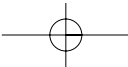
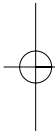
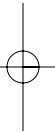


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Dark-Hunter novel yet

ACHERON

Coming Summer 2008
Piatkus Books



June 23, 9527 BC

Acheron sat on the railing of his balcony completely drunk as he watched the elaborately dressed guests arriving for the birthday party in the palace below. His back was pressed against the building while his legs were stretched out before him in a precarious balance. He wasn't sure how much he'd imbibed at this point.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to kill him. But if he were lucky, he might yet tumble from his

perch to the rocks a hundred feet below and die horribly there.

That would definitely fuck up his twin brother's birthday celebration. For the first time in weeks, he laughed at the thought of Styxx dropping dead in front of the gathered nobles and dignitaries.

It would serve them right.

"It's my birthday, too," he shouted, knowing no one could hear him. Even if they could, they wouldn't care.

Not even Artemis could be bothered to celebrate with him. Why? Because she was afraid someone would see them together . . .

Gods forbid.

Acheron turned his head and winced as pain tore through him. He hated the fact that she alone could give him so much anguish. So careful he'd been to shield himself from the callousness of those around him. But Artemis, she cut him on a level no one else could touch.

And like everyone else, she didn't care how much she hurt him.

Then again, he should be grateful. At least this year he wasn't celebrating the anniversary of his birth in prison . . .

Or a stew.

Ever alone. Even when he was in a crowd, surrounded by people, he was alone.

Truthfully, he was tired of it. No one wanted him. The only reason his so-called family cared

whether he lived or died was because if he died, their beloved Styxx died too.

“I’ve had enough.”

Even though he was only one and twenty, he was as tired as an old man. He’d lived beyond his years and wanted no more pain. No more loneliness.

It was time to end it.

The voices he heard in his head were louder now. They were calling him home . . .

Acheron stood up on the railing. The winds from below rushed up, over him, fanning his hair out as he stared down at the black sea. He dropped his goblet and watched as it tumbled down below, vanishing from his sight.

One step.

No pain.

Everything would end.

“It’s time,” he breathed. There was no one here to stop him this time. No Ryssa to pull him back. No father to tie him down and prevent it. No Estes to call for a physician.

Freedom.

Closing his eyes, he let go and stepped off.

Fear and relief whipped through him. In a moment, he’d have his long sought after peace.

Suddenly, something hard struck his stomach. Acheron gasped at the pain. He opened his eyes out of reflex.

Instead of falling, he was now rising, away from the sea. The sound of the waves crashing against

rocks was replaced by the heavy fluttering of giant wings. He turned to see a demon holding him.

“Let me go!” he shouted, trying to free himself.

She didn’t. Not until she’d returned him to the balcony where he’d been.

Acheron staggered back as she perched on the railing and watched him closely. She had long straight black hair that fell over skin that was marbled with white and red. Her eyes glowed in the darkness, white irises, surrounded by vivid red. Like her hair, her wings and horns were black.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice filled with venom.

“Akri should be more careful,” she whispered kindly. “Had Xiamara been a moment later, you would have died.”

“I wanted to die.”

She cocked her head in a gesture that reminded him of a bird. “But why, akri?” She looked over her shoulder to where the people were still arriving. “So many come to celebrate your human birth.”

“They don’t come for me.”

Xiamara frowned at him. “But you are the prince. Heir.”

He laughed bitterly. “I’m heir to shit and prince of nothing.”

“Nay. You are Apostolos, son of Apollymi. Revered by all.”

“I am Acheron, son of no one. Revered only within the confines of a bedroom.”

She stepped slowly down before him. Her wings tucked themselves around her body. “You don’t remember your birth. I understand. I was sent here by your mother with her gift for you.”

He was trying to follow her words, but his mind was too numbed by drink. The demon was insane. She must have him confused with someone else. “My mother is dead.”

“The human queen yes. But your real mother, the goddess Apollymi, is alive and wishes you all of her love. I am her most faithful servant, Xia-mara, and I am here to protect you as I’ve protected her.”

Acheron shook his head. He was drunk. Hallucinating. Maybe he’d already died.

“Get away from me.”

The demon didn’t. Before he could escape, she placed a small orb on his heart.

Acheron screamed out as pain tore through him. Never in his life had he felt anything like this and given the tortures they’d put him through, that said much. It was like there was poisonous fire in his veins, ripping through him.

From the center of his chest where the orb rested, his skin changed from tawny to blue . . .

And as the pain and color unfurled through him, images and voices screamed out, piercing his

eardrums. Scents assaulted his nostrils. Even his clothes burned against his skin. He fell to the ground and curled up into a ball as every sense he had was assailed.

“You are the god Apostolos. Harbinger and son of Apollymi the Destroyer. Your will is the will of the universe. You are the final fate of all . . .”

Acheron kept shaking his head in denial. No. It couldn't be. “I am nothing. I am nothing.”

The demon lifted his head. “Why are you not happy? You are a god now.”

Fury rode him hard as he grabbed her. He didn't understand his powers or anything else that was happening to him, but all the years of his life, all the degradations and horrors tore through him. Those he let travel from his mind into hers.

The demon cried out as she slung her head back. “Ni! This was not supposed to happen to you, akri. Not this . . .”

He grabbed her and forced her gaze to meet his. “It was bad enough when they thought me the human son of a god. Can you imagine what they'll do to me now? Take these powers away from me.”

“I cannot. They are yours by birthright.”

Acheron fell back, banging his head against the stone floor. “No!” he shouted. “No! I don't want this. I only want to be left alone.”

Xiamara tried to embrace him.

Acheron pushed her away. “I want nothing from you. You've done enough damage to me.”

“Akri—”

“Out of my sight!”

Her eyes glowed with reluctance. “Your will is my own.” The orb she’d held against him appeared as a necklace about his neck. “If you need me, akri, call and I will come.”

Acheron pressed his hand against his skull that ached and throbbed with new voices and sensations. He felt as if he were going mad, and perhaps he was.