

Acheron

Sherrilyn Kenyon

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Extract

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Part I

May 9, 9548 BC

“Kill that baby!”

Archon’s angry decree rang in Apollymi’s ears as she flew through the marbled halls of Katoteros. There was a fierce wind blowing down the hallway, plastering her black gown against her pregnant body and whipping her white blond hair out in spiraling tendrils. Four of her demons ran behind her, protecting her from the other gods who were more than eager to carry out Archon’s orders. She and her Charonte demons had already blasted half of her pantheon back. And she was ready to kill the rest.

They would not take her child!

Betrayal burned deep inside her heart. Since the moment of their union, she’d been true to her husband. Even when she’d learned Archon had been faithless to her, she’d still loved him and welcomed his bastards into her home.

Now he wanted the life of her unborn child.

How could he do this? For centuries she’d been trying to conceive Archon’s son—it was all she’d ever wanted.

A babe of her own.

Now due to the prophecy of three small girls—Archon’s jealous bastards, her child was to be sacrificed and killed. Because of what? Words those little brats had whispered?

Never.

This was her baby. Hers! And she would kill every Atlantean god in existence to keep him.

“Basi!” She shouted for her niece.

Basi flashed into the hallway before her and staggered until she braced herself against the wall. As the goddess of excess, she was seldom sober—which fit Apollymi’s plan perfectly.

Basi hiccupped and giggled. “Did you need me, Auntie? By the way, why is everyone so upset? Did I miss something important?”

Apollymi grabbed her by the wrist and then teleported them out of Katotos where the Atlantean gods made their home down to the hell realm of Kalosis where her brother ruled.

She’d been born here in this dank, forbidden place. This was the only realm that truly scared Archon. Even with all his power, he knew the dark was where Apollymi reigned supreme. Here, with her powers fortified, she could destroy him.

As the goddess of death, destruction and war, Apollymi kept a room in her brother’s opulent ebony palace to remind her of her station.

That was where she took Basi now.

Apollymi locked the doors and windows to her room before she summoned her two most trustworthy demon protectors. “Xiamara, Xedrix, I need you.”

The demons who resided on her as tattooed marks pulled themselves off her body and manifested before her.

In her current incarnation, Xiamara’s everchanging skin tone was red, marbled with white. Long black hair framed a pixieish face where large red eyes glowed with concern. Xiamara’s son Xedrix shared her features, but his skin was marbled with red and orange, something it often did when he was nervous. “What do you need, akra?” Xiamara asked, addressing her with the Atlantean term for lady and master.

Apollymi had no idea why Xiamara insisted on calling her akra when they were more like sisters than master and servant. “Guard this room from everyone. I don’t care if Archon himself demands entry, you kill him. Do you understand?”

“Your will is ours, akra. No one will disturb you.”

“Do their horns have to match their wings?” Basi asked as she spun around the bedpost while eyeing the demons. “I mean really. You’d think to be so colorful, they’d have more variety. I think Xedrix would look better if his were orange.”

Apollymi ignored her. She didn't have time for Basi's stupidity. Not if she were to save her son's life.

She wanted this child and she was willing to do anything for him.

Anything.

Her heart hammering, she pulled her Atlantean dagger from her dresser drawer and held it in her hands. The gold hilt was cold against her skin. Black roses and bones were entwined and engraved down the steel blade that glowed in the dim light. It was a dagger meant for ending life.

Today it would be used to give it.

She winced at the thought of what was to come, but there was no other way to save him. Closing her eyes and gripping the cold dagger, she tried not to weep, but one tear slid from the corner of her eye.

Enough! She roared at herself as she angrily wiped it away. This was a time for action, not emotions. Her son needed her.

Her hand trembling from fury and fear, she went to the bed and lay down. She pulled her gown up, exposing her belly. She ran her hand over her distended stomach where her son was waiting, protected and yet in danger. Never again would she be this close to him. Never again would she feel him kick and turn in restlessness as she smiled in tender patience. She was about to separate them even though it wasn't time yet for Apostolos to be born.

But she had no choice.

"Be strong for me, my son," she whispered before she sliced open her stomach to expose him.

"Oh, how disgusting!" Basi whined. "I'm—"

"Don't you move!" Apollymi roared. "You leave this room and I'll rip out your heart."

Eyes wide, Basi froze.

As if knowing what had happened, Xiamara appeared by her side. The red-and-white-skinned demon was the most beautiful and loyal of all of Apollymi's army. In silent understanding, Xiamara lifted the baby out of her and helped Apollymi seal herself shut.

The demon removed the blood red scarf from around her

neck and wrapped Apostolos in it before she held him out to Apollymi and bowed low.

Apollymi pushed the physical pain aside as she took her son into her arms and held him for the very first time. Joy spread through her as she realized he was whole and alive. He was so tiny, so frail. Perfect and beautiful.

Most of all, he was hers and she loved him with every part of herself.

“Live for me, Apostolos,” she said, her tears finally flowing. They fell like ice down her cold cheeks, glittering in the darkness. “When the time is right, you’ll return here and claim your rightful place as king of the gods. I’ll make sure of it.” She placed her lips to his blue forehead.

He opened his eyes then to look at her. Mercurial and silver, just like hers, they swirled. And they held within them a wisdom far beyond even hers. It would be by those eyes that mankind would recognize his divinity and treat him accordingly. He brushed her cheek with one tiny fist as if he understood what was meant for him.

She sobbed at the contact. Gods, it wasn’t fair! He was her baby. She’d waited a lifetime for this and now . . .

“Damn you, Archon, damn you! I will never forgive you for this.”

She held her son close and never wanted to let him go.

But she must.

“Basi?” she snapped at her niece who was still swinging around the bedpost.

“Mmm?”

“Take him. Put him in the belly of a pregnant queen. Do you understand?”

She let go and righted herself. “Um, I can do that. What about the queen’s brat?”

“Merge Apostolos’s life force with that of the queen’s child. Let her know by oracle that if my child dies, so does hers.” That would protect him more than anything else.

But there was one more thing to be done. Apollymi jerked the white sfora from her neck and held it to Apostolos’s chest. If anyone suspected he was her son or any god detected his presence in the human realm, they would kill him instantly.

His powers would have to be bound and locked away until he was old enough and strong enough to fight back. She placed the orb to his chest and watched as his godhood slid from him to the sfora. His tiny body turned from blue to the pale skin of humanity.

Now he would be safe. Not even the gods would know what she'd done.

Clutching the sfora tight in her hand, she kissed his brow one more time before she held him out to her niece. "Take him. And don't betray me, Basi. If you do, Archon will be the least of your fears. So help me, I won't rest until I bathe in your entrails."

Basi's brown eyes widened. "Baby in belly. Human realm. Don't tell anyone and don't mess up. Got it." She vanished, instantly.

Apollymi sat there, looking at the spot where they'd been. Her heart screamed out, wanting her baby returned.

If only . . .

"Xiamara, follow her and make sure she does as she was ordered."

The demon bowed before she vanished.

Her heart broken, Apollymi remained in her bloodied bed. She wanted to weep and to scream, but why bother? It would do no good. Her tears and pleas wouldn't prevent Archon from killing her child. His brats had him convinced that Apostolos would destroy their pantheon and replace Archon as the king of the gods.

So be it.

Her body aching, she pushed herself from the bed. "Xedrix?"

Xiamara's son appeared before her. "Yes, akra?"

"Fetch me a stone from the sea, please."

He appeared confused by her order, but he quickly complied.

When he returned, she wrapped the rock in swaddling. Weak from her son's birth and her own anger and fear, she leaned against Xedrix and held his arm. "Take me to Archon."

"Are you sure, akra?"

She nodded.

The demon helped her back to Katoteros. They appeared in the center of the hall where Archon stood with his daughters Chara and Agapa—ironically the goddesses of joy and love. The two of them had been born parthenogenically the first time Archon had looked at Apollymi. Together the goddesses had sprang out of his chest. His love for Apollymi had been legendary. Until he'd destroyed it by asking for the one thing she'd never give him.

The life of her son.

Archon's features were perfectly formed. Tall and muscular, he stood with his blond hair shining in the dim light. Truly, he was the most beautiful of all gods. Too bad that beauty was only superficial.

His blue eyes narrowed at the bundle in her arms.

"It's about time you came to your senses. Give me that child."

She moved away from Xedrix and placed the stone baby in her husband's arms.

Archon glowered at her. "What is this?"

"That is what you deserve, you bastard, and it is all you'll ever get from me."

By the light in his eyes, she knew he wanted to strike her. He didn't dare. They both knew who the stronger god was and it wasn't him. He ruled only because she stood at his side. To rise against her would be the last mistake he'd ever make.

By Chthonian law, one god was forbidden from ever killing another. To do so would bring their wrath down on the foolish god who'd angered them. The punishment for such actions was swift, brutal and irreversible.

Right now, Apollymi was embracing her rational thought over her turbulent emotions by a narrow margin. For Archon to strike her would push her over the edge and he knew it. It would make her forget to be afraid of the Chthonians and then she'd unleash the whole of her fury against him. She would no longer care who was punished and who died . . . not even herself.

Patience to the spider . . . She reminded herself of her mother's most favored saying.

She would bide her time until Apostolos grew into his own. Then he would rule in Archon's place and show the king of the gods what it meant to be all powerful.

For her son's sake, she wouldn't upset the capricious Chthonians who might very well side with Archon and kill her child. They alone could permanently strip her powers and destroy Apostolos. After all, Archon and his lover Themis's three bastard daughters had been given the power of fate over everyone and everything. And out of their stupidity and fear, the Greek Fates had accidentally cursed her son.

That alone was enough to make her want to kill her husband who stared at her with a confused frown.

"You would damn us all for one child?" Archon asked.

"You would damn my baby for three half-Greek bastards?"

His nostrils flared. "For once be reasonable. The girls didn't realize they were condemning him when they spoke. They're still learning their powers. They were afraid that he'd supplant them in our affections. It's why they were holding hands when they spoke their fears. And because of that, their word is law and it can't be undone. If he lives, we die."

"Then we die, because he *will* live. I've made sure of it."

Archon bellowed before he threw the swaddled stone through the wall. He reached for Agapa and Chara and began chanting.

Apollymi's eyes flared red at what they were doing. It was an imprisonment spell.

For her.

And because they united their powers, they would be able to bring her to heel.

Even so, she laughed. But most of all, she took note of every god who joined in to help her husband bind her. "You will all regret what you've done here this day. When Apostolos returns, you will all pay dearly."

Xedrix put himself between her and the others. Apollymi placed one hand on his shoulder to keep him from attacking. "They're not going to hurt us, Xedrix. They can't."

“No,” Archon said bitterly, “but you will remain locked in Kalosis until either you reveal Apostolos’s location or he dies. Only then will you be returned to Katoteros.”

Apollymi laughed. “My son, at his maturity, will have the power to come to me. When he releases me, the world as you know it will die. And I will take you all down. *All* of you.”

Archon shook his head. “We will find him. We will kill him.”

“You will fail and I’ll dance on your grave.”

The Diary of Ryssa,
Princess of Didymos

June 23, 9548 BC

My mother, Queen Aara, was lying on her gilded bed, her body covered in sweat, her face ashen as an attendant brushed her damp, blond hair from her pale blue eyes. Even through the pain, I'd never known my mother to appear more joy-filled than she did that day and I wondered if she'd been this happy at my own birth.

The room was crowded with court officials and my father, the king, stood to the side of the bed with his Head of State. The long, glass windows were open, letting the fresh sea air offer relief to the heat of the summer day.

"It is another beautiful boy," the midwife happily proclaimed, wrapping the newborn infant in a blanket.

"By sweet Artemis's hand, Aara, you've done me proud!" my father said as a loud jubilant shout ran through the room's occupants. "Twin boys to rule over our twin isles!"

At only seven years of age, I jumped up and down in glee. At long last, and after my mother's numerous miscarriages and stillbirths, I had not one brother, but two.

Laughing, my mother cuddled the second-born infant to her pale breast while an additional midwife cleaned the firstborn.

I snuck through the crowd to watch the firstborn baby with the midwife. Tiny and beautiful, he squirmed and struggled to breathe through his newborn lungs. He had finally taken a deep, clear breath when I heard the cry of alarm from the woman who held him.

"Zeus have mercy, the eldest is malformed, majesties!"

My mother looked up, her brow creased by worry. "How so?"

The midwife carried him over to her.

I was terrified that something was wrong. The babe looked fine to me.

I waited while the baby reached for the brother who had shared the womb with him for these months past. It was as if he sought comfort from his twin.

Instead, my mother pulled his brother away, out of his sight and reach. "It cannot be," my mother sobbed. "He is blind."

"Not blind, majesty," the eldest wisewoman said as she stepped forward, through the crowd. Her white robes were heavily embroidered with gold threads and she wore an ornate gold crown over her faded gray hair. "He was sent to you by the gods."

My father, the king, narrowed his eyes angrily at my mother. "You were unfaithful?" he accused her.

"Nay, never."

"Then how is it he came from your loins? All of us here witnessed it."

The room as a whole looked to the wisewoman who stared blankly at the tiny, helpless baby who cried out for someone to hold him and offer him solace. Warmth.

But no one did.

"He will be a destroyer, this child," the wisewoman said, her ancient voice loud and ringing so that all could hear her proclamation. "His touch will bring death to many. Not even the gods themselves will be safe from his wrath."

I gasped, not really understanding the significance of her words.

How could a mere baby hurt anyone? He was tiny. Helpless.

"Then kill him now." My father ordered a guard to draw his sword and slay the infant.

"Nay!" the wisewoman said, halting the guard before he could carry out the king's will. "Kill this infant and your other son dies as well. Their life forces are combined. 'Tis the will of the gods that you should raise him to manhood."

The elder twin sobbed.

I sobbed, too, not understanding their hatred of a simple baby.

“I will not raise a monster,” my father snarled.

“You have no choice.” The wisewoman took the baby from the midwife and offered it to my mother.

Frowning, I saw a note of satisfaction in the midwife’s eyes before the beautiful blond woman made her way through the crowd to vanish from the room.

“He was born of your body, Majesty,” the wisewoman said, drawing my attention back toward her and my mother. “He is your son.”

The baby squalled even louder, reaching again for my mother. *His* mother. She cringed away from him, clutching her second-born even tighter than before. “I will not suckle it. I will not touch it. Get it away from my sight.”

The wisewoman took the child to my father. “And what of you, Majesty? Will you not acknowledge him?”

“Never. That child is no son of mine.”

The wisewoman took a deep breath and presented the infant to the room. Her grip was loose with no love or compassion evident in her touch.

“Then he will be called Acheron for the River of Woe. Like the river of the Underworld, his journey shall be dark, long and enduring. He will be able to give life and to take it. He will walk through his life alone and abandoned—ever seeking kindness and ever finding cruelty.”

The wisewoman looked down at the infant in her hands and uttered the simple truth that would haunt the boy for the rest of his existence. “May the gods have mercy on you, little one. No one else ever will.”

August 30, 9541 BC

“Why do they hate me so, Ryssa?”

I paused at my loom to look up at Acheron’s timid approach. At age seven, he was an incredibly handsome boy. His golden hair gleamed in the room as if it had been touched by the gods who seemed to have abandoned him. “No one hates you, akribos.”

But in my heart I knew the truth.

And so did he.

He came closer to me and I saw the red, angry handprint on his face. There were no tears in his swirling silver eyes. He’d grown so used to being hit that it no longer seemed to bother him.

At least nowhere other than in his heart.

“What happened?” I asked.

He looked away.

I left my loom and crossed the short distance to his side. Kneeling in front of him, I gently brushed the blond hair away from his swollen cheek. “Tell me.”

“She hugged Styxx.”

I knew without asking who *she* was. He’d been with our mother. I’d never understood how she could be so loving to me and Styxx and yet so cruel to Acheron. “And?”

“I wanted a hug, too.”

Then I saw it. The telltale signs of a boy who wanted nothing more than his mother’s love. The shallow trembling of his lips, the slight watering of his eyes.

“Why is it that I look exactly like Styxx and yet I’m unnatural while he is not? I don’t understand why I’m a monster. I don’t feel like one to me.”

I couldn’t explain it to him, for I, unlike the others, had

never seen the difference myself. How I wished Acheron knew the mother I did.

But they all called him a monster.

I saw only a little boy. A small child who wanted nothing more than to be accepted by a family that wanted to disown him. Why couldn't my parents look at him and see what a kind, gentle soul he was? Quiet and respectful, he never sought to harm anyone or anything. We played together and we laughed. Most of all, I held him while he cried.

I took his little hand into mine. A soft hand. A boy's hand. There was no malice in it. No murder.

Acheron had always been a tender child. While Styxx sought to whine and complain over every minor thing, to take my toys and those of any other child near him, Acheron had sought only to make peace. To comfort those around him.

He seemed older than a child of seven. There were times when he seemed even older than I.

His eyes were strange. Their silver, swirling color betrayed the birthright that linked him to the gods. But surely that should make him special not horrendous.

I offered him a smile that I hoped would ease some of his pain. "One day, Acheron, the world will know just what a special boy you are. The day will come when no one will fear you. You shall see."

I moved to hug him, but he pulled back. He was used to people hurting him and even though he knew I wouldn't, he was still reluctant to accept my comfort.

As I stood, the door to my sitting room opened. A large number of guards came inside.

Scared of the sight, I stepped back not knowing what they wanted. Acheron clenched his small fists in the skirt of my blue gown as he huddled behind my right leg.

My father and uncle walked through the men until they stood before me. The two of them were virtually identical in looks. They had the same blue eyes, the same wavy blond hair and fair skin. Though my uncle was three years younger than my father, one would never guess to look at them. They could easily pass as twins.

“I told you he would be with her,” my father said to Uncle Estes. “He’s corrupting her again.”

“Don’t worry,” Estes said. “I shall take care of the matter. You’ll never again have to worry about him.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, terrified of their dire tone. Did they intend to kill Acheron?

“Never you mind,” my father snapped at me. I’d never heard such a harsh tone from him before. It made my blood run cold.

He grabbed Acheron and shoved him toward my uncle.

Acheron looked panicked. He reached for me, but my uncle took him roughly by his arm and jerked him away.

“Ryssa!” Acheron called.

“No!” I shouted, trying to help him.

My father pulled me back and held me. “He is going to a better place.”

“Where?”

“Atlantis.”

I watched in horror as Acheron was taken away, screaming for me to save him.

Atlantis was a long way from here. Too far, and up until a very short time ago, we’d been at war with them. I’d heard nothing but terrible things about that place and everyone who lived there.

I looked up at my father, sobbing. “He’ll be afraid.”

“His kind are never afraid.”

Acheron’s screams and pleas denied those words.

My father might be a powerful king, but he was wrong. I knew the fear inside Acheron’s heart.

And I knew the fear of my own.

Would I ever see my brother again?

November 3, 9532 BC

It has been nine years since I last saw my brother, Acheron. Nine years and not a day had gone by without my wondering what he was doing. How he was being treated.

Whenever Estes visited, I always took him aside and asked about Acheron.

“He’s fine and healthy, Ryssa. I cherish him as an addition to my household. He has everything he requires. I shall be glad to tell him that you asked after his welfare.”

Still, something inside me was never quite content with those words. I’d petitioned father repeatedly to send for Acheron. To at least bring him home for a holiday. As a prince, he should never have been sent away. Yet there he stayed in a country that was constantly on the brink of war with ours. Even though Estes was an ambassador, it didn’t change the fact that if we went to war, Acheron, as a Greek Prince, would be killed.

And Father refused every request I made.

I’d been writing to Acheron for years and normally he wrote back religiously. His letters were always brief with only a handful of details, but even so I cherished every one.

So when a letter had come to me a few weeks ago, I’d thought nothing unusual about it.

Not until I read it.

Greetings most esteemed and exalted Princess Ryssa.

Forgive me for my forwardness. Forgive me my impertinence. I found one of your letters written to Acheron and have, at great peril to myself, decided to write to you. I cannot tell you what harms befall him, but if you truly love your brother as you say you do, then I would ask you to come and see him.

I'd told no one about the letter. It hadn't even been signed. For all I knew it was a hoax.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't, that Acheron needed me.

For days I debated about going until I could stand it no more.

Taking my personal guard Boraxis with me for protection, I snuck out of the palace and told my maids to tell my Father I was visiting my aunt in Athens. Boraxis thought I was a great fool for traveling all the way to Atlantis for a letter that the author hadn't even signed, but I didn't care.

If Acheron needed me, then I would be there.

However that courage faltered days later as I found myself outside my uncle's home in the capital city of Atlantis. The large gleaming red building was even more intimidating than our palace at Didymos. It was as if it had been designed for no other purpose than to inspire fear and awe. Of course, as our ambassador, it would benefit Estes to impress our enemies so.

Far more advanced than my Greek homeland, the island kingdom of Atlantis glistened and glowed. There was more activity from the people around me than I'd ever seen before. It was truly a bustling metropolis.

Swallowing the fear I felt, I looked at Boraxis. Taller than most men, with coarse black hair he wore braided down his back, he was large and burly. Lethal. And he was loyal to me to a fault, even though he was a servant. He'd been protecting me since I was a child and I knew I could rely on him.

He would never allow me to be harmed.

Reminding myself of that, I walked up the marble stairs, toward the golden entrance. A servant opened the door even before I reached it.

"My lady," he said diplomatically, "may I help you?"

"I've come to see Acheron."

He inclined his head and told me to follow him inside. I found it odd that the servant didn't ask me for my name or business with my brother. At home, no one was allowed near any of the royal family without a thorough screening.