Chapter 31

It’s Going to Take a Lot to Drag Me Away From You

There was a strange serenity to boating on the river Styx. If I hadn’t been worried about our demise and rescuing our friends, I would have enjoyed it. As it was, I watched Crow as he flew, worried that somehow if I took my eyes off him, or if I looked away, he could disappear. I mentally willed all of us to go faster. I could feel the time slipping though our collective hands. What if we couldn’t find Brid in time? What if we did and got back only to realize that our portal had closed, our pillars unable to hold it open long enough? Fear was a second pulse in my body, shoving ice into my veins.

Up ahead from his spot in the underworld firmament, Crow cawed, breaking through any chatter on the boat. We stilled as we listened to the loud, sharp cries—they sounded like alarm calls.

I scrambled to my feet, trying to see what Crow’s warning was about. Everyone stood alert, tension winding its way through the group, except for Charon who looked only mildly interested, which I think was his default expression. For several moments, we couldn’t see anything. Then the boat followed a bend in the river, revealing a large hill sloping down to the sandy bank. Tall grass waved in the breeze, the area edged with trees.

Joy lanced through me as I spotted Brid and Sayer running down the hillside, June and Lily on their backs. The joy was quickly followed by relief. *Alive.* They were all alive. We were still in deep shit, we still needed to escape, but the possibility of all of us getting out of the underworld existed. I could work with that. If we’d lost one of them…well. I didn’t want to think of that.

Sean whined at the same time as Ezra reached out and grabbed my arm.

I’d been so focused on Brid, on everyone being okay, that I’d missed that something was chasing them toward the river.

Very quietly next to me I heard Ezra say, “What the fuck is that?”

That pulse of fear returned to my body and my mouth went dry. I hadn’t known Ezra long, but I knew he was like us—he’d seen some shit. *Weird* shit. Since I’d found out who I was, I’d seen oceanids, shape shifters, sentient crows, and an actual goddess. I’d ridden a zombie elk. I think it was safe to say that people like me, like Ezra, gained a certain unflappable quality to us in order to function. With all of that in mind, as I stared at the thing chasing my friends, my baby sister, and the love of my life, my initial response was also, *what the fuck is that*?

The ghoul flowed down the hill, quick and sinuous. “I think that’s the ghoul,” I finally responded through numb lips.

“It looks like the Kool-Aid Man if he lost his pitcher,” Ezra said, his gaze never straying away from the ghoul. “And they used river water from the Styx to make it.”

I had been expecting, I don’t know, something like the creatures Hollywood served up as zombies. I wasn’t sure why. But Ezra wasn’t too far off in his description in a way. The ghoul wasn’t red, but there was something…liquidy about the way it moved. A piece of night sky, shaped into a vaguely human form that shifted when it moved. It hurt to look at, and at the same time, I couldn’t look away.

Sean yipped, nipping my pant leg and yanking.

I frowned down at him, knowing he wouldn’t have done it without a reason. “What is it?”

He whined, jerking his nose at the shore and looking worried.

“I know, they’re in danger. We see it. Hopefully we can get to it in time—”

He whined louder, running to the edge of the boat and looking down at the water, then at Brid, then back at me.

The river. Horror seeped through me. Oh god, Brid didn’t know about the river.

And they were all running *right at it.*

I had to get on shore. I had to stop it. But so much water stood between me and land. The river laid out before me, my loved ones tauntingly close, but still too far away. “Charon—can you make this go any faster?”

He looked at me lazily. “Yeah.”

We stared at each other for a minute.

Right. Remember who or what I was dealing with. I tamped down on my fear and irritation, even though I wanted to peel him like a grape for slowing things down when we needed help *now.* “I beg of you, Charon, mighty boatmen of the dead, will you please make this boat go faster?”

He smirked at me then, straightening up as the instrument in his hands shifted yet again, this time leaving the realm of string instruments entirely. Charon hefted his bagpipes, settling them into a better position, before he began to play.

I’d heard bagpipes before—mostly on TV or in videos on the internet. Charon’s bagpipes were something else. A continuous sound chorused out of the instrument, with intricate grace notes embellishing the melody—the song a fast, whirling tune. Layered on top of that was a sort of wailing sound, like human voices, that made my hair stand on end. Somehow I knew that sound was exactly what I thought it was, the wailing of the dead, the chorus of countless souls pouring out their misery along with the dancing notes of the pipes. It was enough to make your guts go cold and your blood freeze.

It also made the boat go faster.

“That,” Ezra said, the wind rippling through his hair as the boat sped up, “Is creepy as fuck.”

“Bagpipes were an instrument of war,” I told him, watching the land creep closer as we sped along. Faster, we needed to go faster. “They were used to intimidate the enemy and signal tactical movements to the troops.”

Ezra glanced at me. “Did they sound like that?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve never heard anything sound like that.”

The inhuman refrain swirled around us as the boat moved forward. I watched helplessly as Brid ran, the ghoul getting closer with each second. The ghoul wouldn’t catch her, though. She’d hit the river first. She’d hit the river and not knowing what it was, plow right into the water and lose her soul.

I couldn’t stand by and watch that happen. “Ramon, I’m going to need you to throw me.”

Ramon looked at the water, before turning his bear head toward me, his expression dubious.

“It’s too far,” Ezra said. “And sacrificing yourself won’t help.” He tipped his head in thought. “But he could probably throw a fox that far.” He turned to Ramon. “What do you think?”

Ramon rolled his shoulders, an ursine shrug. We started to argue, frustration and fear making our voices sharp.

Sean gave one sharp yip and then shifted, returning to his human self. He ran to the edge of the boat, his hands cupped around his mouth, screaming for all he was worth. “Don’t touch the water! Brid! Sayer! Not the river!”

I joined him, screaming so hard I thought I might damage my throat. “No! Away! Away from the river!”

Sean and I yelled, waving our arms, before Ashley and Ed joined us, adding their voices. We were loud, but between their distance and the wailing of the pipes, I didn’t think they could hear us. We kept trying, our friends getting ever closer to the water’s edge, the ghoul gaining with its rolling strides.

Behind me I heard a roar, the bellow of a grizzly bear. I turned just in time to see the massive bear that was Ramon lean back and hurl the small, orange fox that was Ezra. My throat closed in fear as I watched him sail over the water, landing easily on the shore. He shifted, arms out, attempting to tackle our friends.

He was almost successful.

Sayer came up short, spinning his momentum away. He stumbled to the ground, taking June with him. Brid, always smaller and faster than her brothers, darted to the side, her momentum barely checked.

I leaned forward, screaming no, as Ramon reached out, grabbing the back of my pants so I didn’t topple head-first into the water.

Brid finally looked up, her face paled, her eyes huge in her face and saw me. I saw shock and joy change her expression as she tried to check her momentum.

And I watched with mounting horror as she skidded in the loose sand of the shoreline, stumbling forward. Her right food lashing out for balance and splashing right into the water of the river Styx. For a horrible moment, it felt like the world froze, everything stopping, but in reality, I’d just stopped paying attention to anything but Brid, Lily starting to cry as she clutched to her back

Then Brid screamed, her voice echoing the wailing sounds of the dead from Charon’s bagpipes perfectly as she joined the chorus.

I felt my heart shrivel up and turn to dust in response as I watched her soul began to detach from her body.