Chapter 28

And I've Been Begging and Begging Myself  
Please Don't Close Your Eyes

Brid awoke with a start, her pulse in her throat as her muddled brain tried to figure out exactly what had woken her. Sayer’s hand on her shoulder—that was what had bolted her awake. Sayer wasn’t looking at her now. Instead his eyes were narrowed as he scanned the area outside their little hideaway, his body rigid. She listened, trying to figure out what he was focused on. The breeze eddied through the leaves, making a gentle shushing sound reminding Brid of water, but she didn’t hear anything else. Slowly she sat up, making as little sound as possible.

She lifted her nose to the wind, trying to remember what the ghoul had smelled like. She hadn’t been paying attention in the cave. No, that wasn’t exactly true. She’d been paying attention, just not to scent signatures. She’d been too focused on not being noticed by the ghoul and checking on June and Lily.

As she sniffed, she tried to remember what the cave had smelled like. Part of the problem was that nothing here smelled like anything she was used to. The dirt, the plants, the—so far—unseen creatures had entirely different scent signatures than the living world. Her brain had been a bit overwhelmed at first, getting used to them.

But she’d been here awhile now. Not sure how long, exactly, but long enough for her memory to start storing the new, strange smells. The copse of trees they were nestled in was very different from the cave, so all she had to do was keep her nose up and wait for any smell she recognized from her time in the ghoul’s lair. If she smelled it out here, then logic told her that scent would belong to the ghoul.

All of this flitted through her mind fast as lightning as she sat next to her brother, scanning the area outside the trees. Nothing but the breeze. Still, Sayer had heard *something* that concerned him enough to wake her, so Brid didn’t relax.

After several long moments, she heard it—a wet snuffling sound off to the left. It wasn’t right up close, but some distance away. Fear iced her veins as she considered the possibility that it was the ghoul…and the possibility that it was something else. Something…worse.

A noise scraped behind her. Brid’s head whipped around to see June’s foot sliding to the side. It was a normal movement, the kind of twitch people did in their sleep, and it brought Brid some relief. They’d been so *still.* The timing, however, couldn’t have been worse. As she watched, June’s eyes slowly opened. She blinked.

Brid motioned to Sayer to keep watch as she duck stepped over to June, moving slowly to stay quiet but also to not spook the necromancer. She was pretty sure June knew who Brid was, but they’d never met. She might not recognize her, and she didn’t want to startle June into making a noise. It was in their best interest to not attract whatever was snuffling about.

June blinked hard, trying to shake off the stupor she’d been in. Brid took advantage of the moment, making the last lunge to her side while putting a hand over June’s mouth. June’s eyes went wide as Brid put a finger to her own lips, letting the necromancer know not to make a sound. When Brid had her attention, she pointed toward where she heard the creature snuffling, before tapping her own ear, hoping that even in her muddled state, June understood. *Don’t make a sound.*

Slowly, carefully, Brid removed her hand from June. Relief settled in as June stayed silent.

It was short lived.

Next to her, Lily bolted awake with a scream, her small faced screwed up in relived terror, her mind no doubt still frozen in the moment she was abducted. Brid clamped her hand over the child’s mouth, hissing Lily’s name while absorbing the blows and kicks as the terrified little girl lashed out.

“*Lily*,” She hissed again as the young necromancer got in a particularly good shot to her kidneys. Lily’s eyes snapped open, wide with fear. Her breath sawed in and out between Brid’s fingers. She saw the exact moment terror shifted to realization in those wide eyes that reminded her so much of Sam’s.

“Brid?” She whispered, her breath tickling Brid’s fingers.

Brid nodded, raising her finger again to her lips before mouthing the word *quiet.* She waited until Lily nodded, her entire body trembling.

She wrapped an arm around Lily, comforting her as she glanced back at Sayer. He scanned the area, brow furrowed. The snuffling noises were louder now. Whatever it was had come closer to them while Brid had been dealing with their charges. She heard no other noises beyond the sniffing sound. Whatever the creature was, it moved on silent feet.

Sayer’s nose tipped up, the furrow on his forehead deepening. He turned confused eyes on Brid mouthing the word *canine?*

She mimicked him, taking in the scents herself, trying to see what he was talking about. He was right, she definitely smelled canine along with some other, odder scent. Not the ghoul—she was certain of that. But what was it?

She frowned at her brother, offering him a small shrug, right as a big ball of *something* bounded between the trees and directly into their makeshift camp.

Brid and Sayer scrambled back, putting themselves instinctively between the monster and the necromancers. She bared her teeth, a growl issuing from deep in her chest, her brother doing the same. She watched as the creature turned its head to the side, reminding her of a curious wolf.

Then she watched the next head tilt.

And the next.

Silence filled their little copse of trees as Brid and Sayer stared at the interloper.

“What the absolute fuck,” Sayer whispered.

“Okay, so you’re seeing three heads, too, right?” Brid asked. “Because for a second, I thought maybe I had banged my head.”

Behind them, Lily let out a delighted shriek. “Puppy!” She bounded forward, all fear gone, as she slipped past a stunned Brid and Sayer, right at the strange canine. Only Brid’s well-honed reflexes made it so she caught the back of Lily’s shirt. If the canine had been at all aggressive, it wouldn’t have been enough. Lily was too close, her hands reaching out to clasp the middle head of the dog, squishing its cheeks.

“Lily!” I tried gently tugging her back, but she was surprisingly strong.

June’s voice came from behind her, raspier than she’d ever heard it on the phone, like maybe June had been screaming so much she’d strained her vocal cords. “You’d think I would be past shock and awe at this point, but turns out I’m not. Is that Cerberus? It has to be Cerberus.” She coughed, talking apparently a struggle for her right now. “I thought he’d be bigger.”

Since the canine…thing…seemed okay with Lily squishing his face—in fact as Brid watched, the canine licked Lily’s cheek—Brid took a second to examine him. He was large, but lanky, making her think he was in the adolescent years of doggy life. Not quite a puppy, but not quite filled out into adulthood yet. His coat was a startling white, especially against the backdrop of the underworld around them. He almost appeared to glow. There was a faint hint of apples underneath his canine scent, making Brid think someone had recently given him a bath. If it weren’t for the fact that he definitely had three heads, she would think he was just a normal dog.

Something rattled against one of his necks, making Brid peer closer. Each head had their own collar, A nameplate dangled from each one. She reached forward slowly, her eye on the dog’s body language. It watched her, but in a cautious way that Brid understood. She flipped the tag over slowly, reading the block print etched into the surface. “It says ‘Spock’ on the nameplate. So not Cerberus, I guess?”

“Maybe,” Sayer said, fingers barely brushing Spock’s coat, “It’s not *the* Cerberus, but *a* cerberus?”

Lily giggled as the middle head licked her cheek, her terror temporarily forgotten.

Sayer caught June’s eye, mouthing a question. *Zombie dog?*

June squinted, then shook her head. “He’s not a spirit. My guess is that some of the myths are true—Cerberus guards the gates into the underworld, right? Maybe he’s a portal guardian, trying to figure out how some of the living wandered into the realm of the dead.”

“That’s not as comforting as you seem to think it is,” Sayer said.

“Well,” Brid said slowly, giving Spock an experimental head scratch. “Whatever he is, he’s friendly, so I say we just roll with it for now. I mean, we’re in the underworld running from a ghoul. How is a three headed portal guardian any weirder?”

June edged forward until she was right behind Sayer. She held out a hand, letting Spock’s far left head sniff her fingers before she scratched behind his ear. “Is that what got us and brought us here? A ghoul?”

“Yeah,” Brid said. “There’s a lot to catch up on. But first, how are you feeling?”

June grimaced. “Wobbly as a day-old kitten. And empty.” She tapped her sternum. “I understand why Sam was so freaked out. I mean, I understood *then*, but in an abstract kind of way. Now I *feel* it. Or I guess I should say, I don’t feel it.” Her smile was tight-lipped and sad. “I’ve overdone it before, but I’ve never felt what it was like to have my powers gone.”

“I don’t like it,” Lily said softly, her hands buried in Spock’s fur.

“I know, kiddo,” Brid told her rubbing a hand on her back. “But we’ll get it back, okay?” They just needed to get back to the living world, first. Brid traded a concerned look with Sayer. They still didn’t know how they were getting back home. For now, it would have to be enough that they were still alive.

There was a sound then, a shriek off in the distance. It split the still air, making shivers crawl up the back of Brid’s neck. Lily stiffened under her hand and all three of Spock’s heads turned to the noise.

“The ghoul,” Sayer murmured.

Both their heads whipped over to where June and Lily had been sleeping a few minutes before. There, lying in the dirt, was the bag Sam’s mom had made. Brid dove for it, snatching it off the ground. As quick as she could she grabbed June and Lily’s hands, sandwiching the pouch between them. Understanding dawned in June’s eyes, so she leaned down to whisper an explanation to Lily while Sayer and Brid watched, listened, and waited.

Off in the distance, the ghoul howled in triumph. The sound was moving toward them. *Fast*. It had found them, or at least their general direction.

“We need to move,” Brid said.

Sayer nodded. “And we need to do it *now.”*