him to take her? Do you wish to watch how much pleasure he can give his lover?"*

*Take me, you mean? Because that's me on that altar, writhing.*

Audrey tore her gaze from the scene. "I don't know. It's n-not for me to decide — *man!* This is twisted." She covered her face with her hands, rubbed hard then closed her eyes. "Are you still there?" she asked, hoping to hear nothing.

*"If you wish us to be."*

A loaded question if there was ever one. She wanted, desperately so, to keep looking at the most handsome man on Earth, yet since he didn't really exist... Would it be very, very sick if she said yes?

*"Open your eyes, Audrey. Watch him pleasure her."*

The tone sounded a lot like a command and instantly raised her feminist hackles. But the hormonal response couldn't be denied. She opened her eyes.

In the thick, low crystal, the woman arched her back while her lover bent over her, said something in her ear that made her grin wide. But when he curled his spine and took her, just like that, the smile turned upside down and a cry of ecstasy left her. Or so Audrey imagined it did since she could hear nothing. The man took her hard at first, she could tell by the tremor in the woman's thighs, then he slowed, retreated to the tip, sank back in. Her own pussy throbbed demandingly at the torturous vision. Why was she doing this to herself? She knew damned well no one was around to help her get rid of the urge. Masochist!

*"We are here."*

*"But you don't count."*

*"You can change that."*

The man added fingers to his penetration. His cock was so shiny, just so damn shiny. Audrey had to look away. Her gaze settled on Purple Hair's statue and how beautiful it was, such perfection, such symmetry and grace even if power emanated from every angle.

*"Do you not want this? Do you not wish for this sort of pleasure to be given?"*

*"By a real man, you mean."*

Audrey saw the frustration, the anger pass very quickly in the strange purple eyes. Oh, a hallucination with a male ego, huh?

*"Look at them. Look at the ecstasy you deny yourself."*

She did, damn him.

The man became two with the addition of Funny Guy bending over to kiss the woman's mouth. Because he stood above his lover's head, he could easily bend over and while taking her mouth, caress her with his long fingers. Audrey cringed with envy when the woman's back bowed high off the altar. The one who looked like her Purple Hair kissed the inside of the woman's thigh, rubbed his fingers back and forth against her pussy before sinking in once more.

Very close by, the sound of a large chunk of ice landing on the ground and breaking in a thousand pieces made her jump back. Audrey's squeal of fright instantly shamed her.

*"This place will kill me,"* she muttered, rubbing her chest.

She checked back to realize the trio was gone. Purple Hair too. The obelisk was empty but still pulsating. She wanted to thank god that the statue had stayed where it'd been since stepping off the socle because she wasn't sure she would've pushed it – him, Purple Hair – away. But then again, maybe it hadn't moved at all. Maybe? For Christ's sake! It *hadn't* moved at all. It'd been there all along and she hadn't noticed.

For some reason she'd rather not examine right now, Audrey acutely felt Purple Hair's absence. In her every bone she felt it.

*"You're losing it."*

Needs stabbed at her, needs that had nothing to do with survival and everything to do with being horny as all hell and having nothing with which to fix it. Purple Hair stood not far from his socle, looking so majestic and tall and argh! That was one glorious cock there. Saliva pooled under her tongue. What she wouldn't give to get her hands – and mouth – on such a delicacy!

But it was there, wasn't it. She could just maybe *touch* it?

"Arghhhhhhh! It's a stone cock."

Had it been so damn long she'd start drooling over marble dicks?

So she waited there like an ass, hoping they'd come back, especially the one with the pale violet eyes. But they didn't. Feeling bereft and not a little stupid, Audrey investigated the rest of the place, found four alcoves with black stone altars in the center of each. So the altars had been there all along. Her mind must have picked it up and replayed it in her hallucination with the two guys making love to that woman.

*To you, you mean.* Because it *had* been her. Ugh. Her head hurt.

Now that she could see one clearly – and not be sidetracked by the image of Purple Hair screwing her on one such altar, compared to the rest, the altars didn't reflect light at all. In fact, they looked as if they *swallowed* it. Audrey shook her head and had come to the conclusion that she'd started to slide back down into psychosis when she caught herself gazing fondly at Purple Hair's statue, wishing it to move again.

*Admit it Pullman, you want him to come back.*

The itch in her arms lessened while she envisioned the two of them together, making love. She snarled a curse, whirled away from the sight of his statue and was caught off guard by the acute pain that jabbed her forearms. All she had to do...

"No."

To keep her mind out of the gutter and her hands busy, she inspected the contents of her backpack again. Have to keep things nice and neat. She pulled it all out, set it down according to size. A dead cell phone, a wad of wet tissues, a sodden travel booklet depicting a pretty Bavarian scenery, some gum, ruined bandages, a water bottle, two granola bars, a pair of wool socks and the handful of Euro coins she'd counted too many times.

"Maybe I can use the socks to weave myself some rope or the gum as suction cups." Or the soon-to-be-be-empty bottle to collect her urine. God, she hoped it wouldn't come to that. With two bars and a bottle, she figured she'd last two, three days. Then she'd starve to death. She was already *so* thirsty.

Movement from within the obelisk made her peer more intently.

*Oh god, he's back!*

Her heart skipped a beat in spite of her. "Ahhh, man. That's just sick."

The one with the purple hair had returned – and boy was she glad in a sick puppy kind of way – and held in his hand a clear goblet of gold liquid. It looked like white

wine to her. She didn't like wine but it looked damn good right about now. She licked her lips. So tempting.

He smiled a predatory grin that raised the hairs on her arms.

"Why do you do this, huh?"

*"We wish to please you,"* whispered the breeze. *"Only to please you."*

"You don't even know what I like."

His mouth widened in a feral grin. *"We know many things about you, Audrey. We know you enjoy males with large hands."*

Audrey's cheeks grew warm. She *did* enjoy guys with big hands. Whoa. But then again, this guy was a figment of her own imagination, so of course he'd know what she liked.

He proffered the goblet closer to the mirror. The golden drink tempted her just as much as the man holding it did. Beyond the mirror, Purple Hair stood taller and curled his upper lip in what had to be the epitome of male pride. A foolish itch to chuckle made her shake her head. Losing her head already.

"At least I'm doing it in style."

A shiver rocked her. She should get out of these soggy clothes or risk catching her death. Starving to death *and* having a head cold would just suck too much.

"I need to dry this," she mumbled, pinching her pants away from her thighs.

After she threw her visitor a warning glance—he turned around to give her some privacy, how weird was that?—she peeled her wet clothes off except the set of gray sports panties and cami, and her wool socks. She couldn't keep the fleece on. For the first time in years, she let her arms bare even if someone else could see. Well, except a close friend or Pete. The cuts looked like tiny blue lines on her forearms. Some of them were neat for when she'd been clear-headed enough to keep her hand steady, others less so. That she'd cut herself to begin with had been embarrassing, shameful even, enough without making a mess of things. It'd begun innocuously enough. Her friends had always been more connoisseurs of rebel chic than her, so when they'd started carving themselves with the end of mechanical pencils—boyfriends' initials, of all things—during particularly boring classes, Audrey had followed suit. What had begun as silly behavior from a bored teen had quickly degenerated into serious cutting from a young woman who never quite fit in. No one would ever have suspected Audrey Pullman of such self-destructing urges. She hid it well, not only physically with long sleeves but with that carapace she'd built. The hypocrisy made her failings even more embarrassing. She didn't even have a good reason. Never been raped, abused, neglected. Her family wasn't perfect but loving just the same.

She laid the clothes neatly on an outcropping, making sure not a wrinkle remained. Her knees hurt and when she looked at them, noticed they were chafed, a faint feeling of déjà vu settled in. *Rug burns, baby. Those are rug burns.* But she hadn't been intimate with anyone in over a month. Why wouldn't her knees be abraded? She'd taken a

plunge in a raging river. It made sense. A sudden stab of lust made her press a hand to her belly. *Whoa. Calm down.*

She looked up and around the eerie place. A frisson tingled at the base of her spine, traveled up to her nape. Dammit. She was colder but at least a bit dryer. Audrey hugged herself and jumped on the spot a few times.

"Okay, what now?"

She didn't even jump when the man blinked out to reappear with a wide midnight blue cape stretched between his hands, as if he meant to wrap it around her shoulders. Her psyche was being so convivial with her. Yet she didn't come any closer to him. Fear hadn't abated even if shock had. She didn't want to voice her fear, both out of very shallow and egotistical reasons and, well, she didn't want him to know he scared her.

*I need a pill. Any kind of pill.*

He seemed to understand anyway and the cape disappeared. His eyes narrowed, he watched her intently, his gaze roving the length of her body, giving her chills and producing a fine, fine shiver of sexual awareness. She was getting horny for a man inside her head while she stood to die within the next couple of days of either exposure or dehydration. And him the sexiest thing alive, barely a couple feet away and looking at her with those predatory eyes.

"What's your name anyway?" she asked. Should she talk to the statue or the image behind the glass? Wasn't that what the books called *Playing to Your Psychoses*? Don't feed the monkeys, so to speak. "Did I give you a name at least?"

Purple Hair looked as if she'd just slapped him. He straightened to his — oh what? — six ten or so height. "*You know our names. You have known our names all your life.*"

*Our names?* She shook her head. Christ, she'd made herself a psychoanalytic hallucination with a grandeur complex. Honestly, she didn't care about the others' names, only his.

He smiled. "*Echion,*" he whispered in her head. He always whispered, didn't he? Fine by her, it was even sexier this way. As if she needed it.

Echion. Where had she heard that name? A vague sense of remembrance tickled the back of her neck. He'd claimed she knew his name. But how could she? From where? Her chafed knees itched and she rubbed one.

"Echion. That sounds, well, ancient." Greek? Latin? Where had she found that name anyway? In an old book perhaps? Or had read it on some statue in a museum somewhere? Or maybe in one of the medical books back when she'd tried to auto-diagnose herself?

"*It is a very old name.*" He tucked his bottom lip, narrowed his eyes at her then released it. "*You are the most luscious female we have ever seen.*"

*Luscious female?*

He must have realized his words had caused a reaction only not quite the one he must have been going for. A mocking, arrogant grin pulled his lips wide. "*You have*

*much spirit. We enjoy mortals with such verve for they make the most vigorous companions. And vigor is vital if you are to enjoy our touch."*

"What if I don't, huh?" she countered. Might as well go all the way since she was dying and going crazy. "What makes you think I even want you?"

Purple Hair, what was his name again? Echion. Echion ran an index finger—that thing had to be ten inches long—down his side of the surface and, dammit, if she didn't feel it all the way down her front. Shivers pebbled her breasts. Her nipples showed spectacularly well, and any other time she would've tried to hide them but since she was hallucinating, she'd be damned if she'd hide from some figment of her imagination.

*"You do want us. As we want you."*

He beckoned her to come closer but did it in a way that indicated she should stand in front of the obelisk, not necessarily "Come over here you, so I can XYZ". Less commanding. More like a request. She preferred that.

Audrey took a few cautious steps and stood about a foot in front of him. He positively dwarfed her in height, even if he was impossibly lean. And angular too now that she could see his jaw and cheekbones up close. He looked chiseled. Or better yet, *chipped*. As if someone had used a wood carver on a block of milky ice. Magnificent.

*"Your body is cold. Let us warm it for you. A small taste of what we can do."*

"I'm not coming any closer," she countered. *Even if I want to.*

*"We accept your choice."*

He put his hand right up against his side of the smooth crystalline surface and closed his eyes.

Suddenly heat wafted to her shivering body. She couldn't believe it! *Heat*. With a sigh, she closed her eyes, lifted her face and absorbed as much as she could without touching anything. Strangely enough, she was becoming comfortable and spent a while imagining his hands really *were* touching her, not just the heat of them. It'd be nice. Not nice, but *nasss* as one of her friends said.

When Audrey opened her eyes again, she caught Echion with his closed, a small grin of contentment lifting one corner of his glorious mouth. He looked so relaxed. He opened his eyes, gently traced her contour—from his side of the barrier anyway—with an index finger tipped with a fingernail that resembled a sliver of bleached almond. Fever followed in his hand's wake.

*"Ahhh."*

She hadn't meant to let the gasp out loud but couldn't keep it in. This was turning into something entirely different. Not that she minded.

*"We could do it again if that is your wish."*

She nodded because she didn't have the guts to say it out loud. Wussie.

He repeated the process but started up by her cheek and Audrey was sure, could *swear*, she felt that finger brushing down her jaw so softly, below along her neck, trace

the curve of her shoulder, down her arm before twisting inside and “touching” her waist and hip. At the back of her mind, she noticed how the obelisk seemed to grow brighter and to “beat” faster too.

Did she care? Not one bit.

Echion’s mouth quivered but he said nothing.

She watched that mouth coming closer, down at her, almost touching his side of the “fence”. All she had to do was go up on her toes and meet him halfway. His amethysts-for-eyes were half closed. His lips glistened.

*Just a quick taste.*

It wouldn’t hurt anyone. This was all in her head anyway. Who’d know?

*“No one but you and us, delectable Audrey,”* he whispered.

He never said “I” always just “us”. He was so...

*“Tempting?”* he finished out loud.

Perhaps some remnants of conscience pulled her back or maybe a shred of self-respect that clamored “Please no sex with hallucinations” stopped her from kissing the man with the purple hair. She couldn’t be sure. All she knew was that she sighed, turned her back on the obelisk and went to sit on a rock by her clothes.

Her intellect had won over her feelings. Again.

She was alone and cold. Again.



## Chapter Five

Echion wanted to throw a fit of rage but as he peered at the mortal female sitting dejectedly while she waited for her clothes to dry, he found he could not hold on to the anger. She looked so lonely and lost, her arms scarred and marked. He knew what they were, aggression turned inward, numbness, loneliness, but would not comment on it to her. Mortals were so fragile. So fragile. But he could change all that for her. Temporarily at least. He could bring her pleasures unimaginable, rapture even, could give her wounded body and heart and spirit all that she needed and more. He would love her, in his own way, as a Shade would. Of course it would not last. But while it did, she would be blissfully happy.

If she would only touch the portal.

"We will have to find another way," Orias whispered as he joined him. Whispered for Shades, mere shadows of their once formidable selves, could still destroy their fragile prison with the power of their voices alone. They no longer had the leisure of choice either. Nor had they virtues, virtues like patience. They *had* to get that mortal.

"What do you want, Orias?" Echion snapped.

"We could have sworn on the twins' heads that she was drawn to *you* the most," mocking Orias said. Echion felt him shrug. "But then again, we always loathed the twins."

Orias' snort of laughter fouled Echion's mood even more. He cursed under his breath and turned from the mirror.

"She will come to us in good time. She will not resist much longer." The whispered sibilants hissed between his teeth. *She wants to come to us.*

Orias nodded, movement that created small waves amidst the green hair. Shades' hair had once been used to create musical instruments that could enchant mortals into giving over their body, their soul. That had been so long ago. No one would remember how now. Nor why.

But Echion would change it all. He would lure this mortal close, would gorge on her—all of them would—thus bringing her to unspeakable heights of fulfillment. Then when she would have her fill, would no longer be able to sustain the strain, he would kiss her farewell, consume her spirit and bring the empty husk to rest where the others whose bleached bones waited the passage of time. His Shades and he would finally traverse the barrier holding him, holding all of them, captive. They would be free once more.

Orias' hand against his nape felt light yet sharp for the tapered fingernails this one enjoyed most. Had Shades been able to scar, each of their backs would bear Orias' passionate mark. Echion included.

"Perhaps we could work together?"

Eons past, at their peak and with mortals flocking to the obelisk, Orias and Echion had proven the most rewarding pair. Perhaps the mix of Orias' light humor and Echion's menacing mien had played a large role in tempting even the most stubborn mortals. Games of the flesh took on a whole new meaning with the two together. Not many had been able to resist. Not one actually.

"She was drawn to *us*," Echion replied, knowing his tone was curt and cold. But such was his nature. Moreover, he wanted to single-handedly free Shades so that all knew who was the strongest and worthiest of them all. No wonder he had always been called The Arrogant One. He was also the only Shade to have ever referred to himself as "I". He had done it only once, a long time ago. Orias had never forgiven him.

And honestly, he wanted her for himself. At first anyway. "She is drawn to *us*," he repeated through a long breath.

Orias' sigh dislodged strands of his hair. "You were always the independent one, dear friend. Always alone even amongst us."

When the other's mouth traced the shell of his ear, Echion could not help the small shiver of lust at the base of his spine. After a tender kiss where his jaw met his neck, his favorite companion whispered, "Then you shall have her first."

"Yet she is stubborn," an uninvited pair of voices remarked from behind them.

Echion did not need to look at the twins to know they must have been enjoying his temporary failure very much. The two's specialty had always appealed to the more debased mortals, those who wanted pain as much as pleasure, who enjoyed the sight of another's degradation and torture. They had ruined more than one mortal in their dark zeal. But this mortal female had not seen them even if they stood the closest to her as she had spent a while examining the obelisk, therefore she must not have shared their tastes. Now *that* had caused him much enjoyment. This meant she had a healthy appetite for lust and pleasures of the flesh without spiraling into the darker pits of lust.

"Her mind is partitioned, clear, yet full of *things*," Echion whispered. He still could not believe the clutter of machines and apparatuses he had glimpsed while she basked in his heat. "Things to go places, things to make other things. And she is afflicted with too much logic."

Orias chuckled. "But she talks to herself a lot so there is hope for her."

"Perhaps she would rather enjoy the darker side of lust. Her flesh bears marks."

Echion turned to the twins. "Perhaps she would. Although we have not seen her respond to *you* at all."

One of the twins, Theseus, only slightly less vicious than his brother, cracked a rare smile.

"She requires more force," countered the other, Aegeus. "Take her, Echion, by force. Take her now and be done with it. We can no longer wait."

In his usual high-drama theatrics, Orias put his finger to his chin and seemed to enter into a deep trance, his angelic face turned upward. "Remind us again, Aegeus, who, in a carnal haze, killed a certain mortal before we could pass through to the material realm?"

"He was *weak*," Aegeus spat. In his world, weakness embodied every fault possible.

And what a sordid display it had been. In the end, the mortal had begged to be finished off. Unfortunately, Shades had no room for mercy in their ice-cold hearts. He had died begging. The thought of this mortal female ending in such manner tightened his fists. Echion shook his head.

Orias chuckled. "Your toy was not weak, he was *mortal*, foolish Aegeus. Aptly so in your hands too."

Aegeus' angular face tightened, as did his fists. Of all the Shades, he was the quickest to anger. He took a step toward Orias. There was no love lost between the two, even if the lighthearted one had never openly moved against the twins. It seemed his jests alone could trigger Aegeus' ire. But of the two, Echion was not sure which fearsome Shade would win. Most would side with the vicious twin, but he would not so easily discount Orias. He had witnessed his anger once.

Theseus put a calming hand over his brother's shoulder. "We need to find what moves her," he whispered, looking at Echion. "And we seem to have found it. She responded to Echion and so she is his to bring across. Now remains the matter of melting some of the ice off her heart. As cold a mortal as we have ever seen, yet still so young. They have changed much. They have become skeptical, logical, dependent on things to survive. Their mating rituals have changed as well."

He seemed delighted by that.

Echion was not. He preferred mortals of old, more trusting, less jaded and cynical. And all these things floating around in her head. Clutter that kept her from knowing the full extent of carnal pleasures. But he would change all that.

Pallas' sudden arrival caused a deeper scowl on the twins' faces. But then again, Pallas had appeared abruptly for that exact reason, to rile the twins. Echion felt the air congeal with the long-seated hatred between the brothers and Pallas, the oldest and wisest in a way, even if his body bore no marks of age. Echion had no insight on the root of such enmity and had often wondered about it. Surprisingly, the mortal named Audrey had spent a short time in a staring contest with Pallas, to Echion's complete shock. Most mortals never even noticed the immobile, silent Shade, and especially not a *female* one at that. But she had.

Pallas' opalescent eyes narrowed yet he said nothing.

Aegeus clearly itched for a fight with the ancient Shade. If mocking Orias often riled the twin, Pallas' mere presence could trigger complete violence.

"You have one night with her, Echion. If you fail to lure her in, on the next night we will take her by force," Theseus announced.

Pallas' scowl deepened.

"She would not survive," Echion blurted out, cursing at the way his words sounded. Worry. He was not worried. Only frustrated. Mortals rarely ventured so deep underground. He only wanted to make sure Audrey survived long enough to release them all. He did not care. Never had. Never would.

"She will be dead anyway in a matter of days," the vicious brother replied, clearly enjoying the game to come. "Why not enjoy her now, take her now while her heart beats strongly and there is life still in her body. We would enjoy making her scream our name. Or *scream* at all."

Orias lost the mocking sparkle in his eyes. He shook his head sadly and disappeared.

What was the strange feeling of dread that had just invaded his gut? What did he care if the twins spoiled another mortal? It would not be the first time. Nor the last. But this time, with her response to him so clear, Echion felt a sort of responsibility toward the mortal. That in exchange for her attention, he wanted to at least bring Audrey *there*, to the precipice of lust. Then he would pull back. The others would do the rest.

"It will not come to that," Echion snapped.

Both twins bowed, Aegeus doing it mockingly. "Hope it does not," they whispered in unison. "We have needs for which her tender flesh would be perfect."

Echion looked back at the outside where the mortal female had fallen asleep with her pretty head leaning against a rock. She looked so miserable. So cold and alone. He knew the feeling well.

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey woke with a painful twitch in her cramped thighs. She stretched, remembered where she was and jumped to her feet.

The statues!

A quick check confirmed they hadn't moved. But she'd moved too fast. Blood pressure dropped and all she saw were red stars against a black background. With her heartbeat loud in her ears, she put her head between her knees and took a few deep breaths. Whew.

Her clothes weren't dry enough but she was too cold to care. She wrestled them on, occasionally glancing at the obelisk and various clusters of crystal. Her palms burned, covered as they were with tiny wounds like paper-cuts. She knew that sort of discomfort well. She left her rain jacket on the boulder. She took a tiny sip of water. Strangely, she wasn't even hungry, just cold and cranky and with panic tickling the back of her neck. She'd have to get out of here. She had to at least try.

"Or die trying." More likely.

Movement caught her eye.

Echion stood at the base of the obelisk. Even with the distance, she could tell something was up with him.

"Aww, I even gave my hallucinations some angst. How cute."

He shook his head as if he thought she were being an idiot. She didn't know why and would make sure to tell the psychiatrist about it, but Audrey was instantly pissed off and stalked up to the obelisk, fists on hips.

"What's up with you, huh? No sense of humor? Well, since you're in my head, you should know that I have one. It's twisted, it hurts people I like sometimes, but it's mine and I like it the way it is. So screw you."

He cocked his head, a sudden flash of predatory attention in his amethyst-like eyes.

"Oh, you like aggressive females, do you? You'd be the first!"

A "what do you mean" expression replaced the lustful glint.

"Oh? You want to know why?" Might as well talk with the guy since he was in her head, therefore wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. At least, she'd provided herself with some entertainment while she waited for the Reaper. "Because men don't like aggressive females. Most of them anyway. It cramps their style, see? Makes them all nervous, uncertain and some of them a bit shy. They don't know what to do anymore, poor buggers. That's what some of them have said anyway. 'You can't be right with women'. It's a lose-lose situation for them, my friend. If they act macho, they get kicked in the ass and if they act sensitive, they're called sissies."

The torrent of words seemed to entertain him greatly since he moved closer to the surface and made a circular gesture with his hand meaning that she should go on. A guy who didn't say a word and wanted her to keep talking? Now *this* was her last proof he wasn't real. But, dammit, if she wouldn't take his invitation!

"Take me for example."

She swore she could hear, "*We would if you let us.*"

"Not this way, my friend," Audrey said through a tight "I'm losing it" laugh. "I've gone out with men who thought my tongue was just fine when it was busy licking their cock but when I'd use it to talk, oh well, now that was a whole different game. They acted as if each word was a ball I threw on their side and they didn't know if they should throw it back or keep it or what. Shit, as if I have the ability to talk for their benefit, you know?"

Echion indicated he did. Bless his heart.

Audrey knelt by the base of the obelisk and shook her head. "Even Pete, my last boyfriend. He was all nice and funny and loved to talk until three in the morning. But then..." She had to clear her throat to keep the lump from embarrassing her. Crying in front of a make-believe man with purple hair and eyes was a bit, well, *sad*.

He knelt on his side of the mirror—not a mirror, her brain remarked, silver glass. *Yeah whatever*. When he moved, his serrated bangs came down over his forehead, gave

him a sexy, dangerous appearance. She'd forgotten how predatory he could look. So unlike the safe men she'd dated.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter anymore."

He indicated that it did with a lean of his upper body and a small nod.

*Am I making all this shit up?*

A shake of head.

"Pete and I dated for almost two years. We moved in together, a first for me, I usually like for us to keep our own places. Anyway. It was going really well. Then he got all 'I need space, you're pulling me down, I think of you as a friend'. And that's the swan song to a girl. 'I think of you as a friend.' Ha!"

Audrey scooted a bit forward when Echion shook his head in disgust. He understood perfectly. She'd created him perfect inside and out.

"Then one day, I come home and he has all his stuff by the door. And I'm all 'Where are you going?' And the jerk doesn't have the guts to tell me. He's apologetic, calls himself a chickenshit. He was hoping I'd work late again." A fist closed on her throat. She waited a while with Echion visibly hanging on her every word. Good man. "When I started on him—I'll give him that, it's ugly when I get angry—Pete looked disgusted, as if he'd thought I'd take this sitting down. He was moving out, for Christ's sake! And planned on doing it like a sly little shit too. Anyway. He started on me too, called me names, which he never did. A snide little bitch. That's what he called me."

Echion's eyes narrowed dangerously. Oh, he'd give Pete a piece of his mind, wouldn't he? Yeah, he would. With his size, he'd make pâté of old five-and-a-half Pete. Audrey wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. And when the man across from her raised his, palm extended toward her cheek, offering comfort and a shoulder to lean on, Audrey Pullman, for the first time in her life, instead of going it alone and showing everyone she had a spine, goddammit, took the offer.

She leaned her cheekbone against the obelisk. Touched the surface.

The sharp little prick of an electrical spark caught her by surprise. A tiny blue arc passed from the tips of his fingers to her skin. She gasped more in shock than in pain. But the heat of his palm proved so good she didn't pull back.

"Is this not so much better?" Echion whispered, his strange eyes trapping her in their violet midst. His voice sounded so real.

Wow, she'd created her hallucination with an accent. Weird.

"Yeah, tell me about it." She fought the urge to snifle. She was a sad case, but not *that* bad. And hot damn, his skin was soft. Like smooth, warm, pliable glass. Molten crystal. And his lips so wet-looking, that perfect nose, the hair so shiny it resembled strands of purple silk. Audrey was caught. She knew it as surely as the insanity tickling the back of her head, as acute as a physical punch to the gut. She wasn't only caught. She was lost.

"Do not fear us," he whispered very close to her face. His breath smelled of nothing. It barely touched her face at all. "We would never cause you harm." His eyelids lowered by increments equal to the diminishing space between his mouth and hers. He was going to kiss her.

Audrey knew she wouldn't stop him.

"I'm not afraid of you," she murmured against his mouth. Barely an inch from her own now. Heat reached her, spread to her face.

"We know."

"You do?"

A half smile played on Echion's lips, curved his angular cheekbone. "We know much about you. This, first and foremost."

His lips pressed against hers.

Had anyone ever told her she'd go from Audrey Pullman to weak-kneed, brain-oozing-out-the-ears, drowning-in-estrogen bimbo—without the good looks—she never would've believed them. But she would now. As soon as Echion's mouth touched hers, her mental faculties traveled in direct and opposite direction to her libido, which soared to dizzying heights she had no idea existed. She wanted things she couldn't even envision, let alone voice. She yearned for the kind of lovemaking no man could give, in ways no one would dare. Urges spread through her. To kiss him and be kissed in return. To fill her hands with his hair, yank him down and crush his face against her. Squeeze her legs on either side of his narrow hips. The urge to wrap her arms around him and never let go reigned supreme. A simple kiss could do that?

"Whew," she breathed.

"And yet we have only just begun."

"There's going to be more?"

"Yes."

Never had so simple a word created such vivid visions.

His lips parted, Echion brushed hers in the tenderest way imaginable. If she hadn't been convinced he lived only in her head, she could've sworn he was real, that the hand he presently snaked up the back of her head existed, that those fingers flexing and cupping her nape were truly a man's and no figments of her imagination, that while he caressed her, his tongue darted out for a quick brush. Lust knifed her.

Audrey arched her head back so Echion would have room to kiss his way down her throat and in so doing, she realized things around her had changed. And not just a little.

The place seemed alive. Gone was the feeling of age, of stillness, replaced with energy that pulsed throughout the cathedral. Crystals no longer looked like broken remainders of eons past but majestic, sharp pillars rising to some glorious gods. The black stone altars now white and polished to a high glimmer, glistened like wet marble on either side of the nave while the gigantic obelisk still throned in the center but now positively radiating with inner light. And the statues...

Audrey gasped. Every last one of them stepped off its socle. *His* socle. They were men.

"They're alive!"

Echion nodded against her mouth. "You brought us back to life. To please you. To taste and love you."

They all looked so magnificent. The whole place did. As if she'd gone back in time to a period where the cathedral had been thriving. They still knelt on the floor in front of a thick crystal, but the tiles underneath weren't broken. A gorgeous mosaic of every known shade of green and blue snaked and zigzagged, curled and ran arrow-straight. They felt warm.

"How is this possible?" she said, tentatively reaching up to touch his shoulder. So hard. The satiny quality of his skin shimmered under the light. "Everything is so *different*."

He pulled away just enough to focus his eyes on her. They really were the color of amethysts. "How so?"

"Well, it looked dead, and now it's—"

"Alive," a man said from behind her. "Because of you."

Echion's hand froze on her chin, which he'd cupped for another kiss. His eyes rolled to fix something above her head. He didn't look displeased or pleased, merely acknowledging the presence.

Audrey turned to watch the one in green, Funny Guy, approaching. He wore a lopsided smirk. *Nothing* but a lopsided smirk. His statuesque and chiseled body rippled as he drew near and knelt beside Echion. His eyes were the color of jade. With a long and graceful hand—tipped with sharp-looking almond-shaped fingernails—he isolated a strand of her companion's hair and let it slip between his fingers. Echion's jaw muscles twitched. He seemed aroused. She could relate.

"We are Orias," he whispered. They always whispered here? "And you are *sublime*."

The way they knelt in front of her, so beautiful, touching, relaxed, facial traits of exquisite perfection, reminded her of those ancient Greek statues of poets in discourse. Except there was a feral intensity to them, a faintest aura of some extreme power pulsing behind the smooth façade. As if these Greek gods could kill a man with a mere flick of the wrist. Plus there was the *size* of them.

Orias abandoned Echion's hair and reached out to trace her cheek, which grew warm. He was hard. And *big*.

With a cocky smile, Orias dipped his chin. "Do not let us interrupt you. Please resume the festivities."

"The men in Audrey's life," Echion began, looking at Orias then Audrey in turn, "have been incompetents. Fools. Maladroits. Yes?"



Despite feeling manipulated, Audrey nodded. She saw the rest of the men disperse around the mammoth cave yet felt spied on, studied, gauged by countless eyes.

"They did not know how to please you," Echion went on. She focused on him again. Easy to do. "They did not know how to make your body flush, your heart race, your mind still. They did not understand how such fine skin required the lightest touch." She shivered when his gaze slid to her chest. "Yet how your flesh demanded a conquest, this duality in your spirit, dominance and surrender, light and dark, give and take. They did not know."

Unable to talk, she shook her head.

"We do," Echion whispered.

Orias nodded his assent. "We do."

A zing of sexual awareness tingled from her nipples all the way down to her pussy. Moisture accumulated. She resisted the urge to shift.

With a feral half smile, Echion put the pad of his index finger on her temple then gently, lightly, slid down her cheek, her jaw.

"We will conquer your flesh with ours, penetrate, capture and gorge." He traced the fleshy peaks of her upper lip, licked his.

"Yet will worship every parcel of your body as if it were – and is – the most radiant of blooms."

Shivers followed his finger as he brushed it down farther, over her shoulder, down her biceps. Audrey's breathing quickened. *Oh god, that's so good.*

"We will take you."

*Never "I". Always "we".* She wondered why.

His finger reached her quivering belly, slipped inward to graze her navel through the polar fleece. Heat spread outward to her entire body. She was panting by the time his finger teased lower.

"Then we will give ourselves in return."

He twisted his wrist so his palm faced upward, curled his fingers and grazed her pubic bone with his knuckles, the whole while his eyes never leaving her face, his lips glistening and energy that seemed to come from within, giving him a luminous glow.

Echion's chin touched her cheek when he whispered in her ear, "We have waited millennia."

A voiceless gasp left her when Orias leaned in to her as well, his breath hot against her other ear. "But we will wait no more."

Her mind racing with images, her heart beating twice its normal rate, her palms slick with sweat, she closed her eyes. "Wait for what?"

They replied simultaneously. "You."

## Chapter Six

While Orias pulled back, Echion gently kissed her throat as one would brush tender lips against a petal, feeling more than kissing, sensing texture, savoring the quality of her skin, the heat of her, the life beating. She tried to swallow, couldn't.

"Would you disrobe for us?" he whispered against her neck. Something incredibly hot and wet touched her behind an earlobe. God that tongue!

With a shiver, she nodded. She could barely breathe, how the hell was she going to take her clothes off? Between trembling fingers she pinched the zipper of her polar fleece and pulled down a few inches. The sound could have been distant thunder. It reverberated inside the cavernous place. Was it a trick of her eyes or had she seen the giant obelisk glow a bit more brightly?

Orias' gaze followed the tiny silver plate with the attention of a bird of prey. His eyes the color of jade narrowed to slits when she reached the last tiny hook and stopped. Heat wafted out of her parted collar, warmed her cheeks. She smelled of lilac, sweat and arousal. She smelled of woman.

She distinctly heard Echion's long intake of air through that perfectly formed nose, his fine features smoothing in his obvious delight when he drew back so he could offer her his hand.

"Not here on the floor," he whispered. "It is not worthy of you. There."

She followed his gaze to the left and opened her mouth. Nothing came out. That hadn't been there. It'd been farther away. She would've noticed a circular colonnaded structure surmounted by a domed roof made of what looked a lot like silver. The columns' bottom half disappeared within a thin coat of steam and then farther down into turquoise water. A long portico led to this partly submerged rotunda. Audrey looked at the Roman bath, for lack of better word, then at the two men. Behind them, the obelisk positively pulsated.

Echion stood, gathered her hand in both of his. They must have been ten inches long. "To warm you. You are so cold."

She was indeed very cold and shivering, although a large part of it stemmed from sheer thrill. She stood, was about to approach the gently declining tiled floor beneath the portico when Echion scooped her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing.

A whoop left her, which made Orias smile. "Indeed."

Underneath her trembling hands, Echion's body felt so hot, so hard. He walked to the edge where water gently lapped at the sloping floor, entered without a moment's hesitation and waded in until tendrils of steam curled up around her dangling feet. Her mucky hiking boots became warm then wet. She wiggled her toes.

"You are so very light," Echion whispered, gazed down at her face. "So fragile."

Fragile? She was *not* fragile.

Abandoning his neck, she reached down and let the tips of her fingers trail in the water. Sugary and exotic smells reached her nose.

*What is happening to me?*

How could she be imagining all these things, these people? So many details, things she'd never even seen in her life. Could she have come up with such particulars, perhaps had seen them in books or on television?

*It's all in your head.*

With Orias silently following, Echion took her to the middle of the colonnaded structure where a low rectangular slab of white marble rested with its top flush at water's height. Their arrival created tiny ripples to snake and lick the polished stone. Sunken reliefs engraved on the slab's sides disappeared beneath the turquoise water. She couldn't make out the designs but knew they represented people and not nature or animals. Neither could she pinpoint its source but diffuse light at the bottom of the Roman bath made everything glitter like gems except for Echion's and Orias' legs, both sets rendered dark pillars underneath the steaming surface. Part of Orias' massive penis dipped below as well. For a full three seconds, she couldn't take her gaze off it.

With extreme care, Echion set her down on the marble slab then planted both hands on either side of her hips and set his violet gaze on her. He looked *feral*.

"We wish to see you in your true form. Without these." He pinched the collar of her fleece. "We wish to revel in your naked beauty. Now."

No one had ever spoken to her this way. Commanded her this way. Yet she did as he instructed, never thinking for even a second of resisting. Why would she? She wanted this.

Neither of the men moved when she lifted a foot, unlaced her boot, slipped it off with the toe of her other foot. With a small *gloop*, the boot fell into the hot water and disappeared below the surface. The second boot followed then the socks. She felt awkward and self-conscious, trying to do things smoothly but ending up a bit brusque. And her arms. They'd see her arms.

*What is happening to me?* She couldn't focus.

As she pulled the fleece over her head, the elastic in her hair became caught in the garment and pulled her hair free. The ponytail dissolved around her shoulders in a cascade of brown curls. She'd been trying for years to let it grow but would have the unmanageable mop cut after a few months when she couldn't take it any longer. She was due for it soon actually. Through her cami, her nipples hardened. Echion's mouth parted on a silent gasp, even Orias, whom she'd come to view as too cool to care, sucked in a breath.

"You are..." Echion began, shook his head, obviously unable to go on.

"A Venus," Orias finished, breathless. His accent made the word into something exotic and juicy, "Vay-nooss".

As if it didn't already beat hard and fast enough, her heart thudded against her sternum, her throat squeezed. She swallowed. When it was time to unzip her chinos, she faltered.

Echion reached out to cup her chin. "Lie back. We will help free you of these."

Relieved and embarrassed for feeling this way, Audrey lay supine on the warm marble slab. Her chest rose and fell quickly with each shallow breath. From this position, the roof resembled a giant silver breast. She resisted the urge to cross her arms.

While Orias watched, Echion opened her fly and, showing tremendous dexterity and lightness of touch for a man his size, slid the garment over her hipbones, down her thighs and off altogether. He didn't even look when he let them drop into the water. Her first reaction was to protest. She quickly subdued it.

His hand trembled when he ran one up her leg, right up to the elastic of her panties. Gray Fruit of the Loom high briefs. Sexy.

"Rest," he whispered.

She laid her head back, tried not to wiggle when he cupped water in both hands and let it trickle over her shoulder and arm, her belly and hip, her thighs down to her feet. Her cami, now practically see-through, clung to her pebbled breasts and left precious little to the imagination. Her nipples proudly pushed up. And Echion seemed to take special pleasure in brushing against one or the other whenever he let water dribble over her. Within minutes, he had her wet in every manner possible. Hot water succeeded in loosening her knotted muscles. She felt more relaxed than she'd ever been. What a thrill.

*Too bad none of it is real.*

Orias came to stand by her head, bent low so he could lean his elbow by her shoulder. He supported his chin on a loose fist. "Echion is very skilled."

She twisted her neck to catch his expression, which was mocking. He winked at her, kissed her lips.

She moaned in his mouth when Echion decided she was wet enough but wore too many clothes. Deft and moth-light, long fingers slipped underneath her cami, triggered violent shivers that arched her back off the slab and pushed her chin against that of Orias, who claimed her mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. Echion raised her cami high. More hot water trickled down onto her now denuded breasts. She closed her eyes.

*Please let it last, she chanted. Please.*

A burning-hot mouth deposited a necklace of kisses all over her chest and belly, trapped a nipple, released it to pay attention to the other. She'd never had such an attentive lover or one so adroit. When Orias pulled up to lean his perfect Greek-statue jaw on his steepled fingers, she spotted Echion standing proud and watching, the network of glorious muscles playing in the bluish light, underlining what had to be the

most sculpted, symmetrical chest ever to grace the planet in the history of man. Truly the most beautiful man she'd seen. He took her breath away.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Are we?"

Didn't he mean "am I" not "are we"?

She nodded emphatically. No surprise these guys could listen in on her mental monologue. That was where they lived in the first place. In her head. She didn't care. They felt plenty real to her right now.

Echion shared a long look with Orias, who merely shrugged and began toying with one of her curls. His nails were the longest she'd seen on a man. They suited him well though, added to his decadence and his air of derisive ennui. The statue of a jaded god.

With his pinkies high up in the air, Echion pinched her panties' elastic waistband and gently pulled down. Audrey had to close her eyes. She was half naked. With two men.

"We are not merely men," Echion commented in that voiceless manner she'd quickly come to associate with them. They always whispered. For a second, she wondered what their voices would sound like. Would they be soft? Deep?

Orias chuckled softly. "You would think the sky had opened up and sent thunder onto the land."

Would their voices be so terrible? She had trouble believing it. He was probably mocking her.

"We require neither sound to be heard nor words to be understood," he added.

"But we're speaking English right now," she retorted, trying too late to tune down the sarcasm.

Echion grinned that predatory smile, the crooked one she'd seen back inside the nave. "What makes you think we are?"

"I *only* speak English. I wouldn't understand if you spoke anything else." She didn't look at herself when Echion adroitly slipped her cami's spaghetti straps down her arms and off. Completely naked now. And aroused as never before.

"Perhaps we are speaking a common tongue," Orias put in near her cheek. "Perhaps we are not speaking at all."

Well, he was the Funny Guy.

She felt extremely exposed, naked as she was before these two with no walls to shield her against... Against whom? There was no one else. Was there? Yet she felt watched. Measured. Weighed. A quick scan revealed only the pulsating obelisk, the glorious cathedral and clusters of giant crystals here and there. Steam rose in coiling tendrils from the turquoise water. Such beauty. Such eerie beauty.

"Is this better?" Echion asked.

As if on cue, a thin film of water fell from the roof all around and effectively created a shimmering screen that shielded them from the outside. Droplets landed in the water with the sound of a handful of diamonds, quiet little ticks and clicks.

She nodded, honestly relieved. "Thank you."

"We only wish to please you." Just by his tone she knew Orias was smiling.

"Open yourself to us," Echion whispered, his words very close to orders.

After a brief mental struggle between her libido and her pride, she widened her feet until her heels rested on each corner. There.

Orias put his mouth right against her ear. "A lesser woman would not have had to ponder on such request. A lesser woman would have spread her legs with her next heartbeat. A lesser woman would not enthrall us the way you do."

"Charmer," she pushed through her teeth. Echion was kissing her thigh. God that felt good.

"My thanks," came the whisper directly, it would seem, in her brain. "Flattery *will* get you very far with us."

As a sprinter waiting for the gunshot would, Echion leaned over and supported his weight on his fingers, propped a knee right between her own and shifted his balance until he could smoothly "crawl" on hands and knees, stopping when his face hovered above her thighs. She shook badly.

"You are perfect," he commented, tucked his bottom lip between perfectly regular, stark white teeth. "Such beauty." He kissed the inside of her thigh as he would a mouth. Took his time, licked his way higher.

"Oh god," she let out.

Orias chuckled. "Ours have long forgotten where they misplaced us and I doubt yours would much appreciate the present situation."

Echion began slowly, so slowly she wondered for a second if she was imagining his mouth on her sex or if he'd really touched her at all. Shivers tightened her pussy. She bowed with a sigh. No one had eaten her out this way. No one. His kissing accentuated, deepened. With a hand, he drizzled hot water at the juncture of her lips so it'd trickle down the cleft, seep inside and join the liquid warmth already slicking her.

That tongue!

Audrey felt her fingers curling into fists. She'd never had a lover so gentle, so precise, yet easily felt the raw power pulsing out of Echion's every pore, if only for the way he positively towered above her, that close-to-seven-feet frame like a giant statue come to life. Perfect skin glistened when he dipped his hand into the water and brought it back. His fingers dripped when he grazed her mouth with it. The water tasted slightly salty. Like tears.

He never asked. She knew what he wanted from her.

Audrey framed his hand in her own and sucked on his fingers. Forefinger first then middle one. So hot. So smooth. Her tongue tickled as she wrapped it around the base of his finger, sucked as she pulled back. Salty. Man's taste.

After he slipped his hand from hers, she spotted, below his chin, the impressive cock hanging right above her pussy.

"Some have said," Orias whispered, "that Echion's touch is more decadent than Renaissance during its Halcyon days, more skilled than a master's brush and more breathtaking than the most beautiful birdsong."

"I-I believe you." Had that been her voice, that squeaky sound?

"Some have said Echion could make love to a woman with only his tongue."

She gritted her teeth as Echion was now using both hands to scoop water and splash her with it before returning to his ardent kissing. Spasms tightened her vulva so bad she feared giving in to the temptation and trapping him there between her legs. She felt her pussy blooming under his skillful touch.

*Oh god.*

"Do you wish to taste the full panoply of Echion's gifts?" Orias whispered so low she barely heard him.

"Yes! God, yes!"

She dug her heels in. Arched her back. Came like a storm.

"Ahhhh!"

Multicolored swirls in her vision forced her eyes closed. She was spinning. Uncontrollably.

Echion's tongue inside her, long fingers stretching her wide for his claiming. Orias' whispers, "Bloom for us, let us in." Hands so hot, hands all over. The smell of her juices, the hard slab digging into her shoulder blades. Miniature suns bursting behind her eyelids. Another mouth claiming hers. She looked down at Echion and caught him staring at her with a puzzled expression on his achingly beautiful face.

"You have bloomed for us."

Did he mean she'd come for him? Of course she had!

Orias abandoned her mouth to capture a nipple, which he sucked and licked and nibbled through a mischievous smile that made his jade-beads-for-eyes sparkle. He "mmm-ed" while he suckled. The sound causing her hands to fist his shiny hair. With a long arm, he reached down between her legs and gracefully slicked Echion's hair back from his face so he could devour her properly. Audrey's back left the slab again, she kicked at the slab corners, skittered with her heels to raise herself higher against the voracious organ devouring her.

More hands appeared to claim her other breast. Another beautiful man bent over her and kissed her belly. One identical to him stood at her feet, one hand full of his cock. His electric blue eyes were narrowed. Oh, the identical ones. She remembered them.

"Argh!"

Echion pushing fingers into her severed the visual contact she'd just made with the masturbating one. She squeezed her eyes shut. Another climax loomed over her. Close. So soon?

"We can bring you to heights of pleasure you did not know existed," Orias whispered then licked the shell of her ear. His tongue traced her neck, shoulder. He chuckled when she fisted his hair and forced him down lower. "Should I consume your flesh as Echion? Could you satisfy us both?"

Audrey felt like yelling there was plenty for all of them but kept her jaws clamped tight. She was so close. Echion must have sensed her impending orgasm for he pumped fingers into her with a slow rhythm that did wonders to her inhibitions. She dug her fingers in Orias' scalp, pawed around for the mysterious man reducing her nipple to feverish flesh and yelped when he bit the side of her breast.

"Ow!"

At once, he disappeared. Whoa.

With a carnal-charged stare and a lick of his upper lip, the masturbating one blinked out as well.

*What the...?!*

The wave was close now. Ready to pull her under. Echion's marvelous tongue made quick work of it. She spilled her pleasure for him with a long, silent sigh, which Orias greedily sucked in. That man could *kiss*. But it'd been Echion's handling that had made the difference.

Orias pulled away to stare at her. "He was always the most skillful one." For the first time, she heard a definite edge below the mockery.

Yet she couldn't spare a moment to look at Orias, too focused as she was on the one between her legs. That mouth—that decadent, decadent mouth. She felt, strangely enough, that he'd been made for her. Just for her. Nothing else mattered at that moment. Nothing but the selfish pleasure he brought her, nothing but him.

All of a sudden, Orias blinked out like the others. He just disappeared.

It must have been as much a shock to her as it was to Echion. He blinked a few times, cocked his head. "You have sent Orias away." He sounded bewildered. Stunned. Proud? "Never has anyone rejected him before. He is most skilled."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just, well, I'm sorry."

Had it been her doing then, all these disappearing men? Her mind must have decided to clear the decks and focus on the most favorite one. Yet she really hadn't meant to send Orias away. But Echion was just too good to share. Maybe she'd subconsciously dismissed the others to better concentrate on the one who most pleased and enthralled her. The one she liked the most. She felt bad especially for Orias. She liked him too.

*I'm really going nuts here.*

Echion came down on all fours so he could lower his upper body over her. He stopped when his chin practically touched hers. Muscled played underneath the perfect, alabaster-colored skin. His heat spread to her. "You sent them away to keep *us*?"



Didn't he mean "me"?

"I-I guess. I guess I have."

His eyes riveted her. "Why?"

*Because I like you better. "I'm not sure."*

Echion lowered himself a bit more, peered even more intently. "Why did you keep only us?"

"I like you."

*Pathetic.*

If his mouth had proven the most deliciously skilled, Echion made it demanding now, first crushing his lips to hers then claiming her with his tongue, his teeth. The ardor left her dizzy. Like a woman drowning, she grabbed him behind the head and forced him down on her, direction he quickly took, which forced a great *humph* of air out of her. God, he was incredibly heavy for his lithe frame. He captured all her senses. Frenzy replaced smoothness and power, patience. A hand trapped her breast, squeezed it, forced it up to his hungry mouth. Audrey enjoyed the change, even if Echion's former touch had been the best she'd had. But now, he wasn't only adept, he'd become wild.

"Lovely, lovely Audrey," he whispered against her mouth, kissed it hard, pulled at her lips then licked them side to side. He did the same to the nipple he'd just begun rolling in his long fingers.

Audrey bowed and pushed her pelvis against his. Goodness, he was so *big*. All of him. So big, so strong and hard. His beauty stunned her even more. No flaw. No mole, no scar, no blemish or mark. Wet skin glistened like polished stone, muscles playing underneath in glorious ribbons and bands, jerking here, contracting there, making his entire body a work of art of such perfection she could've cried just looking at Echion. Burning hot, his cock demanded she make room for it between her thighs, which she did on a long sigh. As she ran her hand over the smooth flawlessness that Echion was, she realized he had no hair on his body except his head and around the eyes.

"Will you welcome us into your flesh?" he murmured between deep kisses. "Will you accept us, take us?"

She nodded, bit his bottom lip.

A voracious smile pulled his glistening lips sideways. "Say it."

"Yes."

He abandoned her breast so he could fist himself and angle his cock against her opening. "Yes?"

"I want you inside."

"Do you welcome me?"

"Yeah," she snarled. Just come *on*. "I welcome you."

He started sliding in when she finished her sentence. "Echion."

Shock then pride flared his eyes. Then he took her.

His initial entry could've lasted forever. He was so big, so long and smooth. Like heated marble. Her breath caught in her throat when he pressed a thumb over her swollen clitoris and circled it slowly, leisurely, coaxing the tender bud from its shell with measured rotations that left Audrey on the brink of insanity. She undulated, writhed beneath Echion.

*Oh god. Ohhhh.*

"More," she snarled.

He gave.

*"More!"*

His smile arrogant yet attractively so, Echion pushed to the end of her, stayed still. Each of his cock's veins pulsated deep within her. Audrey opened her mouth to sigh but moaned instead as he retreated. She clung to him with her legs and arms. She didn't want him to leave.

"No, stay."

Pleasure exploded in burning pins and needles when he thrust back in. She thought he'd initially penetrated her to the end. Not even close. Now he had. She could tell the difference. His cock stretched her wide and deep and pleasantly burned. He crushed her clitoris under his thumb. A violent spasm hit then she bucked up against him. Echion seemed surprised either by the force of her push or by the ferocity of her snarled command that he take her hard, dammit. He did.

Her voice rose in staccato rhythmic to his potent hip work. But before she could come again, he pulled out entirely.

"What—"

Audrey *humphed* when Echion slid backward off the slab's side, rolled her onto her belly and pulled her down so her legs slipped between his and the stone. Her butt pushed up against his groin. So hot. He leaned over her, licked her neck while he planted her hands on the other side of the slab. She had to stretch, could barely reach it. Audrey glanced behind her in time to see Echion wrapping his large hand over her butt and aiming. A cry left her. Then a long moan. Unabashedly, she spread her legs for him as he finished the lengthy penetration. He was so tall that he could lean over her back and trap her hands against the slab's edge. She felt his entire body crushed against hers, connected back against chest, down to their legs. He curled his hips upward, thrust back in. She let him hear it!

"Echion. Echion. Ahh." Biting hard didn't stop the moans and grunts his forceful claiming ripped from her. *God, oh yes, yess.*

Her juices slicked them both. He felt so good. So right. Echion was built for her. Was hers. And she was his.

He pushed, retreated, shoved back in. In long, potent thrusts. Slow figure eights. A monstrous wave rose in her mind's eye. A wave that would leave her roiling, spinning,

lost to rapture eternal. Fever-like heat spread throughout her body. His muscled chest and shoulders proved the strongest, most deliciously hard she'd ever experienced. Unyielding, his hands kept hers trapped underneath. Not that she'd go anywhere.

"Yes," she whispered, the sibilant hissing. "Echion...yes...take me." Her voice rose higher. *Ah, ah, ah, ah.* Higher still. "I'm yours...take me."

Audrey could've sworn a brilliant flash of light blazed behind her. She didn't care. Extreme heat spread from his cock, his entire body, to her distended sex. As if she'd infused him with the ability to melt her between the legs. Climax ripped through her. Was that her voice she heard? A single, crystal-clear note filled the rotunda. Powerful spasms milked his cock, that beautiful organ, that work of art created for her. She milked Echion, squeezed and gripped and enfolded him, the best lover she'd had. She wished they could stay this way forever. Extreme fatigue pulled her down. So weary.

Behind her, he stilled, sheathed to the hilt. A soft kiss made her grin through the vestiges of orgasm and sleep tugged at her eyelids. She felt satiated and content. Full. Sheltered and safe. But he hadn't come? Not that she could tell.

"Did you, erm..." She cleared her throat, which squeezed her vaginal muscles around him. "Was it good for you?"

He pulled out, gathered her in his arms and lowered them both in the hot water. So soothing. She rested her head against his rock-hard chest. Sugary-smelling steam filled her nose, her brain. She could hardly think straight. She felt drunk. Audrey felt his hand gently caressing her between the legs. Everything throbbed satisfyingly.

*What's happening to me?*

She looked up into Echion's beautiful face. "Where am I? What *are* you?"

She had to close her eyes when he leaned over and kissed her eyelids. "Rest."

"Tell me." She had to force the words out. So tired. "I want to know."

"Shhh." He kissed her lips, lingered there for a few seconds.

Audrey couldn't *not* look at him for so long and opened her eyes. An expression of regret made him a tableau of sorrow, his head down at an angle, his eyes downcast, partly shielded by his serrated bangs. With obvious reluctance, he set her back on the slab and retreated by a few steps.

"You have given me great pleasure, Audrey, as never before. A gift of inestimable beauty." He closed his eyes and spoke without opening them. "I wish to be with you again."

"So do I."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She sensed a lot hinged on her response. "I like you. I like being with you."

There, she'd said it.

Echion sighed but said nothing.

Sleep finally won and forced her brain to shut down. She felt a contented smile pull at her cheek. It only occurred to her after a second or two that Echion had referred to himself in the first person singular. He'd said "I wish", not "we".

## Chapter Seven

"How could you be so selfish?! We had her. *You* had her!"

For once, Echion agreed with Aegeus. He *had* had her. All he would have needed to do was take the last shred of her energy – so willingly given – and the door to her world would have opened for them. Yet he had faltered. There had been such tenderness in the way she had said "So do I". She *wanted* to be with him again. She had admitted to enjoying his presence.

"You are a *fool*!"

Aegeus' voice thundered. A deep tremor was felt under their feet. A few paces away from where the Shades had gathered, a crack snaked down the length of the obelisk. Tiny crackling sound forced them all to anxiously look at it. Theseus, after putting a calming hand over his seething twin, approached the mirrored pillar, their window on to the mortal plane.

Echion barely paid attention. Everything felt different since Audrey's arrival. Everything felt *alive*. Echion swore he could *smell* the outside world, the scented air on his face. When he looked down at his hands, he thought his nails bore a new shade of pink, that his fingers and hands looked more human. Impossible. A trick of the portal's light no doubt. Audrey's life force bathed everything in a rosy glow.

Theseus pressed a hand against the glass. It sank ever-so slightly. Not much more would be needed to completely dissolve the barrier. Then they would cross over. And Audrey would be dead.

"We have never been so close," the calmer twin remarked. "Yet here we are still."

Orias looked down, shifted his foot then shared a long look with Echion, who only shrugged as he turned back to gaze at Audrey's sleeping form. She was so beautiful and frail, all alone. He should go to her. He wanted to hold her again, feel her heart beating against his chest, her breath against his neck. She smelled so good. Like flowers and a summer breeze. The urge to touch her again tingled in his palms. In fact, he had to. Not now. She needed to rest. Then he would go back and take. Take it all. Why did that not fill him with pleasure?

Already for a first encounter, after his dismissed brethren's departure, he had taken much from her yet she lived still. More than he had taken from a mortal before. One he had left alive that is. What shocked him the most was how she had forgotten about the others, willingly given everything to him, every ounce of energy she had, had even called his name in the throes of passion. No one had ever gifted him such. Mortals were usually too caught up in their own rapture to call out a Shade's name. Yet she had. And it had sounded so loving.

Echion felt proud. Proud and worried. It did not surprise him she had not enjoyed Aegeus' bite, not every mortal enjoyed the twins' dark tastes. But why had she pushed Orias away? No one had ever done so. And why had he failed to take her entirely when it would have been so easy? Why had he let her live, knowing his Shades and he would remain trapped?

*We – I – wanted to be with her again.*

"She is stronger than she appears," Theseus remarked after he took his hand off the obelisk. The sunken handprint filled in slowly. "You did not hold back from her." He smiled lasciviously. "Aegeus was much envious. As we all were."

Echion could not help a small glance at Orias. The Mocking One held the perpetual smirk but Echion could tell he was hurt. His first rejection. From a female too.

"You will go back now," Aegeus hissed. "And you will take her. Or we will."

Echion stood at his fullest, half a hand taller than the vicious twin. "She does not want you. She had no response to you."

"No *loving* response. But we can feed off mortals' fear just as deeply."

The thought of what Aegeus was capable of...

Echion stared hard at the seething brother. "You are not to touch Audrey again."

"*Audrey?*" Aegeus sneered. "Audrey? Since when do Shades refer to mortals by name? She is a mortal, sustenance, a pet at most, ours for the taking. And when we cross over to their world, we will do to them what we have always done. Rape their bodies, drain their souls, consume them. Then discard the carcasses."

Echion felt his ire flare out of him like a bad fever. Something twisted his entrails in a cold, clammy fist. Fear? Was this fear? Shades feared nothing and no one. What was wrong with him? He hid his predicament lest his brethren use it against him. Shades' notoriety for turning on one another no longer needed to be established.

Only Orias seemed to notice the bunching jaw muscles and drew near. "Letting the mortal rest before taking her again will ensure she is ripe for a deeper claiming. Echion was right to wait for he brings out the most potent emotions." He tsked at Aegeus. "Aegeus, always so *premature*. In all things."

The vicious twin snorted derisively. "Said as a lover would. But you were always Echion's whore."

Orias was already holding the thrashing twin by the throat, fingernails digging in, by the time both Theseus and Echion entered the fray. They managed to separate the two snarling Shades, but only for a second before Aegeus lunged at Orias and tackled him. They rolled away in a tangle of limbs. Echion grabbed a fistful of Orias' hair and yanked him upright. He growled loudly.

With a sound like burning logs popping, cracks appeared at the base of the obelisk. They all froze. Another tiny crackling sound popped somewhere around them, stopped then resumed for a second or so. Ominous sounds. Like a frozen lake thawing under one's feet.

"We should do well to remember the terms of our imprisonment," Theseus whispered. "The gods did not only want to get rid of us, they also meant to silence us." He threw a lethal glare at Echion as he hoisted his twin off the ground. "You have erred, Echion. You must go back to her. Do it quickly. Or we will honor my brother's word, take her by force and feed off her fear. And her pain."

Ever silent Pallas appeared then and motioned for Echion to look at the temple where he had left Audrey sleep off the fatigue. She lay still on her side with her hands tucked under her chin. But she had begun to stir. Dreaming? Pallas made a motion of his head, opalescent eyes narrowed.

*Audrey.*

Echion's first impulse was to rush to her and hold Audrey until the dreams subsided. Such a strange reaction. What had happened to him while he coupled with this mortal? What power did she hold over him to have him so worried? He shook off the dreadful *weakness* and drew near the slab. There was no water. She had seen it only in her mind, felt its false heat, when she had not moved from the cave in which she had gone to sleep, was only now naked and growing colder, weaker by the moment, lying on one of the black stone altars. Slowly being drained. Inexorably.

When he passed by, Pallas put a hand on Echion's shoulder and leaned over. Hot lips touched his earlobe when he breathed, "Do not squander her love."

Echion almost jumped back. He had never heard Pallas say a single word in the eons they had shared in the underworld. Even before their fall from grace. And what ludicrous notion! A mortal could not love a Shade. Preposterous. Infatuated, drunken with lust and unable—and unwilling—to resist, yes. But no mortal could feel such deep emotion as love, not for one such as he. Shades were very much like demons to mortals. Immortal beings who preyed on their souls, fed on their emotions to grow stronger and reclaim their place on the surface world where they would once again be idolized and worshipped. Shades fed on mortals. Period. This was as far as the relationship went.

"You are mistaken, Pallas," Echion replied, his eyes not leaving Audrey's twitching form.

She looked so cold. Because she was. None of what she had seen had been real. No water, no curtain to shield her from his hungry brethren as they had watched Echion take her. No white marble but the porous black altar draining her life force, which his cajoling, caressing and enticing generated. The more he pleased her, the more life force there was to drain and the more Shades would feed.

"She has no love for us nor we for her."

With a shake of head, Pallas straightened, his hand slid down. For the first time, Echion saw a crack in the silent Shade's stoical mask, a window into the impassive heart that reminded him yet again how guarded and enigmatic Pallas truly was. In the opalescent gaze, he saw pain. And he saw anger.

He watched Echion join the mortal and sit on the corner of the altar so he could stroke her hair. So shiny. So vibrant and alive. Envy jabbed its little fingers in his belly and wormed its way upward. To his heart.

Echion knew nothing. He did not seem to understand the threat facing him. Mortals were as much tempters as Shades were. She had already spun her web, using her voluptuous body and engaging mind, her tiny hands and welcoming flesh. So rosy.

He shivered and turned away.

As the black stone drained her energy, spurred by Shades and their inveigling, she would grow weaker, the portal thinner. A hymen about to be ruptured. Finally.

Echion was wrong. And he was in danger. Perhaps even needed saving. From himself most of all.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The penetration was never-ending. As if she were only a door, a portal, a means to cross over from one place on to another. Echion's whispers filled her ears, her brain, just as his member claimed her sex. As much as it satisfied her, she wanted more. Return the attention. To fill him with herself. Give herself over to Echion completely. To her last breath. Willingly.*

Audrey woke on a startled gasp to find the object of her dream naked and sitting by her side, staring at her with those strange, unblinking eyes. He looked different. His skin. No more like polished alabaster but much bronzer, very similar to Mediterranean skin tone. His hair had darkened too and could pass for black instead of the purple it used to be. The statue of a Greek god come to life.

*My subconscious adjusting its color scheme.*

She looked around at the pulsating obelisk, the glowing nave beyond and sighed. She'd hoped she'd woken for real. She *had* to get out of this place and try to find a way back to the surface. It occurred to her she wasn't even hungry or thirsty. Just very, very tired. Maybe it was already too late.

"I thought you wouldn't return," she said, surprised her voice was so raw and gravelly. She *arhum*-ed but couldn't clear her throat. It hurt.

"Is that your wish?"

"No."

He blinked then, severed the link and looked down at his hands. A frown creased the perfect brow. She studied his hands as well. Still impossibly long and smooth but definitely more human. No longer a statue's hands but a man's.

"You're changing." *Into what*, she meant to add.

He nodded. "Perhaps we are both."

"Or maybe I'm getting too weak to conjure up the rest of the fantasy."



The quick glance he threw her left a strange taste in her mouth. She sat and hugged her raised knees. She wasn't cold, only needed to...well, hug something. And she *was* naked.

Out of nowhere Echion pulled the same midnight blue cape he'd offered her when they'd been separated by the crystalline surface. He flapped it expertly then let it settle over her shoulders and back. So soft. Pleasantly heavy.

"Are you cold?"

She shook her head. "Just...tired. I'm so..."

Suddenly, tears welled her eyes. She refused to blink in case they'd spill over. *I'm dying. I must be. I should be hungry and thirsty. Damn, I should have the urge to pee at least.*

She felt nothing.

Echion leaned over, shock plain on his achingly beautiful face when a tear finally spilled over and traced a hot path down her cheek. He touched it tentatively, collected the tiny drop and studied the pad of his index finger. "Why are you sad?"

Hadn't he ever seen a woman cry? With a face like his, surely he'd broken at least a dozen hearts.

"I'm lost. I'm alone. Just feeling sorry for myself. Give me a minute and it'll pass." She tried to smile. Probably grimaced instead.

"You are not alone. We are with you."

She shrugged. Would she hurt her make-believe lover's feelings if she confided his presence didn't really count all that much?

Echion put his face right in front of her. There was no evading his intent stare. "We will not leave you. We will accompany you to—" He stopped, straightened suddenly and looked away. The pillar's pulsating light played with his chiseled profile. God, he was gorgeous.

"Accompany me to the end?" she finished for him. "Thanks." Sarcasm, the last line of defense.

He shook his head. "To the gateway."

"I'm *dying*, Echion. I'm stuck in a cave, talking to myself, fantasizing about the most beautiful man I've ever met. It's not exactly the way I thought I'd go. I always hoped it'd be in bed. But I guess it's as good as any other way. At least I won't suffer."

"You are not alone, Audrey. We are here. For you. We will always be here for you."

An élan of affection made her sigh. "I wish you were real, Echion. You have no idea how bad I'd like you to be real." She could fall for a man such as him. Easily. What woman wouldn't?

"Do you still wish to know what we are?"

She chuckled, rubbed the tears away. *Yeah, well, that should be good.* "Sure."

"We are Shades."

The words sounded like a death sentence, pronounced with all due ill omen.

"What do you mean, Shades? What's a Shade?"

Echion snarled something she didn't get. Strangely, she could swear he wasn't talking to her but someone else. Yet they were alone. Weren't they?

"Have mortals completely forgotten us?" he whispered, turning back to her. "Shades, Audrey. Tempters, whisperers, takers. There was a time when gods feared us, when man worshipped and reviled us, the grantors of wishes, the tricksters. Mortals would come to us to learn the forbidden pleasures thus abandoning the gods, who grew jealous and wily. We were tricked into this place, this underworld. Envious gods shut us out of Elysium, our home, your heaven." Echion smiled a mirthless grin. "This is our prison, our hell. Made by gods."

"You're what? You're like, what, fallen angels then?"

The lascivious peek he threw her had nothing angelic about it. When he spoke, his words dripped with mockery. "Your god's list of sins was created to ward man against us. *We* are greed. *We* lust about thy neighbor's wife. *We* are covetousness and avarice. We are demons to your god – Asmodeus, Beelzebub, Leviathan. *Us*. The Greeks called us daimons, Egyptians thought of us as a single entity – Apep. To the Hindu, we were Asuras."

He spoke quickly, as if he were afraid of being interrupted. No worries there. She could hardly process his words. Demons?

"I've never heard about any of that before! How am I coming up with all this religious *crap*?"

Echion punched the slab and broke a chip off it. "We are *real*," he growled low in his throat. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

She'd wanted to know what his voice would sound like. She had her answer now. Orias had been right. Like a tenor on speed. Thunderous.

"Forgive me," he said at length. "We did not mean to frighten you."

"You didn't."

"We only wish... Time was never a friend to us."

"Yeah, to me neither. Like right now. I wish we had more time. You and me, alone."

He looked back at the obelisk and frowned. She could see despite the angle of his face how his jaw had just tightened, his eyes narrowed. "Stand back."

"Who? Me?"

Another roll of thunder accompanied his voice. Audrey looked up to see particles of crystal detaching from the ceiling and falling on the mosaic floor. Like fallen stars crashing against an unforgiving Earth.

"*Who*, Echion? Me?"

Incredible sadness flashed in his eyes before Echion's arrogant lift of his perfect lips returned. "Nothing," he whispered. "Forgive us our foolish words."

She tried a valiant smile when he cupped her chin and kissed her cheek. "You had me scared there."

"We never meant to scare you, lovely Audrey. We had only wished to grant you at least—"

She started when a hand—not Echion's either—landed on her upper arm. She floundered back and almost fell off her perch. The touch made her scars burn. Orias chuckled as he steadied her in oh-so hot arms.

"Dramatic entries were always a most favorite indulgence." His jade-green eyes sparkled mischievously. That mouth! He kissed the top of her hand. "That and lovely blooms such as yourself."

Even if Echion didn't say a word, Audrey could tell he was pissed off if only for the way his mouth thinned.

"I'm sorry for earlier." How did one apologize to a figment of the imagination? Should she? Man, what a mind screw. Literally. "I, er, I didn't mean to be rude and chase you away."

His lips lingered on her hand, traveled upward to her wrist. Heat spread up her arm and she had to fist the cape to keep from shaking. When he rolled his eyes at her, lust blazed. "Our poor heart nearly broke but is mending quite nicely now."

She smiled in spite of the insanity tickling the back of her neck. Demons. Pfft. What a charmer that one. She wondered who she'd tailored him after. She didn't know anyone like him. Or Echion for that matter.

"You must be growing so utterly bored," Funny Guy whispered, bounced his eyebrows. "But we have a remedy against such affliction."

He'd already slipped his arm under her knees when Echion planted a very proprietary hand on her shoulder to keep her put.

"Orias."

The word sounded like the warning it was.

An irreverent eyebrow quirked up, Orias silently mouthed "Oooh."

"It's okay, Echion," Audrey replied, still feeling guilty for chasing Orias away the last time and fighting not to feel like an object. She didn't like the "it's my female, hands off" look on Echion's face. She'd never gone for the jealous types. "So what's that remedy against boredom? I could sure use something to cheer me up."

*Demons? Come on.*

"A fête, dear Luscious One. A fête the likes of which you have never seen before."

After he helped her down and let go, Orias made a sweeping gesture of his arm and, as if he'd just painted a scene pulled out of a fantastical story, layers of colors and sounds and motions were added to the background. Audrey felt as if she were watching through colored glasses with tinted lenses being layered on one after the other.

First water disappeared. Sucked or absorbed, she didn't know. Only that one second it was there, licking the top of the slab on which she'd sat and the next, it was gone. Then appeared all kinds of men, each more glorious and stunning—and *naked*—standing around a chaise draped in black shiny fabric. One of them, this one fully clothed in gray, stood in retreat, glaring at her. She recognized this brooding one, Opal Eyes, with the jet-black hair. He clearly wasn't part of Orias' "fête".

Soft flute wafted to her. Smells of outdoors and summer and fun filled the place. She sighed. So much better than all this talk about Shades and demons. Behind the men, the obelisk positively hummed with radiance.

She couldn't help it. "Oh dear. *Whoa.*"

Audrey made a tiny, squeaky sound when she pushed off the slab and realized it'd been one of the altars. She thought she could recognize the shape and bas-reliefs around the base. Only it wasn't made of porous black stone as she remembered. Strange. She could've sworn it'd been white marble. Um. But she was so tired she might be mistaken. She took a tentative step forward.

A duo of superb men sporting long spiky hair that came down over their wide shoulders in a punkish style, detached from the rest and approached.

Oh, she remembered *those* two! One of them had bitten her while the other quietly masturbated. If she hadn't known better, she would've thought these two were the Bad Boys in her little fantasy party. One of them for sure. The Biter. But it couldn't be. She'd never gone for the bad-boy types and so wouldn't create a pair—even lookers like them—for herself to play with while she waited for death by starvation. Plus, hadn't she already "dismissed" them? Although she had Orias and here he was! Maybe she just didn't know what she wanted anymore. Maybe madness had claimed her. She meant to check her watch, hoping to see more than zeroes, but it wasn't there. Had she taken it off? Where were her clothes anyway? Audrey scanned the floor but found nothing. She distinctly remembered Echion dropping her boots by the slab—altar, whatever. Yet no boots, no watch. Nothing. As if she'd made up the whole thing. As if reality was in fact fantasy and that she was having a hard time keeping the details straight, and her hallucinations was now real, more real than anything else. Was she even conscious? She'd lost her mind.

*What an uplifting thought.*

The Biter, who appeared younger for some reason she couldn't explain, licked his lips and didn't stop his advance until he stood chest to nose with her. Almost as tall as Echion and just as slender. When he leaned down to smell her—*smell* her—she resisted the urge to squirm. She was *not* going to squirm in her own mental screw fest. She had her pride. Yet she couldn't ignore the fear he inspired. Titillating fear. The kind of fear a gal could learn to tame. Bungee jumping kind of fear.

He angled his chin sideways so his mouth touched her ear. "Delectable."

The whispered word had the effect of an electrical shock. She started, swallowed hard.

She couldn't help it. It was right there in front of her hands. Audrey's gaze slid down to Biter's perfectly aroused cock. A Greek statue brought out of stone at the height of pleasure. Sculpted provocation. A phallus made of alabaster.

He straightened, curled his fingers and would've touched her cheek had Echion not roughly slapped it down.

*"Do not, Aegeus."*

Ah, so the Biter was called *Ay-gooss*. Strange names these. Sounded Greek, but most of all, they sounded *ancient*. Like ancient deities. Demon names. Audrey shook her head. She could hardly think straight.

Who did Echion think he was anyway? She didn't belong to him. She belonged to herself. She could do whatever she wanted.

*Man, I sound drunk.*

What was going on with her? Had she already slipped into unconsciousness? Was she having the last dreams before dying? She didn't want to wake. Ever. It was better staying here with them. Her own made-up demons, her Shades. Ha.

She barred Echion's arm with her own and moved closer to Orias, who'd adopted a posture of utter ennui, foot tapping and rolling his lovely green eyes. "I'm a grown woman. I can handle myself. Thanks."

Pete's accusation came slicing back in. A snide bitch. Was she, right now, being a snide bitch? On her deathbed!

Just as she started thinking she should focus solely on Echion—help her poor mind out and focus on the one she preferred anyway—Orias leaned in to her and planted a passionate kiss that left her panting. When he finally released her mouth, his eyes sparkled like gems.

"Indulge yourself in anything you desire. It is all yours. *We* are all yours. To take. To give to. Any one of us was made to bring you pleasure."

"Or pain," Biter replied with a rapacious smile. "All tastes have a home here."

His identical copy—ah, he'd been the one to masturbate—nodded his assent. "Nothing is beyond your reach tonight. Take it all, Audrey."

A shiver raced up Audrey's spine. *Um. Yeah, thanks, guys.*

"Why fear something you can embrace?" the identical copies—*twins*, I guess—whispered. "Something that would embrace you in return?"

As much fear as this creepy duo inspired, there was an edge of "what if" that shamefully just wouldn't go away. *What if...*

Audrey felt a hot hand slip into her own and gazed up into Echion's face. She squeezed it for no better reason than one, it felt good, and two, it seemed to have an effect on the twins, who nodded and took a few steps back and away. Clearly, a battle of wills was waging here.

*Are they fighting over me? Actually fighting?* This was all so messed-up.

On one side Orias held her elbow while Echion clutched her other hand and thus escorted, she made her way to the chaise where the mocking one made a big show of dusting it and placing it just so then moving it half an inch this way or that. Finally, when Echion's face looked about ready to split down the middle—the guy could scowl almost as well as she did—Orias made a sweeping bow to encourage her to take a seat. The obelisk's glow fell on his hair. Definitely green. She hadn't seen wrong the first time.

She sat tentatively with Echion standing behind her. Her own bodyguard.

"A refreshment perhaps?" Orias offered, all of a sudden holding a long, narrow glass of brown liquid.

*Oh my god, he knows that too.*

She grinned, took the glass. "That's not what I think this is?"

Orias chuckled. Velvet whispers. She shivered at the sexy sound. "A double negation inside a trick question. We might very well fall at your feet to worship you, O Clever One. And yes, it *is* what you think this is not."

"Ha!"

Still grinning, she dipped her lips in the glass. Um. It didn't taste like any chocolate milk she'd had before. A bit watered down maybe. She held her tongue. No use haranguing with the people—*demons*—in her head. If they were as stubborn as she was—and since she'd made them up, they plausibly would be—then she wouldn't be getting anywhere arguing or complaining.

"Thank you."

Now that she could see them clearly, some of the others didn't seem as luminous as those she'd chatted with so far. Except for the sulking black-haired Opal Eyes in the corner, all were naked, yet some of them didn't embody sheer perfection the way Echion, Orias and the pair of Bad Boys did. Not that there was a single bad-looking guy in sight. All of them sculpted works of art. Still, when it came down to comparing, none of them came close to Echion. Perhaps maybe Orias.

He sat on the floor at her feet and proceeded to caress the knee exposed by the parted cape. His long fingernails triggered cramps in her belly. Oh, and he knew it too, the tease. The brown liquid—whatever it was, it wasn't chocolate milk—sloshed in her glass. A drop landed on her thumb and slowly slid down to its base. With his gaze on her, Orias curled his tongue out and collected the tiny bead.

The effect was no less than electric.

"You enjoyed that, did you not?" he asked.

Behind her, she heard Echion's sharp intake of air. She squeezed his hand harder on her shoulder, inexplicably wanting to make sure *he* wouldn't disappear. She wanted him there. Needed him with her. Yet Orias' overture couldn't be denied. "Yes."

"Would you enjoy others' touch as well?"

The Biter, Aegeus, grinned.

"No biting," she warned.

Orias' whispered chuckles were the sexiest thing she'd ever heard. Except for Echion's.

"No teeth," Aegeus replied with a ravenous visual sweep of her legs.

With the one she'd come to view as his twin, he knelt by her left leg while the other claimed her right. Their hands were gentle and hot against her calves. Orias, making a big show of his plight, squeezed his wide shoulders in the middle, forcing her knees apart and denuding her pussy to their hungry gazes. Smells of her juices reached her. She looked down, noticed her wet, gleaming flesh poking out of the black hair strip. She'd never seen her pussy so dark. Her heartbeat accelerated.

"We would ask if our touch brings you pleasure," Orias whispered through a wicked smile. "But we doubt there is a need as your delight is as obvious as it is a torture. Yours is the sweetest nectar. And our thirst is raging."

Delicately, he walked his fingers up her thigh and pressed the back of his index and middle fingers right against her vulva, proceeded to rub her cleft up and down and around.

Oh god. *That* was good.

His eyebrow arched as if something had shocked him. He pulled his fingers and flared his eyes at them, twisting and turning his wrists to show the other two caressing her legs. "We believe there just might be enough to share after all."

Behind her, she felt Echion tense. She twisted her neck to look up at him, smiled. "It's all right, Echion. As long as you're with me."

He didn't match her smile but his nostrils did flare when she ran her tongue to moisten her lips. She was parched. That stuff in her glass wasn't doing anything. Then her hand was empty.

*Of course.* She wasn't even surprised anymore.

"We will stay with you," Echion whispered. He knelt behind her. Because of the height, she could now lean back and use his chest for backrest, which she did with a sigh. "We will not leave you."

"Good." She closed her eyes as Orias' fingers returned to their torturous rubbing. The guy's hands were pure sin. "I like you here with me."

Her favorite "demon".

## Chapter Eight

Sitting there with a man between her legs and two others on either side—and god knew how many more just standing back and watching—was proving to be the most erotically charged situation she'd ever experienced. Hell, she'd never even imagined anything like it, never mind *live* it. How her world had changed in the span of a day or two, how her reality had morphed into something fantastical and eerie, just like the men surrounding her. Beautiful, ghostly, impossible. She didn't even mind that they could see the scars on her arms. Now *that* was a first.

While the brothers kissed and caressed her ankles and knees—such wickedly skilled mouths—Orias literally brought her a breath away from climax. Just by rubbing the back of his two fingers against her pussy. She was so incredibly wet. And ready. Even if the idea of having another man—Shade, demon—than Echion between her legs kind of left her feeling awkward, she couldn't help the lure. He'd be watching and probably enjoying himself, wouldn't he? Plus, he looked more than appreciative of the spectacle she'd become, whispering sweet nothings in her ear that raised her blood pressure even if she understood not a word. Or perhaps because of it.

Orias managed to part her and using three fingers, made his knuckles into the most electrifying sex toys. A soft moan left her. She bowed against his hand, spread her knees a bit wider, each of the brothers helping by moving outward. Small at first, she undulated her pelvis in circles, her shoulders firmly supported in Echion's arms, his mouth right against her ear. She could hear his deep breathing.

"We wish to taste you," Orias whispered, looking up into her face.

She nodded.

With a wide grin, he dove for her pussy and readily laved it with wide passes of his expert tongue. Sucking sounds made her close her eyes. She felt him pull her flesh into his greedy mouth, trap her throbbing clit in, release and tongue-lash it until a massive wave of heat spread to her entire body, right down to her toes.

Echion snaked a hand in front and caressed one of her breasts. His chest pressed hard with each breath he took. Audrey reached up, wrapped her forearm around the back of his neck. Perfect fit.

"Don't you go anywhere," she murmured up at him.

"Never."

Did she ever like the sound of that! To hear him make such a promise proved even more pleasurable than Orias' attention because to her, no one surpassed Echion. Not even close. She liked being near him. In fact, she loved his presence, the way he made her feel cherished, beloved. If only she'd met him before.



Not that he was real. Audrey's sigh turned into a gasp.

Without warning, she spilled into Orias' mouth. With avid sucks he received her. A long groan deflated her chest. Behind her closed eyelids, amber light pulsated fast and hard. The rhythm felt familiar. She couldn't place it.

Then the pleasure changed. Became more acute. She looked down to see Aegeus had replaced Orias between her legs and was flicking the tip of his tongue right against her engorged clit. She spread her knees wider when she felt another wave about to unfurl. But she wanted more. She wanted Echion too. Pawing behind her with her other hand, she grabbed at his thighs, shoved and pushed until he'd straightened and stepped a bit to her left. His large cock appeared above her head. Like a hungry bird, she opened her mouth to receive him. If at first he seemed reticent, her fist around the base of his smooth shaft seemed to convey her point very well. He hissed a gasp when she pumped him once then angled his glans into her mouth. He wouldn't ever fit completely inside, the size of him wouldn't allow it, but she took as much as she could. He tasted of saltwater and honey. She'd tasted him before, hadn't she? This all felt familiar somehow. While Aegeus devoured her sex, she did the same to Echion.

A chain unbroken formed. A Celtic knot of eroticism, of pure egocentric pleasure and celebration of physical aesthetics. Harmonious unification. She made love to Echion while the three around her legs made love to her.

And when she climaxed, so did the man in her mouth. He seemed as shocked as she felt when tiny pulsations at the base of his thick cock traveled upward along his shaft to bloom into her waiting mouth. The taste of him surprised her. So much more potent than anything she'd had and utterly foreign.

"Audrey," he whispered, fisting her hair and tucking his bottom lip behind his teeth. He seemed on the verge of tears. "How is this possible?"

She *mmm*-ed in answer, pulling and pulling, milking Echion to the last drop. His precious cum. Liquid heat. A deep flush darkened his cheeks. He almost looked like a man right now, less like a statue.

A seed she now realized had been planted long before bloomed into a self-revelation that reverberated to the edge of her being. She more than liked being near him. She loved Echion.

As if his body was somehow attuned to her mental state, his lips darkened to the color of pink lilies, his hair turned black, his fingernails lost the glossy quality of polished stone and transformed before her eyes into those of a man. Was she the precipitant of his change? Was he changing because of her? *For her?*

Between her legs, Aegeus broke his word and bit her. She yelped. But her pleasure had been so close Audrey only had time to gasp before a brutal climax unfurled with the violence of a flag in gale winds. A spasm bucked her pelvis up against his mouth. He grabbed her behind the butt and forced her hard against his ravaging mouth. Her voice rose. She wanted to be taken. Now!

With Echion obviously still in the throes of his own rapture, Audrey felt herself being lifted, spread wide then penetrated deeply. Thrusts bounced her breasts. Fingers curled into her butt. Someone sucked at her toes, her fingers. Whatever part of her was free, it didn't remain for long. Hands held her, supported her, caressed and teased. With her fist still around Echion's member, she let out a long cry. She didn't want to open her eyes. She didn't want to. Breaking the spell would ruin everything.

*"...how we have hungered for you..."*

The multilayered whisper floated around her, into her. Serious heat settled in her distended pussy. Still Aegeus—must have still been him—took her. He pulled out. She yearned to have him in her again. This god to depravity come to life. Why had she pushed him away in the first place?

*"...welcome us into your flesh..."*

For a few seconds, nothing happened but the caressing and teasing. Then a mouth replaced the rock-hard cock. Who was this? She looked down, noted Aegeus' identical copy greedily eating her out. His hands were a tad rough but damn if she'd change a thing. She closed her eyes again and groaned her pleasure up at Echion. She felt him kneel behind her. His mouth landed on hers in a passionate kiss. The taste of his semen and saliva mixed, his tongue pillaged every recess, exposed each secret. Pleasure exploded outward from her sex to the rest of her.

*"...take us in..."*

She did, welcomed a different cock into her. This one took her slowly but so deeply she feared it'd be too big for her to contain. The seemingly endless penetration stopped when the burning glans began pushing against the end of her channel. He retreated. Audrey sighed at the fever tingling her skin. Then he thrust back in. Echion sucked the moan out of her.

*"...taste you...take you..."*

When she was abruptly flipped onto her knees and elbows, Audrey didn't even protest. Might as well go all the way. The end of her fantasy. The end of herself.

She knew it was Orias who presently licked her cleft, recognized the way his fingers splayed over her butt cheeks to make her nice and wide for him. She couldn't keep the hiccupping cries of pleasure in.

*"...bloom for us..."*

Orias proved even more skilled than the brothers. With a cock as thick as it was smooth, he entered her so slowly she couldn't be sure at first. Then all doubt left her when he undulated teasingly, never claiming her deep enough to make her come. Oh, the damn tease!

Then he thrust. Hard.

"Ah!"

Brilliant light invaded her brain despite her closed eyes. Her heart felt as if it'd stopped to resume in an arrhythmic, crazy tempo. Her chest hurt. She tried to swallow but couldn't find enough saliva. She was so weary, just so *weary*.

*"...consume you..."*

In and out. Orias' fingers dug in her flesh. His knees kept her legs stretched to the maximum. Implacable penetrations. She came like a bomb.

Instead of accompanying her there, he pulled out abruptly. She understood when she opened her eyes and caught Echion roughly yanking Orias away. She couldn't maintain the position now that he didn't have his knees between hers and flopped onto her side.

*"...ours to take..."*

The others, those not as perfect as Echion and the rest, they were the ones whispering. Fear stabbed into her chest. She tried to pull the cape to her but Aegeus yanked it away. His brother's smile scared her.

"Not like this!" Echion roared.

Audrey cried out when the obelisk pulsed blindingly. Some of the men turned away from her to face the giant pillar. One put his hand to it. "Almost," she heard him whisper.

Thunder rolled deeper into the cave. It seemed as if the floor shuddered.

"Echion?"

He seemed to forget the smirking Orias and fell to his knees. Two very human hands reached up to cup her face. A single tear rolled down his cheek. "Forgive us."

Taking her with him, he lay on his back, unyielding arms wrapped around her. His rock-hard chest pressed against her breasts and nipples. Everything else faded away, the pulsing obelisk—that rhythm felt so familiar, it was bothering her—the rest of the whispering men, even Orias and his oh-so-skilled mouth. Vestiges of climax electrified her. She wanted Echion so much it hurt. With a total lack of inhibitions, she straddled his lean hips, rose so she could fist his cock then sank around him. All the way in.

He felt different. Warm. Alive.

She began moving over him, rocking her hips, her hands reaching up to fist her own hair. God, it was so good. A lifetime of pleasures, limitless. She became woman around his cock, simultaneously became conqueror and besieged city, the grantor and taker, both sides of a same coin. He escorted her into rapture so deep, so all-encompassing a pleasant numbness spread to her legs, up her back. So sleepy now. Her heartbeat accelerated while the rest of her became very, very still.

His gaze was riveted to hers. Audrey smiled down at him when a great languor burgeoned outward from her sex to the rest of her. Something drained her. She'd gladly give the last of her strength to Echion. He only had to receive it.

"I love you," she whispered with her eyes closed.

She'd known for a while now. She might as well tell him. Why did it feel like goodbye?

In her mind's eye, she saw blackness swelling in front of her, starting to lap at her feet. Each roll of his hips brought the black wave higher, closer. For every penetration, she felt herself sinking. Into the void. Her last gift.

*"...take you..."*

She forced her mouth to form the word. "Echion."

Still she felt his gaze on her like a physical thing. It pressed against her face, sought to enter her mouth, her spirit. Hands like talons gripped her hips. Why was he taking what she willingly gave? Couldn't he just *accept* it?

The others' whispered chant intruded into her focus. She tried to block it out. Partly succeeded when Echion's hands encircled her waist. Such hot hands.

"Forgive us," he kept murmuring, each instance softer than the one preceding it.

Why was he asking forgiveness? He hadn't done anything wrong.

*"... conquer you...your flesh..."*

She was near. A climax of such purity that it scared her. No turning back now. She was sliding, spinning, lost. Oblivion waited for her. The end. The black wave rose over her head.

*Oh god, so cold.*

Echion bucked under her. Audrey let it out. The primal scream filled the cave. She was coming.

*"...take her...consume her...FINISH HER!"*

A split second after the wave took her, Echion roughly pushed her away.

"No!" his voice thundered.

She landed on her side, bit her tongue and hurt her elbow. Her sex tightened impotently with unspent release. She'd been so close. Audrey floundered to her knees in her great weakness. Tired. Weary. Lost.

"Echion? What? What's wrong?" Just speaking drained her.

She looked around. The rest of the men suddenly weren't the aching beautiful statues to Greek gods they once reminded her. They no longer embodied beauty and temptation, angelic in their decadence and temptation, glorious of form. If her eyes didn't betray her, her brain mess with her, she would've found they looked a lot like *demons*.

They massed around Echion and her. The identical pair grinned a mean sort of smile that did nothing to her sense of impending madness. Only Orias seemed his usual self. He shook his head and *tsk-tsked*.

Echion kept a hand flat out toward her, as if to ward against her. His eyes were huge. Horror filled them. He climbed up on a knee while still backing away from her.

"I cannot take her," he cried out, his thunderous voice a bit less so, almost like a man's. He looked as shocked as the others must have felt. Disgust twisted the brothers' once-angelic faces.

"You must finish the task," Aegeus spat, himself no longer whispering.

His brother nodded. "Or we will do it by force."

Echion stood, stumbled as if he no longer knew how to use his legs. He looked down at himself, tentatively touched his tanned belly. Audrey thought he really did resemble a man of Mediterranean heritage with black hair and olive complexion, a proud brow and long, straight nose. Only his eyes, still the color of amethysts, belied his newborn humanity.

"I cannot. I *will not* take her."

Orias narrowed his eyes. "'I', Echion?"

"Yes, I. I will not take her!" Echion raked his hair back. "I refuse to!"

"Why?!" demanded Aegeus' brother, visibly at the end of his patience. A roll of thunder accompanied his monstrous voice.

Echion balled his hands into shaking fists. "Because I *love her!*"

*What?*

Orias glanced at the reeling brothers and shifted his foot toward her. He made a small gesture for Audrey to step back behind him. She did.

*What the hell is going on?*

"Echion? What's going on here?" Her heart beat madly and matched the obelisk's pulsating light. *Precisely* matched the light.

He didn't seem to hear her as the pair of menacing brothers converged toward him. He backpedaled, lost control of his legs—as if the limbs were new to him—and stumbled like a drunkard back over the altar.

Aegeus pounced first and pinned Echion against the slab of black stone. "You will finish what you have started!" he roared.

"Leave him alone!" Audrey yelled. Her shout barely registered above the men's thunderous voices.

"You must finish her!"

She instinctively put her hands up to protect her head. Large chunks of crystal rained down around them. Some of the men dispersed while others trooped at the base of the obelisk, watching it fearfully. A couple of the socles where the statues had once stood rocked and tumbled to the side.

Audrey wanted to go to him. Yet didn't move a single muscle. Fear rooted her to the spot. Fear and realization. Truths, each more terrible than the first, piled to form a teetering pillar.

Everything here was *real*.

The pillar's light matched her heartbeat, *not* the other way around.

Echion *did* love her.  
And they *were* demons.

## Chapter Nine

Never in his long, long life had Echion felt this way. Torn between two places, two states of being. No longer a Shade, he could tell, yet not a man either. What had he become? He felt weak in his body yet renewed life and energy fizzled in each of his deadened limbs, his chest and even his mind. His heart beat madly. He sweated, by the gods. Sweated!

And he was afraid.

Watching the other Shades take Audrey, her rosy flesh stretched wide around them, glistening with her juices like a rained-on bloom, had proven too much to his fledgling self-control. He had not meant to take her as well, knowing Shades would not be able to cross over without his help, his contribution. But her flesh had called to his in ways he did not know how to ignore. So he had taken her. Or she had taken him. Sank around his member with a look of ecstasy on her beautiful face. Her body, which he had thought so fragile, had nearly unmade him. Her life force had transferred to him, willingly given, freely granted because of her feelings for him. What other explanation could there be? He had not seen any of it while she had been intimate with the rest. Only with him—*for* him—her face had changed, her expression one of pure joy, not only lust. While Audrey straddled him, took him deep into her warm and responsive body, Echion had not been able to focus on anything else but the way her eyes looked down at him. He had seen it in other mortals, although never directed at him. Love. Audrey loved him, a Shade, a monster draining her of her life force, about to take the last shred of energy from her. It had been too much. He could not do it. Not to her. Not his Audrey.

Aegeus sneered when he lowered himself onto Echion, who could barely keep the other Shade from hopelessly pinning him to the altar. "How the mighty have fallen, Echion." He licked his lips, grinned. "Can you not push us away? Have you become so *weak*?"

Behind him, Orias took a step forward. Gone was the mockery. The green eyes shone with hatred. Echion shook his head, silently pleaded with his only ally to stay back so he could protect Audrey since he obviously no longer could. His former power was all but gone. From Echion The Arrogant to weakling mortal. The shame.

Theseus yanked Echion's hand over his head and crushed it against the abrading stone. Then he froze, a flare to his thin nostrils. When he brought his fist back and took a long look at it, Echion knew why. He was bleeding.

"What is happening to you?" Theseus whispered. He smelled Echion's bleeding fist. With a curl to his tongue, he licked the wound. "You taste like a mortal."

Without warning, Aegeus sank his teeth in Echion's shoulder and bit him. A roar of pain left him, caused the nearest colonnades to rattle on their socles. Agony shot through him while Aegeus kept biting, digging his nails into Echion's flanks to keep him still, teeth tearing skin and tissue and pride. Through it all, Audrey's scream sliced the air with her crystal-clear, female voice. His pain doubled when he thought of what would befall her.

After an excruciating time, Aegeus raised himself. His teeth were pink with blood, his lips the color of rubies. "He does taste like a mortal. And *bleeds* like one."

"We now have two mortals to help us cross over to the material plane," Theseus remarked. He looked back at Audrey then down at Echion. "Bring her closer."

Without warning, Pallas shoved Orias out of the way, grabbed Audrey's wrist and yanked her to him. Both brothers and Echion roared in outrage, although for different reasons. With Audrey wrapped in one arm, Pallas leaped above the closest cluster of crystal, shattered one when he landed. Audrey cried out. One of the Shades disintegrated in a thousand shards.

"Orias!" Echion yelled. He managed to fight off Aegeus and kicked at the brothers, sending Theseus stumbling back. "Stop him!"

Large chunks of ceiling rained down on the dried fountain, collapsed part of the colonnaded temple, which leaned dangerously to one side. A low moan like a wounded beast preceded its total breakdown. In a white and gray cloud, the temple crumbled on itself. Echion was momentarily blinded. When the choking stone dust settled, he spotted Pallas still holding on to Audrey's wrist. Rage twisted his gut.

Audrey shrieked when Orias rushed out of the settling cover of dust and slashed at Pallas with his wicked nails as if he wielded four blades. He released Audrey's hand so he could defend himself. Echion would give everything to have his old powers back. He watched, impotent, when Audrey stumbled away from Pallas and into Orias' waiting arms.

"Save her!" Echion roared, dodging debris as he ran across the nave. "Orias! Save her!"

A great weight tackled him, crushed him to the unforgiving floor. Shards of crystals and broken ceramic tiles sliced his flesh. He bled from both hands now.

"We will enjoy consuming you," Aegeus sneered into his ear. A rough hand gripped his hair and yanked back. "But first, we will take her, and this time, we will not be so gentle."

By the corner of his eye, he spotted Orias battling Pallas still with Theseus about to reach the mêlée but at the last possible second, his ally dispatched the Silent One with a violent kick to the solar plexus that propelled Pallas back to crash into the brother. Both went tumbling down. Thunder accompanied their roars of fury.

Echion's heart leaped in his chest when Orias, safely holding Audrey against him, rushed out of the cave to disappear into one of the many side tunnels, his green hair flapping madly behind him. She was saved. Temporarily at least.



At the last possible second, Audrey turned back. Their eyes met. Echion knew then the full meaning of the word. Such a tiny word. Loss.

He grunted in pain when Aegeus roughly yanked him back to his feet and plastered him against one of the columns. The other's erect cock pushed in his lower back. Echion bit down hard while Aegeus raked his curled-in fingers all the way up his thigh. A feeling of wet heat followed in the wake of the brother's hand. Blood.

"We will enjoy seeing you humbled this way, Echion. We just might make you last, even if it delays our crossing over."

"Taste it while you can," Echion snarled. He bucked back because he could do nothing else.

Unforgiving hands pinned him to the broken pillar, the stone's asperities dug in his skin. Aegeus kissed the back of his neck, pressed his teeth against the skin and sent a shiver of disgust and fear down Echion's spine. Oh, he would suffer. Aegeus would make sure of that. At least they had not caught Audrey. Nothing else mattered.

Aegeus snaked a hand between them so he could grab at Echion's hip. He lingered there in a parody of a lover's caress. "You were so close," he whispered in his ear. "You could have tasted the material world once more but you squandered it all for a mortal. Why? Do you think she can ever love you?"

Echion gave a violent buck that nearly dislodged the vicious twin. Nearly. "She already does."

Why he found strength in these puny words, Echion had no idea. But he did. It must have been part of being mortal. Words may have had more power for a man than they did for a Shade. Unfortunately, he would never discover what else made him a man.

"Perhaps," Aegeus replied then licked Echion's ear. "But why would you settle for the love of one when you can take them all?"

"I did not take her love. She gave it to me. Willingly. You will never understand such a gift."

Echion grunted when the other circled his chest so he could wrap his long hand over his throat. The mortal side of him rebelled right away. He thrashed violently, kicked. Stars popped at the edge of his vision. Air stopped coming in. Then resumed when Aegeus let go.

"We will not kill you. In fact, we will keep you alive a long time. There are things for which you need to atone, old quarrels we need to revisit. In the end, Echion, you will beg me to finish you."

A low grunt left Aegeus. Then the terrible weight was abruptly lifted.

Out of instincts he no longer understood, Echion whirled around and kicked out with both feet. A scene of utter chaos greeted him. While the Shades not powerful enough to take on the ancient ones such as him had begun congregating around the

base of the obelisk, waiting, whispering words he no longer understood, Pallas had Aegeus by the throat in a deadly embrace.

Echion took a tentative step toward the tunnel where Orias had disappeared with Audrey. What was going on? Why wasn't Pallas chasing after Orias if he had been so intent on capturing Audrey for himself?

Pallas sent the twin crashing into one of the altars, shattering it. Shades standing around the obelisk disintegrated. Others vacillated and fell like frozen statues. How could this be? Shades were invincible!

Realization dawned on him.

How foolish and arrogant of him. Echion had never understood how closely linked they had become with their surrounding. The gods' prison had been well designed indeed. He cursed Shades' foolishness and his own vanity. Shades had never been invincible. The gods must have known it would come to this, that Shades would destroy themselves quite effectively without any outside influence, even if it took eons, which it had. They had built their prison of crystal and stone knowing it would be easily broken down. Such perfidy! He had lived for millennia yet had understood nothing. Nothing about him, his prison, his brethren and what kept them alive. What a fool he had been!

"Audrey," he whispered. His mortal voice sounded so frail in his ears.

He had to save Audrey before the whole thing came down around them. Already the obelisk shuddered.

Theseus charged out of another tunnel, clearly beside himself with rage. His roar filled the cave. Echion cringed at the thunderous sound. Like a giant coming to life. An angry giant.

"*Pallas!*" Theseus thundered.

The usually stoical brother was aiming directly at Pallas' back. Even if Echion did not know the silent Shade's motives, he understood nonetheless this one was his only remaining ally. Without him, his chances of saving the woman he loved from the brothers' clutches were nonexistent.

Desperation became hatred. Hatred became energy.

Still much more powerful than a normal mortal, Echion grabbed the largest piece of broken altar and went at the place with a vengeance. Each muscle burned. Each bone felt ready to snap. Still he went on. Lifting the piece of stone with two hands, he sent it crashing against a thick cluster of pinkish crystals. A handful of Shades fell to the ground. He picked up the stone again and hurled it across the nave, sent it through a long but thin mineral formation, which shattered and took down several other Shades. On it went. The socles on which they stood when they toyed with mortals, destroyed. One by one. The collapsed temple disintegrated. Echion no longer had control over his emotions. He wanted to destroy them all. He was lifting the stone again when Theseus came crashing into him. Echion flew back, dropped his weapon.

"Fool! No!" Theseus' face had lost all of its former beauty. To Echion, the twin resembled a demon fit of any mortal's nightmare.

A bit farther away, Aegeus howled in pain when Pallas hurled him over the lone remaining altar, literally threw him against the obelisk. A large crack appeared from base to middle. Thunder ripped the air. Smells of sulfur and seawater filled the cave. Pallas stalked to where the twin struggled to climb to his feet, yanked him up by the hair and propelled him toward Echion, who barely had time to avoid the living projectile. Aegeus crashed into his twin.

He had never known Pallas to act this way. Where had all this rage come from?

Yet Echion saw the gift for what it was. There would not be another occasion this good.

He retrieved the heavy stone and, putting everything he had, threw it at the brothers. Theseus was struck in the back of the head. A shock wave expanded outward when his body went stiff then exploded into a million shards. Echion cried out when some pierced and slashed him.

Pallas, his face impossibly devoid of emotions despite the destruction he rained on their home, leaped over fallen debris and broken columns. He landed a step from Echion, grabbed him by the throat, brought him right against his chest.

*This is the end.* Echion was physically too weak to fight Pallas and merely fisted the other's wrist. Their gazes met and held.

"Save your beloved, you foolish *mortal*," Pallas snarled under his breath. He had modulated the last word like the insult it was.

Echion broke the implacable grip and pushed him away. "I have! Orias took her to safety. You will not be able to get to her now."

His relief was short-lived when Pallas shook his head. "You understand nothing."

Time stood still. The gods must have been holding their divine breath. Planets must have ground to a halt, constellations frozen, nature's very heartbeat stilled. For Echion understood. Finally *understood*.

How ironic that a Shade who had lived a life of deception, had embodied ruse and trickery, had lured, whispered and enticed, had now fallen prey to his own perfidy. Now he knew the sort of pain he had caused over the eons. Echion acutely tasted the venom he had been fed.

He had been betrayed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey's heart would surely break. It beat madly against her sternum, painfully like a trapped animal crashing against its cage.

*Echion.*

Orias' hand clutched around her forearm kept her from slowing down or even catching her breath. Nausea choked her. Stitches stabbed her sides. Her naked feet hurt. She could've been running on broken glass and hot coals. Probably was.

"Orias," she groaned. Saliva, thick and sour-tasting rolled the R in his name. "Please!"

He must have understood her croak since he slowed his mad dash down the tunnel. Despite the glow, she could barely see where they were going. The air had grown warmer the farther down they'd gone. Stars burst at the edges of her sight. She blinked back the tears.

*Echion.*

What would they do to him?

With a yelp, she stumbled and would have fallen had Orias not held her upright by the arm. Her skin burned. She managed to get her feet back under her. Tears stung her eyes.

"Stop...Orias...I c-can't go...on."

He stopped running so abruptly she collided against his side, was knocked in the temple by his hard elbow. More stars burst in her vision.

"Ow."

She felt his arms encircle her shoulders to keep her from falling. "Rest. We will find another way back in."

He wasn't even winded.

"What—" Audrey fought nausea for a second then swallowed hard. "What will they do to him?"

He didn't reply, only squeezed her harder. She felt him lean his chin on the top of her head. "We have to...go back...for Echion."

"We will."

"It won't be too..." She couldn't even finish the sentence. The thought of Echion hurt, fighting off those *demons*.

"There is still time for you to help him," Orias whispered. "If you are strong enough."

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her a few paces away where he deposited her feet so she could stand. She couldn't see well but an opening in the wall created a soft breeze to graze her face and naked legs. The ground felt regular here, smooth. Tiles?

"How?" She'd do anything to help Echion. "Tell me. I'll do it."

He stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her and held her close. With his shallow breaths, his rock-hard chest pressed against her back, so did his cock. He was aroused?! How could he even think of such things when Echion might be hurt or worse?

Audrey didn't have a choice but to shuffle forward when he pushed her with his body toward the gaping opening in front of her, pressed until she'd taken a few tentative steps inside. Complete darkness owned the entrance because this was a doorway, complete with bas-reliefs carved around the edges, most of which were lost to the gloom. Small crystals protruded from the rough stone wall. They barely shone against the rest. They needed more light.

"What's in there?"

"Echion's salvation. But only if you are strong enough."

"I am."

"It will kill you."

"I don't care."

Whoa, where had this one come from? Of course she cared if something killed her or not, only not as much as saving Echion. And where had *this* notion come from? Wasn't she the Snide Bitch? Impervious to the cuteness of puppies and sappy movies? She'd never, ever, not once in her life, sacrificed herself for anyone. Not lovers. Not friends. Yet she would gladly give everything she had for Echion. Why?

"Because your heart is not as cold as you enjoy believing," Orias whispered in her ear. "Because there is something there, something strong, pure and alive. And you must relinquish it to save Echion."

*It.* Her love for him of course.

"Your poets have sung hymns to it for as long as they could use their voice. Most mortals only recognize it when it is taken away."

"Because I love her!" Echion had roared in their shocked faces when he'd pushed her away, claiming he couldn't go on. She'd believed him. And damn it if she didn't love him in return. So Orias had guessed right.

"Time grows short, Audrey."

One of Orias hands left her shoulder, long fingers traced her neck, the juncture of her collarbones and down lower, before brushing against her nipple.

"Your gift will save him but doom you."

"It doesn't matter." The scars on her arms didn't even itch despite the stress and fatigue and, well, certain *death* breathing down her neck.

Orias cupped her breast. "There will be no pain."

"Just do it." She swallowed back the rest. There was no time for this! Dammit.

His thumb trapped her nipple against the base of his index finger and rolled slowly. Despite the situation, her body betrayed her with a tiny pulse down in her pussy. At once, soft amber light spilled into the gloom and illuminated...

Hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Echion left the chaos of the cathedral and rushed inside the tunnel where Orias had taken Audrey. How could he have been so blind? The trickster had done these things before, only never to him. Echion had told even worse lies. How the tables had been turned. He struck his shoulder against a protruding crystal and cursed. This mortal body was so fragile!

He heard Audrey's scream. The high-pitched, crystal-clear note ripped the air and tore at his heart.

His legs took him over obstacles and deeper into the tunnel faster than he would have thought possible. His feet burned from the many cuts and injuries, as did his hands. Fear drove him on for he knew where Orias had taken her. Knew what the Shade wanted to do. The ultimate gift.

Faster. Deeper. To her.

And may the gods protect Orias if he hurt Audrey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey didn't think her brain would ever recuperate from the horrific vision. A gigantic cave sprawled in front of her littered with skeletons, bones, skulls, artifacts and unrecognizable things. Every region of the globe was represented here, every era and every size. Armors lay pell-mell strewn among bits of leather straps and shoes. So many shoes. Boots, sandals. Weapons. Swords and daggers. Guns. All things left by people over the millennia. Things dropped, left, lost. As if entire countries had sent at least part of its army to die down here. The walls were covered in achingly beautiful murals depicting rituals of carnal abandon, orgies, massacres, of people swept up in sarabandes of lust and sacrifice. Her scream shocked her.

She would've stepped back but Orias kept her firmly put.

"Your bones will join those of the others before you," he whispered. "The ones who made the ultimate contribution. Your love for Echion will set him, *us*, all free. Is that not the greatest gift?"

"Who are all these people?" From screaming she'd gone to whispering. Like *them*. Only in her case, it was not to start screaming again. Her throat felt raw. She could hardly process the sheer magnitude of what she was seeing. All these people. Dead.

"Seekers, travelers, volunteers, captives, soldiers, lovers, lost ones. The rich, the poor, the young and venerable. The sick, the healthy. They are all here. They have all given – well, in some cases, we have *ripped* from them – the gift you are about to grant us."

"I thought Echion said –"

It dawned on her. Orias' lie.

"You stabbed Echion in the back. That's not what he wanted you to do."

"We took certain liberties with our Echion's wishes, we will admit." He kissed her ear, which amplified the amber glow illuminating the cave. "He will thank us in due course, when he is saved from destruction."

Anger turned to resignation. "This is going to work? Me for him? How?"

"We will take from you what the others would steal from him. A fair exchange for one who forsake much for you." Anger laced his words.

A sob tightened her throat. *Damn, Pullman, don't you start.* "What do I do?"

"Receive us into you. One last time. Let us feed on your life force. Then the portal will open. Echion and we and the rest of the Shades will cross over into the mortal realm. Free from this prison." His hand brushed against her hip, fingernails chillingly sharp on her skin. "Your gift will set us free."

"For Echion," she retorted. *One last snide remark, huh? You go, girl.* "I'm doing it for him. Not you. You're a backstabbing liar."

"Aw, we already told you flattery would take you far with us."

Orias chuckled as he raked his sharp fingernails up her thighs and butt. Then his grip froze on her hips, thumbs digging deep in her lower back while the rest of his long fingers wrapped around in front.

She nearly vomited her fear and disgust and rage. Audrey bit down hard and squeezed her eyes. For Echion, she chanted. And if it was just one more of Orias' lies, well, nothing she could do about it now.

"We could have been so much more than this," Orias whispered. He kissed her earlobe. "So much more."

A grunt left him. When one of his hands suddenly let go, she whirled around and leaped back a step. From his tall seven feet he collapsed on his knees, holding his side and grimacing.

Echion stood behind him, his face a mask of rage. A serpentine blade protruded from his shaking grip.

If at first Audrey thought Orias had been taken care of, she groaned in despair when he climbed to his feet, shaking his head and checking his side. A mocking grin pulled the corner of his mouth. "Echion, how you hurt us."

"How could you?" Echion demanded. His still resonated much louder than any human voice she'd ever heard. It positively rumbled in his chest.

The Shade lost the grin. "How could *you*!?" Orias countered. "You forsake us for *this*?"

Audrey flinched when Orias pointed an accusing finger at her.

"I should have trusted Pallas instead of you."

"Ah yes, poor Pallas of the broken heart. We never understood the depth of his wound and how it had festered over the eons. We should have been more careful of the Silent One. But we are sure by now the twins have taken care of their former competitor and longtime enemy."

"Theseus is no more."

Orias cocked his head theatrically. "Oh? Well then, more mortals for us."

He took a step then froze when a sharp tearing sound made him wince and look at his side again. Audrey saw a crack in the flawless skin snaking outward like a spiderweb.

"How?"

Echion spread his feet wider, ready to deliver another measure of serpentine blade if need be. "The gods chose our prison well."

Before he could say another word—and he looked as if he had a good retort ready—Orias' skin crackled all over with the ominous sound of something about to break loose. Audrey barely had time to raise her hands and cringe when he literally exploded into long, jagged shards. Burning pain lashed her arms and legs. She yelped, her voice joining Echion's.

Through the pain, she heard him calling her name. The sweetest sound. Pawing blindly, blood was in her eyes, in her mouth, she reached out and closed her hand around an arm. Warm and moving. Echion!

"Come!" he snarled. "We must hurry before the portal breaks down!"

"What portal?"

But they were running again, only this time she didn't fly behind the one holding her wrist. Because unless her brain had stopped functioning, Audrey swore Echion was slowing down by the moment until she'd actually begun to pull *him* along. She didn't know how long they ran, stumbled and knocked around in the tunnel, only that when they finally barged into the cathedral proper, the obelisk blazed so bright she couldn't even look at it directly. The whole place was bathed in bright light very close to sunlight. It hurt her brain. A scene of utter chaos greeted her. Broken colonnades, split altars, pulverized clusters of crystals as if a great, vengeful foot had stomped on the place and reduced everything to rubble. Even the tall pillar in the middle looked about ready to collapse with deep cracks all over its surface. Liquid silver seeped out of its veins and onto the ground, which shuddered and buckled in places. There was no one there but a few broken statues. Were those Shades?

"Hurry," Echion said. His voice had lost much of its resonance.

"Where's the portal?"

"The obelisk."

His wrist slipped out of her clutch. Audrey turned and gasped. Blood covered Echion. Only his bright violet eyes shone out of the streaked mess. His hair was clumped against his skull. He panted hard, clutching his chest.

"Go," he whispered, obviously at the end of his rope. "Go."

The obelisk—the portal—stood barely thirty feet away. "We can make it. Come on."

She couldn't move fast enough to keep him upright and when he collapsed on his knees then sank onto his side, wheezing, his eyes closed, Audrey made it in time to



keep his head from thudding against the cracked tiled floor. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Echion? Come on, only a few more steps." She tugged on his long arm. He may have been slender for his height but he was still much too heavy for her to carry or even drag.

"You go. Do not look back." His eyes opened and fixed on her.

"Without you? Think again."

Stark white teeth appeared in a crescent when he grinned. "Stubborn mortals. Just go."

Audrey knelt by his side to cradle his head. Tears fell down and splattered his face. "Did I ever tell you about the time my ex called me a bitch?"

## Chapter Ten

Somehow, kneeling by the man she'd fallen in love with felt more right than anything else she'd ever done. Too bad they wouldn't get to enjoy any of it. And with the damn "portal" barely a few paces away. Oh well. Large chunks of ceiling fell and landed around them. Rock dust floated thick in the air. She coughed.

She brushed his matted hair back from his face and tut-tutted. "Look at that. You're letting yourself go, Echion."

He tried to push her away but was probably too weak and only rested his long hand over hers. His eyes seemed to focus on something above her head and flared.

"Come," someone whispered behind her.

Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest!

When she turned and saw Opal Eyes—what was his name again?—her throat squeezed. He looked as if he'd been run through a rosebush backward. Twice. Tiny cracks darkened his glossy, pale skin. With obvious difficulty, he bent and hoisted Echion up by the armpits.

"Why are you doing this?" Audrey asked, still unsure she could trust this one. He obviously had his own very personal agenda.

He didn't reply and instead started dragging Echion toward the blazing obelisk. She rushed to help and managed to snake an arm under his. Blood slicked her grasp right away. When they stood right at the base with brilliant light stabbing into her eye sockets, into her brain, Opal Eyes put a hand against the glasslike surface. It went *right through*.

Turning to her, he motioned with his chin. Jet-black strands of his hair fell over his eyes, obscuring his gaze to her. Was this another of the Shades' tricks? Yet what choice did she have?

Everything happened at once.

A moan like a giant wounded beast resonated throughout the place, filled the very air with vibrations she felt deep in her gut and under her naked feet. The Shade's eyes flared as he looked up. She cried out. He shoved Echion and her right against the obelisk where they tumbled in a snarl of limbs through the glassy surface. Viscous silver liquid like blood coated her.

Through the silvery opening, she saw a massive piece of stonework crash on the dark-haired, silent Shade, who disintegrated into black crystal shards before literally falling to pieces with the broken rocks and debris. The force of the destruction blew Echion and her right through and out the other side. Shards of black crystal landed all around them when they thudded against the rocky ground and rolled a few times.

Her hand closed around one such shard, about the size of a short ruler. Its sharp edges cut into her palm. She welcomed the pain since it pushed the darkness a bit further away, gave her a few seconds to do what would undoubtedly be her last deed. She flopped onto her side and draped her arm across Echion's chest, her last conscious thought floating out of her like smoke in a breeze.

\* \* \* \* \*

A prick in the crook of her arm made her cringe. Or she thought she did. Something pulled at the skin on the back of her hand. Smells like pine-scented detergent and flowers tickled her nostrils. She swallowed. Her left palm burned. She couldn't move her fingers when she tried flexing them.

"Pardon?" a woman asked very near to Audrey's ear.

She hadn't talked, had she? Not that she could remember.

"What is that word you speak always?" the woman asked in heavily accented English. Her voice had receded. She was talking to someone else. A word leaped from the foreign language. "Ee-kai-yon."

*Echion.*

Everything came flooding back. The Shades. The destruction. The sacrifice. Where was he? Was he safe? Had he bled to death? When blackness surrounded her again, Audrey didn't mind at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd begun cutting herself again.

It'd been a while. She thought she'd climbed out of that hole, at least a little. Maybe she hadn't even gone up an inch. Funny how self-destructive behaviors took so much more time and effort to kick than good ones. The therapist she'd seen sporadically for a while would say she'd only had a relapse, that she had to keep looking forward, stay focused on the positive. She'd tell him to go fuck himself. His mustache looked stupid anyway so who the hell was he to tell her what to do?! His techniques hadn't worked. Expensive bullshit is what she'd paid for.

So two days after waking in a Munich hospital, dazed, panicked, numb in and out, she'd started on her left arm—she was a right-hander. Her right had soon followed. Pain was a good thing, kept her grounded. With the lights off and accompanied by shadows, she used one of the plastic fork's prongs and cut herself while sitting up in bed watching German TV channels. Nice and practical. Large, block-letters E. Always just E. The staff hadn't seen them. Otherwise they surely would've kept her. She wanted to leave. She *had* to leave.

Audrey presently pulled at the sleeves of her polar fleece to hide the self-inflicted marks. They didn't even hurt all that much. She was just so numb.

"You must sign here, below the line," the doctor said.

His eyes never left her face when she leaned over the bed and signed the form clipped to a plastic board. The small bandage on her right hand had begun to peel at the corner. Signing a waiver in a language she didn't understand. Talk about a blank check. The weight of his stare burned her face. Audrey didn't look up. She didn't need to. She knew what was in his eyes. He thought she was crazy.

Audrey nodded again when the doctor confirmed she really wanted to leave despite his desire to keep her a few more days to run some tests. She'd been doing that a lot these days, nodding. At more drugs—until horrific nightmares had brought the nursing staff running into that crazy Englishwoman's room then she'd laid off the funny yellow pills. Nodding on the phone as her parents took turns telling her how much she'd scared them and wanted to come pick her up—she'd convinced them not to—her sisters sharing how afraid they'd been, her friends how sorry they were for not coming along. Nodding kept these painful reminders short and people away. Because the one person she wanted to see right now was gone.

Echion. Was. Gone.

Better, they'd have her believe he'd never even existed.

The rescuers, alerted by the park attendant who'd waited for her to return before he closed shop, had found no one but her on the Partnach Gorge trail. At her incessant rambling about a man, they'd gone back several times, spent hours looking for her elusive companion. Finding nothing. They'd even interviewed a group of hikers who'd crossed paths with Audrey and they hadn't seen a man with her. Of course not. Their guide must have just gloated. Hadn't she warned Audrey it was too dangerous? Cow.

So there'd been nothing but a naked, bewildered woman covered in cuts and clutching a bit of black glass they'd had to fight to pry out of her bleeding hand. It rested in her palm right now, the only remainder—her one proof—she hadn't dreamed everything that had gone on, hadn't dreamed them all. Hadn't invented Echion.

It'd been two weeks.

After the doctor shook her hand and left, Audrey finished packing and zipped the suitcase. She'd stuffed everything pell-mell, except for the sliver of black crystal, this, she'd tucked safely into her padded water bottle carrier and intended to keep it on her at all times. But the rest? No energy for organization. The heavy stuff could go on top and squish the rest. She didn't care. Someone at the hotel had gone through the trouble of forwarding her stuff to the hospital in Munich where she stayed. She hadn't even called to thank them. No energy for that either.

She could tell as she signed herself out they thought she was crazy. Maybe she was. Her arms should hurt but didn't. When had she eaten last?

Sun stabbed into her brain when she stepped out of the airy foyer and onto the interlocking brick pathways the color of dried blood. Audrey checked her hands again. Covered in cuts. Not self-inflicted those. She peeled off the bandage and dropped it into the garbage can. The stainless steel reflected her pale and drawn face.

"He was there," she murmured through her teeth. "He's *real*."

Had to be.

The impulse to rub up her sleeve and start cutting again itched in her palms. Audrey sighed and put a reassuring hand at her hip over the bottle carrier slung postman-like. She put her sunglasses on. A barrier against the sun. And the world.

Funny how the right side of her brain had still juggled the logistical pins despite the confusion and numbness, how she'd been able to book things and cancel others, reschedule and update, just keep on functioning. As if nothing had happened. As if a great big hole hadn't opened in her heart and threatened to swallow the rest. What if they were right? What if she'd dreamed the whole thing—semiconscious, hungry, wet, tired, confused? *What if...*

She took the bus leading to downtown Munich. Dropped a two-Euro coin into the slot because she couldn't be bothered to give the exact change. Audrey was sitting pole-straight, staring out the window when it first happened.

Fleeting movement against the reflective glass. A shadow where a flash should've been. She started. Sweat instantly slicked her palms. She looked around. No one moved except for the gentle roll of the bus as it navigated the roundabouts and narrow streets. A gothic-style church selfishly poked its twin steeples over the rest. Raped the sky. Audrey slowly pulled her sunglasses down her nose and angled her head so she could look straight on at the window. Dirty glass and smears, a dried drop of something, remnants of some bird droppings on the other side of the pane bleached by days, maybe weeks, under the sun. Nothing else. Sobs of fear and relief and frustration tightened her throat.

When it started to look like downtown to her—meaning narrower and more crowded streets, sunny terraces and worn-smooth cobbles—Audrey stood, rolled her suitcase to the back door and waited for the bus to let her off. After a hiss of air, hydraulic systems lowered that side of the fuel-hybrid bus and she stepped out into the street. With a smell of fries coming out of its exhaust, it rumbled on. German engineering.

A fountain with water arcing high over the stone rim caught her eye because of its sunlit spray. Suitcase thudding against the uneven cobbles, she wandered over, abandoned it a few paces away so it wouldn't get wet and approached so she could look into the fountain. A lot of coins twinkled at the bottom like tiny gold fish. Familiar coins, Euro cents, others she couldn't recognize. Sun hit the rippling surface. She found a spot and sat against the stone rim.

"What now?" she murmured. Ignoring the quizzical look her immediate neighbors gave her was easy. She'd never been good at ignoring people. She was now. At the store, she always felt the customers' stares press between her shoulder blades as she'd get a copier order ready or bend under the machines to fix a paper jam or one of the myriads things that could and usually did go wrong. Right now, she wouldn't even care if people would make a circle around her to stare.

*Too numb to care.*

A faint breeze pushed some of the spray onto her. With the way it landed on her jeans and the prismatic effect of sunlight, her lap looked strewn with small amethysts. The color of Echion's eyes. A lump suddenly choked her. She missed him so much. Audrey caught her hand rubbing at her forearm where she'd marked herself. The sliver of black crystal in her carrier called her name with its siren song. Just a tiny prick, a quick scratch to make the numbness go away. Maybe she could go eat at a terrace, give herself an excuse to use their bathrooms. She'd have peace and quiet there.

At first, Audrey thought she was fantasizing. But no. Inside the fountain proper, *something* was happening to the surface.

Oh god.

It smoothed for a few seconds, as if it'd become a thin, perfectly ironed sheet—she was a good ironer—before rippling, coiling, swirling into a familiar shape. A face. One she knew well. Audrey stared in disbelief, heartbeat swooshing in her ears, at Echion's profile. The haughty set of his chin, the Greek nose, the high brow.

She realized she'd scurried away from the fountain when she knocked into people.

"S-sorry...excuse me," she stammered.

*Oh god, oh god.* Was it real? First the cutting, now this? Stumbling back farther, she pawed blindly behind her for her suitcase's handle. *Get the hell out, get the hell out.* She didn't find it.

She turned to where she'd left her suitcase. It was gone. A family with a sporty-looking stroller occupied the spot.

"What the hell is going on?" she snarled.

The dad gave her an affronted look and pulled his little one by the sleeve. Safely away from the crazy woman.

Out of the corner of her eye, Audrey caught a black dot moving impossibly fast. She pivoted just in time to spot someone rushing off with her suitcase, which jerked and shuddered on the uneven cobblestones. The person disappeared around the corner.

"Hey!"

Pigeons flew out of her way when she took off after the robber. She needed what was inside. It was her stuff. Hers. Passport, tickets, everything. To go back home, forget everything, pretend she wasn't about to autodestruct or just start falling into pieces herself, just as the quiet Shade had done.

*Dammit.*

Her lungs and thighs ached from the sudden physical activity. The bottle carrier thumped against her hip as she sprinted to the corner, skidded to avoid a pair of older men sharing a partly folded map between them, and caught the corner of her suitcase up the street disappearing below a wrought iron arch. The glossy sign announced *Something-Something Englischen Gartens*. German place names were so long. Audrey barely slowed when she passed under the sign. Some urban park. Paths led in different directions and just as she was considering letting go, a man walking his dog along the

second trail to her right yelled at someone, showing him his fist. His dog barked frantically.

She snarled. "Christ."

Half of her screamed to stop and call for help. Half of her wanted to make this asshole pay for the rest. Trapping the bottle carrier against her hip, Audrey charged up the trail, past the dog walker and caught sight of her suitcase where the thief had just rushed behind a circular Greek-like structure. The poignant reminder needled her forward. As if this thief were soiling her memories of Echion—or her hallucinations.

"Hey! That's mine!" she yelled.

She ran around a bench park, swerved to avoid bushes, rushed around the other side, thinking she'd circumvent the rotunda and catch the thief coming out the opposite way. A tiny brass plaque reading *Monopteros* in black letter typeface flashed in the bright sun. Graffiti defaced the exquisitely carved columns and brackets supporting the domed roof.

Her heart leaped when she saw her suitcase, alone, set against the stone wall. Chickenshit. She panted a bit but at least had retrieved her stuff. And it *was* her suitcase, no mistake there.

She hadn't felt this alive in two weeks. Blood pumped her veins. She huffed a curse, bent over her suitcase to inspect the zipper. Intact. Good.

The fine hairs on the back of her head rose in waves. She stood bent in half, frozen by fear and watched as a shadow detached itself from a spot in the grass, lengthened in front of her, rose against the stone wall like a ghost out of a haunted lake. Her heart skipped a few beats. Audrey squeezed her eyes shut.

She didn't know if she should beg for it to be real or if hallucinating would be better. Sobs bubbled up. Gradually because moving fast would probably finish the job and make her faint, she turned around to face the source of the shadow.

Nothing.

A half cry, half groan of despair left her. Shameful. She couldn't help it. The cuts on her arms itched. Picking at them would make everything go away. She should've brought one of those yellow pills. Just one.

Audrey gripped her suitcase and rolled it to her. She never had time to whirl around when an iron-hard hand gripped her by the neck and reeled her back against the wall. A grunt left her when her shoulder blades ground against the stone.

"We are pleased to see you once more, Audrey," a man whispered behind her.

With a cry, she looked down, horrified, as an arm encircled her rib cage and trapped her right against the wall. An arm made of *shadow*. Yet as real and unyielding as anything physical. Another joined the first but didn't merely trap her, it embraced her as a lover would, caressed her waist and hip, slipped lower and triggered an instinctive reaction to knock her knees together. The shadow hand slid below and cupped her mons. Sour saliva seeped under her tongue.

"Stop. Please." *Please.*

Heat radiated from the shadow hand. It didn't move. "Why do you wish to protect the sanctity of your flesh when you have already desecrated it so splendidly?"

"I didn't—"

"Shhh." The whisper stirred the hair that had come loose from her ponytail. "We have watched you do things to yourself, beautiful and terrible things. And we have wondered. Was it a gift to us perhaps? To remember us or to forget?"

She swallowed hard when the hand inched slightly lower. Her thighs had begun to cramp from keeping them so tight together. What things—

*Oh my god.*

"You were watching me?" *Cutting myself.*

"And what pleasures you have brought us, Audrey. An offering to our glory that did not go unnoticed or unappreciated. We were always ardent devotees to the dark side in mortals, the one redeeming virtue your race possesses."

Something pushed against the back of her, as if her unseen aggressor was literally reforming, forcing himself out of the very wall to take physical shape. Colors and texture appeared. The arm holding her became muscled, long, its skin a pale bluish tint. The other, the predatory hand, curled fingers to follow her natural curves.

She felt his breath closer against her neck. A warning. Then he bit her. Not hard. Pain would've been better than the leisurely nip he took against her nape. An unhurried lover's bite.

Her world vacillated.

He licked upward along her neck. This time, his bite had nothing loving about it.

Cringing, she kicked out with both feet while simultaneously bucking back. His grip momentarily loosened around her middle and she slipped out and underneath. She barely had time to stumble back up. He seized her by the back of the neck and this time, did it hard. She yelped. His hand wrapped over her mouth, crushing her lips against her teeth.

"Shh," he whispered in her ear. "Loud noises still bother us. We have lived in silence for so long." He chuckled when she thrashed and kicked back against his shins. He felt made of rock. Probably was. "Although your lover makes the most delectable kind of noise when properly persuaded."

Audrey froze. Echion?

She felt her aggressor nod. "He will be so happy to see you again. When he sleeps, he calls for you. Because he needs to sleep now since he has become *mortal*. Well, half mortal. Such a hindrance since we can never finish him. But we have learned to compromise. In exchange for his body, we let him keep his dreams. A fair trade."

She wanted to bite the detestable hand. Hurt him. That monster. Make him pay.

"And now that we possess you again, Echion's fall will be complete."



Echion. She hadn't dreamed it all, hadn't dreamed him. He existed for real. And this Shade had him. Fear turned to rage. She felt herself grow still. The numbness that had pervaded her mind and body for the last two weeks, that had dulled the cuts' pain and deadened the sting of her loss was suddenly lifted to make room for a terrible clarity. She knew. Everything. The truth. Her truth.

Echion had been real. He had loved her. And this *thing* was going to take him away.

Audrey twisted to see the Shade towering behind her. He let her take a look. The angelic face brightened when her gaze settled on him. The irises like sapphires widened. He smiled. A vicious thing. Audrey couldn't help the shiver. One of the brothers, Aegeus. The Biter.

"We are pleased to see you remember us." He licked his upper teeth for added emphasis.

He pulled his hand from her mouth. She refused to lick her lips even if she felt saliva—or blood—on them and instead stared stubbornly up at him. "Where is he?"

"You place demands on us?" Aegeus replied with a wide smile. "Mortals are so endearing. Watching you desecrating your flesh was delectable but we much prefer your spirit when it is riled than when it is miserable." His grin turned uglier. "Echion is not far, waiting, very much the arrogant he has always been, that murderer who would forsake his own kind for a mortal, who would destroy a Shade for a creature who lives a handful of years. But when he sees you..."

"Why do you do this?" she retorted, desperately trying not to envision what he'd left unsaid. "You're free now. What do you care what happens to Echion and me? Can't you just let us go?"

"We would not waste our time on one such as you or even the betrayer Echion. But he has done something unforgivable. Something even too wicked for the likes of us. On the day of our liberation, on the eve of our final and complete glory, Echion murdered Theseus. Mere paces from the portal, moments away from freedom, he killed our brother." Aegeus' eyes narrowed to murderous slits. Audrey had to lower her gaze from the sheer hatred blazing in the blue orbs. "So we now wish to pay him in kind. Take something of his that he values above everything else. And this will finally put an end to the aberration Echion has become."

She noticed on his naked chest a network of scars. Those hadn't been there. As if his skin had crackled, split then healed too quickly. He looked down at himself, frowned. "Pallas' gift. Another who came close to forsaking his own for a mortal. Without our help, he would have sacrificed everything to his beloved mortal. Fortunately, we showed him the error of his ways. In the end, he killed his pet himself." Aegeus grinned mockingly. "A messy affair. And we think he has still not forgiven us. But soon we will find Pallas again and he too will pay for his great betrayal."

Pallas. Of course. Now she remembered. The dark-haired one who'd sacrificed himself to push Echion and her out of harm's way. She put her hand against the bottle

carrier. Obviously, Aegeus didn't know Pallas was no more. "How did you get out? I thought the door closed with us."

"What makes you think the portal closed at all?"

She did a mental three-sixty. The portal was still open?

He nodded. "Unfortunately, we were the only one strong enough to cross over. But soon, others will lure mortals near, will consume them as Echion should have done with you and will join us on the material realm. What grand plans we have for you, dear little creatures."

Audrey didn't even want to think of the implications. "Just take me to Echion."

Aegeus leaned over so close she had the strange feeling he was stealing her breath. Literally *stealing* it. She felt dizzy. "Do you think such a gift will come freely?"

"I never even hoped it would."

A wide grin stretched his gorgeous lips across his teeth. To be so beautiful outside and carry such a dark soul. A statue to the god of beauty and malice. "So endearing. We could have brought you such pleasures. We could have taught you all we knew, Theseus and us, together with you. It is there, the curiosity, the taste for darker pleasures is there, we can feel it, we have seen it." He let a long index finger run down her arm where she'd cut herself then straightened, looked away. "Let us hurry then. He has waited so long already."

Audrey let him take her by the forearm—his hand completely encircled it—and guide her back out of the park, down an alley flanked on either side by houses getting more decrepit by the corner. No one seemed to notice her. Had she become transparent? The awful numbness threatened to come back but she pushed it away. Echion needed her. Sounds of life wafted to her from opened windows and doors. Such nice weather for this time of the year. Munich would've been worth the look.

"Where are we going?"

He turned to look at her then faced onward again. His long, sinewy back tapered to a narrow waist, lean hips, a perfect bubble ass and long swimmers' legs. Except for his hair—Aegeus' black hair had blue highlights to it, whereas Echion's had purple—he resembled Echion so much from the back, the sight drove a stake through her heart. She missed him. Her hands missed him. Her lips did too.

She felt as if they'd walked hours, which they probably did. They exited what she'd come to view as the bad part of town, rushed along a river filled with either oblivious pedestrians or people adept at ignoring others. She couldn't believe no one would see the naked seven-foot wonder charging down the street, towing a panting, scowling chick. Yet no one seemed to as Aegeus dragged her along a promenade by a tranquil river then over a narrow wooden bridge that spanned a moat around what looked to her like a small country castle of white stucco and roofed in terracotta tiles that caught the dying afternoon sun. A chill to the air forced Audrey to shiver. She could barely breathe when Aegeus rushed by a wooden sign in typical German fonts stating *Schloss Blumenberg*. She knew *schloss* meant castle. Wasn't *blut* blood in German? The *bleeding*

castle? Sounds from a brass band wafted in on the breeze over the serene moat. A pair of swans swam lazy circles near the opposite bank.

Aegeus yanked her with him as he circled a thick, round tower, down past a stretch of straight wall and neared one of the long windows. One of the tiny panes had been broken. He snaked his hand in the serrated hole in the glass, didn't seem to notice he'd cut his wrist when he pulled out. Audrey waited for blood that never came. Shades didn't bleed? Echion had. She still remembered his blood on her hands and arms. Tears stung her eyes.

"What did you do to him?" She hated asking but had to know.

Aegeus pushed the window in, kicked a leg over the sill and offered her his hand. His eyes felt like a pair of blue lasers when he set his penetrating gaze on her. "Do you wish to know if we have damaged his beauty or his spirit? Will you find satisfaction or even pleasure knowing he has been proud and strong, that even as he screamed in agony he would not divulge where Pallas has fled? We have much history, the Silent One and us, one we wish to settle."

She resisted the urge to place a protective hand over her bottle carrier, where she'd placed the black crystal shard. Remnants of the Shade Aegeus wanted to find. Why did he? What history to settle? Echion probably didn't even know Pallas had doomed himself to save them. He'd been so wounded. The Biter had tortured him for information Echion didn't even have.

"I just want to know what you did to Echion."

"Do not worry over such matters for you will soon share his fate."

She tried not to show her disgust when Aegeus took her hand and effortlessly lifted her up and over the windowsill so he could deposit her inside a darkened dining room filled with thick-legged tables covered in white cloths, and with suits of armor lined along an old brick wall. The tall Shade at her side had to stoop under the low, vaulted brick ceiling. A short, cleated door in a corner gave her goose bumps. Like a dungeon door. He pulled on its thick iron loop, flicked the light switch—such a strange gesture for a being like him. She followed him down narrow stone stairs that circled over and over. Not just the door reminded her of a dungeon. *Dear god, where has he kept Echion?*

"Shades and mortals share this at least as we have always kept our victuals in the lower levels." His chuckle made her ball her fist. Demented monster.

The single light bulb at the top of the stairs barely lit the way down but Audrey managed not to kill herself as she followed the Shade out of the stairwell and into an empty room that must have been a wine cellar since racks were still attached to whitewashed walls. On the uneven stone floor, a square five-gallon water container stood out incongruously against the medieval setting. The smell of moist earth filled her nose.

"In here awaits your lover." Aegeus pointed to a darkened, arched doorway in the far wall. He leaned in to her ear and whispered, "We will allow you some time together

before we return to name the price of our benefaction. Meanwhile, we will enjoy a few mortals to take the edge off our hunger."

"What if I run away?" She whispered too for no reason she could explain.

Aegeus chuckled softly as he straightened to his considerable height. "Would you leave your beloved behind? Would you abandon one who renounced his own kind for you? In which case, we just might keep you to ourselves."

"You know I wouldn't leave him."

He sighed. "Alas. Such a waste. But we much prefer to *take* the gift than have it willingly given."

Aegeus left her standing there, walked toward a wall and just *melted* into it. A thin sliver of shadow flitted across the rough surface then slipped up by a crack in the ceiling. Audrey shivered in horror.

Her heartbeat reached a manic tempo, swooshed in her ears, pulsed against the collar of her polar fleece. She swallowed, crept one step toward the doorway then two, three. Bracing herself against whatever state in which she was about to find Echion, she poked her head into the darkness. "Echion?" she called softly.

A soft murmur raised the hair on her arms. "Echion, it's Audrey. Where are you?"

Something shifted on the stone floor. She heard a faint rustling sound then a scrape. She skidded back a step when a long arm flopped into the sliver of light hitting the floor, palm up, fingers loose and caked with dried blood. She fell to her knees so she could cradle his hand. She would've recognized those long fingers anywhere.

"Echion," she breathed over and over. "I'm here. I'm here to help."

"Why?" he whispered, cleared his throat. "You should not have returned. Aegeus used you."

"I know."

"Yet you returned." There was wonder in the weary voice.

"They said they didn't find anyone else but me. I wouldn't forget, I kept dreaming. I thought I was going crazy..." A sudden sob choked the rest of the sentence. "I'm not leaving you behind."

Now this last sentence had been said with so much aplomb she paused, surprised with herself at this newfound bravery. She had no idea what to do. Aegeus could – and probably would – kill her with one hand, yet she felt this overwhelming sense of rightness, that everything would be okay. Somehow, she'd find a way. She patted the carrier at her hip, remembered there wasn't water in it but a bit of crystal.

"There's water here," she said, kissed his palm. "Can you come out? Are you tied down?"

"No ties keep me in this hole, Audrey." Echion's voice was so faint she barely heard the last few words.

"Then what does?"

"Shame."

God, she hated Aegeus with as much passion as she loved Echion. Heat like a fever engulfed her face.

"It's all right. I'll help you come out, okay. Just lean on me."

"Save yourself." He pulled his hand out of hers and returned to the shadows. "You should not have returned. Aegeus has gone to feed; there is time. Leave."

"Shhh."

She pawed blindly into the darkness and finally caught something. A shoulder, an arm. Hair spilled over her knuckles when she snaked her hand around his neck and braced herself against the wall to pull him to her. Something sticky gummed her hands. Audrey gritted her teeth. Yet nothing could've prepared her for the sight of him when she managed to half drag, half pull him closer and into the lit portion of the doorway. Timid light bathed Echion's sorry state. She cried. For him. For her. For the rage choking her.

Bite marks covered his arms, his legs, what portion of his back she could see. Long red lines crisscrossed and zigzagged all over his body. He smelled of blood and sweat and misery. His hair was matted and hung over his face. She cupped his chin but Echion wouldn't look up.

"Do you think I care about how you look?"

"Just leave," he whispered. "Please."

"No!"

She hadn't meant to speak so loudly or so curtly, god, not to him, but the word had just come out of her like the crack of a whip.

Echion looked up and through the tangled bangs, the pair of amethysts-for-eyes blazed with shocking intensity. She felt trapped in that strange gaze, willingly remained so. He blinked and broke the spell. "How can you want us — *me*, this way? I am so..." he shook his head. "Weak."

"You're not weak, you're a man now. Mine."

And by god, she wouldn't leave until she had either saved Echion, killed Aegeus or died trying. Probably died.

Echion let out a long sigh and leaned his head against her raised knee. "I have dreamed of you, of touching you. But I fear Aegeus will turn my dreams into nightmares."

The cuts on her arms itched. Audrey couldn't help but agree with his grim assessment. "But we'll be together."

He acquiesced with a nod.

## Chapter Eleven

Echion could not hold her gaze long. He had brought her here. It was his fault Aegeus would use her against him. If only he had been stronger, had denied his longing for her.

What was he saying? No mere longing warmed his heart at the sight of her. He loved her. Had almost from the beginning. Still, his failings would cost her dearly. He hated what he had become, even if part of him rejoiced at his newfound mortality, a life he would have spent with Audrey, except that now he might enjoy his frailty by dying with her. As she had said, at least they would be together.

She removed some kind of carrier from around her shoulder and set it on the floor so she could pull the top layer of clothing off. Echion's eyes welled when he saw the scabbed cuts on her arms.

"Are those...?"

She nodded. "Aegeus told you?"

"He would relay your plight in much detail."

Audrey cleared her throat and said nothing.

How he loathed Aegeus for what he had done, how he had spied on Audrey in her secret moments of vulnerability then come brag to Echion at the things she had done to her body. Because of her pain. Because of him. A bright wave of anger swelled inside.

Audrey removed the white garment close to her skin to once again don the outer layer. He found his eyes drawn to the tubular carrier resting on the floor and wondered why. The thing was nondescript at best. With the thin, white sleeveless garment, she bathed him.

After she'd washed the shameful reminders of Aegeus' treatment and held the large water container against his lips so he could drink his fill, Echion leaned back against the wall and straightened his cramped legs. Every parcel of his body ached. Even the most intimate ones. *Especially* the most intimate ones. Aegeus had taken him too many times to count. A shiver of disgrace and rage tightened his shoulders. Had he had his former powers, Aegeus would have suffered greatly. Might still if he found a way to overpower the Shade. And if he succeeded...

"I've missed you so much," Audrey said as she set the container on the floor.

He nearly cried out in shock when she encircled his shoulders and held him close. Such energy! The surge of strength washing over his body left him giddy. Echion enfolded her in his arms and squeezed her as hard as he dared. His muscles stopped from aching, his skin from burning, his head from throbbing. Renewed vigor filled his veins. He had never felt anything like it. He could take on the world!

"Can you feel it?" he asked in her hair. She smelled of sweet things and sunlight.

He felt her shake her head.

Was he only dreaming then? Another ploy of Aegeus' to further hurt him?

Audrey looked up into his gaze and he knew the reason for his newfound strength. It sparkled in her eyes. An effervescence so fresh yet so mortal. She truly had given him a new life. Twice now. In his underworld while he was a full Shade and now again, she fed the Shade still in him and the man he had not quite become. She filled him entirely.

The declaration seemed puny but left him just the same. "I love you."

She grinned. Such a lovely sight. "Me too."

Two tiny words. Each held hope and life.

He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her eyelids. She returned the favor but lingered on his lips. He had dreamed of such a moment. His flesh had ached at the memory of her body pressed against him. His hands had curled impotently over emptiness as he imagined how her tiny womanly body would fill them. They shared a long, chaste kiss. He felt like flying. To have spent millennia whispering the most decadent things in mortals' ears, to have tempted into debauchery and excess of all kinds, to have taken and been taken, and to now enjoy a simple kiss. He truly was a new *man*.

"I'm sorry for your friend, Echion."

"You should not. He betrayed my trust." To say Orias had been his intimate companion. As close to a friend as a Shade could have.

"No, not him, the other one, Pallas. He's... He sacrificed himself to push us through. I saw him breaking up."

Of course—not Orias but Pallas. What strange occurrence to owe his life to the Silent One, who had forever proved a secret to everyone. Or so he had thought. Obviously, his hatred of the twins had taken root long ago and had run deep enough to bring about his self-destruction. He had trusted Orias over Pallas. All that time.

Audrey pulled away to look at him. "I have—"

"Thank you for reviving him." The whispered words dripped with sarcasm. "We were never adept at nurturing mortals back from the brink of death."

Echion's heart nearly broke then and there. Their dire situation returned magnified a thousand times. He pulled away from Audrey in time to see Aegeus change from shadow against the wall to fully formed Shade. His grin gleamed pink with what he knew to be blood. Gods, the things he would do to his beloved Audrey. Rage locked his jaw. He lowered his gaze so the cunning Shade would not see the threat there. He had to remain the beaten, downtrodden, raped-into-submission *mortal*. Half mortal. The mortification of having Audrey care for him this way, tend to all his mortal body's base, sordid needs burned like a bad fever.

Aegeus stalked to the still-kneeling Audrey and hoisted by an arm. Her yelp of pain sliced across his heart.

"No!"

Echion meant to jump to his feet but the Shade roughly shoved him back. Echion flew backward a good five or six paces and crashed against the far wall where he hit the back of his head and saw stars. Blood from his cut tongue filled his mouth. He swallowed it. Again, his gaze was drawn to the red and black carrier now on its side.

"No more delays," Aegeus snarled in a harsh whisper. His eyes blazed. "We will take your mortal until she collapses on her knees. We will take her kneeling until she falls on all four."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and forced her against him, facing outward so Echion had ample opportunity to look into her big, frightened eyes.

Aegeus leaned his chin against her shoulder. "Then we will take her lying on the ground, broken and torn until she can no longer find the strength to live." He turned his hateful gaze on Echion and smiled a wicked grin. "And if you interfere, Echion the Betrayer, we will make sure to punish her accordingly for your foolishness. Try to guess how long her fragile flesh would last if we were to show no restraint at all."

The cold fingers of abject fear squeezed his innards and forced Echion to quiet lest his behavior hurt Audrey even more.

She stood pole-straight as Aegeus pinched the sleeve of her outer garment and twirled her round and round as a dancer would.

"Undress for us," he murmured when he stopped her facing Echion.

His heart would surely give. "Aegeus, there is—"

"*Quiet!*" the Shade thundered.

Echion knew his cringe mirrored that of Audrey. The sound felt like a sudden slap of wind stealing one's breath.

"It's all right, Echion," Audrey said in a firm and steady voice. "He can't take anything I won't give him."

Such power in a frame so slight!

He watched with powerless fear and fury as she slowly peeled off her clothing. First the outer layer then the pants made of rough blue material. The undergarment followed and soon she stood in her socks, red-faced, naked in front of him but not *for* him.

Aegeus grinned wide. "Turn to me."

With a last look his way—Echion wanted to fly at the loathsome Shade again but feared worsening her fate too much—she turned to face the towering Aegeus, a vision of sculpted beauty and grace while ruse and malice hid underneath the perfect shell.

"Kneel for us, Audrey, and take us into your mouth." While he stated his demands, his eyes never left Echion's face. "Biting will not harm us." He chuckled.

Even if he could not see, from the way she knelt and faced upward, shoulders tight, one hand in front of her, Echion knew she had followed the Shade's commands.

Revulsion made him kneel up. Aegeus' vigilance must have wavered as he desecrated the woman Echion loved. Eyes half closed, he caressed her hair, fisted then released it.



Echion's hand closed over something. The tubular carrier Audrey had brought with her. A change came over him. A heightened sense of *everything* filled his veins, heated his blood. He could hear and see and smell things that had until then escaped him.

He also experienced a sudden slew of emotions.

An old hatred, an old pain. Revenge filled his heart, his head, his limbs.

*Avenge us.*

Echion's breath nearly stopped. He had no idea what the carrier contained only that with it, he felt more like a Shade than he had since his crossing over to the material plane.

Slowly, with his heart thudding painfully hard against his chest, Echion rose to his feet. Aegeus did not seem to notice or to care. He wrapped his hand behind Audrey's head. Echion knew exactly what was about to happen for having tasted it himself. He would spare Audrey the ignominy even if it killed them both.

With energy born out of fear and rage and an old a sense of loss he could not explain, Echion charged for the Shade about to defile his Audrey in the most odious way possible.

The great bellow must have pulled Aegeus out of the trancelike stupor since he hurriedly pushed Audrey away a split second before Echion barreled into him, sending both of them crashing against the wall. Chunks of bricks and debris fell from the ceiling. His mortal coil nearly gave under the impact. Such pain!

"How dare you touch her!" Echion roared. His fisted the bottom half of the carrier and ripped the top off. Inside a tingle shard of black crystal gleamed like polished ebony. He let it slip out and would have fisted it had Aegeus not slapped it out of his hand.

"You will pay for this, Echion the Betrayer," snarled the Shade. "We will rape your mortal before your eyes, close enough to let you hear her flesh tearing around us. Again and again—"

Echion kned him between the legs while simultaneously pushing off the wall. With Aegeus' hands around his throat, they fell backward.

Audrey cried out. Echion did not hear the words. Suddenly, a tiny mortal hand appeared over Aegeus' shoulder. For a split second, a flash of darkness arced downward and ended in the Shade's exposed neck. He clawed at it, howling. Released, Echion punched the hated face, violently, his knuckles in agony against the stonelike surface. He no longer cared. Aegeus had to be destroyed.

His face contorted with fury then seemed to crystallize into a heinous scowl. Only half of the Shade's face seemed mobile, the rest frozen like a grimacing statue. "What—?"

Echion did not wait. He yanked out the crystal shard Audrey had planted into the hated neck, meant to stab again, deeper this time. He never had the opportunity as Aegeus shoved backward and stumbled back to melt into the stone.

"No!" Echion's thunderous voice, despite being half mortal, deafened him.

"Quickly!" Audrey said as she hurried to the door.

He preceded her there. "Stay here. It is too —"

"Don't you *dare*. He hurt me as much as he did you."

Echion kissed the top of her head. "Forgive me. Fear blinded me. Lead the way."

He followed her, crystal shard in a steady fist — Aegeus had much to pay for — and exited into a darkened dining place filled with tables and chairs. Strange armors he had never seen lined one wall. A fleeting shadow near the window caught his attention.

"There!"

They charged after the shadow, which had seeped out of the broken pane and into the night. Echion would not let her pass first and firmly kept her aside with an arm as he kicked a leg over the windowsill. While he stood guard, she followed him outside.

Movement at the corner of his eye kept him from looking into the direction in which she pointed. Which was fortunate, since he would have missed Aegeus as he reformed out of the wall not two paces away. His beautiful face, half frozen in a hideous mask, shone like alabaster in the gloom.

Echion *humphed* when the Shade tackled him. They rolled and thrashed, pinned the other only to be pinned in turn. Water splashed around his legs and Echion realized the fight had taken them to the edge of a tranquil lake, a moat around the large mansion in which he had been kept. He drew strength from the crystal in his hand and kicked the Shade in the chest, sent him backpedaling to flounder then claw back up the embankment. He would have caught Echion at a disadvantage had a metallic, bucket-like implement with a spout not hit him squarely in the face. He slapped the puny thing away but not in time to parry Echion's next attack.

Audrey had bought him a precious moment of inattention on Aegeus' part. No more than a heartbeat. Enough.

Envenomed with the wrath and disgust for what that hated *thing* had done to his beloved Audrey, he grappled Aegeus from behind, wrapped his longer arm around the other's neck to better pin him. He raised his other hand high and this time nothing could stop him.

Echion plunged the crystal shard into Aegeus' side. Plunged deep.

A great tremor shook the Shade. He collapsed onto his knees, turned his face back toward Echion. For a split second understanding passed between the two. A debt had been repaid. He saw it in the darkening blue eyes. A wrong had been righted and not only the one done to Audrey. Another one, a *much* older one, had finally been redressed. With crackling sounds like water freezing instantly, he solidified into a grimacing, half-beautiful, half-repulsive figure. A statue to some perverse god with a black crystal forever implanted into its side.

Echion backed away until he caught sight of Audrey about to hit the ground. He scooped her up behind the knees and more or less fell with her, using his own body to soften the landing.

"Thank you," she kept murmuring in the crook of his shoulder.

Echion could not believe what he had just done. *Accomplished*. The renewed energy that had fizzed in his veins left him, as if it had come from the crystal and now that he no longer held it, his mortal frailty surfaced once more.

He held her close to his heart. His cherished one. "He will not hurt us again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey had no idea how she could even function. Although she *had* managed to attack a Shade with a watering can. With her suitcase retrieved—luckily no one had stolen it from the park—she'd rented a room in the first hotel she could find, a posh affair of marble and frosted glass. She didn't care about cost right then. Echion had waited, hidden, until she'd opened one of the side doors to let him in.

He presently sat on the edge of the plush king-sized bed, crispy white sheets such a contrast to his abused and marked body, and stared in mute disbelief at the TV, which she'd turned on just to have some noise in the room. He held the remote in two hands as one would a fragile bird. His fingernails were just awful. He leaned so far forward to better stare at the glowing screen that she contemplated warning him but let Echion watch television in peace. A weird sight if she ever saw one. While he sat there, she drew him a hot bath and used the entire bottle of scented gel. His poor body needed to soak. She had a shower, brushed her teeth three times. She wanted to clean the taste of that odious Shade from her mouth. She could still feel him on her tongue. Tears welled her eyes. She'd felt so empty while she'd forced her mouth to accept the revolting intrusion. Serene even. As if nothing had mattered anymore as long as Echion was safe.

She came out of the bathroom wearing one of the terry robes and, after a while of watching Echion cock his head at some German-speaking reality show, cleared her throat softly. "A nice long bath will do you good."

"Yes," he replied without looking back at her. "Mortals are stranger than I realized."

Her laugh must have startled him as much as it did her. "You have no idea."

He carefully deposited the remote on the TV and joined her by the bathroom door. A mix of naïveté and male pride made him the most contradictory, gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Quiet strength emanated from every pore, a sense of stillness and inner silence unlike anyone she'd ever met. He clearly was more Shade than human but if the size of him would send most running for the hills, his face had lost the stony arrogance while a healthy dose of humanity, of warmth even, had smoothed the haughty angles. His hair had darkened to black with purple highlights depending on the angle of the light. His eyes though, had remained fully Shade. The color of amethysts. He would be the recipient of many stares and better get used to it.

"Everything is so *small*," he whispered.

He'd also have to get used to ducking doorways.

Audrey hooked wet strands of hair behind her ear. "And breakable. Be careful where you put those big mitts. I'm already maxing out my cards."

He leaned low so he could place a kiss on her mouth. A delicate kiss that left her sighing.

Echion stepped into the large bathroom. He filled it with his towering presence. "I have needs I do not understand."

It must have been so awful learning to be a man in Aegeus' sadistic custody. Echion must have been so confused and frustrated and afraid. No one had been there to explain, to guide, to help. She was there now. She'd explain, guide and help. She'd love him too.

"We'll take it nice and slow for tonight." She squeezed by his elbow and checked the water temperature with her hand, commenting as she went.

Echion imitated her gesture, arched an eyebrow when bubbles stayed on top of his knuckles. He watched them burst for a while before stepping inside the bathtub and forcing his tall frame into it, legs bent at acute angles and arms draped over the ledge. He sighed contentedly and sank deeper until his chest was submerged. So many wounds and cuts and abrasions. So much pain.

Audrey used the end of a hotel hand towel to run gently over his abused body. He closed his eyes. So trusting. His hair felt so smooth in her hands as she washed it for him, her nurturing gene at eleven on the proverbial ten scale. She hadn't once washed a lover's hair. Or any part of a lover, period. But then again, she'd never felt this way for someone before, this protective while at the same time intellectually accepting the man could take care of himself better than anyone she knew. He'd taken on a Shade.

"How old are you?" Echion asked, eyes still closed.

"Thirty-three. You?"

For the first time since—god, she couldn't even remember when she'd last seen him smile—he grinned wide. Echion opened his eyes. "Old."

"Come on, how old are you? How long do Shades live?"

He traced the cuff of her robe's sleeve and watched a while as droplets seeped into the terrycloth. "*Life* is not a word I would use to describe what moved us for we had been in the prison of stone and mirrors a long time, dormant, waiting. Shades have always been. I cannot recall a time when it was not so. I remember the rise and fall of so many great mortal civilizations, most of them you would know nothing about, some of them so long gone now that their memories are all that is left." He pointed to his temple then let his hand rest on his chest. "My age and history do not matter."

"What does then?"

He turned his amethysts-for-eyes gaze on her and held very still. He had enough Shade left in him to look like a statue, as he had when she'd first seen him, so majestic and proud and stunning, even all scrunched up inside a too-small bathtub. "You do."

She helped him get out of the tub and gave him every towel there was in the stylish bathroom. He made huge, wet footprints on the slate tiles when he preceded her into the bedroom.

"Good thing we have a king-size or your legs would dangle over the edge." She smiled when he turned to her.

"You dote on me."

"You don't like it?"

A flash of feral intensity lit his gaze. "I would enjoy returning the favor even more." He was so tall, even sitting on the bed, the top of his head reached her chin. He opened his arms. This was an invitation she wouldn't refuse.

Standing between his knees, she cupped his face and smiled.

"Would you let me disrobe you?"

A nod dislodged a curl from behind her ear.

He gently pulled on the terry cloth belt until the knot gave with a slight tug. Long fingers so adroit and tender she barely felt anything at all slipped in the opening and parted the robe over her shoulders then down her arms. Her nipples hardened. She tried not to look at her arms. But she did. She could almost hear it. The bubble bursting.

Echion's face tightened when he likewise looked at the cuts on her arms. He blew on each, kissed each. "Had my powers been complete," he whispered between kisses. "I would have made Aegeus suffer greatly for these."

Audrey just shrugged. It wasn't all the Shade's fault. She'd gone at her arms before. She just hoped she wouldn't again. Not with Echion in her life. He'd make the numbness go away. *She'd* make it go away. For him but more importantly for herself. She wanted to enjoy life with him and cutting herself just wouldn't be acceptable.

He took her hands, kissed the knuckles then pulled her with him on the bed so she'd lie on her side with him behind her. Spooning with a Shade. A sudden fit of giggles took her. What a crazy life.

"Are you crying?" Echion whispered, coming up on an elbow and leaning over her shoulder.

"Nah, just thinking about the fortune you'll cost in clothes. The tailors will love you."

"I miss the times when mortals would go around in their natural state instead of hiding themselves even when the elements are not harsh to them. It makes little sense to deny themselves the beauty of others' forms."

"Don't worry, people will be admiring your 'form' even with a poncho on." The edge in her words surprised her.

"Are you jealous, Audrey?" he whispered teasingly before kissing her earlobe. "You should not be. I belong to you as completely as you do to me."

Her feminist hackles should've have risen at that. They didn't. Pete would fall on his ass. She'd taken a strip off other boyfriends for less. *Echion isn't a boyfriend.*

"You have never asked about the place you saw." His carefully modulated tone conveyed his uneasiness well.

"You mean the place where Orias took me?" It'd been the closest to hell as she'd ever seen. Not something she wished to revisit.

"Do you not want to know what it was?"

"Is it important?"

"Yes, it defines me. It is what I used to be. If you abhor even the memory of that place, then you abhor me."

"It...it wasn't a pretty sight, all those bones. Dead people no one ever buried." How worried their families must have been. She shivered despite the comfortable heat provided by the man behind her.

"They were those who gave themselves freely to us. Throughout the ages, they have come to us of their own volition, given their bodies over to our touch so that we may give them the ultimate pleasure. I cannot ask for your forgiveness over what I was or have done. I was a Shade. It is part of me still."

She nodded. "I understand. I'm okay with it. I *think*. We'll find a way to make it work for us."

"We will."

The first tendrils of sleep forced her eyes closed. She wanted to nuzzle and chat with Echion all night but the recent events had just been too much for her. Soon, she felt her breathing deepen; her muscles loosen.

Echion placed a soft kiss on her temple and lay behind her, a protective arm draped over her shoulder, a hard, hot mass resting snugly at the juncture of her legs. Despite the differences in sizes, how perfectly they fit.

## Chapter Twelve

They came for him in the guise of taloned birds of prey. But he knew them to be Shades. A flock of them, hateful beings bent on making him suffer and pay for his great betrayal. They rent the flesh of his hands when he flailed at them, sought to gouge out his eyes for daring to look at one not their own. He yelled. Hands gripped him by the shoulders to force him onto his back. He lashed out. A familiar voice made the flying bird-Shades dash away with vengeful but-for-now defeated shrieks.

“Echion,” a gentle voice said over and over.

He opened his eyes to realize he had only been dreaming, that he lay with Audrey in a bed now warm and clingy with his sweat. Without a word, he threw his arm around her and held her close, his mouth ravenous once more to claim and possess her. She opened to him. Accepted his touch. He had to douse the fire. She would make it all better.

He rolled on top of her but kept himself up on his elbows lest he crush her beneath his much greater weight. She parted her thighs, so warm, so slender. Tears mixed with sweat and stung his eyes as he ravaged her face with a rain of kisses. Her cheeks, her mouth. All his now. Fire burned in his lower back. How could mortals go on with such failings debilitating their bodies? He could hardly think for the myriad little aches and pains and needs he suffered.

She pressed her pelvis up against him and he knew she yearned to douse the fire plaguing her as well. Echion curled his hips so the tip of his cock could find its home. And such a warm, inviting home it was!

“Audrey,” he whispered in her ear.

She would make the pain go away. The demons in his head would not dare torment him while he was with her, inside her, sheathed and sheltered. Loved.

Echion pushed inside her. With a long sigh he sank to the hilt, in the back of his mind shocked she could contain him so deeply, being so slight even for a mortal. Heat transferred from her to him. He pulled out, slid back in.

Their coupling was hurried and desperate. He tried to contain his fear and anger but these new emotions clawed out of him in the form of punishing thrusts that rocked the bed frame. Audrey seemed bent on exorcising her own inner demons as well since she snarled in his ear to make it go away, make the numbness just go, to free her, make her one with him, each part of the other.

He lost himself in her. With fire burning the last shred of restraint he had, he bore down on her with all he had, took her and took her again. Her cry reverberated in the

stillness. Soon his joined hers. From scream of release, their verbal unrestraint soon turned to silent weeps of relief and liberation. He gathered her in his arms and rocked them both until he felt nothing but her heartbeat against his chest.

Watching her sleep could easily become his favorite pastime.

Echion barely breathed so he would not disturb her rest. Audrey's hair stuck out in fuzzy brown curls he ached to touch. Moonlight stabbing in between thick drapes the color of olives caressed her shoulder and neck while casting the rest of her in tempting shadows. Shadows he wanted to explore and caress and cherish.

He watched while dawn licked upward from Audrey's toes to her calves, her thighs where his handprints had made red marks he already regretted, then up over her rounded backside as she lay on her side, both hands tucked under her chin. Echion did not move from the taxing stillness he had imposed on his mortal body even if each muscle screamed for relief. She would wake soon and he wanted to see it happen.

Already her breathing became shallower. When her eyelashes fluttered, Echion watched intently as Audrey's face in turn relaxed, tightened then brightened as she opened her eyes and focused on him. He would never need more proof than this. Protective feelings he had never experienced flooded him. It would be his self-imposed vow to protect this woman from harm. And the gods help those who would stand in his way.

"I will destroy anything that would dare hurt you."

"Well, good morning to you too." She yawned, smacked her lips and grinned. "Room service. If I'm going to burn my credit cards, I should do it in style."

While he watched her go back and forth in the bedroom, first doing her ablutions in one of the tiny porcelain sinks imbedded in a thick slab of granite—he had nearly demolished it when he leaned against it to watch his reflection in the mirror. He looked *mortal*. She had then spoken into a device called a "phone" and sat to wait for "room service". So many new things surrounded him, unknown even if Shades, while they slumbered, had followed humanity's change through the ages. Their new machines had remained a mystery until now. The room was filled with them, some tiny others larger and imbedded into the walls. She also insisted he wear something to cover his nudity. He had never realized how full of idiosyncrasies mortals were.

A soft knock came to the door and instantly caused him to ball his fists and stare at the panel hard enough to make Audrey chuckle. He yanked on the shiny knob but the door would not budge.

"It's locked. Turn that little brass thing to the right. Yeah, that's it."

He opened the door to find a young man dressed in black and white staring up at him. Echion was reminded that most mortal males would probably not stand taller than doorways. He leaned over so he could take the tray out of the still-staring young man's hands. It was heavier than it looked. Perhaps humans were stronger than they appeared.



"Leave us."

A distracted expression came over the young man, who nodded once and turned to leave.

"Oh my god, wait," Audrey said as she squeezed by Echion's elbow. "Excuse me."

But the young man did not stop. How dare he not listen to Audrey?

Echion whispered out of habit. "Stop."

The young man froze in place.

"How?" Audrey put her hand over her mouth, turned to look up at him. "How did you do that?"

"Mortals were always inclined to listen to me."

She threw him an affronted look. "Hey, we're *people*, all right?"

"Have I offended you?"

"Would you just let the poor guy go? For god's sake."

"Please leave us," Echion said, careful to modulate his words into a more polite request lest he rile Audrey again. Mortals had always been so easily roused.

After she had closed the door, she leaned against it and stared. "How did you do that? He was like a robot."

Echion did not know what to tell her. He was still part Shade and would probably retain some of his former powers. Persuasion among those. "I am not like you, Audrey. I have kept with me a part of my former life. Forgive me if I have offended you."

"Well, yeah, you've offended me, but that's not what gets me the most. You could have told him to jump on the spot and bark like a dog, and something tells me he would have."

"Do you wish to try? You could summon him back—"

Both hands patting the air, she shook her head. "No, no, that's okay. We'll figure it out later. Just don't do it to me, okay?"

"I would never speak to you in such manner."

"Good."

He took the tray laden with victuals to the bed as she instructed. Everything on the tray was so dainty and small. Cups the size of walnuts, saucers no bigger than a quarter of his palm, tiny rolls of bread, some sort of shiny implement to smear jelly the color of rubies out of a small glass dish. Something moved in his stomach. Or he thought it did. Tight and aching, his belly constricted. He put a hand over it to feel for the faint rumbling.

"Hunger."

He had witnessed its effects on many mortals but had never actually felt it in himself before crossing over. How bizarre. Aegeus had been most jubilant over this weakness and made sure to trigger it daily.

"Unless you have a polar bear stuck in there, yes, it's hunger. You have to eat regularly or you'll keel over." She sat cross-legged on the bed and poured a dark, rich-looking liquid into one of the walnut-sized cups. The smell that reached him accentuated the rumblings in his abdomen.

"Have you ever had coffee?"

"No."

"Be careful. Tiny, *tiny* sips. Especially this stuff here."

The minute cup pinched between his fingers, he took a tentative sip, waited for his tongue to master the complex taste. "It is vile."

Audrey laughed. Such a lovely sound. "Oh, you're not wasting a drop of this thing. It's four Euros fifty a cup. Here, give it to me then."

He spent a while watching her drink the black liquid and doing so with obvious relish. Later he tried the milk, which he recognized by sight. Now this, he could drink. Although it tasted different from what he had always imagined it would. As Shade, he had tasted nothing but mortals, their sweat, the juices, the occasional drop of blood from an overzealous lover, but never actual food. Shades had no hunger other than the lustful kind. He would have to learn how to deal with so many different and new needs.

Echion ate his share of everything but made a mental note to never, *ever* again try anything that remotely resembled what she called "breakfast links". Ground-up animal parts?! He shivered. Echion also learned he had a "sweet tooth" for his predilection of certain victuals in the tray. That red jelly was so tasty he would have eaten the whole thing had Audrey not stopped him. Colors and scents and sounds of their eating whet another sort of hunger. He found he could barely focus on his meal whenever he watched her fingers bringing morsels to her mouth, which glistened temptingly.

"I'll have to go out and find you something to wear. I hope they have a big and tall store around here."

"You must not leave this chamber without me to guard you. What if you are attacked?"

"By what? Bavarian pigeons?"

He did not share her mirth. What if something happened to her while he was too far away to help? What if she were hurt or worse?

"I'll be fine, Echion. I used to have a life before, you know. Which reminds me, we'll have to find you some papers—and that should be fun, fun, fun—so you can come back home. Unless, er, you have other plans?"

"I have already demonstrated my plans. I stay with you."

She grinned mockingly. "And that should get *me* plenty of stares too. The 'what does he see in her' kind. I don't exactly stop traffic on the cute scale, you know."

"And for this, I will break their necks."

"No neck-breaking, okay. We 'mortals' resolve our problems the good old-fashioned way. Denial and lots of chocolate."

"What will I require 'papers' for?"

"You need special documents to travel from country to country. You speak English, even if I have no idea how or where you could've learned, so we'll go to my embassy and start from there."

"Shades spent millennia listening to mor – to *people*. This is how we learned all their secrets." He felt himself grow hard under the sheet he had wrapped around his waist at Audrey's insistence. "When you woke us, we remembered everything we had heard while in our great slumber, every age and epoch, every great change. Nothing in detail but in a general sense of how people had changed, the new ways in which they discoursed. Yet some things have remained the same through the eons." He patted his member down under the impromptu toga. "Some things I now share as well. Like this."

A deep blush darkened her cheeks. She smiled, shrugged, put the cup down with a little rattle that told him either she was nervous or was also growing aroused. Either way, he intended to do something about it.

"Audrey."

She stopped trying to fit everything back the way it had been on the tray before their meal and looked up to meet his gaze. Heat flared out from his chest to his neck and face.

"You must not always make everything perfect. There can be beauty and peace in a small measure of chaos."

She nodded and abandoned the little saucer. "I know. I'm working on it."

Echion reached out to tug on her belt. It gave with a very satisfying little jerk. "There is beauty in imperfection, in marks and scars, in experience." He slid a hand inside the collar and slipped the robe down her shoulder and arm. The small cuts gleamed pink in the morning light. He traced the largest and oldest. "A scar is a triumph. It was once customary for warriors to show their scars as signs of their victories."

"Those aren't about victories." She looked down and grimaced. "They just make people stare – not that I care – but that's just the way it is. They stare and they pity."

"Do you pity yourself when you look at your scars?"

Echion saw that he had angered her. Her nostrils flared, her eyes narrowed. Defiant, her eyes held his. "No."

"Then let them stare at your scars and witness how many times you have triumphed. Let them count each victory at their leisure."

With a flick of his wrist, he tugged the robe past her breast. "Now I wish to make love to you here and now while the sun is climbing still. Aegeus kept me in the lower level so no one would hear me scream. I have not seen or tasted the sun's kiss in millennia."

He rose from the bed, turned away from her just long enough to part the drapes as wide as they would go. Facing her once more, he sighed at the beauty displayed for him. She was so luminous, so bright and vibrant. She made *him* feel alive as he never had felt before. Audrey smiled up at him.

Nothing else was needed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Audrey didn't know how she managed it but she put the tray on the dresser by the bed without spilling anything or getting tangled up in her partly done robe. Bright sunlight spilled into the room, bathed everything in platinum and silver. She wanted to blink but wouldn't miss a second of the glorious vision before her. Echion stood haloed in sunlight, between the pillars of olive green the drapes had become, silhouetted in his grace and symmetry and quiet strength by the bright morning being born outside their window. A tree with its leaves gently swaying created a kaleidoscope of green foliage and golden light. Smells of approaching summer wafted in through the opened pane.

"I wish for you to disrobe, Audrey, and let me see each secret you are."

She wondered if he noticed how he'd whispered. Like a Shade. He was still part Shade though, wasn't he? Which made him all the more alluring.

Her hands trembling only slightly, she pulled the robe down lower, both breasts denuded to his hungry gaze, rising with her breaths growing shallower by the second. He positively towered over everything in the room. If he reached up, he could put his hand flat on the ceiling.

"Disrobe completely."

A gesture of his long hand indicated she had to finish the job while he watched. God, she'd never been so excited and anxious and just horny as hell!

Audrey sat on her heels in the middle of the bed so she could open the robe all the way down.

He smiled. "Using the best implements, the purest pigments, a master could spend his life trying to interpret your beauty to the masses and yet never come even close to the truth. I have seen works of art throughout the history of man. Artists and sculptors have brought me their most prized accomplishments, their cherished work, all for my pleasure. Nothing I have ever witnessed equates to your splendor. For you are mine." The smile turned feral. "Tell me your secrets, one by one."

She did.

Audrey Pullman revealed to this unique being, not quite Shade but much more than a man, all her secrets. Every last one. She shared her soul, her joys and sorrows, her fantasies, her nightmares. Where she wanted to be touched. How she wanted to be taken. What she would scream when Echion would bring her there, to that place that held nothing but pleasure and release, physical, emotional, where she could simply feel, just *be*. She told him everything. And while she spoke, Echion listened, not once

interrupting her or telling her she ought to be ashamed for sharing such torrid detail or thinking such debauched thoughts. Nothing seemed to surprise or shock the silent man nor leave him disgusted or disappointed. He listened with rapt attention. And when she finished, when juices slicked her pussy from the mental orgy in which she'd just starred, when Echion's eyes had narrowed and his lips became glossy from licking them, Audrey stopped.

Silence owned the sunlit room. Particles of dust danced in the air between them. The only barrier because she knew. She *understood*. Nothing would ever tear them apart. They could beat anything. She had the scars to prove it. Let the people stare!

"Let me see your secret pleasure," he whispered, taking a step forward.

The sheet he'd wrapped around his waist became undone and crumpled unheeded to the floor to reveal his statuesque beauty. Despite the marks, or perhaps because of them—just like hers—she found him the most glorious sight she'd ever laid eyes on. His cock hung heavy over his thighs. So thick and long. Glossy and smooth. Hers.

She leaned back on her hands, knees bent and spread her legs. Revealed her secret pleasure to him. She knew he could see her juices coating her, the narrow strip of dark hair glistening. Audrey let him have a good long look before she spread her legs wider to denude the rosy flesh. Air tickled her exposed pussy.

"You have bloomed for me," he whispered, licked his lips. "And I have yet to touch you."

"That's how much I want you."

There was something reverent about how he knelt on one knee and gently kissed the inside of her ankle. But the purity of his attention ended there when he curled out his tongue and while watching her the entire time, wickedly ran the tip of it all the way up from her thigh to her knee. Audrey shivered.

The way he looked at her, he must not have seen the same thing she did—a not-so-nice girl with little muscle tone, out-of-control hair, rolls on her belly, a botched bikini line and cracked heels. What *did* he see in her? Whatever it was, it must have pleased him. No one could fake the expression on his face, the love in his eyes. She could spot phony a block away. Echion wasn't.

His hands first triggered shivers then cramps in her thighs when he gently encircled her ankle, the long fingers meeting effortlessly above her heel. He pushed to raise her knee. Did the same to her other leg. So exposed. Sunlight spilled into the room. Audrey closed her eyes briefly.

"Like a platter of the most exquisite offering," he whispered while leaning forward low enough for her to feel his breath on her vulva. His hair spilled in a black-purple cascade over one of his shoulders. "A banquet to regale even the most capricious palate. My own sweetest ambrosia that I will taste at my leisure, sample in delicate sips to absolute satiation, from nibbles to unrestrained gusto until I have consumed all your riches." He curled his tongue, flicked her clitoris, which his breathing alone had caused to harden then cupped his wicked, wicked organ to receive her pleasure. He *mmm*-ed

while pleasuring her but stopped. "Then I will do it all over again. And *begging* will not hasten my conquest."

Audrey had never liked talkers in bed. Until now.

He did exactly as he said he would. He ate her in delicate kisses that grew harder and deeper then feasted on her pussy as a starving man would with bites and licks and sucking noises. God, he even licked his fingers! Audrey had cramps from holding the position but nothing would keep her from welcoming Echion's fierce lovemaking.

Soon the first wave hit. Tingling at the base of her skull spread downward to her butt then up between her legs, which began to shudder, to the end of her feet while another followed soon afterward. And this one, this one hit her hard.

Audrey screamed so loud she shocked herself. Fisting the sheets, she unleashed the fury inside for Echion to take. Growls, commands, taunts. She used them all. As long as he didn't pull his mouth from her, as long as he didn't stop making love to her cunt with his mouth. Demanding hands forced her knees up and wide. He laved her pulsating flesh in great, wide passes then narrowed, pointed ones. She came. Again and again. He brought her there. She made sure of it. Culmination loomed over her. She couldn't take much more.

Echion must have felt the edge creeping closer. He stood in front of her, all his magnificence and hard beauty, and cupped her chin with one hand while he fisted his cock with the other. She kept her mouth wide, her tongue over her bottom teeth to make sure she didn't hurt him—he was so big, he barely fit—while she slowly sank halfway down his shaft. Impossibly smooth and hot. Audrey grabbed his testicles to better anchor him to her. He wasn't going anywhere. Not until she was done sucking him dry. Each precious drop gone.

His low snarls proved encouragement enough. Her hand tight around his cock, she worked him in fast and frenetic pumps that soon exhorted a strangled grunt every time the heel of her hand hit his groin. Still she fisted him. A faint pulsation at the base of his cock heralded his peak. She cupped the first few jets of cum in her hand, worked it back around his penis to make it all nice and glossy for her and licked the glans of the rest. So much of it.

"Mmm, that's all mine," she murmured, licked, groaned her pleasure up at him. His belly constricted with her firm handling. "All mine."

Echion brushed her hair back from her face. "Shhh."

She protested—only for a second or so—before she let him push her back supine on the bed. "Touch yourself for me."

He knelt between her knees while she caressed her belly, her breasts, her hips. She brought her hands over her mons, "hid" it from his ravenous gaze. "Here?"

He nodded. "There."

She'd never masturbated for a lover. Not that they'd never asked. They had. Only she'd never accepted to share something this personal with them. Well, once with Pete, but she'd had wine that night. She didn't need it today.

Fingers splayed so she could rub herself into a frenzy, she circled and circled, teased herself for her own pleasure but for his as well because she could tell he enjoyed it. A lot. His nostrils flared. He swallowed hard a few times when she pushed her hips upward. When she slipped a finger inside then another and started a piston motion, slow, torturous, Echion licked her hands and fingers, the insides of her thighs. Soon he straightened so he could sit against the edge of the bed.

"Come to me, Audrey."

The words could've been commands yet weren't. The tone made all the difference. On her elbows and knees, she rolled over to straddle him. The top of her head barely reached his chin. She smelled her juices on his mouth when she rose off his lap and kissed him. While he kept her from falling over backward, she used both hands to stroke his cock before she sank down around him. So hot. Smooth. Hers. A long sigh of contentment deflated her chest. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she'd arrived. Apogee. Like coming out of a hole on a bright summer day.

The first roll of her hips flared his eyes. But when he trapped her waist in his long hands, she was the one staring. He lay on his back, used his feet flat on the floor to push up against her, take her deep, straight in and out then with a pronounced curve that made her bite her bottom lip. Excruciatingly slow penetrations. He'd told her small sips first then...

"Ah!"

Echion bucked so briskly and unexpectedly she nearly popped off him. Ecstasy hit not long after. Then another thrust. Another wave. She thought she'd do the riding. How wrong she'd been. He rode her. Uncompromising, ever-so precise, he made her gasp his name, made her cry it out loud, made her moan and sigh it. Each instance was preceded and followed by profound penetrations. Her breasts bounced from the force of his bucks. She didn't care. She used to. Not a very flattering position.

His belly was like a trampoline. Taut, hard. She gripped his wrists in case he wanted to take his hands off. Together, they rolled and thrust, ground and pounded, shared themselves to their last parcel of soul. Stars fizzed behind her eyelids after a particularly potent push closed her eyes. She felt herself lean back. Too far. She almost fell but Echion caught her. Then she became fire.

It licked her skin, tingled along her distended pussy, engulfed her in its fiery embrace until all she could and wanted to feel was its loving burn, its teasing little fingers poking her everywhere. Like a vengeful storm she came.

Her voice scared her. Powerful. Old. So old. Memories she couldn't explain filled her mind's eyes. A kaleidoscope of images and places, people, colors and sensations. Foreign yet known. Arms encircled her, held her close. Audrey realized she'd started to cry. Not out of sadness. She wasn't sad. God, she was actually *happy*. Not in a fake, just-on-the-surface sort of way, but in the true sense. She felt powerful, relevant. She could do everything. Loved. That's what she was.

Panting hard, she lay against Echion's chest. Their sweat and her cum slicked them both. One last spasm tightened her vaginal muscles around him. She felt him smile against her cheek.

"Such fragile-looking mortal frames," he whispered. "How wrong Shades have been. All those years, you were always the stronger of the two. We needed you more than you ever needed us."

"I need you," she panted.

He rolled her underneath, pulled out so he could yank the sheets down under her butt and tuck them tight around them both. He was good at this. Snuggling with a giant of a man would prove fun. His feet stuck out under the blankets. Audrey peered at them, cringed. "You'll be cold in the winters."

Echion's smile turned lascivious. "Only if we lie still. I have been still too long. I intend to sleep as little as possible."

Audrey laughed. "Yeah, well, you might have all that Shade thing still going for you, but I don't. I'm just a lowly mortal who needs eight hours of sleep. Otherwise, I get cranky."

He cocked his head. "I will need to learn this new way of speech."

"There are a lot of things you'll need to learn. But first, we have to get you some papers."

Pride flashed in his violet eyes. "What we want, we will get."

"That should be fun at the customs counter." As if traveling with a long-haired, too-handsome-for-words giant who looked like a Greek statue come to life wouldn't already be buckets of fun. An idea occurred to her. "Maybe you could do what you did to the guy who brought us breakfast? I mean, you know, *convince* someone at the archives or something to make you a birth certificate. Then we apply for a visa, I dunno. We'll check the Net for procedures."

Echion's eyebrow arched high. Man, she loved when he did that. "I am still part Shade."

As if that would make everything simpler. Perhaps it would.

"Then you'll have to find a job. My measly salary won't feed both of us. You must eat like a bear."

Echion grinned wolfishly then sobered. "What is your profession?"

"It's hardly a profession. Just a job. I work at a copy place."

"And they make copies of what?"

"Papers."

They shared a laugh.

"All will go well, Audrey."

"What makes you so sure?" She caressed the pectoral under her cheek and smiled. "Aside from the 'I'm a Shade' bit." Her imitation wasn't that bad at all.



“Because we will make it so.”

For once, Audrey Pullman didn't have a thing to say. So she just grinned, closed her eyes and pushed the worries away.

## **Epilogue**

Trapped within a vestige of his once formidable self, he dreamed awake. Felt even though a great numbness had spread to his very core. Rejoiced while lamenting his loss. The old pain. The old anger. Yet he was thankful. For the way it had ended. Or begun. His suffering accentuated while his powers greatly diminished now that he lay on the mortals' side. All worth it. The wrong had been righted. His beloved had finally been avenged.

So he waited for the end. Inevitable. Long sough. For life without the one he had lost was no life at all. A ruin. A prolonged death, one breath at a time.

But how exquisitely fitting that he would end as an eternal thorn in his sworn enemy's side. The irony pleased him.

For the first time in his long existence—all cursed three and a half millennia since his great loss and countless more before—Pallas was finally happy.

## About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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