Chapter 21

Homeward Bound

(I Wish I Was)

Brid had followed the creature that snatched Lily on silent paws, her brother Sayer quietly trailing in her wake. Not that the ghoul—she assumed it was *the* ghoul, the one that had gone after Sam, because she didn’t want to entertain the thought that there was a whole passel of them—paid them any mind. It was like it couldn’t see them. Or maybe it could see them and just didn’t care.

Either way, they weren’t really registering as a threat on the ghoul’s radar. It had ignored them as they leapt through the magical rift in their reality. Ignored them as they followed it along the unfamiliar twilight path, paws sinking into the strange dirt.

Lily hung so limply from the ghoul’s arms; Brid might have thought that they were too late—that the worst had happened. If Brid hadn’t been able to hear Lily breathing, she would have been really worried.

No, that wasn’t right. She was already worried. She would have been frantic. Brid liked Lily Hatfield. Even if she hadn’t, she felt the drive to protect the young in the pack. It didn’t matter that technically Lily wasn’t pack.

She wasn’t even a werewolf.

She was *Sam’s* though, and that made her pack. Brid had known that somewhere, not-very-deep-down, she hadn’t accepted that she’d broken up with Sam. What she hadn’t realized was how thoroughly she’d rejected her own actions. In her mind, Sam wasn’t a *friend* of the pack—he was *pack.*

He was hers, full stop.

The certainty of that couldn’t be ignored, not when she had followed his little sister into the underworld. Not when Sayer had gone along with no argument, not even a questioning glance.

Because he felt like Lily was pack, too. Otherwise he would have at least *tried* to make his Taoiseach consider the risks before plunging into a totally different reality. When she got home—and she refused to consider the fact that she might not be able to get home—she was going to have to think more on this.

She didn’t think she’d made the wrong move breaking up with Sam in the first place. Her pack had needed some stability and considering a necromancer as one half of their leading pair of alphas would have rocked the boat on tsunami levels.

Even though she hadn’t been wrong, she could admit that there might be other options. They could come up with something. They *needed* to come up with something. It wasn’t every day that a person went gallivanting off into the underworld—not alive, at least. And yes, she would have done it simply because it was the right thing to do, but she also knew that hadn’t been her primary drive. In this case the right thing to do had just happened to dovetail with her course of action.

Her pack had tried to convince her that Sam was a passing fancy. Young love and all that. Statistics were against a couple her age being together for the long run, she knew that. It wasn’t like she could just say, “oops, I was wrong” and get a divorce. Not if she picked him as her mate.

But…

And that was the problem right there. That very persistent, very loud *but*.

But it was Sam.

They might argue and screw up. He was different from her, from her life, in so many ways. But no one, absolutely no one, made her feel like Sam did. It wasn’t just that he made her feel loved. Brid was spoiled in that way—she never, ever doubted that her family, her friends, loved her. Being loved wasn’t a novel feeling, not for her.

With Sam, it was more than that. It was the way he looked at her. The way his eyes would shine as he softly smiled and she would feel like she was more. Just…more. Not only capable of doing what needed to be done, but also that, should she fail, he would still smile at her like that. Still love her.

And that’s what it came down to, really. Sam loved her with his whole self, and goddess knew she loved him right back. How was she supposed to pick someone else when that certainty had settled into her soul like the solid foundation that it was?

The simple fact was she couldn’t.

And none of this would matter if she couldn’t get Lily back from the ghoul and get them all back from the underworld.

They followed the ghoul on quiet paws into a cave that lead to a large cavern. The ghoul darted ahead, depositing Lily next to another person—an adult, though Brid couldn’t see much of her. She was turned on her side, curled up in the fetal position facing away from Brid. The soft purple glow of the weird cave they were in did strange things to colors and shadows, so her vision wasn’t great to begin with.

She hoped it was June, because that would explain where June had gone and why she wasn’t answering her phone, but she also hoped it *wasn’t* June. That maybe she’d randomly decided to go on vacation and not answer her phone or tell anyone. If she was here and breathing, though, at least she was still alive.

The ghoul squatted by them for long enough that Brid laid down at the far end of the cave and watched. The sand had muffled any sound of her movements, so she still wasn’t sure if the ghoul could hear or not, but it didn’t seem to be able to see her. Sayer nestled next to her in sphinx pose, focused entirely on the ghoul.

It had stopped singing at least. Or humming? Brid wasn’t sure how it had made that sound. It had been almost hypnotic and made Brid think of sirens. Did the ghoul use its voice to beguile Lily? She’d never heard of ghouls doing that, but then, she had never really heard anything about ghouls. She had no real information beyond the fact that this one was the kind that fed off necromancers.

There was a scraping sound as the ghoul leaned against the wall to stand. It took long, flowing steps across the sand, moving more like a liquid than a solid. Ghouls were built so differently than anything Brid had ever seen. She couldn’t predict anything it would do or how it would act, and that unsettled her.

The ghoul flowed over to the entrance into the tunnel part of the cave and collapsed down into the sand again. Resting, maybe? It didn’t seem to be paying much attention to anyone else in the cavern. Long minutes ticked by and Brid started feeling restless. She wanted to check on Lily and the person that was possibly June. The ghoul didn’t seem to be paying attention to them, but it was possible that this was a trap.

She must have started unconsciously to stand, because Sayer leaned against her. A warning—stay down. Just because the ghoul hadn’t noticed them didn’t mean that was the truth. Time moved slowly as Brid rested and waited, listening to the unfamiliar sounds that floated into the cave. Birds? Were those birds? What kind of things lived in the underworld? Did things live in the underworld, or were they…not alive, but something different?

Brid shivered. She’d never felt so far out of her depth.

Or so afraid.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed when the woman started to wake, but the quality of the light filtering in from the tunnel changed, making her think a few hours had gone by. Nothing really noticeable, but her breathing changed, and her foot twitched.

The ghoul straightened. Stood. Moved in that smoothly rolling wave that it had. Hovered over the woman. As Brid watched, it leaned in, covering the woman’s body with its mass. Brid couldn’t see the woman who was possibly June anymore except for her sneaker. The sneaker jerked, going rigid, digging a gouge in the sand. The soft sound of it echoed in the cavern. Followed by strange sucking noises.

Feeding. The ghoul was feeding.

Brid’s stomach rolled.

Sayer leaned into her again, a silent *I know*.

It was terrible and they couldn’t do a single thing except watch.

The feeding didn’t take long, the ghoul straightening after a few moments. By then the woman’s sneaker was limp again. So still that Brid strained her ears to listen for any indication that she was still alive. Relief flooded her when she picked up the shallow sound of the woman’s breathing.

Whatever the ghoul wanted, it wasn’t to kill them. At least, not yet. The ghoul hovered over Lily and the woman for a long moment, head cocked to the side. Something must have grabbed its attention then, because its head snapped to the side, its focus so intense Brid could almost feel it.

The ghoul let out a soft cry before it moved swiftly to the entrance of their cavern.

It disappeared without a backwards glance.

Brid and Sayer waited, ears pricked, listening to make sure the ghoul had really left. A few minutes ticked past with nothing but the soft violet glow of the cave and the quiet sounds of Lily and the woman breathing.

Brid stood, trotting over to them, Sayer right behind her. Between one step and the next, she was human, her brother following suit. Without speaking, Sayer went to check on Lily while Brid went to the woman. Once she was close enough, she grabbed her shoulder, turning her gently onto her back.

Brid had never met her in person, but she’d seen a picture. If this wasn’t June, it was her doppelgänger. “It’s June.” She kept her voice so low it was almost sub-vocal. Sayer would still be able to hear her, and she didn’t want anyone else listening in. The ghoul might have left, but they didn’t know what else was out there. No need to advertise they were here more than necessary.

Sayer grunted, the sound matching the same level of volume as Brid’s. “Figured as much.”

Brid grasped her wrist, laying two fingers over June’s pulse point. The beat was steady, but her breathing sounded a little shallow. Brid couldn’t quite tell if it was the light from the cave walls making June’s brown skin look a little ashen, or if it was a side effect of the ghoul feeding off her. Brid placed her hand on June’s forehead, finding the skin clammy to the touch.

“How’s Lily?” She whispered.

Sayer gently pulled back the young girl’s eyelid to check her pupils. “Out like a light. Pulse is good. Breathing okay. I don’t like how cold she seems, though.” He turned worried eyes to Brid. “This cave isn’t chilly, it’s humid. Her skin should be a lot warmer.”

“June’s too,” Brid said. “We’ve got to get them out of here.”

Sayer took in the cave, his expression grave. He sniffed the air and sneezed. “I don’t particularly want to keep them here, either, but where are we going to take them?”

Brid shrugged. “We’ll figure that out later. Right now, the biggest threat is the ghoul. Let’s get them away from it, first. Then we’ll regroup and try to find out way home.”

Sayer nodded. “Switch me. I’m taller than you and it will be less awkward for me to carry June.”

She took his place, scooping Lily into her arms. Lily’s doll fell to the ground, jostled out of her arms when Brid picked her up. Sayer scooped up the doll, tucking it into her arms. Then he picked up June, cradling her to his chest.

“Follow me,” Brid said, picking her way across the sandy floor of the cavern.

“Don’t I always?” Sayer asked.

“Yes, but considering everything…just stay close, okay? I don’t like the idea of losing sight of you here.” Even thinking about it for a second made Brid shudder.

“Yeah,” Sayer said, his voice quiet. “I get it. You stay close, too.”

“I will.”

Brid stepped out of the cavern and into the tunnel that would lead them out, her brother right behind her, practically treading on her heels. She didn’t mind. Losing someone in the underworld was definitely a bad idea.

They made it out of the cave entrance, taking in the area around them in a glance. Brid didn’t see any sign of the ghoul and didn’t want to stay out in the open long. They were too exposed, too easy to see.

Even though she’d seen the area around the cave opening earlier, she hadn’t had much time to study it. The geography kept surprising her. She hadn’t expected there to be plants in the underworld. Or streams. She hadn’t known what to expect, honestly. It was a strange twilight world unlike their own, and yet, similar in lots of ways, too.

“Which way?” Sayer asked.

Brid huffed. She had no idea where they should go. This world not only didn’t correspond with theirs as far as she could tell in terms of geography, but she also wasn’t sure where she could go to get them out of this place and back to their homes. “I’m pretty sure we can’t get back the way we came.”

“Whatever kind of portal it opened,” Sayer said, “closed behind us.”

“That would probably be the first place it looked anyway,” Brid said. “But that’s a guess. Just in case, though, let’s go the other way.”

“It’s as good a choice as any,” Sayer said, adjusting June in his arms.

Brid turned left, leading her small party away from the cave quickly. She wanted to put as much ground between her and the ghoul as she could.

Somewhat aimlessly wandering through the underworld wasn’t a great option, but all things considered, Brid figured it was better than being *found* in the underworld. Unless their friends somehow came and got them.

Brid prayed hard to her goddess that Sam or Nick would be able to work their magic and come find them. Because right then, she couldn’t see any other way they were going to make it back home, and that thought chilled her down to her marrow.