Chapter 25

We All Have a Hunger

Creature couldn’t find the cold star. It would flare, only to disappear. Like a wink in the nighttime sky.

Still taunting. Still cruel.

Every time Creature got close, it would disappear, vanishing from reality like an oasis in a desert fever dream.

Creature howled in frustration.

Angry and frustrated, Creature headed back to its nest. It instinctually knew the nest would bring comfort. Its own, quiet spot, to eat. To rest.

Not to sleep—never to sleep. Creature had slept enough. It was afraid to do it again.

What if it didn’t come back? What if it went into a dream, a nightmare, and stayed there. Stuck underground, waiting and half dead.

No.

 *Never.*

Yet creature could feel the energy draining from its limbs. It needed food or sleep, and soon. It wasn’t sure there would be enough in the nest. Paltry scraps of food compared to the cold star. Again, frustration welled up inside Creature, making it roar into the twilight world around it. Roar into the shadows.

Even though the shadows never roared back.

Yet.

 *Yet*.

Because someday, Creature would find more like themselves. More for the nest. One day, a shadow would yell back, revealing that Creature was not alone.

It just needed to hold on. Just a little longer.

Creature trudged back to the nest, its mind whirling through plans, ideas, thoughts about the cold star. Keeping only half an eye on the surroundings.

Thinking, not looking. Not watching. Not paying attention.

Until it was through the cave entrance and into the nest. Where it sat for several minutes, mind lightyears away, before it noticed how *empty* the cave was.

The food.

The food was *gone*.

Panic swelled within Creature, making it run, making it dig through dark sand, as if the food might have burrowed out of sight.

It tore apart the cave, desperation giving its limbs strength, while taking away any semblance of control.

But it did no good.

The food was gone. The nest was empty.

 The creature screamed in fury.

 It howled.

 And howled.

 And hoooowwwwlllleeed.

Until it was empty.

 Sobbing.

 Exhausted, it fell into a doze. A slumber. Collapsing like a felled tree into the sand.

 When it awoke, Creature was afraid, because Creature had slept, and sleeping scared Creature. Then it was filled with wonder, because while Creature had slept, it hadn’t disappeared. It was still here in its empty nest.

Creature laid in the sand and took in the simple joys of existing. Of being.

When it was calm, Creature climbed out of the sand. It looked for the food, examined the shadow lands for that spark, that power, that called to Creature.

The spark wasn’t as clear here. Something about the shadowlands made it hard to see. It stood out in that other place, that other world. A beacon.

Here it was…muted. The power too similar to the shadows in some ways. Creature left its nest, through the cave, and back out into the open air. It listened. It sniffed. It tasted the air around it like a snake might have done.

There.

Off to the left. Out in the shadows was…something. Creature wasn’t sure what, exactly, but maybe it was the food. Maybe.

There was only one way to be sure. It had to go see. It had to follow. So Creature took long strides, moving quickly in the shadows, to do just that.

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Brid wasn’t sure how long they’d traveled. The light was strange in the underworld. Time…she wasn’t sure time even moved here. Not like it did back in the land of the living.

After untold minutes or hours, they stopped, taking refuge in a copse of trees. They looked like birches, with their papery bark, the color a deep, forlorn gray. Sayer found a good spot to set June down and Brid set Lily next to her. Both were still out cold, though their heartbeats were steady. Brid didn’t think their color was very good. They needed proper care. Not just food and rest, but maybe a doctor. Three things that Brid didn’t think they’d find here.

Sayer peered back the way they came, pausing to scent the breeze. “Do you think it’s following us?”

“Yeah,” Brid said, taking the opportunity to rest, the strange moss-like ground covering softer than she would have thought. “I do. Not sure how far back it is but…” She grimaced. “The ghoul tracks them somehow. It knew where to pop up to grab Lily. I can’t imagine that it wouldn’t do that here.”

Sayer settled down next to her, stretching out his legs. “We need rest, all of us.”

“I know.” Brid flopped down, laying flat, knowing her brother would continue to keep a look out while she relaxed for a moment.

Sayer glanced at their charges. “We’re all going to need food and water, too. Soon.”

Not surprisingly, her brother had come to the same conclusion that she had. Lily and June would need to eat to replace whatever life-force or magic the ghoul sucked out of them. Both her and Sayer had changed forms a few times and then walked a long distance carrying another person. They were burning through calories with no way to replace them.

“I could try to hunt.” Sayer’s offer sounded dubious, even to him, she could tell.

“Do you think the Persephone myth has any truth to it?” Brid asked. “Or is the underworld like Underhill in faerie stories?”

“You mean would it even be safe to eat or drink anything while we’re here?” Sayer frowned out at the landscape as he thought it over. “I don’t know.”

“Me either,” Brid said. “Which makes me very reluctant to experiment. I don’t fancy the idea of spending months of my life down here because I decided to eat some berries or a rabbit. If they even have rabbits.”

Sayer turned worried eyes on her. “Then I don’t think we should risk it. And I’m not sure I’d want to see their rabbits.”

“Neither do I on both counts.” Brid rolled to her knees, moving closer to June and Lily. She started checking their pockets.

Sayer didn’t say anything, but she could almost feel his question. “Just checking to see if they have anything useful. Matches. A stick of gum. Anything.”

“Good thinking.”

Brid’s slight hope fizzled out quickly, her hands finding nothing. As a last-ditch effort, she checked Lily’s doll to see if she had anything stashed there. Her fingers closed over something strange and she pulled it out into the light.

“What is it?” Sayer asked.

Brid recognized it quickly, but gave it a sniff to make sure. “It’s one of the pouches Tia makes for Sam. She made some for the girls. It hides their magic.” Seeing the pouch that was so like Sam’s brought on a bittersweet wave of emotion. She missed him, which hurt, but the reminder was also comforting. After a moment’s thought, Brid tucked the pouch between Lily and June’s hands, using the necklace cord to bind the hands together.

“Do you think that will hide them both?” Sayer asked.

Brid settled back in the moss, pulling her knees up to her chest. “I’m not sure.”

“It’s going to be difficult to carry them like that—”

Sayer’s words were cut off by an eerie howl. To Brid it sounded like anguish buried in rage.

Brid and Sayer froze, heads up and alert. It howled again, sounding far off, but closer than either of them would have liked.

“Was that the ghoul?” Sayer whispered.

“I think so,” Brid whispered back. “And it sounded pretty unhappy. Which makes me think the pouch trick worked.”

They sat for several minutes, not talking further, only listening. As time flowed past, the small sounds of the underworld came back to their version of life. Things rustled. Something small and high pitched sang in the trees.

But they didn’t hear anymore from the ghoul.

After another long wait, they relaxed a little.

“I know it’s stating the obvious, but we really can’t go much longer without water,” Sayer said. “Or food.”

“We’ll put it off for now,” Brid said. “Until we have no choice. What we can do is sleep.”

Sayer frowned, but didn’t stop watching the direction the scream had come from. “Do you think that’s safe?”

“Safe as anything else here,” Brid said. “We need rest and now the ghoul can’t track them by their power.”

“We don’t know how well it can see,” Sayer reminded her. “Or whether or not it could sniff us out.”

“I know, but we can’t keep up as we have.” Brid waved a hand out their current hideout. “This is the best hiding place we’ve seen since we left the cave. It’s not great, but it’s not out in the open, either. We can take turns playing lookout and get a nap in.”

Sayer sighed. “You’re right, of course. I don’t like it, but you’re right.” He patted the moss. “You go ahead and catch a few winks. I’ll take first watch.”

Brid didn’t bother to argue. It would only waste time. “Maybe we’ll be lucky and by the time I wake up, they’ll both be awake and ready to march.”

Sayer gave her a faint smile. “I think you’d have better luck wishing for a picnic hamper to appear.”

“I see no reason that I can’t wish for both,” Brid said, settling into the moss. “There’s no rules here about wishing for more than one thing.” After all, at this point, wishes were pretty much all they had. Which meant Brid didn’t feel bad at all for tossing up a third one along with the rest. In her mind she phrased it as a general plea—for someone to arrive to take them home.

To see their friends and family again.

But in her heart, she knew she was wishing for Sam.

She didn’t feel guilty about it, either. If anyone she knew could get them all out of here, could get them home, it was Sam.