Chapter 36

You Think I'd Lay Down and Die?

Oh No, Not I, I Will Survive.

Crow was pecking my forehead. I hadn’t opened my eyes, but I’d become intimately familiar with that sensation over the past few months. Which probably meant I was making poor life choices. But hey, at least I was alive to make them. Go me, I guess.

I cracked open my eyelids. Crow stood over me, the strange light of the underworld gilding his feathers in an otherworldly purple light.

“Thanks,” I said.

*For what, Meat?*

I waved my hand in the air somewhat drunkenly. “You know, all the things. There were many.”

Crow shook out his wings, resettling them. *You’re welcome.*

Sean’s face came into view above the crow, his eyes squinting down at me. “He’s not dead. You owe me five bucks.”

Ezra’s face joined him, his forehead almost touching Sean’s. “Huh. Well, aren’t you full of surprises.”

“You have no idea,” I said fervently.

Ashley shooed them both out of the way, dropping down to her haunches to peer at me. “You stopped breathing, but just, like, for a second.” She leaned in closer, dropping her voice. “I knew you’d be fine, but I only told Brid. I thought the sooner we got out of here, the better, and everyone moved faster when they thought you were hovering on the brink of death.”

I snorted, trying to sit up. I failed, flopping back down on the wooden deck. That was when I realized we were back on Charon’s boat. I rested a moment, wheezing from that little bit of exertion. “You think they’d be used to it. ‘Oh, is Sam on the brink of death? Must be Tuesday, then.’”

Ashley smirked down at me. “That’s true enough.” She lifted her face. “Hey, Ed, want to help me here for a second?”

I heard a few light steps—Ed moved quietly for his size—and then I was unceremoniously scooped up off the ground.

A barely muffled groan escaped from me, because I *hurt*. It felt like I was one big bruise.

“Sorry,” Ed said, gently depositing me against something warm and furry. A quick glance confirmed I was leaned up against Ramon’s side. Apparently he was the only one who hadn’t changed back yet. I gave him a fairly unsuccessful pat of reassurance.

I glanced around to make sure everyone else was okay. Brid was talking to her brothers; slanting looks my way to make sure I was fine. I gave her a little wave, letting her know I was well enough—that we’d have our own reunion later. She needed time with her brothers right now. Ezra was chatting with Ed and Ashley. June had Lily on her hip, walking her over now that I was settled.

I held out my arms and Lily hurled herself into them, and I was glad to be leaning against the solid mass that was Ramon in bear form, or she would have knocked me over in my state. She snuggled in, hands clasping to my shirt. I looked at June.

“I think she’s in a bit of shock,” June said, settling next to me. She took in our surroundings and snorted. “Hell, I think *I*’*m* in shock.”

“What happened to Spock?” I asked.

“He ran off home or wherever he came from. As soon as the mess was over, I looked up and he was gone.” She sighed, sinking back against Ramon. “What happened to the ghoul?”

I held up my Stygian coin. “Creature is in here. It’s safe and contained—when it’s time, I can hand the ghoul over to Hades. I want to get Creature back where it belongs.”

“Would have been easier to kill it,” June said, her eyelids drooping.

“Yeah,” I said. “But easier isn’t always better. Or right.”

I wasn’t sure if she heard me or not. She was already asleep.

Charon dropped us off as close to the opening back to our world as he could. He was surly about it, but since we’d given him the last of our coins, he couldn’t do much beyond grumble. We trudged away from the shore to the tune of what I’m pretty sure was Bye Bye Bye by \*NSYNC.

I don’t remember all of the hike. June and I were hoisted onto Ramon’s back with Lily sandwiched between us. It wasn’t comfortable, but none of us could really complain. Lily kept ahold of me the entire time. I didn’t blame her one bit.

After everything else, our arrival at the veil was anticlimactic. I kept expecting something to jump out and get us at the last minute. Nothing did. Our group poured through the rift back into our world, except for Sayer, Brid, Sean, and me. They went to speak to their parents and say goodbye.

I went to speak to Douglas.

I walked up to the man I killed, the man who had almost killed me, and had succeeded in killing so many people, including Brooke and Brannoc. “You came through for us today. For that, I thank you.”

“It doesn’t wipe the slate clean,” he said.

“No, but it’s a start.” I ran a hand over my tired face. “You know what you want to ask me yet? That favor?”

He thought about it, then shook his head. “I’ll come to you soon. Right now, you need to get through to the other side. Your uncle is on his last legs.”

I wasn’t quite ready to shake Douglas’ hand, so instead I nodded and went to get Brid. They were hugging their parents and crying, but they were happy tears, joyful in their reunion.

“We’ve got to go,” I told them gently. “We can’t hold the veil open forever.”

Brid eased away from her father, a watery smile on her face. “Okay.” She sniffed, before leaning down to give a final goodbye to her mom.

I held out my hand to Brannoc.

He ignored it, pulling me in for a hug. It’s a little weird, hugging a ghost, but in the underworld, he felt very solid.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?”

“For this.” He patted my back before he let me go. “For keeping them together. For fighting for and saving my children.”

I was too tired to even shrug. “What choice did I have? It’s not like I could just leave them.”

Brannoc shook his head, a rueful smile on his face. “That’s what I’ve always liked about you, Samhain LaCroix. To you, there really was no other choice.” He grabbed the back of my neck and pressed his lips to my forehead. “I will be proud to call you my son,” he said softly.

I watched him, unsure what to say back. “A lot of people seem to be adopting me lately.”

A slow grin spread across his face. “In my case, I think I’m just beating legalities.” He glanced at his daughter, then back at me. “You’ll be a good Blackthorn, I think. Take care of them, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. And this time, I didn’t bother offering my hand. Instead, I gave him a quick, firm hug and said goodbye, before finally stepping from the land of the dead and back into the land of the living.

The cabin we had left had been old, a little dusty, but neat. The cabin we stepped into now was entirely different. Strange vines crawled up the walls. Nothing seemed to be on fire, but I could smell smoke. James was helping Fitz wipe blood off his face and Nick was half-passed out in a chair, his face ashen.

Minion stood over him, patting his shoulder. “You don’t look so good. How can I help? I could get you some water. Or a sandwich. Or—.”

Nick closed his eyes and shook his head.

The front door opened and Ava peeked in. She turned to shout over her shoulder. “They’re back!”

Both her and Lock rushed in, checking Ezra first and then the rest of us. Once it was clear we were all mostly fine, they wrapped Ezra into a fierce hug. Ava’s eyes were squeezed shut, but Lock was smiling gently. “We were worried.”

“Of course you were,” Ezra said, his tone light, but he hugged them just as fiercely. “You would be lost without me.”

“Good to have you all back,” Fitz said.

I waved a hand over his face. “You okay? You’ve got a little red on you.”

Fitz grinned. “None of it’s mine. A few things came a knocking while you were gone. We persuaded them to move along.”

“Good,” I said, suddenly wanting nothing more than to collapse again. “Nick, you still alive?”

He gave me a thumbs up, never opening his eyes. Exhaustion etched his features.

Brid burrowed under my arm, before snuggling close. That was when it finally clicked in that we were alive, we’d made it, and though we really needed to go home and rest, at least two of our party needed clothing and one was still a bear.

But those problems, at least, were manageable. “Ramon, please go to the bedroom and change back. And can someone—”

James stepped forward, handing clothes to Brid.

“Right, that.” I sighed, resting my cheek on her hair. “Let’s go home.” For the first time in a long time, no one tried to argue with me.