

Insidious

By Shawn Carter

I started my work on the lower decks. It was the most logical and safest place to begin. To start in the upper decks would have drawn me unneeded attention and my mission would have been discovered. Down here, however? No one would notice the subtle changes of the populace. Those above did not see anyone down here living breathing people but as an unruly and unwashed inconvenience. Though they would never admit it, some of them would have left these refugees to die in an already dying world. Though it would be wrong to use the word die. Persephone would never waste such potential recruits like that. Some, of course, would have resisted. Those foolish enough to do so would become carriers. Doomed to shuffle away the rest of their miserable lives. The others who were wise enough to see and accept their new lot in life would be given special treatment.

To call it special would have been a generous term. The populace wasn't offered much of a choice. The ones deemed healthy enough were herded off to the Siren Terraforming Processing. The rest either became Slicers or slave labor to create said Siren Terraforming Processing plant. It was never a pretty process. Seeing families torn apart and watching their loved ones shuffle down one hallway as they watched the other shuffle down another. Not sure which fate was chosen for them or their family. I'll admit watching a young child being ripped out of their crying mother's arm did sting a little. Children often were put in with the siren line. Why the siren genome mingled well with children was beyond me. Salen had explained the science behind it and such. It just never clicked and I am fine with it. As long as we have troops at our disposal I don't need the details.

I make my way through the bowels of the ship. The crowds of people are never-ending. It's a depressing sight to behold if I am being honest. Since this was a retrofitted warship, there wasn't enough space for people. So the vast majority were forced to linger and wallow in the hallway. Seeing families huddled together for both safety and warmth was heartbreaking to witness. It was sickening to think that the affluent were able to have their private rooms above this squalor. As I walked past I witnessed a man curled up in a ball. His tattered jacket covering most of him, but I could still see him shivering. Each step I took was like a time loop. Just needless suffering and pain. I could feel my heartache with each step I took. These people needed to be saved and cared for.

Since wandering down here I had only heard of one person with authority even bothering to check in on things. Though from the whispers I heard it was an accident and they were after the commander of this wonderful vessel. What piqued my interest was another whisper that followed. A man named Blake had come across them and had his arm broken. It was twisted in such a way that would heal in no time, but have lingering pain. Only one species would do such a thing to prove a point. Though this man was lucky to even have an arm to heal. The ones I knew would have torn it off and let him bleed to death without a second thought. The one that

did it still retained some of their fading humanity. The whispers couldn't figure out who this shadow was. The most unique description I got was that she was a petite young-looking woman with long well kept blond hair.

The rest wasn't a lot to go by. To the average person, all shadows looked the same. They were aloof and apathetic gods and goddesses who had no concern for the average person. The woman didn't share any of those characteristics though. From what I had been told, she had shared concern for a small child on the verge of tears. Most of her kind would have ignored the child and moved on. This woman didn't. She even spoke with the child's sister and treated her like an equal. I wish I was there to witness such an event take place.

Veronica. The whispers had mentioned her name. Such a normal and plain name for a goddess. Almost like she didn't want to be noticed and be a phantom amongst the populace. I had heard of one of her kind could shapeshift at will. This Veronica did not have that power, why else would she travel to the lower decks as herself? I'd have to wander up to the other decks to gain a better perspective and more information.

"My lady," a refugee says to me as she takes my hand and kisses it. I don't why I didn't expect it, this woman had been 'willed' to bask in my glory. It was just the first time to witness and experience it. I know I should feel proud and important, instead, I feel awkward and undeserving. As I stand there, more humans come. All of them disheveled and exhausted. Some bowed, while others just titled their head down.

"You acquire our assistance?" a man asked as he too made his way through the crowd and next to the woman. The man pressed his lips and clenched his fists as he looked up at me. I am still not used to this gift given to me by Persephone. Seeing all these wanting eyes caused me to step back. These people had once been desperate, afraid, and alone. Herded to the bottom of this ship as an afterthought. They looked to me for guidance and to fill the emptiness in their lives with something.

"Yes. Yes, I do," I answer as I place my free hand on top of the man's head. He closes his eyes and smiles. The rest take a knee and look straight at me. I can see their adoration of me in their eyes. "I acquire you to find someone. She is a shadow, perhaps an important one at that. Go to the upper decks and gather what information you can," I pause. Should I have them spread their love of me? No doubt I'll be found out faster, but at a certain point, the resistance would be minimal at most. "If you deem it necessary, spread your affection of me to anyone you deem worthy of it."

"Yes Virulent," they all answered in unison. Virulent, a catchy name. I still hadn't figured out a good name for myself since being gifted with these powers. My old name was forgettable and anyone that knew me before was dead anyway. The name had a sinister tone to it and fit my gift well. I watched as my adoring fans stood up and filtered out of the hallway. I realized I didn't know how far my reach was and what would happen when my limit was reached. The last thing I needed was to lose control and everything to spiral out of hand. I needed

to hold the element of surprise as long as I could. With a shadow on the ship, I needed all the advantages I could get.

I looked down at the woman where my hand was and thought of an idea. “My dear, do you wish to serve me?” I sounded silly just saying it. This God complex thing was new and uncomfortable. How Persephone lived like this was so perplexing. I’d have to ask her how she did when I saw her next.

“Yes. I do want to serve you!” The woman preached. I kept my smile, but inside I twitched. Having someone willing to serve me without question will take getting used to.

“I have a special role for you,” I continue as I close my fingers around her head.

“Anything for you, my love,” and like that she began to change.