Chapter 35

I'm Going Off the Rails on a Crazy Train

There was no transition between sleep and waking up somewhere else. One minute I was drowsing in a chair, listening to Hades hum as he sewed, and to the clink of Brigid’s cup on the saucer, perfectly content under a warm blanket. My belly full, the taste of orange and vanilla lingering on my tongue.

The next instant I was jarred awake, my eyes snapping open. Cold from the sand seeped through my pant legs, my arms clamped around Brid’s body. Every ache, cut, and abrasion screamed into wakefulness. My breath sawed in and out of my lungs like an overworked bellows.

I would have preferred a gentle fade in. Of course, if we were going to delve into preferences, I would have loved it if none of us were fighting for life alongside of the river Styx at all. I could go for an entire week of hanging out in my pajamas on the couch with nothing trying to stab me, eat me, or steal my soul, to be honest. I’d take a long weekend, if a week was too much. But if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride, I guess as the saying goes.

And frankly, I’d already used up some heavy duty wishes. I looked down at Brid in my arms. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing slow and steady. It was silent around us, and when I glanced up, I could see that everyone was still frozen in time, that strange grace Hades had given us still firmly in place.

I moved so that one of my hands was free without moving Brid from my lap. With trembling fingers, I touched her face.

Please.

*Please* wake up.

She didn’t move beyond breathing. Not so much as a flicker of her eyelid. I cradled her to me, pressed my lips against her forehead, and closed my eyes. I sent a prayer to Hades, to Brigid. Nothing coherent, just…feelings. A mess of hope, fear, gratitude, wonder, and worry. I sent the whole tangle to them, not bothering to sort any of it.

From somewhere far off, I swore I heard the snip of those old metal scissors, followed by Hade’s voice. “Done!”

Brid shuddered in my arms.

I leaned back.

And Bridin Blackthorn, the love of my short, ridiculous life, stared back at me.

I grinned and it felt wobbly. “Hey, gorgeous.”

She blinked up at me, her brow furrowed. Her hand trembled as she reached up, brushing her fingers over my cheek. “Sam?”

A sob jerked my chest, for all that I was smiling. “Yeah, Brid. I’m here. I’m finally here.”

“What took you so long?” She mumbled, sounding put out.

“Seattle traffic,” I said, laughing now, but also crying. I was basically a hot mess and I’d never been happier to be one.

She snorted, her eyes closing for a second. “That will get you every time.”

I brushed back her hair, even though it was too short for the gesture to do any good. I just needed to touch her. Needed to see that she was here and alive and okay. She opened her eyes again and I smiled at her.

“We have a lot to talk about,” I said. “When we get back. But in about two seconds I feel like it’s going to get real batshit and we don’t have time to get into it.”

“Okay,” she said, eyes still a little glazed.

I gave her a quick kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said.

And then I dropped her in the sand, whipping to my feet just as Hades’ grace period ended. For once, I wasn’t too late.

I was right on time.

Everything surged back to life. Lily crying. June holding her, looking shell-shocked. Sayer screaming as Ezra held him back, the reality of Brid’s return not apparent to them yet. Ramon roaring, the sound echoing oddly in this world. I heard noise from Charon’s boat, Ashley and Ed yelling something, but I couldn’t make out the words. The ferryman screamed, “All aboard!” laughing as he banged out some kind of heavy rhythm on an electric guitar.

Crazy Train. He was playing Crazy Train.

The cerberus dog barked, trying to keep the ghoul at bay as it reached for me. It made a noise, then. A screeching howl, full of loneliness. Of pain. Of hope. For a split second, I had the idea that I was listening to the sounds my own heart made before Brid had opened her eyes.

But it was the ghoul—I knew it was the ghoul, and I thought about what it must be like, to really be alone in the world like it was. To have no one and nothing—to be so empty inside. To know only hunger and want.

Beside me, I saw a flash. Brid had opened up that portal to wherever it was that her swords came from. She handed one to me, the cool metal weighty in my palm. Instinctively, she knew the ghoul was mine to deal with, and she was gifting me the means to do it.

I could kill the ghoul. Right here. Right now. I could end this whole thing and we’d never have to deal with it again.

I’d made a promise to Hades that I would try, but really, what option did I have? The ghoul ate my kind of magic. I didn’t have any other tricks up my sleeve. No last minute inspiration or cool magic. All I had was a sword. Which, frankly, I had no idea how to use. The full extent of my swordplay knowledge came from video games or smacking wooden sticks together as a kid and saying, “clang.” Brid’s sword didn’t seem to grant instant knowledge or ability.

It was just a sword.

Douglas would have lopped off the ghoul’s head already and probably set it on a pike to warn any other ghouls away.

But I wasn’t Douglas.

I dropped the sword, vaguely hearing the soft *thud* as it hit the sand.

The ghoul surged forward, ignoring the three headed dog trying to keep it at bay. It moved to me, a thing of nightmare and shadow. Of hunger. The ghoul, eater of death magic, coming right of me. Unstoppable. Inevitable.

And I opened up my arms wide, throwing myself at it. We clashed, slamming into each other. I wrapped the ghoul in a big bear hug. I welcomed it like I would a long lost relative. Or maybe not, since the last time I’d met a long lost relative, I’d punched him in the face. A beloved relative after a long journey, then.

Which I’m pretty sure no one saw coming, especially the ghoul. I’d basically brough a hug to a knife fight.

It didn’t have skin the way I knew it—no fur, or scales, or armor plating. No, it was like I hit resistance for the briefest of seconds, then it snapped, like the peel of a grape as you bit into it. I was sinking into…something. Warm. Oily. Viscous? It felt terrible and clingy. Like it was everywhere—soaking into my pores, flowing into my ears, my nose, my screaming mouth.

I was drowning in it. My system flooded, my mind no longer entirely my own.

I was the ghoul.

The ghoul was me.

We were Creature. We were Sam.

The sheer and utter depth of its pain and loneliness, its unending hunger, broke my heart. To be that—to live that way—and never know a moment of peace. It was an existence after a fashion, sure, but it was no way to live.

I opened up my heart to it. Letting it pour out its grief, its misery.

I’m not sure how long we were suspended like that. Time in the underworld was already an iffy thing, and being swallowed up by a ghoul took away what few markers I had. All I knew was that I was completely enveloped, but not in a soothing or good way. It was like living inside a scream. Every nerve abraded.

Then, in the corner of my vision, something began to glow. So faint at first, that I thought I was imagining it. The light was along the edges, deep blues and purples, like a bruise. It grew brighter, a throbbing heartbeat of color in my vision.

The ghoul moved toward it. Hesitated. Stopped.

*Go on*, I told it. *It’s safe. I got you.* I reassured Creature, not knowing if I was lying, but pretty sure I wasn’t because it felt right.

The ghoul shuddered, resisting.

*I will help you*, I promised. *We will find where the others are and take you to them. This place isn’t for you anymore.*

*Alone?* Creature asked.

*No, you won’t be alone anymore*, I said, and I meant it. *You’ll be with me until we can find the other ghouls.*

I thought for sure it would take more than that. What had I done to make Creature trust me? Why would it take anything I said on faith? A thought surface, from Creature or my own intuition, I couldn’t tell—Creature trusted me because I’d been the first to approach it without fear or anger. The first to not run away. I’d held out a hand and Creature had accepted it.

With one more shuddering sigh, Creature slid fully into the light.

And was gone.

I stood in the sand, not far from the river Styx, drenched in sweat. Shaking like the smallest leaf in a windstorm. My hand outstretched, holding the Stygian coin that had been around my neck. The coin I’d been feeding with blood since I got it that held onto necromantic magic like a battery.

Except now it was full of Creature, trapped neatly in the small silver disc.

The only thing I could hear was my labored breathing, so I looked up. Everyone was quiet, even the ferryman. My friends stood around me, shocked and silent.

I looked back, swiping sweat off my face with my sleeve. I coughed, spitting goo onto the sand. Was it dark because of the sand, or was that the color of whatever had been in my mouth. You know that, best not think too much about it.

“Well,” I said, trying to smile, “that was a thing.”

And then I promptly collapsed into the sand and passed out.