Chapter 30

Ain’t No Mountain High Enough

The ghoul had stopped screaming, but that didn’t bring any Brid comfort. At least when the ghoul was screaming, she knew where it was. Now it could be anywhere. The copse of trees they were nestled in was quiet, the few noises she’d heard in the underworld temporarily gone. Even the area beyind the trees remained eerily quiet, ratcheting up Brid’s already jangling nerves. Spock, the cerberus dog, remained stiff under Lily’s free hand, all three heads on point.

Sayer shifted uneasily. He didn’t like the ghoul’s silence, either. “We really need to go.”

“We do,” Brid said, “but we’re not going to be able to move very fast.” Not only were June and Lily both weak from their confrontation with the ghoul, but they’d have to hold hands to keep the pouch between them. Sayer and Brid could carry them like they had earlier, but it would be a bit of a three legged race situation.

Sayer frowned at June in concern. “How are you feeling? Do you think you’ll be able to run?”

June shook her head, her eyes tired. “I’m not even sure I can walk for long. That…thing took a lot out of me.” She dropped down to her haunches so she could see Lily. The little girl had her head up, trying to look brave, but her lower lip was starting to wobble. “Hey now, none of that. I know it feels weird and you’re scared, but we’ll fix it.”

June glanced up at Brid, a question in her eyes and Brid realized that the necromancer had gone missing before Sam had regained his powers. Now she was turning to Brid, hopeful for answers.

“There, at least, I have good news,” Brid said. “Sam got his back.” She didn’t add that he’d had some help—Lily needed hope right now and the details might just introduce new doubts.

June seemed relieved.

“This happened to Sam?” Lily’s voice quavered, uncertain.

“Yes,” Brid said, ignoring the momentary ache she felt as she thought of Sam. Was he okay? Was he trying to find them? She put it aside, focusing on the problem at hand. “It happened to Sam and he’s fine now. We’ll get you all better.” *We just need to get you home first.* She tipped her head, listening, trying to get some idea of where the ghoul might be. Nothing, the lack of sound offering no comfort. Her skin itched in a way that told her they needed to *go* and they needed to go *now*, and on some level, she knew the ghoul was getting closer.

“We’re going to have to try and carry them,” she told Sayer. “Even us walking with them on our backs will be faster right now than them trying to walk on their own steam.”

June eyed them both before sighing. “It’s not that I don’t agree with you, and I know it’s no time to get squeamish, but I wish you both had clothes on. Getting a piggy back from a buck naked young man almost half my age feels a bit weird.”

“It fits the theme, then,” Sayer said, turning to give her his back. “Because everything has been a bit weird since we got here. Climb up. I’ll try not to make it weirder.

June looked at her hand, then one holding Lily’s. “Climbing is going to be difficult.”

After a quick back and forth, Sayer and Brid decided to squat down low so June and Lily could get to their backs more easily. When Lily had her free arm around Brid’s neck and June had hers around Sayer’s, they both stood slowly, trying to keep them connected.

It was incredibly awkward. Not only was Brid shorter than Sayer, but Lily had the shorter arms of a child, while June’s were much longer. They made minor adjustments, trying to make it as easy as they could. By that time, Brid and Sayer were both antsy. Spock whined low in his throats, a strange chorus of sounds, like an anxious harmony.

“We can start slow,” Brid said. “But we really do need to hightail it out of here.”

They left the copse of trees, Spock on their heels. It was every bit as awkward as Brid had imagined and the slow pace chafed. After a few minutes of trial and error, they found a rhythm, gaining some speed as they moved through a field full of long grass and wildflowers. Brid worried about what the grass might be hiding, but worried about the ghoul more.

She felt the press of a wet nose on the back of her thigh, Spock attempting to shift them in a different direction. Not toward the ghoul, but not fully away from it, either. Sayer startled when Spock did the same to him, and they almost jostled June and Lily’s hands free.

“What’s he doing?” Sayer asked in a harsh whisper.

“Herding us, I think.” Brid bit back a curse as she stubbed her toe on stone she couldn’t see. Shoes. She really missed shoes.

“But is he herding us away from trouble or toward a new, different trouble?” June asked.

“He’s a good doggy,” Lily said, her voice drowsy as she leaned heavily against Brid’s back. “He wouldn’t take us somewhere bad.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Lily, but we can’t be sure.” Brid offered the words gently incase Lily got defensive on the dog’s behalf. They pushed forward, Spock’s nudges becoming more forceful with every few steps. She snapped her teeth at Spock in warning. “You’re not the head of this pack.”

“But he’s from here, right?” Lily asked. “Shouldn’t we listen to him?”

Brid and Sayer exchanged a look, because Lily had a point. Behind them, in the distance but far too close for comfort, a branch snapped. Spock’s head whipped toward it, his chorus whine back in his throat.

“I think either way we decide to go,” Brid said, adjusting Lily on her back. “We’ll need to run.”

“Agreed,” Sayer said. “Hold on, you two. It’s going to get bumpy.”

They took off, slowly for the first few steps to get their stride synched up as close as they could, and then faster. Soon they were loping through the grass, Brid splitting her attention between her brother’s movements and the land ahead of her. Spock wasn’t nudging anymore, but running alongside, angling them in the direction he wanted them to go.

Brid bristled at the behavior—they didn’t know Spock and he was trying to tell her, a pack alpha, where to go. She wanted to snap and snarl at him. She also wasn’t sure if he was herding them out of concern for their wellbeing or trying to guide them somewhere *he* wanted them to go for some unknown reason.

But if they didn’t give into him now, she was desperately afraid Spock would trip them up. If they all fell, there was no way Lily would be able to keep hold of the pouch and all of this would be for nothing.

So it was with clenched teeth and a worried eye that she gave in to Spock’s maneuvering and veered them toward the altered path. Sayer didn’t comment on her decision, didn’t try and argue with her. Brid was pretty sure he’d come to the same conclusions she had.

Spock’s path took them up a hillside. Not only did that slow them down, but they’d be more visible on the hill—there were no trees on it, only more of the swaying grass. Brid didn’t think the ghoul had very good eyesight, at least not the way she thought of it, but she also didn’t know what else was out there.

*One predator at a time. If you keep making up villains, you’ll end up running in circles.*

They crested the top of the hill, pausing for breath and to get their bearings. It was high enough that Brid could see some of the land before them. The plains and craggy outcroppings they’d just left, dotted with the occasional tree. Off to the right, where they’d been heading, flowed a wide river. The water was an inky blue-black. Something about the way the water moved made her shiver. If they’d run in the direction they’d been going in, they would have hit that river. They would have either had to run alongside it or cross it, and she had the feeling she didn’t want to cross it, though the forest on the other side would provide more cover. As she watched the river twist through the landscape, she wasn’t sure they’d be able to avoid it entirely unless they wanted to double back and run toward the ghoul.

“Which way?” Sayer asked.

Brid wasn’t sure what she would have chosen—if she would have checked with Spock or simply headed forward. But before she could even open her mouth, Lily sneezed, and before anyone could stop her, she jerked her hand out of June’s grasp to wipe her nose.

“Lily!” June yelped.

The little girl gasped in dismay, quickly grabbing for June’s hand. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—it was an accident!”

From somewhere down in the plains behind them, they heard the ghoul scream in triumph. Brid risked a glance back and saw a small, black dot moving swiftly though the grass.

She hitched Lily up on her back. “Run!”

They bolted forward, speeding down the hill, not thinking about where they were going as long as it was *away.*