Chapter 29

Everybody Look at Me
'Cause I'm Sailing on a Boat

When I was a kid, I used to check out D’aulaires Book of Greek Myths on a regular basis. I read the chapters featuring the underworld a lot. I wasn’t sure if that was from a subconscious understanding of my connection to the dead, or if I just thought the pictures were cool. Now that I was standing on Charon’s boat, I don’t think it was either of those things. No, I think what kept bringing me back was the fact that those stories were always infused with a sort of heavy, bittersweet sadness that I could now identify as grief. Loss was something I knew intimately as a child, which made those stories resonate so deeply within me. The stories of the underworld were always at their core about grief, and in many ways, so was mine.

In those stories, Charon always had a gravitas to him. He was a specter, his benevolence purchased and so always consistent. You could count on death’s ferryman in a way that you couldn’t count on other personas in Greek myth. I couldn’t remember much else about Charon beyond the basics—he ferried the dead across the river Styx. He was supposed to have a temper and was often pictured as a guy who’d been living rough on the sea for a long time. I definitely remember a beard.

This Charon was clean cut and dressed sharply, if in an old-fashioned manner. The last time I saw suspenders and a straw boater was when Ramon went out for a play in high school. I didn’t remember any connection to music, either. You couldn’t always trust myths and stories to give you the facts on these kinds of things—I knew that. I wasn’t sure about a temper yet, but his moods appeared to shift quickly from one to the next.

In all my time reading that book of myths in my school library, I never imagined that I would see Charon pouting…but he was absolutely pouting right now. He strummed his instrument idly, the entire time glowering at Ramon, who was still a bear. Ramon, for his part, sat on his furry rump and looked cheerfully back. I hadn’t been sure how well we’d all fit when Charon’s boat had first pulled up to the bank of the river, but like the stringed instrument in his hands, it seemed to shift, growing bigger and wider to fit our party.

“I still think it was cheating,” Charon mumbled darkly, his eyes flashing.

“We had a bear, we used a bear,” I said with a shrug. I sat a few feet from him in the middle of the deck, Sean curled up at my side, his eyes closed. Until this moment, I had no idea that canines could get seasick, but apparently they could. With no dock and the boat being a few feet from the riverbank, we’d been worried about touching the river. So instead of climbing aboard and taking our chances, Ramon had tossed us onto the deck. Not everyone had been keen on being chucked over a soul-eating river by a werebear, but beggars could not be choosers. Then Ed had helped him scramble onto the deck to join us. As a wepwawet, Ed apparently didn’t have to worry about touching the water.

“I’ll admit it was a loophole I hadn’t foreseen,” Charon said. He picked out a sprightly tune with nimble fingers. Charon was a lot like his boat, and if I watched him long enough, sometimes those fingers flashed to pure bone, but only for a moment.

I scanned the deck, checking to make sure the others were safe and accounted for. Ashley and Ed stood at the prow, looking ahead. Sean and Ramon seemed pretty settled where they were, but Ezra was leaning over the side and staring at the water in a way that made me nervous. He was also still completely naked. Which, honestly, if I looked as good as Ezra, I’d probably swan about naked all the time if I could.

“Ezra, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” One bump and he’d be over the side. I did *not* want to explain to Ava and Lock that I’d lost their friend in the Styx.

“But it’s the river Styx!” Ezra told me indignantly. “When am I going to see this again?”

“You’re going to see a lot of it if you fall in,” I warned.

He scoffed. “Fox like reflexes, Sam.”

“Water splashes, Ezra.” I turned to Charon. “If the water splashes up, it would still affect him, right?”

Charon nodded with a skeleton grin. I had to try very hard not to shudder.

Ezra sighed and it was a whole body affair. “Fine.” He came over to where I was sitting and dug through the backpack, taking out his jeans and slipping them on. He glanced at me. “Splinters.” Then he flopped onto the deck.

I couldn’t help it, I started to laugh.

“What?” Ezra said.

I shook my head, wheezing. “It’s just—” I had another fit of what could only be called giggles. “We’re on Charon’s boat on the river Styx and I was just thinking that in all the times I read about this as a kid I never once thought this trip would include the mention of ass splinters.”

Ezra leaned back on his palms. “What can I say? I bring joy. I’m a constant source of amusement.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. I’d desperately needed that laugh.

“As much fun as this is,” Charon said, once again plucking idly at the strings of his instrument, which had taken the form of a banjo. “I cannot hold this boat at the shore forever. We need a destination.”

“You can’t just…” I waved my hand around. “Take us to them?”

Charon shook his head. “I can’t track the souls of the living. I only ferry the souls of the dead.” The edges of his lips curved up. “Usually.”

“Ashley,” I said, waving her and Ed over. “Any ideas on how we can find them?”

She frowned at Sean. He whined miserably, whether from his inability to sense his siblings or from being on the boat, I wasn’t sure. She pursed her lips, her head cocked to the side as she thought. She turned to Ed. “Crow?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Now there’s an idea.”

I groaned. Crow didn’t really have a name as far as I knew it. I wasn’t even entirely sure what Crow *was*. He wasn’t a normal crow—for starters, he was gigantic. He could also talk to me, though he usually used that super power to mock me. As far as I could tell, he was sort of a celestial crow. A crow of the gods, but not quite a god himself. He was sort of like Ed, straddling some sort of middle ground between mortals and higher beings.

He also couldn’t keep his beak to himself, and that thing hurt. I sighed. “Fine, but he’s not always keen on being summoned.” It wasn’t even really a summoning, more of an entreaty. Being able to call on him was one of those things that I was pretty sure made me weird, even among necromancers. I’d never seen my uncle call the Crow. They were linked with death, sure, but that didn’t mean they were ours to summon. I was pretty sure it was one of those things that came from my mom’s side of the family. After all, it was her fault my middle name was Corvus.

 I closed my eyes, attempting to center myself, and called for Crow. Nothing happened. I kept my eyes shut, trying not to be distracted by the sounds of the river, or Charon’s music. Finally, when I was about to give up, I felt a sharp pain in my skull.

A sharp pain that I recognized. I slapped my hand over the spot, rubbing it. When I opened my eyes, a large crow was settling onto the deck. “That hurts, you know. You could just say ‘hi’ like a normal person.”

Crow ruffled his feathers with mild contempt. Crow’s feather ruffling was an incredibly nuanced thing. *The gods preserve me from being normal.* He turned bright eyes on the surrounds. *What interesting things you’ve been up to, Meat.*

“I try to stay busy,” I said dryly. I rested my hands on my knees and straightened my back. “I was wondering if you could help us locate some souls.” I told him briefly what was happening and who we were looking for.

Crow hopped in place, ruffling his feathers in thought. *I will do this, Meat, on one condition.*

“Okay,” I said warily. “What are you going to ask for? A steak? Sacrifice in your honor. A lifetime membership to the Audubon society?”

Crow pinned his sharp gaze on me. *You will not repay me with such fripperies. This is no small thing, therefore your repayment must be equally weighty.*

I did not like the sound of that. “What do you want?”

Crow considered this for a moment. *When you have a child, you will name it after me.*

“That,” I said, “Is some classic Rumpelstiltskin shit. I’m not giving you my first born.”

Ashley snorted. “What is it with you? No one wants your baby, Sam. No one.”

“He wants me to name my first born after him,” I said, waving my hand at Crow. “How else should I interpret that?”

*You’re named after me*, Crow pointed out. *Do I own you?*

I considered this. Being named after Crow hadn’t brought anything bad down on me, beyond the occasional peck to the skull. It had, in fact, been very helpful. So far. “What’s the catch? Ten years from now, and I going to owe you my soul or something?”

Crow cawed a laugh. *That’s not how I work, Meat. I simply find I like having those who share my name.*

I thought this through, but it was one of those situations where I didn’t really have enough information. I looked at Ashley and she shrugged. I guess she didn’t know either. Could be a bad idea. Could be good. I guess that was a problem for future Sam and his hypothetical children.

“Okay,” I said, holding my hand out to shake before I realized that was a stupid thing to do. Crows don’t have hands. “If I ever have a child, I will somehow manage to convince my partner to give them the middle name of Corvus. Does that work?”

*You could just use ‘Crow’ you know. No need to get fancy.* Then he pecked my hand hard enough to draw blood.

“Ow!” I snatched my hand back, shaking it to make it stop stinging. “Was that necessary?”

*No*, Crow admitted. *But it was funny.* He stretched out his wings before leaping into flight. I watched him circle a few times above the boat, before he spread his wings out and flapped down river.

“Follow that bird, I guess,” I said, holding my arm out like a presenter.

Charon tapped a beat with his foot, keeping time while he strummed a lively tune on an old, beat up acoustic guitar.

*Just so you know, Meat—the first one of you to make an ‘as the crow flies’ joke will get pecked in the head.*

“Duly noted,” I said, settling back on the deck, relieved to be finally making some forward progress. I only hoped we would get to them fast enough.

*Hold on Brid*, I thought. *Please hold on. We’re coming.*