

# OBRUERE

Claude Hejl

**L**ethe kept to the darkness.

It was easier to hunt there where the men and their boats and their hooks could not get her.

It was safe, but lonely and cold. She longed to see the light where it reflected through the water, as warm as her mother's embrace. But it was safer in the dark water, even if her scales turned gray and lost their luster as they rotted, and her tail was as limp as seaweed.

Anaitis would watch Lethe, her eyes bright even in the half-light of the deep. Anaitis' scales were radiant, the myriad shades of blues and greens and reds under the bioluminescent algae and jellyfish.

"Come to the surface," Anaitis would say, hair floating in the drift, braided with pearls, shells, and bones. "Come, hunt with us."

"I have everything I need here," Lethe replied, waving a hand at the piles of bones that littered the floor of her cave – small fish, a baby shark, the carapaces of dead crustaceans.

"Why would I go to the surface?"

"You eat the flesh of the weak and small and sickly. If you come with me, you could eat like Queen Amphitrite."

Anaitis' smile was cruel, her fangs red.

"Nonsense," Lethe laughed, shaking her head. "That's not allowed. Only Amphitrite can eat ..."

"Men." Anaitis turned, preparing to swim from the cave, back into the light. "When you're not scared, come with me."

Lethe swam circles in the mouth of her cave for weeks. The fish were long gone; her ribs were beginning to show – skin stretched thin across her skeleton, scales rotting away. She could barely breathe, and her gills fluttered away into the darkness with every inhale and exhale. She was weak, fingers and scales shaking in some offbeat rhythm.

"Come with me," Anaitis would beckon every day, her voice more enchanting than the song of the strongest siren, eyes like luminescent pearls. "Come. Eat. Live."



But every day, Lethe declined, even as death lurked behind her, its skeletal fingers tightening around her throat. She felt herself breaking down – she wanted to join Anaitis, but danger lurked up near the surface, away from the safety of her cave. She couldn't lose Anaitis, couldn't watch herself lose Anaitis. If Lethe stayed in the deep instead of watching Anaitis hunt, she would be spared the heartbreak.

She felt death's claws break skin the day Anaitis came for the last time.

"I will not return," Anaitis said. "You're too weak, even now. Another day and you will not survive the hunt. You have a death wish, staying here."

"I know." Lethe's voice was a husk of its former self. She knew what the fish she devoured must feel as they were being digested.

"Then what will you do?"

"What I must."

And Lethe joined the hunt, but stayed towards the outer edge. The water there was warmer, but ice still filled her veins.

Bringing the ship down in the storm was easier than Lethe would have thought. Men fell into the sea to be scooped up by the merfolk. The blood warmed the water.

Anaitis came to Lethe, nails bloody, a heart in her hands. "Eat."

It was warm on her tongue, bitter and salty as Lethe swallowed bites of muscle and sinew. A fire ignited and raged throughout her body, spreading from her limp hair to her shrunken gut to the rotting tips of her fins.

"Have you returned, Lethe?" Anaitis asked. Her fangs were bloody; it coated her mouth and neck and hands like war paint.

Her mouth, too, was warm under Lethe's. The blood was intoxicating. Lethe choked on it, hungry for more even as she cut her lips and tongue in the process. She felt herself come back to life, the blood and Anaitis' love bringing her back from the brink.

"Thank you," she said, again and again until it lost all meaning, until her words had the cadence of a hymn.